

Behind the Tube: This Is "The FBI"

By Julius Duschka

I first came under J. Edgar Hoover's spell during the 1930s when as a boy I ate my corn flakes and sent in my box top and dime for a Junior G-Man badge. From badges I graduated to big-little books and comics filled with accounts of FBI derring-do. Later, I listened to "The FBI - in Peace and War!" on the radio and read books about the FBI by Quentin Reynolds, Don Whitehead and Mr. Hoover.

But now the FBI walks, runs, stakes out, examines, confers, drives, flies, shoots and arrests - all in color - in my living room every Sunday night. It is said that 48 million other Americans—including Mr. Hoover, of course—regularly join me in watching Efrim Zimbalist Jr. and Stephen Brooks track down high commissioners of La Cosa Nostra, Communist spies and lesser bad guys week after week. Throughout the nation the show ranks 14th or 15th in popularity. But in the Washington area it is the fourth or fifth most popular program.

I found the TV-FBI on the Warner Brothers lot in Burbank, California out beyond the Hollywood Hills. The first person I met on the sound stage where "The FBI" is filmed was a real FBI agent. I was not taken by surprise, however, because I had heard that the always-efficient Bureau

kept the filming of the television series about its exploits under constant surveillance. Nevertheless, FBI agents and bank tellers have always made me nervous, and I did not feel at ease until I later discovered that the agent detailed to the television series had once been a Junior G-Man himself.

"Accuracy's the big thing in this program," Charles Larson, the soft-spoken, balding producer of "The FBI," told me as we talked in his office. Larson, a writer who won his spurs in television by doing "Lone Ranger" scripts and whose credits include impressive "Studio One" productions, has a copy of Mr. Hoover's red-jacketed book, "A Study of Communism," on a corner table of his spacious office which is only a few minutes away from the sets for "The FBI." On his coffee table is a government pamphlet entitled "Ninety-Nine Facts About the FBI."

"This is true, accurate; this is the way it is," says Larson, pointing to the pile of 50 or so FBI scripts in another corner of his office. "We're not dealing with James Bond or 'The Man From U.N.C.L.E.'"

Perhaps not. With the use of official case numbers and the frequent display of FBI insignia and other par-

aphernalia, the viewer is given the impression that he is seeing a case unfold in just the way special agents developed it. Actually, however, each show is only a dramatic interpretation of a carefully disguised FBI case. "We're trying to balance the importance of truth," Larson explains, "with the necessities of drama."

The FBI techniques displayed on the television screen are authentic. When, for example, the story line requires a piece of evidence like a hair or a strand of thread from a coat to be photographed under a microscope, the hair or thread is sent from Burbank to Washington so that a photo of it can be made in the real FBI laboratory. The photograph is then mailed back to the Warner Brothers lot and used in the proper place on the show.

The two-part show "The Executioner" which began last Sunday (March 12) and will be concluded tonight (Channel 7, 8 p.m.) started as an "Interesting Case Memorandum" prepared some time ago by FBI employes in Washington working under the supervision of C. D. (Deke) DeLoach, one of two men who hold the title of Assistant to The Director. Now at Warner Brothers - as has long been the case in all FBI offices - when the words "The Director" are used they





refer only to Mr. Hoover.

The memorandum was one of hundreds that DeLoach has shipped by the boxload to Quinn Martin, executive producer of "The FBI" in the two years since Mr. Hoover (and it is always Mr. Hoover at Warner Brothers or at any FBI office) gave Martin's QM Productions and Warner Brothers permission to do a television series on the FBI. Under a 1954 Federal law no one can use the FBI name, cases, files or symbols without The Director's approval.

Producer Larson says he likes to think of the FBI shows as dramatized documentaries, and that may be as good a way as any to describe them. The FBI memoranda that strike the producer's fancy are farmed out to writers who embroider them into dramatic shows. The programs have evolved from introspective to action television. "The Executioner," for instance, is a straightaway chase based on Case No. 72-7841C. By the time this installment is over, the FBI will have tracked down two Cosa Nostra commissioners and a couple of their "contract killers." Final scripts of the show were sent to DeLoach in Washington for his approval, a standard operating procedure for "The FBI."

In the first FBI television shows 18

months ago there was considerable introspective talk by Zimbalist's inspector Lewis Erskine about his wife (who had been killed before the series began when she got in the way of a bullet meant for him) and his now motherless but grown daughter. Stephen Brooks, the young, handsome actor who plays Special Agent Jim Rhodes and is Erskine's No. 1 assistant, had a romantic interest in the daughter. But this sub-plot was soon dropped, reportedly at the request of The Director. Special Agents don't fool around with Inspectors' daughters, and now Rhodes is merely Erskine's "Robin".

Scripts are not only checked and approved by Mr. Hoover or one of his top aides but FBI security checks were run on actors Zimbalist, Brooks and Philip Abbott (who portrays assistant FBI director Arthur Ward) before they were signed for their roles. Extras and bit players who portray other agents are not given FBI checks, but the casting director for the show knows they must be clean-cut and well-barbered.

