For Jess Cain, A Life of Laughs, With No Regrets

By Greg O'Brien
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What's in a name? Plenty, if you're Jess Cain. When the Boston radio legend, former television host, and veteran actor was baptized 78 years ago at St. Agatha's in West Philadelphia, the Irish priest administering the first sacrament declared, "I'm not going to name this child Jesse, a pagan name like that!"

A closer reading of scripture revealed that Jesse is one of the first names mentioned in the Bible. And so Jesse it was.

"Part of my curse growing up was my name," said Cain from his home on the flat of Beacon Hill, noting the forename is often given to girls, with the feminine spelling of Jessie. It was an added curse growing up in a "dinky row house" in North Philly, sharing a room with a grandfather in cramped quarters and eating breakfast in a kitchen with a hole in the linoleum floor that leaked crumbs onto his dad's Model T Ford in the garage below. It didn't help, either, that Cain was a skinny little kid with a crosseye that could be corrected only if he wore thick glasses with a pinhole eye patch in one lens that looked like a hard-boiled egg split in half.

"It was horrifying," recalled Cain, a founding father of local morning AM radio programming in Boston, a Rosetta stone of entertainment and culture at WHDH for more than three decades as host of the eponymous *Jess Cain Show*, and a nominee for the national Radio Hall of Fame whose double-figure ratings have never been matched in the region.

Indeed, it was a miracle — the sovereign hand of God — that Cain survived his youth emotionally intact.

"There was constant needling," said Cain, noting that the provocations extended from the playground to the classroom where the nuns, the Sisters of St. Joseph, held sway over everything from discipline to handwriting. "The nuns wouldn't allow me to be left-handed, so they tied my left hand behind my back, running a small piece of clothesline from my wrists through a loop in my corduroy knickers. One nun, Sister Theresa Marie, was particularly derisive. "You are a bold and brazen article," she often told Cain, "and you won't amount to anything!"

The cornerstone of Cain's blue-collar parish, St. Matthew's, was a former World War I Army barracks from Hog Island in Philadelphia that served as a church. The parish couldn't afford a Catholic school, so the faithful's children were shipped off to nearby St. Bernard's School where they were treated as trespassers. "Why don't you go over and sit on a hill until they build you a school," the nuns often told the interlopers. One morning, Cain was late for school after serving the 7 a.m. Mass, and so a friend of his father drove him to St. Bernard's. Racing out of the car, Cain caught his school bag on the rear bumper, and was then dragged several feet, tearing a gaping hole in his pants and his knee. "I limped into school and was ordered to stay in the cloakroom because I was late," Cain recalled. "I had a tough time rationalizing this. I was serving Mass. I was doing the Lord's work!"

Cain, who later pioneered a four-hour radio format of music, news, and cutting edge humor with comic characters like Sidney Flack, the PR man, Jack Crack, the beat poet, and Dirt Cloudy, the sports announcer, had much to rationalize in his early days, but the challenges honed his humor. "Humor, as someone once said, is tragedy reviewed in tranquility," said Cain. "I can relate to that."

Other than direction from his parents, the inspiration of an uncle who was a published poet, and the mentoring of a friend named Horace Fornace, called "Junior" for obvious reasons, Cain's only consistent reinforcement as a youth came through acting. But in the beginning, it wasn't pretty. "My first memory on the stage was in kindergarten," he said. "I was a cowboy in a schoolyard play and I wet my pants. I tried to cover it up by sliding the holster over. All the parents laughed, and I died. I just died."

Jess Cain at home in his Beacon Hill condo. He is a nominee for induction into the Radio Hall of Fame. Balloting for this year's contenders will be by broadcasting executives who are Hall members, but the general public can cast votes online by becoming Hall members for a dues payment of $15. To cast a vote for Jess Cain, visit the Radio Hall of Fame at radiohof.org. Selections will be made August 1.

Four years later, his career was redeemed while playing Mickey Mouse in a silk costume with a rubber hose for a tail. "One of the kids on stage pulled off my tail, which was held by a staple. The audience was amused. I turned around and bonked the kid on the head, and the place went into an uproar. The incident became part of the show, and I realized then that I could make people laugh."

Cain never looked back from there. "Movies and radio had such an impact on me when I was young," said Cain. "I would walk back from a Saturday matinee and be Jimmy Cagney, Pat O'Brien, or Frederic March. I could sustain that. The mirror in grandpop's and my room became the television set when I was ten. I would constantly mug in front of it." Cain continued his acting at Northeast Catholic High School, the largest Catholic boys high school in the country at the time and a place with an excellent drama department. After an exceptionally good performance one day, Cain received a surprise visit backstage by none other than Sister Theresa Marie, who had once said he would never amount to anything. "She hugged me," recalled Cain, still stunned by the visit. "She was glorying in the fact that I had been one of her students. Previously, I had thought that if I ever saw her again, I would spit in her face. Instead, I got a tear in my eye. It was a very emotional moment. What a turnaround!"

