

**You're listening to Imaginary Worlds, a show about how we create them and why we suspend our disbelief. I'm Eric Molinsky.**

**I always enjoy a good Rod Serling impression because it's just so much fun to do his voice.**

### *MONTAGE*

**But Rod Serling wasn't doing an intentionally spooky voice. That's how he talked. Also, his style of writing, "tonight, a podcast, for your approval," that was not intentionally florid. That's how he wrote.**

**Along the same lines, it's been difficult to revive the Twilight Zone — not for lack of trying. There was a movie in '83, the first reboot in '85, another attempt in 2002, and the latest one on CBS All Access.**

**The verdict in all these reboots has been the same: something is missing. In fact, the latest one has inspired a bunch of think pieces about what's missing from the fact that you can say anything on TV now, to the fact that the new show is an hour long instead half an hour. And as many people have pointed out, we already have a Twilight Zone for our times: Black Mirror.**

**But I think what's missing is Serling's voice -- not his literal voice, but his singular voice as a writer. Over the show's five year period, he wrote most of the episodes, and this weird, spooky universe was deeply personal to him. He used it to work through major issues that defined his life's work.**

**By the way, I'm going to discuss many of the twist endings from classic Twilight Zone episodes in case you never saw them, or the endless parodies of them.**

**First, to understand what defined Rod Serling's outlook on life, you need to know where he's from: Binghamton, NY. There was nothing unusual about Binghamton when Serling was growing up. But that's the point. It was the quintessential all-American small town-slash-city.**

**Mike Pipher lives in Binghamton now. He's part of a small group of locals who have been working for years to brand Binghamton as the hometown of Rod Serling. He gives Twilight Zone tours around town and hosts mini-festivals.**

**He says, Serling's family was very well known in town. His father ran a butcher shop, that was so popular, when Rod was 8-years old, they bought him a motorized bike so he could deliver meat all around town.**

MIKE: It gave him a real work ethic at a young age, his brother Robert would say he made more money than his father did in the butcher shop by delivering stuff, he had such personality in his eyes, and the women would melt and just give him more money with big tips!

**Nick Parisi is the author of Rod Serling: His Life, Work and Imagination.**

NICK: To hear him talk about his childhood it was it was an idyllic time it was you know he had a lot of friends he would play at the local park. He was very into sports he played sports, he had a very close-knit community in Binghamton.

**On The Twilight Zone, Rod Serling would later create exact replicas of locations from his childhood -- down to the carousel (cara-sell) he used to play on as a kid - - even though the show was filmed 3,000 miles away in Los Angeles.**

NICK: His desire to go back to Binghamton and go back to his childhood that comes up in first in an episode called Walking Distance which is probably my favorite Twilight Zone episode about you know a burned out executive who just wants to go back to his childhood and relive the those days of cotton candy and carousels and that kind of thing.

**In fact, that character literally revisits his childhood, and meets himself as a kid.**

*OLDER MARTIN: Martin, I only wanted to tell you that this is a wonderful time of life for you. Don't let any of it go by without enjoying it. There won't be any more merry-go-rounds, no more cotton candy, no more band concerts. I only wanted to tell you that this is a wonderful time for you. Now. Here. That's all, Martin. That's all I wanted to tell you..*

**Mike Pipher says even though Birmingham wasn't mentioned in these episodes, the locals knew what Serling was doing.**

MIKE: The very first episode pilot, "Where is Everybody?" with Earl Holliman, there's something that's very prominent to those who grew up here. There's a famous ladies apparel store that was on the main street across from their meat market called Resnicks. And in the episode, you see Earl Holliman going over to this truck that says

Resnicks, and he's talking to a lady who happens to be a mannequin and when he opens the door she falls to the ground and he knows she's a mannequin.

*HOLLIMAN: You're the first person I've seen, I don't want you to be frightened but...(SFX MANNEQUIN FALLS OUT OF CAR)*

**There is a Twilight Zone episode called The After Hours which is about mannequins. But the store in that episode is not Resnick's. Serling recreated a different department store in Binghamton.**

MIKE: That store as it's portrayed in After Hours is really unique, I've even taken tours for the museum to look at the elevator banks to the layout of the glass display cases, he really, really worked hand-in-hand on the set to get the image he wanted.

