Raymond Burr

Raymond William Stacy Burr was a Canadian-American actor born May 21, 1917 in New Westminster, just east of Vancouver, British Columbia. His father, William Johnston Burr was a hardware salesman, and his mother, Minerva Annette was a pianist and music teacher from Chicago, Illinois. The family would spend five years in China. However, they would divorce when Burr was six. He would move with his mother, brother and sister, to Vallejo California. Burr would attend San Rafael Military Academy and graduate from Berkeley High School. He is said to have worked in a Vancouver stock company when he was 12.

Burr would work on Broadway in 1941’s “Crazy with the Heat” and 1944 “The Duke of Darkness”, at which time he joined the Navy. After the war, his first screen role was in the John Wayne film “Without Reservations” in 1946. For the next 11 years, he would be in some 50 feature films, along with a wide variety of radio work. His screen presence was difficult, since his weight was often over 300 lbs. However, this sometimes worked to his advantage, such as in the Hitchcock film Rear Window, where he had a significant role.

It was during the late 1940’s to mid-1950’s that radio listeners had a chance of enjoying Burr’s voice. He would perform on a variety of shows such as Pat Novak for Hire, Dragnet – both as police officers, one bad and one good. He was the star, Captain Lee Quince on CBS Radio’s Fort Laramie. His best role is said to have been in 1957’s “The Silent Witness” on CBS Radio Workshop – in which Burr’s voice alone is heard.

But in 1956, Burr auditioned for the role of Hamilton Burger in a CBS television version of Perry Mason. Executive Producer Gail Patrick Jackson told Burr he would be better in the role of Perry Mason, but he had to lose 60 lbs. After a month-long crash diet, Burr tried out. After one look, creator and author, Earl Stanley Gardner, took one look and said, “That’s Perry Mason”. He would have a 9-year run from 1957 to 1966. He would be nominated for three Emmy’s, winning two for Best Actor and Outstanding Performance. Only one show was filmed in color as an experiment to see if the show would translate from Black and White. However, it was decided to end the run in 1966.

Burr would then star in Ironside for Universal Studios. The series would run from 1967 to 1975. Again, the show was very well received, being nominated for 5 Emmys and 2 Golden Globe awards.

Burr would have roles in many other shows, movies, and mini-series. However, it was in 1985 that he would find guaranteed work for the rest of his days. Burr was asked if he would do a made for TV movie, Perry Mason Returns. He agreed to do the Mason movie if Barbara Hale returned to reprise her role as Della Street. Hale agreed and the movie was aired in December 1985. In this version, Della Street became the defendant. By 1985, the rest of the principal cast had passed away, so Hale's real-life son William Katt took the role of Paul Drake, Jr. The movie was very well received, and Burr would make a total of 26 Perry Mason television films.

Burr was a well-known philanthropist and very generous. He supported a wide variety of organizations, including giving his salaries from the Perry Mason movies to charity. His kindness and reputation was well known for many years. Ray Collins, who portrayed Lt. Arthur Tragg on the original Perry Mason series, stated, "There is nothing but kindness from our star, Ray Burr. Part of his life is dedicated to us, and that's no bull. If there's anything the matter with any of us, he comes around before anyone else and does what he can to help. He's a great star—in the old tradition."

During the filming of the final Mason movie, The Case of the Killer Kiss, Burr’s health was failing due to renal cell carcinoma, a malignant kidney tumor that has spread to his liver. Burr would have several “Goodbye” parties before passing away on September 12, 1993. He was survived by his partner of 33 years, Robert Benevides. Burr was 76.

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.