THE NBC SEASON

From the Springfield (MA) Republican of October 5, 1932: “The Shadow speaks again! The mystery voice of the air, bringing more tales of the strange, the weird and the supernatural, is returning to the broadcast waves over a National Broadcasting Company network. The omniscient presence, wrapped in impenetrable secrecy, appears before the microphone .... Although the identity of the Shadow remains a secret, his dramas of the strange and the unusual are familiar to many radio listeners who have followed its previous broadcast series.”

After a full year on The Detective Story Magazine Hour, his brief stint on Love Story Magazine Hour, the short-lived Perfect-O-Lite broadcasts and the musical-drama-variety Blue Coal Radio Revue, The Shadow returned with a full season of supernatural and detective stories under the title Blue Coal Mystery Revue, in what the September 25, 1932 issue of the New York Times referred to as “tales of the strange, the weird and macabre ... original mystery stories dealing with baffling occurrences in all parts of the world.” Variety offered what was probably the earliest indication that The Shadow was making a return to the airwaves in its August 30, 1932, issue: “When Blue Coal debuts on Columbia, Oct. 22, it will be the first time that one commercial will go out of its way to slip in a plug for another.” It was all part of the contract the anthracite company had made with Street & Smith. In return for the credit given it on the program, the publishing house agreed to furnish the scripts for the mystery play interludes on the program. Together with the free use of the stories, Street & Smith agreed to let Blue Coal revive “The Shadow” character, one described by Variety as “a figment that the publishers had given heavy play while they themselves were on the air up to last season.”

The announcement in the August issue was premature. The Shadow did not premiere over CBS in late October. Instead, it made the transition to NBC and began earlier that month. The October 1, 1932, issue of Billboard revealed some of the behind-the-scenes details regarding the production: “Last season’s program was a mixed musical and dramatic affair and the current bookings for time will have a musical on CBS of half-hour duration in the nature of a revue. George Earle, who had the half hour Sunday evening program last season, will again handle it as musical director [a position originally slated for Billy Ariz]. Earle will also take part in the NBC program which will start October 5 at 8 p.m., where he will revive The Shadow and play the part presumably, altho the identity of the character in question is not being announced. The half hour will contain mystery and other strange tales. The series will be original, and an 11-piece band will be on hand.” Later, in the November 12, 1932, issue, Billboard remarked: “This mysterious character which has been done both by Frank Readick and George Earle, is, of course, associated with modern mystery and detective stories.” While some might question a musician doubling as an actor, this wasn’t unusual during that stage of network broadcasting. Writers, directors and musicians would, on occasion, fill in for a bit part. Careful examination of the scripts verifies George Earle was, indeed, playing supporting roles on The Shadow so it remains probable that he played “The Shadow” briefly, for at least one broadcast.

The October 5, 1932, issue of The Boston Globe offered a news brief for radio listeners on the same day the new series premiered: “The Shadow, mystery voice of the air, will speak for Blue Coal when a new series of
stories, never before heard on the air, is inaugurated over an NBC-WEEF network tonight at 8 o'clock. Although the identity of The Shadow remains a secret, his dramas of the strange and unusual are familiar to radio listeners. The mystery of the sinister voice was still being publicized, while newspapers across the nation had already divulged the identity. The October 5 issue of the Akron Times-Press claimed that the new Shadow was "not Columbia's Frank Readick, and his identity will remain a secret." The October 14 issue of the Grand Rapid Chronicle reported the Shadow's return, contradicting the Ohio paper: "He's on the NBC-WEAF net and his name, in case you haven't heard, is Frank Readick. Last year he was just 'The Shadow' and enjoyed hearing remarks about his program, but now he takes his place among the headliners." It should be noted, however, that the newspapers could only work with press releases issued from the network and often contradicted each other, leaving one to wonder whether The Shadow's identity truly remained a secret to anyone other than their readers. The October 2 issue of Radio Guide revealed Frank Readick as the former announcer, claiming a press agent revealed the fact and "now everybody knows 'The Shadow.'"

For almost five years (1925-30), the Silver Masked Tenor entertained in the dual role of delighting and mystifying his radio friends while wearing a real mask supposedly made of silver that covered the top half of his face. It wasn't until 1930 that his identity became public knowledge after much speculation that the Silver Masked Tenor was a famous celebrity. The tenor was Joe White, who never had a singing career until he donned the mask and premiers on the Goodrich program.

