

The Sounds of War:
Radio, the Aural Experience and National Consensus
in
World War II

by

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Abstract

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Radio reached the apogee of its influence the United States during World War II. With its nearly universal presence in American households, immediacy, and intimacy of address, radio has long been recognized for its contributions to the war effort. Narrow industrial control and a history of close network cooperation with the government facilitated univocal support for Administration goals during the years leading up to and during the war. This dissertation argues that radio actively used the qualities of sound, through what I call the *sonic palette*, to engage the imagination of listeners and to influence audience reception. Part I of the dissertation discusses the industrial conditions that fostered the development of this repertoire of aural expression, which developed organically over time to compensate for radio's "blind" broadcasting. Radio strove to create an image in the mind's eye, using sound alone, to provide information, atmosphere and emotional character to programs which would be readily understood by listeners. Writers and directors mediated texts with music, sound effects, voice characteristics, and

many forms of sonic coloration such as rhythm, pace, dynamics, tone and timbre. Audiences learned to recognize both conventional and innovative uses of this vocabulary of sound. Part II illustrates how this sonic palette was intentionally used to support intervention before the war and war goals during the conflict, despite the fact that radio was barred by law from advocating political positions. I analyze three works which exemplify this thesis. The 1939 broadcast of *Ballad for Americans*, sung by Paul Robeson, inspired an outpouring of patriotic expression which supported FDR's call for unity as war broke out in Europe. Edward R. Murrow's subtly dramatic news broadcasts from London during the Blitz in 1940 captured the imagination of the American public and shifted public opinion in favor of intervention. During the war, CBS's bold docudrama of the Detroit riots in 1943, *An Open Letter on Race Hatred*, called for tolerance and cooperation on the Home Front. These works, and hundreds of others, skillfully used creative sound to appeal to the emotions of the audience to influence their attitudes.

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Preface

Sounds of Life

In 1902, when Marconi first transmitted a transatlantic wireless telegraph signal, lighting the path that eventually led to radio broadcasting, the world was still a rather quiet place. Until the 19th century, most Americans, like other people living in towns, villages or the country, never heard anything in their lives but the sounds of nature or those produced by human activity. For the majority, living on farms, the sounds of a wagon rolling by or the hoof beats of a horse approaching on the road caused enough disturbance for activity to cease while onlookers peered in the direction of the sounds to find their source and meaning. The interruption was often a welcome break if the sound signaled the familiar and safe.

By comparison, life in towns was louder and livelier. City dwellers, the few, compared to most of the population, were perpetually in the presence of everyday street sounds—rolling carts and coaches, street peddlers hawking their wares, the hum of crowds, as Dickens vividly described. “ [M]en are shouting, carts backing, horses neighing, boys fighting, basket-women talking, piemen expiating on the excellence of their pastry, and donkeys braying these and a hundred other sounds”¹ On market days and at festivals, weddings or religious holidays even country folk would hear the sounds of merrymaking, or even fights breaking out. These sounds quickened the pulse.

Music broke the silence of everyday life with work or folk songs, hymns and other church music. Concerts were rare and for the privileged. To hear a Haydn string quartet or a Rossini opera was likely to be an experience that was not repeated—even for

¹Charles Dickens, “The Streets, Morning,” in *Charles Dickens’ Best Stories* (Garden City: Hanover House, 1959). Originally published in *Sketches by Boz*, July 21, 1835.

the most cultured listeners. For the most part, if people wanted music, they had to make it themselves. Music made at home or when working passed the time, expressed feelings of joy and sorrow, silliness and sentiment, history and heritage.

Far less common, but unforgettable, were the sounds of war. Accounts of wartime, whether from soldiers who had been in pitched battle or those miles away tell of the frightening presence of sounds of violence—gunfire and explosions, Whitman’s proud music: “You sounds from distant guns with galloping cavalry, / Echoes of camps with all the different bugle-calls, / Trooping tumultuous, filling the midnight late.”² Even in early times there are reports of the fearful sounds of war—the yelling, cries of agony, crashing of weapons, of horses whinnying in fright, of the shrieks of war’s victims fleeing. These occasional, but intense experiences punctuated otherwise quiet lives; quiet not only because of their quotidian routine, but also because they were largely silent.

To the sounds of nature, music, war and the hubbub of congregating people, the 19th century added the intrusion of machines. The railroad rent the quiet countryside as it roared through. The noise of the mill and factory assaulted the ears of workers, often piercing the air far beyond the limits of the building. And yet, I believe that, if we could recreate that mid-19th century environment in our 21st century world, before the streetcar, the automobile and the airplane, the phonograph, talking pictures, radio and television, the loudspeaker and the loud speaker talking into his Bluetooth, most of us would find it very quiet. Most of the time, and in most places, the aural experience was not the ever-present, multi-textured, uncontrollable, often indiscernible stream of sound that we live with today. To evoke that world, we have to go inside, turn everything off and seal out

²Walt Whitman, “Proud Music of the Storm,” in *Drum Taps*. In *Walt Whitman: Selected Poems 1855-1892*, ed. Gary Schmidgall (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999), 242.

the sound of the street to experience that silence and the isolation that often comes with it.

In reading this work, I ask the reader to imagine that quiet place. Only then will the reader be able to approximate the astonishment, wonder, thrill, intrusion, and seduction that listeners experienced when mechanized sound entered their lives. That was the aural experience for radio's audiences during its glory years.

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PART I

THE RISE OF RADIO CULTURE IN THE UNITED STATES

Introduction

In a speech given shortly after the outbreak of WWII, Archibald MacLeish, then head of the Office of Facts and Figures, the predecessor to the Office of War Information, warned his audience that “the principal battleground of this war is not the South Pacific. It is not the Middle East. It is not England or Norway, or the Russian steppes. It is American Opinion.”¹ His observation was more notable for its candor than for its keen insight. Interventionist and isolationist factions had been waging that battle since the late 1930s. Led by public figures like Charles Lindbergh, fiery radio personality Father Coughlin, and non-interventionists like Senators Gerald Wheeler and Burton Nye, who used their high profiles, credibility, and rhetorical skill, isolationists warned against involvement in another foreign war. The memory of World War I, a mere twenty years earlier, had not faded and those memories were tinged with resentment against the propaganda activities of the Creel committee, the Wilson administration’s communications arm, which stirred up anti-German sentiment and support for American involvement in the European war.

In his book, *How We Advertised America, the First Telling of the Amazing Story of the Committee on Public Information*, George Creel, who had been a muckraking journalist before his appointment by Wilson, defended the tactics behind the emotional appeals to the hearts and patriotic fervor of Americans to win support for the war in his

¹ Archibald MacLeish, *A Time to Act: Selected Addresses*, “Divided We Fall, Address at the Inaugural Dinner of Freedom House” (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1943), 119.

rallies, posters and through the newspapers. Thereafter, people would forever associate the previously innocuous word “propaganda” with the taint of manipulative government public opinion campaigns.

By the time MacLeish delivered his speech in 1942, the Roosevelt administration had been wooing a skeptical public since the Anschluss in 1938. With keen sensitivity and great care, it steadily built support for American involvement in the war with a communications campaign. The first of several government bureaus was set up in 1940 with the purpose of disseminating information favorable to the administration’s support of its European allies in what was eventually to be a comprehensive effort to bring about a national consensus for intervention. In 1941 the Office of Facts and Figures was established, with MacLeish at its head, to coordinate with other government agencies in circulating accurate information about the war. In mid-1942 Office of War Information (OWI) took its place, expanding its reach to liaise with the communications media and Hollywood in advancing war goals. The departments’ review function, which both censored and mediated what the public was to be shown and how it was to be portrayed, became a lightning rod for conflict not only between the each medium and the OWI, but also within the bureau. But throughout the war, the OWI worked closely with each medium to convey FDR’s policies and to shape the public view of the war.

Four years later, after the war was over, the media’s role in bringing about victory was already the subject of study. Paul Lazarsfeld, the pioneering émigré media researcher trained in the Frankfurt School of Social Research, studied American attitudes towards radio as part of his work as director of Columbia University’s Bureau of Applied Social Research. One area explored was the role of communications media during the war.

Overwhelmingly, radio emerged as the single most important media source. “...when a national goal was clear and delimited, the radio stations did a job which is widely acknowledged...sixty-seven percent [of American’s polled] put radio on the top of the list, with newspapers getting 17 per cent, magazines 3 per cent and moving pictures 4 per cent of the vote.” ²

To paraphrase Winston Churchill, this was radio’s finest hour. A mere fifteen years earlier radio was in forty-five percent of American homes and fledgling networks were experimenting with programming to capture audience interest.³ Despite the Depression, ownership soared in the 1930s as radio found its voice, network coverage expanded with programming for every taste, and radio sets fit for parlors and priced for ordinary folks were brought to market. By 1938 over eighty percent of Americans owned a radio. The outbreak of hostilities in Europe pushed radios into over ninety percent of U.S. households—all but the rural sections of the Deep South had radios by the end of the decade.⁴ America was literally “all ears,” listening to radio an average of five hours per day.⁵

Radio’s importance in the battle for public opinion was well understood long before the end of the 1930s. FDR’s Fireside Chats had calmed an anxious public at the depths of the Depression and radio had been a tool of influence for many factions

² Paul F. Lazarsfeld, *The People Look at Radio* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1946), 82.

³ Douglas Craig, *Fireside Politics: Radio and Political Culture in the United States, 1920-1949* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 13.

⁴ National Association of Broadcasters, *NAB Study of Urban Radio Listening, March, 1941; in cooperation with NBC and CBS* (New York: National Association of Broadcasters), 131.

⁵ Ibid.

throughout the decade, taking advantage of its huge audience and its intimate address. A growing understanding of psychology, advertising and public relations contributed to an increasingly sophisticated use of the medium for selling ideas as well as soap. The post-World War I generation of businessmen and politicians had learned from such texts Walter Lippmann's *Public Opinion*, and *The Phantom Public* which explored crowd behavior in social contexts. But they benefitted as well from Freud's nephew (and father of public relations) Edward Bernays' practical applications of group psychology to influence the public in *Crystallizing Public Opinion* and *Propaganda*. In the early 1920s, long before the radio's future was understood and its power confirmed, Bernays observed that radio listeners, like the readers of newspapers and advertisements were "mysteriously part of the crowd mind."⁶ Bernays used this understanding to develop public relations campaigns that would attract media attention, divorcing the message from the original source, with the ultimate goal to persuade large populations to buy the products of his clients. While Bernays' intent was to apply these techniques to selling products, his books were widely studied for their political applications. In his later years, he recounted how he had found out that Nazi Propaganda Minister has used one of Bernays' own works as a guide. "Goebbels had shown [Hearst correspondent] Weigand his propaganda library, the best Weigand had ever seen. Goebbels, said Weigand, was using my book *Crystallizing Public Opinion* as a basis for his destructive campaign against the Jews of Germany."⁷

⁶ Edward Bernays, *Crystallizing Public Opinion* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1923), 103.

⁷ Edward Bernays, *Biography of an Idea: Memoirs of Public Relations Counsel Edward L. Bernays* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1965), 77.

The overwhelming presence of radio—its reach into every household, its immediacy in delivering the latest news, its intrusiveness into daily life, its pervasive war messages on every program contributed greatly to its influence on American attitudes. It was truly a mass medium, the only mass broadcast medium of the war era. Other media were highly diffuse, both in their content, and their reach. Newspapers were among the least uni-vocal of media. Even those papers owned by large publishing entities did not speak with a single voice in every city and town. Importantly, newspapers competed for readers far more than radio ever did. Most cities had numerous papers, while, nationally, there were only four radio networks, and local stations depended on those networks for the vast majority of their programming.⁸ And newspaper readership was far lower than radio listening, diminishing its influence.⁹ These factors may account, in part, for the gap of fifty points between radio and newspapers found in Lazarsfeld's study.

Magazine influence was even less than newspapers, at three percent.¹⁰ A few magazines had national reach and large audiences, such as *Time* and *Life*. But their combined readership was far smaller than the radio audience and demographically more segmented than newspapers. In short, print media did not reach a significant part of the population, and did not have the focused voice of radio afforded by narrow institutional control. Even the fact that print provided more in-depth coverage than radio was not

⁸ By the mid-'30s, at least three-quarters of prime time programs were originated at the network level. This statistic is based on my analysis of raw data reported in Harrison B. Summers, *A Thirty-Year History of Programs Carried on the National Radio Networks in the United States: 1926-1956* (Columbus: Ohio State University, 1958).

⁹ Paul F. Lazarsfeld, *Radio and the Printed Page: an Introduction to the Study of Radio and its Role in the Communication of Ideas* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1940), 227.

¹⁰ Lazarsfeld, *The People Look at Radio*, 82.

considered an advantage: few people considered that a benefit.¹¹ Radio audience surveys repeatedly found that many people believed that newspapers had too much information and were hard to follow. One survey respondent from a pre-war Lazarsfeld's study comparing radio to newspapers said "When they talk to you, *they talk in plain English.*" Corroborating this view, another commented "I understand more easily when I am listening. *It is explained better.*"¹² (Italics in the original.)

According to the post-war study, *The People Look at Radio*, American reaction to film as a source of information about the war was more limited than one might think. A mere four percent of respondents felt that film served the war effort best.¹³ Yet, movie audiences were large and movie attendance frequent. In the mid-1940s movies were the most popular form of entertainment in the country, with over 95,000,000 attending weekly.¹⁴ The film industry, as closely controlled by institutions as radio, was equally as tied to government influence. Since 1938 Hollywood, like the radio industry, had been under the shadow of anti-trust accusations by the FCC. It appears to be no coincidence that, shortly after the Motion Picture Committee Cooperating for National Defense was set up in mid-1940, the monopoly action was settled favorably to the movie industry.¹⁵

¹¹ Lazarsfeld, *Radio and the Printed Page*, 227. More than 60% of newspaper readers preferred radio news. This study did not include listeners who did not read the newspaper.

¹² *Ibid.*, 145.

¹³ Lazarsfeld, *the People Look at Radio*, 82.

¹⁴ U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Seventeenth Census of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Bureau of the Census, 1950).

¹⁵ Michelle Hilmes, *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922-1952* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 231. War related films from Hollywood have been studied extensively, notably in Clayton R. Koppes and Gregory Black, *Hollywood Goes to War: How Politics, Profits and Propaganda Shaped World War II Movies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

Hollywood responded to its war task in volume and often in quality. In addition to the feature, viewers saw newsreels with war news from around the world as well as short subject films. These were often on war related topics such as rationing and Civil Defense, some of which were produced directly by the government, but many were studio projects. Given the visual richness and dramatic potential inherent in the film medium, it might be thought that film's influence would be as great as radio's, but it was not. One reason may be that audiences never saw the "real" war on film and clearly differentiated fictional films from the reality of the front. Although newsreels and short subjects brought footage from the Theaters of War, these were highly mediated works, selectively choosing visual images that did not dwell on the carnage---particularly to the Allies. In addition, by the time newsreels made it to the theaters, they were last week's news. Radio had an advantage of immediacy that could not be matched by film. I believe that it also had an image of reality—through live broadcasts that were convincing, even though these broadcasts were as heavily produced as the films. The difference is that the audience perceived that radio was spontaneous because it was live.

Given post-war attitudes towards radio's contribution to the war effort, what exactly is it that made it not merely influential but trusted? I contend that the characteristics of the medium contributed greatly to that trust. The fact that radio was live added to the perception that it was more timely than any other source, but that does not explain audience trust. Despite its mass distribution, radio had the intimate quality of the personal appeal, the human voice, the presence in the parlor that relieved isolated silence and established a connection to the wider world. All of this was accomplished through sound alone. It is the argument of this work that the qualities of sound that were applied

to radio production—tone of voice, timbre, music, effects, dynamics, pacing, along with the characteristics of audience reception—imagination and the personal relationship listeners developed with radio, were instrumental in building the trust that people placed in radio. Further, I contend that the networks understood how to use this aural repertoire, a *sonic palette*, to affect audiences. They applied those techniques and an understanding of audience dynamics to war-themed programming, contributing to audience receptivity and trust. My research explores the power of expressive sound in winning over public opinion in support of the war.

I will make my argument in two parts. The first section, The Rise of Radio Culture in the United States, describes and builds support for my theory of radio influence. The first chapter describes how the habit of listening evolved and rapidly rooted itself in American culture in the 1930's. It also discusses the industrial factors which shaped the development of commercial radio and thereby influenced programming decisions and program development. Chapter two looks at the industry's struggle to overcome its perceived weaknesses as a "blind" medium. Embracing that "handicap" led to the development of radio's unique form of aural expression. Chapter three describes the elements of the sonic palette, the vocabulary of sound, and explains how its influence was known and applied to programming by the networks. The idea of the sonic palette is a new one and requires definition, illustration and support, which the chapter provides as a foundation for the balance of this work. I believe the radio producer's toolkit: music, performance characteristics, sound effects, casting, dynamics, tempo and other elements all mediate the text. This chapter explores each of these characteristics and how they

figured in the creation of radio programming during the 1930's and developed as a mode of expression that was well understood by listeners.

Part II, *Orchestrating the Message*, takes the foundation laid in the first section and applies it to wartime programming. Overhanging radio in the years before the outbreak of war was the threat of government anti-trust actions begun in 1938, which effectively held networks to a course of diplomatic cooperation with the OWI and the Roosevelt Administration that continued throughout the war years. The three chapters of this section serve as examples of this cooperation and illustrate the application of the use of sound to mediate the messages.

Chapter four analyzes the legendary broadcast of Paul Robeson's performance of LaTouche and Robinson's *Ballad for Americans*, which aired only two months after Germany invaded Poland. It serves as the model reaction to the outbreak of war in Europe – a call for unity and a celebration of American values—and was immensely popular. This chapter explores how form, authorial provenance, performer and performance create ambiguities and construct meaning in an otherwise middle-brow poetic and musical expression. Among the most significant factors is the sonic presence of Paul Robeson whose voice and persona projected an image across the airwaves that was an aural representation of the ideals the producers intended to communicate.

Chapter five looks at Edward R. Murrow's broadcasts during the London Blitz of 1940. The war crisis in Europe both demanded and inspired new forms of radio news programming because of rapidly changing events and radio's capability to report live from the scene. Because of his rhetorical training and instinctive understanding of radio's intimate address Murrow was able to influence audiences at home to favor intervention

with his vivid descriptions of Londoners under attack. My analysis of *London After Dark*, the portrait of the city in the midst of an air raid, suggests that it was heavily produced and not spontaneous at all. It contends with the issues of authenticity and intention in light of his—and the network’s—professed objectivity.

The immense scale of the war effort brought long standing racial tensions and questions of equality to a head. Segregation in the armed forces and conflict on the Home Front threatened the stability of society and the war effort. Chapter six views this issue through the docudrama of the 1943 Detroit race riots, CBS’ *An Open Letter on Race Hatred*. Writer-director William Robson accuses the audience of race prejudice which fostered a climate that provoked the violence while mesmerizing them with a brilliantly produced program aurally suggestive of crime dramas. His bravura depiction of the June incident draws on the music, sound effects and acting styles of the popular suspense genre to tell the story of the riots. Among the many issues he must navigate is the need to aurally distinguish white and black speakers without resorting to the sonic stereotypes so common on radio. He was not always successful.

Radio in World War II represents the apogee of influence and trust in mass media in America. It is difficult to imagine a time when the home and public spaces were not subject to constant aural and visual stimuli, but that was the way the world was before electronic sound. We do not have the same relationship with these miracles that society did during radio’s heyday. During those fifteen years, radio broke the isolation of rural Americans, brought “free” entertainment to Depression era households and provided a window on the excitement and terror of world events. Its welcome presence asked only for active listening, for participation in bringing the sonic illusions to life in the mind.

Shortly after the war, television eclipsed radio and the national consciousness once again embraced the visual over the purely aural. Audiences became passive and never had the same trust in media that they had during the war. Perhaps that is because television left nothing to the imagination.

Chapter 1—

Captivating Sounds: an American Story of Business and Pleasure

Sound emerges from the ether

December 24, 1906, has long been considered the birthday of radio. But, much like the Christmas holiday, the precise date is less important than the auspicious event itself and the imagery that has come to surround it. On December 21st, inventor Reginald Fessenden had demonstrated to engineers from AT&T and Western Electric, as well as to several newspaper reporters, the capability of his continuous wave transmitter and receiver to broadcast voices and music as an audible stream of sounds to distant wireless receivers. With that technical success, he notified ships along the Atlantic coast that he would transmit a program of music and readings on Christmas Eve, a private experiment with only his family and laboratory assistant as witnesses. The broadcast commenced with an explanation to listeners of what he planned to do, followed by a recording of Handel's *Largo*.

“...Then came a violin solo by me, being a composition by Gounod called “O, Holy Night”, and ending up with the words “Adore and be still” which I sang one verse of, in addition to playing the violin, though the singing, of course, was not very good. Then came the Bible text, “Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to men of good will.”¹

Fessenden received informal acknowledgements from ships and a handful of wireless operators “as far away as Norfolk,” but, like the Christmas shepherds, the witnesses were anonymous and scattered.² The importance of Fessenden's

¹ Reginald Fessenden to S. M. Kintner, January 29, 1932, <http://www.fessenden.ca/controversy.htm>.

² Ibid.

accomplishment was not recognized at the time but it served as the first, crucial, step in unraveling the mysteries of radio transmission and reception. Years later, he described the event in that letter, written late in his life in response to a Westinghouse executive who wanted to know the exact details. Fessenden's letter is the only document describing a broadcast that had, even by 1932, become radio lore.³ The program choices and timing of the broadcast suggest not just a holiday greeting, but a miraculous moment. Handel's aria from *Xerxes* is a magisterial piece with stately pacing, and, at three minutes, blessedly conformed to the length of a phonograph record. But even if listeners had never heard this well-known work, they may have perceived a feeling of procession and elevated importance inherent in the unhurried, forward-moving climb of its melodic line and solid supporting bass accompaniment. Among all the seasonal favorites from which to choose, Fessenden selected "O Holy Night," with its chorus "Fall on your knees, O hear the angel voices. O night Divine." It is tempting to speculate on a double meaning—one which equates the broadcast with a unique and important event and a heavenly sound audible to all with "ears to listen."⁴

We can never know Fessenden's reasons for selecting these pieces for his broadcast. Perhaps, as an engineer, he chose works that he felt would smoothly transmit across the airwaves. Or perhaps "O Holy Night" was a piece he felt he could credibly play on the violin. Possibly he owned few recordings that were suitable for a Christmas Eve broadcast. Nevertheless, the programming choices were not random, and the timing of the transmission was rich with meaning. His letter tells us that he ended the "Gounod"

³ Fessenden's December 21 transmission and experiments in 1900, 1903 and 1905 were thoroughly documented and published in the *American Telephone Journal*, January 26, 1907 and February 7, 1907.

⁴ Gospel of Mark, *The Oxford Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), Chapter 4, verse 9.

song with the lines “Adore and be still.”⁵ Why bother to add that specific detail? Why conduct a broadcast on Christmas Eve except to elevate importance of the transmission? Like the gospel writers, Fessenden was writing history long after the fact, with the hindsight to guide reception. Although his letter makes no grand analogies, Fessenden leads his reader, suggesting, and then discarding, earlier experiments as not worthy of that designation before singling out the December 24 transmission as *the* original broadcast. By 1932, radio’s promise had been fulfilled, but in 1906 its arrival went unnoticed for more than a dozen years, as Fessenden, Lee de Forest, Marconi and other radio pioneers struggled to solve the technical problems of transmission, reception and interference on the airwaves and, not incidentally, to find what the technology was good for. During those years, American’s practiced their listening skills elsewhere.

Sound, commerce and consumer behavior

Virtually none of the psychological phenomena of the radio can be fully understood apart from the framework of political and economic philosophy under which the industry has developed.

Cantril and Allport, The Psychology of Radio

This chapter traces the origins of the business and behavior of listening from the first days of the recording industry, through radio’s search for an identity, to the successful dominance of the corporate networks of the 1930s. The story of the mechanization of sound in America and its impact on culture is inseparable from its commercial origins and free market approach. In the United States, radio developed as an entertainment medium, a vehicle for popular culture, as commercial interests obliged the tastes of radio audiences. In this it followed the path laid for it by the recording industry,

⁵ Fessenden. Note: Fessenden’s recollection of the composer was wrong. “O Holy Night” was written by Adolph Adam.

taking advantage of newly acquired listening habits of the audience and its wish to be entertained.

Many nations quickly recognized the potential power of sound, and especially the broadcast of sound, to reach and influence listeners, and their governments took control of the airwaves. Acting virtually alone, the United States permitted the technology to be developed commercially, even as it mandated that the airwaves serve the public interest and despite the fact that critics maintained that radio's interpretation of the public interest meant "what interested the public." Permitting commercial interests to direct the future of radio set on course an interdependent relationship between the business factions which drew profit from listeners and the listeners themselves upon whose good will the success of the enterprises depended.⁶ I contend that behavior was shaped by the purveyors of the technology and programming, who in turn were shaped by what they learned about their consumers. This chapter looks at how this double-sided relationship evolved and influenced program development in a nearly monopolistic commercial environment. This industrial atmosphere produced the sonic palette, a nearly codified, readily understandable repertoire of aural conventions and techniques used to enliven a sound-only medium and to influence the response of listeners. Ultimately, the entrepreneurial atmosphere of commercial competition inspired and encouraged creative innovation even in a corporate environment.

⁶ In other countries, government radio broadcast to the public what it believed they ought to hear. In the case of Great Britain, for example, the centralized government programming model was the improvement of the cultural level of listeners. In Germany, the Nazi takeover of the airwaves very early on was a major factor in gaining mass support for their eventual takeover of the government itself. It continued to be the prime conduit for spreading propaganda.

THE HABIT AND SEDUCTION OF LISTENING

Recorded sound: technology creates new audiences

In the early 1900s mechanically produced sound was still a wonder in development, thrilling listeners even with its limited capabilities. Edison's invention of recorded sound, in 1877, followed Alexander Graham Bell's discovery of telephony by two years. His advances in telegraphy transmission had made him a wealthy man and funded his now famous Menlo Park, New Jersey laboratory where he first captured the sounds emitted through a telephone-like device. By inscribing voice vibration patterns with a stylus onto a thin piece of foil he could play them back by running the stylus through the grooves made by the sound waves. After patenting a recording device in late 1878, Edison dropped the project for nearly ten years as he turned to the perfection of the more obviously commercial incandescent light. When he returned to sound recording in the late 1880s, a time when Fessenden was working in his laboratory, Edison focused on business applications like recording telephone messages and office dictation. But, by 1890, Edison's nickel-in-a-slot demonstration machine and moving picture kinetoscopes were fascinating the public in saloons, hotels, penny arcades and railway stations. Soon entrepreneurs opened store fronts devoted entirely to the new electric amusements that showcased the experience of hearing recorded sounds and seeing moving images. People were satisfied with the experience alone; what was actually heard or seen was of less importance. Recorded sound became an entertainment medium.

For about a decade, the two technologies, silent film and recorded sound, entertained a public both fascinated with and untroubled by the fact that sound and sight were not joined. These sensory paths then diverged and were not to cross again for

nearly thirty years at the beginning of the sound era of motion pictures. Cinema continued to develop under a public performance model dependent upon a relatively small output of films, which were increasingly complex and expensive to produce. Distributed on a weekly schedule, audiences could choose to view them once or twice before they disappeared forever. By comparison, much lower economic barriers democratized and personalized the listening experience almost from the start. By the turn of the century, Edison and his competitors, Columbia and Victor, known collectively as the “Big Three,” were selling phonographs for as little as \$10.00, well within reach of middle class households, although higher quality, furniture-like models cost over \$400.00.⁷

Contrasted to the high production and distribution costs of the film industry, recording cost little to create the master. During the era of acoustic recording, from 1888 until the early 1920s, a recording session required only a room, a recording and reproducing diaphragm and stylus, and a horn which captured the sounds. Performers positioned themselves close to the horn’s open end and sang or played. The recording device created wave impressions on a wax cylinder or disk which would be cast in metal for reproduction. Once the master was created, the standardization of manufacturing by the early years of the century dropped the reproduction cost to only \$.07 and the retail price dropped to \$.50 from \$1.00-\$2.00.⁸ This put recordings within the reach of an increasingly prosperous middle class, and demand grew rapidly. Technical limitations also assured that the early phonograph was an at-home listening experience. The sounds

⁷ Andre Millard, *America on Record: A History of Recorded Sound* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 49.

⁸ Ibid., 50.

of the record could be heard only a few feet away from the machine, even when projected through a large and awkward horn.

Nevertheless, the public appetite was immense, with record sales growing from an output of 500,000 units in 1897 to 2.8 million by 1899, and increasing eightfold over that by 1904.⁹ Here was home entertainment which each household could tailor to meet its own tastes, at least to the extent that the technology would permit. In the early 1900s the limitations of acoustic recording favored the human voice with accompaniment and single instruments—pianos, banjos, and xylophones, over large ensembles or stringed instruments. Early recording catalogues mirrored the public's taste in sheet music and were filled with sentimental favorites, the songs of Tin Pan Alley, including Ragtime, “coon songs” that came from America's long fascination with minstrelsy, as well as the songs of musical theater, vaudeville and operetta. As limitations in sound reproduction were overcome, the Big Three were eager to burnish their reputations by producing so-called “good music”—classical masterpieces and operatic arias. But this material was also profitable. The cultural aspirations of the middle class and the star status of opera singers in the first decades of the century fed a market for classical music. Caruso's rendition of “Celeste Aida” and the recordings of other opera greats were promoted as bringing high culture, domestic tranquility and the image of refinement into the home.

But the sentimental favorites of the nineteenth century in the clarion tones of Irish tenors, as well as naughtier Ragtime melodies by vaudeville performers, found their place as well. Filling out the catalogues, producers satisfied niche markets for ethnic recordings of Irish, Italian, German, Polish and music of other immigrant populations. Curiously,

⁹ U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920* (Washington, D.C.: Bureau of the Census, 1920), 991.

record catalogues offered more military marches during the years leading up to World War I than any other genre, although this could be, in part, because of the relatively better acoustic reproduction for brass instruments compared to other types of ensembles. Encouraged by Washington, the industry helped to spread Wilson's policies. Dozens of war songs poured out of Tin Pan Alley, most notably George M. Cohan's "Over There," which sold over one million records and was recorded by many singers, including Cohan himself for Edison and Caruso for Victor.¹⁰ Despite the war, sales of phonographs and records soared in the years between 1914 and 1919, each increasing more than four hundred percent. Over two and one quarter million phonographs were sold, and over one hundred million records, an industry high point not to be achieved again.

These statistics illustrate the enormous acceptance of new entertainment technology, but behind these data are the millions of Americans whose personal and social behavior changed dramatically in response to the newly accessible machines. While competition arising from the expiration of patents drove prices down, the triumph of the 78 RPM disc over the cylinder, the user friendly player, and the installment payment plan also contributed to bringing entertainment into American living rooms. What had previously been a privileged experience in a concert hall could now be an everyday occurrence. People quickly adapted to new technology and altered long standing patterns of behavior. These behavioral changes brought about by the phonograph in the early part of the century later eased the entrance and acceptance of radio into the home during the 1920s.

¹⁰ Kathleen E.R. Smith, *God Bless America: Tin Pan Alley Goes to War* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2003), 73.

By the early part of the century the parlor piano was being sidelined and along with it the social sing-along. In their landmark study of cultural change in America, *Middletown*, Robert and Helen Lynd compared the social behavior in 1900 to that of the early 1920s, describing the rapid adoption of the phonograph. They illustrated the trend with an excerpt from a local newspaper article that heralded the first appearance of a phonograph in 1890 as “drawing large crowds. The Edison invention is undoubtedly the most wonderful of the age.”¹¹ The new entertainment technologies, including the cinema the phonograph and early radio, disrupted community-reinforcing social behavior such as amateur bands and choruses, which were prevalent in the late nineteenth century. “Solo singing or group singing to jazz accompaniment still appear occasionally at small parties but is far less common than a generation ago. Serenading is a thing of the past...Today there is no chorus of business class men. In the city of today, nearly three and one-half times as large as that of 1890 there are only two adult musical societies in which the earlier tradition survives, as over against four in 1890.”¹²

The Lynds devoted considerable attention to the disappearance of “spontaneous music” in their chapter on Traditional Ways, mourning the loss of youthful serenaders who filled the summer nights with song, home musicales and the ubiquity of learning a musical instrument. Commenting on the decline of music lessons, they report that “the mothers of the present generation were brought up in a culture without Victrola and radio...Today when great artists or dance orchestras are in the cabinet in the corner of

¹¹ Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown a Study in American Culture* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1929), 244.

¹² *Ibid.*, 246.

one's living room...the ability to 'play a little' may be in increasingly less demand."¹³ They observed that musical culture had brought cohesion to the community in the prior century and that, although music had become more widely available, it no longer served the same social function. William Kenney calls attention to the social symbolism of the piano compared to the phonograph, linking the effort and persistence of acquiring skill on an instrument to fundamental values of the nineteenth century which esteemed sacrifice, duty and work. The phonograph, by contrast, was disparaged as requiring nothing more than the ability to set the machine in motion, thereby reflecting the deteriorating moral fiber of the Twentieth century. One critic, from *Talking Machine World*, indicted the phonograph as causing "mental muscles [to] become flabby through a constant flow of recorded popular music."¹⁴ The decline in sales of pianos during the second decade of the twentieth century offers objective evidence that people were turning away from self-produced music and the work associated with acquiring the skill. Between 1909 and 1919 piano sales for the uprights used in most middle class homes in the United States fell by thirteen percent, even as the population grew by fifteen percent.¹⁵

Of the many time-binding, passive habits that social critics decried, listening was one that had become indispensable to the average American. In a 1921 survey distributed in Edison recordings, one respondent claimed to "love our machine so much [that] if we

¹³ Ibid., 247.

¹⁴ William Howland Kenney, *Recorded Music in American Life: the Phonograph and Popular Memory, 1890-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 11.

¹⁵ U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920*, 942. It is curious to note that although the market for upright pianos dropped, larger pianos, primarily baby grands, doubled in sales during the same period, possibly reflecting aspirational purchases by the upper middle class. Nevertheless, the overall market for pianos fell significantly and never recovered to previous levels relative to population growth.

had to part with any piece of furniture in our home, we would give our bed up before we would part with our Edison.”¹⁶ Echoing these sentiments, the Lynds quoted a family forced by unemployment to take to the road to find work in the summer of 1923: “[We] strapped a trunk on the running board of the Ford, put the Victrola in the back seat with the little girl, and went off job-hunting. Wherever we lived all summer we had our music with us.”¹⁷ That passionate affection would soon be passed to the radio, the possibilities of which were only just beginning to emerge.

THE RISE OF RADIO

Broadcasting begins: 1918-1922

Like a soldier mustered out of the army at the end of the Great War, radio was thrust with no clear sense of identity into civilian life in a changed America. The Wartime Communications Act that had conscripted the adolescent radio technology for war use temporarily shut down the airwaves and with it experimentation in sending music and programs through the ether. By the time wartime restrictions were lifted, the social, technological and geographic landscape had irrevocably altered, signaling the real arrival of the Twentieth century with its speed of change, shifting mores and culture of advertising, all of which favored the development of commercial radio.

The early years of radio did not anticipate the potential for broadcasting, immense audiences and the creative use of sound. In the years before America entered the war, development focused on radio as an extension of wireless telegraphy and until the mid-Teens major industrial interests were much more concerned with extending the distance

¹⁶ Kenney, *Recorded Music in American Life*, 11.

¹⁷ Robert S. and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown in Transition: A Study in Cultural Conflicts* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1937), 244.

of wireless signals than with carrying voices. At the same time, however, an amateur market for radio equipment began to develop. It was left to independent inventors and amateurs with home-made crystal sets to explore the possibilities of sending voices and music in the air. Through the experimentation of these enthusiasts the idea of programming eventually emerged.

Further complicating the early development of radio were the numerous patent disputes over technology and manufacturing rights to the many components. Spurred by intense interest from the Navy, which recognized the strategic and military importance of long distance wireless, particularly for communications at sea, Congress passed the Radio Act of 1912, reserving the power to take over the airwaves in time of war. Upon America's entrance into World War I, the government commandeered the airwaves and mandated cooperation among the various arguing patent holders and corporations for the duration of the conflict. As a result, considerable progress was made with technological issues, and radio proved to be of vital use on sea and land throughout the war. Based on this evidence, industry renewed its interest in institutional use and international business communication—the telephone business model. After the war, Congress brokered a settlement of patent disputes: American Marconi, retained a virtual monopoly on marine communication, GE held exclusive rights to manufacture vacuum tubes, and AT&T was free to develop radio as an extension of telephony. In 1919, the Radio Corporation of America was formed, uniting the interests of American Marconi and GE. Within a few months, RCA entered a deal with AT&T and its subsidiary Western Electric in which all patents of each entity were available to the others. This alliance lasted until 1932 when the parent companies were forced to sell their stakes in RCA as a part of an anti-trust

consent decree; RCA, however retained its full ownership of NBC. Radio's industrial future was set for the duration of its formative years, but its future in broadcasting was not perceived.

By the end of the war there were 6,500 radio hobbyists in the United States who were preoccupied with tuning in other radio buffs. Although they, too, first imagined radio as an independent telephone, the lack of privacy and interference on the airwaves quickly dampened enthusiasm for this application and complaints came to the attention of the Commerce Department, which was responsible for radio's regulation.¹⁸ During this period, from the end of World War I until 1922 when new licensing was severely restricted, anyone who wanted a radio license simply had to apply for one, in compliance with the Radio Act of 1912. This conferred upon the individual or organization the right to use transmitting equipment and to broadcast within certain frequencies using call letters to identify the individual or organization with the permit. Since the future use of radio was not understood when the 1912 law was passed, a long period of unregulated broadcasting resulted in a cacophonous conflict of signals. The idea of a radio station as it would later become known, and as we understand it today, didn't materialize until the capping of licenses restricted access to the airwaves. But this early unrestrained experimentation also revealed radio's future use: listening.

Interest in reception first led some amateurs to "broadcast" music over the airwaves, almost as targets for others to tune in to in the crowded sound spectrum. Many of these early "broadcasters" didn't even have a license. They were initially inspired by a desire to bypass Western Union and the telephone to communicate with others.

¹⁸ Catherine L. Covert, *Mass Media between the Wars* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1984), 203.

Gradually, these early experiments encouraged hobbyists to send other messages, such as farm prices, news and weather reports to rural areas that didn't have regular mail service or newspapers. Universities and clubs began to broadcast live music and talks. In 1921, when an amateur transmitted the Dempsey-Carpentier fight from ringside, sports broadcasts by enthusiasts became common.¹⁹

The product of experiments and individual efforts, early programming was not broadcast at regular times or with any advance notice, so listeners had no idea when to tune in. Within a few years, amateur and educational broadcasters produced fliers and magazines for radio hobbyists. These were originally the only source of program information, connecting listeners and clubs with each other to learn about their broadcasting hours and "programs." However, the entire day was not pre-programmed. Programs were shifted, dead segments were filled with extemporizing by announcers, unplanned drop-in interviews and conversations, and the playing of phonograph records. The fact that there was no publicized regular daily or weekly schedule of programs for stations until the late 1920s illustrates the local nature and fluid quality of radio programming in the early years. By the middle of the decade, weekly program schedules, gaps included, were published in local newspapers and radio station magazines. The effort to keep listeners abreast of programming inspired the next leap—to commercial broadcasting.

Brought to you by.....

Commercial broadcasting began in 1921, not with sponsored programming, but with a modest but regular schedule of recorded music. As part of its war work,

¹⁹ Samuel L. Rothafel and Raymond F. Yates, *Broadcasting, Its New Day* (New York: The Century Co., 1925), 113-115.

Westinghouse set up two radio stations in Pittsburgh for point to point experiments, one at their plant, and one five miles away at the home of Dr. Frank Conrad, the engineer charged with researching radio transmission. After the war, Conrad continued to experiment at home and established a consistent two hour time slot in which he played recorded music lent to him by a local Pittsburgh area record store. When Westinghouse executive H.P. Davis learned of the popularity of the program by noticing that local stores were advertising the sale radio receivers so that local residents could pick up Conrad's broadcasts, he saw it as an opportunity to promote the sale of radio sets on a much larger scale by providing a service that people would want to listen to.²⁰ The first station, KDKA in Pittsburgh was among 25 licensed in 1921 that were allowed to transmit programming directly to the public. The mix of programs included weather reports, commodity prices, music, concerts and talks. Broadcasting caught on rapidly; six hundred stations were licensed the next year. Suddenly, it was clear that listening, and not interpersonal communication, was the future of radio. By the beginning of 1922, these licensed stations were the only ones permitted to broadcast recorded programming, despite the fact that amateurs had pioneered the practice.

How did this rapid transfer from amateur to professional occur? Ever since radio was returned to public use after World War I, unrestricted traffic resulted in cacophony on the airwaves. Radio buffs took over frequencies assigned to others, jumped from band to band, and tried to blast competing signals off the air. In response to these problems the first radio conference was held in early 1922, moderated by Secretary of Commerce

²⁰ H. P. Davis, "An Early History of Broadcasting in America," in *The Radio Industry: The Story of Its Development as Told by the Leaders of the Industry to the Students of the Graduate School of Business Administration* (New York: A.W. Shaw, 1928), 191-195.

Herbert Hoover. He laid the problem directly at the feet of “the American small boy,” whom he blamed for disrupting the airwaves with his hobby.²¹ Whether or not that was a valid accusation, the result was a victory for the nascent professional broadcaster. Although critics charged that only commercial broadcasters benefited from the consignment of amateurs to the lowest bands of the radio spectrum, other institutions—universities, churches and other licensed entities also had clearer access to radio broadcasting because of the reduction in the number of simultaneous transmissions. Despite some criticism and even anti-trust actions, the government continued to act in a way friendly to business, which was perceived as conveying the most benefit to the public at large.

Broadcasting in America, unlike most of the rest of the world, quickly evolved into a commercial, rather than public, medium. The early, failed movement for the government to retain control of radio at the Federal level was inspired by a desire to wrest control of international communications from the British for the purpose of fostering American trade interests, rather than by more idealistic goals. Intense lobbying and Congressional debate ended in the formation of RCA in 1919, which would manufacture equipment as well as focus on international communications.²² A cooperative relationship between the government and the radio business continued throughout the 1920s as the networks emerged, and into the 1930s during their greatest period of growth. This long history of cordiality between networks and government smoothed the way for a

²¹ Michelle Hilmes, *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922-1952*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 38.

²² Daniel J. Czitrom, *Media and the American Mind: From Morse to McLuhan* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 70.

close working relationship during World War II. Periodic calls for more public service programming and anti-trust litigation disturbed this relationship from time to time, but issues were generally resolved favorably for the development of the radio industry. This was particularly crucial during the Depression years, when the idea of dampening one of the few growth segments in the American economy was considered foolish, if not dangerous—a strategy that the networks exploited at every opportunity.

Early Programming experiments: 1922-1926

From 1922, when formal licensing began in earnest, until the major networks were established in 1926 and 1928, radio programming was developed locally and evolved with trial and error.²³ Stations played recorded music, aired live talks and brought in performers to sing, play or tell jokes, relying almost exclusively on audience feedback from letters and phone calls to assess the success of the programming. Listener reaction continued as the primary mechanism for programming decision making until the development of formal research using the new tools of social science in the 1930s.

Very quickly, radio programming settled into a format consisting almost entirely of classical music, punctuated with the occasional lecture or sermon. Stations were sensitive to the requirement that they serve the public, which was interpreted early on as broadcasting cultural programming. But the availability of free talent certainly contributed to programming decisions. Large cities drew on pools of singers and instrumentalists who were willing to perform for free as a way to publicize their talents. Newspaper listings for performers often included their addresses or the name of their

²³ 1928 was the year in which William Paley took over the struggling Judson-Coats network and set up CBS. NBC was formed in January of 1926 by RCA as part of a dispute resolution with AT&T.

manager.²⁴ In smaller cities and towns, which didn't have a sufficient supply of conservatory-trained talent, stations experimented with radio plays, using amateur actors from local thespian groups. Sometimes these plays were adaptations of classic stories, but as stations ran out of classics to fill the many radio hours, they began to call for original material from the listening audience.

The need to have an announcer, a kind of master-of-ceremonies, brought the first radio personalities to the public. The best of these announcers not only introduced the talent and read local reports and the required station IDs, but also interviewed performers and drop-in guests. Their most important function might have been to extemporize when scheduled musicians failed to show up, which was a common occurrence in the era of unpaid talent. These announcers, almost all male, developed followings as reflected through fan mail. The stations tried to keep the announcers anonymous as a way of controlling costs and egos, as the movie studios did with their players in the early years of film, with such creations as D.W. Griffith's *Biograph Girl*. But this was a failed effort. Announcers became local celebrities and drew audiences both on air and at outside events. As stations worked out their programming mixes and became increasingly professionalized, local radio became a spawning ground for announcers and many others who later developed lasting national presences.

Early Radio Audience Reception

As the radio group had hoped, equipment sales grew rapidly once stations had clear signals and programs that people wanted to hear. In 1922 there had been only an estimated 60,000 receiving sets in use in the United States; a year later, after the licensing

²⁴ Erik Barnouw, *A Tower in Babel: A History of Broadcasting in the United States, Vol. I* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 127.

limits had been set by Secretary Hoover, and broadcasting of programs actually started, there were 1.5 million. By 1930 there were over twelve million radio homes, with three million radios sold in 1929 alone—radio was in over 40% of American households. Another three million were sold the following year before the Depression finally slackened the pace of growth in 1932.²⁵ Nevertheless, by the middle of the decade radio ownership began to climb rapidly again and by the end of the 1930s radios were in over 90% of homes nationwide.²⁶ Radio traced a path from hobbyist gadget in 1922, to prestige product for the higher classes mid-decade, to squarely middle class by 1930, to ubiquitous necessity by 1940. By comparison, the telephone was a luxury people felt they could do without; in 1940 only 30% of U.S. households had one. The twin prospects of “free” entertainment and the ability to acquire low priced radios that became available after RCA’s stranglehold on patents was broken in a negotiated Anti-trust consent decree in 1932 were irresistible to Depression era families who wanted take part in this great cultural change.

Over a period of ten to twelve years, from 1922 to the early 1930s, the reactions of listeners metamorphosed from wonder and amazement, to “imagined communities” to complete assimilation. From its earliest moments, radio’s link with the ether associated it with metaphysics and mystery. That voices could travel long distances through the air, without even the benefit of electrical cable, was confirmation of radio’s quasi-magical status. The coincident early twentieth century obsession with communication with the spirit world through mediums, Ouija boards and other extrasensory methods conveys the

²⁵ Herman Hettinger, *A Decade of Radio Advertising* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1933), 42.

²⁶ National Association of Broadcasters, *NAB Study of Urban Radio Listening* (New York: National Association of Broadcasters, 1941), 131.

credibility of these ideas. An early essay in the periodical *Radio Broadcast* lyrically described this perception of radio as “apparently supernatural...affording a change from the regularity of nature and of average human experience....the transmission and reception of pure form, without substance...This form, this exchange of thought, is constantly passing about us---*passing through us---from countless transmitting stations at this very instant!*”²⁷ The strangeness of this phenomenon—“pulling voices out of the air” did not meet with universal approval, much less enthusiasm. Letters to the editors of radio publications indicted the technology as “a popular craze” or an “epidemic.”²⁸

Later, when broadcasting began in earnest, one of the most commonly reported reactions was the listener perception of a personal relationship with the radio voices coming through the receiver. Listeners wrote in to stations as if they were personally acquainted with radio personalities, scolding the announcer or host for a disliked program and expressing concern about them in others. For example, Lowell Thomas, one of radio’s most popular program hosts, received fan mail that criticized as well as praised. One wrote calling him to task because a young girl in his home left the table in tears after Thomas made a disparaging remark about “thick ankles.”²⁹ Listeners offered unsolicited critiques of everything from speaking styles to program content. One farmer wrote to an educational station in Wisconsin, “These lectures have become an absolute nuisance,” while another offered elocutionary advice, “Your voice came in last night in good shape,

²⁷ Covert, *Mass Media between the Wars*, 202. Covert quotes W.H. Worrell in the November 1922 issue of *Radio Broadcast*. Italics in the original. Covert goes on to note how movie makers and song lyricists would later represent the voice coming out of the radio as the “voice of God.”

