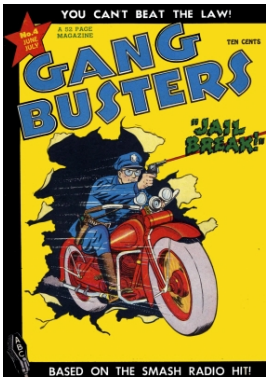
“Gang Busters” (July 20, 1935)

Added to the National Registry: 2008
Essay by Cary O’Dell



A “Gang Busters” comic, 1948


Phillips H. Lord

A “Gang Busters” premium

The long-running, renowned radio series that gave birth to the expression “coming on like gangbusters” was the brainchild of veteran radio producer, writer and actor Phillips H. Lord. His hard-hitting, cops-and-robbers saga, born 1935, was a distinct departure, not only for the listening public, but also for its creator. Previously, Lord was best known for creating and starring in the radio series “Seth Parker” (a.k.a. “Sunday Evening At Seth Parker’s”), where he played a kindly, elderly Maine-dwelling preacher. On “Seth” each week, along with a thin storyline, the show showcased philosophy and a generous amount of hymnal singing. But in contrast to “Seth,” and its homespun, slice-of-life innocence, however, “Gang Busters” (originally titled “G-Men”) was about gangsters, crooks and criminals—and the men and women who pursed them. The show helped usher in a new era of action, frankness, and hyper-realism for the radio airwaves.

“Gang Busters’s’” reach for realism, its torn-from-the-headlines, based-on-a-true-story approach, which laid the groundwork for such later no-holds-barred dramas as “The Untouchables” and “Law & Order,” was its calling card. Each week’s fact-based tale was culled from the closed files of the FBI, provided with his full blessing from the Bureau’s director himself, J. Edgar Hoover. Along with real-life names and incidents, the series strove to give a gritty, unadorned view into the world of the underworld. Thanks to its talented, rotating cast of actors (the series was basically an anthology) and the program’s excellent use of its arsenal of sound effects (allegedly the largest in use in radio at that time), the “theatre of the mind” power of “Gang Busters” was vivid: one could practically see that week’s criminal’s seedy hotel room hide-out with it wobbly wooden table and thread-bare mattress, the tired neon sign blinking outside a second-story window. Thanks to the skilled sound technicians, the fisticuffs portrayed on the program (which occurred often) were especially striking, and assaulting to the ear. Punches, slaps, kicks, grunts, and hits: all were rendered with stunning clarity and evocativeness.

As can also be ascertained, being based on true stories also allowed the series to broach certain topics that most other (fictional) series of the time shied away from. Due to its subject matter, "Gang Busters" was able to make mention of all sorts of unseemly, previously seldom-mentioned societal ills from drug abuse (including heroin addiction) to prostitution to even gangland murder.

The format of "Gang Busters" remained consistent throughout its run, even after Lord, who hosted the first few seasons, abdicated the narrator role to former New Jersey state police officer H. Norman Schwartzkopf (the father of the Gulf War general Norman Schwartzkopf), who himself was later replaced by NYC's former police commissioner, Lewis Valentine. After the show's trademark sound effects-laden opening (resonate with whistles! alarms! sirens! and gunfire!) the host began each installment by "interviewing" a police officer associated with that night's case. Or, more accurately, an actor playing a real-life police officer. This interview "by proxy," as the series always put it, though always one degree removed, nevertheless further underscored the show's commitment to fact and authenticity. Similarly, so did the show's weekly special feature, "Gang Busters Clues," the "America's Most Wanted" of its day, where real-life, at-large criminals were named and described over the air, with the hope that listeners could help authorities get their man. Legend has it that by the end of its run, "Gang Busters" had helped nab well over 100 con men, crooks and killers.

The subject matter, and the forthright way it was addressed on the air, obviously lent "Gang Busters" a distinctly grown-ups-only feel, a distant cry from some of radio's other then popular action-adventure and detective programs (for example, the more kiddie-friendly "The Lone Ranger" or "Dick Tracy"). Yet, despite the show's rather adult appeal, kids must have been listening; like so much other radio product at the time, the program issued a variety of premiums and merchandise tie-ins all geared towards youthful listeners. Along with "official" "Gang Busters" tin badges, youngsters could also send away for or purchase "Gang Busters" comic books (now collector's items) and even a "Gang Busters" board game.

If kids were listening, at least they were not being corrupted or seduced into a life of crime by the show. Though most installments were told from the point-of-view of that week's criminal, "Gang Busters" left no question about whose side it was on. Since the show was originally conceived as a tribute to America's law enforcement (like Jack Webb's later "Dragnet" and its female, TV counterpart "Decoy"), on "Gang Busters" the cops always came out on top. It was a policy the show's producers adhered to--every criminal depicted would always be punished in the end, either in getting caught and sent to jail or in death.

"Gang Busters," radio's most proudly pro-police and authority series, when it arrived on the air, did so was at a unique epoch in American history. In the 1930s, due to the devastating effects of the Great Depression and other occurrences, many Americans had lost faith in their larger institutions. In their place, people had come to romanticize the realm and lives of mobsters and other outlaws, from Hollywood fictions featuring James Cagney and Edward G. Robinson to the nefarious true-life exploits of Pretty Boy Floyd,

Machine Gun Kelly and their ilk. In many ways, "Gang Busters," as a series, was waging a public relations war, and a difficult one at that. It was no accident that the show's first episode—which aired July 20, 1935—was a dramatization of the life and killing of Public Enemy No. 1, John Dillinger. Dillinger's death at the hands of police in July 1934, which took place two months after the killing of Bonnie and Clyde and three months before the gunning down of Pretty Boy Floyd, occurred outside of a Chicago theater. Because Dillinger died from a bullet to the back of the head, many viewed his killing by law enforcement as "cowardly." "Gang Busters'" treatment of the Dillinger case was brutal and, not surprisingly, unsentimental and unsympathetic, a way for Lord and the Bureau to realign public opinion.

Of course the longevity and success of "Gang Busters" helped pave the way for a myriad of later police procedurals, from radio's "The Silent Men" to TV's "The Untouchables" and "Dragnet." Its success owed much not only to America's then feverish preoccupation with crime, but also to its long-standing and still-enduring--from the Old West to O.J.--infatuation with it as well. "Gang Busters'" enduring appeal was its ability to package these dark stories and dark themes into exciting, action-packed installments that, while they intrigued us in their sensationalism, simultaneously fed into our concepts of law and order and, ultimately, into our innate sense of right and wrong.

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