


Phil Harris (born [Wonga Phillip Harris](#);[1] June 24, 1904 – August 11, 1995) was an American singer, [songwriter](#), [jazz](#) musician, actor, and comedian. Though successful as an orchestra leader, Harris is remembered today for his recordings as a vocalist, his [voice work](#) in animation (probably most famous later in his career for his roles as bears, one being Baloo in Disney's *The Jungle Book*, and as Little John in Disney's *Robin Hood*). He also voiced Thomas O'Malley in Disney's *The Aristocats*. Harris was also a pioneer in radio [situation comedy](#), first with [Jack Benny](#), and then in [a series](#) in which he co-starred with his [wife](#), singer-actress [Alice Faye](#) in eight years.

Bandleader

Harris was born in Linton, Indiana, but grew up in [Nashville, Tennessee](#), and identified himself as a Southerner (his hallmark [song](#) was "That's What I Like About the South"). His upbringing accounted for both his trace of a Southern accent and, in later years, the self-deprecating Southern jokes of his radio character. The son of two [circus](#) performers, Harris's first [work](#) as a drummer came when his father, as tent bandleader, hired him to [play](#) with the circus band.[2] Harris began his [music](#) career as a drummer in San Francisco, forming an orchestra with Carol Lofner in the latter 1920s and starting a long engagement at the [St. Francis Hotel](#). The partnership ended by 1932, and Harris led and sang with his own band, now based in Los Angeles. Phil Harris also played drums in the [Henry Halstead](#) Big Band Orchestra during the mid-1920s.

In 1931, Lofner-Harris recorded for [Victor](#). After Harris recorded for [Columbia](#) in 1933, he recorded for [Decca](#) in 1935. From December 1936, through March 1937, he recorded 16 sides for [Vocalion](#). Most were hot swing tunes that used a very interesting gimmick; they faded up and faded out with a piano solo. These were probably arranged by pianist Skippy Anderson.

On September 2, 1927, he married actress [Marcia Ralstone](#) in [Sydney, Australia](#); they had met when he played a concert [date](#). [2] The couple adopted a son, Phil Harris, Jr. (b. 1935), but they [divorced](#) in September, 1940.


 In 1933, he made a short film for RKO called *So This Is Harris!*, which won an [Academy Award](#) for best live action short subject. He followed with a feature-length film, *Melody [cruise](#)*. Both films were created by the same team that next produced *Flying Down to Rio*, which started the successful careers of [Fred Astaire](#) and [Ginger Rogers](#). Additionally, he appeared in *Thunder Across the Pacific* (1951), alongside [Forrest Tucker](#) and [Walter Brennan](#), during the same year, he made a cameo appearance in the Warner Bros. musical, *Starlift*, with [Janice Rule](#) and [Dick Wesson](#), and was featured in *The High and the Mighty* with [John Wayne](#) in 1954.[2] Phil was in a [movie](#) released in 1956 called Goodbye, My Lady co-starring with Walter Brennan.

Radio

In 1936, Harris became musical director of *The Jell-O Show Starring Jack Benny* (later renamed *The [Jack Benny](#) Program*), singing and leading his band, with Mahlon Merrick writing much of the show's music. When he showed a knack for snappy one-liners, he joined the Benny ensemble portraying himself, but scripted as a [hip](#)-talking, hard-drinking, brash Southerner, whose good nature often overcame his ego. His first trademark was his jive-talk nicknaming of the others in the Benny orbit. Benny was "Jackson," for example; Harris's usual entry was a cheerful "Hiya, Jackson!". He usually referred to [Mary Livingstone](#) as "Livvy". His signature song, belying his actual Hoosier birthplace, was "That's What I Like About the South." His comic persona—that of a musical idiot who never met a bottle he didn't like or a mirror he could bypass—masked his band's evolution into a smooth, up-tempo big band. Many of Harris's vocal recordings were comic novelty "talking blues" numbers not unlike the talking numbers of African-American comedian [Bert Williams](#), a style sometimes considered a

precursor to modern [rap music](#).

In time, Harris's comic persona made such an impression that he got a [chance](#) to step out on his own, though he remained loyal to Benny and a key member of the Benny cast for a few more years. In 1946, Harris and wife Alice Faye began co-hosting *The Fitch Bandwagon*, a comedy-variety program that followed the Benny show on Sunday nights. It was sponsored by hair products manufacturer [F.W. Fitch Co.](#) of [Des Moines, Iowa](#).