²⁸ Rothafel and Yates, *Broadcasting, Its New Day*. The entire first chapter of this book discusses this controversy.

²⁹ Richard Butsch, *The Making of American Audiences: From Stage to Television, 1750-1990* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 199.

but I thought it sounded a little scared.”³⁰ The early years of radio broadcasting were ones of active listening. People spoke to the radio announcers as if they were in the room. Writing to a newspaper editor, one Midwestern traveling salesman reported his observations that in every home he visited in a year—over 200—no one listened to the radio quietly. “Even the prayers and the church services [on air] were interrupted with bright remarks, and other irresponsible and extraneous material.”³¹ Although this naïve interaction with radio eventually disappeared, the bond of active listening continued in the form of personal identification with programs, characters and announcers. This companionability formed part of the basis for the trust which Americans had in radio.

Public absorption in radio resulted in cultural changes, the importance of which was never underestimated. The Lynd’s *Middletown* research, which took place in 1924, was too early for radio to have made significant inroads into the culture. They estimated that only about 12% of business class and 6% of working class homes had radios at that time.³² Nevertheless they foresaw its coming as one of the technological “space-binding, leisure time inventions imported from without—automobile, motion picture and radio—reshaping the city.” They noted that, in contrast to the automobile, for example, radio was seen as restoring youth to the family hearth. “More than one mother said that her family used to scatter in the evening—‘but now we all sit around and listen to the radio.’”³³ But

³⁰ Derek Vaillant, “‘Your Voice Came In Last Night...But I Thought It Sounded a Little Scared,’ Rural Radio Listening and ‘Talking Back’ during the Progressive Era in Wisconsin, 1920-1932,” in *Radio Reader: Essays in the Cultural History of Radio*, ed. Michelle Hilmes and Jason Loviglio (New York: Routledge, 2002), 73.

³¹ Richard Butsch, 187.

³² Lynd *Middletown*, 263.

³³ *Ibid.*, 270.

by the time the Lynds wrote up their field work and published it in 1929, they saw problems that radio presented.

As it becomes more perfected, cheaper and a more accepted part of life, it may cease to call forth so much active, constructive ingenuity [as was required by operation of a crystal set] and become one more form of passive enjoyment. Doubtless it will continue to play a mighty role in lifting Middletown out of the humdrum over every day....But it seems not unlikely that...it will at the same time operate, with national advertising, syndicated newspapers and other means of large-scale diffusion, as yet another means of standardizing many of Middletown's habits.³⁴

By 1935, when the Lynds did their follow up research, *Middletown in Transition A Study in Cultural Conflicts*, radio was approaching its zenith and was fully integrated into everyday life, its presence threading in and out of the study. But they were not so pessimistic as they had been in the late 1920s, looking at radio ten years later in the light of dire economic conditions. Radio had found its way into well over half the homes in Middletown, providing “an almost entirely passive form of leisure in Middletown. It is likely that this inexpensive form of leisure...has involved a relatively larger amount of time per radio during the depression, and that it has constituted a mild cohesive element in family life.”³⁵ The Lynds’ work bracket radio’s earliest period, when it embodied the disruptions of the modern world which were nearly too difficult to absorb, through the period in which radio was fully assimilated. They lamented the increasing standardization of modern life and the encroachment of mechanized entertainment on time and social interaction, but this trend only accelerated as the decades passed. The generation which grew up after the Great War quickly adapted to these changes. They accommodated themselves to the behaviors required to take advantage of the benefits of new technology.

³⁴ Ibid., 271.

³⁵ Robert S. and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown in Transition*, 263.

In the case of radio, this meant stationing oneself in front of the set, planning one's time around favorite programs, and attending carefully to what one heard, since there were no visual cues to enhance comprehension. I suggest that this discipline also extended to sharpening listening skills and learning the meanings of the aural conventions which developed during the 1930s.

BROADCASTING AS BIG BUSINESS

Industrial factors in the evolution of programming

The history of the creative development of radio programming is embedded in an industrial model. Practices associated with big business—standardization, centralization and establishment of controls—affected the development of programming relatively early. These are important because they provided the working environment for the codification of sound, in part, as another manifestation of efficiency. In this section I discuss how corporate structure in a commercial, competitive marketplace streamlined the industry and its production practices. This occurred through a series of revelatory business experiments. Informal chain hook-ups led to network consolidation. This amplified audience sizes which permitted economies of scale in production as well as national advertising, all of which make more economic sense than fragmentary local broadcasting and advertising sales. More program choices led to more radio households. As audience reach expanded, so did competition between the networks for those listeners. This spurred the development of quality programming to attract and retain those listeners. Decisions associated with programming were the most important in the life of the network; a narrow vertical management structure evolved to exert quality control. The ultimate byproduct of this industrial model was a small, incestuous creative community

which shared and borrowed ideas, participating in the development of programming genres and the communicative possibilities of sound.

Corporate expectations

Big business interests entered broadcasting with major investments and far reaching ambition. Most notable were AT&T, which looked to extend revenues of its long distance telephone lines, and RCA, which was Westinghouse's and General Electric's marketing and manufacturing arm for their patents on transmitting equipment, radio parts and radio sets. The success of the Westinghouse-owned station KDKA in Pittsburgh set off an immediate demand for radio sets and spurred its RCA parent companies to acquire radio broadcasting licenses.³⁶ Large newspapers also entered the broadcasting business, but at first saw radio as an opportunity to publicize their print publications, not a way to extend advertising sales. Resistance to on-air advertising arose from a concern that radio would siphon off print advertising revenues. This inhibited the newspapers from aggressively pursuing radio's possibilities, a fear that was substantiated when newspaper advertising plummeted in the Depression, while radio revenues soared.

The advertising business model did not come to dominate broadcasting until the 1930s when networks and their affiliates aggressively turned to sponsored programming as a primary source of revenue, rather than as a way to offset programming expenses. During the early years, individual radio stations were subsidized by their parent companies and were seen as a source of publicity to grow radio set sales. It was only when sales fell off dramatically in 1932, and stations were expected to pay for

³⁶ Barnouw, *A Tower in Babel*, 72-74.

themselves, that they were pressed to sell local advertising, using a large pool of commission-based ad salesmen eager for employment during the Depression.³⁷

From the earliest days of radio, the question of how to pay for broadcasting obsessed the industry. As programming professionalized and talent demanded to be paid, broadcasting became increasingly expensive. In addition, engineering advances, that made broadcasts clearer and easier to tune in, raised facility costs and required additional technical personnel at stations. Sponsored programming, the essence of commercial broadcasting, did not generate sufficient revenue to cover these mounting costs because of the fragmentary local nature of broadcasting which reached too few people to attract national advertisers.

Network consolidation brings professionalism and centralization to programming

The idea for the networks had its origin in AT&T's persistent, if elusive, objective of making a radio business model along the lines of its telephone enterprise. It wanted to set up radio stations and sell transmitting time by the hour to any who wanted to get a message across to the public, beginning with WEAJ in 1922.³⁸ Years of experimentation in selling radio time, conflict with other companies over the right to broadcast, and intense lobbying of the government to grant them clear wavelengths and limit the numbers of stations to reduce overlapping transmissions led to a simplified commercial approach which formed the basis of network broadcasting. AT&T's strength and uniqueness was in its long telephone lines, which could bring in remote broadcasts and

³⁷ Ibid., 236.

³⁸ Alfred N. Goldsmith and Austin C. Lescarbourea, *This Thing Called Broadcasting* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1930), 37. Also, See Barnouw's discussion of AT&T's efforts with WEAJ for a fascinating anecdotal history of the AT&T's attempts to launch a toll radio station in which phone company employees tried to provide programming by singing and playing instruments when they failed to attract customers to buy broadcasting time .

link multiple radio stations with the same programming, extending the reach of a program to an immense audience. The tantalizing goal of huge reach with a single broadcast became an industry Holy Grail.

Early experiments have taken on legendary status and are credited as the events which exposed the future power of network broadcasting and audience influence. AT&T's three-station East coast hook up that broadcast Woodrow Wilson's halting Armistice Day comments just weeks before his death in 1923 resulted in a mass gathering of an estimated 40,000 the next day in the streets near his Washington home.³⁹ But it is AT&T's 24 station link of the contentious 1924 Democratic convention in New York which demonstrated most dramatically the thrill, impact and immediacy of events that could simultaneously reach the farthest corners of the nation. This convention was divided between pro-Klan factions and those supporting Catholic Alfred E. Smith. The convention floor erupted with fiery speeches, angry roars and borderline violence—all of which were audible to the listening audience. They were audible, at least, until NBC cut off the broadcast and replaced it with a recording of Schumann's lyrical *Träumerei* (Dreamy).⁴⁰ When decorum was restored, the broadcast was continued, but the impression made by the fracas remained a powerful image. Audience response was immediate and stations were eager to participate in future link-ups. But the emotional impact on listeners also provided early evidence that the audience could interpret and be moved by emotionally charged sounds.

³⁹ Gene Smith, *When the Cheering Stopped: The Last Years of Woodrow Wilson* (New York: William Morrow, 1982), 216-221.

⁴⁰ Barounw, *A Tower in Babel*, 150.

By the end of 1925 many of the technical issues, competitive and legal battles had been settled, once again with the direct involvement of Secretary of Commerce Hoover.⁴¹ GE, RCA, and Westinghouse, known as the radio group, as well as AT&T, used their influence in Washington to crush amateur competition and to license strong bandwidth frequencies which covered large segments of their regions. Hoover awarded powerful channels to large companies; small stations run by universities, religious groups and civic organizations were relegated to weak frequencies; many marginal stations were shut down; patent and licensing disputes were settled; monopoly charges were resolved with satisfactory results for the major companies. The justification for these big-company victories was that the results were manifestly in the public interest. Listeners now had clear broadcasts without constant interference and good programming emanating from those stations because of the significant investment being made in production.

Government intervention not only solved the reception problem for listeners, it also paved the way for the establishment of the networks. Under terms of the settlement, GE, RCA, and Westinghouse, which had previously only manufactured and sold radio equipment, were now free to broadcast programs and they licensed the use of AT&T's long lines to provide multi-station hook-ups. In exchange, AT&T agreed to get out of the broadcasting business. David Sarnoff, then general manager of RCA, had been contemplating a chain arrangement for several years that went beyond the occasional event-based broadcasts, and moved to formalize station relationships in late 1926 in a

⁴¹ Hoover stepped into these disputes because of the urgency of the situation, but recognized that he was probably making decisions that far over-reached his authority, and claimed he welcomed a court challenge. By the time Federal courts decided that he had, indeed, no right to these decisions, the new structure was already in place. Subsequent legislation, the Radio Act of 1927, mandated, among other things, that all license holders had to reapply, but this had no meaningful effect. By this time both NBC and CBS had been formed and many small stations had either sold their licenses or been permanently marginalized.

new company whose owners consisted the members of the radio group, and headed by Merlin Aylesworth, an executive from the electric utilities industry.⁴² The National Broadcasting Company established two networks designated Red and Blue. The Red network was to use WEAF, which it had just bought from AT&T as part of the legal settlement, for its flagship station. This provided the new network with the infrastructure and experience to begin commercial national programming.

AT&T had invested heavily and refined its programming capability far beyond the early days when staff members played violin solos to fill air time. And because it had been the test case for AT&T's toll broadcasting model, WEAF had a sales force with considerable experience. NBC was now ready to roll that model out to the rest of the country, offering to sponsors New York based programs with a nationwide audience. A Blue network, anchored by the radio group's station WJZ, was launched several months later, and would always be considered the weaker of the two networks.⁴³ In its initial arrangement, affiliated stations would be paid \$50/hour to air sponsored programs as part of their network agreement while the network retained the balance of the sponsor's payment. Affiliates would pay the network \$45/hour for unsponsored programming received from NBC and be permitted to sell their own programs to local sponsors in

⁴² Kenneth Bilby, *The General: David Sarnoff and the Rise of the Communications Industry* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986), 87. Bilby, a long time executive at RCA, explains that Sarnoff was overlooked by RCA CEO Owen Young as the head of NBC in favor of the older Aylesworth. He prized Aylesworth's experience in resisting regulatory forces, despite the fact he didn't even own a radio before joining NBC. In 1930, Sarnoff assumed the presidency of RCA and, in consequence, became Aylesworth's boss.

⁴³ Ultimately, the Blue network was spun off as ABC in 1945 as part of NBC's anti-trust settlement with the government.

hours they were not broadcasting network programs.⁴⁴ Considerable pressure was put on these stations to air the sponsored nighttime programming from the network, because these hours were considered prime listening time. The network, in return, provided high-quality, prestige programming that was attractive to the affiliates and their listening audience.

If NBC was born the coddled child of privileged, corporate parentage and entered life blessed with benign government relations, then CBS was the scrappy outsider, fighting for a chance at life. The network was conceived in mixture of idealism and defiance by impresario Arthur Judson. His hope to give his concert artists a prominent place on the airwaves dissolved when a tentative arrangement on NBC with RCA's David Sarnoff failed to materialize, spurring Judson to start a competitive network. A sneering Sarnoff told Judson he would never get access to AT&T's long lines for transmission. Working behind the scenes in Washington, Judson's partner, George Coats, raised the specter of an NBC monopoly, secured the needed license with AT&T, and in September of 1927 the United Independent Broadcasters went on the air with twelve affiliated stations. They were totally unprepared. Without adequate broadcasting facilities, undercapitalized and lacking in even basic radio experience, the culturally ambitious programming had an inauspicious first season and very nearly closed down for lack of funds. Fearful of being tarnished by association with a rag-tag operation, potential advertisers committed to NBC instead. Funding from the Columbia Phonograph Record Company was abruptly cut off when it appeared that the new network would not

⁴⁴ Hettinger, *A Decade of Radio Advertising*, 90-91. The charge for sustaining programming quickly dropped to \$25/hour at NBC. Later, CBS created a competitive advantage by offering sustaining programs for free.

stabilize. A patchwork of private investors including a New York socialite, the owners of the Philadelphia affiliates and their wealthy friends kept the company on life support until the son of one of the investors who was looking for something to do with his restless energy, William Paley, took the helm. With a genius for organization and deal making, Paley quickly brought in Paramount studios as a major investor, stabilized the company's credit and consigned Arthur Judson to head up programming for the network, a job Judson had wanted all along. The new entity, Columbia Broadcasting System, went on the air in September of 1928. With its shaky start and considered less prestigious by advertisers, CBS began its existence with something to prove. Labeled from the beginning as an underdog, and lagging NBC in the chase for advertisers, the network strove to improve its image and it chose to do so through programming, hiring young, talented producers, and by taking risks. In consequence, CBS, more than the two NBC networks or the fourth network, Mutual Broadcasting which came into existence in 1934, stands out for its innovative programming and for exploring the creative possibilities of sound.

Network programming begins: a corporate model evolves

Although radio had already developed loyal listeners and individual stations had developed programs which would eventually find national audiences, professionalized radio programming did not really begin until the formation of the networks. Faced with the task of producing many hours of varied programming every week that would be attractive to sponsors and affiliates alike, the young networks quickly moved to centralize program development, and standardize production methods. Network success depended on increasing the number of sponsored hours each year. This industrial, structured

approach facilitated not only the creation of program genres and sub-genres within drama, variety, comedy and music, but also the swift development of radio-specific writing and production techniques intended to communicate meaning through sound which listeners would soon learn to interpret.

The corporate programming model was clearly and obviously foreseen as early as 1926. In a humorous *New York Sun* article referring to the launch of NBC, H.I. Phillips satirized, and perhaps lamented, the standardization of programming that would come with the launch of national networks:

“What is your plan in regard to Bedtime Stories?” was the next question. “Ah,” was the reply. “I am glad you asked. Centralization of the Bedtime Story industry will be brought about at once. Do you realize that at present there are over 1,167 concerns turning out Bedtime Stories east of the Mississippi alone? Do you know that none of them is making money and that the product is far from satisfactory? Our plan is to close all these factories and open one big Bedtime Story plant in Long Island City and produce a complete Bedtime Story by one operation in which the human element is reduced to a minimum.”⁴⁵

Business consolidation was a persistent theme in the 1920s, so with the formation of the networks it was quickly apparent to the industry that the days of locally originated programming were numbered. The most popular of these pre-network era local programs, such as Chicago’s *Amos ‘n Andy* and H.V. Kaltenborn’s commentaries which had started on WEA, would be absorbed by the national networks, obtain major sponsorship and be broadcast to the nation. The networks would constantly be on the lookout for regional successes that they could bring to national sponsors. But, despite some regional exceptions, network programming would increasingly be developed and produced primarily in New York until the mid-1930s, when many shows moved to Hollywood. New York, however, still remained the hub of production.

⁴⁵ Goldsmith and Lescarboua, *This Thing Called Broadcasting*, 338.

To take advantage of economies of scale and develop a nationwide business that would attract major advertisers, NBC and CBS consolidated their functions in a vertical structure reporting directly to a chief executive. At CBS, for example, advertising sales, marketing and market research were grouped together under one executive while production, programming, and network operations reported to another. Within the programming group were a writer's department, a program department likened to the editorial department of a publishing company, a music department, and production, which handled all the elements of creating a program including sound effects.⁴⁶

This narrow organization with few executives above and a large staff of functionaries below provided controls that permitted rapid, top-down decision making favored by Aylesworth and Paley. This style was much admired for its effectiveness. An article about Paley in the 1930s in *Fortune* gushed without irony that "Paley, as a business man, is a theme that practically brings tears to the eyes of [board] directors...Not only is he a master advertiser and feeler of the public pulse, but...he is the greatest organizer, the best executive, the quickest thinker, the coolest negotiator they have ever seen."⁴⁷

Senior executives on the advertising side of the network structure matched major commercial sponsors and the programs developed by the creative staff. Because Paley saw creative programming as a competitive advantage over the better financed NBC, he

⁴⁶ John S. Carlile, *Production and Direction of Radio Programs* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1946), 7-9.

⁴⁷ Ruth Brindze, *Not to Be Broadcast: The Truth about the Radio* (New York: The Vanguard Press, 1937), 53. Quoted from *Fortune* magazine.

viewed virtually all decisions in the company through the lens of whether they would improve programming.⁴⁸

By centralizing program creation at the network level, much of the talent to produce the shows was drawn to New York to work for these large corporate organizations, either directly, as staff members, contract employees and free lancers, or indirectly, by working for the advertising agencies that produced commercial programs.⁴⁹ This is not the sort of environment one thinks of as the cradle of creativity. However, Paley, in particular, encouraged experiments, especially in the non-commercial, and therefore low budget, programs. But both networks were in constant need of fresh programming and the new industry drew talented newcomers who were often given the opportunity to try new ideas in exchange for long hours and intensely stressful production schedules. In consequence, rather than stifling innovation, the fact that nearly the entire creative radio community worked directly or indirectly for two network organizations based in New York City fostered the exchange of ideas and techniques. Writers, directors and producers knew each other and worked together at one or both networks during the years of radio's dominion over broadcasting. This was not a large community; there were only a few hundred writers in radio during its peak years, including continuity writers who wrote transitions, and a much smaller number of creative writers who wrote

⁴⁸ Lewis J. Paper, *Empire: William S. Paley and the Making of CBS* (New York: St. Martin's Press. 1987), 36-37.

⁴⁹ Important commercial programming continued to be developed outside New York, especially in Chicago where the Hummert soap opera empire was based, and in some other regional pockets. But even the Hummerts moved to New York in 1935. Also in the mid-1930s, Hollywood became a center for radio program production because of the ease of access to star talent. However, for most programming idea development, script writing and especially advertising sales/agency oversight continued to be centered in New York.

radio plays, serials, and semi-documentary programs.⁵⁰ The networks themselves were not very large organizations relative to their immense social influence and huge revenues. In the mid 1930s CBS had just over 400 total employees and the combined NBC networks had only 1359.⁵¹ Of these employees, far fewer than half were actively engaged in program development; it was a small creative community.

Members of the coterie of creative people influenced and were influenced by each other. Certainly, much of what was produced by this small group was, at best, work-a-day material, which engendered scorn by cultural as well as industry critics. Academic and critic James Orton attacked radio programming as “drivel” written at the “level of a 13 year old,” and foretold of a time when the American intellect would be degraded.⁵² Program standards, he argued, should be higher. Instead, he warned, the networks were dangerous New York-based cultural arbiters which erased individuality and high culture.⁵³

The unrelenting demand for new material produced mediocre results from hacks and the gifted alike. Nevertheless, talented people innovated and their ideas were copied and became the new standards of the field. These standards were absorbed into the corporate organization that supported the process and created a kind of playbook for broadcasting with its conventions for writing, production, and performance. Literally

⁵⁰ Catherine Seymour and John T. W. Martin, *Practical Radio Writing* (New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1938), vi.

⁵¹ Barnouw, *A Tower in Babel*, 250.

⁵² William Orton, “The Level of a Thirteen Year Old,” in *America in Search of Culture* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1933). Published originally in the *Atlantic Monthly*, 1931.

⁵³ Bruce Lenthall, “Critical Reception: Public Intellectuals Decry Depression Era Radio, Mass Culture and Modern America,” in *Radio Reader: Essays in the Cultural History of Radio*, ed. Michelle Hilmes and Jason Loviglio (New York: Routledge, 2002), 50.

dozens of books were written for aspiring radio writers, producers and directors which described the production process. The fundamental principle which underpinned these creative conventions was the need to communicate to audiences by sound alone, the development of which I will address in the next chapter.

Programming in a commercial environment: balancing the public good and the profit motive

From the standpoint of the networks, radio was comprised of two interdependent elements: advertising and programming. While advertising supplied the revenues, programming supplied the audience for the ads. The early programming mix changed and evolved constantly to satisfy competing demands. Radio stations had to serve several masters in order to retain their licenses, which had to be renewed annually. Entertaining the public and pleasing sponsors were insufficient: stations were required to program material in the public interest. But what “the public interest” meant was never defined in the Radio Acts of 1912, 1920 or 1927. In consequence, stations were without guidelines and always theoretically at risk of losing their licenses based on the type of programming they aired. Reflecting these dual objectives, the industry developed a programming mix which included *sponsored* programs, for which a single advertiser paid for a show, and *sustaining*, which was unsponsored and intended to “sustain” the listener’s interest between sponsored programs. Some industry officials, however, defined the term to mean that the network “sustained” the cost of production for unsponsored programs. Sustaining shows were not under the same pressure to cater to popular tastes and generate a large audience that would retain advertising sponsorship. The theory was that the programs broadcast on radio be a balanced schedule of commercial material of a popular nature and non-commercial offerings that were intended for public edification. The broadcasting

industry, led by the networks, loudly touted their practice of offering far more sustaining programming than sponsored. However, the facts show a different picture.

It has been often quoted and widely accepted by historians that, until the early 1930s, over 70 % of programming was sustaining and that stations and networks sold only as much time as was required to subsidize their operational costs and meet profit goals.⁵⁴ However, that overall number is misleading because it averages all hours of broadcasting in every station across the nation, for every on-air hour of the day. My analysis of network programming shows a much more intensely commercial picture at the network level because of their increasing dominance of the various dayparts in which listening was greatest. For example, NBC Red had twenty-three hours of weekly prime time programming on air in 1928, and only sixteen on NBC Blue, while CBS, then in its first year, had fewer than seven hours. But by 1932, NBC Red had nearly twenty-eight hours on prime time, Blue had nearly twenty-four and CBS broadcast almost twenty-three. All three networks were broadcasting over three hours of prime time, defined as the hours between seven and eleven, a night.

The mix of commercial versus sustaining programming *on the networks* was actually the reverse of the often cited statistic of 30/70. In 1928, sustaining prime time shows were thirty-one percent of network programs. In 1932 sustaining programs had

⁵⁴ Hettinger, *A Decade of Radio Advertising*, 115. As part of their function as watchdog for the public interest, the Federal Radio Commission collected data from the networks concerning the amount of time that was sold to sponsors and how much radio time was devoted to sustaining programs. In 1931, this was reported as follows: NBC (both networks) 33.8% sponsored, 66.2% sustaining. For CBS, 21.94% was sponsored and 78.06% was sustaining. Hettinger used these statistics in his seminal work *A Decade of Radio Advertising*. Scholars have referenced his work, as well as referring to the statistics from the FRC itself as a source to document the assertion that radio programming was largely non-commercial.

increased to only thirty-three percent.⁵⁵ In other words, the numbers submitted to the FRC considered the many hours of the broadcast day and were not based on what actually was heard by most of the audience. This point emphasizes the intensely commercial nature of program production from the very beginnings of the networks. They were always looking for programs with the potential for sponsorship. Deciding what to air became the consuming question of the industry, and for which its leaders had no background to bring to the decision making process.

Radio was started by people who had either a personal or professional interest in technology. Certainly by the time the two networks were launched, the most powerful people in radio were businessmen with engineering, manufacturing or telecommunications backgrounds. But radio had evolved into show business, particularly with respect to commercial programming that subsidized its existence. Once it became big business, determining what shows to broadcast or withdraw had major economic and regulatory consequences.

In the 1920s, before the era of audience research, all programming decisions were made based on the judgment of the station and network executives. Contributing to their reliance on personal tastes and biases were the phone calls and letters they received from listeners. Stations, and later the networks, counted and tallied listener opinions to assist them in their programming choices, publishing internal reports and saving letters in their files for reference.⁵⁶ They probably did this as much to show to regulators when their

⁵⁵ My analysis of the network programs on air between 1928 and 1932 consulted Harrison B. Summers, *A Thirty-Year History of Programs Carried on the National Radio Networks in the United States: 1926-1956*. (Columbus: Ohio State University, 1958).

⁵⁶ Derek Vaillant, "Your Voice Came in Last Night...", 53.

licenses came up for renewal in demonstration of their responsiveness to listeners as for assistance in programming decisions. These early tallies also served as “data” to respond to advertisers clamoring for proof of radio advertising’s effectiveness. In addition to pressure from sponsors and the government, the networks were at huge financial risk in their programming decisions. They anxiously sought a better way to evaluate audience response to programs and were enthusiastic pioneers of the use of social science in measuring listener reactions and demographics beginning with the first Crossley survey in 1930, for the Cooperative Analysis of Broadcasting (CAB). This was the kind of quantitative data that gave comfort to business executives. Nevertheless, although the industry would soon come to be obsessed with ratings, audience letters and phone calls, as well as arbitrary judgments and personal reactions of executives and sponsors continued to have major influence in the fate of programs and individual performers. Importantly, since sustaining programs were not rated, informal reactions were the only sources of feedback on the commercial potential of these shows. Probably the most striking illustration of this point is the near overnight metamorphosis of the *Mercury Theater of the Air* into the *Campbell Theater*. Within a week of the *War of the Worlds* broadcast in 1938 Campbell Soups was negotiating with CBS to pick up Welles’ anthology.

Sponsored Radio Production: the reign of the advertising agency

*The radio audience will never stand for direct advertising—Herbert Hoover*⁵⁷

Despite Hoover’s prophecy, there was never any real doubt within the industry that advertising was the solution to the problem which dogged broadcasting from the

⁵⁷ Herbert Hoover interview in the *New York World* quoted in Rothafel and Yates, *Broadcasting, Its New Day*, 160.

start: how to make radio pay for itself. Long before advertising became the primary source of revenues in radio, industry leaders foresaw a future in which advertising made broadcasting self-sufficient. In a series of lectures at Harvard Business School in the 1927-1928 academic year, executives of the radio group—RCA, Westinghouse, NBC, and General Electric described the history and growth of the industry. Their presentation left no doubt that the future was in advertising.

From the very beginning the question of “who is to pay” has been constantly raised, and one plan after another has been proposed and abandoned. I have never felt concerned about this point, firm in my belief from the beginning....Its advertising value has always been recognized, and I have felt from the beginning that sooner or later this would be realized and would be the answer to the question.⁵⁸

Advertising evolved slowly not because there was reluctance on the part of commerce, but rather because of radio’s ambiguous and uneasy position as a communications medium. Congress saw radio as the heir of telephony, a regulated monopoly for the public good, not as an extension of the newspaper or magazine industries, which were constitutionally free from government control or interference. Yet radio straddled both spheres.

During the late 1920s, to fend off government action, the networks pledged self-regulation, professing their humility at being conservators of a “public trust” that bows to the will of the people who really control radio. David Sarnoff expressed the position of the industry: “It is the audience, not the station, which determines the position of the broadcaster in the air.”⁵⁹ This defensiveness was manifested in a policy of commercial

⁵⁸ H.P. Davis, “The Early History of Broadcasting in the United States,” 223.

⁵⁹ David Sarnoff, “The Development of the Radio Art and the Radio Industry since 1920,” in *The Radio Industry: The Story of Its Development as Told by the Leaders of the Industry to the Students of the Graduate School of Business Administration* (New York: A.B. Shaw, 1928), 109.

sponsorship of individual shows, in which the advertiser's name was mentioned but no selling copy was read, and, in particular, no pricing was discussed. This seemed to satisfy regulators and social critics because no direct selling sullied the programming. But instead, it really cultivated the art of indirection. Without the ability to discuss the product, the sponsor message had to be communicated more subtly. The program itself had to reflect the advertiser's image and provide positive associations with the product.

Advertising and editorial copy are combined in the sponsored program. The two are blended in a perfect union. Thus we speak of the Goodrich Hour, The Ever Ready Hour, The Clicquot Club Esquimaux. And the General Motors Party, tacitly and unconsciously coupling the editorial or program features which appeal to use with the advertising message they contain.⁶⁰

The seemingly benign practice of naming the program after the sponsors, the profession of service to the public, the feigned humility at being trustees of the national good are products of an atmosphere of psychological manipulation, ironically forced on the networks because they were not permitted to directly advertise products to the public. The use of psychology in advertising and selling burgeoned during the 1920s, as the works of Sigmund Freud were accepted and applied to business. William Paley even hired Edward Bernays, pioneer of public relations and nephew of Freud himself, to help create and manage the image of CBS.

Perhaps most dangerous of all was the blurring of the line between product and program. Whereas magazine and newspaper editorial departments strove for independence from advertiser pressure, radio embraced the advertiser as one with the program. The networks encouraged direct involvement of the advertiser with the

⁶⁰ Merlin H. Aylesworth, "The National Magazine of the Air," in *The Radio Industry: The Story of Its Development as Told by the Leaders of the Industry to the Students of the Graduate School of Business Administration* (New York: A.B. Shaw, 1928), 240.

programs. By the early 1930s, advertising agencies produced virtually all of the sponsored programming.⁶¹ This unity between advertiser and editorial function, unprecedented in journalism, had the effect of making the entire commercial program an advertisement, an advertorial to use today's parlance. The implication for the development of radio programming in general, and, more specifically, the conscious use of sound techniques to communicate specific meaning, is that the entire atmosphere of the networks was one based on indirect signals.

This method permeated all parts of the programming process, not only advertising. Fear of heavy handed regulation encouraged self-censorship. The National Association of Broadcasters (NAB) wrote in its first code of ethics the broadly ambiguous phrase "endeavor to prevent the broadcasting of any matter which would commonly be regarded as offensive."⁶² Certain topics were taboo, like sex and labor strikes; others had to be handled with euphemisms, like the use of "irregularity" to mean constipation. Profanity of all kinds was not allowed. Radio, as an industry, perhaps like much of society at that time, grew up with a code of conduct rooted in Victorian avoidance of indelicacy. So that being forced to find ways to communicate meaning obliquely was natural.

By the time direct advertising, defined as the mention of price, began in 1930, the long practice of coded communication was embedded in programming. Sponsors had benefitted from direct control over program product and basked in the indirect positive associations of their product with public approval. There was no reason to give up those

⁶¹ Barnouw, *A Tower in Babel*, 239. Although Barnouw makes this point, the same assertion can be found in many radio era books, both critical and supportive of the industry.

⁶² Brindze, *Not to be Broadcast*, 176.

benefits, just because they were now allowed a hard sell approach as well. And the need to respond to the requirements of regulation, appease social critics and meet the demands of the public was not relaxed.

This integration of program and message was not lost on the critics of radio. Voices emerged in the 1930s to criticize radio's commercialization and especially the programming that resulted from this orientation. Radio, omnipresent, commercially driven and addressing the audience as a mass, was a lightening rod as well as a focal point for criticism of changes in society at large. To James Rorty, one of the most visible and vocal, commercial radio was a surrogate for the failings of the entire American economic system. Rorty, a onetime advertising copywriter, left wing journalist and confirmed Marxist, attacked radio as the most powerful, pervasive agent of that control. Critics like Rorty and Ruth Brindze felt that advertising had become the central form of communication in America.⁶³ In their view, people were unable to resist advertising appeals; this was particularly egregious on radio, where one could not skip over the ads, as one could with print. They saw that sponsored programming was simply a vehicle to convey advertising messages, deliberately appealing to the lowest common denominator of the masses. Although critics were persistent in their appeals to further regulate programming, they had little effect.

⁶³James Rorty, *Order on the Air* (New York: John Day Co., 1934), 18. Rorty's political agenda made his view especially suspect during the Depression years with its social and labor unrest and growing fear of Communist ideology.

Sponsored Programming's musical presence

As one author of advice on how to become a radio writer put it plainly “radio programming is either music or talk.”⁶⁴ Throughout many of the years in which radio was the only broadcast medium, music dominated the airwaves for both sponsored and sustaining programs. In the networks’ first three seasons (1928-1930), music and variety entertainment represented eighty percent of broadcast hours.⁶⁵ Virtually all of the music was sponsored and the few hours in the week devoted to spoken word programming—primarily news commentary, public affairs and religious talks, were sustaining. Non-musical programming increased gradually, to 31% of nighttime by 1932. By the late 1930s, however, the mix of musical programming to various genres that were not music had shifted. For example, in the 1936-1937 season, nighttime network programming consisted of a 50/50 mix of music and variety programming/non-musical genres. Daytime had become dominated by soap operas, which were on for a third of all daytime hours, about 38 hours per week.

These trends broadly illustrate several things. First, music and especially popular musical and variety entertainment, were the mainstay of radio and of sponsored programming, particularly at night. Musical and variety genres were in place early and did not change much over time. Network radio adopted a vaudeville format for its variety shows, aired concerts of popular, classical and “semi-classical” music, and, in time, country music, built around well-known and rising talent. Shows were usually anchored by an individual or group, which might be a vocal ensemble, brass or dance band, full

⁶⁴ James Whipple, *How To Write For Radio* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1938), 10.

⁶⁵ Whitmer analysis of network programming, 1928-1936.

orchestra or other combination of instruments. These musical genres were attractive to companies to sponsor because they appealed to large audiences representing broad demographic groups. These were also the shows that consumed most of the production by advertising agencies until well into the decade when shows like *The Jack Benny Show* and *Fibber McGee and Molly* demonstrated the success of the comedy format.

When considering the evolution of radio in communicating meaning aurally, and in the development of a repertoire of creative techniques that influenced reception, the vast majority of musical and variety entertainment programs, whether sponsored or not, fall *outside* of this creative spectrum. This is not to say that spoken-word programs were the only source of “training” to listeners in the interpretation of sound. Indeed, music and voice played a major role in aural coloration. But I am saying that most programming intended to entertain audiences through music, whether high brow or low brow, participated only subtly in that process, in part, by helping to transition listeners from the more familiar experience of viewing a concert or vaudeville act to a blind experience of just listening to that same kind of program. Similarly, the advertising agencies which produced the sponsored shows were mostly involved with those that were primarily musical and variety entertainment. As we narrow down the path of program development of the unique capabilities of the new medium in sonic communication, we can rule out much, but not all, sponsored, advertising agency produced programming. To be sure, agency-produced musical/variety programs were slick, professional, expensively crafted, and perfectly timed—a characteristic that was crucial in radio. But with respect to contributing to the new art of radio, agency activities, as well as those of the network producers, were more important in the development of the many new dramatic genres and

sub-genres. Drama in its many nighttime and daytime forms, including comedy, influenced audiences disproportionately to the hours allotted to it, something I will explore more fully in chapter two. It is too simplistic to dismiss musical and variety programs as mere entertainment, essentially without message. That corporate sponsors associated themselves with specific musical forms, generated goodwill and sold their products is message indeed. Cliquot Club mixers and the Esquimaux' popular music for good times; General Electric and dignified symphonic music; and the genre crossing tea dance music of the A & P Gypsies, to name just three very popular, long running shows, successfully influenced listeners. But these shows essentially transferred old forms to the new medium and did not explore the possibilities unique to radio.

Dramatic Genres Evolve

By contrast, dramatic form is inherently narrative and both offered a wide range of sonic elements with which to tell a story, and also required them to compensate for the loss of the visual experience. Radio plays had been aired since the first days of broadcasting, and each network scheduled one to two hours per week of drama consisting primarily of Bible stories, biographies of heroes, and thrillers. Few of these programs were sponsored at first. Beginning with the 1930 season, the networks began to experiment with dramatic programming, each adding a few hours per week in nighttime and daytime in fifteen minute to half hour formats. Importantly, 1930 was the first year in which *Amos & Andy* was aired on network radio in a five-times-a-week schedule (NBC-Blue). It caused such a sensation of national interest that the networks stepped up their development of light or comedic dramatic forms, expanding offerings in the mystery-thriller, comedy, love-interest, and "informational" sub-genres and adding "prestige"

dramas to the mix. These genres were further segmented as either anthologies or serials. In most cases there was an attempt to find sponsorship immediately, but often a program went on-air as sustaining in the hope that listener response would make the show salable. For example, *The Rise of the Goldbergs* began its run as a weekly sustaining program on NBC Blue nighttime in late 1929, shifting to a six-times-a-week format in 1931 when it picked up sponsorship. Other light dramas, with or without ethnic or regional elements, were tried and many began long runs in the early 1930s, including *Lum and Abner*, *Easy Aces*, and *Vic and Sade*. As with many programs, the first serial “soap opera,” *Clara, Lou and Em* was aired first on a regional station, WGN Chicago in 1930, before being picked up by NBC in 1932 as a nighttime serial. Daytime drama genres mirrored nighttime, but programs were designed to appeal to the overwhelmingly female audience. Forced to rely on sound to differentiate characters, situations, locations and scene shifts, playwrights and directors began to evolve aural conventions. These were often built around ethnicity, regional or class distinctions which were easy for the ear to discern.

Sustaining Program Production: a coterie of creative minds

Although the preoccupation with developing shows that could pick up sponsors consumed network program departments, meeting FRC requirements did not preclude sponsorship of programs that served the public. In the early years, the absence of real guidelines led to safe programming choices, such as classical music, poetry and educational talks. The Metropolitan Opera broadcasts and the *Music Appreciation Hour* with Walter Damrosch were high culture, sustaining programs that were routinely touted by network management as satisfying the FRC’s requirements. Yet both of these, and many others, were eventually sponsored. News and public affairs programs were

typically sustaining, but Hans von Kaltenborn's commentaries, which had been on air unsponsored long before the networks were formed, picked up sponsorship in 1932 for several of his weekday broadcasts.

Sustaining programs could take creative risks that sponsored programs could not, since there was no advertiser to "own" the program. Beginning in the early 1930s and building throughout the decade, more and more experimental programs were tried. Many of these pushed radio's creative limits. Freedom from the tyranny of the sponsor encouraged development especially in dramatic form. In particular, radio plays in anthology and serial form explored the creative use of sound. But many new genres arose combining musical and literary forms, mixing fact and fiction, dramatization and narration. Although individual playwrights, masters of sound effects and music directors played major roles in advancing radio art, the giants of the medium generally combined the roles of writer-director-producer. Among the most important of these were Norman Corwin, Arch Oboler and Orson Welles. Some, like Corwin, were sonic visionaries whose creative lives were devoted to the medium. Corwin wrote, produced and directed dozens of the most influential single events and anthologies ever aired on radio. Arch Oboler stands out primarily as a writer whose startling use of imaginative sound in tales of horror took on legendary status in his own time, especially in the series *Lights Out*, but also in many sustaining radio dramas. Orson Welles terrorized the nation in his Halloween Eve broadcast of *War of the Worlds* in 1938, among the most widely known of radio events. But it was his understanding of how to weave familiar sounds—music, background noises and the voices of news announcers—that created the illusion. He had

practiced these skills on the *Mercury Theater of the Air* and in other radio work, including his famous turn as *The Shadow* in 1937 and on *Columbia Workshop*.

Conclusion

The work of Corwin, Oboler, Welles, and many others, still managed to blossom within the corporate structure and developed an aural mode of communication that cross-fertilized within and across the networks in spite of, and in some ways, because of, industry concentration and standardization of techniques. An innovative use of sound one day became a page in a cue book or sound effects library the next. Throughout the 1930s in a process of development and adoption of creative conventions, a sonic palette, emerged that was used to create recognizable mental imagery for listeners that would instantly evoke a response. This became the currency of radio.

Chapter 2—

“Blind” Broadcasting: the Search for a Mode of Aural Expression

Mass culture is a system of signals which signals itself.

Theodor Adorno—The Culture Industry

An early appreciation by industry pioneers that programming for radio demanded a unique approach tailored to a sound-only medium did not result in a smooth or rapid evolution of a sonic palette. Many years of relentless experimentation and demonstrations of audience responsiveness gradually solidified a base of industry knowledge that, by the mid-1930s, constituted a repertoire of proven and familiar techniques used by professionals throughout the industry. In the hands of work-a-day writers and directors, this vocabulary of sound was incorporated into programming which poured over the American public in the hundreds of hours per week consumed by the typical listener, and educated them to interpret the conventions and standards of meaning that were routinely used. Of equal importance was the work of radio visionaries—writers, directors, and producers, whose imaginative use of the medium was so influential that it not only contributed to the methods used to communicate through sound, but moved audiences profoundly and added new layers to their aural understanding even in a single program. This combination of quotidian techniques discovered, developed and refined over many years, coupled with quantum leaps in radio art through innovative, individual programs that were widely heard, created the conventions and practices that I refer to as the sonic palette as used by the networks and understood by the audience by the late 1930s.

This aural repertoire was an evolved, not codified, living language of sound. With the exception of recorded sound effects which became semi-standardized after the mid-1930s and account for only one, albeit important, class of sonic representation, there was no universal set of tools known and used throughout the industry. Rather, as with spoken language, new sounds and tonalities entered the lexicon as they were used, connoted meaning to auditors, and then were used again by others in similar contexts to convey similar meanings or expressions of emotion. The curious characteristic of radio is that the communication is largely one way, from the broadcaster to listeners, so that the audience was not only blind, as described from the earliest days of radio, but essentially mute. Listeners did not contribute as they would in spoken language, yet they nevertheless had an essential, participative role. Audience feedback to the stations, and later to the networks, signaled not only understanding (or lack of it), but more usefully, the effectiveness of the communication—their response to broadcasts. Through specific comments as well as the volume and tenor of the attitudes expressed by listeners, the industry learned what was meaningful and what was not, what touched them emotionally and how programs affected them personally. Audience response was nearly instantaneous: station and network switchboards lighted up during broadcasts and letters poured in by the tens of thousands reacting to programs.

In addition to audience reactions, other industrial factors influenced the evolution of the sonic palette and compressed its development into relatively few years. The relentlessness of the programming day demanded a constant stream of new material and the struggle to improve the odds of success, as well as the increasingly corporate approach to broadcasting, drove the networks to early experimentation with the new tools

of social science. Audience surveys provided a comforting quantitative approach which was added to the base of spontaneous listener reactions. Competition for listeners spurred network executives to incorporate what they learned from successes and failures into their programming. In addition the industry was concentrated, so the small absolute number of writers, programming executives and producers absorbed the knowledge and passed it about within their small community.

The Aural Experience

Sonic Palette: A Mixed Metaphor

The metaphor which I use to describe these communicative techniques—sonic *palette*—bears some consideration. Why not describe it as a language, consistent with the representation that it evolved and communicated the way language does? Music, which also uses the word “language” to describe its range of techniques, might be an equally apt analogy. Artists in all genres regularly borrow descriptions from other forms to capture the overflow of imagery which will not be confined to a single mode of expression. In literature and music these exchanges are common: Whitman wrote a “Song of Myself;” Richard Strauss composed half a dozen tone poems based on German literary works; Mussorgsky’s “Pictures at an Exhibition” musically painted a series of canvases *and* the progress of the onlookers. In trying to define itself, radio, which its pioneers conceived of as a new art form, not just a commercial medium, examined its possibilities, liabilities and aspirations.

The most obvious of these possibilities was the power and expression of sound, which, like music, provokes an emotional response and stirs the imagination. When radio expresses emotion it borrows from music many forms of indirect discourse including

timbre, dynamics, pace, intonation, and rhythm. These and other characteristics of sound are intentionally or instinctively incorporated into any “performance” whether by a single speaker, an orchestra, a drama, or on radio. But radio did not want to be confined by its method of transmission. It wanted its programs to be “seen” by its audience as well and radio struggled with its obvious limitation in visual representation. From a practical standpoint, programs, especially dramas, needed to establish location, time and characters, and needed to do it quickly—before they lost the listener to another station. Pioneering radio writer, one of radio’s great innovators and major contributor to the art of the sonic palette, Arch Oboler, believed that “The radio dramatist has perhaps five seconds to spare; by the end of that time he must have reached out and gripped the listener so irretrievably that it will be impossible for him to turn the dial.”¹ To do that meant that the listener needed to form a mental image of the context: Where is the action set? What is the era? Who are the players and how many are present? And they had to do it with sound alone. But this was not only true of drama. The audience needed to frame musical programs, news and informational contexts and their participants as well.

Programmers, writers and directors experimented from the first with radio’s properties to set the scene and enable the audience to follow the program using only their ears. In their writing about the challenges of creating radio programming, practitioners continually mixed visual and aural metaphors, as in this passage about radio’s artistic ambitions by NBC Production Director Albert R. Crews in his book *Radio Production Directing*:

The radio production director is a painter who uses a loudspeaker for his canvas; actors, speakers, music, sound effects for his colors; and a mixing panel for his

¹ Arch Oboler, *Fourteen Radio Plays* (New York: Random House, 1940), xi.

*palette. He must consider himself a conductor as well as a partner-creator of a symphony of sound.*² [Italics in the original]

In consequence, I have chosen a metaphor that expresses the tension between sound and sight inherent in the ambitions of radio to communicate and move people and to exert power over its audience. The sonic palette incorporates the characteristics of music and language. But it also presents an image for the mind's eye, one that draws, as a painter does, from a wide array of colors and textures and even materials and is somehow broader than language, broader than music. In the end, radio's effect on listeners is to enable them to both feel and see through their imagination. And so, I give equal weight to the visual aspirations of radio's pioneers because they did.

The Mind's Eye

The industry's preoccupation with creating a mental picture for the audience also reflects the pervasiveness of the early twentieth century's visual culture. Film, photography, illustrated magazines and tabloids, even billboards were all products of technological advances that had been rapidly assimilated and set a baseline of expectation. In this environment, the emerging radio industry considered itself handicapped by the absence of visual stimulus.