All through high school, Cain clearly relished all the "fuss" actors received; he was smitten with the ego of it, but most importantly, he wanted to entertain. After graduation, his career was put on hold for a supporting role; he enlisted in the U.S. Army and served in the infantry in World War II with Audie Murphy's company in Europe, receiving a Silver Star in the process. After the war he attended LaSalle College, then returned to acting —this time on Broadway, playing the comic Harry Shapiro in Stalag 17. The show was in New York for a year, then toured for another.

Cain then landed the lead role in a national television show out of Philadelphia, "Marge & Jeff." For a year and a half, the show ran on the old Dumont network before it folded. Out of work, married with a child and another on the way, Cain was scrambling for the next gig. He ultimately found it in South Bend, Indiana, in the land of "Touchdown Jesus." A friend opened the door for Cain at Notre Dame's radio and television station, an NBC affiliate, where he was given a jazz show, hosted "Mother's Movies" (an MGM film package), and met a young broadcaster from Boston named, Jack Hynes.

After year on the job, Hynes — the son of then Boston Mayor John B. Hynes — returned East to work at WBZ-TV. "If I find anything, I'll liberate you," he told Cain as he walked out the door. The call came six months later after Hynes had moved to WHDH-TV, which was about to go on the air as Channel 5. Cain was hired at WHDH to host a movie show, which never got off the ground for lack of movie rights, so he was relegated to radio — an assignment he protested at first. "You don't understand," Cain pleaded with his new boss, the uncompromising William P. McGrath. "It's over with radio! It's all pictures now."

Apparently, even in radio, it ain't over til it's over. For the next 35 years, Cain sat at center stage with his mike, playing a leading role in Boston radio, also appearing for a time at noon on Channel 5 to host the old New England Food Show. In addition, he signed the station on the air and off every day; in fitting irony, his was the last voice heard on WHDH-TV after the television station shut down when its license was transferred to WCVB in Needham. The radio station continued broadcasting under new ownership.

After teaming up for two and a half years with Ray Dorey, a former singer with the Benny Goodman Band, Cain got his own early-morning show, first airing at 5:30 a.m, then later from 6 a.m. to 10. His guests over the years were a virtual Who's Who of Hollywood: Lucille Ball, Clint Eastwood, Peter Ustinov, Steve Lawrence, Eydie Gorme, Michael Cain, Rod Steiger and Alfred Hitchcock, to note a few.

On the day Hitchcock was interviewed, Cain told a house full of visiting relatives to tune in over breakfast. Hitchcock and Cain on the air conversed about various murder plots: an English woman killing her husband with a frozen leg of lamb, then serving the murder weapon up to a Scotland Yard inspector over dinner, and the grisly use of kitchen implements like an electric carving knife and a garbage disposal.

"How would you remedy a house full of 15 people who have overstayed their welcome?" Cain asked Hitchcock.

The director paused for a moment, then in a characteristic, exaggerated monotone replied, "Botulism!"

Moments later during a commercial break, the phone rang in the control room. It was Cain's brother-in-law. "I can't tell you how much we've enjoyed our stay," he blurted out. "We won't be here when you get home."

Always an entertainer, Cain in his "spare time" enjoyed performing lead roles in the North Shore Theater where he appeared in shows like *On Golden Pond* and *The Odd Couple* with actor Tom Poston, and in 1967 he recorded the now celebrated "Carl Yastrzemski Song," an ode to Yaz during his Triple Crown season. The words were written by John Connolly, who worked at the station and had written for several Boston papers. The song is played in *Fever Pitch*, the new movie about a sad sack Sox fan, and has been referenced on many television shows over the years, The Gong Show and Chicago Hope among them.

As he nears 79, Cain has the heart but not the body for more entertaining: a hip replacement, a broken knee, and now a bad back. "I do miss it," he said, "but I just couldn't take the pressure again. I was on a treadmill and didn't know it — getting up at 4:30 a.m. five and six days a week. There was no time to catch your breath. I feel a lot of guilt now thinking back on my wife Jean (a renowned urban landscape artist), saying to our four kids: 'Be quiet, your dad is sleeping.'"

With plenty of time now for reflection, Cain is critical of what he hears on radio these days. "I don't think it's a power for good," he said of talk show trends. "I think radio has killed two forms of humor — whimsy and blue material where the audience was allowed to interpret. Today everything is so bombastic. A lot of it is self-righteous anger, total intolerance designed to feed beliefs you already have, as opposed to getting people to think."

Case in point: Many years ago while visiting a friend in Sarasota, Fla., Cain was asked to take a walk on the beach with a young broadcaster about to start his first FM show in Detroit, and to advise him on the finer points of radio. "The fellow was named Howard Stern," said Cain with aversion. "I could have drowned him, but I didn't. I had the opportunity!"

Throughout his far-ranging life, Cain has had many opportunities, most of them for the good. In so many ways he is fundamentally Irish. His maternal grandparents hail from a fishing village in Sligo, and at a recent therapy session for his back problem, he instinctively related to an old Irish priest ("I just call him Father") wearing a t-shirt emblazoned: "Made in America with Irish parts."

The most significant component for Cain has been humor. As he ponders a long, successful career, there are no regrets. "When people look back on my work," he said, "I hope they think it helped make them laugh, that it gave them a lift. That's what laughter does. It gets you through life.

"If you don't laugh, you cry. It's as simple as that."

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