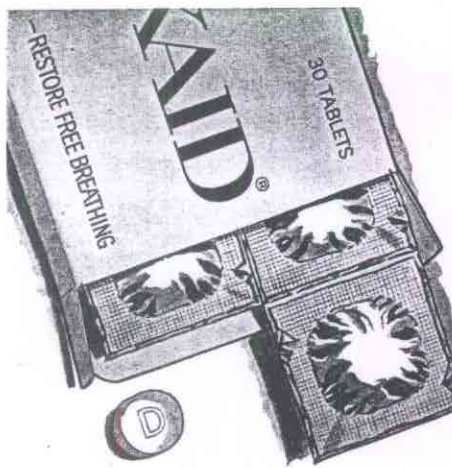
"I certainly would not want to have any of the beatniks with long sideburns and beards as employees of the Bureau," Mr. Hoover told a House appropriations subcommittee last year.

Mr. Hoover said that he was not looking for the "collar ad" type but that he wanted men who were "clean-cut, mature, and who will measure up to the image which I think the American people feel an FBI man should be." Mr. Hoover also said he has received thousands of letters from viewers of "The FBI" who told him that Zimbalist looks good, like an FBI man should.

Zimbalist, who is of Hungarian descent and the son of a concert violinist, has black hair that is a little long over the ears for an FBI agent but is quite conservative for a Sunday evening idol. His face is deeply tanned, his nose is straight and his jaw is firm, but he is old enough to be conscious about his age. He wouldn't tell me how old he was; nor would anyone else around Warner Brothers. But a little amateur investigative work and some plain old Sherlock Holmes deduction led me to conclude that Zimmy—as everyone on the set calls him—is in his late forties.

Everyone should look as good as he does at his age! He says he gets up at 5:30 every morning to play tennis before reporting to the studio at 7:30 or 8. The days on "The FBI" set are long, often stretching 10 or 11 hours,

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"The FBI" Continued

and Jimmy says he generally is ready for bed by 9:30. These are certainly exemplary hours for a man who has come to symbolize the FBI almost as much as Mr. Hoover himself. Zimbaldist lives alone. His first wife died and he is divorced from his second. He collects first editions of rare books and reads 17th and 18th century novels as well as books on metaphysics.

The only fault Mr. Hoover might find with Jimmy is that he is a compulsive gum-chewer. Zimbaldist does not smoke and like all actors he watches his diet because he is worried about a paunch and jowls. So as he whiles away the seemingly interminable waiting between takes he vigorously chews gum. When it is time for him to be Inspector Erskine, however, he carefully parks his gum in an out-of-the-way corner of the camera platform.

Hovering around Jimmy on the set is a tall, greying, helpful, pleasant and polite man who is the FBI agent detailed to the show. In the tradition of his calling he asks to be anonymous. He is no James Bond (for one thing, he drinks a rather ordinary California Chablis with tenderloin beef tips for dinner). But he is good company and it is easy to understand why Mr. Hoover put his television trust in him. Special Agent Anonymous told me he had talked with The Director in Washington before taking on this assignment and that the importance of his job was impressed upon him.

On set, the resident FBI agent is concerned about such matters as the language used by Jimmy and the other actors portraying FBI agents, the tone of their voices, the way they look, and, of course, the manner in which the FBI makes arrests. Zimbaldist, for instance has only four suits to choose from in the shows because

Clean-cut, mature, and who will measure up to the image which I think the American people feel an FBI man should be ...



most agents can only afford to have about four suits on their \$200-a-week salaries.

"The FBI should approach people in a business-like, friendly way and an agent should say, 'Pardon me, FBI,' or something like that," the anonymous agent told me. "I see to it that arrests on the show are done in a professional manner. No shouting or pushing people around. We don't do that in the FBI. Of course, if a man is a hard-bitten criminal there is a time for aggressiveness.

"But," the agent adds, "I'm not here to tamper with dramatic values. My responsibility is only to see to it that there is a dignified, accurate portrayal of the FBI."

The script for one scene in tonight's show calls for Inspector Erskine to show a woman his identification card. "FBI," he says, business-like.

The woman, according to the script, is "impressed" and registers this fact on her face before saying, "Well, what

Continued on next page

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"The FBI" Continued

do you know about that."

Whenever Zimbalist or another actor needs to flash an identification card, he borrows the resident agent's card.

Hovering around both Jimmy and the FBI agent is another man intimately connected with the show who, in the tradition of his calling, also prefers to be anonymous. He is the man from J. Walter Thompson, the advertising agency for the Ford Motor Co. which pays \$13 million a year for the privilege of sponsoring "The FBI" each week on the ABC television network. The man from J. Walter Thompson is of medium height and has a rather slight build, but he is a man to be reckoned with on the set because he represents the people who pay the bills. And it costs more than \$160,000 to produce a single hour-long television show.