Very early on, the radio industry grappled with the constraints and requirements of an aural medium. In a post-broadcast memo discussing an experiment in programming in 1924, executive Stuart Hyde Hawkins at station WJY, the broadcast studio of RCA, recounts the station's experiment with four themed programs. In the first, "A Night with the Conquistadores," their intention was "to create in the minds of the listener enough imaginative scenery to give a Latin American atmosphere ... [with] music all of Spanish

² Albert R. Crews, *Radio Production Directing* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1944), 7.

characteristic... [and] the one talk on the program was a Latin American travelogue, and the announcements were, in so far as possible, suited to the furtherance of whatever illusion the production was able to carry to the poor blind audience...”³ Describing the audience as “blind” suggests a disability, as if sight is the essential sense and listening alone is somehow a lesser, or impaired experience. As much a wonder of technology and communication as radio was, the fact that it was a sightless experience was considered a handicap that had to be overcome. As the industry developed, it continued to be thought of as somehow “successful only insofar as it creates for the audience an illusion, carries the listeners to another world” but that it “is limited in its machinery of illusion as compared with the theater.”⁴ In their wide-ranging 1930 commentary on radio, authors Alfred Goldsmith and Austin Lescarboursa praised the superiority of the total audience experience of theater, from the impression made by the space to the “actual performers, seen as well as heard.”⁵ They concluded that “Radio is poverty-stricken in its machinery.”⁶

Throughout the ‘30s and early ‘40s dozens of how-to books were published for the aspiring radio director or writer. Nearly all of these emphasized the necessity to create a visual image. In describing the ideal announcer one author stressed that the program

³ Samuel L. Rothafel and Raymond Francis Yates, *Broadcasting, Its New Day* (New York: The Century Company, 1925), 44.

⁴ Alfred Norton Goldsmith and Austin C. Lescarboursa, *This Thing Called Broadcasting; a Simple Tale of an Idea, a Mighty Industry, a Daily Habit and a Basic Influence on Our Civilization* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1930), 114-115.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 115.

⁶ *Ibid.*

must “impress upon minds a picture of the man himself.”⁷ Another book painstakingly illustrated the importance of a visual image by describing the Mississippi River episode of the NBC series “Tales of Great Rivers.” With musical and textual examples the authors illustrated how important it was to create “an aural picture in the listener’s minds.”⁸ Other authors spoke of sound-only broadcasting in disparaging tones. “It is unfortunate that many familiar sounds do not reproduce correctly over the loud-speaker,”⁹ one complained, about the need for better sound effects, while another produced a list of words to avoid like “assiduous” and “reminiscences” because they “do not convey meaning to the ear as they do to the eye.”¹⁰ It is difficult to fathom what the author imagined visual representation could do to enhance the ideas communicated through those words.

The industry never really got over the self-image of being visually impaired. Years later, as a “requiem for radio” at the dawn of the television era, Arch Oboler defended radio: “‘Blind’ broadcasting that was only heard was an art form, as unique, as image provoking as music.”¹¹ The aural experience alone seemed to need a defense.

It is curious that concerts, poetry recitals, lectures and political rallies, common forms of entertainment and diversion for the middle classes during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, must not have been perceived as primarily aural experiences.

⁷ Robert West, *The Rape of Radio* (New York: Rodin Press, 1941), 34.

⁸ Katherine Seymour and John T.W. Martin, *Practical Radio Writing: The Technique of Writing for Broadcasting Simply and Thoroughly Explained* (New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1938), 22.

⁹ James Whipple, *How to Write for Radio* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1938), 38.

¹⁰ Seymour and Martin, *Practical Radio Writing*, 14.

¹¹ Arch Oboler, *Oboler Omnibus: Radio Plays and Personalities* (New York: Duell, Sloan & Pearce, 1945), 308.

Somehow the visual component of these events was considered central to the audience experience, even though in many of these activities what the audience saw consisted only of a single individual standing before them speaking, singing or playing an instrument. Watching that performer engaged the eyes as well as the ears to create a comprehensive impression of the performance. To be sure, speakers and recitalists used their bodies, gestures, and facial expressions as part of the communication to the audience. But the essence of the presentation consisted of either music or words, the very content of radio. Yet content and sound were not considered sufficient and the radio industry continued to try to simulate for the listener's imagination a complete experience of performance.

Power and Presence

From the very beginning, radio broadcasting was viewed as a medium of live performance. For most of history there simply had never been any other model; the performance experience had consisted of live audiences watching live presentations. Cinema, in the early 20th century, was the first to disrupt that enduring, ancient model by presenting a simulated performance on a screen. The fact that films were themselves silent, and that sound was provided only through musical accompaniment, does not seem to have troubled either audiences or the film industry during the decades before *The Jazz Singer*, certainly not enough to inhibit its development. But the other two components—a *live* audience present at the event *watching* a visual and aural performance—were retained, and the filmic form transitioned easily into the culture. Importantly, after the brief era of the “cinema of attractions” which introduced people to the wonders of moving pictures, film became a dramatic medium. The narrative form, sustained by

visual interest, was rapidly accepted and film became the dominant form of entertainment by the early 1920s.

Radio pioneers seemed to understand that the loss of the visual image, coupled with the physical absence of the audience radically altered the essential dynamic of live theater which enables the performer to connect with the audience through visual contact. This contact goes two ways. The performer projects his or her presence to engage the audience through actual eye contact and by physically expressing communication. The audience, in turn, participates in the performance by following it visually as well as attending to it aurally. They adopt a crowd psychology, a kind of fellow-feeling with those around them, which also influences their reception, responding with applause and other actions and sounds appropriate to the circumstance. In successful events—musical, political, theatrical, lecture or other genres—the audience and performers or speakers stimulate each other. Even on a mundane level, people experience this effect when telling a story or teaching a class: an interested audience inspires a better performance, which, in turn, heightens their response. We perceive that interest through visual as well as aural cues. Radio lacked not only visual communication, but the audience was also not a crowd, and not “present” in any way to the performers. It is the latter phenomenon that elevated the importance of listener response—letters and phone calls, and later audience surveys. A sacred principle during the years of radio’s primacy was the live broadcast, to preserve, in some measure, the dynamic of immediacy that seemed essential to the performance and to connect with the audience. Radio researchers Hadley Cantril and Gordon Allport explained this need for authenticity as that which makes the listener believe he is part of the events he is hearing. “What is heard on the air is transitory, as

fleeting as time itself, and it therefore seems real. That this sense of the living present is important to the audience is shown by its resentment of broadcasts from electrical transcriptions. Even though such transcriptions cannot be distinguished by the majority of people from real performances, listeners feel dissatisfied.”¹²

Whatever the inherent weaknesses of a “blind” experience, the medium’s reach and communicative power were anticipated. In his 1923 public relations manifesto *Crystallizing Public Opinion*, Edward Bernays noted that radio listeners, like the readers of newspapers, advertisements, and even letters, were “mysteriously part of the crowd mind.”¹³ Radio’s power to move listeners and to influence the masses was recognized by the industry from its earliest days. The famous AT&T broadcast of the 1924 Democratic convention, at which an on-air near riot broke out between Klan-backed factions and Catholic candidate Alfred E. Smith’s supporters, is widely seen as the first event which exposed radio’s power to influence a mass audience. Heard by millions in the first 24 station hook up, the event gripped the nation. The reaction by listeners and the press to the uproar was both immediate and memorable. Nearly every contemporary account of radio’s history claims that broadcast as the moment at which the medium’s ability to rouse emotions and captivate millions of listeners isolated in their homes was recognized.¹⁴

¹² Hadley Cantril and Gordon W. Allport, *The Psychology of Radio* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers., 1935), 259.

¹³ Edward Bernays, *Crystallizing Public Opinion* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1923), 104.

¹⁴ Many writers referenced the 1924 convention was a defining event as the first to reveal the power of radio to influence audience feelings. These include Roxy Rothafel and Raymond Yates in their early (1925) look at the new medium *Broadcasting: It’s New Day*, economist Herman Hettinger’s 1933 *Decade of Radio Advertising* and Seymour and Martin’s *Practical Radio Writing* in 1938.

The power of select epochal historic events, landmark programming breakthroughs, and technical developments was quickly recognized and the innovations they inspired were absorbed into programming practice as quickly as the audience reaction validated their importance. But in its earliest days, presenting programming that depended entirely on sound was unique and uncharted, and developed in real time through trial and error. Over the next decade techniques to harness that power would be refined and channeled for commercial, social and political purposes by many constituencies.

A Prelude to the Sonic Palette

Even before the broadcasting era had begun, the idea that specific sounds could elicit specific emotions was being explored by no less a light than Thomas Edison. It is a commonplace that people respond to music on an emotional level and that there are conventions in Western music which are believed to evoke similar responses among listeners. Minor keys are thought to be “sad;” patriotic or martial tunes are written in 4/4 time and march tempo; hymns frequently use chord progressions reminiscent of Bach chorales. In 1920, Edison, in an effort to keep alive his rapidly dwindling share of the recorded music industry, marketed a line of songs which were promoted as proven to create a specific, beneficial response. Although clearly intended as a way to extend the life of his record and phonograph businesses, Edison nonetheless attempted to validate his claim with a scientific experiment by enlisting psychologist Dr. W.V. Bingham of Carnegie Institute of Technology in Pittsburgh. Bingham, in turn, assembled a panel which included scholars and critics of music, education and psychology from Columbia University, Ohio State and other institutions who would choose musical selections—589

in total—to be evaluated for their effect on mood. Although experimental psychology and quantitative social science were in their infancy in 1920, the testing was conducted under conditions that were considered rigorous for the time, and independent of the Edison Company. The objective of the test was “to determine not how the subject *acts*, but how he *feels* while listening to various selections. We wanted to know which ones made him sad, and which made him exuberant.”¹⁵ The three evaluators were all psychologists, rather than ordinary test subjects, and “All three are experts in introspection. They have learned to inspect and analyze their own feelings and thoughts, just as if these were so many exhibits in a museum.”¹⁶ We may find this test laughable today, but in 1920 it stood up to best practices in the new discipline of applied psychology. Bingham’s three testers whittled the 589 selections down to 135 pieces, each of which “proved that it exerted a marked and definite effect. Each had proved that this effect was much the same upon numerous different normal listeners.”¹⁷ The final selections were then grouped by type of mood. For example, songs “For More Energy!,” “To Bring You Peace of Mind” or “To Stimulate and Enrich Your Imagination.” The songs were then catalogued and distributed to music stores in pamphlets in the hope that they would stimulate sales.

Curiously, not all the songs elicited predictable effects. For example, among the songs which were guaranteed to improve peace of mind were numbers as diverse as the Bach/Gounod “Ave Maria” and “Little Alabama Coon.” To reinforce the impression of its effect, illustrated in the brochure adjacent to the song titles in this category of music

¹⁵ W. V. Bingham, *Research on Moods and Music* (Orange, N.J.: Thomas A Edison, Inc., 1920), 22.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 23.

were two drawings of a middle class housewife, showing her collapsed on a sofa, unable to even remove her hat or gloves with the caption “nervous and exhausted from shopping,” and one in which she has revived because she is “soothed and refreshed by music.”¹⁸

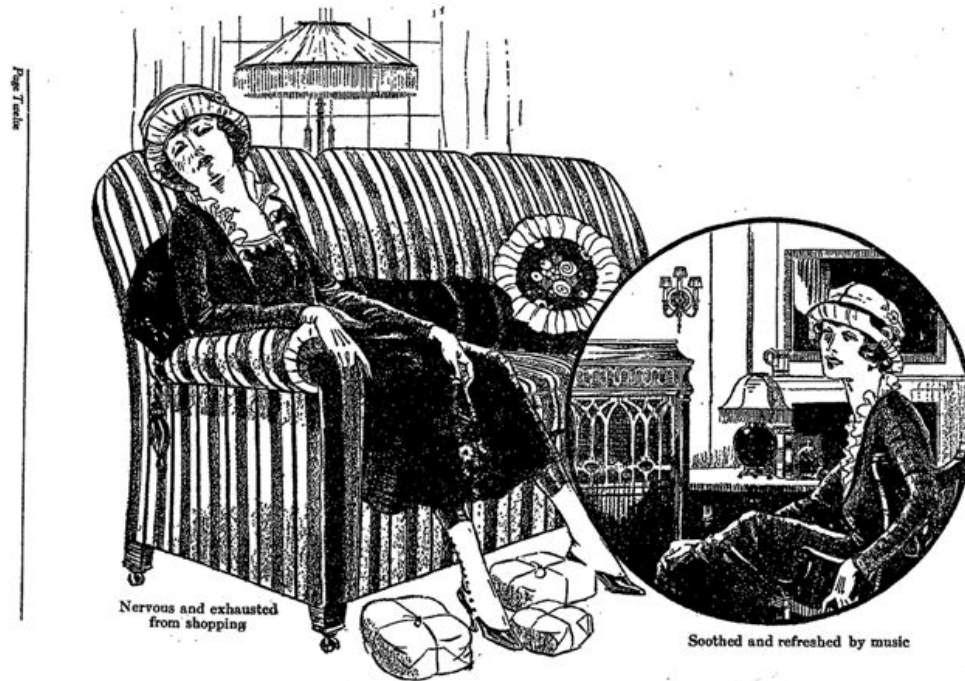


Fig. 1 Music “To Bring you Peace of Mind”¹⁹

The purpose of recounting this curious experiment is not to ridicule its quaint methods, hilarious results or crass, commercial intentions. Indeed, radio itself certainly didn’t shrink from being crassly commercial. Rather, it is to provide a glimpse of the serious consideration given to an idea in currency in the 1920s, an era that was much captivated by the new theories of psychology, that there is a demonstrable scientific basis that predictable reactions can be expected from listeners exposed to certain specific aural

¹⁸ Ibid., 13.

¹⁹ Ibid.

stimuli. Although I do not suggest that the Edison experiment was widely known, the application of psychological techniques to influencing groups certainly was.

Experimentation began in broadcasting in a cultural atmosphere in which psychological principles were being applied to business on a daily basis. This practice combined with the rapidly mounting evidence that listeners responded to programs with common reactions, influenced those developing radio fare. Each program was an experiment with results that accrued to the base of industry knowledge that eventually formed the sonic palette.

The Sonic Palette's Textual Foundation: the Script

The professional atmosphere created through the mere agency of voices and other sounds adds a miraculous chapter to the history of dramatic expression.

Roxy Rothafel—Broadcasting, Its New Day

Writing for the ear

Implicit in the development of aural techniques is the idea that radio era practitioners refer to as writing for the ear. I suggest that the script has an essential, if silent, role in the construction of the sonic palette, which without sound is unrealized. The text is more than just a canvas; radio transmission holds that place. Words are certainly analogous to paint colors, which have latent potential to be a work of art. But it is the combination of these textual colors that, when spoken or mediated with other elements like music, voice, and other performance elements, positions them within the framework of the sonic palette. The writer, however, is clearly an artist within this construct. In radio, as in theater and other performance modes, the creation is not the writer's alone. But the most fully realized examples of radio art were conceived in the minds of their writers first of all. The greatest of these, like Oboler, Norman Corwin, Irving Reis and many others, were not satisfied with their role as writer and became

producers and directors as well. Some wouldn't allow anyone else to direct their works, once their personal worth to the industry was validated. In early radio migrating from one role to another was not difficult, since the medium was constantly innovating and changing. These writers didn't want to hand off their visions to others. A program could be undermined at any number of stops in the production process—director, sound department, music department, the casting process, and, not least of all, the sponsor if it was a commercial program. Gifted, proven writers who did not become directors themselves could not always control how their programs would be produced, but the production group in the industry was small, and writer-producer-director relationships were developed that often raised the standards. At the same time, hundreds of hours/week of ordinary scripts, produced by over-worked and unimaginative directors, were broadcast to the public, and these scripts, too, incorporated the conventions of the sonic palette, often in the most bland manner.

The science and craft of radio writing

Recognizing the need for a narrative style different from theater, different from print, radio writers gradually developed an approach tailored to the unique technical and reception characteristics of the medium. The topic concerned not only writers but scholars as well. Despite their differing approaches and interests, the empirical experience of industry practitioners is consistent with the experimental results of social psychologists.

A landmark study in the social science of radio, Gordon Allport and Hadley Cantril's 1935 *The Psychology of Radio*, undertook to "map out... the new mental world

created by radio.”²⁰ Envisioned as a comprehensive review, Cantril of Columbia, and Allport of Harvard, worked with researchers at their own universities and gathered over a dozen scholars from diverse institutions to conduct experiments in listening, programming, and performance. In addition to conducting their work independently, they studied broadcasting practices at both NBC and CBS, working with writers and producers, some of whom later published instructional books for industry aspirants. Among the many areas Cantril and Allport studied were the effects of differing programming elements on listeners. Their results had implications for script writing and program development, many of which provide a factual basis for industry axioms.

They found that most test subjects preferred listening to short prose over reading and retained much more of what they heard than what they read. Not surprisingly, they found that the lower the cultural level of the listener, the less difficult the material they could understand and retain. Given the mass audience demographics, they recommended that words be kept simple and conversational: “The conventions of spoken language rather than those of the written language must prevail,” but that “words should be common though not necessarily short.”²¹ They advised that, to the extent that writers could control program length, they should limit radio discourse to what the average listener could grasp and follow “A speaker of popularity and prestige, President Roosevelt, [who] finds a period of about twenty minutes most satisfactory.”²² Curiously,

²⁰ Cantril and Allport, *The Psychology of Radio*, vii.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 212.

²² *Ibid.*, 213.

for the purposes of comprehensibility, long sentences were more effective than short ones, with syntax providing clues for the mind's ear.

Their findings on radio drama both echo the industry's sense of being visually handicapped and evoke the power of the imagination to create a more idealized performance. Without sets, costumes, physical appearance and characterizations by actors early radio drama, was

indeed a failure until producers learned that however successful a play may be on the stage or screen it must be radically transformed before it is adaptable to the requirements of broadcasting ... [An equally important impediment was the fact that the listener] feels none of the subtle excitement animating the patrons of the theater; he has no sense of the occasion and is not on his good behavior. [and] The rapport throughout is tenuous and unnatural, easily broken by the ringing of the telephone, the baby's crying ...or any of a hundred other interruptions [by which] the listener leaves the audience without embarrassment merely by turning the dial.²³

These restrictions forced the radio writer into strict discipline. The play must be short and fit precisely the airtime allotted to it. Topics must be for the everyday person, not those who wear "top hats and evening cloaks."²⁴ They should use few, highly differentiated characters within the range of listener experience and easily recognized by voice.

Openings needed to be "crisp and compelling to the attention, for within the first minute the listener must be persuaded that the production is worth hearing" and it must hold the listener throughout.²⁵ Up to 85% of audiences switched away from programs in that first minute unless they were intrigued by the opening.²⁶

²³ Ibid., 227.

²⁴ Ibid., 227-228.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 212.

The consequence of failing, and radio drama failed repeatedly until broadcasters learned these lessons, was losing the audience and, importantly, the sponsor who supported most programs. “A dull beginning can be fatal, because the listener knows that the air can be filled with music to be had for a slight turn of the wrist.”²⁷ But by 1935, when Cantril and Allport wrote up their findings, they recognized that even with all these handicaps, the radio producer had learned to compensate for the medium’s shortcomings; drama was already the sixth most popular form of radio of the forty-two categories of programming on air. By far the greatest ally that the writer had was the listener’s imagination. Radio, they believed, was superior to film and to the stage because, “given the slightest encouragement the listener can build his own imaginative scene.”²⁸ After years of listening, the radio audience had revived a skill common with children, but long dormant in adults.

[Radio listening] has placed an unaccustomed burden upon the listener’s visual imagery, a relatively neglected function of the adult human mind. The visual imagination of children is both fresh and compelling, but in adults it has been impaired by long adaptation to the ready-made settings of the cinema and stage and dulled by the routine of living.²⁹

Film, they asserted, provided commodified daydreams preserved on celluloid and repeated over and over. That radio was happening live, that it was original and without preview or mediated by reviews heightened the potential for excitement in the experience. The best writers, they contended, incorporated that understanding into their creative process.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., 232.

²⁹ Ibid., 233.

The many instruction books for would-be radio writers reflect the lessons learned through experience, and documented in Cantril and Allport's research. They emphasized the importance of colloquial speech and urged writers to choose words that would be easily understood in a radio transmission. "Always select words for the ear and not for the eye."³⁰ This meant avoiding words which might be harsh or confusing. Writers were encouraged to acquire skill "in writing words and phrases to be *heard* and not *read*."³¹ [Italics original] Impromptu speech has a naturalness that is different than written prose. Repetition and hesitation are inherent in conversation, and speakers [are] "also guilty of many minor errors in grammar. *But it is these very errors which label speech impromptu.*"³² [Italics original] Word choices like "cannot" and "would not" were discouraged as stilted and the use of contractions "can't" and "wouldn't" were suggested as more colloquial choices. The goal of writing naturally for the ear was elusive, in part because performance and natural delivery were essential components, and the writer often didn't know who the announcer or actor would be.

Writing radio drama called for technical mastery of setting time, place and identity of characters. To quickly establish the scene required simple characters and situations. Instructional authors repeated the warning that "The first five minutes of a radio drama are regarded as vital. It is generally considered that if an audience cannot picture a character and catch the drift of the action with these five minutes a radio play will drag along in a muddled and confused way."³³ Writer and producer Irving Reis, who

³⁰ Seymour and Martin, *Practical Radio Writing*, 14.

³¹ Whipple, *How to Write for Radio*, 361.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

created the groundbreaking *Columbia Workshop*, warned against following these guidelines unimaginatively. “[Avoid] the ‘here comes so and so’ school of exposition. It is dull and sloppy to establish a character in this obvious fashion.”

Despite this warning there were many tactical conventions that radio writers used to create clear images for the listener. Dialect was regularly used to establish class and race as well as location. Studies of listener comprehension showed that no more than three characters could be followed in any one scene and that they should only rarely be all of the same sex. “Contrast is terrifically important. You could never do four women on radio; their voices would all sound the same.”³⁴

Above all, radio writers were reminded that they were writing for the masses. This meant that vocabulary should be chosen with the listener with the lowest level of education in mind. Subject matter should have broad appeal, something which the industry worked hard to define. Radio producer for advertising agency Lord and Thomas, and instructor in radio for the University of Chicago, James Whipple, compiled an extensive list of listener likes and dislikes to be kept in mind when writing a radio drama. The fifteen guidelines were conveyed in a rather cynical tone which reflected Whipple’s long experience in commercial radio. They include a preference for entertainment over education (#1), comedy—which should be “rough and ready” rather than subtle, happy endings, American characters who are “not above the middle class socially although they like them to come in contact with “‘the elite’ as they like to see ‘how the other half lives,’” clean stories “believe it or not,” and situations that are within their personal

³⁴ Leonard Maltin, *The Great American Broadcast: A Celebration of Radio’s Golden Age* (New York: Dutton, 1997), 67. Maltin quotes from an interview with radio producer Himan Brown.

experience. “They [audiences] are sentimental and enjoy weeping, if it is not protracted, and if the scene is followed by a comedy relief (sic).”³⁵ He further advised that although “adults are *not* critical of details,” that children are, and that “good direction and artistic acting are not appreciated.”³⁶

Ravishing the audience: a acquired skill

Writing for the ear was not all tactical. The best writers also understood the emotional possibilities and power inherent in sound, and knew that their scripts could shape the performance long before it got into the hands of the director and the many contributors to its final realization. So potent is this power that industry writers on radio evoke the image of rape. In our twenty-first century culture the image of rape is one of the most criminal forced violence. Amazingly, that is not the connotation given by radio era admirers of the medium, reflecting society’s ambivalent view of rape at the time. Rather, radio is seen as an irresistible force, but that is considered its strength and the playwright’s ideal. In the preface to Arch Oboler’s *Fourteen Radio Plays*, writer Irving Stone extols Oboler’s talent for arresting his audience as a model for all radio writers. “The playwright can be a seducer in capturing his audience; the radio dramatist must be a rapist.”³⁷ Stone was not alone in calling on this image. Robert West’s 1941 *The Rape of Radio*, might be thought, from its title, to be a critique of the industry and its lost potential. But, in fact, West does not suggest that radio has been raped, but that we, the listeners, are raped by radio. Listeners are overwhelmed, often against their will, by its

³⁵ Whipple, *How to Write for Radio*, 12.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Irving Stone, “On Reading a Radio Play,” foreword to *Fourteen Radio Plays*, by Arch Oboler (New York: Random House, 1940), xi.

pervasive presence which penetrates their consciousness and from which they cannot or will not escape. Curiously, West is a radio admirer, but does not see it without faults. His tone accepts radio's conquest as a reality and chronicles for the reader those qualities, personalities and events most influential in its takeover. In addition to the "cult of the announcer," the "amplified oratory" of politicians and the "infiltration of musical culture," he credits the radio drama as a major contributor in ravishing the public. But, clearly, he believes the public wants to be ravished, over and over again, and that great, innovative writers have advanced radio's ability to do so.

Trying to capture how great writers incorporated radio's sonic power into their texts is elusive. Radio's greatest writers commented rarely and not always with clarity concerning their creative process. In his essay "The Art of Radio Writing," Arch Oboler's advice to have "something to say that hasn't been said before quite in the manner in which you say it!" is frustratingly generic.³⁸ Nevertheless there are glimpses of how he crafted his prolific output. He insists that most radio is overwritten and thereby robs itself of its power. "What is left unsaid...lives on *under* the scene, is re-created in the awakened emotions of the audience a thousand times more effectively than if it were pounded out in words."³⁹ He believed that overwriting is the legacy of radio's self-consciousness of its blindness and its mortal dread of "dead air." Writers tried to compensate for the lack of visual stimulus with "something pounding out of the loud-speaker all the time."⁴⁰ Oboler's advice: "Story first, then, learn the trick techniques as a

³⁸ Oboler, *Fourteen Radio Plays*, xvi.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, xx.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

basis for an eventual personal synthesis of techniques which are *of* your story rather than supplementary *to* it.” [Italics original] Consistent with his belief in under-writing, Oboler feels that radio’s power to be effective is inversely proportional to the use of tricks and techniques—from music to sound effects to dialogue, which overrun “our own mental imagery of what is going on in the characters’ minds.”⁴¹ Oboler tells us that silences written into the script and spare use of the sonic properties of radio force the listener to be drawn in, to be intrigued enough to listen, and yet free enough to use the imagination to not only visualize the actors and the action, but *what is going on in the characters’ minds*. This personal identification with the program, through what is heard and what is not, is the essential power of radio. Oboler warns that it is the writer’s task to try to control the many departments that want to embellish or interpret his text through the “judicious use of signposts” which indicate everything from specific music, to fade in/out cues, to sound effects, to use of the voice. In his case, the only way to assure that his work would be produced as he imagined it was by becoming a director himself.

Appealing to the ear by understanding its susceptibilities

Every point of the discussion on radio writing returns to the ear. Word choice, time, place and identity, choice of dialect, and vocal characterization are all tested by the audience’s aural reception. Authorial concerns with emotional impact and how to achieve it in the text and control it through the production process still receive their final evaluation in how the listener responds to a sound-only stimulus. The essential component in writing for radio is the knowledge of what makes the experience of

⁴¹ Ibid., xxvi.

listening uniquely different from seeing. Director Albert Crews stated the case better than perhaps anyone. “The ear is credulous.”⁴²

In his instructional volume *Radio Production Directing*, Crews, who had been a professor of speech and head of the radio department at Northwestern University before he joined NBC as a director, approached his subject in a way fundamentally different from others writing for this audience. He conducted a close examination of the psychological and sensory experiences that he felt differentiated radio from other modes of performance. Crews described the ear as, “an incurable romantic,” compared to the eye which is “a hard-bitten realist... unwilling to make concessions to the imagination.”⁴³ Crews’ beliefs are supported quantitatively by the findings of Cantril and Allport’s experiment with the use of fictitious words. In that test subjects were exposed to real and fictitious words in a written text and by listening to the same text in a “radio” program. “Fictitious words were judged as authentic when heard more often than, when read...Individuals seem to be less critical and more gullible toward spoken material.”⁴⁴ The audiences’ inability to subject their experience to a test of both eye and ear made them more vulnerable to the message.

Crews found the ear easy to deceive compared to other senses, considering this appropriate in the dramatic context and to the benefit of creating engaging radio fare, rather than in the context of propaganda or the willful manipulation of the audience, although many other writers and critics made that argument. The eye, he claimed, trusts

⁴² Crews, *Radio Production Directing*, 56.

⁴³ Ibid., 70-71.

⁴⁴ Cantril and Allport, *The Psychology of Radio*, 177.

what it sees only if it is consistent with prior experience. By contrast, the ear will believe more readily something it has not seen, no matter how incredible. He cites Orson Welle's *Mercury Theater of the Air* production of *War of the Worlds* as the prime example of this credulity. In this his view matches closely with James Whipple's assertion concerning audience acceptance of preposterous mystery stories. Whipple offers the advice that "The masses like mystery stories and do not object to the most illogical situations or plots so long as they can shudder."⁴⁵

Crews finds the eye "intellectual" but the ear "emotional," which facilitates the work of the radio dramatist "whose job it is not only to plant ideas but to arouse emotions," something he believes that facts alone cannot do.⁴⁶ As evidence for this he points to the success of radio news for which "sound has the added power of emotional appeal."⁴⁷ Among the many capabilities and sensitivities of the ear that Crews considered, he found two of particular interest to the creation of effective radio: that sound is "perceived automatically and acted on without conscious thought" and the ear's selectivity which "attends only to sounds which are meaningful to it *at the time*."⁴⁸ (Emphasis added). The ear unconsciously collects sound throughout one's life, but the memory is not lasting until it is called upon to do so by a stimulus. Crews claimed that a memory of an emotion caused by a sound could last a lifetime, but the actual sound itself does not come to mind unless stimulated by another aural cue. That makes the radio listener a bank of stored experiences, ready to respond when prompted. The second

⁴⁵ Whipple, *How to Write for Radio*, 12.

⁴⁶ Crews, *Radio Production Directing*, 73.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 73-74.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 58.

characteristic that Crews found most meaningful, the ear's selectivity, refers to a filtering process that the mind engages in when confronted with sound stimulus. He sees this as a kind of protection that enables people to live in a sound drenched environment, the ability to disregard sounds that do not carry current meaning and process those which do. To the radio writer or director this potential for sensory overload should be considered in the production process, and corresponds to Arch Oboler's maxim that all elements of the radio writer's art should be used in moderation.

Crews analyzed what he called physical, operational and reaction characteristics of the ear for their significance in radio production. His intention in doing this was to lay the groundwork for a discussion of each of the elements which the ear perceives for their use in all kinds of radio programming and his is the only account my research has uncovered that attempts to classify the characteristics of sound into what I have called the sonic palette. This may perhaps come from his background as an academic, but it certainly reflects an interest in understanding what kinds of stimuli produce an influence on the listener. But Crews, writing in 1944 in the last great days of radio's primacy in broadcasting, was chronicling, with a methodical mind and an interest in grounding his work in a scientific method, the practices of the industry that had accrued over the previous decade and a half.

The fact is that radio producers, writers and directors worked under stressful, time pressured conditions, and did not stop to analyze their influences or practices. When asked, their articulation of their own creative process did not expose its methods or its genius in the way that their work did. Those who did consider methods of production, the authors of books for aspiring radio professionals, nearly always provided a basic

orientation to the way in which business was conducted in radio and practical, but extremely general advice. So, finding evidence for any artistic practices, including the sonic palette, comes primarily from close “reading” of the actual audio texts, with occasional insights from those who created them, and even more rarely from artist-thinkers like Albert Crews.

Chapter 3

The Sonic Palette

The solutions to the challenges of “blind” broadcasting formed a growing body of techniques that was understood and used by production professionals. But this was not a formal methodology. It grew organically, as writers and directors tried new approaches, adopted them and cross-fertilized their work with that of others. It formed a kind of “aural tradition” known and used by those in the industry. This chapter organizes and illustrates those techniques by sonic category, in part, to show that an extensive system was in place, however informally, and how it worked. Its primary components, the many nuanced aspects of sonic coloration, the voice, music, and sound effects, enabled creative practitioners to layer their texts with meaning, stimulate the imagination and evoke an emotional response from listeners. I believe that understanding how comprehensive the techniques really were and how extensively they were used is important context for the argument that writers, producers and directors fluent in its means, actively applied them to influence audiences in favor of war and social policy. Having these fundamentals in mind should inform the reading of Part II of this work.

1. SONIC COLORATION: TOOLS OF THE PALETTE

The realization of any performance is dependent on its many parts, which combine, overlap and blend into a cohesive presentation. This is no less true for radio than it is for theater, opera or a concert. Although the final conception ultimately reflects the vision of the director who harmonizes the elements into a unified whole, each element of the sonic palette contributes uniquely, much the way each instrument in an orchestra delivers a personal as well as an ensemble performance. Director Albert Crews believed

sonic effects could be calibrated to the ear's understanding. "The ear seldom reacts to a single phenomenon, since we seldom distinguish between pitch and quality and volume, but assess the sound as a whole...."¹ Dimensions of sound like pitch, timbre, rhythm, dynamics, inflection and intonation communicate to listeners through the three parts of the sonic palette which are themselves exclusively aural in nature—the voice, music and sound effects. Controlled by the artist in performance, these tools provide color and texture that combine to express the character or scene in the script. Before looking at their combined effect, it is instructive to consider each sonic coloration individually. These aural characteristics are shared in common and act in similar ways, but not identically, generally reinforcing each other to create a complete aural picture.

Pitch

Crews believed that "from pitch alone [the listener] draws many conscious and unconscious conclusions."² He confirmed academic and industry studies finding low pitches as having a calming effect and high ones as irritating. Listener preference for baritone and contralto voices may have been related to limitations of the microphone, which reproduced sound at low frequencies better than high ones. This led to hiring people with lower voices, accustoming listeners to these voice types and further reinforcing the image. High pitched voices, like Gracie Allen's, were often used to as comic caricatures portraying women as flighty and dumb. Men with high voices were stereotyped as weak. Arnold Stang parlayed a career which started as a cracking-voiced adolescent on *The Goldbergs* into a life-long image as a perpetual milquetoast with a

¹ Albert R. Crews, *Radio Production Directing* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1944), 60.

² Ibid.

voice that Stang himself described as "a frightened chipmunk who's been out in the rain too long."³

Perceptions of pitch also figured into music and sound effects. "Rising pitches tend to be exciting and have a disturbing, electric effect...Most production directors, even if they know nothing about the psychology of sound, know that building to a high pitch is one way of getting a climax."⁴ A famous example of a tension effect from high pitch comes from outside the realm of radio—the strident, repeated high string figure that Bernard Herrmann used in the unforgettable shower scene (and other tense scenes) in *Psycho*. However, the context must be considered. Sound effects man Robert Turnbull suggested that although high pitches are associated with tension, they may also "give a lighter feeling, a gayer mood [while] low pitched sounds lean more to the morose and somber mood."⁵ The cello movement, "The Swan," from Camille Saint-Saens *Carnival of the Animals* conveys this melancholy mood, and was used as underscoring in radio as well as in film.

Timbre and tone

One reason why generalizations concerning the effect of a single sonic color, such as pitch, are problematic is that they do not operate in isolation. The effect on the listener is greatly affected by the source and production of the sound. University of Michigan speech professor Waldo Abbot points out that "High pitch itself is not nearly so undesirable as the quality that goes with it.... [The public] objects to the harshness of

³ , *Pittsburgh Post Gazette*, October 3, 1947.

⁴ Crews, *Radio Production Directing*, 62.

⁵ Robert B. Turnbull, *Radio and Television Sound Effects* (New York: Rinehart, 1951), 8.

tone of a high voice and to the amplification of this harshness.”⁶ Writers sometimes used the words timbre, tone and quality interchangeably, but the distinctions among them illuminate how different the effects can be on the audience. The word *quality* is used to denote a distinguishing trait. But I suggest that timbre and tone are different from each other. For clarity in my analysis, timbre refers to the unique character of the instrument or voice producing it, while tone means the something that is added to achieve a particular result. The timbre of a voice or instrument is inherent. A bassoon has a sound different from a cello; it has a different timbre, although both instruments are low pitched. Many people can recognize voices immediately from their timbre. Baritones Lawrence Tibbett and Bing Crosby, both famous radio personalities, had totally different timbres as well as different tones. Tibbett’s timbre has been described as dark-hued, and noble. His operatic tone had the intensity which was a function of his vocal production, which was trained for projection and support required by opera. Bing Crosby’s warm croon sounds totally different: the warmth is a function of timbre, while “croon” reflects the kind of unforced flow of sound which was ideal for radio. Robert West described Crosby’s speaking voice and delivery as having the “genius of geniality,” something that comes from the tone of his performance. “His manner gives the audience the impression of the good fellow who will pat you on the back as if he had known you your whole life.”⁷

Crews credits the ear for its ability to distinguish tone of voice and interpret the underlying quality it represents in a person. “We hear a quick, irritable command spoken

⁶ Waldo Abbot, *Handbook of Broadcasting* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1941), 47.

⁷ Robert West, *The Rape of Radio* (New York: Rodin Press, 1941), 47.

and we assume that the man who issued the command is a grouch, a prig, or a conceited ass. The assumption comes instantly and without our even knowing why.”⁸ Tone quality is often a telling sign of the speaker’s character, but in radio as in other mediated performance settings, it is consciously controlled to produce audibly the emotion required in the text or the situation.

Rhythm

Rhythm is pattern in sound, and although most obviously associated with music, it is equally present in spoken performance and sound effects. Crews believed that rhythmic patterns conveyed commonly understood meaning to listeners. Subsumed in rhythm is duration, repetition, pace and tempo, and even meter, as well as the individual pattern of the sound.

Slow, steady patterns are soothing and reassuring. Fast, staccato uneven patterns are upsetting and disturbing. Quick, steady patterns have a martial, stimulating effect. Gradually increasing tempos are exciting, stimulating and tend to make unstable emotional reactions. These are not new facts. They have long been known to every musician—to every African medicine man.⁹

Within Western tradition, at least, some patterns are ingrained in culture. A war song is never written in $\frac{3}{4}$ time, like a waltz. People react kinesthetically to rhythmic patterns. For example, repeated drum beats suggest intensity, the meaning of which varies depending on the instrumentation, rhythmic pattern and, of course, the context of the script. A jungle drum’s slow, steady beat tells one story, while rapping out a tattoo on a snare drum might mean a slow march to the gallows.

⁸ Crews, *Radio Production Directing*, 64.

⁹ Ibid., 65.

Robert Turnbull, CBS soundman on radio for twenty years beginning in 1931, believed that the fact that specific sound patterns produced predictable reactions was rooted in human psychology. It was part of the job to know what reactions these common patterns evoked:

A steady sustained sound gives a feeling of directness, continuous movement, formality, stability, and if a quiet sound, one of repose and tranquility. An *undulating sound*, varying in pitch and rhythm, expresses insistence, purposeful movement or perseverance. An *intermittent sound* expresses informality, indecision, disorder, and lack of purpose or leadership. [Italics original]¹⁰

Understanding these rhythmic abstractions is only the first step in sonic representation. Applying them in expected ways, as with the example of using a tom-tom to convey a crisis in the jungle, certainly added to the sonic palette and its automatic understanding. But some radio professionals were masters of unexpected uses of rhythm.

One creative approach to rhythm considers the absence of sound. The space between words or sounds can convey as much meaning as the sounds themselves. Arch Oboler, champion of under-writing, used that effect in *Burial Services*, his very first play for *Lights Out*, the suspense series with which he is closely associated. In this story, a girl is presumed dead, but in fact, she cannot speak or open her eyes, and is buried alive. Silence actually plays a defined role in the drama: “What I had written was horror beyond horror. I had underwritten [the script] so completely that each listener filled the silences with the terrors of his own soul,” Oboler remembered. “When the coffin lid finally closed on the conscious yet cataleptically paralyzed young girl in my play,” it produced an

¹⁰ Turnbull, *Radio and Television Sound Effects*, 7.

outcry from thousands of listeners who were so distressed by the suggestion of reality that they worried that they may have buried their own loved ones alive.¹¹

Dynamics

The use of volume for effect on radio is not a simple matter of loud or soft or of compensating for the microphone's technical sensitivity. When used with imagination, volume can influence the emotional response of the listener. The three dimensions of volume that can add color are balance, intensity and the rate of change in level.

Combining these elements in proper proportions for different situations produces results that Turnbull believed could predictably communicate the intended emotion to the listener, evidence of a sonic palette:

Sounds that *suddenly increase in volume* express a feeling of climax, intensity, concentration, impatience, and aggressiveness. They are the sounds of definite action. Sounds that *gradually increase in volume* express a feeling of relentlessness, suspense, progress, patience, pursuit, gathering strength, resolution. A gradually increased volume of sound gives a very definite feeling of insistence and purpose. Sounds that *suddenly fade* indicate a feeling of cowardice, fear, lack of purpose, loss of strength or defeat. Sounds that *gradually fade* express a feeling of dejection, temporary defeat, possible regrouping of forces, and suspense. Sounds that *increase in volume and suddenly stop*, or are held to specific volume level, give a feeling of opposition, conflict and frustration. Suddenly cut-off sounds are very good for suspense effects.¹²[Italics original]

Balance is a question of weight among the sonic elements. Effective use of balance is rarely symmetrical. It can be boring or prevent the audience from identifying what is important in the scene. If a scene has several background sounds, for example street sounds and traffic, all of which are at the same level, the audience must work to figure out what is happening. Add dialogue at equal volume levels and they may not hear

¹¹ Arch Oboler, *Oboler Omnibus: Radio Plays and Personalities* (New York: Duell, Sloan & Pearce, 1945), 22.

¹² Turnbull, *Radio and Television Sound Effects*, 8.

it. Unless a jumbled effect is called for, listeners will be unintentionally confused. An asymmetrical use of sound balance suggests perspective, the layering of sonic elements at different distances within the scene. Used progressively, that is increasing or decreasing a sound effect at a certain rate, gives the listener the impression of something coming closer or leaving—such as a train, a marching band, even an army.

Directors and sound effects technicians recognized the importance of understanding the threshold of sound—the number of cycles/second that are audible to the human ear—in creating the mood for the scene. One director even insisted on starting an airplane sound at 12 cycles/second, below the threshold of sound, and gradually raising it as it came within range of the actors in the scene. Although the audience couldn't hear it at first, the director felt that this would bring out a more credible performance in the actors as the war plane came closer. The actors would naturally raise their voices when the plane came really close. *Columbia Workshop* director and former sound engineer William Robson described how this effect worked:

You're in a quiet room, you talk quietly; if you're in a crowded room....and everybody is talking and the music is going loudly, you can talk louder and everybody else talks louder and the threshold of sound goes up...¹³

Crews counseled that directors should calibrate the intensity of sound to achieve the desired effect and to be aware of the interdependence of pitch and dynamics in these cases. While a low pitched sound is generally reassuring, extreme volume can make a dramatic effect. For example, thunder is low-pitched, but at high volume it can be frightening. He lamented that many directors do not recognize these interrelationships when working with the voice. Many believe that raising the volume on important

¹³ Leonard Maltin, *The Great American Broadcast: A Celebration of Radio's Golden Age* (New York: Dutton, 1997), 93. Quoting William Robson.

information so that the audience doesn't miss it, but it may have the opposite effect than is called for: "How many production directors shout soothing information to their audiences!"¹⁴

Variation in sound: inflection, intonation, tone patterns

Radio writers considered variation in sound, whether in the voice, music or effects to be the source of expression in performance. Rhythmic variation, discussed earlier, is necessarily a part of this process, but here I speak of melodic effect in music, inflection and intonation in the voice, and tone pattern in sound effects. In the speaking voice inflection is one of the traits that gives an actor's voice its uniqueness. Timbre alone may tell some who the speaker is, but it is the characteristic melodic use of voice which becomes associated with and recognizable as the performer. Radio history is filled with voices whose rhythmic-timbre-intonation patterns identify them immediately—from H.V. Kaltenborn's clipped authority to the staccato bark of Walter Winchell to Eve Arden's sardonic, down-turning contralto.

Although Abbot admonished aspiring radio performers "Do not allow your delivery to have a seasick effect of equal highs and lows," some radio actors, were able to turn a sing-song inflection into an indelible trademark. Ex-Vaudevillian Ed Wynn used his characteristic mannered delivery as part of his comic persona, becoming a radio star with his long running show *The Fire Chief* which ran throughout the 1930s. Intonation and rhythm are the fundamental components of accent which enable the actor to impersonate different nationalities, ethnicities and regional dialects. One of the most malleable of all voice characteristics, inflection became one of radio's most frequently

¹⁴ Crews, *Radio Production Directing*, 62.

used tools, and not only for accents. Albert Crews felt that inflection and intonation had the same effect in the voice as they did in music, creating a major or minor impression on the listener: “The ear is so quick to detect a minor melody in a speech pattern that it can be established in two or three lines. There is a definite minor melody in certain speech as there is in music, and the listener inevitably draws the same conclusion about both...that he is listening to a defeated person.”¹⁵ The ability to project different voice patterns was essential to radio actors. It added “color, life and emphasis” to performance, but the skill was also a necessity if an actor was to find regular employment on radio.¹⁶

Melodic or tone patterns were equally used in sound effects to produce emotion or atmosphere. For example, an oscillator emitting a rising and falling tone wave was often used in science fiction for an other-worldly effect. A widely-recognized atmospheric effect from outside the radio world which has iconic recognition in popular cultural is the opening theme by avant-garde composer Marius Constant from the TV show *Twilight Zone*. A simple figure plucked on the high notes of a guitar and backed by intermittent bongo rhythms, the theme culturally stands for science fiction; people sing it to express a weird experience or encounter. The sound pattern has come to stand for the idea. Another famous pattern came from the detective show *Dragnet*. The opening signature, blared by bass trombones, consisted of two identical three-note, dotted-rhythm patterns separated by a static pause. It not only indelibly announced the show, but has similarly taken on iconic status. (Dum.....Da-Dum Dum.....Dum Da Dum-dum DUUUUUM).¹⁷

¹⁵ Crews, *Radio Production Directing*, 74.

¹⁶ Abbot, *Handbook of Broadcasting*, 263.

¹⁷ The theme sounded ominous to more than one composer and its origin was the subject of controversy. Once it became popular—a recording was issued in 1953—composer Walter Schumann was charged as having stolen it years before from Miklos Rozsa. According to Rozsa, Schumann had visited the set of the

Tone patterns and vocalized sound often stand for emotions or reactions which are recognizable to all. The reader will probably hear in his or her head the melodic tone combination associated with ridicule in the jibe on the syllable “nyah, nyah, nyah-nyah, nyah.” (Quarter-note, dotted eighth, sixteenth, quarter, quarter).

2. THE VOICE

From its earliest days, radio’s ability to exert power over the listener was apparent. The first and perhaps most enduring impression came from the power of the human voice. In the chapter of their 1925 book *Broadcasting, Its New Day* which speculated on the future of radio, theater impresario and early radio personality Roxy Rothafel and his collaborator Francis Yates observed “It should have the power to make the invisible listener more of a part of the performance, to create an illusion of intimacy.”¹⁸ The connection of power to the voice was a recurring theme in radio literature. “[the director] must realize that the spoken word is an inflammatory thing, that the human voice is the most potent conveyor of emotion, an instrument that appeals to the imagination of man,”¹⁹ advised Abbot. Radio programming is sustained by the speaking voice. It is the connective tissue that opens and closes the show, introduces every musical selection and sets up every comedy routine. It sells every product, tells the story of the news and persuades the listener to vote, to be calm in a crisis, and to go to war. It inflames passions—for good and ill, breaks hearts, woos, rails and makes the listener laugh or weep. It is the sonic interpretation of the text.

now-classic 1946 film *The Killers*, and heard a cue which later became the Dragnet theme known as “Danger Ahead.” A lawsuit for rights to the theme was settled with both composers sharing royalties.

¹⁸ Samuel L. Rothafel and Raymond Francis Yates, *Broadcasting, Its New Day* (New York: The Century Company, 1925), 22.

¹⁹ Abbot, *Handbook of Broadcasting*, 146.

