THE SOUND SERIAL

Dick Tracy, Captain Harvel, Flash Gordon etc.

versus

The Scorpion, The Clutching Hand, The Crimson Ghost etc.

Compiling tonight's program was a very frustrating experience; the first "rough-cut" of the show ran some seven hours, and while a von Stroheim might have stuck to his guns and presented it in such a form, we relented a little and cut it down to a very tight four hours. Still, a little long, actually, for a compilation program -- except that we assume that 90% of our audience tonight will be serial devotees, and to that unique section of humanity there's just no such thing as "too much". In any event, we regret very much having to leave out some good things. If we had wanted to present only the best serial material, we could have done very nicely sticking to some half-a-dozen Republics. If we had wanted to present a complete "history" of the sound serial, we could have shown far more excerpts -- but given less meaty chunks of each one. We hope you'll agree with our compromise, which aims to present an overall picture of the sound serial, from the independents as well as the majors, and to cover as many different aspects of the field as possible. If the show goes well and there is sufficient interest, there is certainly ample material available to supplement this program with another one. For a more detailed analysis of the sound serial, we refer you to the article "Serials With Sound" ("Films in Review", June 1953) and "40 Years of Cliff-Hanging" ("Films in Review", February 1957). With these notes we'll have to content ourselves with a brief coverage of the serials represented, and let the excerpts speak for themselves. And were we to list the complete casts for these films, our notes would contain nothing else! In most cases, however, we have attached the complete casts and credits to the excerpts. Just about every silent-screen veteran still active in the thirties - Jack Mulhall, Bill Farnum, Kenneth Harlan, Nigel de Brulier, Monte Blue, Robert Frazier, Clara Kimball Young, Bryant Washburn - made their last stands in the serials, and you'll see all of them -- some three or four times -- during the course of this evening.

Program, in order of screening:

1931:

THE GALLOPING GHOST (Mascot) Dir: Reeves Mason; with Red Grange, Dorothy Gulliver, Walter Miller, Francis X. Bushman jr.

"The Galloping Ghost" was sold as a football thriller (although football plays a negligible role in only two episodes) and somehow it never caught on. It's a pity, because from an action point of view, it was one of the very best of the old Mascots, jam-packed with lively stunt work. Mason was a whiz at this sort of stuff, and of course distinguished himself by directing the big action sequences in such films as "The Charge of the Light Brigade", "Duel in the Sun" and "Ben Hur". (Ep. 2 complete; excerpt of ep. 3)

1934:


Far more polished than most Mascots, this was a darned good actioner. Logic was never a strong point in the Mascots however, and their writers always worked on the assumption that nobody ever remembered action in detail from the previous episodes. Accordingly they cheated like mad, and at least one sequence that we're showing (Frankie Darro's strange new-reel footage!) is quite absurd. You'll also notice stock footage from "Galloping Ghost" too! 
1934:

THE RETURN OF CHANDU (Principal-Sol Lesser) Dir: Ray Taylor; with Bela Lugosi, Clara Kimball Young, Wilfrid Lucas, Maria Alba.
Bela Lugosi, villain of several serials and red-herring of another, here plays the hero -- and ironically enough, only a short while after playing the heavy in Edmund Lowe's "Chandu the Magician". Lesser's serials were always more polished than the Mascots, and, thanks to their musical scores (the Mascots had none) they date far less. Lesser constructed his serials so that the first episode was actually a feature (of some 7 reels) in itself, coming to a satisfactory conclusion. Exhibitors thus had the chance of playing just the feature, or following up with the rest of the serial. Our excerpts - some two reels - are from the latter half of the serial. You'll probably recognize the old gateway (repaired!) from "King Kong" in several scenes.

1935:

THE LOST CITY (Independent; Harry Revier) Dir: Harry Revier; with William Boyd, Kane Richmond, Claudia Dell, Josef Swickard.
Quite certainly the worst serial the talkies turned out ("Queen of the Jungle" was cheaper, but at least had good stock footage) "The Lost City" is an incredible piece of work, seemingly made up as it went along, with an astounding conglomeration of atrocious performances and ridiculous situations. And the dialogue was often, unintentionally, a joy. We've tried to avoid the really laughable bits (one day, if we ever do a "Worst Films of All Time" show we'll include the fantastic episode 8 from this serial!) but even so, what we have included will give you a good idea! William (Stage) Boyd was apparently drunk through the entire serial, and by the final chapter was literally so drunk that he could neither stand erect nor speak distinctly.
If one can look for "historical" content in a farrago of this kind, it is interesting to note that its opening anticipates exactly the opening of "Flash Gordon" a year later.

1936:

THE CLUTCHING HAND (Weiss: Stage & Screen) Dir: Albert Herman; with Jack Hulhail, Rea Shade, William Farnum, Ruth Mix, & everybody.
One of the last of the old-fashioned and rather doddering indie serials, this is an enjoyable throwback to the good old days. The cast is fantastic -- nobody seems to have been passed over -- and even Jon Hall had a minor role, under the name Charles Locken. Within a year or so, independent producers like the Weiss Brothers and Sam Katzman were to tie up with Columbia and with better casts and bigger budgets, their output was infinitely better. Weiss' "Secret of Treasure Island" for Columbia was one of the best action serials ever made.