*MARSHA: I remember now, I'm a mannequin and it was my turn...*

*SALESWOMAN: Your turn to leave us for a month.*

MIKE: When you come to Mirror Image, the bus station episode, again it's formatted so well, it's filmed at MGM but he made sure the details were just the way the building was laid out. I've shown them tours too.

**Here is Rod Serling in 1972, talking with a group of students about his chronic nostalgia.**

*ROD SERLING: In my case, it's a hunger to be young again, a desperate hunger to go back to where it all began, you'll see this is as a running thread through a lot of things that I write.*

**So what killed his childhood? To start -- World War II. He enlisted to serve the day after his high school graduation. Nick Parisi says, Serling wanted to be a paratrooper, and he worked hard to get into the 511th parachute infantry.**

NICK: Kind of the irony of this is you know the greatest warning about you know be careful what you wish for you may get it, you know he wished to be a paratrooper and he was assigned to a parachute infantry regiment and they were used as an infantry regiment you know they were used as a traditional ground infantry. So he spent a lot of time in combat. He trained in New Guinea for about six months and then they went to a Lahti where they were going to go through some heavy jungle and jungle warfare. And when he arrived in Lahti you know one of the first missions was basically to just kind of traverse this mountain range at the middle of the islands and get from one side to the

other and essentially just kill everything on the way, just to make it across to you know just clear out the enemy. So this was for him and everybody else it was 30 days of hell.

**Amy Boyle Johnston wrote a book called *Unknown Serling*, which looks at Serling's work beyond the *Twilight Zone*. She says throughout his career, Serling is obsessed with the cruel irony of war. In fact, there's one particular story he wrote that ended up in three different shows he worked on in his career before *The Twilight Zone*. But the plot of this story on each show was exactly the same.**

AMY: A scout of three to five soldiers is sent out and what happens is they can communicate back to the base but the base cannot communicate back to them. And what happens is that in order for the 500 soldiers left behind to proceed they need to bomb the area where the scout team is and they can't tell the scout team this is going to happen and they're going to bomb the area. And what happens is they need to send the bombs and the scout team is decimated in order for the team behind can live.

**Serling was in communications, so if this were a true story, he would've been the guy on the radio hearing from the scout team, unable to tell them their fate.**

AMY: I would bet that happened from how he returns to this again and again and again. It would seem that would haunt anyone who would ever experience that.

NICK: When he got out of the military and he admitted that he got into writing as a form of therapy. He said, I pursued writing as a way to get these things out of my gut and onto the paper. So he really did consciously make that decision that he was going to deal with his military trauma you know in writing. As far as *The Twilight Zone* goes the most autobiographical he got in *The Twilight Zone* was that in an episode called *The Purple Testament* which is actually set in Lahti in 1945. And he actually uses some of his buddies names in the war for that episode for the guys that got killed.

*OFFICER: Sargent, who did we lose?*

*SARGENT: Gilbert, Horton, Morgan and Levy.*

**That last name you heard, Levy, was a good friend of Serling's. Melvin Levy was the jokester of the platoon, and he was killed when a crate of food landed on his head after they had gone without food for a week.**

NICK: And for whatever reason Melvin Levy just kind of got stuck in his position and didn't move and a crate fell right on his head and killed him instantly. And they were they were friends and Serling helped to bury the body the next day, and you know these

you know this voraciously hungry guy and all guys just killed by a crate of food. I mean it doesn't get any more purely ironic, and that certainly had to have an effect on his world view.

**When I heard about Melvin Levy, the first thing I thought about was The Twilight Zone episode Time Enough at Last, about a man who only wants to be alone to read books. After a nuclear war, and he finds himself alone in a library full of books. Then his glasses break. That's the ironic twist everyone remembers, but what always struck me was the moment afterward, when he looks up to God -- or the God of the Twilight Zone and says:**

*MELVIN: That's not fair! That's not unfair at all! There was time now – all the time I needed. It's not fair! (CRIES)*

**But the death that would haunt Serling the most happened back home. Serling's father died of a heart attack while he was deployed overseas.**

NICK: He requested permission to leave to go to the funeral and it was denied. And so he never got to say goodbye to his father and his father was only 52 years old when he died of a heart attack.