The Goodrich Silvertown Orchestra became one of the most popular aggregations of musicians featured on the radio, partly because of the mystery surrounding the masked tenor. William Sweets knew The Detective Story Magazine Hour needed a similar aura to accompany the dramatic productions. While Sweets and Harry Charlot were adapting short stories from the mystery magazine into feasible radio scripts, one of them decided to have the prelude and introduction to the scenes delivered by an anonymous announcer with an ethereal presence who acted like a guilty conscience to the protagonists who could not hear him. It was Charlot who created the idea and name of "The Shadow." It should be noted that at this point that a few reference guides claim the title of the program switched from Detective Story Hour to Detective Story Program after the first few broadcasts. This is inaccurate, however. The source of this information may have originated from newspapers, which often failed to report the correct or full title among the radio listings. The correct title was Detective Story Magazine Hour and never changed during the 52 weeks it was on the air. Even though the program ran a half-hour, programs referred to as "Hour" were broadcast on the hour, or on the half-hour; the designation did not indicate the program length. Newspaper listings should never be taken as the gospel, hence what started the confusion in the first place—now carried over into numerous encyclopedias and websites—especially when one considers that the Washington Post listed this program as Tales of Mystery in their radio listings!

Eight weeks after the Detective Story Magazine Hour ended in July of 1931, The Shadow supposedly made an appearance on a radio broadcast heard over KMOX, KSD and WKL in St. Louis. Sponsored by the Seventh Annual Southwest National Radio and Allied Products Exposition, the St. Louis radio show was heard twice a day from 4:45 to 5:15 and 7:30 to 9:30 p.m. CST in a week-long special broadcast (Monday through Saturday, September 21-26, 1931) from the Crystal Coliseum. Most of the performances were musical in nature, with the Hawaiian Melodists (Joe and Dick), Eddie Jackson's Crackerjacks, Romeo and Juliet (performed by Robert Betts, tenor, and Grace McGowan, soprano), and Helen Traubel. Not all of the stage performances were broadcast, but on the evening of Friday, September 25, The Shadow was heard over the ether in a rare public appearance. As pictured in this advertisement, the Shadow was scheduled to unmask in front of those in attendance!

According to a number of news items following the unmasking, Frank Readick was the actor on stage portraying the mysterious Shadow. When The Shadow later made a return to radio, newspapers reprinted a press release issued by the radio stations that the masked man's identity still remained a mystery, hoping the staged event was forgotten in the minds of radio listeners. A number of columnists who recalled the news item of September 1931 were quick to point out that Frank Readick's name had been reported as the elusive figure and questioned the validity of the press release. At the time of the unmasking, Street & Smith may have had no intentions to revive The Shadow and therefore created the confusion that mounted throughout the months following.

The October 5 issue of The Washington Evening Star commented, "the stories in which he is to appear have never before been on the air." This, however, was not entirely correct. Jumping on board with scripter Edith Meiser was Alonzo Deen Cole, a major contributor to the bone-chilling stories. On May 28, 1931, radio station WOR in New York premiered The Witch's Tale, one of radio's earliest horror series—tales of ancient curses coming true, severed hands that crawled and mad scientists creating unearthly creatures. The scripts were both original stories and adaptations of classic literature, including Frankenstein, "Rapaccini's Daughter" and Faust.

Cole started as an actor in St. Paul, his hometown, in his late teens and toured in dramatic shows and played extensively in stock companies prior to...
ANNOUNCER: Ladies and gentlemen, the Blue Coal dealers of your city bring you that well-known character of the air... The Shadow!

SOUND: Cymbal Crash... Misterioso Music... THE SHADOW: Again the Shadow... ha, ha... Weird, fantastic shape... He is silently watching - life and death - he mars under his piercing gaze. What chance has mere man? Ha, ha... The Shadow knows!

plays hosted by an old cackling witch to compete against the ballroom music on rival networks. When an offer opened the door for him to contribute to the Shadow broadcasts, some of his scripts were rewrites of previous Witch's Tale broadcasts. The program still featured adaptations of short stories that had appeared in Street & Smith magazines, but now original stories were added to the mix with an emphasis of horror and ghosts rather than detectives.

The second broadcast of the series, "The Image" (October 12, 1932), was a tale about a professor of the occult who discovers, to his horror, how to transform into a werewolf. The episode ends on a high note when a police officer shoots and kills the beast only to witness the professor's niece accidentally falling for the same curse and transforming into a werewolf before his very eyes. "The Image" was previously dramatized on The Witch's Tale on February 8, 1932. For the rewrite, the character of old Nancy (the host of the program) was replaced with The Shadow's narratives. For the most part the script remained the same, but the names of the characters were changed.