 Harris and Faye married in 1941; it was a second marriage for both (Faye had been married briefly to singer-actor [Tony Martin](#)) and lasted 54 years, until Harris's death. Harris engaged in a fistfight at the [Trocadero](#) nightclub in 1938 with RKO studio mogul [Bob Stevens](#); the cause was reported to be over Faye after Stevens and Faye had ended a romantic [relationship](#). In 1942, Harris and his entire band enlisted in the U.S. Navy, and they served until the end of [World War II](#). By 1946, Faye had all but ended her film career. She drove off the [20th Century Fox](#) lot after studio czar [Darryl F. Zanuck](#) reputedly edited her scenes out of *Fallen Angel* (1945) to pump up his protege [Linda Darnell](#). Originally a vehicle for big bands, including Harris' own, *The Fitch Bandwagon* became something else entirely when Harris and Faye's family skits made them the show's breakout [stars](#). Coinciding with their desire to settle in southern California and raise their children – Phil Jr. (born 1935 and whom Harris had adopted while previously married), Alice (born 1942) and Phyllis (born 1944), *The Fitch Bandwagon* name disappeared when [Rexall](#) became the program's sponsor in 1948; the show was renamed *The Phil Harris-Alice Faye Show*. By that time, it had become a full-fledged situation comedy featuring one music spot each for Harris and Faye.

Harris was the vain, language-challenged, stumbling [husband](#), and Faye was his acid but loving wife on the air. Off the air, as radio historian [Gerald S. Nachman](#) has recorded, Harris was actually a soft-spoken, modest man. "But it was the 'Phil Harris' character," wrote radio historian [John Dunning](#) (in *On the Air: The [encyclopedia](#) of Old-Time Radio*), "that carried [the show]: his timing was exceeded by none, including [Jack] Benny himself. Like Benny, Harris played a character who in real life would be intolerable. That both men projected themselves through this charade and made their characters treasures of the air was a notable feat."

Young actresses [Jeanine Roos](#) and [Anne Whitfield](#) played the Harris' two young daughters on the air; unlike [Ozzie and Harriet](#) Nelson's two young sons, the Harris's real-life children did not seem to have any inclination to join their famed parents on the air. The series also featured [Gale Gordon](#) as Mr. Scott, their sponsor's harried representative, and *Great Gildersleeve* co-star [Walter Tetley](#) as obnoxious grocery boy Julius Abruzzio. [Elliott Lewis](#) – already a distinguished radio performer and producer/director – found himself in a comic role that would be long remembered, playing [Frank Remley](#), a layabout guitarist whose mission in life seemed to be getting Harris into and out of trouble almost continuously; his "I know a guy . . ." – usually, referring to a shady character he'd enlist to help Harris out of a typical jam – became one of the show's catch-phrases.

The Phil Harris-Alice Faye Show ran until 1954, by which time radio had succumbed to [television](#). Harris continued to appear on [Jack Benny](#)'s show, along with his own, from 1948 to 1952. Because the Harris show aired immediately after Benny's on a different network (Harris and Faye were still on NBC, whereas Benny jumped his show to CBS in 1949), Harris would only appear during the first half of the Benny show; he would then leave the CBS studio and walk approximately one block to his own studio down the [street](#), arriving just in time for the start of his own program. He was succeeded as Benny's orchestra leader in the fall of 1952 by [Bob Crosby](#).

After radio

After the show ended, Harris revived his music career. In 1956, he appeared in the film [*Good-bye, My Lady*](#). He made numerous guest appearances on 1960s and 1970s [tv](#) shows, including the [*Kraft Music Hall*](#), [*Burke's Law*](#), with the most memorable being as a [college](#)-educated, jive-talking horn-player in "[Who Killed Billy Jo](#)", [*The Dean Martin Show*](#), [*F Troop*](#), [*The Hollywood Palace*](#) and other musical variety programs. He appeared on [ABC's](#) [*The American Sportsman*](#) hosted by [Grits Gresham](#), and later [sports](#) announcer [Curt Gowdy](#), which took celebrities on [hunting](#), [fishing](#) or [shooting](#) trips around the world.