While the FBI agent on the set worries about human images, the J. Walter Thompson man is largely concerned with automotive images. He makes certain that new Fords are available when needed for the automobile chases that are a staple of the

shows. You might think that he would want FBI agents to ride in Fords and La Cosa Nostra commissioners to be seen only in, say, Chevrolets. But, no, that is not the way advertising agencies work. If there is to be an automobile it must be a Ford. Automobile crashes are inevitable in an action show like "The FBI," but the man from J. Walter Thompson tries to keep them at a minimum and as bloodless as possible.

About half of "The FBI" is filmed on location and the climatic scenes tonight were made early in February in the San Gabriel Mountains 70 miles east and north of Los Angeles, although the setting is supposed to be the Appalachian Mountains in Pennsylvania. The show's normal home is Sound Stage 3-A, a huge, barn of a building on the Warner Brothers Burbank lot, hard by a 30-year-old New York brownstone street set where "Scarface" and many other Jimmy Cagney movies were filmed.

At the one end of the sound stage is a set duplicating a couple of marble corridors, two dark-paneled offices and

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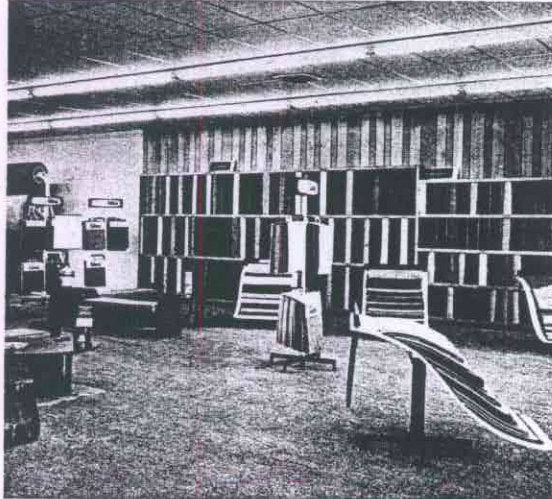
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"The FBI" Continued

to Agent
Rhodes, Mr.
"Deke" DeLoach,
or something
like that...



the black elevator doors of the FBI headquarters in the Justice Department building in Washington. The comfortable brown leather couch in Assistant Director Ward's office, a copy of "Deke" DeLoach's own office in Washington, is a favorite with napping technicians when the set is not in use. One was sleeping there when I looked in on the office. Faithful as their productions of the corridors and offices are, they remain only a set. The door marked "J. Edgar Hoover, Director, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Entrance," leads into a blank wall.

The show's opening and closing views of the Justice Department building and other Washington scenes were shot in the spring of 1965, when Zimbalist spent a week in Washington trying to learn something about the FBI and its procedures. They were updated last spring when Zimbalist returned, principally to be photographed in a prototype of the 1967 Ford Mustang convertible—in which he drives away from the Justice Department each week after solving yet another case.

Around 30 shows have been filmed for each of the two seasons "The FBI" has been on television. The show is presented year-round; so, many of the shows can be seen twice in a year. Ford recently decided to sponsor it for a third year and it currently is also shown in 26 foreign countries. Seven to eight days are required to film one, hour-long show which—when time is taken out for commercials and credits—runs only 43 minutes on the tube. A single scene for example, is often filmed seven times before the director is satisfied.

Like all television shows, "The

FBI" mercilessly devours writers, actors and material. About 25 script writers contribute to the series during a year, even though much of the dialogue heard on Sunday nights comes from the typewriters of Producer Charles Larson; Norman Jolley, the associate producer of the show; and Mark Rogers, a writer who regularly works with Larson and Jolley. All three know the show so well they can quickly rewrite a script to their—and the FBI's—liking. Seven or eight directors are used during the filming season, which this year ran 10 months—from last May to this March. There are 10 to 15 speaking parts in each show.

"You can do only so many kidnappings or spy stories," Larson lamented. "We're always looking in the FBI memoranda for unusual angles, unusual villains, unusual conflicts."

The FBI's television audience, he says, prefers spy cases, accounts about organized crime and stories where the lives of Zimbalist and Brooks are endangered. A particularly successful episode had Brooks riding in a truck with a box of nitroglycerine in his hands.

Another reason for the success of the show is the presence each week of Inspector Erskine and Special Agent Rhodes. Two real FBI men, if indeed it is any longer possible to separate FBI reality from myth, are seldom flown across the country to solve one big case after another. But, as Larson noted, "you don't have high ratings on television without continuing characters."

"People like to see their friend Inspector Erskine week after week," Larson added. "Why, they even write to him now to ask how to get into the FBI."



Julius Duschka was political correspondent for The Washington Post until last September when he became associate director of Stanford University's new professional journalism fellowship program. He continues to contribute occasional articles to this paper.