

S. Barrington man turns Golden Age of Radio into career

Carl Amari wasn't alive when the Golden Age of Radio dominated the airwaves, but as a kid growing up in Schiller Park in the 1970s, he was obsessed with old-time radio shows.

His 12-year-old mind became captivated by "The Lone Ranger," "The Green Hornet," "The Shadow," "Inner Sanctum Mystery," "Gunsmoke" and others.

"I made a shrine to classic radio in my basement with Jack Benny photos," said Amari, 48, of South Barrington. "My dad thought I was a really weird kid. He'd say 'Go play outside!' But when it became a business, he said, 'Hey, I like this.'"

It became several businesses, actually, including a nationally syndicated radio show on WIND 560-AM, "Hollywood 360," which Amari co-hosts live with Lisa Wolf every Saturday night from the station's Elk Grove Village studios. The show airs on more than 180 stations around the country, from Los Angeles to Washington D.C.

Besides playing radio shows from the 1930s, '40s and '50s, they do movie reviews, hold trivia contests and have celebrity guests. Actors Channing Tatum, Jason Alexander and Malcolm McDowell have been among the recent guests, some of whom take live questions from listeners.



GIRE & SOTONOFF

**FROM SUBURBS
TO SHOWBIZ**

"I try to make it fun and educational. I don't just play the shows," said Amari, who's a trivia whiz. "People just love classic radio, and they seek out great radio like that. That is how people were entertained in those days. There was no TV. They'd gather around the radio. It was theater of the mind."

These days, Amari is expanding from "theater of the mind" to a theater near you. For the past few years, he's been shuttling between Chicago and Hollywood producing movies. Among his credits are the action-drama "Madison" and the comedy "Eden Court." He's currently producing a remake of the 1972 cult classic zombie movie, "Children Shouldn't Play With Dead Things," and expects to make a major announcement later this year about a story he helped



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Carl Amari of South Barrington hosts the nationally syndicated radio show "Hollywood 360" in the WIND 560-AM studios in Elk Grove Village. He's now branching out from classic radio to produce feature films in Hollywood.

develop with some Hollywood A-listers.

"I'll definitely be producing more movies in the future," Amari said.

Amari's career began because of a mistake. While a student deejay on Triton College's radio station, he decided to play some of his bootlegged tapes of classic radio shows. That was, until he got a cease-and-desist letter from one of the stars of those shows, comedian Mel Blanc.

That letter led Amari to educate himself on how to license and buy the rights to old radio shows. To say he took that lesson and ran with it would be an

understatement.

Amari formed a business, Radio Spirits, and began amassing a collection of classic radio shows — eventually owning more than 60,000. His interest in the genre drew the attention of several old Hollywood stars, including George Burns, who regularly invited Amari to join him for lunch at his country club. The two became friends and ended up working on several projects together, including an audio collection of "Radio's Greatest Comedies." Amari licensed the "Burns & Allen" shows George did with his wife, Gracie.

"He mentored me," Amari

"Hollywood 360"

What: Carl Amari and Lisa Wolf co-host the nationally syndicated "Hollywood 360" radio show, featuring classic radio shows, movie reviews, trivia contests and celebrity guests.

When: 8 p.m. to midnight Saturdays

Where: WIND 560-AM on the radio dial

Info: hollywood360radio.com

said of Burns.

Amari sold Radio Spirits in 1998, but then continued to work in the field. He helped get the satellite radio station, Radio Classics on Sirius XM, up and running. And he created/produced the nationally syndicated radio series, "The Twilight Zone Radio Dramas," hosted by actor Stacy Keach.

In a natural progression, Amari started buying up classic TV shows. Through a new company he launched in 2001, Falcon Picture Group, Amari collected rights to 10,000 classic TV shows such as "Bozo's Circus," "The Real McCoys," "Family Affair" and "The Flip Wilson Show." By owning them, he's able to license them for broadcast or release them on DVD, which he's done with some shows.

In 2007, Amari took on the ultimate classic: the Bible.

"I was ready to create something on my own," he said.

Using his radio drama skills, Amari produced several best-selling audio Bibles, including "The Word of Promise," starring more than a dozen well-known actors. It's so far sold more than 1 million copies. Jesus is played by actor Jim Caviezel — who had that same role in Mel Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ." The series also features the voices of Richard Dreyfuss as Moses, Jon Voight as Abraham, Lou Gossett Jr. as John and Luke Perry as Judas.

Amari gets choked up when he thinks of the response from listeners. Of all the things he's done so far in his career, he says, the Bible project is the work he's most proud of.

"People will track me down and tell stories of how listening to this saved them from suicide, or helped them get through a tough time in life. It's changed people's lives," he said. "I feel like I've done the most good for people through that."

— **Jamie Sotonoff**

• *Dann Gire and Jamie Sotonoff are always looking for suburban people in showbiz. If you know of someone who would make a great column feature, email them at dgire@dailyherald.com and jsotonoff@dailyherald.com.*