Another early Shadow thriller was "Man Beast" (October 26, 1932), which told the story of a pair of lovebirds named Johanna and Rudolph who stab the local sheriff who longed to make young Johanna his bride. Johanna and Rudolph are apprehended while attempting to flee, and the wounded sheriff accuses Johanna of being the cause of suspected witchcraft in the community. After being sentenced to burn at the stake for being a witch, Johanna discovers Rudolph signed over his soul to the devil, officially becoming a warlock for the purpose of joining her in the other world.

The November 12, 1932, issue of Billboard reviewed this episode, commenting that this particular story "is more like a fairy tale for older children, with the general theme different than such stories... The stories should be along the modern detective style or else the title of the half hour period means nothing... Naturally, such a dramatization leaves the good old Shadow in the lurch and hardships him terribly. He really has nothing to do with such a story except act wise and so nullifies the value of the title."

Alonzo Deen Cole not only scripted "Man Beast" but also played the lead along with his real-life wife, Marie O'Flynn. Composed originally for The Shadow, this script would be performed again three years later for The Witch's Tale under the same name for the broadcast of June 6, 1935.

The May 1933 issue of Science Fiction Digest noted: "The Witch's Tale, written by the versatile Alonzo Deen Cole, is rated by radio critics as one of the five leading acts on the air." After a seven-year run, Cole retired old Nancy and struck up a friendship with Phillips H. Lord, writing scripts for his Seth Parker and Gang Busters programs.

Other cast members playing supporting roles included Paul Huber, future voice of the fictional John Barclay; J. Scott Smart, before his years in the title role of The Fat Man; future screen actor Brian Donlevy in two episodes, "Live Bait" (February 15, 1933) and "Framed In" (March 8, 1933); Santos Ortega and Alan Reed (under the name of Teddy Bergman), both future leads for Commissioner Weston; Ted De Corsia and Everett Sloane, who would ultimately play the recurring role of Shreeway the cab driver; and two pre-Mad Lanes with Marjorie Anderson in "Dance Hall Murder" (February 22, 1933) and Agnes Moorehead as the mentally-tortured June Conway in "The Drums of Death" (November 2, 1932).

The format of the series generally depicted a crime being committed and the detective (or protagonist playing the role of a detective) defying the odds in order to solve the mystery, even when the story involved supernatural elements. The city editor of a major newspaper plays detective in an effort to solve the murder of two crime reporters in "Death Warrant" (November 16, 1932). A female detective goes undercover as a replacement dance hall girl in "Dance Hall Murder" (February 22, 1933). A detective on the bottle is fired from his job and, to reclaim his dignity, sets out to solve the murder of two crime reporters in "Death Warrant" (November 16, 1932). A female detective goes undercover as a replacement dance hall girl in "Dance Hall Murder" (February 22, 1933).

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A Problem with Live Radio

Like many live radio programs of the era, The Shadow program would on occasion run overtime. The broadcast of December 21, 1932, ran over 15 seconds, delaying synchronization. It worked the other way around when, on January 25, 1933, The Royal Gelatin Program ran over 15 seconds, delaying synchronization and the start of The Shadow presentation.

Because Frawley was a staff member at the NBC studios, and because The Shadow made a transition to there, it comes as no surprise that Frawley received the all-important task of making the sponsor look good.

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impact of a particular scene. Drama was created through a representational illusion of the setting and characters, often taking a while for the momentum to pick up. The same could be said for many early talkies in cinema. The microphone was mobile so actors were not limited to standing in the same spot exchanging their lines, but they often stood in place for the camera. Action sequences, in turn, bore little or no dialogue.

About two weeks after the premiere of the 1932-33 season, station WHAM in Rochester began broadcasting the same Wednesday evening scripts in consecutive order on Thursday evenings. Sponsored by area Blue Coal distributor H.H. Babcock Company, Jack Lee directed these repeat productions with a completely different cast, marking his only contribution to the series. Lee was a talented thespian who worked on the New York stage, including playing the role of a corpse in Martha Madison and Eva Kay Flint's murder mystery, Subway Express. Charles Siverson supplied the music which was also his only contribution. Each script was performed two weeks behind the New York City productions, but an episode was skipped shortly before Christmas and the Rochester broadcasts were only one week behind after the holiday. Only 29 of the 30 episodes were broadcast during this repeat run on Thursday evenings from October 20, 1932, to May 4, 1933.