AMY: For Serling, his father and Binghamton were one. He came back disillusioned and Binghamton never really existed again for him. His childhood ended the day he left for war.

**Mike Pipher says to get a sense of how hard his father's death hit Rod Serling, you should read the memoir his daughter Anne Serling wrote.**

MIKE: Anne would tell whenever they came back every summer, he would two or three times he would drive in by himself, he wanted to be alone, he would drive in by himself, he wanted to be alone and he would just drive alone the old house, the parks, where the meat market was, and he had a lot of letters, his mom and dad wrote him faithfully in the service, and he wrote them back faithfully, and he has those letters and Anne Serling, she's go out, she'd see him on the shore there, just reading the letters over and over again and weeping, he just never had that closure.

**Although he tried. In that episode, Walking Distance, about a man who literally revisits his childhood, there's a poignant scene where the man reunites with his father. And it's eerie, because they're both the same age as his father.**

*MARTIN: Then you know, pop?*

*ROBERT: Yes, I know. I know now you are. I know you came from a long distance, and a long way and a long time. But you do know other things, don't you, Martin? Things that will happen?*

*MARTIN: Yes, I do.*

**After his father death, Serling moved elsewhere, and set out to find his voice as a writer. His work ethic was insane. Like Hamilton, he wrote like he was running out of time — and he was.**

**That's all after the break.**

BREAK

**Let's jump to September of 1959, right before The Twilight Zone launched.**

**Rod Serling was already a household name by this point, because he had written high quality TV dramas. Today, we might think The Twilight Zone is a high quality TV. But that's not how people thought back then. In 1959, high quality meant realism -- like the show Playhouse 90, where Serling had written a critically acclaimed episode about boxer with brain damage called Requiem for a Heavyweight. Science fiction, on the other hand, was considered lowbrow culture – the stuff they played at drive-in movies.**

**So the announcement that Serling was going to do a show about UFOs and aliens seemed like a weird career move, especially since he was known for speaking out about contemporary issues like Civil Rights.**

**So he down for an interview with Mike Wallace, this is before Mike Wallace was on the show 60 Minutes.**

*MIKE WALLACE: Is pre-censorship, though, involved? Are you simply writing easy?*

*ROD SERLING: In this particular area, no, because we're dealing with a half hour show which cannot probe like a 90, which doesn't use scripts as vehicles of social criticism. These are strictly for entertainment.*

*MIKE WALLACE: These are potboilers.*

*ROD SERLING: Oh, no. Un-uh. I wouldn't call them potboilers at all. No, these are very adult, I think, high-quality half hour, extremely polished films. But because they deal in the areas of fantasy and imagination and science-fiction and all of those things, there's no opportunity to cop a plea or chop an axe or anything.*

*MIKE WALLACE: Well, you're not gonna be able to cop a plea or chop an axe because you're going to be obviously working so hard on The Twilight Zone that in essence, for the time being and for the foreseeable future, you've given up on writing anything important for television, right?*

*ROD SERLING: Yeah. Well, again, this is a semantic thing important for television. I don't know. If by important you mean I'm not going to try to delve into current social problems dramatically, you're quite right. I'm not.*

**This is a famous interview because Serling is lying through his teeth. He knows he's going to use The Twilight Zone for social commentary. So who is he trying to fool? The network? The advertisers? The public?**

**Let's back up to the late 1940s.**

**After the war, Serling went to Antioch College, where he started writing as a kind of therapy. In fact, Amy Boyle Johnston found an early story of his where he put war itself on trial. And he got interested in fantastical radio dramas.**

AMY: The first rejection we have of Serling, it was written to Antioch College and it states Mr. Serling, this is fantasy. Fantasy is not commercially viable.

**So he kept trying to figure out how craft his point of view into stories. After college, he got a job working at WLW radio in Cincinnati.**

AMY: And then when WLW came to him and said you have any radio program you want. He wrote a program called It Happens To You where you took the stage of this average person and watched what happened to this person but It Happens To You is very Twilight Zone-esque. In fact one of the It Happens to You was re-written as a Twilight Zone episode.