Announcing: an industry obsession

With its ever present insecurity at being a “blind” medium, the radio industry recognized immediately its dependence on the voice, but finding what suited the medium in the many different modes of presentation was less obvious. In the beginning, nothing was more important than the announcer, who was not only the aural representation of the station and its programming, but was required to fill with extemporaneous speech the many gaps that occurred from imprecise program timing or when performers didn’t show up as scheduled. Roxy Rothafel was credited with successfully pioneering this new form of address. His musical variety program, “The Capitol Gang,” named after one of Roxy’s vaudeville theaters, first aired on WEAf in 1923, with Roxy as master of ceremonies. Unlike so many whose theatrical experience actually hindered their understanding of the requirements of new medium, he intuitively adapted his style and his “intimate, often almost emotional talks in introducing his ‘gang,’ became a favorite in a moment.”²⁰

Stations quickly understood that radio speaking was different and more intimate than public speaking. But they didn’t easily find the right voices for the many different programming needs, and solving that problem became the industry Holy Grail. Dull or excessively bombastic voice delivery drove away listeners and complaints poured into stations. Many would-be announcers couldn’t pronounce words, especially musical terms and composer names. Announcers whose approach appealed to listeners became immensely popular, attracting loyal fans.

The rapidly industrializing medium sought to understand the appeal of those who were successful and to standardize their approach to assure uniformly acceptable, radio-

²⁰ Paul L. Kinkead, “Where Is the Radio Going?” (1927), in *Readings in Public Opinion: Its Formation and Control*, ed. W. Brooks Graves (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1928), 533.

specific modes of speaking. To that end the Radio Voice Technique Committee was formed in early 1925 by RCA and New York University “for the purpose of determining what characteristics constituted the perfect radio announcer.”²¹ Comprised of public speaking instructors from NYU as well as “leading figures in the educational, religious, scientific, journalistic and dramatic worlds,” the committees studied recordings to come up with a consensus on the ideal approach to radio speaking.²² They considered, in order of importance, “rate of delivery, stress variation, distinctness, average pitch, pitch variation, change of pace and formality.”²³ A further survey by RCA to evaluate listener preference for male and female announcers resulted in a 100 to 1 vote in favor of men. Guidelines were established: 175 words/minute was the best average rate of delivery; changes of pitch were favored, but not too many; a Mid-West accent was preferred; deep voices carried more successfully than high ones; women were excluded from announcing. Problems arose because the Committee could not define or standardize the role of personality, and the most successful announcers failed the formality test. In an attempt to conform to the rules laid down by the committee, Roxy was soon asked by the management of WEAf to be more formal and dignified.²⁴ The characteristics of pleasing personality couldn’t be defined but popularity trumped testing. The overwhelming rejection of women announcers cannot easily be explained. Women singers and

²¹ Alfred Norton Goldsmith and Austin C. Lescarbours, *This Thing Called Broadcasting; a Simple Tale of an Idea, a Mighty Industry, a Daily Habit and a Basic Influence on Our Civilization* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1930), 133. Quoting from the organizational brochure of the Radio Voice Technique Committee.

²² Ibid., 135.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., 134.

performers enjoyed immense popularity over the air. One theory, tinged with the prevalent gender biases of the time, proposed that women showed too much personality. “The greatest fault with the woman announcer was that she had difficulty in repressing her enthusiasm and maintaining reserve and dignity of her position as announcer. Radio audiences resent a voice that is too intimate on short acquaintance. The reason for this is probably that the audience is sitting at home, the supposedly private and sacred precincts of which the announcer enters.”²⁵ They suggested that some voices breached a tenuous divide in which some are welcome, because they are congenial, but not too forward. It is curious that strange men were more greeted more cordially than strange women—it appeared to be a question of manner, but just as likely, it was a question of attitude.

Understanding the projection of personality through sound

As radio’s popularity consumed the country, social scientists undertook to explain how the voice expresses personality over the radio and the basis for listener voice preferences. Cantril and Allport’s field experiments were designed to see if listeners could correctly judge personality traits and physical characteristics merely by listening to a text read by male and female “announcers.” A separate test compared male and female announcers.

It is interesting that test subjects could generally judge correctly on many measures, including age, appearance, political preference, extraversion/introversion and dominant/submissive behaviors, merely by listening to the announcer’s voice, although what voice characteristic contributed to those judgments they could not explain. More revealing, however, is that listeners all formed the same impression of the announcer

²⁵ Ibid., 137.

even when their judgment was wrong. Cantril and Allport concluded that the impression of the voice formed by the listener was what conveyed personality. In view of the fact that the test readers were not professional actors, that impression was subject to considerable control in the voices of real radio announcers and performers. Further, when stereotypes were present in the voice it led to stereotyping in personality. The more heterogeneous the delivery, the less successful was the listener's judgment. Finally, Allport and Cantril tested the impressions of blind listeners against sighted ones, and the sighted listeners formed far more accurate impressions of the personalities of the announcers. They concluded that despite the aural sensitivity of blind listeners, the fact that they had no visual memory to call upon contributed to misidentification. Sighted listeners consistently formed images of announcers that correlated with prior visual experience.

In the second test, male announcers were overwhelmingly preferred to female, confirming the results of the RCA survey of the late 1920s. Other findings similarly confirmed the empirical experience and attitudes of the industry. Women were described as more affected and unnatural, less interested in their material and less persuasive than men. Women test subjects felt they "knew" the personality of the women announcers; men were not as confident of their ability to judge their own sex. Low voices were preferred to high ones, for both men and women. Whether a voice was considered attractive had absolutely no impact on preference for speakers of either sex. In fact, coarse voices were preferred—*even those of women*—over refined ones. The more cultivated the woman's voice the less she was preferred. Harsh male voices were preferred for politics, news and other "matter of fact" material.

Cantril and Allport conceded that results of both tests reflected cultural prejudices and preconceptions much more than any absolute vocal characteristics. By 1935, when their study was published, listener attitudes about voices were substantially the same as they had been in 1925 when the Radio Voice Technique Committee and RCA did their original research. The Committee produced recommendations that were contrary to common sense and actual listener attitudes, but the industry followed its listeners and its own instincts. By the mid-1930s radio had become quite sophisticated in its understanding of what kinds of voices were successful for different kinds of programs. The industry experimented constantly and reacted to listener feedback. The dynamic that existed between the audience and the broadcasters continually refined the model.

Conveying meaning

Radio professionals and researchers tried to describe the specific characteristics of the voice which were most effective. Their task was complicated by the many different situations and genres on radio. Announcing on a variety show called for a different voice than a sporting event. News readers, commentators and political speakers developed a signature vocal style within each sub-genre of talk programming. Drama's vocal range was as varied as the subject matter and characters portrayed. Nevertheless, there is considerable agreement as to what was important and successful that came from the voice alone. Chief among these properties is credibility, the ability to convince listeners that what they are hearing is true. It may be actually true, or it may be the projection of believability. But the audience must be convinced by the sound of truth.

Separating out the voice itself from the performance is a difficult exercise in semantics. By performance, I refer to the artistic realization of a particular production as

presented in the vision of a director. Naturally, every radio program was a performance and most were produced under the guidance of a director. The announcer or actor responded to that direction with the voice, manipulating it to present a characterization specific to a situation. But in many cases, the actor or announcer was cast because his or her voice already had properties that were suitable to the program. This was no less true for the host of a weekly variety show than it was for the actor in a drama.

How a speaker sounds is a function of how he or she uses these tools, sometimes consciously, but as often, instinctively. Through the use of the voice the speaker projects character—personality, social status, gender, and sometime race and ethnicity. More ineffable, but nonetheless demonstrable, is the ability of voice to inspire, not just express, emotion—trust, fear, sorrow, joy.

Landmark radio voices

Radio's annals are filled with signature voices. This makes sense, since success in the medium depended upon establishing an identifiable aural presence. The first voices that captivated the nation were counterfeits. Freeman Gosdon and Charles Correll, white writer/performers, parlayed their familiarity with minstrel tradition into *Amos 'n Andy*, the first nationally syndicated radio program. First aired in 1928 after a local incarnation in Chicago under different names, the pair became a national sensation with their daily program that had more than 40 million listeners by 1932. Although frequently attacked as racist in the post-Civil Rights era, the show had devoted listeners of all races during its 28 year run and has as many defenders for its innovations in radio drama and sympathetic, humanizing story lines—including some which expose racist treatment of characters—as it has detractors for reinforcing racial stereotypes. Most relevant to this

work is the fact that the serial relied on entirely on accents and vocal delivery for the portrayal of the show's 170 characters, all of which were spoken by Gosdon and Correll alone. It would take an entire volume to analyze the accents, pacing, rhythms, timbres, and character-defining verbal nuances that differentiated each member of this multitude. Suffice it to say that the on-air ubiquity of *Amos 'n Andy* accustomed audiences to identifying characters by voice, as well as to expecting stereotypical accents as markers of race, class and regional origins. The lessons of *Amos 'n Andy* were not lost on script writers and directors, who copied their formula—ethnic, class-based humor— with shows like *The Rise of the Goldbergs*, *Lum and Abner* and *Ma Perkins*.

At another end of the radio and class spectrum was the voice which calmed the Depression. When radio era writers describe the magical effect of a single voice on radio they invariably lead with Franklin Delano Roosevelt. This is as true for authors of instructional books and radio histories as it is for social scientists like Cantril and Allport. FDR's voice is described as intimate, with "soothing power at a time when the air was filled with voices whose raucous prophesies did not match their political wisdom."²⁶ It has a "friendly, agreeable tonality" and "carries with it the implication that the speech is casual and impromptu."²⁷ West marvels that the most dreadful news was presented with a relaxed sound. Cantril and Allport considered Roosevelt the ideal voice for inspiring confidence and dependability of judgment which gives a "character reading of the speaker based on the voice alone."²⁸ Roosevelt's voice reflects his "mood, temper and

²⁶ West, *The Rape of Radio*, 420.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 421.

²⁸ Hadley Cantril and Gordon W. Allport, *The Psychology of Radio* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers., 1935), 109.

personality.” A litany of positive attributes emanating from his voice produces a saint-like perfection: “sincerity, goodwill and kindness, determination, conviction, strength, courage and abounding happiness.”²⁹ Cantril and Allport further state that people find “his manner informal, intimate and sincere, paternal and reassuring; he seems simultaneously to be both master and servant of the people.”³⁰ This is all the more remarkable considering the fact that FDR’s voice was distinctly patrician. Its slow, measured pace and clean articulation had nothing of the everyman quality to it. FDR spoke at around 130 words/ minute, in contrast to the radio average of 150. But throughout the radio era, popularity often seemed to defy conventional wisdom, as the Radio Voice Technique Committee found in its short life. It may be that FDR’s vocal timbre, as it came through the radio, produced a soothing effect. Director Albert Crews believed that timbre, the quality of a sound or voice, was the most influential of all sonic characteristics. “[Timbre] is one of the most important of the artist’s pigments when he is painting in sound...The secret lies in controlling and being able to use the quality or timbre of sound to telling advantage.”³¹

One cannot divorce FDR’s voice from the atmospherics of the context and the text. The setting is not a studio but the Oval Office at the White House, which was not as familiar to the audience as it is today. The listener is prompted with a visual image of informality. Then, FDR addresses the audience with “My friends,” in contrast to the more formal “My fellow citizens” used by other politicians, with calm pacing and leisurely

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., 211.

³¹ Crews, *Radio Production Directing*, 64.

articulation. Cantril and Allport temper their idealization of FDR's voice by acknowledging that listeners were influenced by what they already knew about the President. John Dos Passos captured FDR's effect as a visual impression in his 1934 essay "The Radio Voice."³² "There is a man leaning across his desk, speaking clearly and cordially to youandme (sic)."³³ He repeats that phrase half a dozen times, each time followed with the grim news of the day—the slow workings of the government, the collapse of the economy, the loss for the individual. The juxtaposition of the catastrophic conditions of the Depression with the "cordial explaining voice" is not mockery but wonder at its mesmerizing effect. "We want to say: Thank you, Frank; we want to ask about the grandchildren and that dog that had to be sent away for biting a foreign diplomat."³⁴ Dos Passos includes himself among the millions whose trust and good will have been secured by the voice, reassuring and sincere, and he pays FDR the ultimate accolade of popular acceptance—the president is a friend, and just like youandme.

3. MUSIC

In general, the script provides the sonic blueprint for the author's vision and the voice executes its realization. Music's role can either be a leading one, as I will describe in detail in chapter four, or, more commonly, a supporting one. In neither case am I referring to programs which are intended primarily as musical entertainment, such as variety shows or orchestra concerts, although these exert their own cultural influence on the listener, planned or otherwise. Rather, I am describing the use of music as part of the

³² John Dos Passos, "The Radio Voice," *Common Sense*, February 1934, 17.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

narrative function. However, the fact that music programming in the radio era was such a pervasive force in culture heightened its effect when used in other genres and in the sonic palette. It deserves some discussion.

The influence of radio musical culture

From the beginning of radio, music dominated the airwaves. Over 80% of program hours in the 1920s were dedicated to music. Even in the mid-1930s, by which time the programming mix was well developed with news, drama, serials and other genres, musical programs still represented over 50% of air time. A great deal of this was contemporary popular music presented by dance bands and singers. It was common for a popular song to receive thousands of hours of airings during its short life. Songs became ingrained in listeners' minds. In *The Rape of Radio*, author Robert West observed that "The infiltration of music culture was hastened beyond [our] wildest dreams by the advent of the phonograph and radio."³⁵ Once radios were ubiquitous, they were left playing as a comforting background sound as much as or more than for active listening. But people absorb much of what they hear, even when not attending directly to it. Many deplored this trend and critics were extremely vocal about it, notably social scientist Theodor Adorno. He attacked what he considered regressive listening, a term he used for listening to formulaic popular song, especially on the radio. The listener "identifies himself with this because he identifies it and thereby merges with his possession."³⁶ But philosophers were not the only critics. Bandleader Benny Goodman objected to the

³⁵ West, *The Rape of Radio*, 117.

³⁶ Theodor Adorno, "On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening" (1944), in *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1991). Essay from *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, originally published in German.

endless repetition of songs on the radio. “Music has become industrialized by the sponsors....I mean they appraise things from their own viewpoint, forgetting that songs played 10,000 times over the air in two years...may indicate a worn-out welcome rather than a tendency to listen.”³⁷

But it is just this repetition and identification which inculcated an awareness of music that increased its value as a component in the sonic palette. For music to be effectively received, Cantril and Allport said, it needed to be familiar. Although they recognized that many critics were “anti-mechanical,” they took the opposite position. They believed that the networks were “wittingly or unwittingly ...raising the level of musical appreciation in the masses.”³⁸ It was not only popular music that was infiltrating the public. Classical music, too, received unprecedented airtime. Ernest Schelling, first conductor of the New York Philharmonic Young Peoples’ Concerts, which aired regularly on radio, described music as a habit. “A person can accustom himself to needing music or doing without it. He can accustom a taste for good or bad.”³⁹ Much “good” music aired weekly on radio, scheduled by the networks as partial fulfillment of their obligation to “serve the public good” which was a requirement for them to keep their licenses. With only four networks on air in the mid-1930s, people had little choice but to be exposed to classical music at some point during the week or suffer silence by shutting off the radio. Then, too, it was common in the radio era to add lyrics to classical melodies and record them as hit tunes. For example, Chopin’s *Fantasia Impromptu* had

³⁷ West, *The Rape of Radio*, 122. Quoting an undated interview with Goodman in the *World Telegram*.

³⁸ Cantril and Allport, *The Psychology of Radio*, 219.

³⁹ West, *The Rape of Radio*, 125. Quoting Ernest Schelling.

been turned into the popular song “I’m Always Chasing Rainbows” in 1917 and was still being recorded by stars like Judy Garland and the Harry James Orchestra in the 1940s. There are many such examples by which mass audiences became familiar with classical music. Despite controversy, this overwhelming exposure to a mixed musical culture was loudly praised by more radio observers like West, as well as those in the academic community, as represented by researchers Cantril and Allport, than criticized by radio’s opponents. As West put it: “Musical democracy tolerates no snob...Those who insist that the world listen to inferior music represent the same dangerous snobbery as those who insist on only the classics.”⁴⁰

Music’s role in the sonic palette has to do, in part, with making listeners familiar with, and therefore likely to recognize, musical references that are incorporated into programs as a cultural or emotional cue. But there is a subtler value. An increasing familiarity with all music heightens the likelihood of a personal response, according to Cantril and Allport.

Melody and rhythm coincide with the affective undercurrents of life expressing far better than language the basic feeling-tone—the mood, emotion, or desire—that underlies all experience. For this reason music has always played an important part in human experience but until the advent of the radio it was impossible for people...to hear music without some kind of exertion.⁴¹

If their observations were correct, by the 1930s, radio drama had a listening audience widely exposed to music of many genres, likely to be familiar with specific musical references and probably responsive to sonic musical effects when well chosen by producers or directors with musical-dramatic sensitivities. Certainly not all programs

⁴⁰ West, *The Rape of Radio*, 125.

⁴¹ Cantril and Allport, *The Psychology of Radio*, 217.

were blessed with creators who had such sensibilities, and it seems unlikely that many were consciously aware of the latent receptivity of an audience lately trained in all forms of musical fare. Rather, I suggest a pervasiveness of radio musical culture in the 1930s and 1940s in which the understanding of musical references and sonic cues would be taken for granted by producers who incorporated them into their programs.

Uses for music in the sonic palette

Where music plays a primary function in a dramatic program, it is nearly always an equal partner with the text. In these works, much of the music is original, written for the production, or consists of interpolated musical selections that help tell the story. These works are occasionally operas, but more commonly they are forms that have found unique expression on the air, for example, the radio cantata and the original poetic drama. In these works, it is arguable whether text and music are indeed equal, or whether one takes a role subordinate to the other. That discussion deserves separate treatment. Consequently, I will defer analysis of music's function in such programs to chapter four which explores the primary role of musical form in a radio work.

Music's supporting function in the sonic palette is less arguable. Writers and directors used music in two ways: tactically to provide information, the where/who/what's-going-on in the scene, and affectively, to create a mood and convey emotion. Both ways use music for sound effects, to transition from one scene to the next, to underscore dialogue and as program signatures. The best writers and directors counseled moderation in the use of music, and above all, a clear understanding as to what exact purpose was served such as establishing a location, indicating action or expressing

joy or sorrow. CBS director and producer Earle McGill felt that “often the most beautiful, effective and haunting of sound effects are those produced orchestrally by imaginative musical arrangement.”⁴² Unfortunately, few dramatic programs could afford orchestras and even fewer original music, often forcing directors to rely on music libraries. These realities, added to pressured timetables, resulted in the same musical effects being used repeatedly. Unimaginative as this might be, it did accustom audiences to a kind of musical shorthand they could readily recognize when used to connote similar situations or emotions, like playing “Aloha Oe” to signal a switch to a Polynesian location (or even a Hawaii-themed nightclub).

Musical information: Orienting the listener

Music opened nearly every program on the air. All recurring dramatic programs, including plays, anthologies and serials had opening signatures, often very distinctive and intended to arrest listener attention and herd them into the living room for the program. These signatures were short, memorable musical fragments intended to express the essential character of the program. The *Dragnet* theme, mentioned earlier, is one of hundreds which rapidly trained audiences that their show was about to start. It was a popular parlor game in the radio era to sing musical signatures and have participants guess the show, a kind of “Name that Tune” based on abbreviated themes. Not all these signatures were original. In fact, many were either traditional tunes, popular songs or classical music fragments which were already well known to audiences that then became associated with the show. For example, the melancholy movement from Grieg’s *Peer*

⁴² Earle McGill, *Radio Directing* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1940), 33. See Chapter 6 for a discussion of music’s partnership with text to produce dramatic effect.

Gynt known as “Asa’s Death” was the theme for a show called *Famous Jury Trials* which ran on the Dumont Radio Network in the late 1940s.

One of the most important informational functions music served was transitioning from scene to scene. Without visual cues audiences needed to understand in a matter of seconds that one scene had ended and another one was beginning, usually with different characters and in a different place. It was common for musical transitions to come from a stock library that included “fanfares, lead-ins, conclusions, neutral bridges, dramatic bridges, etc.”⁴³ In a serial, continuity editors might track these musical transitions so that the same or similar transitional themes would be used whenever the action called for that setting again, for example, returning to *Ma Perkins*’ kitchen. One serial, the immensely popular *Vic and Sade* even used musical jokes as a recurring, and therefore audience enticing, device. A popular feature of every program was the “musical pay-off” intended to get a laugh out of music whose title refers to what happened in the preceding episode. It took considerable creativity, not to mention managing a lot of stress, to tie a recognizable music title to the show’s content five days a week throughout the year. Music was also used diagetically. A scene in a bar or dance hall might be underscored with a song coming from a jukebox or dance band to create a realistic backdrop. More typically, however, underscoring was used to express the feelings of the characters or the emotion the audience was expected to feel.

Expression: Mood music, again

Among music’s most important and frequently used functions in a radio drama was to set mood. While music was often used creatively and to great effect, it was

⁴³ Crews, *Radio Production Directing*, 425.

perhaps even more frequently used conventionally. The notion that specific music could represent specific emotions that audiences would respond to with understanding did not die with Edison's experiment with *Mood Music*. In fact, mood music is the name that the radio industry gave its catalogues of standardized sonic cues. Radio author James Whipple even compiled a list of seventeen categories under which mood music was published, including "slumber and children's scenes, dramatic moods (*agitato* and *andante*), moods of the sea, exotic moods, and speeds (hurries)."⁴⁴ CBS's music department compiled its own cue book derived from a relatively narrow range of classical musical selections. Music directors were actively encouraged to use and re-use them. Although Albert Crews warned against hackneyed effects, such as the use of a tremolo below dialogue to suggest anxiety, he also compiled a list for aspiring radio directors which included cues and mood music such as "impending doom, chase music, and love motifs."⁴⁵ Several radio era writers agree that silent era cue books used by organists and pianists accustomed the public to a range of recurring musical passages that connoted specific situations and emotions. In fact, CBS had a policy that fostered a rather standard approach to transitions modeled on silent film scores. As radio drama developed, and small stations as well as large produced their own plays, enterprising companies developed commercial musical effect recordings, just as they did for sound effects later in the 1930s. The fact that there were such clichéd musical effects simply confirms the regular use of a sonic palette, even if unimaginatively.

⁴⁴ James Whipple, *How to Write for Radio* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1938), 46.

⁴⁵ Crews, *Radio Production Directing*, 425.

One such example is a product of the series *Men of Destiny*, a biographical series with aspirations of educating the masses which was syndicated to commercial advertisers. The episode dramatizing an event in the life of Oliver Cromwell is punctuated throughout with well-known British themes. It opens with “God Save the King” as the narrator bridges from present to past with an excerpt from Edward VIII’s resignation speech back in time to Charles I’s beheading. The show’s focus was the purported internal struggle Cromwell engaged in when taking power: should he be king or remain Lord Protector? The Westminster chimes theme signals that it is night. Cromwell’s restless nights were consumed with troublesome dreams –with Schumann’s *Träumerei* in the background. Suddenly the Schumann music swells and the ghost of Charles I appears to advise Cromwell not to make his mistakes. When the ghost of the King disappears, so does *Träumerei*. Cromwell awakens and decides not to take the title of king. His wise decision, ratified by God, is accompanied by a surge in music by Purcell—the famous Bell Anthem, well-known to Christian audiences as the hymn “Rejoice in the Lord, alway.” (sic) To those without prior knowledge, its magisterial pace and rich orchestration carry the sense of importance. Musical clichés punctuate each scene change and mood of this short program, a result, perhaps, of the shoe-string budget of the University Broadcasting Council of Chicago, which was its producer.

Arch Oboler felt that music had rarely been used effectively in its dramatic capacity “as the counterpoint to the emotional sweep of the story.”⁴⁶ This required an original score for a drama, which was rare in the radio industry. Still rarer were the composer/dramatist collaborators or producers who understood how the text and music

⁴⁶Arch Oboler, “The Art of Radio Writing,” in *Fourteen Plays*, by Arch Oboler (New York: Random House, 1940), xxiv.

could support each other. Two such individuals were Norman Corwin and Bernard Herrmann. Corwin, the prolific “boy wonder,” wrote, directed or produced some of the most original radio programming of the era. Composer, conductor Bernard Herrmann was a musical prodigy now best known for his film scores which read like a compilation of many of the classic movies of all time, including: *Citizen Kane*, *Jane Eyre*, *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit*, *North by Northwest*, *Psycho*, and *The Naked and the Dead*. Both men contributed to radio some of the most inventive uses of music in the medium and worked together frequently, especially on the innovative series *Columbia Workshop*.

Although Corwin, who joined CBS in 1938, was not a musician, virtually all his productions used musical elements in compositional style. Often this meant interpolating recognizable songs, as he did his “Crosstown Manhattan” which interspersed familiar melodies with dialogue. Corwin was among the few who could command full orchestra and singers for his sustaining productions, and both commissioned new and introduced previously unheard music, such as the first hearing of the now legendary “Round Hitler’s Grave” with words by Woodie Guthrie and Pete Seeger. Corwin even used an instrument as a character in his innovative play “The Odyssey of Runyan Jones” in which a child speaks to a character named “Harpy” who is portrayed by an actual harp—the sounds of which are so carefully scored that they are nearly understandable as “dialogue” that the child then interprets.

Bernard Herrmann’s career at CBS began in 1934 at age 23 as a conductor in the music department. Within nine years he led the CBS Symphony. Throughout all those years, in addition to conducting he acted as music director on hundreds of programs and as composer on many. Herrmann wrote or arranged scores for an astonishing 64 episodes

of *Columbia Workshop*, where he met Orson Welles. His collaboration with Welles began with writing original music for the *Mercury Theater of the Air*, including the legendary *War of the Worlds* broadcast and culminated with *Citizen Kane*. His imaginative work in that film provides a vivid example of his dramatic use of music. In a scene from the faux-opera *Salamambo*, the aria sung by Susan Alexander was written in a tessitura intended to strain the voice, ending in a high D, to create the impression of “a terrified girl floundering in the quicksand of a powerful orchestra.”⁴⁷

Herrmann and Corwin first worked together in 1939 on the *Columbia Workshop* production *Seems Radio is Here to Stay*, curiously called by Corwin a “verse brochure.” The designation probably refers to the fact that Corwin was asked by CBS management to produce a work that would supplement the National Association of Broadcaster’s campaign to gain public good will towards radio on the medium’s 25th anniversary of broadcasting—in other words, a PR piece. The program, which celebrates how radio has extended the reach of culture, entertainment, and public affairs to the millions with a receiver, is typical of Corwin’s work. It juxtaposes lofty ideals, set in verse, and humor, all told with a light touch and self-deprecation. Music’s role is spare but always significant, often dramatic, with highly specific directions written into the script.

Following a fortissimo chord, full orchestra, a narrated prologue “poetically” teases audiences around the world to stop what they are doing: “Were you EXPECTING us? /Your dial deputized to let us in.”⁴⁸ A radio announcer’s voice introduces the

⁴⁷ David Raskin, “David Raskin Remembers His Colleagues,” 1995, *American Composers Orchestra*, http://www.americancomposers.org/raskin_herrmann.htm. Raskin quoting Herrmann.

⁴⁸ Norman Corwin, *Seems Radio Is Here To Stay* (New York: Columbia Broadcasting System, 1939). Note: all italics and other textuality are original in the privately published “brochure,” which appears to have been produced as for network affiliates, sponsors and others in the industry.

production, a kind of voice of God, which is followed by a lead-in that incorporates effects and music in the sophisticated use of sound that both Corwin and Herrmann are known for.⁴⁹

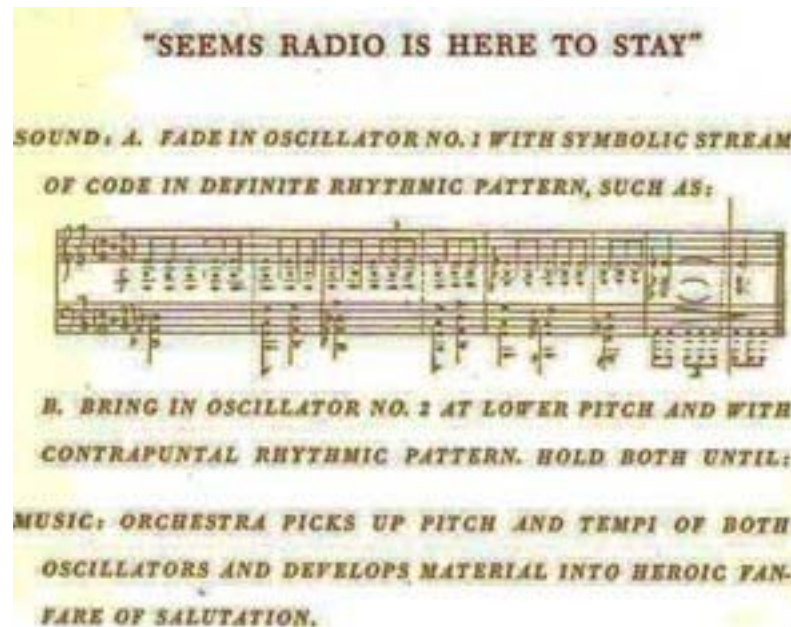


Fig 2. "Seems Radio Is Here To Stay" Opening Cues⁵⁰

This dramatic opening incorporates a Morse code pattern, a sound fully recognizable to the audience. That isolated sound, emblematic of wireless telegraphy's beginnings, is replaced by a fully orchestrated musical theme overwhelming the humble telegraph rhythm, which is subsumed in it. In the notes to an edition of his radio plays, Corwin advises would-be producers of this show that "This cue is so complicated that if you cannot get the proper music it would be better to forget the cue entirely and get on to the

⁴⁹ Martin Gabel, the announcer, appeared frequently on radio when a noble voice was called for. He also worked frequently with Orson Welles on *Mercury Theater of the Air* as well as with Corwin, who used him as the narrator in Corwin's most famous program, *On a Note of Triumph*, the victory broadcast which was later made into an Academy Award winning film short.

⁵⁰ Corwin, *Seems Radio Is Here to Stay*, CBS Brochure.

Narrator's acknowledgment...either that or substitute an ordinary fanfare.”⁵¹ This musical flourish humorously demonstrates the triumph of radio, a point made clear, in case the listener doesn't get the musical joke, by the narrator's next remark: “That will take care of overtures and prologues for tonight.”⁵² Transitioning, the narrator speaks to an anonymous voice that represents the audience, a device that is repeated throughout the program as a humanizing counterpoint to the showy display of radio's cultural gift to the world. The main body of the broadcast calls from the past three icons of high culture, Walt Whitman, Beethoven and Shakespeare, presenting fragments from their best known works. With poetic narrative wrap-around, it showcases radio's service to mankind by bringing their masterpieces to millions. Corwin does this with humor, but elevates the message with poetic form and language that addresses the audience with considerably more respect than typical radio fare. All the elements of the sonic palette come into play, but the collaboration with Herrmann stands out. Each of the three vignettes is scored evocatively with a mosaic of musical styles, some original, some direct quotations, and one, in particular, arranged from the work of another as homage to the composer.

In the Whitman scene, the poet is called, literally and musically, from the grave to witness the miracle of radio using characteristic radio language to read an excerpt from “Leaves of Grass.”

“Come in, Walt Whitman, ...come in and bring with you a snatch of music of the spheres.”

MUSIC: PASSAGE SIMILAR IN SPIRIT TO THE EERIE MOVEMENT WHICH CONCLUDES HOLST'S 'PLANETS.'⁵³

⁵¹Norman Corwin, *Thirteen by Corwin* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1942), 243.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Corwin, *Seems Radio Is Here to Stay*.

Herrmann did not use Holst's "Planets" but instead wrote an ethereal melody set sensitively with tremolos in the high strings and woodwinds that evokes, rather than resembles, the music which inspired it. But the idea—Corwin's to conjure up the firmament, and Herrmann's orchestrated suggestion of awe-inspiring other-worldliness, permits the audience to see in the mind's eye an apparition, an esteemed visitor from the heavens, not a scary ghost. In the carefully chosen excerpt, Whitman's words speak of machinery, wonders and miracles in small things. The narrator picks up these words but amplifies the image, bragging about the science of radio and its global reach—in direct contrast to the poem's celebration of small things.

Stepping back further into the past, the narrator calls out to Beethoven—loudly—inviting him to listen to the radio: "O Beethoven! O Ludwig! Have you got your hearing back?"⁵⁴ As the narrator woos him from the dead, little by little the sounds of the Fifth Symphony rise in crescendo. Corwin was extremely specific, he called for the end of the second movement, which is timed so that the narration finishes as the music rises to a dramatic conclusion. Herrmann's conducting was all that was required, as the narrator points out. "You see, Beethoven? /You have not been changed/By so much as a hemisemidemi-quaver."⁵⁵

The third vignette calls out to Shakespeare to visit America, where "You stand with Bibles on our shelves/And are often quoted as a savior." Alternating voices remind the audience of the famous one-liners which have Shakespearean origins like "Dead as a doornail" and "Sweets to the sweet." A long excerpt from *Hamlet* fades in and out,

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

constantly interrupted with voices of engineers and announcers broadcasting the Bard's great work around the world. Music does not figure in the complex cross-fading of dialogue from present and past.

The show's final segment returns to the present to parade the abundant riches of programming for one and all aurally in wishes and testimonials of listeners naming their favorite shows and personalities, like H.V. Kaltenborn, *Let's Pretend*, serials, and bandleaders. A final soliloquy ends the program much as it began, with a reminder of the difficult times the world was facing; war is invoked with the cue: "thunder drums in, low but ominous; under narrator up to music cue."⁵⁶ America's free speech, represented by radio, and resistance to tyrants threatening the peace is underscored with a musical cue, that might have seemed bombastic, in hands less skilled than Herrmann's: "MUSIC: FLOURISH OF STRENGTH AND DEFIANCE." [Emphasis in the original] Herrmann excerpted a fragment from Charles Ives' setting of his personal patriotic favorite, "The Red, White, and Blue" to the tune of "Columbia the Gem of the Ocean." This emphatic musical statement had double meaning. Ives was Herrmann's mentor and in 1939 didn't enjoy the kind of esteem and recognition that he deserved. Herrmann could have chosen, or arranged any national song which would have communicated well to the audience. He musically spoke his own reverence to Ives by its inclusion. But the choice also communicated meaning through its unique orchestration. Ives was no conventional composer. His harmonic texture and inventive rhythmic variation on traditional tunes characterize his highly individual style—fresh, modern, unsentimental. He updated the traditional with arresting new sonorities, rather than rejecting it and used American

⁵⁶ Ibid.

musical themes at a time when American's artists—composers among them—were considered provincial. This sound is clear in Ives' music, and its inclusion as underscoring reinforces the “strength and defiance” which reflected Corwin's own strongly held interventionist political stand.

The narrator returns to the opening sentiment that radio is here to stay and the broadcast ends with another virtuosic display of musical meaning. Waxing poetic and a bit pretentious, the narrator ponders the meaning of voices in the ether: “My voice commingles now with northern lights and asteroids and Alexander's skeleton.” The musical cue calls for a return to the mystic theme. It is not clear whether Corwin wanted the theme reminiscent of Holst's *Planets*, although from the text that might seem likely. Instead, however, Herrmann returned to the opening figure of the Morse code. But instead of being a soloist, as it was at the start, the code is now merely one of the instruments in the orchestra, no more distinctly individual than any other. This choice suggests the great strides in technology and achievement of radio. Its humble origins in electric signals are present, but the whole enterprise, represented by the orchestra, has surpassed those beginnings.

4. SOUND EFFECTS

Sound effects are the most obvious part of the sonic palette and the most susceptible to cliché. But it is perhaps the fact that they were overused that sound effects became indelibly inscribed on the collective mind of the audience. No matter how annoying, repetition teaches. In their need to situate a broadcast in time, place and circumstance, the audience learned to accept this aural shorthand without distaste even when the effects were unimaginatively produced and used too often. What mattered was

that they were understood. There is a place in the sonic palette for readily recognizable symbols that provide information, just as there is for the creative use of sound to interpret texts that elevate the program to a level of deeper engagement mentally and emotionally. In fact, I suggest that it is the abecedarian use of sound effects that accustomed and sensitized audiences to interpreting backgrounds, thereby sharpening their listening skills, much the way that practicing scales and etudes trains the pianist's fingers to play more advanced pieces.

The evolution of sound effects

In the early days of radio, just broadcasting sound was a big enough accomplishment. But presenting drama exposed radio's greatest insecurity which had to be addressed. Without scenery, costumes and other visual clues, the naked voice stood alone with the script to inform the viewer of the facts needed to follow a drama. Nowhere was the absence of visual imagery more painfully obvious. Directors turned to the use of narrators, announcers and awkward expository dialogue to set the scene for "blind" listeners, a convention that never really completely disappeared, even after sound effects became a fully developed partner in production. On the most basic level, the listener needed to become mentally oriented to the source of the action. This gave rise to such radio clichés as "Look who just dropped in..." and "Meanwhile, back at the ranch."

Supplementing narrative techniques, rudimentary sound effects evolved. Early radio director John Carlile described the way stations met the challenge.

For years, other matters [than sound effects] occupied the minds of the radio station staff. There was music and speech; there was comedy and song. To broadcast these was amazing enough. ...When we needed the sound of a bell in conjunction with a ship's telegraph system for a dramatic episode, we put a few tickets for an important broadcast in our pocket and paid a visit to the manufacturer of such equipment....If it was a fire siren that we wanted, we went

to the city fire department and borrowed that. We did not expect that we would some day require all these things and many more on the shelves of a large sound effects library.⁵⁷

Initially, there was no attempt to make sound effects realistic. Like all other program elements, sound effects were developed with experimentation and without method. There were no “sound engineers” until the late ‘20s. If a sound was required, anyone in the studio pitched in with an improvised effect. Slapping a leather cushion with stick produced a simulated gunshot; someone might slam a book on a table or even drop a piano lid to create the effect of a slamming door.

Stations began to hire drummers from vaudeville and silent film orchestras that disbanded because of the advent of talking pictures. Trained in music, these men had the precise timing demanded by radio and experience providing theatrical effects. But techniques that passed in theatrical environments had to be adapted to radio. “The drummer’s trick of revolving a can of buckshot to simulate rain sounded like a hundred Niagaras when held close to the sensitive mike. A thundersheet shaken or a train whistle blown in the studio sometimes overloaded the equipment...so the soundman ran to blow the whistle or shook the sheet out on the fire escape.”⁵⁸ By the late 1920s, interest in radio drama increased as plays and then serials began to be written directly for the medium and tailored to its “blind” conditions. Network broadcasting soon consolidated program production and it became more urgent to develop a more professional approach.

⁵⁷ John S. Carlile, *Production and Direction of Radio Programs* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1946), 215.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 183.

Industrial conditions and the professionalization of sound effects

As the 1930s began, the three networks were broadcasting more than 36 hours of non-musical programming each week, more than half of it serial or other dramatic programming, a trend that would accelerate as the decade advanced. The pressure to meet these demands drove every facet of broadcasting towards an industrial model simply to keep up. Over the next few years, the number of weekly program hours that required sound effects grew so rapidly and substantially that the improvisatory approach could not be sustained. Effects had to be repeatable, not invented anew each time they were required. The position of sound specialist evolved, replacing drummers, but retaining one of their essential characteristics—they saw themselves as performers, not as sound technicians. Many of these were inventive craftsmen who contributed to the creative use of sound. But whatever their creative abilities, they needed to supply a large volume of reliable, recognizable sounds to the growing number of dramatic shows that needed them. Sound departments were set up as separate functions and they grew as fast as the demand and the ability to produce sounds permitted. The main impediment was the need to repeat effects with minimum effort; this called for reproducible sound. Until quality sound effects recordings were available, every sound had to be created live by a technician every time it was called for. This required manpower, standard methods and equipment. Sound departments worked tirelessly with outside companies to develop and produce recordings of the most common sounds that were required and those which were most difficult to simulate in a studio environment. It took until 1936 before commercial recordings were available that satisfied the networks with their sound properties.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ John Carlile described the many years of experimentation and disappointments encountered by network soundmen as they worked with outside technicians to develop credible recorded sound effects. At first,

Soundmen used these recordings in combination with their own proprietary sound repertoires. Sometimes as many as five turntables ran simultaneously to produce required effects. Sound departments expanded. At NBC, for example, there was, as late as 1933, a single sound specialist, Ray Kelly, who had a part-time assistant. Within five years the department had fourteen senior sound technicians and a sound effects library with over 3000 sounds on 800 different disks.⁶⁰ It was estimated that in 1940 over 75% of effects were derived from records.⁶¹

Conventional effects: sounds good for every occasion

As dramatic production increased, writers flocked to the networks to fill the insatiable need for scripts. Fledgling radio dramatists packed their scripts with directions for sound, as if to prove that they understood how to write for the new medium. More experienced writers and directors also experimented, incorporating sounds that not only filled in needed information and established mood, but also signature sounds that identified the show.

The use of sound effects to supply the when-where-what's going on information to the audience led to the sonic conventions that supplied essential facts but fell victim to unimaginative overuse.

companies recorded actual sounds of explosions, trains, avalanches and other exterior noises, expecting them to transmit over radio in a realistic manner. Because sound environments couldn't be controlled, these were failures. Network sound people also worked with their counterparts in film, trying to adapt their special sound effects to radio use. This was even less successful. Sounds used for film had even less realism. Because film effects were supported by sight, the audience had "two gates, the eye and the ear" with which to make sense of the scene. One of the main technical issues was that recorded sound was a second generation away from sound produced in the studio. Effects that were produced live were aurally fresher. Recorded effects lost some of that crispness when aired. It took six years of experimentation, with mounting pressure on the network soundmen, before improvements in sound fidelity were developed that successfully recorded effects.

⁶⁰ McGill, *Radio Directing*, 22.

⁶¹ West, *The Rape of Radio*, 98.

Where would we be without the ever-present door? More than any other effect, program in and program out, the sound effect door is well-nigh indispensable. It can create for the ear quickly an accurate aural ‘picture’ of the relative positions of the various speakers. It is the mother and father combined of the whole art of perspective in radio drama. Open and close a door, an actor walks toward and on the beam of the mike, and what more could any listener ask to help him to know where the character is? ⁶²

While acknowledging the important role of the door in radio, director McGill saw clearly that it was a shorthand and unimaginative aural effect that the industry was shackled to. The Smithsonian Institution had recently taken early microphones from NBC for their new exhibit on sound technology, but “no one has ever tossed an orchid to that early production man who seized upon a door and found that it was good,” he wryly observed.⁶³

While directors lamented the need for conventional sounds, they accepted it. Both Albert Crews and Robert Turnbull compared the use of these quick devices to briefly ringing down the curtain in the theater to show the passage of time during an act. They didn’t need to be realistic; they were cues to the audience so they could recognize change in scene or time. There were many such devices, so many and used so frequently that they are emblematic clichés of the radio era. Clocks of every description were used to show not only time, but era and even atmosphere. A Grandfather’s clock striking at midnight denotes not only the time of day, but place, and in the right context, a suspenseful situation. Big Ben’s resounding tones communicate London. The jangle of a mechanical alarm clock tells the listener it is morning, in the present day. When a cock crows, we are on a farm, perhaps sometime in the past. But twittering birds might also

⁶² McGill, *Radio Directing*, 23.

⁶³ Ibid.

signal morning, perhaps in the suburbs. Sounds like these might be combined to produce the transition of night passing into day. The audience recognized the symbolic meaning based on the context, which the script had to reinforce. There are dozens of aural devices like these, so many that they were categorized and filed for easy reference. While American networks categorized sounds in their effects libraries, Albert Crews tells how the BBC carried this idea to an extreme of codification that is ample evidence of a sonic palette in use. They classified sounds in six dimensions: realistic confirmatory effects, realistic evocative effects, symbolic evocative effects, conventionalized effects, impressionistic effects and music used as a sound effect. Each category had a precise definition and every time a sound entered the canon it was slotted into one of them for easy reference.⁶⁴

In many cases realism didn't matter; the point of such devices was to orient the listener quickly and move on to what did. This is not to say that realistic effects were not important, but they were not always required. Simply because an effect was conventional did not mean it was bad. Overuse and excessive dependency on clichéd effects did degrade radio drama. By the early 1940s the three most frequently used effects were the start-up engine of a car, an airplane motor, and hoof beats of horses.⁶⁵ However, judicious use of aural conventions advanced the action. Well done or not, these conventions were inscribed in listeners' minds as readily recognizable parts of the sonic palette.

⁶⁴ Crews, *Radio Production Directing*, 126-127.

⁶⁵ West, *The Rape of Radio*, 100.

Atmospheric effects

As with music, sound effects were often used to create a mood or convey an abstract idea. This was particularly common in suspense and science fiction dramas which called for a macabre or otherworldly atmosphere to arouse listener emotions. Soundmen frequently met these tasks using electronic sounds, like oscillators, reverberation chambers or stroking feathers across the strings of a piano when the damper pedal was held down. But many of the moods that were required were in ordinary settings, using everyday objects, even when they were intended to arouse anxiety in the listener. One example, the classic *Suspense* drama “Sorry, Wrong Number,” starred Agnes Moorehead in the role of a bedridden woman who overhears two men plotting a murder when her phone line gets crossed. She finds, through many anxious calls, that she is the intended victim. The drama’s suspense builds strictly between the counterpoint of the victim’s voice and the increasingly agitated use of the telephone dial.

Albert Crews expressed the advice of the industry when he cautioned would-be radio directors that “Sound can only fulfill a function which can be described in terms of pitch, volume, quality, duration and distance. Described in any other terms it is not a function of sound.”⁶⁶ Nevertheless, many scripts called for atmospheric effects that have no real sound—like snow falling, or a cat crossing a rug, and creative directors and soundmen took on those challenges to express the indescribable through sound, often with enchanting results. The script for one of radio’s most original children’s programs *Let’s Pretend* called for “moonbeams shimmering, a flying trunk and a magic carpet,”

⁶⁶ Crews, *Radio Production Directing*, 143.

recalled the show's creator, Nila Mack. This assignment called for imaginary effects that would support the words. It took three soundmen all day.

We blended music with manual apparatus. Two or three recordings were mixed into one. The Hammond organ came in for a severe workout. But at the end of the day I had a lovely path of moonbeams.... [and] a flying trunk (on the second hand side) that fell and zoomed, and when it finally landed and bumped its way to a stop, it made the audience laugh.⁶⁷

Director Earle McGill clarified why such a scene could work: "Sounds need the support of words to complete their meaning. They must be buttressed by adequate and rational context that supplies not only motivation for their use but in some cases even explanation and identification."⁶⁸ It was the seamless integration of words with creative effects that transformed this fairy tale into a work of imagination that could inspire a child to see it in her mind.

Skilled directors and soundmen learned to manipulate sound to create what they described as "impressionistic" effects—sounds that were not always real, but always evocative. This often called for layers of sound. For example, the voice of God might be portrayed by superimposing an echo onto the actor's voice. For added effect, layered in the background, might be the sounds of a choir singing on open vowel sounds, moving chordally, then processed through a filter for an otherworldly effect. *Columbia Workshop's* Irving Reis described how their sound experiments brought emotional power to radio drama.

We have to take the wrinkles out of the voice. Through the use of an electrical filter, we add or subtract a rasp, a lisp, a growl, at will. We have learned how to enlarge a sound until, like a closeup in the movies, it occupies the entire space of

⁶⁷ Nila Mack, "Writing for Children," in *Off Mike: Radio Writing by the Nation's Top Radio Writers*, ed. Jerome Lawrence (New York: Essential Books, 1944), 141.