Radio Guide described the spooky broadcasts in dramatic fashion: "Rain laden wind moans about the turrets of an isolated castle, a forlorn dog howls at the eerie, cloud-shuttered moon. Tense whispers disturb the oppressive silence of vaulted corridors. The Shadow, that awesome specter of the radio, glances apprehensively at a chronometer, crunches the glow from a cigarette and tensely awaits a white shirted youth's permission to strike terror to the hearts of his followers. Weird music—climactic chords in minor keys—solemnly calculated to provide mysterious atmosphere in the absence of the motion picture industry's flitting bats and flickering neon tubes."

In the same manner as Rochester, Street & Smith expanded the Detective Story Magazine Hour program in Houston. According to newspaper archives, the KXYZ Players were the real stars of the program. New and original radio scripts were created for the Houston broadcasts. For the premiere broadcast of September 16, 1932, for example, the story was titled "The Kid's Last Chance." For October 28, the drama was titled simply "The Kid." This leads one to suspect the scripts dramatized were not the same ones featured across the rest of the country. Street and Smith's name was clearly promoted in newspapers dated September 16 and October 14. One local newspaper described the evening's scheduled presentation as "XXYZ Players Burlesque, a detective story." There has been nothing to verify whether The Shadow was the horror host. The broadcast schedule was as follows: September 16, 1932—Friday, 10 to 10:15 p.m.; September 23, 1932—Friday, 10:15 to 10:45 p.m.; September 30, 1932—no broadcast; October 7, 1932—Friday, 10:15 to 10:45 p.m.; October 14 and 21, 1932—Friday, 7:30 to 8 p.m.; October 28, 1932 to March 5, 1933—Friday, 9 to 9:30 p.m., March 12 to July 2, 1933—Sunday, 8:30 to 9 p.m.

On April 17, 1933, Ormond Gerald Smith, president of Street & Smith and founder of
many popular magazines of the time, died of a stroke at his East 78th Street residence. A review of the script for the broadcast of April 19 shows no mention by the announcer regarding the death, but this doesn’t rule out such a special statement being made at the start or end of the broadcast and separate from the script. George C. Smith, vice president and treasurer of the company, died of pneumonia at his Park Avenue residence, surviving his brother by only 11 days. A friend of the two brothers told reporters the work and responsibility of directing the large publishing business was evenly divided between the two. Both names were featured at the bottom of the table of contents pages along with the edition notice, publishing information, copyright column of each issue of Detective Story Magazine. The final episode of The Shadow concluded on April 26, so a mention of George C. Smith’s passing would not have been heard on the program. WHAM in Rochester, which was behind a week, with the final broadcast on May 4, and a mention over those airwaves remains possible.

The Blue Coal Mystery Revue was broadcast on a network of 10 stations across the East Coast via hookup on Wednesday evenings from 8 to 8:30 p.m., EST. WFBR Baltimore; WCSP Portland, OR; WEEI Boston; WJAR, Providence, RI; WTIC Hartford, CT; WGY Schenectady, NY; WEAF New York City; WRC Washington; WLIT Philadelphia; WTAG Worcester, MA.

The popularity of The Shadow reached as far as the Midwest. In December 1933, the Knox Company of St. Louis approached Street & Smith seeking broadcast rights for The Shadow, unaware that NBC was airing the program as the Blue Coal Mystery Revue along the East Coast. Street & Smith replied favorably with a counter-offer to sponsor a series of radio dramas based on another of their successful pulp magazines, Doc Savage. A series of 26 scripts had been produced for syndication, broadcast on various local radio stations as early as spring of 1934. In New York City, the series was heard beginning November 1934.

Weeks after the 1932-33 Blue Coal Mystery Revue concluded, The Shadow made a return to the airwaves this time in the form of a satirical. Comedian Jack Benny evolved slowly from his vaudeville roots to become a weekly comedy addition on variety programs featuring rousing orchestras and clever vocals. When the Canada Dry Ginger Ale Program dropped sponsorship in January 1933, Benny was hired as the weekly comedian on The Chevrolet Program in March. Frank Black and his orchestra, tenor James Melton and singer Grace Hayes supplied the musical entertainment while Benny and his cast supplied the comedy. A four-part comedy skit called “Who Killed Mr. X?” spoofed radio mystery thrillers and premiered on the evening of May 26, 1933, and concluded June 16. Throughout the installments, Benny questioned those in the courtroom, Sherlock Holmes (played by Benny) is brought into the case, King Kong gets involved, and The Shadow (played by Ralph Ashe) appears as the sinister voice who laughs, informing the audience that Benny has the wrong suspect. The Shadow does not make an appearance in the first installment, but plays the role of the spooky narrator for the remaining three broadcasts. Ashe was able to mimic Frank Readick’s Shadow laugh almost to perfection and radio audiences might have thought it was Readick playing the role. The “Who Killed Mr. X?” skit was dramatized previously on the Canada Dry Ginger Ale program of October 24, 1932. The courtroom murder mystery about a headless victim was not broadcast in installments, and Fran Frey played the role of a phantom. It was common for skits to be recycled throughout the early Jack Benny broadcasts.