**And he got a reputation as someone who was not afraid of a fight.**

AMY: He believed in equality, he believed in women's rights. I was told a story when he worked at WLW as a writer, there were three staff writers and there was a janitor who was African American who worked downstairs that wanted to get radio work of speaking, and Serling would go down and fight for him to get a speaking role because they wouldn't hire him, they would only hire him as a janitor.

**He created another Twilight Zone-like show in Cincinnati called The Storm, but the first time he came to national attention was with a TV movie called Patterns,**

**which was about a corporate exec struggling with morality in a cut throat business. Back then, a TV-movie was essentially a play performed live on TV. Patterns was so critically acclaimed, they performed it again on another night -- which was unheard of.**

**Again, Nick Parisi:**

NICK: The stardom that it brought to Rod Serling was he did have a little bit more freedom to at least listen to his conscience a little more and say, you know I'm going to try to say something more in my scripts I've always wanted to, and he did get into some very early stuff that he did in Cincinnati that where he addressed some controversial topics but on national television he hadn't done it. But after Patterns he said yeah I'm going to do this, and he almost immediately got into trouble. You know they just bashed them for trying to address you know social issues on television. And he would he fought back and he almost inevitably lost these battles. But he would always go down fighting. And so he gained this reputation as being a fighter. And he gave a nickname, televisions' angry young man because he did want to address these things and he very rarely got a chance to do it in the way that he wanted to do it, unfortunately.

**His biggest clash with the network came over a TV-movie called Noon on Doomsday. It was inspired by the murder of Emmett Till. Serling was particularly fascinated by the mob mentality of the white people in Mississippi, who rallied around the killers because they saw them as one of their own being persecuted by outsiders and media elites.**

**Again, here's Serling from that Mike Wallace interview.**

*ROD SERLING: And I wrote the script using black and white, initially, then it was changed to suggest an unnamed foreigner. Then the locale was moved from the South to New England, and I'm convinced they'd have gone up to Alaska or the North Pole if, and using Eskimos as a possible minority, except I suppose the costume problem was a sufficient severity not to attempt it, but it became a lukewarm, eviscerated, emasculated kind of show.*

*MIKE WALLACE: You went along with it, though.*

*ROD SERLING: All the way. I protested. I went down fighting, as most television writers do, thinking, in a strange, oblique, philosophical way that better say something than nothing. In this particular show, though, by the time they had finished taking Coca-Cola bottles off the set because the sponsor claimed that this had Southern connotations, suggesting to what depth they went to make this a clean, antiseptically, rigidly acceptable show.*

He could've had an easier time trying to say something in other media like plays or novels. Even films were starting to directly tackle issues like race and class. But he feared TV was the only medium he was suited to write. And he was also really good at it, especially the half hour format. And he believed in TV -- not the way it was in the '50s, which was mostly Westerns, game shows and sitcoms, but the potential of TV to speak to contemporary issues quickly and directly. And Amy says, TV needed him just as much.

AMY: Serling was held up to be the mark of what a TV writer could be. Whenever someone said TV has these pat shows, it's entertainment, it's cheap, it's whatever, CBS could always say here is Rod Serling. This is CBS, the Tiffany network could hold up Rod Serling and say this is one of the finest writers out there and he's working for us.

His next big battle was over genre, not content. He wrote a TV-movie called *Time Element*, about a guy in the '50s who suddenly finds himself on the eve of Pearl Harbor, trying to warn everyone. The fantastical concept was a very hard sell but when it finally aired, *Time Element* was a huge hit. And it's now considered a back-door pilot or a proof-of-concept for the *Twilight Zone*.

And in *The Twilight Zone*, the war comes up over and over and over again. And a lot of his stories about astronauts always felt to me like stories about soldiers who found themselves on a strange mission in a hostile location.

Another theme he keeps coming back to: a lost golden age, like the episode *A Stop at Willoughby*, where a stressed out executive thinks he's found a portal to an idyllic 19th century town along his commuter rail to Manhattan – a town that may or may not be real.

BUSINESSMAN: *Willoughby. Next time, next time, I'm going to get off.*

But death is lurking everywhere in *The Twilight Zone*.

CORNOR #1: *Just jumped off the train, did he?*

CORNOR #2: *Doctor said he died instantly (FADE)*

Serling also keeps coming back to the theme of social isolation. And when he writes those character in particular, you can tell that he has a tremendous amount of faith in their humanity, or he's absolutely appalled by their lack of humanity.

