

Billy Batson, Radio Raconteur!

By Dr. Peter M. Coogan

Billy Batson was a superhero, but only in his dreams.

In 1939 Billy Batson's parents, a pair of well-off archeologists, gave him a stack of superhero comics to read while they were off on a dig. He loved them and started to dream up his own adventures of Captain Marvel, a super version of himself as an adult. When they returned, Billy told them his stories, and Batson Sr. took him to see his cousin, Sterling Morris, owner of radio station WHIZ, who taped a few of the boy's stories and put them on the air as filler. The response was huge and the audience demanded more.

Billy's uncle Thaddeus served as his agent and got him a good deal, setting up a similar deal with Fawcett Comics to promote the radio show. Morris helped shape the tales, including transforming the kindly and responsible Thaddeus into the evil Dr. Sivana (which the good-natured Thaddeus loved). The shows were successful and soon were spun off with shows about Mary Marvel (based on Billy's actual sister) and Captain Marvel Jr. (based on Freddy Freeman, the sixteen-year old orphan news vendor who sold comic books to Billy). The Batsons took in Freddy and he and Mary began to date, eventually marrying.

At first, Fawcett published Billy's stories as straightforward superhero stories, but then Thaddeus insisted that they include the framing devices of Billy at the microphone so as to promote the radio show (which are available at www.olderadio.com).¹ (My dad had one of these old Captain Marvel radio shows on a 78 rpm record. I loved listening to that record as a kid). The other Marvel Family stories were also adapted from the radio shows, but on the radio these were performed these more along the lines of the Superman radio show with actors portraying each part, unlike Billy's monologues.

The program was successful, as were the comics, and Uncle Thaddeus invested wisely. The show came to an end in 1953 with the lawsuit brought by DC Comics. Most people don't realize that Billy's deposition (he did not testify in person but by deposition, thanks to expert lawyering by Thaddeus) brought down the comics and radio show when Billy admitted to creating Captain Marvel after reading Superman comics. Billy, only twenty-five at the time, moved out to Los Angeles and sought parts in films, but ended up taking a management position at a public radio station. He still shows up occasionally on *Law and Order* as a judge.

In 1970, Billy Batson met Jack Kirby, who had recently moved to California after leaving Marvel Comics to work for DC Comics, and from this meeting came a proposal by Kirby to revive Captain Marvel.² And this meeting stirred Batson's interest in other media adaptations. In 1971 Billy Batson wanted to return to performing on radio and worked on a deal with the fledgling National Public Radio to run short episodes of new Captain Marvel adventures (Batson was ahead of his time: in 1981 NPR aired a Star Wars

adaptation and in 1985 a thirteen-episode Doc Savage show).³ DC revived publication of *SHAZAM!* in 1972 as part of the same deal, intending to run the comics as a cross-promotion with the radio show.⁴ The radio show never came about as it conflicted with the CBS Saturday morning show, *Shazam!*,⁵ and Batson didn't realize that he had lost the rights to Captain Marvel as a result of the lawsuit settlement in 1953.

It is possible that articles claiming that the Marvel Family members were regular superheroes and interacted with established WNU personages such as Superman or The Shadow are based upon a book written by Rick Freeman (Frederick "Freddy" Freeman) that he prepared as part of the return of the Marvel Family in the 1970s.⁶ Freeman had come across Philip José Farmer's *Tarzan Alive* (1972), and thinking the book a clever fictional biography (not realizing that Tarzan is a real human being), he wanted to do a similar treatment of Captain Marvel, and so prepared a history of the Marvel Family. I first saw a version of this book in photocopy form while unloading a box at Michigan State University's Comic Art Collection (I don't think it has been cataloged yet, but if you go to MSU you can request it in Special Collections) and later I saw a photocopied version selling for \$100 at Comic-Con International in San Diego. Articles based on the manuscript were also published in an obscure Marvel Family fanzine, *Marveleum*. Freeman did a fair amount of genuine genealogical research on the Batsons and his own family and made the book look like a collection of actual documents, so it would be very convincing to any researcher who came across it.⁷

¹ Anyone writing about Captain Marvel has to contend with the framing device of Billy telling the adventures of himself as Captain Marvel over the radio and also of Billy not aging. Why would Fawcett have included these framing devices? If Billy were relating these adventures, wouldn't crooks show up and either shoot him or gag and kidnap him from the radio station (as crooks tried to do to The Shadow)? How does one explain Tawky Tawny or Mr. Mind? Further, if the whole thing actually happened as reported in the comics, what was a good Jewish boy like Solomon doing fraternizing with all those pagan gods and heroes? The principle of Occam's razor states that the simplest explanation is the best, so it makes sense to view Captain Marvel's comic book adventures as a straightforward retelling of events, which means seeing them as comic-book versions of Billy's radio show.

² Ronin Ro, *Tales to Astonish*, p. 147n (Bloomsbury Books, 2004). Unfortunately, the company did not want Kirby (or C.C. Beck) to draw the book or his assistant Mark Evainer to write it, and it was given to editor Julius Schwartz, writer Denny O'Neil, and artist Bob Oskner, until Nelson Bridwell convinced them to let Beck take over the art chores.

³ For more on the Star Wars adaptation, see "Fable for the Mind's Eye" <<http://www.strangenewworlds.com/issues/feature-09b.html>>. For more on the Doc Savage radio show, see "Doc on the Air" <<http://members.aol.com/the86floor/radio/>>. For a sample of the Doc Savage scripts, go to Simply Radio Scripts <http://simplyscripts.com/radio_af.html>.

⁴ *Shazam!* 1, cover dated February 1973.

⁵ *Shazam!*, produced by Filmation, aired on CBS Saturday mornings from September 1974 to May 1976.

⁶ For one such example, please see Al Schroeder's "A Bewitched Batson Genealogy, or the Marvel Family Tree," *Schroeder's Speculations*, 20 Sept. 2003, <<http://www.novanotes.com/specul/batson.htm>>.

⁷ In addition, in an effort to generate publicity for these revival projects, Freeman hired an actor to appear as a younger version of himself outside the Cobalt Club, where real mystery men and costumed vigilantes were members. It's possible Freeman, who might well have been a member of the club, was attempting to generate seed money for his projects by creating interest in the Marvel Family among the millionaire clubmen. This appearance is noted in the fourth Prince Zarkon novel, *The Earth-Shaker* (Doubleday, 1982) by Lin Carter. Thanks to Art Bollmann for bringing this early example of "guerilla marketing" to my attention.