⁶⁸ McGill, *Radio Directing*, 38.

our drama. We know how to pinch a sound down until the man's voice becomes no louder than the scratching of a pinpoint on ivory. We have learned to make sound more gruesome and distant by throwing it into an echo chamber.⁶⁹

Sonic signatures

As noted earlier, all radio programs had aural signposts, usually musical fragments that told listeners when the program started and ended. But other shows also used sound effects for their signatures, and not only at the start of a show. Suspense series seem to favor that form. *Lights Out*, on which Art Oboler made such an impression, began with a reverberating Chinese gong that was less musical effect than pure resonating sound. One of the most emblematic radio era openings was the sound of the creaking door which announced the mystery series *Inner Sanctum*. This was a simple effect created by rusty hinges that had been buried in the dirt and watered until they reached optimal sonic squeakiness. Soundman Terry Ross, who created the signature line told how a new stagehand came on the set one day and “fixed” the hinges, oiling them so they wouldn’t make a sound. Shortly before the show went on air, the mistake was found, but too late to fix it. Ross imitated the sound himself for that one show to preserve the expected sonic continuity.⁷⁰

Occasionally, a sound effect used within the program became a signature statement, especially on comedy shows. Among the most famous were deliberately unreal, extended gags which were eagerly anticipated by listeners. Jack Benny’s show, the most popular on radio, had many humorous signature effects, including his personal musical emblem, “Love in Bloom,” played on the violin. Each was a sonic representation

⁶⁹ West, *The Rape of Radio*, 101.

⁷⁰ Maltin, *The Great American Broadcast*, 94. Quoting an interview with Ross.

of his eccentric personality. Benny's Maxwell automobile, with its coughing, balking rattle, testified to its owner's cheap side, while the whisk broom gags illustrated his excessive fastidiousness. The Maxwell, in particular, practically became a character on the show, always breaking down, gasping and shuddering to a halt, playing for laughs in an extended comic bravura performance. Similarly, audiences looked forward to the opening of Fibber McGee's closet, an overloaded affair stuffed with every manner of clanging pots, crockery and thumping objects that came tumbling out getting a huge laugh from the studio audiences as, presumably, it did from the home listeners. These effects were orchestrated and performed by their creators, the soundmen who considered themselves artists, sometimes comic artists. Had they sounded real, they wouldn't have been funny.

Real backgrounds

It was not only drama that needed sound effects. As radio producers and directors learned about the effects of sound they began to realize the power of capturing the actual background noises of a live event. Albert Crews' advice on how to involve the audience in a drama was equally relevant to those producing other live programs:

It is of paramount importance that the director place his audience within the scene...the use of sounds at various distances from the microphone will orient the listener in the surroundings of the scene... because the audience places itself at the point of closest sound."⁷¹

Variety shows, concerts, baseball games, political rallies and on-the-spot reporting each had different aural elements that added to the experience of being present in the event, which was the radio's ultimate goal for the at-home listener.

⁷¹ Crews, *Radio Production Directing*, 412.

Interest in live sports began early in the radio era. Using rudimentary technology, the first boxing match was broadcast live from the ring at the Dempsey-Carpentier fight in 1921, with all the sounds of the match carrying to the listening audience. Crowd reactions often drowned out the announcer, but that only added to the excitement of the atmosphere. By the time baseball games were regularly broadcast, the announcers were in a sound booth which assured a clear transmission of the game—but none of the excitement. Very quickly they began to use an additional mike to capture the reaction of the fans. By the 1930s, remote microphones were strategically placed throughout the ballparks so that the sound was not an undistinguished roar. Back at the studio, the engineers balanced the crowd reactions and mixed them with the announcer's play-by-play to broadcast the sound of baseball that has since become instantly recognizable, and, to fans, a fair substitute for being there.

Audience response became a sonic feature in most entertainment programming, not only miked, but milked. Initially, audiences were invited to variety shows to provide performers with an audience to play to. But stations found that a laughing audience brought home listeners a greater sense of enjoyment and presence at the event. They later extended the practice to recurring shows, especially comedies. Not satisfied with natural responses to the program, producers began to provoke audiences with “laugh” cards held up at strategic moments. Studio audiences were happy to oblige; it made them feel part of the show. But the artificiality of this practice became one of radio's annoying practices.

Live backgrounds enriched the emotional atmosphere of political rallies from radio's infancy as the 1924 Democratic convention demonstrated. But the uncontrolled crowd so flustered the AT&T engineers that the broadcast was cut off. By 1928,

politicians and broadcasters were not only more accustomed to radio's power to stir, they encouraged it. Both parties took advantage of the immediacy of radio with a more informal rhetorical style suited to the medium, abandoning the oratory of the pre-radio era. Al Smith, whose presidential hopes were the subject of the '24 controversy, was ready for a re-match. His voice "was that of a fighter, explosive, harsh, yet not enough to be exceedingly disagreeable. His raspy quality was modified by a great sense of humor."⁷² He attacked the microphone, which he called the "pie plate" with energy meant to inspire roars of support from the assembled delegates. The broadcasters were ready with microphones interspersed throughout the hall, primed to pick up the extended cheering and contention that greeted the candidates. With each election radio became more and more important, and events were managed as much or more with the listening audience in mind as for those in the hall. In the 1930s and thereafter, politicians became ever more acutely aware of the potential for mass influence through broadcasts of political rallies, with the Nazis the most potent and infamous example. Their live extravaganzas incorporated not only Hitler's raging, echoing voice, but martial music, choirs of Hitler Youth, and the overwhelming sonic approval of the assembled multitudes.

Sonic intrusiveness

During radio's heyday sound effects had a mixed critical reception. They were seen as necessary to unburden the script from providing information that would be obvious, if only the audience could see the performance. But the effects were much criticized for being obvious in themselves, over-used and often distracting. Writers who

⁷² West, *The Rape of Radio*, 415.

were uncomfortable with dealing with radio's sonic singularity overcompensated by adding too many scenes that required orientation for the listener and too many sound effects within each individual scene. It took not only talent and imagination to write for radio but the kind of mind that could gesture in sound. Radio drama was a short form of expression. Many serials were only fifteen minutes in length—including the commercials. In no case was a radio drama more than an hour in length. This pared down format benefitted not from *more* sonic background but from fewer effects that were *meaningful*. Only rarely were individual effects longer than a few seconds. Even sustained effects, such as one indicating a continuing train trip, faded far into the background once the initial point was made at the start of a scene. The best informational effects were short, specific and perfectly timed to work with the dialogue. Crisply executed, a sound effect could transition from one scene to another with a single sound, sometimes without even a single line—a boat whistle to establish a dock, a siren to signal a prison escape.

Effects within the course of a scene often registered a piece of action. Together, speech and effect should be subtly reinforcing. Effects become wearisome when they are not subtle. For example, when a character enters a saloon and sits at the bar, it is not necessary to hear the door open, footsteps crossing the wooden floor, and the character adjusting the barstool—in addition to the atmospheric murmur of patrons and clinking glasses. Nevertheless, many radio dramas suffered from such overuse of sound effects. Even the best writers indicated far too many effects, especially those who did not write exclusively for radio. In these cases it was the director's role to pare down the effects. In addition to the microphone's inability to discriminate among a number of simultaneous

sounds, the drama could not build its internal pace and tension with so many effects.

Arch Oboler summed up the problem in describing a hypothetical scene in a restaurant:

In what should be tense dramatic pauses between the conversational passages...we are never permitted to fill the transitions with our own mental imagery of what is going on in the characters' minds; instead, the intervals are filled with the everlasting tinkle of silverware and the rattle of crockery.⁷³

Oboler's analysis illustrates the imbalance between effects and dialogue that gets in the way of the drama. Instead of enhancing the realism of a dramatic situation, effects distract the audience and the play loses momentum and listener interest.

Sound effects to augment the total radio experience

Pedestrian overuse of sound effects did not stifle innovation and conventional sonic shorthand did not replace creativity. Many programs, commercial and sustaining, serial and single drama contained vivid and original uses of sound effects as well as the many other elements of the sonic palette. But sustaining programs took greater risks since there was less at stake, and the landmark productions which advanced radio as an art form were primarily sustaining. Even in the midst of the radio era, these shows were recognized for their sonic genius. Robert Turnbull cites 1936 as the "Golden Year" for sound effects, "for on July 18, 1936 the *Columbia Workshop* started...[as] an experimental radio theater [whose] objective was to develop acting, writing, musical and production talent, and to experiment with new ideas and techniques in radio drama."⁷⁴ It is perhaps a coincidence that this is the same year in which high quality sound effects recordings were first available, but it seems certain that by mid-decade, radio had sufficiently come of age for the networks to encourage a more creative use of the

⁷³ Oboler, *Fourteen Radio Plays*, xxii.

⁷⁴ Turnbull, *Radio and Television Sound Effects*, 191.

medium. Executives at CBS saw the weekly *Workshop* and other sustaining series as a proving ground, a safe place to incubate programs which might have commercial potential. By mid-decade there were many talented writers and directors who had grown up in radio who wanted a showcase on which to experiment. *Columbia Workshop* produced dozens of sonically innovative programs and was responsible for the directing debuts of Norman Corwin and Orson Welles, and brought major authors, like Ernest Hemingway and Archibald MacLeish, to write for radio. It is beyond the scope of this work to cover this series in detail. I will illustrate my point with just two of the series' innovative use of sound effects. The first of these, Poe's *Telltale Heart*, was an ideal story for radio. Irving Reis held listeners spellbound with his dramatization, complete with actual heartbeat, magnified 10,000 times. At first the murdered man's heartbeat is subtle, but it grows, along with the dramatic tension until its reverberations overpower his killer and the listening audience. Another *Workshop* production was Stephen Vincent Benét's own adaptation of his O. Henry Award winning story *The Devil and Daniel Webster*. Director Earle McGill wove sound effects into Bernard Hermann's dramatic score to contrast the supernatural events with the human. New Hampshire farmer Jabez Stone regrets that he has sold his soul to the Devil, who is on his way to collect it. Stone begs his neighbor, the great Daniel Webster, to get him out of the contract. Webster and Stone race on horseback to meet the Devil in a fifty second ride—a really long time in a radio drama. The wild ride is scored with operatic richness and punctuated with a few dramatic flourishes—a cracking whip, and underscored with the sound of hoofbeats. Later, the Devil agrees to Webster's challenge to a trial, but with the condition that he select the jury. It is a trick. The jurymen, dead souls of the worst villains in New England

history, make their dread entrance. We hear a banging door and the whistle of the wind, but instead of ordinary footsteps, ghostly music heralds their appearance, an eerie effect Herrmann orchestrated with vibraphone and bass violin.

All the innovation in sound effects and use of the sonic palette did not come from CBS, although they made a clear commitment to developing the potential of the medium. NBC, which had many of the most successful programs on the air, most of which were musical variety and comedy hits, simply didn't need to take as many risks. Nevertheless, they did provide important writers, like Arch Oboler, with showcase opportunities. A milestone in radio history for its inventive use of sound is Oboler's adaptation of Dalton Trumbo's novel *Johnny's Got His Gun*, the anti-war book whose title is a reference to the opening line of the George M. Cohan song that inspired America in World War I. (Johnny, get your gun, get your gun, get your gun.) The show, aired in 1940, distills Trumbo's work to a fantasy in the mind of protagonist Joe Bonham (played by James Cagney) who lost his limbs, sight and ability to speak in a bomb blast. Although the book's setting is a hospital in World War I, Oboler projects it to the present day giving it immediacy and relevance in pre-war America. Johnny has been trapped in his own body for twenty-two years with only his thoughts to sustain him. He drifts between past and present, reality and delusion. He imagines his sweetheart in his arms, the horror of the battlefield, his mother. In between daydreams and nightmares he hears people coming and going from his room—nurses, technicians. In their footsteps he imagines the people he loves coming to see him. But it isn't true. Each of these short vignettes is punctuated with the sounds that orient the listener to the moment—the present, the remembered and the imagined: the soft hum of medical machines that sustain him, the whizzing of a

mortar going by and then exploding, a fragment of Cohan's hit song, carnival sounds from a happy time in the past. Finally, desperate to communicate, Joe uses his head to tap out in Morse Code. S-O-S. As the drama rises to its climax, his head continues to tap, telling his keepers what he wants. Joe's interior voice tells of his wish to be taken away in a glass box and put on display throughout the country to warn against war. To factories and schoolhouses. To parks and government assemblies, and finally, to churches. Each setting is identified with conventional signals like crowd sounds, a gavel pounding, and bells, but sensitively orchestrated and timed as counterpoint to Joe's voice. The script is so tightly written, so creatively produced that it gives no feeling of conventionality, only tension and, ultimately, pathos. Joe imagines himself—the hero of his own fantasy—passionately, eloquently demanding the end of war, church bells ringing in support.

JOE:

Take me into your churches, your great towering cathedrals, which have to be rebuilt every fifty years because they are destroyed by war. Carry me in my glass box down the aisles where kings and priests and brides and children at their confirmations have gone so many times before... Set me high on your altars and call on God to look down upon his murderous little children, his dearly beloved little children. Then bring in the fierce ones, the spawners of hate, the inventors of slogans! Bring them in and make them look at me! And then DARE them -- DARE THEM! -- to break the peace!

MUSIC: (A BUGLE ... "TAPS" ... IN ITS ENTIRETY ... THEN OUT)⁷⁵

But it is not to be. Taps signals his fate and the end of his dream.

In this show, Oboler broke his own rules. Sound effects are woven through every part of the play, and many are conventional ones. One can hardly imagine an effect more obvious than using taps to signal the end of Johnny's dream, as well as the end of the show. Yet the overall effect of the show is powerful and heart-wrenching, proving that a

⁷⁵ Arch Oboler, "Johnny's Got His Gun," Radio drama, 1940, <http://www.genericradio.com/show.php?id=MTEzMDY4NzE1MQ2>.

master knows how to break the rules. Bad practices are what gave sound effects a bad name. The fact that they were so easy to incorporate, so readily communicative, encouraged lazy thinking and overuse. But when used imaginatively and integrally in programs, as Oboler and other great writers and directors did, the audience would be swept up in the emotion of the drama and deeply moved.

5. PROGRAM FORM AND THE SONIC PALETTE

In the ongoing experimentation to develop programming suited to the medium, radio innovated unique program forms which flourished in its aural environment. Over the course of radio's primacy as a mass medium several of these were developed which were specially advantaged by sound. Although form may seem the least intuitively obvious part of a system of sound, formal structure often influenced how a work was written and realized. I believe that the use of these forms also influenced their reception, much the way the choice of structure for prose or poetry exerts its influence on the reader. For that reason I include form as a part of the sonic palette.

Three forms found expression in radio that did not translate as successfully to other media or performance settings: the verse play, the radio cantata and dramatized news. In each of these cases the formal structure influences the choice of topic which is suited to it, the voices, sounds and directorial style. The verse play lent itself to lofty topics. The formality of the language permitted abstraction, symbolic sound and more mannered performances that would seem awkward in a more straightforward radio play. Dramatized news straddled reality and fantasy, tricking the listener with its seeming authenticity. It used the entire sonic palette to entertain as it informed. The radio cantata evolved from a traditional musical form. Its length, use of poetic texts, both spoken and

sung, chorus and soloists provide the sonic variety and brevity ideal for radio. Its formal structure, however, was generally reserved for serious topics and elevated messages.

In addition to their role in the overall sonic palette, each of these program forms was brought into service on topics of national interest before and during World War II. In the chapters of Part II, form has a major role in creative realization of the works analyzed, particularly the radio cantata and dramatized news. I will reserve a detailed discussion of formal structure for those works.

PART II

ORCHESTRATING THE MESSAGE

Prologue

In 1936, one of the most successful teams on radio began its improbable eleven year run on NBC's *The Chase and Sanborn Hour*. Ventriloquist Edgar Bergen bantered with dummy Charlie McCarthy and guest stars in comic skits and snappy exchanges. Their performance, which was based on a visual conceit, enchanted audiences who had never seen them live or on screen. Although this seeming contradiction appears to defy logic, it is a classic illustration of radio era programming and reception. Audiences cheerfully participated in the show themselves, using their listening skills and imagination to construe in their mind's eye what the visual reality would have dispelled as illusion. The industry counted on this capacity in its listeners and its own ability to create the sonic conditions to enchant them.

During the war era, radio and the Roosevelt administration participated in this kind of aural ventriloquism to influence the attitudes of the American public. Many have explored the cooperative relationship between the government and the media both before and during the war which resulted, ultimately, in a unified voice towards the conflict and the war effort.¹ Radio's involvement has been well documented. And, although scholars have asserted that the government played the role of ventriloquist, there is evidence that, as with Bergen and McCarthy, it is not always certain whether the dummy is being

¹ Among the studies on this topic are: Michael S. Sweeney, *Secrets of Victory: The Office of Censorship and the American Press and Radio in World War II* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), Gerd Horten, *Radio Goes to War: The Cultural Politics of Propaganda During World War II* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), and Allan M. Winkler, *The Politics of Propaganda: the Office of War Information, 1942-1945* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978).

controlled or controlling the performance. In Part II of this work, I will demonstrate how radio drew on its sonic repertoire to help steer the public towards attitudes favorable to war goals. But, in studying the relationship between the works of this era and government policy, I realized that Roosevelt was not always explicit. In the period leading up to Pearl Harbor, the Administration was ambivalent about entering the conflict, although not about intervention in the form of aid to Britain. Indeed, even today historians continue to look for determinative evidence which would point to whether Roosevelt really favored entering the war unless under attack, as America eventually was.² So, although radio scholars and historians place FDR in the role of the ventriloquist, with radio performing his policies, the alternate case bears some scrutiny. Radio liberals, many of them close to Roosevelt himself, did not equivocate as the President often did. They pressed ideas that may have reflected his views but not always his explicit policies. Indeed, long before the war started in Europe, radio voiced its antipathy for Fascism. For example, Archibald MacLeish's *The Fall of the City* (1937) and *Air Raid*, (1938) used the indirection of drama to skirt FCC regulations that prohibited radio from taking partisan stands, while it appealed indirectly to the audience using the emotional power of creative sound. In these and other works, radio acted the role of ventriloquist, trying to influence the nation well in advance of official policy.

My task is to demonstrate the use of creative sound to indirectly influence listeners towards those intentions. Each of the three chapters of this section profiles programming supportive of social consensus. In each case, radio is the voice out front, sometimes reinforcing Administration policy, sometimes leading it. Although the

² Richard W. Steele, "Preparing the Public for War: Efforts to Establish a National Propaganda Agency, 1940-41," *The American Historical Review* 75, no. 6 (October, 1970):1647.

Administration's *control* is not in evidence, the symbiotic relationship is. Grounded in dependency on government for its license, as well as in shared liberal values, radio produced programming in accord with its aims. And, when the Administration couldn't or wouldn't speak, radio persuasively did that for it too.

The American Scene at the Close of the 1930s

America's tenuous economic and social conditions complicated Roosevelt's approach to increased international tensions and contributed to his unfocused public position. FDR had monitored the rise of Hitler from his first days in office, but was not convinced of the threat to Europe and America until 1938 as FDR scholar Steven Casey explains: "Initially, Roosevelt's perception of German strength was deeply ambivalent. While he recognized that the Nazis were clearly acquiring the power to do some damage beyond their borders, he detected numerous signs below the surface that Hitler's rearmament program was engendering political and economic difficulties."³ The president, fully occupied with domestic issues and acutely aware of public resentment of America's involvement in the last war, moved slowly.

By the late 1930s the American social landscape had been battered for a decade by the effects of the Depression. Grim conditions persisted for much of the country despite years of New Deal policies which coaxed the economy back to 1929 levels by 1936, fueled almost entirely on the back of government spending. Although unemployment gradually fell to 14.3% from its 1933 high of nearly 25%, the 1938 recession drove it up again to 19% from which it would not retreat substantially until the

³ Steven Casey, *Cautious Crusade: Franklin D. Roosevelt, American Public Opinion and the War against Nazi Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 8. Rearmament and the resurgence of the military manufacturing which supported it erased unemployment in Germany and with it Roosevelt's optimism that Hitler's hold would collapse from within.

war effectively erased it.⁴ This continued economic instability spurred social activism born of frustration in some, and reinforced cautious conservatism in much larger segments of the population.

Layered upon the collapse in business and manufacturing which affected workers in cities and towns were the devastating effects of extended drought in the Great Plains throughout the 1930s which created the Dust Bowls. Looking for work, many of these people accelerated ancient patterns and migrated to America's cities, where, by 1940, nearly half the population lived and competed for scarce jobs. Over the decade of the 1930s all of the population growth in the nation occurred in metropolitan areas, adding eight million to already densely crowded conditions.⁵ This latest internal migration followed the nearly two million blacks who left southern farms for work in cities during the Great Migration that began in 1900. Conspicuously absent from this migratory flow during the Great Depression were new foreign immigrants to follow those who had flooded America's cities during the late 19th and early decades of the 20th century. These first and second generation immigrants accounted for 36% of America's population in 1930—nearly 40 million people, the vast majority of whom continued to work as laborers and craftsmen.⁶ Foreign immigrants, a newly urban black population and rural migrants now competed in a significantly diminished workplace. The thousands of strikes and labor actions that eventually resulted in the National Labor Relations Act in 1935 did not

⁴ Richard K. Vedder and Lowell P. Gallaway, *Out of Work: Unemployment and Government in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1993).

⁵ U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Sixteenth Census of the United States: 1940* (Washington: D.C., U.S. Bureau of the Census), 342.

⁶ Mary Ann Thatcher, *Immigrants and the 1930s; Ethnicity and Alienage in the Depression and On-Coming War* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1990), 314.

benefit Americans of all races and ethnicities equally. Where, in 1930, the foreign born had worked in manufacturing, steel, mining and shipping in numbers far exceeding their proportion of the population, by the end of the decade their participation in these occupations had dropped dramatically.⁷ Black workers had even less success in obtaining good factory jobs because of discriminatory union policies.⁸ The first to be laid off, immigrants and blacks were replaced by native born whites in the rare situations in which new jobs were created. A disrupted social landscape was a threat to internal stability, but it was untenable in the context of involving the country in another war in which the cooperation of all was essential both to fight the war and to support its war industries.

Finally, the public did not support another war and was extremely suspicious of any government advocacy of foreign policy that might lead to it. The Creel Committee, which had directed Wilson's support of World War I, had soured the nation on propaganda. In 1927, political scientist Harold Lasswell warned of its dangers while acknowledging that all countries engage in it in peace and war:

...if any administration has in its power a Bureau of Public Information [it is] really an advertising bureau, a propaganda bureau, a bureau of publicity to exploit the various agencies and departments of the Government, it is a very dangerous thing in a Republic; because if used in a partisan spirit of for partisan advantage of the administration it has a tremendous power.⁹

⁷ Thatcher, *Immigrants and the 1930s*. 66. Quoting the 1940 Census. In 1930 foreign born whites represented 11 percent of the population, but 28% of all coal miners, 26% of all steel and iron workers, 32% of all deckhands and sailors, and 49% of all cabinetry millworkers. By 1940, their share of these occupations dropped to 28%, 16%, 20% and 21% respectively.

⁸ Ford was a nearly unique exception to this. Henry Ford, in maintaining a non-union shop, gave opportunities to black workers that were not otherwise available. Of his 80,000 workers in River Rouge, 11,000 were black. Frank Winn, "Labor Tackles the Race Question," *The Antioch Review*. 3, no. 3 (Autumn, 1943): 349.

⁹ Harold D. Lasswell, *Propaganda Technique in the World War* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1927), 14.

Lasswell asserted that World War I “drew forth an unparalleled mass of rationalizations... [in which] truth seekers find different truths” which were “suitable for circulation by the protagonists of either set.”¹⁰ In other words, the rationale for World War I found the same generic justification in the propaganda of the British, the Americans and the Germans. The American public felt manipulated and turned cynical, as social scientist Charles Siepmann described in his analysis of the challenge facing radio as it entered its first war.

A twenty years’ post mortem on the conduct of the last war, conducted by scholars and aided by publicists and writers, had created a profound sense of disillusionment among the younger generation about the real grounds and purpose of our participation in it.¹¹

Siepmann lamented the loss of the word *propaganda*, “perfectly respectable...(and indeed dignified in its origins by Mother Church)[but] has become so muddled and distorted...that it can no longer be mentioned without arousing profound suspicion and hostile resentment...[and is]now part of an obscene vocabulary [associated with] Dr. Goebbels.”¹²

The reasons for isolationism were not limited to anger over the first war, but opponents of intervention exploited public cynicism as well as the citizenry’s natural desire to avoid being drawn, once again, into a conflict that seemed to belong, at that time, to the Old World. Roosevelt was well aware that he would have to win over public opinion through indirection; he avoided committing himself publicly, and, privately, he

¹⁰ Ibid., 53.

¹¹ Charles Siepmann, "American Radio in Wartime, an Interim Survey of the OWI's Radio Bureau," in *Radio Research, 1942-1943*, ed. Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Frank Stanton (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1944), 112-113.

¹² Ibid.

expressed uncertainty over America's direct involvement. For support and encouragement in that campaign, he turned to the media.

FDR and the Media

By the mid-1930s FDR's relationship with the press had become fractious and frustrating. Despite his assiduous courting and skillful image projection, the majority of newspapers had opposed his candidacy in 1932 and steadfastly editorialized against the New Deal. By 1936 only a third of America's daily newspapers could be counted on for favorable coverage of administration programs and policies. When William Randolph Hearst turned against him and the Patterson-McCormick chain split its allegiance, his press support sank to a nearly unprecedented 25%.¹³ Nevertheless, FDR's popular support carried him to landslide victories in '36 and again in 1940, in part because of his masterful use and the overwhelming reach of radio, but also because his approach to all communications media was comprehensive and continuous.

In his first term Roosevelt built a publicity machine to sell his policies through informational propaganda and indirection. Cannily mindful of public resistance to direct propaganda, an image further reinforced by its use in the Nazi regime, Roosevelt turned to more subtle, but no less influential means. New Deal plans and programs were packaged in explanatory terms, patiently and respectfully telling American citizens how the country would recover from its economic crisis, building popular support with which to pressure a not always cooperative Congress. Under the guidance of Steve Early, the first-ever Presidential Press Secretary and a veteran of the Paramount newsreel organization, the administration blanketed the print media with hundreds of releases

¹³ Betty Houchin Winfield, *FDR and the News Media* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 127

every week.¹⁴ Early, himself, supplemented these releases with a stream of by-line articles in widely read middle brow magazines like the *Saturday Evening Post* which explained “how the president worked, the mistaken fears about propaganda, and his ‘Below the Belt’ file of ‘biased’ stories.”¹⁵ In addition, Mrs. Roosevelt’s column, “My Day,” begun in 1935 and scrupulously non-political, eventually ran in 135 newspapers bathing the president in the reflected good will garnered by the First Lady.

The Administration quickly extended its reach well beyond traditional print media sources. As part of New Deal expansion in bureaucracy, “information” and education departments were expanded in Federal agencies. A 1937 Brookings Institution study identified thirteen agencies with publicity departments employing 312 press relations staffers and 5,594 workers in the Government Printing Office.¹⁶ As international hostilities escalated the Administration stepped up its use of its communications capabilities to build support for intervention. Skirting the resistant print media, both the White House and the agencies turned to film and radio to spread Roosevelt informational propaganda using a combination of personal and Damoclesian persuasion. The film industry had distained Roosevelt’s call for New Deal propaganda, which resulted in Administration production of its own documentaries, including the very well received *The Plow that Broke the Plains* and *The River*. But by the late 30’s, as government policy shifted its focus to opposing the Nazi threat, industry resistance dissolved. Although this change of attitude may be attributed, in part, to the liberal sympathies of the industry’s

¹⁴ For example, Winfield reports on a 1939 study of government publicity that found, in a single seven week period of 1937, that the *New York Times* printed 1281 items that appeared to be government press releases or heavily influenced by administration publicity departments.

¹⁵ Winfield, *FDR and the News Media*, 85.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 92.

overwhelmingly Jewish management, the 1938 Justice Department charge of anti-trust violations against eight industry giants for their dominance of film production and distribution loomed over them and signaled a turnabout to complete cooperation with Administration policies.¹⁷ Favorable consent decrees among the parties in 1940 guaranteed industry support for war efforts and staved off litigation until after the war.

Although radio, too, came under a watchful regulatory eye, its relationship with the government was both more cooperative and more complicated. Unlike the film industry, radio had always been regulated and required to perform public service to retain its license to broadcast. In consequence, the networks cultivated relationships at the highest levels of government from their earliest days, airing hundreds of hours each year of public service broadcasting, including political speeches and government-produced informational programming. As the European crisis developed, radio devoted extensive coverage and commentary to the unfolding events, inventing, as it went along, an entirely new genre. In sheer quantity and tone this coverage supported FDR's increasingly active policy of intervention.

But the industry's relationship with the government was complicated by a conflict between official FCC policy and FDR's much more cordial one. The FCC's long pending anti-trust litigation and new, proposed regulatory requirements increased pressure on the industry throughout 1938, climaxing just before the fall of Poland in autumn of 1939. Tremendous, favorable-to-the-Administration coverage of the beginning of the European war helped hold off the FCC.

¹⁷ See Clayton R. Koppes and Gregory Black, *Hollywood Goes to War: How Politics, Profits and Propaganda Shaped World War II Movies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990) for a comprehensive discussion of government and the film industry during this period.

Roosevelt was not in accord with the FCC's punitive stance towards the broadcasting industry. He himself had been well served by radio and had many personal friendships within the networks and among writers and artists whose work appeared on air. He fostered a cooperative spirit that he felt was much more effective.¹⁸ Moreover, the credibility which radio enjoyed with the public, coupled with its support of the Administration's positions, synchronized with the White House's own indirect style of publicizing its policies. A 1939 survey in *Fortune* confirmed audience trust in radio. When asked "If you heard conflicting versions of the same story which would you be most likely to believe," 40.4% cited radio. Only 26.8% felt that newspapers were more credible and a paltry 13% considered an "authority" most believable.¹⁹ The University of Chicago's Sherman Dryer credited trust in radio on its "empathetic response from the listener...intimacy and rapport...which radio established between its programs and the listener."²⁰ Dryer, who was also the moderator of the *University of Chicago Round Table*, likened this relationship to the one radio listeners had with FDR himself in his Fireside Chats.

Historian Richard Steele asserts that "circumstances had early led the broadcast industry to adopt a pose of disinterested public service on political matters, and that mask of proclaimed objectivity served both as a cover for a one-sided presentation of national

¹⁸ Among FDR's friends and acquaintances in the industry in 1939 were playwright Robert Sherwood, poet Archibald MacLeish and William Paley.

¹⁹ Sherman H. Dryer, *Radio in Wartime* (New York: Greenberg Publisher, 1942), 58, Quoting *Fortune's* survey. An additional 19.8% were unsure of any source.

²⁰ Ibid.

issues and as a defense against those who detected the underlying reality.”²¹ Hardening its position towards the industry might damage the advantage afforded by this long standing cooperation. Merely by adjusting the tone of voice or language in a program, radio commentators could, almost imperceptibly, shift from favorable to neutral or negative. Easier still would be to provide less coverage to administration policies and programs. The White House worked vigorously to maintain that advantage.

The Networks salute

In response to the both subtle and overt pressure, the networks took up the mantle of Administration policy. Critical, although popular, commentators, like NBC’s Hugh Johnson and CBS’ Boake Carter were squeezed out in 1937. Virulently anti-Semitic, racist and isolationist, Roosevelt-hating Father James Coughlin, who had an audience of 40,000,000 listeners, was more difficult to remove. His fiery attacks brought criticism to CBS, but the affiliates resisted efforts to cancel his program. Deputed by FDR, Joseph Kennedy could not influence him, nor could the Vatican, to which Kennedy appealed for help. Finally, right after the fall of Poland in 1939, the NAB, under pressure from the FCC, passed a new code which prohibited selling air time for offensive or controversial issues that were supported by individual broadcasters. This action silenced Coughlin, but public opinion was already turning against him, as his positions began to be interpreted as open support for Fascist dictatorships. Supporting the move to rein in commentators, CBS Vice President and head of New Programming, Paul White, declared that “to permit

²¹ Richard W. Steele, "The Great Debate: Roosevelt, the Media and the Coming War," *Journal of American History* 71, no. 1 (June 1984): 82.

any one individual a regular platform from which h could guide of attempt to guide the nation's thinking might constitute a fearful peril.”²²

And although the Equal Time provision of the Communications Act of 1934 afforded opponents of the Administration a rebuttal, the networks limited these views to responses to policy speeches. Informational, morale building, news or educational programs didn't fall under that requirement, and into this immensity of ambiguous ether White House policy, Administration support and intervention sentiment poured. In addition to the hundreds of press releases, dozens of programs were produced by government agencies and aired as public service programming. Steele describes the support as an “almost total blackout of noninterventionist perspective,” despite substantial Congressional and public opposition to involvement.²³ Even as late as November of 1941, 44% of those surveyed were against sending an army to defeat Hitler.²⁴ Other surveys reflected the same resistance, even though the respondents overwhelmingly believed that the United States would be successful.

Tacit support for Administration policy, and the impossibility of policing every program that went on the air—especially sustaining programs-- emboldened Roosevelt supporters, committed liberals and interventionists working within the networks to develop and air shows that would further their political sentiments. Dramas and other forms of entertainment were not considered subject to the Equal Time provision, yet the industry, social scientists and scholars all understood how effective these programs were

²² Dryer, *Radio in Wartime*, 160. Quoting Paul White.

²³ Steele, “The Great Debate,” 79.

²⁴ Ibid. Steele cites a survey conducted by Hadley Cantril for FDR. Cantril had become the President's personal advisor and public opinion arbiter, despite FDR's long time skepticism of social science opinion polls.

in shaping listeners' views even though they only declared it openly once the war started. Dryer emphatically averred that "The audience of entertainment and dramatic programs is ready-made, receptive to interpretation and directives. We know our own people better than we can ever know the enemy." He urged the creative use of radio for war propaganda, even though he acknowledged that "frequently, the line between information and drama is a thin one."²⁵ Harold Lasswell, too, acknowledged that people "are in the habit of asking if a news report is true, but they do not ask if a dramatic skit is true...[it is] the most effective means of communication by radio."²⁶ And Charles Siepmann believed that "war should, as far as possible, be superimposed on the air as on people's work-a-day lives, on the peacetime pattern of programs."²⁷ This started long before the bombs fell in Hawaii. In mid-1941, a review of broadcasts for their interventionist or isolationist content revealed more than five times the coverage of interventionist views as isolationist: 42 hours: 8 hours.²⁸ Isolationist speeches balanced interventionist ones, but the advantage was tipped in favor of the Administration with programs which were considered non-controversial, including dramas, morale-building shows and patriotic programs with such titles as "Defense for America," "British War Relief," and "America

²⁵ Dryer, *Radio in Wartime*, 58, 82.

²⁶ Harold Lasswell essay in Dryer, *Radio in Wartime*, 98. Dryer's book consists of chapters arguing in favor of radio propaganda. Each chapter is followed by an essay from an authority responding to Dryer's views, some agreeing, and some refuting. Lasswell supported Dryer's chapter "The Ammo" which called for the dramatization of true events, the effectiveness and ethics of which depends on "the skill, the integrity and purpose of the technician and the strategist." 81.

²⁷ Siepmann, "American Radio in Wartime," 118.

²⁸ Steele, "The Great Debate," 86. Citing a review conducted by Steve Early's office. Isolationist speeches balanced interventionist ones, but the balance was tipped in favor of the Administration with programs which were considered non-controversial, including dramas, morale-building shows and patriotic programs with such titles as "Defense for America," "British War Relief," and "America Preferred." The survey did not include the many, many frequent news reports from London or the continent, or broadcasts of interventionist news analysts like Elmer Davis.

Preferred.”²⁹ The survey did not even include the many, many frequent news reports from London or the continent, or broadcasts of interventionist news analysts like Elmer Davis.

The Sounds of War

This is a war of sounds—the human voice set on a stage of music, sound effects and other devices [and] the human voice plus radio’s ability to exploit the listener’s imagination.
Sherman Dryer

The chapters that follow illustrate only a few examples of how the creative resources of the sonic palette were brought to bear on the war effort beginning in the late 1930s. The broadcasts were chosen for their demonstrated importance to national issues, each airing at a time when stakes were high and the public was on the alert, ready to be influenced. I contend that in each case the artists who produced them were well aware of the power of the medium and of sure of their ability to mold opinion through sonic performance. Those involved in the production of each of the works which I analyze were influential in their time, liberal and exceedingly attuned to how to produce a reaction through aural effects.

Chapter 3 explores the collaborative effort that produced *Ballad for Americans*, which became a national phenomenon. Although Norman Corwin was only the producer of the program, he is recognized as radio’s pre-eminent genius of the sonic palette, who, in 1939, *Time* magazine had already described as having “a front-row seat among radio poets,” and would later be called “an acknowledged master of the art.”³⁰ His creative

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ "Corkscrew in the Sky," unsigned review of *They Fly through the Air with the Greatest of Ease*, by Norman Corwin, CBS Radio, *Time*, February 27, 1939; "Radio Prizes for Corwin," *Time*, March 4, 1946, Quoting *Harper's* magazine critic, Bernard DeVoto.

instincts brought it to the air but Paul Robeson's sonic presence and ambiguous image stirred the emotions of the audience and encouraged a widely shared expression of patriotism at a time when national cohesion was in doubt. This broadcast stated broadly and unabashedly the values which Roosevelt espoused but addressed only tentatively in late 1939, when the new war in Europe seemed to call for a positive expression of reassurance. The chapter shows how musical form, scoring and performance evoked an identification with the message of the *Ballad* which crossed class, ethnic and political barriers.

By the fall of 1940, when Edward R. Murrow aired the London broadcasts which I discuss in Chapter 4, England's need for support from the United States was becoming acute. The London Blitz raged during September, while, at home Roosevelt's campaign for a third term occupied his attention. In speeches, Roosevelt presented a mixed message; he scorned isolationists who were testifying in Congress while promising that he would not enter into a war. "I have said it ... again and again and again. Your boys are not going to be sent to fight in any foreign war."³¹ Yet in September he had taken steps to give destroyers to the British in exchange for naval bases in the Caribbean and would soon be in unpublicized talks with the British which would lead to the Lend-Lease Act.³² Roosevelt's public statements belied his true position, but as a politician up for election he took an equivocal stand. Murrow was under no such obligation and his daily broadcasts influenced millions to sympathize with the British. This chapter explores how

³¹ Franklin Delano Roosevelt (Speech, Boston, October 30, 1940), <http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/fdr-churchill/>.

³² William Henry Chamberlain, "How Franklin Roosevelt Lied America into War," in *Perpetual War for Perpetual Peace: A Critical Examination of the Foreign Policy of Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Its Aftermath* (Caldwell, ID: Caxton, 1953), 490.

his use of rhetoric and instinct for drama, coupled with an innate understanding radio's intimate address bridged a gap that Roosevelt did not attempt at this crucial time.

In *Ballad for Americans* and Murrow's broadcasts, radio advocated policies that FDR either openly or covertly espoused. In both cases it advanced a liberal agenda, appealing to the emotions of the audience, drawing on the credibility of the medium and its supposed impartiality. This benefited the President, influencing public opinion and rousing public feeling as the country moved towards war because it advanced his causes without risk to him personally. But in 1943, when racial unrest on the Home Front threatened war production and internal stability, radio took on this inflammatory issue when Roosevelt retreated from it entirely. The war had erased many of the country's problems for large majorities of the population. War production and the armed services had eliminated unemployment and tensions calmed between most ethnic groups. But not for African Americans. The war exaggerated their unequal treatment, even as they were urged to support it. Roosevelt, who felt vulnerable to growing Republican power and to the Southern Democrats that supported Jim Crow, would not address the issue even when riots raged all over the country. In his stead, CBS aired *An Open Letter on Race Hatred*, a dramatized documentary of the Detroit riots written and directed by William Robson. Nothing so bold had ever been broadcast on such a controversial issue. Robson's command of the tools of radio drama—voice, music, sound effects and crowd scenes enabled him to craft a gripping and entertaining work which never flinched from its message that nothing less than America's future was at stake if bigotry could not be overcome. The program effectively freed radio from its ties to the White House,

allowing it to broach topics that were previously politically untouchable. As Robson told *Time* magazine, “The ether has been broken.”³³

³³ "Outspoken Radio," unsigned review of *An Open Letter to the American People*, by William Robson, CBS Radio, *Time*, August 9, 1943.

Chapter 4

Out of Many, One: *Ballad for Americans* and Fostering Ideals of a Unified Citizenry

“And now you know who *I am*,” sings the narrator. “Who are you?” asks the chorus. “*America! America!*”¹ As the last sounds of Paul Robeson’s magisterial voice faded away, concluding the November, 1939 premiere of *Ballad for Americans*, the studio audience erupted in an ovation said to have lasted twenty minutes. Home audience response was no less emotional and prompted a reaction second in radio annals only to Orson Welles’ adaptation of *The War of the Worlds* which aired almost exactly a year before. The response was so strong that CBS scheduled a second performance on New Year’s Day 1940. Within weeks Robeson recorded it for CBS, selling over 20,000 copies in its first six months, and was booked for concert performances of the work across the country throughout 1940 and 1941, many in front of audiences of as many as 30,000.²

The first performance of the radio cantata *Ballad for Americans* provoked a spontaneous outburst of patriotic identification that gave listeners a momentary emotional release which offset the rising tension associated with deteriorating world events. Programmed as the centerpiece of the fourth show of the CBS sustaining series *Pursuit of Happiness*, the work premiered on national radio just eight weeks after the invasion of Poland and the beginning of World War II in Europe, a time when listening audiences were anxious and constantly tuned in. This earnest, somewhat homely choral tribute to

¹ Earl Robinson and John LaTouche, *Ballad for Americans, Cantata for Baritone and Chorus* (New York: Robbins Music, 1940). All subsequent quotes are from this edition.

² Unsigned reviews of *Ballad for Americans*, by Earl Robinson and John LaTouche, New York, *New York Times*, April 14, 1940; June, 26 1940; June, 24, 1941.

America's inclusiveness triggered an overwhelming, broad-based and lasting response which cannot be attributed simply to serendipitous timing and a nervous demonstration of sentiment inspired by a litany of American platitudes. I suggest that a more complex process put the tools of the sonic palette to work in support of national unity, subtly aligning Roosevelt Administration goals with the radio industry and, in particular, with the progressive interventionist predilections of the many artists and producers responsible for the broadcast. With the audience's interpretive skills finely tuned from countless hours of radio listening and their susceptibility primed by a decade of distressing events and appeals to them in their homes, they willingly succumbed to the powerful aural imagery invoked by the performance. Although no one could have predicted the intensity of the immediate reception to *Ballad for Americans* and its subsequent longevity, I contend that very deft hands knowingly used an understanding of radio's sonic capabilities to craft the program to achieve a social effect. With its deceptively simple conflation of traditional American and Popular Front rhetoric, a formal musical structure that signaled its seriousness of purpose and, especially, the sonic presence of its inspired, but tantalizingly ambiguous casting of Paul Robeson in the role of the American Everyman, *Ballad for Americans* transcended political, sectional, ethnic and racial differences. The work appealed to virtually everyone who heard it because they believed that it spoke to directly to and about them. Largely unaware of the social and political provenance of its creators and interpreters, radio listeners' emotional response to the eleven minute cantata provided grass roots evidence that dry, factual opinion polls could not capture: the nation was beginning to coalesce in its collective self-image in a way favorable to government policy and, eventually, to support of the coming war.

The Americans of the Ballad

To understand the sonic and emotional forces at work, it helps to imagine the first hearing of *Ballad for Americans* on radio. Tuned in to *Pursuit of Happiness*, an unabashed, upbeat valentine to American values aimed at a middle-brow audience, listeners are prepared to relax and enjoy; they are not looking to be challenged or lectured to. They attend to the performance aurally, music and words fly by their ears making impressions of which only a few are retained. Textual and melodic repetition assist the listener in remembering a few themes. A great wash of orchestration, choral texture and the declaiming voice of Paul Robeson buffet auditors back and forth between grand and popular musical idioms, upending their expectation that they are listening to (yet another) patriotic anthem. The ironic, colloquial tone makes *Ballad for Americans* both modern and intimate, signaling a new interpretation of American ideals. Chief among them is the idea that the country was built into its singular greatness by “nobodies” of vastly different origins and backgrounds.

The first section, told by narrator and chorus to one another, ties iconic American texts together with the “nobodies” who wrote them and fought for the values embodied in them. In a first hearing the names of the familiar—many of whom, like Benjamin Franklin were not really nobodies, even in their own time—are credited with forming the nation along with those known to very few: “Washington, Tom Paine, Benjamin Franklin, Chaim Solomon, Crispus Attucks, Lafayette. Nobodies.”³ American history sweeps by, from the founding of the nation through western expansion, Emancipation and growth to modernity. In each case, noble ideas or bold acts are ascribed to these

³ Crispus Attucks was a free black who died in the Boston Massacre and Chaim Solomon was a Jewish financier who helped underwrite the war.

nobodies. Rather than bringing heroes down to a lower level, the nameless people are elevated by their deeds. A vision emerges of an America made not by giants and heroes, but by immigrants, workers and strivers of every ethnicity, religion and class. The second section hammers that impression into place with litanies of occupational, ethnic and religious identities, sparsely scored to make the text stand out. In answer to the question posed by the chorus, “Are you an American?” the narrator replies:

Am I an American? I’m just an Irish, Jewish, Italian, French and English,
Spanish, Russian, Chinese, Polish, Scotch, Hungarian, Swedish, Finnish, Greek
and Turk and Czech and double Czech American.⁴

The attentive listener may hear his or her own nationality, religion or occupation mentioned in the several honor rolls of American “nobodies,” but even without personal recognition, the overall impression, underscored with musical emphasis and textual repetition, is a populist theme of a country united by its humble origins, hard work and high purpose, not divided by its differences. America’s pre-war environment raised the political importance of social harmony among its many ethnic groups and in this chapter I will show how *Ballad for Americans* contributed in its small way to those goals.

The American Mood at the Close of the 1930s

The rosy image of unity projected by *Ballad for Americans* was largely fictional. The ravages of the Depression intensified long simmering ethnic and racial prejudices, as American born whites openly showed their hostility and resentment to those whom they believed took jobs away from older stocks. This xenophobia had been gaining momentum since the end of World War I, driven by fears that America might be

⁴ Conspicuously absent from this list are the Germans who made up the second largest immigrant population in the country, and the Japanese, a much smaller group. Finally, the homonym phrase “Czech and double Czech” oddly calls to mind the 1930 *Amos ‘n Andy* film of the same name, with Gosden and Freeman appearing in blackface.

vulnerable to revolutionary impulses from within by its large, foreign born population. Congress virtually shut down immigration by the mid-1920s, and throughout the decade worked to develop a system that would preserve the “racial balance” of the United States, i.e., one which would restrict the inward flow of immigrants from countries other than the British Isles and northern Europe.⁵ A popular movement rapidly spread, extending suspicion and antipathy towards all immigrants, especially non-citizens, justifying and providing an outlet for pent up racism. Although obvious extremists like the Ku Klux Klan took up the anti-immigrant cry, the sentiment extended far more deeply into the culture into hundreds of new and old patriotic societies and other traditional institutions, which were able to become a powerful political block by joining umbrella organizations like the American Coalition, whose seemingly blameless goal was to “keep America American.”⁶ In the 1920s their rhetoric scapegoated immigrants for the nation’s social ills, especially organized crime, but with the onset of the Depression, fear and anger escalated. The trusted middle-brow press, like the *Saturday Evening Post*, editorialized freely to send immigrants “back where they came from” and “save America for *real* Americans.” The rhetoric lowered social inhibitions and gave license to ordinary folks to localize blame and lash out openly against immigrants, whether naturalized or not.⁷

The quiet but persistent voice of Louis Adamic, Slovenian-American novelist and essayist on immigrant issues, crusaded against these stereotypes. *The Native’s Return*, his balanced and insightful account of his 1932 visit back to the Balkans reveals America

⁵ Mary Ann Thatcher, *Immigrants and the 1930s: Ethnicity and Alienage in the Depression and On-coming War* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1990), 37.

⁶ Louis Adamic, *My America: 1928-1938* (New York: Harper & Brothers), 202.