Less than a year after the mystery spoof reached the airwaves, the musical segments had blended into comedic format, but the fully developed comedy skits were not agreeable to an executive at Chevrolet, who rewarded Benny with a pink slip and replaced him with an all-music series featuring the Victor Young orchestra. Spoofing the Shadow character alongside such nationwide characters as King Kong and Sherlock Holmes was not unusual. The character of the horror host also was nationally known, thanks to the six film shorts, mystery magazine, and prior Shadow radio broadcasts in Oregon, Utah, Texas, Kansas and Louisiana. None of the Blue Coal Mystery Revue broadcasts are known to exist in recorded form, but a couple of these early Jack Benny broadcasts do, offering us a glimpse of what the Shadow sounded like. A sound clip of Frank Readick’s rendition as the Shadow from one of Universal’s film shorts is also available on a number of websites. The opening tag line for the later Orson Welles broadcasts was recited by Readick, and in the episode “The Shadow Challenged” (January 19, 1941), the villain masquerading as the fake Shadow was Frank Readick, a brilliant stroke of casting. One year later, from June 22 to August

Frank Readick looking more like the clutching claw in character before the NBC microphone as the mysterious storyteller known as the shadow.
3, 1934, The General Tire Program featured a reprise of the apparently successful mystery skit. In a comedy bit titled “Who Killed Mr. Stooqe?” (also known as “The Stooqe Murder Case” on the scripts), The Shadow made a return appearance as played by character actor Joe Franz. This was no doubt because the Jack Benny program had moved from the East Coast to the California, which afforded an entirely different selection of supporting actors. The character of the Shadow, however, lasted a mere two broadcasts. With the broadcast of July 6, Franz was mimicking a character known as “The Phantom” in the same capacity as that of the Shadow, which lasted four consecutive broadcasts. Had Street & Smith objected to the unauthorized use of the Shadow character in the comedy skits? Quite possibly, considering the Shadow character was never featured in any future Jack Benny programs even though a number of other horror and mystery hosts were, including the Whistler.

RADIO BROADCAST LOG FOR BLUE COAL MYSTERY REVUE

#1 "SPECIAL ORDERS" October 5, 1932
#2 "THE IMAGE" October 12, 1932
#3 [TITLE UNKNOWN] October 19, 1932
#4 "MAN BEAST" October 26, 1932
#5 "THE DRUMS OF DEATH" November 2, 1932
#6 "THE BROTHERHOOD OF MAN" November 9, 1932
#7 "DEATH WARRANT" November 16, 1932
#8 "JADE" November 23, 1932
#9 "FIGHTING COMEBACK" November 30, 1932
#10 "MURDER BY ACCIDENT" December 7, 1932
#11 "THE MISSING COBRA" December 14, 1932
#12 "THE YELLOW FINGER" December 21, 1932
#13 "DEATH AT LONELY POINT" December 28, 1932
#14 "THE GUILLOTINE" January 4, 1933
#15 "THE ACE OF SPADES" January 11, 1933
#16 "WHEN WOLF MEETS WOLF" January 18, 1933
#17 "BEGGAR'S RANSOM" January 25, 1933
#18 "CROONING FOR CRIME" February 1, 1933
#19 "BOOMERANG" February 8, 1933
#20 "LIVE BAIT" February 15, 1933
#21 "DANCE HALL MURDER" February 22, 1933
#22 "SKYSCRAPER RACKET" March 1, 1933
#23 "FRAMED IN" March 8, 1933
#24 "BLASTED ALIBI" March 15, 1933
#25 "OVER BURNING WIRES" March 22, 1933
#26 "FANGS" March 29, 1933
#27 "BLIND" April 5, 1933
#28 "HARBOR RAT" April 12, 1933
#29 "NIGHT CLUB RACKET" April 19, 1933
#30 "HANDS IN THE DARK" April 26, 1933