FLASH GORDON (Universal) Dir: Frederick Stephani; with Buster Crabbe, Jean Rogers, Charles Middleton. Episode One: "The Planet of Peril".
First of 3 Flash Gordon serials (and one "Buck Rogers") with Buster Crabbe, this is still far and away the best serial of its kind. The mixture of expense and economy is surprising; some things are done extremely well, others almost carelessly. On the whole however, it shows the benefit of the extra budget, and the sets borrowed from "The Hunch" and other films add to the values too. One episode even carefully copied some of the weird machines from "Metropolis"! All of the Flash Gordons had a strange intermingling of future and past -- the futuristic machines and rocket ships for example, would be manned by soldiers in costumes and armour of the middle ages! One big departure was a very positive stress on sex -- only hinted at in this chapter, but to come very much into its own in episode two.
1937:

TIM TYLER'S LUCK (Universal) Dir: Ford Beebe; with Frankie Thomas, Jack Hylahall, Francis Robinson. Universal's post-'Flash Gordon' serials had good production values, but they seemed to lack the guts and fast action of their exciting earlier chapter-players as "Pirate Treasure" and the fine Buck Jones serials. "Tim Tyler's Luck" is typical of the post-'36 Universal serials.

1938:

THE GREAT ADVENTURES OF WILD BILL HICKOK (Columbia) Dir: Sam Nelson, Mack Wright, with Bill Elliott, Kermit Maynard, Monte Blue, Mala, Frankie Darro. Episode 3.

The earlier Universals, excepted, and certain Republics too ("The Lone Ranger") most western serials added little that was not found in the regular B westerns. At Columbia they degenerated into little more than fights and chases, although this one, their first western serial, had more production value than most. There's very little plot to it all, and even so, it has to resort to silent-type titles every so often to explain what is going on! But it certainly moves, as did most Colombias, and the agitators keep ringing away non-stop on the sound track.

1939:


We're including these brief excerpts from p. 9 as an example of the brazen way Universal would throw in antiquated stock footage, and make no attempt to match up. In the last episode here, Johnny Mack Brown, who wears a black outfit throughout, rides up in a white hat -- a sure tip-off that stock is on the way. But even with the white hat, the deception is painfully obvious!

1941:

THE IRON CLAW (Columbia) James Horne; with Charles Quigley.

James Horne (who did some of the best Laurel and Hardy comedies) never took his serials seriously; often he deliberately satirised them. Sometimes it paid off well, but here even he didn't seem to care too much. But even this weak serial is good compared with the boring and actionless chapter-players that Columbia turned out, via Sam Katzman, in the late 40's and early 50's.

1941:


Republic were turning out some fine action serials in the 40's - slick, polished, well-written -- and well-directed by the team of Whitney and English. This first chapter, a 3-reeler, is slower-paced than subsequent episodes in that it concentrates on building up mystery and suspense, but it still has some very lively moments. Hidden-killers and villains were a "must" at Republic, and this has a picturesque one in "The Ghost". Ralph Morgan seems the most innocent of all the suspects, and therefore the most guilty. But wait -- Republic use Morgan's voice under the villain's mask too -- which makes it almost a certainty that he is The Ghost! Republic never once played fair in such a situation! The stock footage at the end of the episode -- the destruction of New York -- is from the old Rko picture, "Deluge".
1941:

THE ADVENTURES OF CAPTAIN MARVEL (Republic) Dir.: Whitney & English;
with Tom Tyler, Junior Coghlan, Harry Worth, Louise Currie.
Episode one.

Made when a projected "Superman" serial fell through, "Captain Marvel" is
infinitely superior to all the later Superman serials made by Katzman.
Again, this first episode is a trifle slowly-paced, but superior values
otherwise make up for it; episode two, back to a 2-reel format, reverted to
speedier action. Not that this one is lacking in action, for David Sharpe,
doubling for Tyler, and stock shots from "Storm Over Bengal" — plus the
first-rate special effects of the Lydecker Brothers — keep things moving
along smoothly. Like all self-respecting Republic serials, this has a
syndicate of scientists, one of whom is the mysterious "Scorpion".

1942:

With the Dead End Kids, Lionel Atwill.

When we had to cut three hours from our show tonight, the early 40's, and
the serials of Japanese and Nazi espionage, gave us our biggest bulk cuts —
partially because this is one of the least interesting periods. To represent
this whole group we left only this trailer — which seems to sum everything
up as well a dozen other excerpts could have done.

1946:

THE CRIMSON GHOST (Republic) Dir.: William Whitney, Fred C. Brannon; with
Charles Quigley, Clayton Moore, Rex Lease.

We had too much good, or at least interesting, footage tonight to be able
to go to the bitter end of the serials in the mid-50's, and show the dull,
plodding and boring nonsense that Columbia came up with. Republic never
sank to their level, but their quality was way off too — and this serial,
though some ten years before the end, shows all too clearly how the decline
was setting in. However, it's still snappy and good fun, and "The Crimson
Ghost" is a colorful villain. Up to their old tricks, Republic gave
I. Stanford Jolley co-star billing, and used his voice throughout as that of
the villain. Yet he had only some three or four scenes (towards the very
end of the serial) and needless to say did not turn out to be the hidden
villain! The serial started out with the customary "syndicate", which
however, has been decimated to only two by this time. And how Republic milk
the final unmasking!

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Wm. K. Everson

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