⁷ Ibid. Adamic quoting from George Horace Lorimer’s 1933 *Saturday Evening Post* editorial.

through the eyes of immigrants who *did* return permanently to the “old country,” was a bestseller in the United States, and provided him access to high profile magazines to try to debunk pervasive myths that demonized immigrants. At the dawn of the Depression “the United States had as yet no idea of what those problems [with immigrant/old stock conflicts] were or that they existed. What the American people did know about them was swathed in sentimentality and linked to unsound, impossible ‘Americanization’ drives and programs which were typically short-cut, un-thought-out stunts; or twisted by racial prejudice and blind fear of strangers in their midst whom they did not understand.”⁸ As the ‘30s progressed, Adamic observed that ordinary, decent old stock Americans were “deeply, in many cases, unconsciously or secretly, uneasy living in their country, or even afraid, alarmed,” which manifested itself in nervous behavior and “fear often blazed into hate....They were ready material to be exploited by sincere, fear-driven patriotic leaders of anti-alien movements, as well as by unscrupulous racketeers-in-patriotism whose function was to drive the “foreigners’ deeper and deeper within themselves and away from the spiritual-cultural centers of America, thus making matters worse and worse.”⁹ What had been repressed distaste and resentment in normal economic times became anger and blame towards immigrants for taking jobs from “real” Americans, and, for those unemployed, for living parasitically on government relief.

FDR and Immigrants

The Roosevelt administration’s many New Deal programs did not specifically address the needs of immigrants or the tensions arising between ethnic and racial groups.

⁸ Adamic, *My America*, 188.

⁹ Ibid., 189-190.

The economic problems of the Depression were so profound, affecting all segments of society that government action was broad in its scope, massive to administer, and constantly under siege by constitutional challenges. If its benefits were distributed unequally, there was little attention paid to micro-managing disparities. It was not until political events cascaded throughout 1938 and 1939 that high level government concern arose about the immigrant community in relation to the rest of the nation and to the United States' involvement in a coming war. Increasingly concerned that war could not be avoided, FDR unveiled his views early in 1938, beginning the long, patient drive to garner public support for a policy of intervention and, ultimately, war. One of his earliest positions in this campaign was an identification with immigrants.

Subtly and yet provocatively, he introduced the idea of the importance of America's immigrant heritage. In his supposedly off-the-cuff speech at the National Convention of the famously bigoted Daughters of the American Revolution, the ever image- and media-conscious president celebrated his—and their—immigrant status. “Remember always that all of us, and you and I especially, are descendents of immigrants and revolutionaries.”¹⁰ Only days before, in one of his relatively rare “fireside chats,” FDR addressed the nation to ask for support for new federal spending intended to provide additional relief and government sponsored jobs in the stalled economy. Embedded in that message, for the first time, was a plea for unity and cooperation. Using indirection, Roosevelt stressed that the government programs were for all the people, and that the

¹⁰ Franklin Delano Roosevelt, "FDR Address at the DAR Convention," in *The American Reader: Words That Moved a Nation*, ed. Diane Ravitch (New York: Harper Collins, 1990). The DAR's exclusivity and racist sentiments were famously repudiated the next year when Eleanor Roosevelt withdrew her membership in protest over the DAR's refusal to allow contralto Marion Anderson to perform in Constitution Hall. The concert took place, with Mrs. Roosevelt's intervention, at the Lincoln Memorial, an event attended by over 200,000.

problems encountered by some groups were the problems of all. As he closed the speech, he more openly appealed to the citizenry to set aside the prejudice and anger that cause internal national division.

... Every patriotic citizen must say to himself or herself, that immoderate statement, appeals to prejudice, the creation of unkindness, are offenses not against an individual or individuals, but offenses against the whole population of the United States...Use of power by any group, however situated, to force its interest or to use its strategic position in order to receive more from the common fund than its contribution to the common fund justifies, is an attack against and not an aid to our national life...There can be no dictatorship by an individual or by a group in this Nation, save through division fostered by hate. Such division there must never be.¹¹

Although he does not directly confront anti-immigrant sentiment or racism, current events at home and abroad informed his rhetoric. Unemployment was increasing and the United States was seven months into a recession within the Depression. Violent labor strikes as recently as 1937 and ongoing civil rights violations were ominous evidence of the fragility of American society. Roosevelt appealed to the civilized better nature of the populace, urging restraint. In carefully juxtaposing the word “patriotic” with phrases like “appeals to prejudice,” and “creation of unkindness” he decried any who use power to “force its interest” or “strategic position...to receive more from the common fund.” Those who did offended the nation as a whole, and were acting in a way unworthy of American values. Without mentioning immigrant or racial prejudice directly, Roosevelt began his campaign for unity.

These two speeches, distinctly dignified and as unlike the hate-mongering vituperation of Goebbels’ propaganda, tellingly embraced two audiences. One to a select, patrician audience, and the other to the radio masses used the weight of his considerable

¹¹ Franklin Delano Roosevelt, "Radio Address, April 12, 1938," in *FDR's Fireside Chats*, ed. Russell D. Buhites and David W. Levy (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992), 122.

popularity to identify himself with the fortunes and future of the people as a whole. By the end of the year, FDR became increasingly pointed in his anti-Hitler rhetoric and his campaign for unity at home. He soon moved beyond his own personal appeals, empowering government departments to seek cooperation from the media and film industry to encourage a kinder, nobler, more inclusive patriotic unity.

An Inaugural Collaboration: *Americans All/Immigrants All*

The earliest and most ambitious media effort to advance ethnic and racial tolerance, *Americans All, Immigrants All*, a 26 week series, was produced in 1938 and 1939 by CBS in cooperation with the Office of Education. The impetus for the series came from Rachel Davis Dubois, a Quaker educator whose advocacy for ethnic harmony led her to establish the Service Bureau for Intercultural Education in 1934. Inspired by the negative rhetoric of Father Coughlin and his use of radio as a pulpit, she approached the Department of the Interior's Office of Education in the summer of 1938 with an idea for a radio series to counteract his attacks. He was always "yelling, 'This is a country for white Christian's.' You know who's left out."¹² Sensitive to growing Administration concerns about interethnic relations in the light of mounting tensions in Europe, Commissioner of Education Studebaker embraced the project and approached NBC. The series' stated purpose "to reduce intergroup prejudice and develop more appreciative attitudes among America's culture groups by dramatizing [their] contributions" was rebuffed by the network.¹³ The last thing NBC wanted to do was to "stir up the

¹² Barbara Dianne Savage, *Broadcasting Freedom: Radio, War and the Politics of Race* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 24. Quoted from an interview with Dubois in 1984.

¹³ Ibid., 25. Excerpted from DuBois' proposal to Studebaker, August, 1938.

menagerie just at the moment.”¹⁴ CBS, more of a risk-taker than NBC, took on the project, seeing it as a complement to their educational series on Latin America, which was just concluding. But DuBois’ and the Department of Education’s collaboration with CBS was not smooth, reflecting the ambivalence towards issues of ethnicity prevalent in the larger culture.

With a title inspired by Roosevelt’s speech to the DAR, *Americans All* profiled a different ethnicity every week, praising its contributions through songs, skits and attempts to capture the essential character of each group. Unfortunately, the show was developed by a committee of experts with conflicting views of how to portray the American experience of immigrant populations. Some, like Rachel Davis Dubois, were determined to address prejudices and injustices against different groups. Others, like critic Gilbert Seldes, insisted on an approach that would emphasize unity rather than division. An attempt at compromise resulted in programming that was “characterized by glaring omissions and other clumsy efforts to make subtle distinctions among popular stereotypes.”¹⁵

As *radio*, the series did not innovate. A homely theme song introduced every program, sung by a small choir accompanied by a piano, giving it a “church basement” quality. An earnest, but mannered narrator connected the many skits. Musical interludes drew for the most part on the folk traditions of the nation profiled, but were supplemented with fragments from the compositions of famous members of that group. Scripts followed a predictable pattern week to week: terrible conditions at home inspired emigration;

¹⁴ Ibid. Quoting James Angell’s memo to NBC Education Director Franklin Dunham. Angell, retired president of Yale, was an internal educational consultant to the network.

¹⁵ Ibid., 31.

groups encountered difficulties, and occasionally prejudice, but worked hard, built the country and

were able to make their contribution to American life because the *whole* of American life was open to them, as to all others, without discrimination of race or creed. They have helped to build the United States because the United States has welcomed them all as Americans All.¹⁶

This kind of copy, excerpted from “The Jews in America,” is typical of the series upbeat tone which denied contemporary ethnic issues, despite its acknowledgment that groups, like the Jews, “were more persecuted than most *before* they came to America” (emphasis added).

Despite its shortcomings, the show garnered many awards, and benefitted from serendipitous timing which may have improved listener receptivity.¹⁷ The series was received very positively, especially by each of the ethnic and racial groups which were subjects of shows—including those which had been subject to the greatest prejudice. Italians, Jews, Irish, Poles and African-Americans, among others, expressed pride in the positive and dignified manner in which they were portrayed and especially in the national exposure they received. Tellingly, however, the majority of positive letters on individual programs came from members of the group profiled on that week’s show, not from those the creators wanted to influence.¹⁸

¹⁶ Gilbert Seldes, “‘The Jews in America,’ Americans All/Immigrants All,” CBS Radio broadcast in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Education, January 8, 1939.

¹⁷ The first episode aired on November 20, 1938, just ten days after *Kristallnacht*. The Office of Education’s William Boutwell wrote in a letter to a CBS executive that “events in Europe have certainly given us a beautiful build-up for ‘Americans All.’” Savage, *Broadcasting Freedom*, 28, quoting from Boutwell’s letter in November of 1938.

¹⁸ Perhaps the boldest stand in favor of ethnic understanding the series took was not part of the dramatization. At the end of the program “The Jews in America,” The announcer read what he characterized as a news item: “New doctors take their place in the world today, doctors to treat sick patients, specialists trying to cure national diseases such as hate. Working under a grant from a

The Pursuit of Happiness: soft selling America to its citizens

The impulse at CBS to encourage unity soon moved beyond government sponsored shows. Programming executive William B. Lewis initiated the series *The Pursuit of Happiness* as war erupted in Europe in September of 1939, using entertainment to advance democratic sentiments. From the late '30s onward, music was brought into government service to raise morale, sell war bonds and entertain the troops, but Lewis had loftier aspirations to improve the national mood.¹⁹ Songs, cantatas and skits would offer reminders of democratic values and celebrate the nation's heritage, packaged in a variety format and presented by headliners.

Had *The Pursuit of Happiness* not been the platform that premiered *Ballad for Americans*, it is unlikely that the series would be remembered at all. It struggled to develop its identity, despite its first rank production resources which included Norman Corwin as the series director and sometime writer. Inspired by a purely political impulse, rather than a creative one, Lewis, later head of the radio section of the Office of War Information, was an ardent supporter of Roosevelt's interventionist policies. He was uniquely situated to influence programming and brimming with the sensibilities that

foundation...these physicians are hanging out their shingle in the nation's capital. 'Light and certain rays kill germs... Educational radio, through this series *Americans All, Immigrants All*, offers you the opportunity to do your part in helping to cure national such national illnesses as fear and hate. This program tells authentic stories of the nationalities who helped to make America. *Americans All, Immigrants All* gives you this knowledge over the air. ... Hundreds of organizations, both Jewish and Non-Jewish... are assembled in special radio meetings to hear this program and follow it with discussion. ...Make [our program booklet] your guide.'"

¹⁹ But music would not directly serve the war effort to the extent it did in World War I, when "Over There" sold over a 1,000,000 copies and millions of Americans responded to its patriotic cadences. For a discussion of music during World War II see Kathleen E.R. Smith, *God Bless America: Tin Pan Alley Goes to War* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2003).

prompted director William Robson to later describe CBS as the “top of a liberal mountain.”²⁰

The CBS press release for *The Pursuit of Happiness* unashamedly proclaimed its ideals:

Pursuit of Happiness will not deal with war or with issues growing out of the war which divide our minds. Instead, these new programs...will turn aside from the stream of grave events and bring us reminders that today, with thankfulness and humility, we Americans still enjoy our constitutional rights to life, liberty and the *Pursuit of Happiness*. [Emphasis in the original.]²¹

This unusual marketing communication readily acknowledges issues that “divide our mind,” a likely reference to intervention and isolation factions in the nation. But it obliquely warns that the U.S. “still” has a constitution, in contrast to others who have lost theirs. Serving educational and entertainment goals had defeated many on radio before and the conventional variety programming format frustrated director Corwin who quickly sought out original material to enrich the mix. Of these, *Ballad for Americans* would have an effect far beyond Corwin’s or anyone else’s, expectations, heralding a time of populist expression of patriotism which encompassed wide swaths of society. *Ballad* was its most beloved anthem—for a time.

From Cultural Icon to Cultural Orphan

Recognizing the criticism which *Ballad for Americans* has endured over time may contextualize its significance as more than just a war era cultural phenomenon. During those years, the work was as widely embraced by the Popular Front as it was by bourgeois audiences. This did not seem to trouble anyone until after the war. Rather, it

²⁰R. LeRoy Bannerman, *Norman Corwin and Radio: the Golden Years* (University of Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1986), 39. Bannerman quotes from an interview in April of 1972 with William Robson.

²¹ Bannerman, *Norman Corwin*, CBS press announcement, 47.

was widely perceived as a sign of the affirmation of democratic values and the overall health of the American society, as compared to those whom we were fighting. That image did not survive, however, and post-war intellectuals soon began to question its worth. Michael Denning, in his comprehensive consideration of Popular Front artistic expression, *The Cultural Front: the Laboring of American Culture*, synthesized their arguments as a rejection of a middle brow aesthetic which undermined the social and political value of *Ballad for Americans* and other cultural products of the movement. Several generations of critics were scathing in their attacks, with Robert Warshow calling it a “disastrous vulgarization of intellectual life,” and Stanley Aronowitz scorning it for being part of the “vanguard of commercial culture.”²² *Ballad for Americans* was emblematic of a Popular Front culture that robbed it of worthy artistic and political expression an argument which Denning believes Warren Susman best distilled:

out of it came an absurd vision of the American past, a peculiar notion of American society in the present, a ludicrous attitude toward American culture in general. At a most critical juncture in our history American socialists helped us little in understanding ourselves or the world.²³

Denning, whose examination of the work and its criticism illustrates the continued relevance of the cantata even today, disagrees with their assessments. He sees *Ballad for Americans* and other populist creative expressions as part of the essential “national-popular” tradition which was inspired by the cross currents of social and political life in the 1930s.

²² Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1996), 116. Denning quoting from Robert Warshow’s essay “The Legacy of the Thirties” and Stanley Aronowitz’ *The Crisis in Cultural Materialism: Class, Politics and Culture in Marxist Theory*. Although I refer to Denning’s discussion of these works, I cite them separately later in this chapter from my own analysis of their writing.

²³ Ibid., 116. Quoting from Warren Susman’s *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century*. Again, I cite the original source from my own analysis later in this chapter.

Ballad for Americans: from Popular Front origins to CBS

No director or writer was more sensitive to the aural possibilities of radio than Norman Corwin, who believed that to truly awaken the audience's appreciation of American values, *Pursuit of Happiness* needed a rich aural, emotion-provoking experience, one that took risks. The variety format was evolving weekly with a patriotic centerpiece anchoring each broadcast. In the first weeks, these had been skits, including an excerpt from the Pulitzer Prize winning play by Robert Sherwood, *Abe Lincoln in Illinois*, read by Raymond Massey who was starring in the show on Broadway. The anchor piece was usually flanked by songs and humor, all with American flavor. Corwin felt that this conventional variety format deadened the series and fought for a more creative approach. *Ballad for Americans*, with its populist theme and original music written to appeal to a mass audience, became the first, and ultimately the most successful of Corwin's experiments, incorporating many elements of the sonic palette, music and text, formal structure and voice.²⁴

There are only two eyewitness accounts of the birth of *Ballad for Americans*, Corwin's and composer Earl Robinson's, and these agree on essential facts. Robinson and John LaTouche, a pair of passionately patriotic young radicals in their early 20s who had both been working in Popular Front theaters, wrote the work under the title *The Ballad of Uncle Sam* for a Federal Theater Project revue, *Sing for Your Supper*. The uplifting message of the heritage and unity of the American people is saved from

²⁴ Corwin later elaborated upon his concerns in a ten page production memo to Lewis, holding *Ballad for Americans* up as an example of the kind of original, aurally adventurous programming that was needed to arrest the audience's interest and passion for its nation. In this memo he called for shows to be built around "American sound patterns and phenomena" which would evoke the country's richness, such as "the bells of the nation," "arteries of the nation" (sounds of bustling transportation), "the energy of the nation" (sounds of production and commerce). Bannerman, *Norman Corwin*, 50-52.

conventional hymnody, in part, through its less than reverential textual and musical tone. In addition the formal cantata structure of the work, through uses of and breaks with musical conventions, imbues it with a tension between traditional and progressive values which I believe added to its credibility and broad appeal. The other sonic characteristic which carried the performance to its immense popular success and influence is the voice of Paul Robeson, whose persona no less than his performance resonated with listeners to exhort them with a clarion call for social harmony and sense of belonging. My analysis of *Ballad for Americans* will consider the influence of each of these aspects of aural communication.

The text: unabashed patriotism behind an ironic mask

Sentimentality was very much out of fashion in the 1930s. In literature and film, soft-hearted tough guys (and “gals”) hid their vulnerabilities with wise-cracks and masked their deepest feelings with ironic repartee. Famous film pairings like Barbara Stanwyck and Cary Grant (*The Front Page*) and Claudette Colbert and Clark Gable (*It Happened One Night*) popularized a kind of hard-boiled banter in which feelings were expressed in opposites. This self-protective device was transparent to the audience, which accustomed itself to this form of expression, and adopted its use in everyday language. The ironic voice which the twenty-two year old John LaTouche adopted for this patriotic paean to democratic values made it modern and colloquial, preventing the lyric from lapsing into treacly sentimentality which the Popular Front associated with bourgeois culture. But it also made it ambiguous, both as to audience and its ultimate message. Although LaTouche himself claimed “the intention of the *Ballad* is an affirmation against negativist thinking, pointing to the historical progress of democratic thought as the

integrating force in the future development of that history,” critics and scholars have challenged its meaning, and audiences of both progressive and conservative leanings have embraced it.²⁵ This may be traceable in part to its ironic tone. Critic Robert Warshow warned that “this ironic use of language is necessarily so indefinite that it easily slips over from the ‘negative’ to the ‘affirmative’ and the moment that happens it becomes a part of the mass culture which it has tried to escape.”²⁶

The first of the work’s two-part narrative elements is a whirlwind of highlights of the history of the United States with an emphasis on the role of the people who built it. It is recounted by an unnamed narrator who parries with a chorus which challenges, questions and joins in the narrative with him. Four pillars of American history are recited—the same ones to be found in any elementary school textbook— the American Revolution, Western expansion, Emancipation and the story of America’s industrial growth. Through a combination of then-modern slang and historical, but well-known quotations, *Ballad for Americans* credits the “nobodies” with the faith and fortitude to build the country, while scorning the “anybodies” as doubters who couldn’t be counted on, setting up a populist trope which is repeated, with variations, throughout the piece.

Narrator: Nobody who was anybody believed it. /Everybody who was anybody they doubted it.

The idea of “nobodies” refers not only to the unknown masses, but, reflexively, to the narrator himself, who is also unknown. The importance of the “nobodies” is apparent, because the audience knows how the story turned out.

²⁵ John LaTouche, Preface to *Ballad for Americans, a Modern Narrative* (New York: Robbins Music, 1940), 4. Text-only version.

²⁶ Robert Warshow, "The Legacy of the '30s" (1947), in *The Immediate Experience* (New York: Atheneum, 1971), 9.

Michael Denning points out that the narrator's identity is continually deferred as the work builds to a climax. In the first part it is because he is continually interrupted. The second part begins because the chorus finally focuses on learning his identity, transitioning the narrative from the past into the present. The narrator teases the chorus with a conundrum:

I'm the everybody who's nobody, I'm the nobody who's everybody.

He does *not* say he is an "anybody," the word reserved for doubters, and, we must infer, reactionaries and the upper classes. In the three litanies, which act more as riddles than responses to increasingly pointed questions, he identifies with a myriad of working class trades, ethnic origins and religions. The climax, i.e. the final identity of the narrator, is further deferred, by a passage that begins like a patriotic hymn, but interrupts itself with a pent-up attack on injustice by the ranks of the righteous:

Out of the cheating, out of the shouting
Out of the murders and lynching,
Out of the windbags the patriotic spouting
Out of uncertainty and doubting
Out of the carpet bag and the brass spittoon
It will come again.

Until this moment, the *Ballad for Americans* text has followed a predictable course affirming the country's traditions of personal liberty, industriousness, and "progress," leavening its idealistic message occasionally with cheeky banter between the narrator and the chorus. This lighter tone makes the work seem more contemporary by giving it a slight edge. But it elides tough issues until this penultimate chant which confronts the evils done on American soil, beginning each phrase with "out." LaTouche does not use "out" to merely banish the wrongs, but as a source of regeneration, as if each ugly reality is transformed in a crucible from which "it" will come again.

The “it” in this case appears to be “our marching song”—the words that follow next. Throughout *Ballad for Americans*, ambiguity is intensified with unclear antecedents. In the beginning, we are told that liberty is the “it” which was believed or doubted. But in subsequent references, “it” is not clear. We do not know precisely what the doubters and believers supported. One can infer that change itself was in doubt—the ability to expand the country, the reality of emancipation, the possibility for a better life through industrial and urban growth. But the impression is never fully clarified until the marching song, which is *not* a militant call for revolution, but a return to a patriotic finale worthy of Katherine Lee Bate’s poem “America the Beautiful,” which hints at the identity of the unknown narrator.

Simple as a hit tune
Deep as our valleys
High as our mountains
Strong as the people who made it.

Indeed, the work ends with the final question and the answer not in doubt: “Who are you?” To which the narrator responds: “America.” Despite Robinson’s own stated intention, scholars differ on whether *Ballad for Americans* finally answers the question which is posed throughout. Most agree with Warren Susman who equated the final “America” with “the people.”²⁷ Denning, however, disagrees, suggesting that the identity is never clarified, which is a metaphor for the lost promise of America. My reading, which agrees with Susman’s interpretation, is supported by the *musical* expression of deferral and affirmation which I shall discuss in the next section.

²⁷ Warren Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the 20th Century* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984).

Although LaTouche and Robinson didn't know each other prior to collaborating on *Ballad for Americans*, they shared the same left wing political commitment to social change and justice for the working class. LaTouche had written for Theater Arts Committee (TAC) cabarets, and Robinson, in addition to his participation in the Composer's Collective, contributed songs to and to and acted in Workers Laboratory Theater productions. The narrative is built on their political philosophy and complicates its potential for ambiguity. During the 1930s various movements laid claim to the notion of "the people." On the left, "the people" were the working class, while on the right, as Denning points out "the 'people' were generally the white American plain people, threatened by an underclass of 'foreigners,' blacks and 'fallen' women, provoked by Communist agitators."²⁸ As shown earlier in this chapter, the Roosevelt administration fostered a broad interpretation of populism which would embrace the entire nation's peoples, both to counteract conflict between factions and to build national unity for the approaching war. *Ballad for Americans* certainly sprang from leftist ideology, but it emphasized positive values and reinforced existing beliefs, which Denning calls a kind of "sentimental populism" in which "the people were not oppressed or exploited, they were merely 'forgotten.' " ²⁹ In its tone of affirmation and skittish handling of difficult aspects of America's heritage, *Ballad for Americans* reflects FDR's own hazy approach to these issues.

²⁸ Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 127. Denning describes a "mainstream populist rhetoric which emerged from the New Deal state and in the culture industry."

²⁹ Ibid. He suggests that the films of Frank Capra embody that rhetoric. Interestingly, he includes FDR's Fireside Chats as part of that sentimentalism.

Even in 1939 not everyone shared a benign view of the work. Although *Sing for your Supper* had a run of a mere six weeks on Broadway when it was shut down with the entire FTP, it was already notorious for its thirteen month rehearsal period and its affronts to [Southern] conservative sensibilities, such as blacks and whites dancing on stage together.³⁰ Both the revue and *The Ballad of Uncle Sam* were considered prominent exhibits of the excesses and radical politics of the FTP which helped to shutter the entire project. Robinson recounts how Texas Democrat Martin Dies referred to the “*Ballad* as ‘an American version of the [Communist anthem] Internationale.’”³¹

The form frames the music

In choosing a form for a work the composer creates a skeleton for the musical ideas. Musicologist Lisa Barg’s characterizes *Ballad for Americans* as essentially without form. She calls it an “episodic, revue-like format” which had its roots in the radical left-wing theater, a description that I find too limiting and does not fully account for its effectiveness on radio and to a much more diverse audience than could be found at Popular Front performances.³² While I do not dispute the surface similarities to the revue, a common style used throughout the 1920s and ‘30s for mainstream as well as political theater which permits the use of song, dialogue and chorus in a pastiche of styles, I place much more emphasis on the Robinson’s designation of cantata. The formality of the cantata structure, juxtaposed with the frequent sonic disruptions to that

³⁰ Earl Robinson, *Ballad of an American* (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, Inc. 1998), 77.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 93.

³² Lisa Barg, "Race and the Cultural Politics of 'People's Music,'" *Journal of the Society for American Music* 2, no. 1 (2008): 51.

form, which I call anti-cantata, contribute to a feeling of instability and irresolution comparable to the deferral present in the text.

Barg notes that the cantata form might reflect political “appropriation of older forms” to efface them of their earlier “bourgeois” meaning, as advocated by Hanns Eisler, the Marxist émigré composer and collaborator of Bertolt Brecht, with whom Robinson briefly studied.³³ Stanley Aronowitz calls the use of cantata by Popular Front composers the “apogee of this tendency” to draw on the “indigenous traditions of America.”³⁴ I suggest that, even if Robinson’s choice of form reflects these views, the subtlety would be lost on the audience. The cantata was still much in currency both in the sacred and secular contexts and, importantly for our discussion, on the radio. The recognizable use of the form renders the disruptions more effective.

Formal connotations: cantata traditions

Just as verse form lent weight and purpose to the landmark interventionist radio plays, form also creates a context of seriousness that acts as a counterweight to the informal language, tone and musical vocabulary of *Ballad for Americans*. When a text becomes musical, the composer reshapes its meaning.³⁵ In designating the work a cantata, the classically trained Robinson reminds the audience of the form’s most

³³ Ibid., 52.

³⁴ Stanley Aronowitz, *The Crisis in Historical Materialism: Class, Politics and Culture in Marxist Theory* (New York: Praeger, 1981), 235.

³⁵ LaTouche, the lyricist, described the piece as a ballad, a form esteemed by the Left as People’s music, as well as within a more widely popular revival of American traditions in the 1930s in art, music and literature. Although the five events in American history use the same hymn-like tune and four line stanzas, they are not continuous, as in a true ballad. Other texts disrupt the narrative suggesting a more complex form is at work. The term “ballad” seems to be a descriptive, rather than formal attempt to align the work with American tradition. Titling the work as a “*Ballad*” for *Americans* situates the work among these, linking it to a historical past.

recognizable musical ancestor, the sacred cantata, such as the more than 300 works of J.S. Bach. Cantatas were originally intended to be used as part of a religious liturgy, but were later performed in concert. Their topics were serious and drawn from scripture. Like ballads, cantatas tell a story, but, in contrast, the story is rarely secular. It is most often associated with the divine and with the highest of moral purposes. In music history, the cantata falls within a spectrum between the sacred song and the oratorio. Like an oratorio, it is a work for chorus and soloists, but is much shorter and on a single subject. Cantatas often call for a speaker. Texts and music are occasionally interpolated from other works which the audience would recognize. Cantatas were originally intended for small church congregations, and later practice still favored chamber performance.

The single subject, the combination of vocal textures, the incorporation of recognizable material and even the intimacy of performance setting all lent themselves to radio. Cantatas were, nevertheless, a common concert hall form in the 20th century, regularly adopted by composers when setting secular poetic texts they deemed worthy of serious, sometimes sacred treatment. Patriotic subjects especially merited this form. There is even evidence of a genre that can be called the radio cantata.

Radio's association with the form may have begun with Kurt Weill's *Der Lindbergflug* (Lindberg's Flight), a 1929 work he designated as a radio cantata. Created for German radio, it was based on the Bertolt Brecht's didactic play (Lehrstück) celebrating Lindberg's crossing of the Atlantic which was considered an almost super-human event that captured the imagination of the world. Involving courage, persistence, mastering the forces of nature and machines, this work portrayed a suitably modern

miracle.³⁶ Later, after the great success of *Ballad for Americans*, Weill was asked by Norman Corwin to write a cantata, *Ballad of the Magna Carta*, for *Pursuit of Happiness* which aired on the series in February of 1940. The form was widely used in the 1930s for both sacred and secular texts, and performed on radio with increasing frequency during the war years.³⁷

Robinson was interested in cantata form as an engaging way to convey his political convictions. As part of the Composers Collective, he (and Aaron Copland, Marc Blitstein and others) had written songs for workers' choruses for marching and use at rallies. The left, in America and abroad, believed that music could be used for ideological purposes, reinforcing dogma in memorized lyrics and the mnemonic of melody.³⁸ The cantata form afforded Robinson a longer work through which he could weave many texts into a story using different voices, both sung and spoken. Through the use of contrasting textures of full chorus and soloist, voice and instrument, the composer highlights certain texts, ideas and feeling to guide the audience through the story and, ideally, influence its reaction through aural coloration. Although Robinson worked on Carl Sandburg's 1936

³⁶ Hanns Eisler, briefly Robinson's teacher after his exile from Germany, also collaborated with Brecht on a 1935 cantata based on the play *Die Mutter*.

³⁷ Many composers wrote serious cantatas in that era, some, but not all were members of the Popular Front. Both Bernard Herrmann and Aaron Copland wrote cantatas with texts dealing with American themes and issues. Herrmann's *Moby Dick* was written in 1937 and was aired on radio. Music from Copland's unfinished cantata, *Ballad of Ozzie Paul*, which concerned the Scottsboro Boys, was incorporated into his 1936 *Music for Radio*. His most famous patriotic work, *Lincoln Portrait*, though not strictly a cantata, was written in 1942 specifically in support of the war effort, and contains the narrative element typical of cantatas as well as the quotation of familiar (folk) songs. William Grant Still's cantata *And They Lynched Him On a Tree* debuted at a NY Philharmonic concert at Lewisohn stadium in 1940, a performance at which Paul Robeson sang *Ballad for Americans*. Randall Thompson, too, wrote the patriotic choral work *Testament of Freedom*, based on four texts of Thomas Jefferson, in 1942, a work which was premiered on CBS in 1942.

³⁸ Denning ascribes the flowering of Popular Front culture, and music in particular, to the efforts of labor movement, especially in New York, to create recreational outlets with purpose. From these beginnings came "mandolin orchestras, theater groups, choruses and sports teams." 68.

anti-war poem, *The People, Yes*, for which he was awarded a Guggenheim grant, he did not complete it until 1941. In 1942 he wrote another serious cantata, on the death of Lincoln, called *The Lonesome Train*. *Ballad for Americans* was the first cantata he completed.

Echoes of the sacred cantata in *Ballad for Americans*

The musical realization for *Ballad for Americans* calls for a baritone soloist, chorus and soloists from within the choral ranks. And, although I do not suggest that Robinson had any intention of mimicking sacred works, I find several relevant points of comparison. The baritone can be likened to the Evangelist, or the prophet who appears so frequently in Bach's cantatas, a kind of omniscient narrator with the force of God behind him. In *Ballad for Americans*, the baritone soloist is the voice of strength, persistence and virtue. In the opening he rumbles out of the heavens to deliver Uncle Sam on a "stormy morn." He anoints his sacred mission by speaking through the mouth of Patrick Henry: "Liberty or death," a miraculous oracular performance. Throughout the cantata, only the narrator sings the refrain (in variations) "Nobody who was anybody believed it. Ev'ry body who was anybody they doubted it," like an old time preacher building his sermon through repetition of its central message. Like a preacher, too, he leads his flock in uttering sacred verse, in this case, excerpts from the Declaration of Independence and the Gettysburg Address.

Narrator: "We hold these truths to be self-evident,
All: [chorus joins, one part at a time] that all men are created equal. That among these rights are life,
Narrator: Yes, sir (spoken)
All: Liberty
Narrator: That's right! (spoken)
All: And the pursuit of happiness."

Encouraging their efforts, the narrator interjects his approval as the chorus symbolically and literally joins in. The narrator and chorus play the role of Good Shepherd/flock throughout the piece; there is never any doubt as to who leads the narrative, even when the chorus picks up the story. Their part, as in sacred cantatas, is often reflective. They anticipate and underlie the story of emancipation with a hushed interpolation from the spiritual “Go Down Moses” (“Let My People Go,”) much the way Bach interpolated hymns of Luther or his own Chorales. These were reminders of important texts that come from other contexts. Occasionally, solo voices from the choir comment on the text with melody. The lengthiest of these rare examples is the alto solo that steps aside from the continued march of American progress to address its most prominent shame: “A man in white skin can never be free while his black brother is in slavery...” Otherwise, the solo voices are mostly spoken, and usually questions for the narrator. This single example emphasizes its importance, as the solo melody seamlessly continues but the text shifts to an excerpt from the Gettysburg Address: “....and we highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain.” The chorus then picks up Lincoln’s words taking the section to its conclusion.

Like a sacred figure on earth, the baritone is a man of mystery. No one knows where he comes from or who he is. That is, in fact, one of the central points of the piece, discovering his identity as all humanity, all of America. Until the end of the work, when, significantly, a unison chorus doubles the baritone’s voice—in the chanting “out of...” section, they sing together with the narrator only as a back-up, harmonically emphasizing important texts. The narrator drops out at the end of this cleansing unison section, as the chorus becomes a patriotic choir in the “marching song.” In an apotheosis of affirmation,

he leads them heavenward: “For I have always believed it. And I believe it now. And you know who I am.” (Tremolo beneath). Their question is rhetorical. They join him in choral fanfare on the word “America. Ah!” (triple forte, fermata).

Anti-cantata: the meaning of sonic interruption

The styles which Robinson incorporated into *Ballad for Americans* lead us on a musical tour of aural Americana which Lisa Barg describes:

[*Ballad for Americans* is an] eclectic fusion of musical rhetoric: sonic and textual tropes of patriotic anthems and hymns and the open modal accents of Americanist symphonic style join[ed] with Eilersesque strains of the workers’ chorus, militant marches and the lyrical sounds and lilting rhythms of turn-of-the-century popular song stylizations [and] allusions to popular music...suggestive of radio-drama background music..and Broadway folk musicals.³⁹

This dizzying sonic pastiche does not itself suggest cantata *form*. However, the shape of the work, the specific ways in which soloist and chorus are used to convey the foundational tenets of American history, its “sacred” texts and hallowed values are consistent with the way the religious cantata frames the narrative, divides passages among soloists and chorus according to their roles, and musically privileges certain segments with richer harmonic and vocal textures to emphasize their importance. Contrast is achieved by scoring other parts more leanly, and, in *Ballad for Americans*, with snatches of folk tunes, and other vernacular quotations. Just as the religious cantata uses chorales, hymns and recitatives to supplement its story, these sections are not merely incidental fragments added for variety.

The techniques used by the composer are intended to advance the narrative. The audience hears the work, guided by its sonic cues which are organized to influence the mood, the message and the intended emotional reaction, in this case a patriotic spirit of

³⁹ Barg, “Paul Robeson’s *Ballad for Americans*,” 31.

unity. In *Ballad for Americans*, cantata form superimposes a framework that supports its seriousness of purpose. But I further suggest that the contrasting sections structurally and aurally redirect its message through interruption and oppositional styles—a kind of anti-cantata form. Deferral of the ultimate affirmation is achieved musically, not just textually, by interrupting the grandeur with jarring contemporary sound. This occurs right from the start, when the crowd repeatedly breaks into the narrator’s opening three-verse solemn hymn-tune, disrupting its progress with jeer-like interjections. “Some birthday!” the chorus cries out in one voice to the narrator’s “On that stormy morn, Ol’ Uncle Sam was born.” Undeterred, the narrator resumes the hymn; the next verse recounting Patrick Henry’s challenge:

Ol’ Sam put on a three cornered hat
And in a Richmond church he sat
And Patrick Henry told him that
while America drew breath, it was “liberty or death.”

In a sing-song that sounds like a tune from a children’s game, one voice bursts out at a galloping pace, “What kind of hat is a three-cornered hat?” Again the solemnity is broken. When the narrator proceeds he responds not to the inane question, but its successor—which is spoken in a hush over an unresolved suspension: “Did they all believe in liberty in those days?” framing the shift into a minor key. This announces the first appearance of the portentous thematic trope “Nobody who was anybody believed it,” followed, in a spritely shift to the staccato recital of patriots who did believe. In the opening section and throughout the work, the conventionally patriotic is disrupted sonically by populist juxtapositions. Serious texts, scored with anthem-like dignity, are repeatedly cut short, redirecting the ear to a new idea. It is always the chorus which

interrupts the narrator. Their early, somewhat disrespectful jibes are quickly replaced by a more eager participation in the narrative.

These are the people. Their mournful “Let my people go,” their jaunty, folksy pioneer progress, their *Ballet Mécanique*-like industrial age labors define their participation in the nation’s growth. The fact that they interrupt the patriotic hymn rewrites its story, coloring its clean, conventional lines with a crazy quilt of sound that better and more credibly reflect the messiness of the democracy’s history. These rapid sonic shifts set up an unresolved tension throughout. The narrator is never allowed to finish his song—*not until all the people have been accounted for*.

The second section, with its three litanies of the people’s identities, turns away from the hymn tune completely. In naming worker occupations, the narrator melodically imitates the recital of revolutionary heroes named earlier in the piece, as if to sonically identify the present day people with the patriots of old. Next, the ethnicities and religions roll forth in rapid fire, connecting each to the next, as if there were, truly, only one, long, multisyllabic word that encompasses all the different peoples. Only then can the choral apotheosis begin, narrator and people singing the hymn, claiming and transforming the “nobody” trope into the melody, until finally—one last deferral—exorcising past evils in the “out of” section, before the final affirmation.

In this section I have argued that the cantata form channeled Robinson’s musical setting into something more significant *in sound* than a simple pastiche of musical styles. *Ballad for Americans*’ musical form, “composed in the context of the preparation for war against Fascist powers recalled the American bourgeois democratic traditions of Lincoln, Jefferson and the founders of the American nation,” resonated with both progressive and

more traditional audiences.⁴⁰ Its providential casting, however, transformed its performance on radio into an epochal event.

The Voice---and its aura

Despite government criticism that silenced *Sing for Your Supper* Robinson was optimistic that *Ballad for Americans* had a future, and in the late summer of 1939, (the show had closed in May), he brought it to Norman Corwin who arranged an audition for the production team and William Lewis. It was at the production audition that the essential casting decision was made, which, more than anything else, would imbue *Ballad for Americans*' radio debut with sonic and psychic power that inspired an emotional identification with its themes, transcending audience differences to elevate the broadcast to legendary status. At the end of the audition, according to Robinson, William Lewis burst out with his idea for the baritone soloist: "Wouldn't Robeson knock the hell out of this!"⁴¹ Paul Robeson's participation was considered so crucial that the network agreed to pay his \$1,000.00 performance fee, something unheard of on sustaining broadcasts. Beyond this anecdote, the accounts are silent on the decision to have Robeson at any cost. One can speculate that Lewis' famous instincts were at play, and, of course, as the highest ranking programming executive he was the decision maker. It was his idea, after all. Money aside, the casting was inspired. Paul Robeson was an international star, a black man with a sonorous voice famous with mass audiences for his rendition of "Old Man River" in the 1936 film of *Show Boat*. Robeson had recently returned to New York after ten years living abroad. He was the kind of headliner that Lewis wanted to anchor

⁴⁰ Aronowitz, *The Crisis in Cultural Materialism*, 236.

⁴¹ Robinson, *Ballad of an American*, 93.

the weekly broadcasts of *Pursuit of Happiness*. The program was approved. There seems to have been little further discussion of the work, except that Corwin resisted shortening it to the traditional 3 minutes the music director wanted. Corwin also changed the name to *Ballad for Americans*, consistent with the overall theme of the series.

Casting Paul Robeson had far more than superficial, commercial meaning. Robeson was already a complex figure with powerful political and social convictions that would later crush his career and reputation in HUAC's reign of terror. But in 1939, his sympathies and activism were known primarily to the Popular Front.⁴² To understand the broadcast, its reception and immediate after effects requires an exploration of the sonic properties of Robeson's voice itself and how these relate to his imagined persona and audience identification with the themes of *Ballad for Americans*. That imagined persona was different in each listener.

Although Lewis' exclamation undoubtedly referred to Robeson's powerful voice, I suggest that the executive was thinking at least as much of the force of his image. After all, Metropolitan Opera baritone Lawrence Tibbett, who later recorded the piece as well, had one of the great voices of the era, and he wasn't the one who came to mind. Ever aware of working in a sound-only medium, the producers were all sensitive to the need to stimulate the imagination of listeners—to project to the mind's eye a fully formed image. Along with that peerless deep voice Robeson brought a reputation burnished over more than a dozen years as a star of Broadway, film and especially as the prime interpreter of spirituals and folk music.

⁴² Although Robeson attracted the attention of the FBI as early as 1941, he did not become the target of HUAC until after the war. Throughout the period he sang at labor rallies and events which supported civil rights, independence movements abroad and for the benefit of political prisoners.

Implicit in his reputation is the fact that he was the ideal black man for the time. The facts of Robeson's background had something for everyone, achievements almost unimaginable for anyone, much less the son of a slave, born in 1899. To use a phrase that makes us cringe today, but was in common parlance in the first half of the 20th century, Robeson was a credit to his race. He had been an All-American athlete, a Phi Beta Kappa graduate and class valedictorian of Rutgers in a time when most African-Americans went to historically black colleges, if they went to college at all. And he was a graduate of Columbia University Law School. These factors were known to all who knew of Robeson. From the very first, his record of accomplishments was included in articles and reviews of his performances, a practice which continued throughout his life.⁴³

He'd had a charmed performing career, famous from almost the first moment he set foot on stage during law school. Eugene O'Neill personally selected him for the lead in the 1924 revival of *The Emperor Jones* after casting him in one of his earlier works.⁴⁴ A casual suggestion in 1925 that he present a recital of spirituals and folk songs, although essentially untrained as a singer, launched an international concert career that caught fire from the his first, now storied performance.⁴⁵ Robeson's career benefited serendipitously from the nation's growing fascination with its cultural roots that was manifested in the art, music and literature in the '20s and '30s.

⁴³ There are many citations of his distinguished background that span his career, including the *New York Times* review of *The Emperor Jones*, May 7, 1924, *Time* magazine's review of his second Carnegie Hall performance in November of 1929 and the Philharmonic concert review in *Time* on July 8, 1940.

⁴⁴ Unsigned review of *The Emperor Jones*, by Eugene O'Neill, New York, *Time*, March 17, 1924.

⁴⁵ Unsigned review of *Recital*, performed by Paul Robeson, New York, *New York Times*, May 4, 1925. This is actually the review of his second recital. The first, in March, was not reviewed by the *Times*, but the sensation it caused brought out a critic for the May concert.

His symbolic role as one of America's most famous African-American's had made him a de facto international ambassador for the United States through his concertizing. Robeson was a successful example of the achievement supposedly open to Americans of every race and ethnicity, an image that lent credence to the text of *Ballad for Americans*. This ambassadorial role sufficiently explained the ten years Robeson spent living abroad, from 1929-1939, but his real motivation—escaping race prejudice—was unknown to most.

Entering the 1930s Robeson was the dignified voice of memory-in-song for a slave heritage. This is a very traditional, even comforting role into which society could cast a black man, and one elevated above the stereotypical because of his impressive, personal history. In an article for *Harper's*, James Weldon Johnson considered the contributions of black artists of all types in moderating prejudicial views held by many Americans. He suggested that the rise in popularity of spirituals as concert music “brought about a smoothing down of the rougher edges of prejudice against the Negro. Indeed, nobody can hear the Negroes singing this wonderful music without a softening feeling towards them.”⁴⁶ Softening, however, is not the same as equality or acceptance; rather, I suggest this is a somewhat patronizing attitude of condescension.

Significantly, Robeson inadvertently reinforced this image with his film work, which arguably made him more famous than his concertizing. He was cast in the 1936 version of *Show Boat*, as Sam, the black dock hand who sings “Ol’ Man River.” Consistent with his concert performance practice, Robeson refused to sing the text in

⁴⁶ James Weldon Johnson, “Race Prejudice and the Negro Artist” (1928), in *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation and African American Culture, 1892-1938*, ed. Henry Lewis Gates (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 344. Originally published in *Harper's* magazine,

dialect, but although that subtle statement of resistance may have caught the attention of some alert filmgoers, it very likely was missed by most.⁴⁷

What they did not miss was the sound of his voice. The rhapsodic New York Times review of the film said “We don’t know how often we have heard Mr. Robeson sing “Ol’ Man River,” but we do know we have never heard it enough, nor will we, not if we ran down to the Music Hall every day during the run of the film.”⁴⁸ This review assumes the reader knows the particular magic of Robeson’s voice, the indelible timbre which William Lewis counted on for *Ballad for Americans*.

What was that sound which carried such meaning? From his first concert, reviewers struggled to find the right words. It was “a voice difficult to describe,” with such depth and beauty it was “a voice in which deep bells ring.”⁴⁹ Trying to create a metaphor for its authenticity in performing songs of slaves, the Evening Post said that with its “dramatic restraint” and “classic simplicity” it had the same “exquisite thrill as the revelation of Chaliapin singing Mussorgsky.”⁵⁰ Later reviewers would say that “in the soft, mellow resources, in sympathy, in its organ-like ease and power it is distinguished among the great voices of the present. By quality alone it exercises a spell that is

⁴⁷ In concert performances, beginning in 1937 at the Albert Hall in London, Robeson altered the lyrics of “Ol’ Man River” to make a stronger statement. At the end of the song he replaced “I’m tired of livin’ but scared of dyin’” with “I must keep fightin’ until I’m dyin’.” Martin Bauml Duberman, *Paul Robeson* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), 214.

⁴⁸ Frank S. Nugent, “The Screen,” review of *Show Boat*, by Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II, Radio City Music Hall, *New York Times*, May 15, 1936.

⁴⁹ Unsigned review of *Recital*, performed by Paul Robeson, New York, *New York World*, April 20, 1925.

⁵⁰ Unsigned review of *Recital*, performed by Paul Robeson, New York, *New York Evening Post*, May 5, 1928.

inescapable.”⁵¹ But these descriptions eluded his voice’s essential nature. Again and again, Robeson’s voice was described as being uniquely black. Langston Hughes, in an article on the Negro artist for the *Nation* described Paul Robeson’s singing as “truly racial.”⁵² Of his Carnegie Hall recitals *Time* magazine that “his voice is the color of his skin,”⁵³ Six years later the New York Daily News would call him “the Lawrence Tibbett of his race” as if to identify the color of his voice with the man himself.⁵⁴

Robeson’s voice was known to radio listeners primarily from films, rather than from his concerts. Between 1933 and 1939, when *Ballad for Americans* aired, Robeson made seven movies—nearly all with songs— which reinforced black stereotypes. Although Robeson later claimed that it was commonplace for black actors to take whatever work they could get, he bitterly regretted doing it. Robeson’s repeated playing of the noble African tribesman or the violent outsider prompted activist publisher Marcus Garvey to protest that Robeson used “his genius to appear in pictures and plays that tend to dishouour (sic), mimic, discredit and abuse the cultural attainments of the Black Race.”⁵⁵

Deeply disturbed by his portrayal by Hollywood, Robeson eventually refused to make further films, but his image was indelibly imprinted through the distribution system of mass culture. Much less well known at the time were his emerging leftist political

⁵¹ Unsigned review of *Recital*, performed by Paul Robeson, *Chicago Herald Examiner*, February 11, 1926.

