

Jack Webb  
Patrick Andre

Born on April 2<sup>nd</sup> 1920 in Santa Monica California, John Randolph “Jack” Webb became famous as a radio, television, and film actor, TV Producer and director, and as a screenwriter.

The son of Samuel Chester Webb and Margaret Smith, Webb was born on Good Friday, in a Catholic family. However, his father had left before he was born. The single mother moved back in with her mother, and the two raised Webb together. The only significant male role model in Webb’s life was his uncle, Frank Smith – a name Webb would use for his partner in his famous Dragnet series. Webb attended Catholic schools until going to Belmont High, where he became student body president.

After high school, he would support his family by working in a clothing store. He tried joining the Army Air Force in World War II but was not successful in flight training school. He would get a hardship discharge since he was the primary income for his mother and grandmother.

He then moved to San Francisco where he became a radio announcer, joining KGO, an ABC affiliate. He tried comedy, but transferred to drama starting with Pat Novak for Hire. He began to become successful, so he, and roommate Richard Breen, would move back to Los Angeles. It was in LA that his talent was recognized. Shows such as Johnny Madero, Pier 23 and Jeff Regan, Investigator contributed to his success. After starting in a revival of Pat Novak for Hire, Webb would start performing and producing show that would transform his carrier and life, Dragnet.

Webb had a significant role in a 1948 movie called He Walked by Night, a semi-documentary film about the police work used to capture a murderer. During this film, Webb became friends with police technical advisor, Detective Sargent Marty Wynn. This lead to the development of the Dragnet radio and TV shows.

To learn more about police work, Webb rode along on night patrols with Sgt. Wynn and his partner Officer Vance Brasher, and attended Police Academy courses to learn authentic jargon and details that could be featured in a radio program. When Webb brought the idea of the show to NBC, executives were unimpressed – since so many crime shows already existed. However, they agreed to a limited run for the show.

Dragnet would start on the radio in June of 1949, but quickly was also on television by the end of 1951. A movie was made in 1954. The show was not an immediate hit, having a bit of a rocky start. But as the actors settled into their roles, and Webb's Sgt. Friday became more deadpan and had a flat delivery, the popularity of the show took off for both listeners and law enforcement. It would receive many awards and citations from police agencies, and law groups for the realism and accuracy that Webb demanded in the show. And violence was not needed. Webb stated that in the first 60 episodes on TV, only 15 gun shots were fired, and there were just 3 fights.

However, Webb was busy with other interests. He had a short-lived radio program called Pete Kelly's Blues, which had similarities to Pat Novak, but was based on the life of a Jazz Musician working in 1920's speakeasy. Actually, Webb was a huge fan of jazz music, so this program, and subsequent 1955 movie, was a labor of love. In fact, Webb is said to have owned over 6000 jazz recordings.

These radio and TV shows, as well as the movies, were produced by Mark VII Limited, a production company started by Jack Webb in 1951. The production company would be responsible for producing 18 TV shows which would air on NBC. These shows included both runs of Dragnet (1952-1959, and 1967-1970), as well as Adam-12, and Emergency. By 1973, he was Executive Producer of five shows simultaneously. As a personal touch, the hands holding the stamp and hammer used to emboss the VII logo in the closing credit were the hands of Webb himself.

Webb was married four times. His first wife was Actress and singer Julie London, with whom they had two daughters. Interestingly, Webb would employ her and her next husband, Bobby Troup, on his show, Emergency.

Webb would continue to try and revive and recapture his earlier success, and was attempting to bring Dragnet back to television for a third run. He and produced five scripts, using Adam-12 actor Kent McCord as a partner, when Webb died of a heart attack on December 23, 1982. Webb was 62 years old. On his death, LA Police Chief Daryl Gates announced that the badge used by Sgt. Joe Friday, Badge 714, would be retired. Mayor Tom Bradley ordered all flags lowered to half-staff for a day. He was buried with full honors and a 17-gun salute.

Information for this biography was taken from the New York Times archive, from John Dunning's Encyclopedia of Old-Time Radio, from the Internet Movie Database, and from Wikipedia. For Old Time Radio Researchers, I'm your announcer, Patrick André. Thank you for listening.