Song hits by Harris included the early 1950s [novelty song](#), "[The Thing](#)." The song describes the hapless finder of a box with a mysterious secret and his efforts to rid himself of it. Harris also spent time in the 1970s and early 1980s leading a band that appeared often in Las Vegas, often on the same bill with swing era legend [Harry James](#).

Harris was also a close [friend](#) and associate of [Bing Crosby](#) and appeared in an episode of ABC's short-lived [*The Bing Crosby Show*](#) [sitcom](#). After Crosby died in 1977, Harris sat in for his old friend doing color commentary for the telecast of the annual [Bing Crosby Pro-Am Golf Tournament](#). Harris said of Crosby's death, "I have grown up to learn that God doesn't make mistakes. Today, I'm beginning to doubt that." An old episode of *The Phil Harris-Alice Faye Show* began with Harris telling the story of how he once won the tournament.

Animation

He worked as a vocalist and [voice actor](#) for animated films, lending his distinctive voice to the [Disney](#) animated features [*The Jungle Book*](#) (1967) as [Baloo](#), [*The Aristocats*](#) (1970) as [Thomas O'Malley](#) and [*Robin Hood*](#) (1973) as [Little John](#) (another bear). *The Jungle Book* was his greatest success in the years at the end of his radio career. As [Baloo](#) the [Sloth Bear](#), he sings one of the film's showstoppers, "[The Bare Necessities](#)," a performance that introduced Harris to a new generation of young [fans](#) who had no awareness of his radio fame. He famously appears to sing the word 'founder' instead of 'fonder' (after the line 'wherever I wander') in this song although this is simply the Southern pronunciation of the word 'fonder' whimsically exaggerated and should not be construed as a mistake. The recording still survives in TV adverts today. Harris also joined [Louis Prima](#) in "I Wanna Be Like You," delivering a memorable [scat singing](#) performance. *The Aristocats* features Harris as alley [cat](#) Abraham de Lacey Giuseppe Casey Thomas O'Malley, who joins in the film's showstopper, "Ev'rybody Wants to Be a Cat," with [Scatman Crothers](#). In *Robin Hood*, Harris's [Little John](#) sings the popular anti-[Prince John](#) tune "The Phony King of England." In 1989, Harris briefly returned to Disney to once again voice Baloo, this time for the cartoon series [*TaleSpin*](#). But after a few recording sessions he was replaced by [Ed Gilbert](#).^[3] His last role was in 1991 film [*Rock-a-Doodle*](#), directed by [Don Bluth](#), as the friendly, laid-back [Basset Hound](#) Patou.

Honors

Harris was a longtime resident and benefactor of [Palm Springs, California](#),^[4] where Crosby also made his [home](#). Harris was also a benefactor of his birthplace of [Linton, Indiana](#), establishing scholarships in his honor for promising high school students, performing at the high school, and [hosting](#) a celebrity golf tournament in his honor every year. Harris and Faye donated most of their show business memorabilia and papers to Linton's public library.

In 1994, a Golden Palm Star on the [Palm Springs Walk of Stars](#) was dedicated to him.^[5]

Death and legacy

Harris died of a [myocardial infarction](#) at his Rancho Mirage home in 1995.^[6] Alice Faye died of stomach [cancer](#) three years later. Two years before his death, Harris was inducted into the Indiana Hall of Fame. They are interred at [Forest Lawn-Cathedral City](#) in Riverside County, [California](#). Phyllis Harris was last reported living in St. Louis (she had been with her mother at her father's bedside when he died), while Alice Harris Regan was reported living in New Orleans.

Harris remained grateful to radio for the difference it made in his professional and personal life. He was quoted as saying, "If it hadn't been for radio, I would still be a traveling orchestra leader. For 17 years I played one-night stands, sleeping on buses. I never even voted, because I didn't have any residence."

Episodes of *The Phil Harris-Alice Faye Show* turn up frequently on compact-disc collections of old-time radio classics, both on their own sets and amid various comedy collections. At least half the surviving episodes of the show's [final](#) season include Harris's audience warmup routine, performed for ten minutes before the show was to begin recording. Many old-time radio historians (such as Nachman and Dunning) consider the show at its best to have stood the test of time, thanks to above-average writing (mostly by the team of Ray Singer and Dick Chevillat) and the two stars who executed it with impeccable timing.

The materials for this audio brief was taken from Wikipedia – the on-line encyclopedia.

I'm _____, for the Old Time Radio Researchers.