⁵² Langston Hughes, *The Nation*, June 26, 1926.

⁵³ Unsigned review of *Recital*, performed by Paul Robeson, Carnegie Hall, *Time*, November 18, 1929.

⁵⁴ Unsigned review of *Recital*, performed by Paul Robeson, *New York Daily News*, October 21, 1935.

⁵⁵ Marcus Garvey, *The Black Man*, January 1937, 2-3.

activities, driven by his resistance to racism in America. The fact that they *were* unknown is, I believe, crucial to the reception of *Ballad for Americans*. The birth of his only son, in 1929, precipitated his move to Europe, in the hope that his son might escape the degradations he experienced. Robeson's proximity to the rise of Fascism aroused a sense of outrage, and he spoke out prominently against Fascist atrocities in the Spanish Civil War and even traveled to Spain to sing at troop hospitals. It was in Great Britain that he began his open support of workers, singing benefit concerts for Welsh miners and other labor organizations. His odyssey in Russia received little attention, despite the fact that in 1936 he put his son into a model school in Moscow for two years, and established a residence there for his family.⁵⁶

The American left was well aware of Robeson's political leanings. He had befriended members of the American Communist Party both in the U.S.S.R. and in Spain and had many acquaintances in political theater both in the United States and Great Britain. He had even discussed his performance in the Broadway revival of *Show Boat* with Emma Goldman.⁵⁷ Articles that heralded Robeson's return to America took little note of his political activities and travels. In mainstream newspapers they are reported

⁵⁶ Paul Duberman's biography tells how Robeson was prized by the Soviets not only for his voice, but his political capital as a prominent American figure, and refugee from racism. But he had a privileged and highly controlled view of the Soviet Union. He associated with the highest levels of the party bureaucracy, was given living quarters reserved for dignitaries and his son was placed in the same class as Stalin's daughter and Molotov's son. Despite his immense enthusiasm for the Communist way of life, he nonetheless followed the advice of Eugene Dennis (Communist Party U.S.A.) who told him to put his son into school with great publicity, so that young Robeson might escape the fate of Dennis' son who was not permitted to leave the school or country when his family wanted to take him out. Robeson steadfastly refused to believe in Stalin's purges, even when friends of his were executed in the Kirov counter-revolutionary "plot." He preferred to believe "They ought to destroy anybody who is seeks to harm that great country." Duberman quoting Robeson's 1936 interview with Ben Davis, Jr. in the *Sunday Worker*. Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, 206-221.

⁵⁷ Goldman thought Robeson "magnificent" but disliked the show. Ibid., 203.

more as a curiosity than for any political import.⁵⁸ Many scholars have reflected on society's acceptance of leftist political views during the late 1930s in contrast with the witch hunts which followed the war. Historian Kevin Jack Hagopian suggests that "The late 1930s and the era of World War II saw the development of a middle-brow audience for a more loosely-constructed Popular Front ideology," which became conflated into a "culture of American affirmation," which focused on similarities, rather than differences.⁵⁹ But others, such as Earl Robinson and media historian Eric Barnouw, both of whom lived through the historical moment, perceived that liberals of all persuasions—whether Communist or Quaker, overlooked difference in their shared opposition to a common enemy, Fascism.⁶⁰

In November of 1939, when *Ballad for American's* was broadcast, Robeson's many-layered image was seen as politically aligned with views of Americanism that were common to all—even though the construction of that view differed dramatically by group. For many, he was the traditional, loyal black American returning home to the safe haven, singing with respect for values shared by all. At this time, thanks to favorable media coverage, this image prevailed. For others, those who knew of his activism, he was

⁵⁸ Robeson gave an interview to the *Daily Worker* shortly after returning to New York. In it he affirmed his support for the Soviet Union even after it signed a treaty with Hitler. He also continued to support the U.S.S.R's right to a "defensive" war until the United States entered the conflict and the Soviets became allies. Ibid., 233-235. But *The New York Times*, for example, made no mention of his Russian odyssey after 1936, when it covered Robeson's placement of his son in school in Moscow, until long after *Ballad for Americans* first aired.

⁵⁹ Kevin Jack Hagopian, "'You Know Who I Am!' Paul Robeson's Ballad for Americans and the Paradox of the Double V in American Popular Culture," in *Paul Robeson: Essays on His Life and Legacy*, ed. Joseph Dorinson and William Pencak (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2002), 168.

⁶⁰ A small group of Leftist intellectuals opposed Popular Front culture and politics, some Trotskiites, even during the height of the movement. Leftist criticism of populist culture would swell after the war as Anti-Communist feeling in the United States caused societal rifts even among working classes.

the voice of the rights of the oppressed and the worker. His performance would find hope and resonance in both groups.

Robeson's performance

Sonically, Paul Robeson dominates the performance of *Ballad for Americans*. By comparison, everything else sounds thin, despite the efforts of its well-trained chorus and professional orchestra. However, this contrast actually benefits the production.

Robeson's voice is so powerful and registers so forcefully that the immensity of musical resources balances, rather than competes with it. Further, Lisa Barg sees Robeson's voice as a counter-balance to the "eclecticism of [the] musical fabric," with its multitude of musical styles.⁶¹ In a sense, his voice lends weight and importance to the piece that it otherwise might not deserve. Without his noble sound the work might simply be dismissed as a hodge-podge of "generic stylistic codes," and well-meaning, but aesthetically impoverished texts. It seems unlikely that, without Robeson, *Ballad for Americans* would have become a sensation. We can hear this aural impression from the very first notes.

An extended brass fanfare of the main hymn theme opens the piece, an ascending, triumphant figure which dies away into harp chords, reminiscent of the entry of a filmic Caesar.

Narrator:
In seventy six the sky was red
Thunder rumbling overhead
Bad King George couldn't sleep in his bed
And on that stormy morn 'Ol Uncle Sam was born.

⁶¹ Barg, "Paul Robeson's *Ballad for Americans*," 31.

Robeson begins the opening verse in organ pedal-tones, distinct, articulated, dignified and thrillingly resonant, honoring the text, commanding attention, like the Evangelist delivering the words of God in a cantata—until the final phrase, “‘Old Uncle Sam was born.”⁶² On that line he lightens his voice to almost a speaking tone, skipping down an octave with a playful tap on the word “Uncle.” The tone is set: this performance isn’t going to be a predictable flag-waving hymn. The expected patriotic anthem sound, solemn and awe-inspiring, blankets the listener, rising to a clarion, full-throated call for attention on the penultimate phrase ending on “morn.” And then, repeating and holding the same note—unexpectedly, and humorously, he flips into another sound, the aural equivalent of a twinkle in the eye. Vocally, Robeson shows the audience in one phrase that his narrator is both God-like and human. The chorus assaults the human side, sliding, rather than singing through an octave run on “some” to explode on “birthday.”

Their outburst reinforces the dual tone of the piece, but the chorus is no match for Robeson. It is not just that he ignores them, placidly continuing with his narration by returning to his rich declamatory style; it is the contrast between the two sonorities that shows his command. One can hear that the chorus is large: they used all their ammunition on the first outburst, but their sound is diffuse, as if they couldn’t possibly overwhelm Robeson’s voice and presence. Clearly, Robeson sounds closer to the microphone. His voice pours directly into it and into the living rooms at home. In this way, using a powerful stream of sound, highly directed electronically, Robeson towers over the chorus, aurally projecting the force of his personality, which, long before this occasion, was already well established in the minds of much of the audience. This is not

⁶² In the score, the line reads “Ol’ Uncle Sam.” Robeson, true to his performance practice of refusing to sing dialect, clearly pronounces it “Old.”

to say that the performance lacks artistic balance. Rather, I suggest that the characteristics of Robeson's voice, the way his persona backgrounds the performance, the sound engineering of the show and finally, the way the score itself is written, all come together in a single focal point which creates the dominant impression that captured its first audience and has provoked discussion for over seventy years.

The two different voices Robeson uses in the first measures of the piece hint at his approach to the entire performance. The god-like voice is darker, with a resonant buzz, a kind of fast vibration that communicates intensity. Even in soft passages this intensity is apparent, suggesting the reserves of power behind it, as in the "Nobody who was anybody..." refrains. The first two of these, which occur in the American history section, are the most dirge-like. A slow, heavy legato breaks the sprightly tempo and mood of the chorus. In the first, a musical anxiety signal in the form of an unstable minor chord sting, such as might be heard at a tense moment in a soap opera, announces Robeson's mournful, defeated lament of disbelief. This tapers away into the narrator's first spoken words: "Nobody had faith. Nobody. Nobody but..." When he begins again, the narrator's alter ego, his "people's" voice, emerges, the voice of the "nobodies." This is a jaunty voice, devoid of vibrato, with a brighter timbre, spitting out the names of the heroes of the Revolution. Back and forth these two voices weave through the texts. The serious, formal sound dazzles and awes the listener. Sometimes, as when uttering the words of the Declaration of Independence or the Gettysburg Address, all the power of Robeson's voice is unleashed, almost to shouting. It buries the chorus in its thunderous call for righteousness; it is the voice of the prophet. When the text is lofty or the

conditions unstable, Robeson honors them with a voice of reverence and conviction sweeping the listener away with its intensely committed stream of sound.

The voice of man slips out only occasionally in the first section, one of which calls up the aural memory of Robeson's star-making role of Sam in *Show Boat*. The narrative of westward expansion jogs along with the pioneers in Robeson's prophet voice, but, accelerating with the Gold Rush, Robeson gets caught up and switches timbres to his people's sound:

The Klondike miners and the forty-niners
Some wanted freedom and some wanted riches
Some liked to loaf while others dug ditches. [Emphasis mine]

Unlike the other American history narrative stanzas, this does not follow the hymn tune. Instead, it bears a thematic-musical resemblance to the refrain of "Ol' Man River," especially the line, "...I'm tired of living and scared of dyin'," which is analogous to "Some liked to loaf while others dug ditches." Both are derivative of 19th century folk songs; both carry work themes; both have a rising melodic line, each nearly a variation of the other, culminating in a high, ringing two-note figure, a four-square tempo and steady quarter/dotted quarter rhythm. Finally, Robeson's slave-Sam voice is much like his people's voice. In this passage, more than in any other of the piece, Robeson sings in a sound familiar to most of the audience, which may comfortably reinforce prior impressions.

In the second section, Robeson comes down from his prophet's mountain and uses his people's voice consistently until the finale-apotheosis begins. In the questioning which begins the catalogue of identities, many chorus voices enter the dialogue, first speaking and then in a kind of sing-speech, as if the people have lost their awe. Now

they want to participate, throwing out occupations to which Robeson responds, in a light, friendly speaking voice. After an exuberant “All of these I am the etceteras, and the ‘and so forths’ that do the work,” he bounces through the litanies of nationalities and religions, in patter worthy of Danny Kaye singing “Tchaikovsky.”⁶³ The chorus feels comfortable enough to emit a long whistle of admiration. The at-home audience can chuckle too.

Robeson’s vocal decisions were clearly intentional. Earl Robinson worked with Robeson every day for a week before the performance, and observed a meticulous, thoughtful work process that considered the needs of the music and text and how his voice would bring them to best advantage. In particular, Robeson insisted that the music be transposed down a major fourth, even though he was fully able to sing it in the original key. He understood what his voice could communicate, and believed that the vocal technique required to sing it higher would have a classically trained sound, rather than the folk-song voice he believed would be more appropriate. This lower register was closer to his speaking voice, which enabled him to move back and forth between speaking and singing seamlessly, so the audience would be less conscious of the differences between the two. There are several aural effects from this. The voice would avoid the mannerisms that signal highbrow, and therefore more culturally remote, music that might be off-putting to the audience. His intention was to put the singer into closer communication with the audience. Barg sees Robeson’s appropriation of the key as a sign of authorship, “By singing the work in and through the voice he utilized in his performances of folk songs and spirituals, Robeson both heightened the narrative’s anti-racist themes and

⁶³ This refers to the Kurt Weill and Ira Gershwin comic list song from *Lady in the Dark*, in which the entire text consists of the names of Russian composers.

retuned its vernacular forms and accents towards a radical (black) imaginary.”⁶⁴ While I think this view invests the Robeson’s action with more politics and authorial credit than it merits, nonetheless, the change of key brings out his own authentic sound, the one with which audiences were most familiar. One other effect of the key change was to create expressive emphasis in certain sections, because of their tessitura. Perhaps the most dramatic of these occurs in the “out of...” section just before the close of the piece. It interrupts the long, final synthesis of the patriotic hymn with the triumph of the nobodies:

Our country’s strong, our country’s young
And her greatest songs are still unsung
From the plains and mountains, we have sprung
To keep the faith with those who went before
We nobodies who are anybody believe it
We anybodies who are ev’ry body have not doubts.

The two tunes merge into one, as the united peoples dispel doubts and “keep the faith.”

Because of the key change in the performance, the succeeding “out of...” section begins on a low D, nearly the bottom of the vocal register, the only time this note appears in the piece. A dark, gravelly sound, the voice emerges from the Underworld, from the depths of Hades to claw its way upward, phrase by phrase, modulating through three keys to emerge in the light of an E flat major chord as the “marching song will come again,” Expunged of the evils of America’s history, Robeson’s prophetic voice pours forth until the end.

Robeson’s lasting identification with *Ballad for Americans*

It bears considering that the work has been referred to as “Paul Robeson’s” *Ballad for Americans* almost from its first performance. Earl Robinson good-naturedly tells how he was repeatedly confused with Robeson, because the cantata became associated with

⁶⁴ Barg, “Paul Robeson’s *Ballad for Americans*,” 55.

the great baritone. “Numerous times I’d show up for a booking and they’d look at me puzzled, and say. Oh, but Mr. Robinson, we thought you were colored.”⁶⁵ Scholars and social critics were not so confused; they purposely left out Robinson, the composer, instead tying the work to its chief interpreter. Denning refers to “Paul Robeson’s *Ballad for Americans*” as if he were the creator, “as a synecdoche for the extraordinary flowering of the historical imagination in Popular Front fiction, film, music and art.”⁶⁶

James Agee and Warren Susman’s critiques of the work reference Robeson’s performance. In recent years scholars Lisa Barg, Kevin Jack Hagopian, Kate Baldwin and Michelle Hilmes, among many others, have written about the meaning of Robeson’s association with the cantata. Earl Robinson slips into the background of these discussions and John LaTouche virtually disappears. In most cases, Robeson’s blackness and his politics consume the discourse. Only Lisa Barg, the sole musicologist of the work’s interrogators, examines the effect of his voice, and even she is primarily concerned with the racial-political legacy of the performance.

Indeed, one cannot dismiss Robeson’s ambiguous status in considering the effects of his voice on the performance and listener perceptions: the nobody/somebody dichotomy. The audience cannot see Robeson, but they know he is black. He is famous, especially for singing songs that black people sang when they were slaves, or for *portraying* a slave singing “Ol’ Man River.” The man is an outsider. He may be world famous, but he is still the “other.” But he is not a dangerous “other.” He sings, not itself a very threatening activity, and not songs of revolution and anger, but songs of sorrow,

⁶⁵ Robinson, *Ballad of an American*, 94.

⁶⁶ Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 135.

faith, redemption. Yes, he sings songs of labor, but not songs inciting violence. To some, his work is ambassadorial, heroic; to others, quaint.

The narrator of *Ballad for Americans* is an outsider too, a kind of archetypal wanderer. He cannot be seen.—Is he, like Robeson, black? If the listener is black, he/she can identify with and be proud of the singer. Depression America was overflowing with the disadvantaged: white, black, immigrant stock or native born. Being unemployed made them outsiders. Many in the home audience were children of immigrant groups that had been exposed to prejudice or degrading treatment. These too, felt like outsiders. On some level, the success story that was Paul Robeson, the esteem afforded by his representing the figurehead of America on a national network, may have given heart to many listeners, even many who were not actually outsiders. He may have represented hope to many; to others, affirmation of America keeping its promise. To those on the left and aware of his values, his performance may have had that effect. And for those not very politically aware, or socially involved, he may simply have been the kind of “colored” man everyone could think well of.

A shifting cultural moment

Ballad for Americans did not sway people to be more tolerant and accepting of the nation’s many ethnicities and races. Rather, it anticipated a cultural shift which would take place over the coming months and years during which Americans hardened against Fascism and in favor of intervention, a process which contrasted the American value system with the repressive, belligerent dictatorships. Sharing concerns which did not divide them, as the Depression’s competition for scarce resources did, and looking for

stability, people's attention turned away from the perceived threats of differences to the reassurance of similarities.

Political sympathies with those at war with Germany mounted as France fell and the Battle of Britain began. Public opinion polls showed a drop in isolationism to 12% from 23% in between May and September of 1940, and support for intervention increased to 53% from 33% during the same period.⁶⁷ But these impressive gains did not hearten Roosevelt, since nearly a third of the nation stood on the sidelines. Even as late as November of 1941, polls would show that only a third of the country supported an immediate declaration of war.⁶⁸ This uncertain picture prompted Roosevelt to improve national morale by trying to set up new agencies like the Office of Facts and Figures which took until April of 1941. Throughout this period Roosevelt, too, looked for reassurance.

There was much less tangible, but, nevertheless, telling evidence of changing attitudes which could not be quantified but which should have encouraged FDR. This was the swell of American pride reflected in the growing popularity of patriotic themes in popular culture. In music, I suggest that this trend began with the *Ballad for Americans* broadcast on *Pursuit of Happiness*. An article in *Time* magazine in July of 1940 entitled "I Hear America Singing" marveled at this turn of mind and voice:

The men who make the nation's songs, the people who hum, whistle and sing them, the musicians who play them, last week made music that swelled and surged in a crescendo of patriotic feeling. As the sounds from millions of radios,

⁶⁷ Hadley Cantril, Donald Rugg, and Frederick William, "America Faces the War: Shifts in Opinion," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 4, no. 4 (December 1940):652. Hadley Cantril soon became Roosevelt's private pollster in his growing concern over the country's willingness to go to war.

⁶⁸ Hadley Cantril, "Public Opinion in Flux," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences* 220, 1942: 136-152.

home phonographs, jukeboxes soared over the seaboard, plains, mountains of the U. S., Walt Whitman might again have said, "I hear America singing." The U. S. was singing, as it had not done in years, of pride in its past, of hope in its future.⁶⁹

The very tone of the article is caught up in this resurgence of sentiment, invoking that emblematic, ebullient American, Walt Whitman, and surveying the national scene without a touch of the Depression's cynicism or fear. Telling of the new appeal of mass concerts, the writer describes a June concert at Manhattan's Lewisohn stadium before an audience of 13,000.⁷⁰ New music with American themes was programmed that came from every part of the country and walk of life. Three of the works were cantatas. Black composer and sometime jazz arranger William Grant Still joined forces with Katherine Garrison Chapin (wife of Solicitor General Francis Biddle) to collaborate on *And They Lynched Him From a Tree*. The New York Philharmonic's Polish born conductor Artur Rodzinski commissioned Oklahoman Roy Harris to write a cantata called *Challenge 1940* based on a text from the preamble to the Constitution which premiered at the event. But musical America wasn't limited to classical venues, however huge, as the author describes:

A year ago fat Singer Kate Smith launched, and recorded for Victor, a song called *God Bless America*. Sales of the record jumped 13% when Poland was invaded, [and] have leaped with every subsequent invasion. Throughout the U. S. today, many people rise, [and] bare their heads when *God Bless America* is played. Currently Tin Pan Alley is rushing out songs like *Defend Your Country*, *I'm a Yank Full of Happiness*, *I Am an American* ("Shout—Wherever you may be, I AM AN AMERICAN"). Yet none of these songs has attained the current popularity of *Ballad for Americans*.⁷¹

⁶⁹"I Hear America Singing," *Time*, July 8, 1940.

⁷⁰ Interest was so strong that the New York Philharmonic played it at the inaugural concert of their outdoor series at Lewisohn Stadium again in 1941. Robeson also sang it to 23,000 in Newark in June of 1941, and before 30,000 at the Hollywood Bowl.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

In this remarkable paragraph, the author captures both the emerging cultural moment and the essence of *Ballad for Americans*. War news was fueling sales of patriotic recordings, spurring the music industry to capitalize on the enthusiasm that they hoped would repeat the musical successes of World War I. He goes on to tell us that sales of Robeson's recording leapt 200% in June (following the fall of France) and that it was the item most in demand at the RCA exhibit at the World's Fair. He even mentions the performance of *Ballad for Americans* at the Republican National Convention in New York City the prior week—but not by Robeson. The author claims “The Republicans were reported to have considered inviting Robeson to sing, [and] decided against it because of his color,”⁷² but in fact, that is not true. At the very time that it was being sung at the Convention, Robeson, “big, magnetic, broad-smiling” was singing the “broad, thoroughly whistleable” *Ballad for Americans* at Lewisohn stadium as the centerpiece of the mass concert described in the article.⁷³ Popular enough to compete with Irving Berlin, formal enough for the Philharmonic, sincere enough for the Republicans, radical enough for the Popular Front, the work and its singular, enigmatic interpreter rode a populist revival of national good feeling which would carry them into and through the war.

Of course, the promise of *Ballad for Americans* was only partially fulfilled in those years. Although prejudices didn't disappear, the war would prove that ethnic and religious differences would not divide the country and that people would work and fight together against a common enemy. Not so for black Americans, for whom the unsettling

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

reality was that they failed to transcend their outsider status, suffering the indignity of segregation and inferior opportunities in the armed forces and on the Home Front. And Robeson's popularity, too, would lose the momentum provided by his radio appearance as the sonic embodiment of the nation's peoples, a victim of post-war anti-Communist frenzy. But in eleven minutes of listening there isn't time to analyze the text or its implications. There is only the aural seduction that sweeps the audience away, leaving an emotional impression. And the last thing that they hear, in a ringing declaration of faith, is:

....For I have l always believed it. And I believe it now. And you know who I am.
America.

Chapter 5

“We take you now to London”: Edward R. Murrow and the Drama of Radio News

For nearly three-quarters of a century, Edward R. Murrow has been acclaimed as a paragon of news reporting, a legendary innovator whose wartime broadcasting set a new standard to which several generations of radio and television newsmen and women aspired. His integrity has been exalted; his style copied; his exploits mythologized. The professional news media has canonized him as the patron saint of journalistic ethics. Documentaries and biographical films convey a sense of nostalgia for a tradition which he embodied and which is no longer sustained. Well-documented biographies reveal few failings, and find excuses for those few. More recently, Murrow's work has been examined by history and communications scholars, and they, too, have found much to admire and little to criticize. The man's work seems to have lived up to the myth. As with many myths, there is a basis in truth and a question of interpretation. It is not my intention to undermine Murrow's reputation. But his accomplishments have been robed for three generations in a mist of idealism and integrity that has not only colored the popular view of the man and his work, but limited scholarly scrutiny to proofs that validate what is already known and believed.

It may be a valuable exercise to examine Murrow's work stripped of the popular notion that his wartime efforts were a tireless pursuit of high-minded ideals—objectivity, truth, democratic values. Indeed, each of these ideas resists a definition to which all could agree, even in pre-World War II America. There is ample evidence that Murrow put his considerable energy and talents in service of the plight of Great Britain and of American

intervention in World War II. But it is not necessary to ascribe his success to virtuous altruism. Rather, I suggest that the record shows a very ambitious man, eager for visibility and success, and for an unfettered environment in which to test himself and his imagination. War-torn England provided just the field.

Let me dismiss the idea that I am charging Murrow with hypocrisy. That is too extreme. Nor is he a classic opportunist, because he clearly esteemed ethical values. But he did make use of circumstances which presented opportunities to advance his situation and his views, and used the power of mass communications to do so as others have done before and since. Murrow brought an instinctive understanding of the creative influence of sound, with which he continually experimented, and considerable training in rhetoric and speech, which he consciously deployed for subtle persuasion in his writing and on-air delivery. His behind the scenes activities were no less meaningful. Murrow was charismatic and something of a chameleon, perfect characteristics for office and social politics. His active behind-the-scenes maneuvers with CBS senior management won him control over London-based news production, while his cultivation of the nobility and of influential government officials in Britain facilitated access to broadcasting opportunities which were otherwise off limits.

In this chapter I will examine Murrow's approach to broadcasting radio news during the London Blitz of 1940, the period in which he came to fame and from which derives his credit in influencing American public opinion in favor of intervention. Murrow was on air nightly during the Blitz delivering short news summaries and participating in round-ups. Once a week, sometimes more frequently, he broadcast longer programs, narratives which described life in London at war; these were the programs

which crafted the complex persona of an intrepid, dashing foreign correspondent who braved the horrors of air raids to bring the human story of London's fight to the living rooms of America. Although he was clearly an innovator, I suggest that Murrow was influenced by drama and radio news programming in America and Great Britain to create his own understated but dramatic style. The popularity of the dramatized news genre confirmed that voices, sounds and story lines held listener interest. The networks' hugely successful, outspoken commentators provided sonic and rhetorical models which Murrow resisted, forming an economical style which said much by its contrast to their openly opinionated, occasionally bombastic commentaries. From the BBC he was drawn to the sober, unsentimental accuracy of news reporting, although put off by its erudition which made it less accessible to the common man. In developing his style, Murrow took into consideration the then-current traditions in news. He did not just inform; he moved people, and did so with careful choices from the sonic palette: voice, sonic coloration, sound effects and text, while claiming to adhere to CBS's official policy of objectivity and neutrality. Audiences listened with rapt attention to live broadcasts from the Blitz, feeling present at the scene, as Archibald MacLeish said at a dinner in 1941 honoring Murrow for his efforts during the Blitz.

You spoke, you said, in London....But it was not in London really that you spoke. It was in the back kitchens and the front living-rooms and the moving automobiles and the hotdog stands...of another country that your voice was truly speaking...You made real and urgent and present to the men and women of those comfortable rooms, those safe enclosures, what these men and women had not known was present there or real.¹

¹ Archibald MacLeish, "A Superstition is Destroyed," in *A Time to Act: Selected Addresses* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1943), 160. From his speech at a banquet honoring Murrow, December 2, 1941.

And yet, these broadcasts were highly mediated: planned with technical precision, scripted, reviewed by censors. Very little that Murrow aired was spontaneous, even though it may have sounded that way. An examination of his work reveals the highly produced and studied approach which made audiences feel present at the scene and unaware of the mediation which scored it so carefully. The public didn't care. They were used to an aural environment of re-enactments, radio dramas and sound effects. Ways in which Murrow drew on those traditions made them familiar and understandable. Listeners were accustomed to being confronted with personal, unsubstantiated, unequivocal opinions. Ways in which Murrow differed from that tradition only enhanced his credibility.

Of the large body of Murrow's broadcasts from the Blitz which formed his reputation, most were solo reports. A few, like the August 24, 1940 *London After Dark* program, a whirlwind tour of the city, and the rooftop air raid broadcasts were highly memorable and sonically dramatic. Yet even the solo broadcasts provide the evidence that Murrow was influenced by radio's traditions of dramatic news and commentary as well as his own training in persuasive speech, using the sound of his voice and the sounds of the city in counterpoint to mesmerize his audience. This approach would benefit Murrow as well as the war effort and was incubated for over two years by the time the Blitz provided him a worthy stage.

Seizing the moment: Anschluss

Murrow's work and the myth both originated with radio broadcasts from London in the late 1930s when he seized the initiative and the microphone to broadcast the news of the Anschluss from Vienna. As CBS's European Director, he was neither a newsman

nor a broadcaster, but an administrator who arranged educational and cultural programming originating from Europe. He was, however, the senior manager in CBS's London-based European operation. Supervised only by long distance, Murrow positioned himself to go on air at this opportune and historic moment. The birth of modern news reporting took place on March 14, 1938 with a series of firsts: the first-ever "World News Roundup", the first use of journalists, rather than radio news readers or individual commentators, the first live reports from European capitals, the first multi-city live hook-up. Regular programming was preempted and CBS gained prestige and visibility from the event. Of the four overseas reporters, only Murrow was not a journalist.

Murrow reported from Vienna, while German-speaking newsman William Shirer, who broke the story, spoke from London. How Murrow, a man with no on-air or journalistic experience got to report from the center of the action while the authentic reporter read his comments from a studio at the BBC reveals the drive and determination Murrow channeled towards opportunities which came his way. When the Austrian Nazis shut down radio access to foreign correspondents on the eve of Hitler's entry into Vienna, Murrow directed Shirer to fly to London to air his report. In his diary, Shirer described the phone conversation: "'Fly to London, why don't you?' Ed suggests. 'You can get there by tomorrow evening and give the first uncensored eyewitness account. And I'll come down to Vienna.'" ² Travel was by no means as simple as it is today. Shirer had to fly to London through Prague, Dresden and Berlin. Murrow, who was in Warsaw, could not book a flight into Vienna, so he flew to Berlin where he chartered a Lufthansa passenger plane. After raising the \$1,250. to pay for it—an immense sum in 1938—he

² William L. Shirer, *Berlin Diary: The Journal of a Foreign Correspondent, 1934-1941* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1941), 102.

flew to Vienna as its only passenger, rather like a sheriff from the Old West commandeering a horse and charging into a shoot-out with bandits.³

Murrow had been assigned to London in 1937 on the explicit condition that he was not to go on air. Public affairs discussions, concerts of bagpipers, and dog show features were typical programs he arranged. This programming does not suggest that Murrow had the ambition or qualifications for on-air reporting. Private and circumspect, Murrow revealed little of himself to others directly. Newsbroadcaster Robert Trout, who worked under him in New York in the Talks Department at the beginning of both their careers, observed that Murrow was “guarded” and “extremely articulate, but not the kind of fella to confide.”⁴ Nevertheless, Murrow left a considerable body of evidence that supports both his aspirations and preparedness for the world stage.

Taking the microphone

Despite claims to the contrary, it seems clear that Murrow, from his earliest days at CBS, had bided his time looking for an opportunity to broadcast. Robert Trout recalled that Murrow expressed fear of the microphone, claiming that he needed a live audience and “I don’t think I could ever be a broadcaster, I need to see their faces and feel their reactions.”⁵ Yet, in late 1936, he prodded Robert Trout to let him read the Christmas Eve

³ Joseph E. Persico, *Edward R. Murrow: An American Original* (New York: McGraw Hill Publishing Company, 1988), 134. Persico’s sources to verify this story include CBS’s official internal biography and Janet Murrow’s diary entry for April 20, 1938.

⁴ A.M. Sperber, *Murrow: His Life and Times* (New York: Freundlich Books, 1986), 89. Quoting from an interview with Robert Trout in 1981.

⁵ Persico, *Edward R. Murrow: An American Original*, 103. Based on an interview with Robert Trout. Even in 1941, when he was firmly established and lionized for his work, Murrow still perpetuated the fiction that he was a reluctant on-air presence. An article that Ernie Pyle wrote about Murrow says “Believe it or not, he’s not passionately fond of broadcasting.” March 31, 1941. *Washington Daily News*.

broadcast—drunk. “He practically ordered me to do it, and after all, he was my boss.”⁶

Trout may have been surprised that Murrow successfully delivered the news, but Murrow already had deep experience in public speaking and influencing others through the spoken word, beginning in college.

Murrow had escaped a provincial life through the very conscious application of rhetorical skills. His life story is a classic tale of American self-invention. The third son of a blue collar family that migrated from North Carolina to Seattle in the ‘Teens, he funded his education at Washington State by working for a year as a lumberjack. He majored in speech, falling under the spell of a supremely charismatic and gifted teacher, Ida Lou Anderson, whose physical deformity stunted her own ambitions and shortened her life.⁷ Murrow’s dazzling good looks, talent and eagerness to learn provided an object for her energies and her frustrated personal life. Only six years older than Murrow, she invested herself completely in his training and referred to him later as “my masterpiece.”⁸ For his part, Murrow credited her with teaching him the “love of good books, good music and [she] gave me the only sense of values I have...I’ve talked over in letters every decision,” a claim supported by their uninterrupted correspondence and his responsiveness to her critiques of his broadcasts.⁹ In college he became a champion debater and a leading actor in plays. Through his voice and oral persuasion he developed a persona which enabled him to rise above his working class origins. Each of his steps

⁶ Sperber, *Murrow: His Life and Times*, 96-97. From an interview with Robert Trout.

⁷ Ida Lou Anderson was a victim of polio. Although she could walk, her spine was twisted which reduced her height by many inches and crippled her gait.

⁸ Alexander Kendrick, *Prime Time: The Life of Edward R. Murrow* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1969), 104.

⁹ Ibid.

towards the first broadcast in Vienna relied on the assiduous application of rhetoric and personality. At the same time he gained first-hand exposure to critical events of the day and to those at the seats of power.

In his senior year Murrow won the presidency of the National Student Federation Association. This post carried a high profile but unpaid position based in New York which he accepted in 1929 at the brink of the Depression, rather than seek a safer path at home. He subsisted on a \$25. /week expense allowance. This job called for him to travel in Europe and the United States meeting with student delegations and distinguished educators. Through this work he developed contacts at the young CBS network and managed to arrange on-air appearances by Einstein, Hindenburg, Rabindranath Tagore and Ghandi by parlaying relationships with professors he had met.¹⁰ After two year-long terms with the NSFA he joined the International Institute of Education (IIE) as an all-purpose assistant to its founder, retired City College Professor Stephen Duggan. In this job, too, he traveled and met with government officials and university administrators and professors throughout Europe. To status conscious Europeans, the title Murrow carried in each of his positions conferred on him an importance that his experience did not justify. But it did provide entrée to quarters that a twenty-four year old might otherwise not gain, an invaluable base of contacts, and the opportunity to practice a manner of deportment and presentational style to move within influential political and social circles.

These talents stood him well with CBS senior management. He was offered the position of Director of Talks at CBS in 1935 based on his easy demeanor in his interview with famously crusty Executive Vice President Edward Klauber. “Talks” at CBS meant

¹⁰ Persico, *Edward R. Murrow: An American Original*, 67-68.

public-service, sustaining programs. These fell, like the News, under the Publicity Department but their influence outside the organization was disproportionate to their commercial contribution to CBS. Murrow's contacts gained over four years working with American and international educators, thought leaders and governments ensured easy access and his ability to provide a national broadcast opportunity met with eager responsiveness from them. In addition to his responsibility for the Columbia School of the Air, he arranged broadcasts by speakers as diverse as Herbert Hoover, Norman Thomas, Mussolini and the Crown Prince of Ethiopia.¹¹

The 1936 presidential election provided Murrow with exposure to the power of radio to influence behavior, which made a lasting impression on him. Speaking as a panelist on a BBC broadcast a year later he made the point that with more than three quarters of the nation's newspapers against him, Roosevelt depended on radio to win support in the election as it had in his calming "fireside chats."

The thing that interests me about broadcasting is its ability to inform the listener and to determine his action...A year ago, his [Roosevelt's] whole presidential campaign consisted of five radio broadcasts made in the weeks preceding the election.¹²

Assigned as part of the CBS contingent covering the National Conventions in 1936, he was also exposed to interviews of politicians, floor debate coverage and commentary interpreting the proceedings. Murrow observed the profoundly different styles of the network's star commentators H.V. Kaltenborn and Boake Carter, as well as the dispassionate, verbally economical extemporaneous reporting of Robert Trout. He spent

¹¹Kendrick, *Prime Time: The Life of Edward R. Murrow*, 134.

¹² R. Franklin Smith, *Edward R. Murrow, the War Years* (Kalamazoo: New Issues Press, 1978), 66. Quoted from a 1937 BBC broadcast entitled "Meet Uncle Sam."

election night at Hyde Park awaiting the president's comments. Eleanor Roosevelt reportedly served him scrambled eggs.¹³ One gathers that this was the beginning of his personal relationship with the Roosevelts.

Opportunity wrested from banishment

By the time Murrow was offered the position of European Director of CBS in 1937, at age 29, he had international experience, extensive contacts among the influential people of the day, a seemingly important title at a powerful radio network, a working knowledge of broadcasting and the manner to move easily within power circles. These general qualifications suited him to the new position, which, at the time, was an assignment to be an impresario working with public figures and ministers of culture. It carried no weighty responsibility; it could be considered merely a glamorous assignment at an outpost, away from the action. Murrow may well have been sent to settle an internal turf war with Paul White, the head of News at CBS with whom his stateside responsibilities conflicted and to whom he would now report. He was the only professional on the CBS staff in Europe, supported by two secretaries and an office boy. They had no facilities but relied on the BBC for its studios, engineers and international broadcasting. Murrow acknowledged in a letter to his mother that he was "sent over here because I caused too much trouble at home or rather to the New York office."¹⁴

However, Murrow may have viewed the London posting differently. His wife, Janet, later said that he believed "there would be a war and that Ed would be setting up

¹³ Sperber, *Murrow: His Life and Times*, 95.

¹⁴ Persico, *Edward R. Murrow: An American Original*, 112. Quoting from a letter to Ethel Murrow, undated. After Munich, Robert Landry wrote an article about Murrow and the triumph of news reporting during the Munich crisis. He noted that when Murrow first went to London that "Columbia did not place too high a value on the job." Robert J. Landry, "Edward R. Murrow," *Scribner's*, December 6, 1938, 8.

the broadcasting of news events.”¹⁵ He had been to Europe three times, in 1930, 1932 and 1935, and witnessed the Nazi rise to power. In his work for the IIE he had been the head of a committee which helped Jewish scholars to relocate from Germany, work he continued even after he joined CBS. He saw how increasingly desperate they became to escape intensifying persecution, a further demonstration of international tension not readily visible to most of the public. That he was genuinely interested in current events was clear to those he met. He impressed Leonard Miall, later the Controller of Overseas and Foreign Relations for the BBC, when they met at a conference in Sweden while Murrow still worked for the IIE. “Ed was a very earnest young man....very much concerned with the problem of fascism and Nazism as it affected students and academics”¹⁶

Murrow was contractually forbidden to broadcast in his stateside job, a condition that continued in England. When he hired William Shirer six months after arriving in London to share responsibility on the continent, the ban extended to him as well.

“Murrow and I are not supposed to do any talking on the radio ourselves. New York wants us to hire newspaper correspondents for that. We just arrange broadcasts. Since I know as much about Europe as most newspaper correspondents....who lack languages and background, I don’t get the point.”¹⁷ The point may have been a desire for control by New York, or it may have been a concession to enforcing the terms of the Press-Radio war, a bitter dispute concerning the right to broadcast news.¹⁸ Nevertheless, despite

¹⁵ Sperber, *Edward R. Murrow: An American Original*, 100. From an interview with Janet Murrow.

¹⁶ Smith, *Edward R. Murrow, the War Years*, 16.

¹⁷ Shirer, *Berlin Diary*, 87.

¹⁸ Mitchell Charnley, *News by Radio* (New York: Macmillan, 1948), 24.

control exercised by New York and remoteness from access to allies at CBS's corporate office, when events in Europe began to move rapidly, Murrow turned distance into an advantage by acting independently, putting himself on air and orchestrating broadcasts of events that moved faster than New York-based executives could enforce their policies. After the success of the Anschluss coverage, Murrow and Shirer regularly broadcast as events cascaded towards the Munich crisis, building up the capability throughout Europe to provide live short wave broadcasts as the news unfolded. Munich, with its 151 broadcasts on CBS alone, provided Murrow himself thirty five on-air reports in twenty days.¹⁹ By the time the crisis was over he was a seasoned and established news analyst. Over the next two years he developed his approach to both creative and substantive aspects of his work which, in combination, differentiated his work from others in radio news.

He was advantaged in his creative work by possessing an ear sensitive to the communicative nuances of oral presentation which informed his approach to the sonic elements of voice, delivery, and production. To his writing he brought a background "[which] had not been contaminated by print."²⁰ Murrow was unique among his predecessors and peers in news by being entirely without journalistic experience and the conventions which accompanied it. Filling this void, Murrow reflected his own sense of drama evident from his student acting and his platform speaking. Finally, he intuitively spoke from a populist sympathy born of his own humble roots, years of working with political refugees and intimate exposure to the rise of Fascism.

¹⁹ Landry, "Edward R. Murrow," 8.

²⁰ Smith, *Edward R. Murrow, the War Years*, 18. From an interview with Charles Collingwood, who said Murrow felt deeply that the radio medium demanded a different approach towards news than print.

MURROW'S TECHNIQUE

My analysis of Murrow's technique involves studying texts and broadcasts of those texts. I have tried to draw primarily on those created in 1940 during the months leading up to and during the London Blitz. Since there is no comprehensive source for his work, a few words on methodology and source materials are required. The most commonly available sources in print for Murrow's broadcasts are his books, *This is London*, which is a compilation of broadcasts from 1939, when the war started, through mid-1941, and *Searching for Light*, published after his death. The latter repeats several of the texts from *This is London* and adds a few others from the Blitz period. Most of that book covers Murrow's work from the period after the United States entered the war through 1961. Much of the work represented in print appears to be abridged, based on comparisons with existing on-air versions for those dates. Compared to text versions, there are very few available audio broadcasts, perhaps a hundred, spanning his entire London career from 1938 through 1945, and about 20 of these were broadcast in 1940. Many of these are available from web archive of the Museum for Broadcast Communications in Chicago. Most of these examples did not occur during the Blitz, but in the months leading up to it. Fewer than a half dozen also appear in the print versions, but they were an invaluable source for determining that the text versions in Murrow's two books were abridged. The Edward R. Murrow Papers at Tufts University Archive contain only a few radio scripts from the war era, and of those, even fewer were from before 1941. Their tapes of Murrow's broadcasts have not been transferred to digital form because of lack of funding and are too fragile to play more than once. It appears that the materials of the Blitz may have been lost in several bombing episodes during the Blitz.

The analysis that follows is broken up into a study of Murrow's narrative style and his sonic palette. The narrative section draws on both text and audio versions of his work through the end of 1940. Because very few audio broadcasts exist for the Blitz period (September through December 1940,) I relied more heavily on printed texts in those months for analyzing his narrative style. The sonic palette analysis, which incorporates a study of his voice, performance and production techniques and what influenced their development, is drawn entirely from available audio broadcasts of 1940, most from the May through August, but a few exist from the latter months of the year. The most significant of these in this analysis, from an aural standpoint, is the *London After Dark* broadcast of August 24, 1940. The primary finding is that Murrow's work became increasingly dramatic in both narrative and presentational elements as that year of crisis went on, increasing his influence on the American public. Yet the aura of authenticity derived from his low key delivery and true-to-life situations only enhanced his credibility.

Narrative approach: Radio for the Common Man

Murrow's most affecting broadcasts were those which told the story of ordinary people living in extraordinary circumstances. His decision to make everyday folk the focus of his broadcasts manifests a pragmatic understanding of what would interest the mass radio audience at home. From his earliest days in England, Murrow expressed his intention to create programming that was "anything but intellectual. I want them [the broadcasts] to be down to earth, in the vernacular of the man on the street....I plan to broadcast from English pubs, from the Brighton Pier and from crowded places on Bank

Holidays.”²¹ Murrow expressed these views to Sir John Reith, the Director General of the BBC, defending himself against the charge that he would “drag radio down to the level of the Hyde Park Speaker’s Corner,” in contrast to BBC policy of trying to educate, rather than sink to the level of the typical listener.²² While these opposite approaches highlight the essential difference between the American commercial system and British state-owned radio, Murrow’s views on programming equally manifested his distaste for the British class system which he described as “offensive.”²³

A broadcast in the earliest days of the war suggested that the bombing was likely to be a great equalizer:

...if this business of repeated air alarms goes on, the sociological results will be considerable. This is a class-conscious country... The man with a fine car, good clothes and perhaps an unearned income doesn’t generally fraternize with the tradesmen, day laborer and truck drivers. His fences are always up. He doesn’t meet them as equals....but if he is caught in Piccadilly Circus when the sirens sound, he may have a waitress stepping on his heels and see before him the broad back of a day laborer as he goes underground....I think it was Marcus Aurelius who said something to the effect that ‘death puts Alexander of Macedon and his stable boy on a par.’ Repeated visits to the public air raid shelters might have produced the same results.²⁴

²¹ Smith, *Edward R. Murrow, the War Years*, 8.

²² Landry, “Edward R. Murrow,” 9-10.

²³ Edward R. Murrow, *In Search of Light: the Broadcasts of Edward R. Murrow* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967), 3. Quoted from a broadcast in 1946 for the BBC called “A Reporter Remembers.” Although Murrow actively expressed his attitudes towards the social structure in Great Britain, he had, at best, an ambivalent relationship with it. He counted as friends many of the British nobility and upper class, spending weekends at their country estates. He cultivated a self-presentation that disguised his own roots, inflating his educational background to include a fictional Master’s degree from Stanford, falsely presenting himself as a having attended the University of Washington, graduating with degrees in Political Science and International Relations, rather than speech. Murrow also dressed the part of the well-heeled, urbane man-about-town. Paul White frequently goaded him by calling him “the very dapper Edward R. Murrow.” Persico, *Edward R. Murrow: An American Original*, 107.

²⁴ Edward R. Murrow, *This is London* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1941), 19. September 4, 1939.

Murrow's reference to Marcus Aurelius, Ida Lou Anderson's model rhetorician, signals his continued esteem for her tutelage. Yet, although wonderfully appropriate, the quote certainly wasn't familiar to the typical American listener. Throughout the war his broadcast essays addressed issues of class with measured juxtaposition and oblique judgment as in this report on discussions in Parliament: "The debates in the House of Lords are often more interesting than those in the House of Commons. The Lords have more leisure."²⁵ Whatever is meant does not appear on the page, and the lines beg for the voice to express its intention through verbal nuance and inflection.

Even before the Blitz began, Murrow's many, many profiles and vignettes of the plight of ordinary Londoners revealed his sympathies with stark images of distress. His longer pieces, I believe, are the ones which made him a star, with their extended narratives which drew out emotional response. By contrast, his news broadcasts, daily reports of troop movements, battles and other reports, were often terse and brief, limited to five minutes. Sir Lindsay Wellington, North American Director of BBC Operations during the war, said that Murrow's best work needed a larger canvas. "The Bible or the secret of Beethoven can't be told in two minutes. And if Ed was—and I think he was—often talking of those subjects, he did need more time, more space to move in, to develop and reveal thinking."²⁶

He was always constrained by time available to tell his story, yet even in short pieces he could distill emotional images into a few words. He typically set the context

²⁵Erik Barnouw, *A History of Broadcasting in the United States: The Golden Web, 1933-1953* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968) Quoting from an interview with Winston Burdett, a late arrival Murrow boy.

²⁶ Smith, *Edward R. Murrow, the War Years*, 93. From an interview with Sir Lindsay Wellington in March, 1971.

with a short overview of the most pressing issues of the day as in this broadcast on the withdrawal from Dunkirk, which was then underway, but the situation still very uncertain: “The British Expeditionary Force has continued to fall back toward the coast and part of it...has been evacuated by sea.” Very quickly he turns to the tense situation on the home front, where “ports are being carefully searched for concealed troops and...to weed out spies.”²⁷ Often, he will include an anecdote which encapsulates the tone of British resistance as in this description of a cartoon “showing an elderly aristocratic Englishman, dressed in his anti-parachute uniform, saying to his servant, who holds a double-barrel shotgun, ‘Come along, Thompson, I shall want you to load for me.’” Again, Murrow places the upper and lower classes side by side, choosing an anecdote which pokes fun at the class system, even as it emphasizes their solidarity. He next turns to what I will call the “snapshot album,” single sentences picturing discrete, unrelated moments which, in succession, relate an entire story.

I saw more grave solemn faces today than I have ever seen in London before...Fashionable tearooms were almost deserted; the shops in Bond Street were doing very little business; people read their newspapers as they walked slowly along the streets...I saw one woman standing in line waiting for a bus begin to cry, very quietly. She didn’t even bother to wipe the tears away. In Regent Street there was a sandwich man. His sign in big red letters had only three words on it: WATCH AND PRAY. [Emphasis in the original]²⁸

The “essay” ends on the image of the sandwich man and his sign, a sight familiar to Depression era Americans, which usually advertises something like “Eat at Joe’s.” Instead, the message is spiritual, and the story is left hanging, as is the listener, much in the tradition of the radio serial cliffhanger.