NICK: He really did believe in human connection. He believed that we have to be connected to each other. We have to be involved with each other and engaged with each other. So he would address that issue of social isolation. Any episode that had to do with space travel generally touched on that idea of the astronaut being away from humanity that you need the companionship you needed you need the connection The Lonely and the first season episode is like that.

*CORY: Alicia -- she weighs more than 15 pounds!*

*CAPTAIN: Cory, I'm telling you, you have to leave that robot behind*

*CORY: She's not a robot! She's a woman!*

*CAPTAIN: I haven't got any choice, you don't understand.*

**Another obsessions of his -- the story of a person that's considered obsolete, whether it's a washed-up movie star or a librarian in a fictitious totalitarian state.**

*ROD SERLING: Any state, any entity, any ideology that refuses to recognize the worth, the dignity of man is obsolete. A case to be filed M for Mankind in the Twilight Zone.*

**And he got to address social and political issues, like mob mentality, using the metaphors of science ficiton.**

**One of the most famous examples is The Monsters are Due on Maple Street, about a white suburban neighborhood that seems idyllic until there's a blackout. Someone suggests this might be part of an alien plot. By the time these friendly neighbors tear each other apart because they can't figure out who might be the undercover alien spy, we pull back to discover this was a plot put in motion by aliens, who were using paranoia to soften the ground for invasion.**

*ALIEN #1: Understand the procedure, now? Just stop a few of their machines, their radios, their telephones, their lawnmowers. Throw them into darkness for a few hours and then sit back and watch the pattern.*

*ALIEN #2: And this pattern is always the same?*

*ALIEN #1: They pick the most dangerous enemy they can find, and it's themselves. All we need to do is sit back and watch.*

AMY: Serling made us question what we can do and who we are. Serling asked what is your role when you see someone not being treated well before you for whatever reason? Serling said do you have the right to stand up? Should you stand up? Will you

stand up? Serling believed in the dignity of mankind on its own. So Serling's turn to existentialism was, what are we here for, what is our purpose and what is the role for the next man? Serling believed that humans had the choice to behave correctly but it was up to them to decide to do so.

**So did it work? Did he fool the network and the advertisers? Nick Parisi thinks so.**

NICK: There are certain people who just don't quite get science fiction or don't quite get fantasy. And you know in my book I talk about one particular person who happened to be one of The Twilight Zone sponsors. He would reportedly call his at his advertising agency every Monday morning and ask them to explain the show to him that was on Friday night

***Ha!***

NICK: Because he just he just didn't get it.

**Although Amy thinks that may not have been true for everyone.**

AMY: People say that CBS had no clue what Serling was doing was political, and that he pulled the rug over their eyes. That's not true, we show certain Twilight Zone episodes to 5<sup>th</sup> graders in this country, we show them The Monsters are Due on Maple Street and they understand this is not just about McCarthyism, but this is about the other in creating the other and the dangers of that. So if 5<sup>th</sup> graders can understand this is about McCarthyism and this is about the threat of the other, CBS executives, some of the smartest men in advertising understood exactly what was going on, but they had the ability to look people in the eye and say, we had no clue! But on the other level, I don't believe one word of that. It gave them deniability.

**But there weren't hoards of people offended by The Twilight Zone. In fact, the ratings were never great. After three seasons, CBS cancelled the show. Serling moved back to the East Coast and got a job teaching when he learned CBS changed their minds. They got two more seasons before the network finally pulled the plug.**

**Serling was bitter. He had a lot at stake in that show -- literally, he owned half the show. Again, Mike Pipher:**

MIKE: You know he was hurt when it was cancelled. The ratings weren't great. And so when CBS approached him about buying the rights, he sold out, Carol was against it, and Rod wished he never did because from day one when it went into syndication, it

never left the air somewhere in the world, and it was always a sore point that he sold out so cheaply, never dreaming there would be reruns like this.

