

Any way you look at it, **Gunmoke** is a prodigy among TV shows. It has been in the vanguard of the "adult" Westerns and of the so-called "psychological" Westerns-although its makers deny any responsibility for the latter. It was-and still is-the most literate Western. It has transformed its actors from little-known bit players into celebrities mobbed everywhere they go; made tidy fortunes for its creators, and sold enough cigarets to stretch several times around the world.

Even more amazing under Chester (Dennis Weaver), Marshal Dillon (James Arness and Doc Adams (Milburn Stone) are three reasons for show's success.

the circumstances, it is the most popular show of any sort on the air today-and has been right at the top ever since its beginning in radio. This despite the fact that it very often has no story in the commonly accepted sense of the word, sometimes being little more than a character sketch or vignette. Since everyone envies-and no one argues with-success, it inevitably has become the most widely imitated show. Some of the things Matt Dillon does, which used to be continued

thought pretty daring, have become cliché's because **every** Western does them. Thus it is fair to say **Gunsmoke** is also the most influential of its kind.

How did it get that way? And what's more to the point, how does it manage to stay that way?

Like most successes, this one was achieved partly by accident and partly by dogged perseverance over the chorus of "experts" who swore it couldn't be done.

Back in 1952 there were laboring in the vineyards of CBS radio a couple of young men named Norman Macdonnell and John Meston. Meston, a Dartmouth graduate, is an angular-faced, strangely inarticulate-seeming man—a Colorado product who had spent a good deal of time working on southern Colorado ranches. Macdonnell, on the other hand, had come by his love of cowhands and their patois through a stable he had acquired in- of all places—Hollywood.

They had the notion that a Western might be done for radio which would be, as Macdonnell puts it, "non-horse-operatic," where everyone would behave more or less as human beings behave in real life, where the characters would resemble the real articles. They sat down and made out a list of all the things they planned not to do. No one would be allowed to say "sidewinding varmint," no one would carry two guns slung low on the hip, **no** one would have a favorite horse, much less one that did tricks.

Instead, the show would operate on the revolutionary but entirely valid principle that in the early West the most hated man in town was usually the marshal.

"Half the time the town tamers **were** worse than the gunmen they were hired to tame," explains Macdonnell. "And they were constantly suspect, no matter what good guys they were.

And Matt Dillon is no exception. If you look closely you will see that there are only three in the world who care at all whether Matt lives or dies. One is Doc, who digs the bullets out of him; another is Chester, who admires him and calls him Muster Dellon, and the other is Kitty, the dance-hall girl, who loves him."

So Meston wrote a radio show called "Jeff Spain." When they showed it to a then-top-executive of CBS, Harry Ackerman, he told them they must be out of their minds. "Westerns are for children," he said flatly, and the idea was dropped.

However, a month or so later a show called "Operation Underground" suddenly went off the air and the network was left with an embarrassing gap in its programming. Ackerman, as it turned out, had his own title for a Western—"Gunsmoke."

"After that," says Meston, "everything was simple. We simply did 'Jeff Spain' and called it 'Gunsmoke.' "

The show was an immediate success. Even the hardest-to-please critics were impressed. Then three months later something transpired which made Macdonnell and Meston look like heroes. A movie called "High Noon" as released and suddenly the adult Western came into almost universal public acceptance. "Gunsmoke" was off and running so far ahead of the field that no one could catch it.

Three years later the transition was made to television. For this delicate operation a new producer-director was brought in, an ebullient gentleman named Charles Marquis Warren, while Macdonnell functioned as associate producer and Meston continued to write the radio scripts. It was Warren who cast the television version—and on this score he fought both Macdonnell and Meston, who were determined to simply use the radio cast, regardless of whether or not the actors

suiting their roles visually.

Warren won-luckily, because his casting was inspired: Big Jim Arness (whose best-known previous credit had been the title role in "The Thing"), hulking, fatherly, capable of great toughness and tenderness; Dermis Weaver, the slightly comic yet human and dignified hanger-on around the jail house; Milburn Stone, perfect as the elder statesman and wise man, "Doc" and Amanda Blake, whose Kitty strikes a perfect balance between the hardness of her profession and the softness which makes her acceptable in every American home.

As it had in radio, Gunsmoke immediately proved a smash. What's more, the TV version had what amounted to an inexhaustible supply of scripts. The radio shows-for the most part-were adapted to the new medium. Then success began to go to everyone's head. According to Warren, "It reached the point where I'd arrive on the set in the morning only to have Arness tell me that 'Matt Dillon wouldn't say a line like that!' Everybody suddenly got to be a self-appointed authority."

After a year of this, Warren left, and the show reverted to Macdonnell and Meston.

And it should be said that it is primarily their taste and judgment that make the show what it is today. What's their secret?

"Well," says Macdonnell, "we try to capture some of the real feeling of *the West*. As well as something real in the people. As soon as your lead becomes a hero, you're in trouble. Sometimes we'll sit down and say to ourselves, You know, this fellow Dillon is just getting too noble. Let's fix him.' So we do. John writes a script where poor old Matt gets outdrawn and outgunned and pulls every dumb trick in the book. It makes him, and us, human.

"Then there is the trick of under-

writing. John used to underwrite so much he'd drive everybody crazy, especially on radio. You know-with the sparse dialog and long pauses. They kept telling us, 'You can't do it.' Every time somebody'd come up with that one, John would ask in his mumbling way, 'Where in the book does it say you can't?' So we did.

"We both like the sound of real cowboy talk. Some of it gets on the show. Like the time I heard a cow-hand of mine admiring a new mare. 'Looks as if she might run a hole in the wind,' he said. John used the line in a script."

Meston's principal preoccupation is with character. Indeed, he has been accused of not being able to write stories at all. Be this as it may, he has written some 160 radio scripts and each one of them has begun, he says, with a phrase, a scrap of dialog or some minute aspect of Western Americana that just happens to please him. "I like to write with great simplicity," he says. "And I like to have my people solve real problems realistically. I like character better than story, and to tell the truth I like radio writing better than television. In radio there is more play for the imagination."

It was Meston who conceived of the Chester character always calling Matt "Muster Dellon." This would not be unusual except that it has always seemed so inexorably right. Warren invented Chester's limp (to explain away Chester's constant presence around the marshal's office). Again, like almost everything in it is somehow fitting.

Says Warren, who is currently producing a fancy new Western of his own called *Rawhide*: "Gunsmoke? It proves that people will still go for folksy persiflage and that get-nowhere dialog. But, you know, it's got something. Just don't ask me what."

Dwight Whitney