

FOR WHOM THE BELL RINGS

by Jack French

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The ringing of the telephone is rather hard to ignore since it usually gets our attention quickly. Playwrights, until it became a cliché, liked to open a stage play with a telephone ringing. A maid would enter from stage right, answer the telephone, and the play would be set in motion. So it's not unusual that radio shows also incorporated a ringing telephone into their opening, usually followed by the title lead answering it. There were almost a dozen different series that used this technique to begin each program. Half of these were detective shows; there were four male PI's and two lady crime-solvers. Two other programs were comedy shows, while one mystery anthology also started with the sound of Bell's invention.

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One of the first shows to use the telephone opening was *Lum and Abner* which began in 1931 and lasted on network radio until 1954. It starred Chester Lauck as Lum Edwards and Norris Goff as Abner Peabody. Since it was on the air for almost a quarter-century, over 1200 audio recordings of it have survived. The opening varied over the years, but a common one would sound like this:

RING...RING...

Abner: "By grannies, Lum, I b'lieve that's our ring."

(Sound of receiver click)

Lum: "Hullo, Jot 'em Down Store..."

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The next series to use the telephone to open the program was *Duffy's Tavern*, which ran from 1941 to 1952. Its creator and star was Ed Gardner who played Archie, manager of the tavern. Approximately 100 shows are in trading currency today. At the beginning of most shows, we'd hear men singing in the tavern, interrupted by:

RING...RING...

(Sound of receiver click)



▲ Stuart Erwin and Florence Lake have telephone troubles galore on CBS's *Phone Again, Finnegan*.

Archie: "Hello, Duffy's Tavern, where the elite meet to eat. Archie the manager speakin'...Duffy ain't here...oh, hello, Duffy..."

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Two crime solvers were brought to network broadcasting in 1943, both of whom began each program with the sound of a telephone. *The Adventures of Nero Wolfe* actually had three lives: 1943-44, 1950-51, both on NBC, and 1946 on Mutual. A total of 32 shows have survived. The '50s version, starring Sidney Greenstreet (as Wolfe) usually opened with:

RING...RING...

Announcer: "Ladies and gentlemen, the ringing of that phone bell brings you mystery and adventure."

(Sound of receiver click)

Wolfe's assistant: "Nero Wolfe's office. This is Archie Goodwin speaking. No, I'm sorry, Mr. Wolfe is busy planning a menu. I'll see if he can talk to you. What's your name, please?"

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The second detective, beginning in 1943, was *The Falcon*; it was on the air for the next 12 years and several actors played the lead, including James Meighan and Les Tremayne. About 75 episodes can be located today and most of them open with the Falcon (Michael Waring) being called by his girl friend on the telephone. A typical beginning of this show would be:

RING...RING...

(Sound of receiver click)

Michael Waring: "Hello...yes, this is the Falcon. Oh, Thelma, I'm glad you called, but I'm afraid that tonight is out, Angel. Some girl wants to break up with her boy friend and it's up to me to make sure he doesn't love her to death."

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In 1946 two more adventure shows debuted with the sound of a telephone ringing. In one, *The Adventures of Sam Spade*, brash Howard Duff starred as a private eye who phoned his secretary, Effie Perrine, (the voice of Lurene Tuttle) and announced the title of each program. This series ran for five years and about 60 audio copies are still circulating. An example of the beginning would sound like this:

RING...RING...

(Sound of receiver click)

Effie: "Sam Spade Detective Agency."

Sam: "It's me, sweetheart..."

Effie: "Sam! Would you please tell me where you are...?"

Sam: "I'm headed for the office, baby, to dictate my report on the Bashful Boy Friend Caper."

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The second series to begin in 1946 was *The Crime Club*. It only lasted a year, but 32 of those shows survived. It was an anthology mystery series with the premise that someone phones the Crime Club, a library of crime and mystery books, and requests a certain book (or story). The librarian (or narrator) was Raymond Edward Johnson and he would begin the tale:

RING...RING...

(Sound of receiver click)

Librarian: "Hello...I hope I haven't kept you waiting...yes, this is the Crime Club. I'm the librarian. 'Silent Witness'? Yes, we have that book for you. Come right over..."

(Sound of organ)

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In 1949 an insurance crime solver series first aired that would go on to become the last dramatic series on network radio; it finally terminated in September 1962. *Yours Truly, Johnny Dollar* had many actors in the lead over the years, including Edmund O'Brien, Bob Bailey and Mandel Kramer. At least 440 episodes are still available. Most of them open with a telephone call from a client:

RING...RING...

(Sound of receiver click)

Dollar: "Johnny Dollar."

Man: "Mr. Dollar, I need your help on a very suspicious insurance claim."

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The same year *Johnny Dollar* debuted, another series began with a crime solver in the lead, only this was a woman. *Candy Matson* starred Natalie Parks and was created and produced by her husband, Monty Masters. This sexy private eye would be on the air for two years, but only 14 episodes are with us now. Each program began the same way:

RING...RING...

(Sound of receiver click)

Matson: "YUkon 2-8209...yes, this is Candy Matson..."

(Organ theme song: "Candy")

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When *Candy Matson* went off the air in May 1951 on the West Coast, another female crime fighter debuted on the East Coast. This series was a juvenile adventure series called *The Lady in Blue*, a 15-minute Saturday morning show. It featured an attractive socialite, assisted by her maid, who went forth disguised in a blue veil to fight crime. The series aired for about nine months and ended; two copies still exist. Here's the way the show opened:

RING...RING...

(Sound of receiver click)

Lady: "The Lady in Blue."

Announcer: "The Lady in Blue is known to the world of crime as a feared and hated criminologist and is known to the criminals only by that name."

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Perhaps we're lucky that Dodge City, Kansas in the 1870's only had a telegraph line and not a telephone line, otherwise *Gunsmoke* might have begun like this:

Announcer: "Around Dodge territory, there's just one way to handle the killers and the spoilers, and that's with the sound of..."

RING...RING...

(Sound of receiver click)

Chester: "Marshall's office...Deputy Chester Proudfoot speaking...What's that? Yup, he's right here... Mister Dillon, its fer you."