**While he thought he got robbed financially, he didn't think the show had a cultural impact. As the world was becoming scarier and the social issues he cared about were coming to forefront of everyday life, he saw TV becoming more and more vapid.**

**His first show after Twilight Zone was a Western that got cancelled. Then he created a knock-off of The Twilight Zone called Night Gallery. But he was working with a producer that didn't respect him, and he didn't get creative control. He worried his best years were behind him. In fact, the most memorable episode of that series which is called, "They're Tearing Down Tim Riley's Bar" has eerie parallels to Serling's life.**

NICK: It is about a middle-aged man who just so happens to be World War II veteran and he feels like he has nothing left to give. His time has passed. He's you know he's given all he can give and in that episode Rod Serling gives this character his boyhood home address 67 Bennett Avenue.

*RANDY: I want to go to 67 Bennett Ave...*

*COP: Hey wait a minute don't live there.*

*RANDY: The devil I don't!*

*COP: You used to live there! Now you live on a high rise on Norton.*

*RANDY: I don't live there, I just wash my socks there, I live at 67 Bennet Ave. It's a two story white frame house. Katie and I bought it two months after we were married.*

*COP: That's empty now, Randy. They're tearing down the whole block. They're going to build an apartment complex.*

**It's classic Serling about an obsolete man full of remorse for a lost golden age. The main character is a widower, but his obsession over not having had enough time with his wife echoes Serling's remorse that he never got enough time with his father.**

**And the real tragic irony is that a few years later, Serling died of a heart attack at almost the same age that his father died, leaving the same emotional impact on his children.**

**But he left a positive legacy as well. His family has great memories of him as a devoted husband and father. He also went into academia, where by all accounts he was a very generous teacher.**

**And his legacy didn't go unnoticed in Hollywood either. He was so ahead of his time in thinking about what TV could do and how a series should be run, now he's considered the first showrunner as we could understand that term today, as someone who gives a TV show a singular voice.**

**But of course his big legacy is the Twilight Zone – although Amy says for mixed reasons.**

AMY: But one of the reasons why The Twilight Zone is what it is today is because CBS would run the Twilight Zone episodes because it didn't cost them anything. When I was a child in Northern California we had five channels. And CBS played The Twilight Zone consistently on Friday and Saturday nights because there was no cost for them. We rarely ever saw Alfred Hitchcock Presents was because it still had residuals. One of the reasons why The Twilight Zone is so big as it is because they kept playing it again and again and again because they weren't writing checks, and while it's unfortunate for the Serling family absolutely one of the reason why it gained in popularity before DVDs, before VHS was because TV was playing this when they weren't playing a lot of other things.

**The other great thing about his writing is that he didn't resolve many of his stories because he's asking tough questions about thorny issues that we don't how to resolve.**

AMY: And modern remakes often try to fix them, and put The End at the bottom, and Serling didn't do that. Serling let the story live on in your mind and that's lacking in a lot of the remakes.

***That's my favorite thing about his work. I'm stunned by how ambitious some of the endings are but they're not unsatisfying at all.***

AMY: Yes, and if you watched a Twilight Zone episode with someone and turned to them and asked what do you think happened? Both of you could come up with wildly different things but they could be probable in that world.

**And those ambiguous endings let the stories linger in our minds.**

AMY: We're allowed to watch it as children, most of us were allowed to watch it as children and the great thing about The Twilight Zone was you thought about it while you

were watching it. As it unfolded, it unfolded in your consciousness. You're not being told a story, you're being invited to live it. And I think that's why it still resonates and the questions that Serling asked – who am I, do I belong – are so eloquently displayed that we still watch and feel as if someone has understood an anxiety we have as well.

**And in the realm of digital streaming, Rod Serling's voice is still speaking to us, and we can hear him anytime, anywhere, which is like something .... out of The Twilight Zone.**

**That's it for this week, thank you for listening. Special thanks to Mike Pipher, Amy Boyle Johnston and Nick Parisi. There are so many other interesting things about Rod Serling – like the fact he wrote the first draft of Planet of the Apes, and the statue of liberaty thing at the end was his idea. If you want to know more, I'm including a list of all the books I mentioned in the show notes.**

**My assistant producer is Stephanie Billman. You can like the show on Facebook. I tweet at emolinsky and imagine worlds pod. The show's website is imaginary world podcast dot org. And if you want to get the full back catalog of Imaginary Worlds, and listen to the show ad-free by subscribing to Stitcher Premium. And you get the first days of binging for free if you use the promo code Imaginary.**