²⁷ Murrow, *This is London*, 113. May 30, 1940.

²⁸ Ibid.

Developing style: Dramatic monologue

His broadcasts before England entered the war show his instinct to include vignettes, but are more general and less visual than those that came later. During the Munich crisis, H.V. Kaltenborn, CBS's leading news commentator, dominated the airwaves from his New York base, translating Hitler's speeches, speculating on the responses of the nations involved, and interpreting actions and terms under discussion. "Out of Studio Nine, in a period of eighteen days, I made eighty-five broadcasts ...everyone of these talks was entirely unprepared," Kaltenborn boasted, "being an analysis of the news as it was occurring."²⁹ Murrow, on air thirty-five times, contrasted with Kaltenborn's tidal wave of opinion by providing factual and "color" commentary on the reaction in England, and served an apprenticeship for his Blitz broadcasts.

For the last four hours I've been going about London, riding in busses, talking with cab drivers, talking with doormen of hotels and clubs, and while it may be true that London isn't typical of England—and perhaps the people that I talked with haven't been typical of London, nevertheless I've been very impressed with the unanimity of support for Prime Minister Chamberlain....I talked with one ex-serviceman and ...he said "Well, sir, about thirty or forty years ago I was in your country, out in Colorado, and I saw those big poker games going on in the gold mines, and the events here have reminded me of those games I saw out in Colorado many years ago."³⁰

In contrast to Kaltenborn's high level analysis, Murrow brings in the man in the street, although his prose is plain, conversational and wordy, showing none of the vivid, touching imagery that would come later. Only the anecdote, likening the crisis to a poker game, enlivens his broadcast, and I wonder if perhaps its aptness for the situation and for American audiences suggests that it is not authentically the product of an interview.

²⁹ H.V. Kaltenborn, *I Broadcast the Crisis* (New York: Random House, 1938), 9.

³⁰ Murrow, *In Search of Light*, 6. September 16, 1938.

There is evidence that Murrow might have been inspired, not by an interview with a serviceman, but from a cartoon in *Punch* which appeared only a month before Murrow's broadcast. In it the key players in the crisis are shown as cowboy poker players in the Old West: Hitler, Henlein and Czechoslovakia's president Hachá play at the "high stakes" table while Lord Runciman enters, looking like a frontier judge. Now it is possible that Murrow's serviceman might have made the same analogy, but it seems too much of a coincidence. This suggests that Murrow may have elided the truth to make a more effective broadcast.



HIGH STAKES

DAREDEVIL RUNCIMAN (to Messrs. Hodža, Henlein and Hitler). "Mind if I take a hand, boys?"

AUGUST 10, 1938

Fig. 3 *Punch*³¹

³¹ *Punch*, August 10, 1938.

With practice, Murrow squeezed out unnecessary verbiage and learned how to incorporate his empathy with England's increasingly anxious position into his broadcasts in ways that would move his audience. On the eve of war, August 31, 1939, he reported the evacuation of London, drawing on imagery from the New and Old Testaments. "Tomorrow we shall see the children, the halt, the lame and the blind going out of Britain's cities. Six hundred and fifty thousand will leave London tomorrow. The exodus will start at 5:30 in the morning."³² Murrow poetically and evocatively describes the planned mass departure from possible bombing targets. This is a conscious choice that avoids sensationalism. He might have said people were fleeing, escaping, running away. Instead, he presents an image of calm and compassionate shepherding to safety. He evokes Jesus' parable that invites "the halt, the lame and the blind," the most vulnerable and despised of people to a feast, a metaphor for salvation for all mankind. His use of the word "exodus" calls up the story of God's protection of the Jews in their escape from Egypt. These were religious contexts familiar to most Americans of the time. They conjure up a calm, orderly procession with thoughtful care for those least able to withstand the difficulties of war. He later provides the facts that support the image of calm control: "Within two hours after the evacuation announcement was made, newspapers appeared in the streets with complete maps and detailed instructions for any who might care for them." But these biblical images also suggest righteousness and God's mercy. Without saying so directly, Murrow sensitively steers the listener to sympathy for England's ordeal. A year later, when the "phony war" was over and the

³² Murrow, *In Search of Light*, 12. August 31, 1939 broadcast. The New Testament reference is from Luke 14:13.

Blitz began, he would appeal to those sympathies with ever more vivid and dramatic narratives.

True-to-life Radio Drama

Murrow understood the radio axiom that you are writing for the ear. His own background in speech and rhetoric disposed him to listen for the sounds of the words he wrote and how they would play upon the listener. He used a tape machine at the CBS office in London to test out the sound of his broadcasts. He often dictated drafts to a secretary, so that he could hear the words and pacing.³³ Broadcasts were timed to the minute and second, documented on show logs. But until he began broadcasting, Murrow had relied on establishing a visual connection with his audience which was absent in radio. Writing about radio drama, Erik Barnouw, the great historian of broadcast communications who began his career at CBS as a writer and director, advised aspiring radio writers that “the absence of the visual element means that radio drama really exists only in the imagination of the listener....[and] must enlist the active collaboration of the audiences’ imagination.”³⁴ Murrow’s broadcasts came to have much in common with radio plays, as dramatic events called upon him to convey the intensity of what he saw in England. He, himself, was a somewhat theatrical person, something which was apparent to those who observed him. I.D. Benzie, Foreign Director of the BBC, said that there was “always more than a ‘tinge’ of histrionics” about Murrow.³⁵ He brought a performer’s sensibilities to his writing as he did to his broadcasting. Although his work became

³³ Smith, *Edward R. Murrow, the War Years*, 42. From an interview with Charles Collingwood in 1971.

³⁴ Erik Barnouw, *Handbook of Radio Writing* (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1939), 12.

³⁵ Smith, *Edward R. Murrow, the War Years*, 9. From an interview with Miss Benzie in 1971.

polished and professionalized during the two years between the Munich Crisis and the Blitz, it took high drama to bring it to another level. The London Blitz provided that. Murrow's broadcasts during the months of continuous night bombing from late August, 1940 through the end of the year exerted a powerful force on American public opinion in favor of intervention. Public opinion polls reflect a shift in favor of intervention of twenty points, to 53%, between May and the end of September. Murrow's broadcasts were a major source of the information which Americans had to come to that change of heart.³⁶ Franklin Smith points out that "Americans had no direct impressions of the war, but only those molded and shaped by the news media and the broadcast journalists."³⁷ I suggest that Murrow's mode of creative expression emerged under the pressure of the extended crisis which gave many of the broadcasts a dramatic intensity and tragic lyricism that affected American's profoundly.

Poetic expression

Murrow's prose style, which emerged in this period, combines the newsman's economy of language with the poet's eye for detail and ear for sound. Murrow rarely used unfamiliar words, but his juxtaposition of images, his choice of subject and description are more poetic than journalistic, more formal in expression than plain newsman's address. His sentences are restrained and avoid melodrama, but the tone and imagery elevate the narrative above the news genre.

A review of his published broadcasts clearly demonstrates the pace of his creative development. Before the Blitz his reports are trenchant, measured and engrossing. He

³⁶ Hadley Cantril, Donald Rugg and Frederick Williams, "America Faces the War: Shifts in Opinion," *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 4, no. 4 (December, 1940): 652.

³⁷ Smith, *Edward R. Murrow, the War Years*, 30.

tells wonderful anecdotes. Some are deeply touching and provide a glimpse of what is to come in the Blitz period—journalistic word portraits of human interest. Godfrey Talbot, a BBC war correspondent remembered that

Murrow was a very sensitive man; very much a human being able to be touched by other people's experiences....He was able, through the spoken word....to give you a picture of what it felt like, what it smelt like, what it burned like and what it was like, at the time, on the spot. So you the listener were standing with him, you were beside him at the microphone, in the streets of London.³⁸

During the Blitz, however, the style becomes more and more dramatic and descriptive. After the early days of the bombing, a change comes over his texts. By early September his language has more imagery, as if he has run out of conventional ways to describe the continuing tragedy. Murrow stretches his descriptive powers both in short phrases and longer portraits.

He talks of the people of the Blitz in a theme with a thousand variations, as this passage, compiled from several broadcasts, illustrates. As the air raid's "warning wail crept through the winter night," people seek shelter.³⁹ The cellar of a "world famous hotel" was peopled by "a cosmopolitan crowd. But there wasn't any sparkling cocktail conversation."⁴⁰ Their lower class counterparts, headed to the Underground, "Three people, old they were, stood beside me in the rain and murk...on their way to the shelters. The bedding rolls were hunched high on their shoulders....Those people, squelched away in the darkness, [looked] like repugnant humpbacked monsters."⁴¹ Up on the surface, relentless bombing raged. "Night after night the obscene glare of hundreds of fires

³⁸ Ibid., 84. From an interview with Talbot in 1971.

³⁹ Murrow, *This is London*, 221. December 23, 1940.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 165. September 10, 1940.

⁴¹ Ibid., 210. November 18, 1940.

reddened the bellies of the big, awkward barrage balloons...transforming them into queer animals with grace and beauty.”⁴² Struggling to control the damage, firefighters, the “black-faced men with bloodshot eyes” are supported by the “girls who cradled the steering wheel of a heavy ambulance in their arms.”⁴³ And at the “all clear,” “hundreds of thousands of humans come oozing up from underground...The ducks in Green Park set up their questioning quacking and the pigeons come back from some mysterious place to Trafalgar Square.”⁴⁴ Over and over, Murrow found new and artful ways to convey generic suffering, daily endured.

His descriptions of the nights during which he stood watch on rooftops or roamed London’s streets dodging bombs are among his richest. In late September, from the roof of the BBC, he sees a building “two windows gone. Out of one window there waves something that looks like a white bed sheet, a window curtain swinging free in this night breeze. It looks as though it were being shaken by a ghost...There’s a three-quarter moon riding high. There was one burst of shell fire almost straight in the Little Dipper.”⁴⁵ This scene, and many like it—nearly all at night—picture the surreal contrasts which are a part of the war experience, such as this description of another night sky in which the beauty of the scene abruptly confronts deadly practicality. “...the moon is almost full, but

⁴² Ibid., 232. March 9, 1941.

⁴³ Ibid., 171. September 12, 1940.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 216. December 2, 1940. Murrow frequently used “oozing” as a description of people going into and out of the shelters, including in the *London After Dark* program of August, 24, 1940.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 181. September 22, 1940.

the heavy cloud rack which scuds across its face has reduced the moon's value as a bombing flare.”⁴⁶

Poetic images are frequently disrupted by the ugly realities of war. Planes flying in formation provide a lyrical moment: “almost invisible, high in the blue sky, [they] swung in a slow circle above the cathedral. They left a trail that looked like the wake of fast speedboats on the blue-green water. A quarter of a mile behind this squadron, cutting in and out of feathery white wakes, came a single plane, swerving side to side in slow, graceful sweeps like a surf rider—the lone fighter covering the rear of the fighter patrol.”⁴⁷ One imagines a summer day on a lake and peaceful recreation, except for the knowledge that the planes are on a deadly mission.

As the bombing became a daily reality for London, Murrow responded with increasingly risky behavior, going out into the streets as soon as the air raids sounded. “Ed’s best broadcasts were always related to some aspect of reality that he had seen or personally experienced,” according to Charles Collingwood.⁴⁸ His colleagues all noticed that he seemed to seek out danger, as if in “compensation in a way for not being in the war,” recalled Richard Marriott of the BBC.⁴⁹ But I suggest that the adrenalin of the experiences also inspired his best writing. Murrow would spend hours in the streets of London during an air raid and then come to the office and write his broadcast. He seemed to become addicted to the process, taking more and more chances as the war progressed. After his famous “Orchestrated Hell” broadcast in 1943, he received a letter from Paul

⁴⁶ Ibid., 201-202. October, 13, 1940.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 203. October 13, 1940.

⁴⁸ Smith, *Edward R. Murrow, the War Years*, 43. From an interview with Collingwood in 1971.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 45. From an interview with Marriott in 1971.

White telling him of all the wonderful press coverage that exploit received but ended by saying "I hope now you are cured. Please, please, please don't do it again!"⁵⁰ In these exploits, Murrow not only wrote and reported dramatically but also seemed to merge with the mythology which developed around him as a dashing foreign correspondent.

Verse Plays

The language which Murrow used and his poetic form of expression differentiate him from all the broadcast reporters of the war era. This rhetorical style, grounded I believe, in his interest in drama, suggests the influence of the verse play, common on radio and Broadway during the 1930s.⁵¹ They usually presented serious subjects, using the formal structure of verse to elevate the material above the commonplace. It is impossible to know how much familiarity Murrow had with the verse plays of Archibald MacLeish and Norman Corwin, or with other playwrights who wrote in verse. We know he knew MacLeish, who gave the keynote address at Murrow's testimonial dinner in 1941. And we know he greatly admired Norman Corwin. In 1942 he collaborated with Corwin on the series *An American in England*. Murrow's Blitz scripts seem to have been influenced by the tradition both playwrights championed. MacLeish and Corwin both used verse form to express their political views on radio, especially with respect to intervention. Because they were presented as a work of art, their views were more

⁵⁰ Paul W. White to Edward R. Murrow, December 4, 1943, Reel 44, Edward R. Murrow Collection, Tufts University Archive, Boston.

⁵¹ Milton A. Kaplan, "Radio and Poetry," *Poetry* 64 no. 5 (August, 1944):271. "Since 1936 when D. G. Bridson wrote the first radio verse play for the British Broadcasting Corporation, The March of the '45", more than a hundred and fifty scripts using verse have been written specifically for radio production. Among the radio poets today can be listed Archibald MacLeish, Stephen Vincent Benet, Carl Sandburg, Maxwell Anderson, Alfred Kreyborg, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Norman Corwin, W. H. Auden, John LaTouche, Louis MacNeice, Norman Rosten, Kimball Flaccus, A. M. Sullivan, Eve Merriam, Sidney Alexander, and the list is by no means complete. These radio verse plays have proved so effective that many of them have won a permanence of form generally denied most radio drama."

acceptable on radio, which increasingly limited direct political expression.⁵² I do not suggest that Murrow tried to cloak his politics in poetic language. Rather, I suggest that he used poetic language to elevate the plight of the British to a higher level of drama, which, indirectly, had the same effect: influencing the audience to engage with the events and support the war. I will use two examples to illustrate how Murrow's work suggests this style.

Murrow's love of short bursts of description, snapshots of scenes, has its parallel in MacLeish's work, as in this passage from *The Fall of the City*:

Close to us are the cabinet ministers:
They stand on a raised platform with awnings.
The farmers' wives are squatting on the stones:
Their children have fallen asleep on their shoulders.
The heat is harsh: the light dazzles like metal.⁵³

Murrow's description of New Year's Eve, 1940 strikes a similar image; even the cadence is suggestive of MacLeish's meter. I have rearranged the lines below as if they were in a verse play instead of a radio script.

Laughing voices filter out through a closely shuttered window.
The big red busses that roam the streets are nearly empty.
Earlier the pubs were full. Not much drunkenness
But plenty of laughter and high spirits.
The stakes in the dart game were up to ten cents a game.⁵⁴

Each writer describes an ordinary scene in quick phrases, capturing ordinary sights in simple words. The juxtapositions matter, but the context matters more. Even though it is

⁵² In 1939 the National Association of Broadcasters, in an attempt to stave off government regulation, adopted a "standards of practices" in which "news shall not be selected for the purpose of furthering or hindering either side of any controversial public issue, nor shall it be colored by the opinions of the station or network management." From the 1939 NAB code quoted in full in Charnley, *News by Radio*, 373.

⁵³ Archibald MacLeish, "The Fall of the City," (1940), in *Three Short Plays* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1961). The play was first performed on *Columbia Workshop* in 1937.

⁵⁴ Murrow, *This is London*, 228-229. December 31, 1941.

not described in either text, there is a sense of implied anticipation. MacLeish's peasants and high powered officials are gathered in a city, awaiting a false savior. Murrow's Londoners make merry against the ever present possibility of an air strike. Tension overlays everything.

Corwin, who regularly wrote in verse, was much more frequently heard on radio than MacLeish. His style was probably familiar to audiences at a time when poetry, which was a regular part of school curriculum, was much more part of the national culture than it is today. A passage from Norman Corwin's *Psalm for a Dark Year* poetically describes a bombing scene in this allegory of war written for Thanksgiving in 1941.

While you speak, new-fallen angels plummet from the skies like a malignant hail;
The air is so ashriek with misery, no decent thought can rise up through it; the
earth is fevered; auroras tremble overhead; pity and mercy both are exiled to a
foreign star, and Charity's aghast to see a million of our brothers writhing in
their blood.⁵⁵

Murrow's descriptions of bombing are never quite as dramatic as Corwin's, but they nevertheless carry considerable poetic language:

The fires up the river had turned the moon blood red. The smoke had drifted
down till it formed a canopy over the Thames; the guns were working all around
us, the bursts looked like fireflies in a southern summer night.⁵⁶

Since Murrow describes a real experience of war, I suggest that his text has greater dramatic power than Corwin's or any other clearly fictional work. His image of fireflies on a "southern summer night" suggests a lazy setting—and a peaceful one—familiar to

⁵⁵ Norman Corwin, "Psalm for a Dark Year," in *More by Corwin* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1944), 171.

⁵⁶ Murrow, *This is London*, 158. September 8, 1940.

audiences. Murrow refracts the horrors of war through the lens of pleasant memories. Surely this is a discomfiting experience for the listener, safe at home in America.

Reading Murrow's texts, one after the other, provides a growing body of evidence of his considerable narrative skill. The stories are compelling, beautifully and sparsely written and not repetitive, despite the fact that he essentially had the same story to tell every day. Frank Gillard, a BBC correspondent during the war said "[Murrow] went through agonies of concentration to write his story. He sat over his typewriter, enveloped and isolated in clouds of cigarette smoke, oblivious to all around him."⁵⁷ The work did not come easily to him, yet on air, he always sounded cool and in control, with no trace of the stress that it cost him to produce it. The vast majority of his actual broadcasts are lost, yet we must always remember that these texts were read nightly, one at a time. This drew out the suspense of the drama and anticipation for the next one, like the tales of some modern day Scheherazade. What made them live was their recounting on air, brought to life by Murrow's delivery.

THE SOUND OF THE NEWS

The Aural Environment: a blur of news-like sound

Although it is always important to consider the interrelationship between the text and the sonic elements of a broadcast, news programming presents a special case. During the era before the war, news was almost entirely talk by commentators. The single, albeit important, exception which I will address later, is the dramatized news genre peculiar to that era. News programming consisted of single speakers lecturing on current events and other items of topical interest. The rise of this genre owes something to the Press-Radio

⁵⁷ Smith, *Edward R. Murrow, the War Years*, 39. From a 1970 letter from Gilliard to the author.

war which complicated the evolution of radio news during the mid-1930s. As newspapers saw their revenues decline during the Depression, while radio grew apace, they tried to retain a monopoly on news reporting. Radio's advantage of timeliness over print, ease of consumption and "free" availability further undermined an already suffering news business. Radio news was beginning to supplant print as the primary source of information, particularly among lower income and less educated people.⁵⁸ Radio initially relied on wire services but as the conflict escalated, the news media boycotted radio, refused to publish radio program listings and pressured the AP and UPI services to stop providing news to radio, forcing the networks to dismantle their nascent news departments and to agree to limitations on news broadcasts.⁵⁹

In lieu of up-to-the-minute news, the networks promoted individual personalities who commented on events, showcasing these speakers as their popularity grew. For the listener, this was a confusing aural environment. There was no formal distinction among commentators. Actual news discussion, ideology, sensationalism, and celebrity gossip were all represented and all fell under the umbrella of news; even the Hooper Ratings reported them as a single programming group.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Paul F. Lazarsfeld, *Radio and the Printed Page* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1940), 227, 252-254. Although print was still the primary source for news by the late 1930s for all demographic types, 25% of the total population cited radio as their preferred source. When adjusted for radio ownership and news consumption, the picture for radio was more skewed, with more than half of middle and lower income people preferring to get their news by radio. By 1945 radio had become the dominant news source for all, with 61% of the population claiming that they got most of their news from radio.

⁵⁹ Charnley, *News by Radio*, 17.

⁶⁰ Even as late as 1946, long after news became more clearly segmented, Hooper's reports included twelve nationally heard commentators and newscasters in the same category. In this group were broadcasters as diverse as Walter Winchell, Lowell Thomas, Drew Pearson, Robert Trout, H.V. Kaltenborn, William Shirer, Fulton Lewis, Jr. and Gabriel Heatter. Both Floyd Gibbons and Boake Carter were dead by then. Irving E. Fang, *Those Radio Commentators!* (Ames: The Iowa State University Press, 1977), 246.

Commentators did not limit themselves to discrete categories of discussion. Gossip monger Walter Winchell and racially bigoted Father Coughlin both weighed in on government and social policies in addition to their primary subjects. Adventurer Lowell Thomas reported news from around the world as well as cultural fare. All were extremely popular and a source of information considered by listeners. Those whose main “beat” could be somewhat more easily be characterized as news, H.V. Kaltenborn, Boake Carter, Gabriel Heatter, Fulton Lewis, Jr. and Floyd Gibbons, leading commentators during the 1930s, focused primarily on current events. They were, however, by no means neutral in their reporting. These men had nothing to use on radio but their voices and their texts. Each had a distinct rhetorical style, incorporating vocal mannerisms, trademark phrases and delivery which separated them from others, making them instantly recognizable to the audience by the sound of their voices alone. Instant recognition helped both the networks and the audience. As listeners whirled the dial in search of programming, listeners could identify favorites and tune in. Just as easily, they could bypass those they wanted to avoid simply by hearing an indentifying inflection.

We can easily categorize commentators into sub-groups: Coughlin, Winchell and Thomas did not actually report news. Coughlin was a priest who delivered a “moral” message. Winchell was an entertainment reporter, Thomas, a travel essayist who did not write his own scripts. Nevertheless, people heard opinions from them on current issues. These blended together with everything else they heard and influenced listener views. Kaltenborn, Carter, Heatter, Lewis and Gibbons can be considered a sub-group of newsmen: former print journalists who wrote their own material and discussed national and world events of immediate interest. Their effect on news consumption was perhaps

even more insidious than the more polarizing Winchell and Coughlin. These people dominated the radio landscape with a great wash of sound carrying information interlaced with personal opinions presented as truth, often with emotionally charged delivery. Studies consistently reported that radio was “freer from prejudice” and provided the “failures, most unbiased” information.⁶¹ Sixty per cent found radio more believable than newspapers.⁶²

The Commentators

It would be satisfying if the vocal and presentational styles of the commentators could easily be reduced to distinct signals of their beliefs and biases, but it is not quite so simple. All brought an editorial point of view which was paired with a speaking style that successfully won them large audiences. But their voice and editorial choices did not always seem an obvious match with the content. The following profiles convey the wide array of styles and narrative approaches that audiences were exposed to throughout the 1930s. News reporting changed dramatically from 1938 onward, and there were many, well-known new-style analysts during the war. However, I include this sampling because these men are representative of what people had become accustomed to before reporting changed after the Munich crisis. Among those listeners was Edward Murrow, whose style was also influenced by what he heard.

Floyd Gibbons- The title of Floyd Gibbon’s show “The Headline Hunter,” accurately reflects his approach: “Excitement is news. I find out what interests me in the news. I

⁶¹ Charnley, *News by Radio*, 51. Results from a *Fortune* magazine poll in 1939 gave radio 49.7% for objectivity compared to 17.1% for newspapers. A study in 1945 by the National Opinion Research Center found similar results.

⁶² Ibid.

take an incident and try to dramatize it into a human story, sticking to the facts, and with one rule above all others—simplicity.”⁶³ Gibbons had a tabloid voice which fired off over 200 words/minute with driving intensity. Machine gun voice and story-telling style do not seem compatible, but he intended to excite people and used his voice to do so. Gibbons didn’t report news. He took news events and retold them the audiences in dramatic style to touch their hearts or make them laugh. News was his inspiration, but entertainment was his intention, whether reporting about heartrending stories of the Depression or whipping up a frenzy about repression in the Soviet Union: “You know, the historic strategy for heading off threatened revolt within a state is to set up a hullabaloo about enemies at the gates.”⁶⁴

Gabriel Heatter. Warm voiced and benign in manner, Heatter, who liked to say “there’s good news tonight,” counter-intuitively got his on-air break reporting daily for CBS from the Bruno Hauptmann trial for the Lindbergh kidnapping. While other reporters sensationalized, he talked of the human tragedy of the case. When a short stay delayed Hauptmann’s execution, Heatter ad-libbed for half an hour, speculating on what the condemned man was feeling. The broadcast brought in 50,000 letters of praise for Heatter and made him a star commentator. From his later base on the Mutual network, Heatter preferred to report on the bright side of things, and during the war he was a voice of optimism, even when there was little “good news” to report. In the few existing broadcasts, one can hear a distinct vocal score. At first, his voice has a hearty sound, pausing regularly at aural commas. As he moves from hard facts to human interest his

⁶³ Fang, *Those Radio Commentators!*, 55. Quoting from an interview with Gibbons conducted in the 1930s by Douglas Gilbert for the *New York Evening Telegram*.

⁶⁴ Fang, *Those Radio Commentators!*, 58. From a 1930 broadcast by Gibbons.

tenor timbre caresses words, and long phrases vary in pitch only a little. But, as he goes on, he builds to a stem-winder like a Chautauqua circuit preacher, raising his voice, then dropping, gradually rising in crescendo. His V-E Day broadcast reminds that he was the voice of optimism, and he repeats the news, “Peace in Europe, Peace in Europe,” before calling up images of thanksgiving and joy in homes and churches across the nation.

Triumphantly he proclaims “Hitler’s nose is rubbed good and hard, [beat] in the mud of humiliation.” Recounting the litany of America’s contribution to the war in armaments, supplies, “ships and tanks and gold” he salutes the contributions of “free men and women and free labor” on the home front, and two million men who will come back “men who bled for this great day.” He vows that America will be a better place for all races and creeds when the men come home. “We gave our pledge, [breath] in the darkest hour, [pause] let us honor it.” As he turns to continued danger into Pacific he grows darker in timbre and increases in intensity, voice rising and falling in pitch and volume. “How are you going to celebrate when you know boys are still dying on Okinawa?” Winding down to the end of the broadcast, he predicts a bright future, preaching salvation, “like a bell tolling: Peace.”⁶⁵

Fulton Lewis, Jr. The golden voice of Fulton Lewis, Jr., who spoke on the Mutual Network, correctly identified his privileged background. He came from a family which traced its roots to the Revolutionary war and had an ancestor who sat in Lincoln’s cabinet. He was nevertheless a relentless reporter who thrived on political exposés. Feared and admired on Capitol Hill, he leaned heavily to the right, delivering his views with smooth voice and a host of techniques which became known as “Lewisisms.” He

⁶⁵ Gabriel Heatter, May 8, 1945. Mutual Network broadcast. The Museum of Broadcast Communications, Chicago, IL. <http://archives.museum.tv/login?from=archives>.

avored compound adjectival expressions like “piddle-paddle, double talking CIO-Communist-backed, left-wing crackpot.”⁶⁶ While his voice was well-modulated, his speech was heavily inflected with innuendo. On occasion he purposefully tripped over words or names to convey contempt: “Alger, Hiss iss iis Hissky ah ah ah ah Alger Hiss case.”⁶⁷ The *Saturday Evening Post* ran a feature article on him called “Voice with a Snarl,” describing his method of conveying sarcasm on the air, which included laboring over words and snide chuckles at opportune moments. Contradictorily, Lewis’ upper class accent and verbosity appealed to older audiences, professionals and business men, but audience polls identified his largest base among the working class.⁶⁸

Boake Carter A self-styled aristocrat, Carter used his British birth to fashion a complete persona, including a phony pedigree, a Philadelphia ride-to-the-hounds lifestyle and a voice which lent a tone of superior knowledge to his broadcasts. Carter experimented with several forms of address before settling on a pseudo-British accent peppered with flipped r’s, drawn out n’s and other exaggerated diction as well as faux-Etonian pronunciation creating what historian David Holbrook Culbert called a “vocal zoot suit.”⁶⁹ Virulently anti-New Deal and isolationist, Carter campaigned against Roosevelt’s policies to considerable effect, using his newscasts as a pulpit. He rivaled Lowell Thomas, the highest rated commentator, for popularity. Many of his listeners felt that his accent exuded education and erudition, and that his arguments against getting into

⁶⁶ Fang, *Those Radio Commentators!*, 210.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 209.

⁶⁸ David Holbrook Culbert, *News for Everyman: Radio and Foreign Affairs in Thirties America* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1976), 172.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 44.

another war were sensible, ratifying the audience's own reticence for involvement.

Staring down facts, he reconstructed events to suit his views like the comment on the impending Anschluss, which he argued simply righted the wrongs of the Versailles treaty.

It is my belief that war is nowhere near Europe, that these events are what might be called surface rashes due to fundamental readjustments. Pimples of adolescence one might say. Austria became a stomach without a mouth.... obliged to depend upon forced financial feeding from the British and French bankers.⁷⁰

The most popular among Roosevelt's foes, Carter alone was silenced by the FCC ruling that networks not take positions on political issues when CBS canceled his very profitable program in 1938. After his departure, and Father Coughlin's there were no powerful voices on the airwaves which opposed the administration.

H.V. Kaltenborn

At the end of the 1930s, H.V. (Hans Von) Kaltenborn was the dean of news commentary. *Kaltenborn Edits the News* was one of CBS's longest running and most esteemed public service programs. Born in 1878 in Milwaukee the son of a penniless, emigrant German baron who drank himself to death, Kaltenborn did not have a privileged upbringing. He left school at fourteen and led a vagabond life traveling through Europe until, at age 27 he entered Harvard as a special student and graduated Phi Beta Kappa two years later. Kaltenborn was among the earliest of news commentators, and began to broadcast regularly in 1923 on WEAJ while working full time at the Brooklyn *Eagle*. He began lecturing on current events to crowds numbering in the thousands as early as 1918. He traveled in the Soviet Union and Asia in the 1920s. Kaltenborn turned to broadcasting

⁷⁰ Boake Carter, CBS broadcast, March 11, 1938, <http://www.otr.com/bcarter.html>.

full time in 1930 when he joined CBS. Fluent in German and French, he brought a wider base of knowledge and experience than any other commentator of the time, and his broadcasts exude the self-confidence that he knew what he was talking about, manifested in both his words and his on-air manner. Kaltenborn was famous for his extemporaneity, made more remarkable by his rapid delivery. He spoke in continuous short bursts of a half a dozen or more words, with pauses in between no longer than a beat or two. A hard edged intensity drove his presentations along, forcing the listener to pay attention. His voice was distinctive for its pronunciation and timbre. He varied his pitch in accord with the intensity of the phrase. He had an old-fashioned diction which one might associate with an earlier generation. That makes him sound professorial and authoritative, if somewhat prissy. He too rolled his “r’s,” and exaggerated multisyllabic words. “Russia” came out “rush ee ah;” epochal sounded like “ee pawk youl.” It’s the kind of voice one can still hear in the films of the very early 1930s spoken by older actors who enunciated with deliberate precision to be understood on film and to sound somehow more cultivated. To this didactic address he brought certainty of interpretation. In an early 1940 broadcast, during the “phony war,” his speculation on the German strategy towards the Low Countries is very characteristic of his rhetorical style. “How could Germany bring the war to an early end?” he asked.

Certainly not, by striking against the Maginot Line. **Certainly not** by any move that would involve conquest---- But it **might** be brought to an end **if** the Germans could gain, [pause] bases, **air bases** on the **Dutch** coast, on the **Belgian** coast---- to use the mass of their planes to strike against Britain” [emphasis added to indicate stresses and inflection]⁷¹

⁷¹ H.V. Kaltenborn, *The World Today*, CBS News, 11 January, 1940, <http://archives.museum.tv/archives>. Analysis of news reports made from Europe.

Each time he says “certainly not” we hear a blustery sound, as if his cheeks vibrated, shaking his head vigorously while pronouncing the words.

The apex of his fame coincided with the beginning of Murrow’s broadcast career, during the Munich crisis. He literally slept on a cot in Studio 9 in New York, awaiting AP feeds and broadcasts from Europe. His simultaneous translations of Hitler’s speeches and the responses from the French Government impressed the nation. Kaltenborn had great credibility and although his predictions were not always correct, he had a remarkable record for one who reacted to what he heard and immediately interpreted it. His was the voice of a wise, old, if intense, seer.

Dramatized News

A program form which flourished in the 1930s, dramatized news consisted of fictional reenactments of major news stories. The most famous and long lived of this genre is *The March of Time* which aired on radio continuously from 1931-1939.⁷²

Serious studies of broadcast news history today dismiss this form as not news at all, but entertainment. Curious evidence for this dismissiveness is the fact that there has been no in-depth scholarly study of this immensely popular genre, although *The March of Time* in its newsreel incarnation has been widely examined. Whether or not dramatized news is entertainment it was nonetheless highly influential and worthy of greater consideration.

Today, many assume that the line between news and entertainment has been clearly drawn and that audiences discern far more critically what they see or hear in mass media and film, and recognize fact from fiction. Audiences are more critical consumers

⁷² The show was canceled in 1939 and reinstated in 1941. It ran until 1946 although it underwent several format changes in its later incarnations.

today than they were in the 1930s, but audiences then, as today, absorb information from many sources, and often take fictional accounts of historical events as accurate representations. There is considerable evidence of audience credulousness and suggestibility in the 1930s. Certainly the *Mercury Theater of the Air*'s broadcast of the *War of the Worlds* demonstrated that.⁷³ Aired in 1938, shortly after the end of the Munich crisis, when the public had been exposed to hundreds of program interruptions with breaking news from Europe, the broadcast caused a panic throughout the country because of its verisimilitude, especially in its first half hour which was dominated by spot news reports from what seemed like real locations. Paul Lazarsfeld, in his groundbreaking study of the social impact of radio on print, *Radio and the Printed Page*, asked "Is the potential radio listener more suggestible than the potential reader? There are strong indications that this is the fact...Of all the facts that make radio a powerful social institution, probably the most imposing one is that radio is the preferred medium of the more suggestible man."⁷⁴ In a poll conducted by Kansas State College, which is widely cited by 1930s researchers and radio writers, 95% of audiences preferred dramatized news to traditional reporting. Anecdotal evidence confirms its popularity.⁷⁵

Although discredited today as a legitimate news format, audiences were not alone in their respect for dramatized news. It was considered an entirely professional and

⁷³ Hadley Cantril, *The Invasion from Mars: A Study in the Psychology of Panic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1940), 55-60. *Mercury Theater of the Air* was a sustaining program, therefore unrated, but Cantril used surveys, an extrapolation of Hooper ratings and the Cooperative Analysis of Broadcasting determined that there were at least six million who listened to the broadcast. A survey fielded by the American Institute of Public Opinion (Gallup) ascertained that one in six listeners admitted that they believed the broadcast was real and were frightened by it.

⁷⁴ Lazarsfeld, *Radio and the Printed Page*, 257.

⁷⁵ Robert J. Brown, *Manipulating the Ether: The Power of Broadcast Radio in Thirties America* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1998), 152.

worthy alternative in news broadcasting. In books and articles about the production of radio news, professionals treated dramatized news with respect. None compared it unfavorably to commentator or analyst forms or suggested that it was somehow inferior. Murrow's boss and CBS news head, Paul White, the unsung genius behind news broadcasting, devoted an entire chapter in his book, *News on the Air*, to the production of dramatized news. White, who came to the network in 1930 after a career at the United Press International, acknowledges the difficulties inherent in this program form: "...newsy news is not always dramatic....[but] occasionally it becomes so dramatic that to embroider it with sound and music is lily-gilding of the most flagrant sort."⁷⁶ Nevertheless he expresses admiration for the genre and offers practical advice as to how best to produce these shows, emphasizing that the key to a successful show was in the selection of news items that "have conflict and suspense."⁷⁷ White saw nothing wrong with looking for drama in legitimate news stories. And he was not alone. Mitchell Charnley, a University of Minnesota professor, considered radio's greatest strength its ability to tell a story through dramatization. "Dramatization is the tool which makes 'documentaries' so effective...for it more nearly approaches reality."⁷⁸

This discussion will be limited to *The March of Time*, but it is representative of other programs which aired during radio's heyday and was the dominant exponent of the form. Shows had an episodic, magazine-style format which varied over time, but the

⁷⁶ Paul W. White, *News on the Air* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1947), 249.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 298.

⁷⁸ Charnley, *News by Radio*, 202. Eric Barnouw and Max Wylie, who both wrote books in the 1930s on writing for radio, expressed similar approving views on the dramatized news genre.

most enduring was the weekly half-hour.⁷⁹ Politics, human interest, natural disasters, international affairs, sports and entertainment were all part of the mix. Often the program had a specific theme around which a number of stories revolved. *The March of Time* liberally incorporated all the elements of the sonic palette. Stories were imaginatively scripted, had huge casts, were scored for full orchestra and chorus, and incorporated sophisticated sound effects. A Harold Arlen show tune, “The March of Time,” was adopted as the theme song and name for the program.

White summarized the effort put into its production. A typical half hour *The March of Time* broadcast required 1000 man hours of production, including 500 hours for research, writing and rewriting, 400 for rehearsals for cast and crew and 60 hours for music. The balance was attributed to administration.⁸⁰ An average of 72 people worked on every show; it was said to be the most labor intensive program on radio, by far. Program material was selected by an editorial committee from *Time* magazine. From the nearly two hundred stories prepared for the magazine weekly five to ten would be chosen, turned into radio skits by advertising agency BBDO, cast almost entirely from a company of stock players, each of whom played several roles in any given show. “They are an amazingly versatile lot. They have an incredible range of voices, dialects and characterizations among themselves and seldom is it necessary to go outside this little group.”⁸¹ Typically, a dozen actors, six men and three women, each played three to four parts every week. News reels were constantly reviewed for voice samples of people

⁷⁹ In 1935, when *The March of Time* was launched as a film newsreel, the radio show briefly went to a five times a week, 15 minute broadcast as a way to help promote the film version. The work and cost of this effort was unsustainable, although very popular.

⁸⁰ White, *News on the Air*, 250.

⁸¹ Tom Carskadon, “Time Marches On,” *Tower Radio*, January 1935, 25.

coming into the public eye so the actors could add new impersonations to their repertoires. So many different voices were called for that the actors specialized in portrayals, often extremely diverse. For example, actor Dwight Weist played both President Conant of Harvard and Bruno Hauptmann.⁸² As many as eighteen extras participated in every broadcast, playing minor parts, and creating mob scenes which were ingeniously orchestrated. A crowd of up to 80,000 people, such as those at Nazi rallies, could be simulated live by placing the extras in the background behind a separate mike and processing their voices through an amplifier as it was broadcast. A two-mike set up created a double layer of sound: main characters in the foreground and crowds in the background.

Music was as artfully handled. The entire CBS Symphony played for each broadcast. Music director Howard Barlow, who worked on the program during the mid-late Thirties, selected the fragments which created atmosphere and continuity. Pieces evocative of certain countries, characters or situations were assigned as *leitmotifs*, to play every time they were referenced. For example, whenever the Soviet Union was referenced, the orchestra would play a snippet from Tchaikovsky's *March Slav*.

"Most important is the announcer" who introduced each segment, and the omniscient narrator who "sets every scene, supplies the transitions when music and sound will not in themselves suffice and generally is to radio drama what the subtitle was to the old silent movies."⁸³ During its lifetime, *The March of Time* made stars of several of its announcers, most notably Westbrook Van Voorhees and Harry Von Zell.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ White, *News on the Air*, 250.

The announcer was referred to on-air as the Voice of Time, but the continuity narrator became known within the company as the Voice of Fate.⁸⁴ Paul White referred to the announcer as the essential *Deus ex Machina* which explained events and their consequences.

One important aspect of *The March of Time* was its policy of strict accuracy in representing events. *Time* magazine general manager Roy Larsen developed the concept as a promotional vehicle for the magazine, and, although the publisher did not control production—ad agency BBDO did that—they insisted on strict adherence to its editorial policy of complete accuracy in facts portrayed.⁸⁵ That there is inherent difficulty in accurately representing facts through invented dialogue and imaginary scenes did not seem contradictory to the show's producers.

Audiences loved it. When *The March of Time* was briefly canceled in 1932 because of its prohibitively expensive production costs, CBS received of 22,000 letters begging for its return.⁸⁶ Writer Tom Carskadon explained its appeal in a 1935 article:

All too many shows resort to rather stupid description, hoping that you will get what is going on, just because somebody is standing up at a microphone telling you about it. *The March of Time* has hit on the magic touchstone of *imagination*. By carefully evolved sound effects, by a thousand of artful allusions in the text, they stimulate your imagination, cause you to see the scene yourself, cause the whole action to take place in your own mind.⁸⁷

From the context, it is not entirely clear whether the writer is referring to news programs or general radio fare, but he clearly sees *The March of Time* as “preeminent in the use of

⁸⁴ Carskadon, “Time Marches On,” 42.

⁸⁵ Raymond Fielding, *The March of Time, 1935-1951* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 14.

⁸⁶ Fielding, *The March of Time*, 19.

⁸⁷ Carskadon, “Time Marches On,” 42.

this blessed, freeing quality.”⁸⁸ It is equally clear from his tone that he has no scruples as to the appropriateness of presenting the news in such a format. Carskadon makes a revealing word choice: artful *allusions*, not *illusions*. This suggests the use of indirection in the texts, performances and other sonic elements of the shows’ productions, which he admired.

In the early 1930s, *The March of Time* provided an engaging mix. Serious topics were often covered with an emphasis on their entertainment value, and an obliquely biased editorial slant. For example, the firing of NRA chief General Hugh Johnson featured an impersonation of his famous rants, including a defense of his high-priced secretary, whom he swore was not his mistress. Johnson, apparently well-known to be drunk on the job, rasps and slurs through his dialogue. This is tabloid journalism set to music. The broadcast does not address any of the issues which led up to Johnson’s dismissal. One infers that scandal is as likely as any other reason. The same episode, reporting on the arrest of Bruno Hauptmann, employs the Voice of Fate in the role of police interrogator. “Hauptmann” responds to leading questions concerning evidence which led to his arrest with grunts protesting his innocence. The vignette ends with his request not to judge him, but it sounds to this listener like a disclaimer inserted into the dialogue to offset the clearly damning litany of incriminating details.⁸⁹

Later in the 1930s, however, *The March of Time* in both its radio and newsreel incarnations became a force for intervention. Radio episodes frequently dedicated full half-hour programs to the explosive events. Their editorial position was entirely clear in

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ CBS Broadcasting, "The March of Time," Radio broadcast, October 5, 1934, <http://otr.com/march.html>.

the language used to describe the various countries as aggressive or victim nations, the type and tone of skits selected to illustrate events and the words put into the mouths of the players, especially the public figures. All was richly scored with music and effects. An episode from March, 1939, which I will discuss in detail, exclusively covered the Nazi takeover of Czechoslovakia, repudiating the Munich agreement of the previous October.⁹⁰

The March of Time: An aural analysis

Most of the broadcast portrays the effects on the Czechs in scenes laden with imagery. It opens in a churchyard, at a fictional commemoration of the 89th birthday anniversary of Thomas Masaryk, the founding President of Czechoslovakia, at which the current President, Hachá, affirms Masaryk's ideals. Congregants sing the national anthem *a capella*, which is interrupted by a swell of orchestral music that we come to understand represents Prague. It is Mussorgsky's "Great Gate at Kiev" from his *Pictures at an Exhibition*. One assumes that most people don't recognize it, and that it references Ukraine rather than Czechoslovakia. With its minor harmonies and exotic orchestration, it sounds "Eastern European." The Voice of Fate speaks over the music, describing the history of the region that emphasizes its high ideals and religious tolerance for Jews and Protestants. A fanfare rises and the listener is transported to a café in that city where seemingly relaxed citizens are enjoying dinner and a broadcast of waltzes. A voice from Vienna interrupts the program with a special announcement from that capital by Slovakian cabinet member Ferdinand Dobianski telling of the "joyous news" of Slovakia's independence. His speech is drowned out by café voices rumbling about the

⁹⁰ CBS Broadcasting, "The March of Time," Radio broadcast, March 1939, Museum of Broadcast Communications, Chicago, <http://archives.museum.tv/archives>.

implications. Beneath their talk is an *agitato* figure from the storm scene in Wagner's *Die Walküre*, which reappears periodically throughout the broadcast as tensions rise. That fades under the ominous and very authentic sound of a marching force tramping on a gravel road. We know from Carskadon's article that *The March of Time* taught the chorus of extras to rhythmically rub sand paper together in time with a march tempo to create this realistic effect.⁹¹

In the next scene, at an elementary school in Bratislava, a woman teacher announces a holiday because of Slovakian independence at the hands of "our protector, Adolf Hitler." She leads them, singing a Slovak anthem, down to the town square, which, perhaps ironically, is named for Masaryk. That song is quickly overwhelmed by the *agitato* figure from *Die Walküre*, and more marching.⁹² The Voice of Fate tells us the troops are coming under the banner of the Swastika and all the Czech flags have been removed.

Two vignettes follow: one is a scene in Berlin of a meeting between von Ribbentrop, Hitler and the soon-to-be-former-President Hachá of Czechoslovakia, which symbolically represents the end of the republic. Hachá's walk down a long marble corridor is accompanied by a drum roll, with narration by the Voice of Fate. It sounds like the prelude to an execution. The other vignette representing the impotent outrage of democratic nations, takes place in the House of Commons, to which we are transferred by means of a Baroque brass figure in the style of Handel. Anthony Eden and other

⁹¹ Carskadon, "Time Marches On," 42.

⁹² *Die Walküre* is the second work in Wagner's four opera masterwork, *Der Ring des Niebelungen*, rooted in Germanic mythology. It tells of the destruction of the old world order so that the new world order can be established.

angry politicians protest this “day of humiliation and shame,” demanding a more courageous new government, as Chamberlain “slumps forward in his chair.” A triumphant fanfare salutes Eden’s speech.

The next scene opens with the howling sound of a winter blizzard and a train in motion. A train whistle whines in Doppler effect to signify speed. Hitler approaches the Czech boarder. The storm motif ominously rises again, taking us to a morning in Prague in a scene set by the Voice of Fate. People on their way to work hear from a truck with loudspeaker that German troops are entering the city. “Do not resist.” We hear marching again and the sound of the crowd, milling around, rises to cover dialogue, and then, the church bell at St. Vitus cathedral tolls followed by many others. Crowd sounds combine contrapuntally with marching feet. The crowd boos the soldiers and the Czech anthem rises again to try to drown out the march. The Voice of Fate, explaining the events, can hardly be heard. A shrill whistle blows to attempt control. The German national anthem played in a jolly, oompah style by a brass (not military) band enters and all sonic elements blend in a montage which clearly demonstrates what the Voice of Fate describes: “The troops are now in Prague...the Republic of Czechoslovakia is no more.” The voice continues with a litany of Hitler’s gains: land, gold, munitions, planes, factories, and “ten million population under the shadow of the Nazi secret police, Nazi decreed rule, all for the greater glory of an alien nation.”

The broadcast ends by recalling the “indignant protest” of the free nations of the world, but that “Hitler’s conquest [is] unchallenged by any power in the world.” The Voice of Fate admonishes that this was all foretold by Hitler, in *Mein Kampf* which he wrote as a prisoner. “Hitler’s” voice enters, reading from that text, that “democracy is a

monstrosity born of filth and fire” and that “Germany will be the world power or nothing” and to that “one great mission we must direct everything.” He ends with a prayer to God which finishes with “bless our battles.” The Wagner theme comes up again in final warning.

An episode of *The March of Time* has all the earnestness of an elementary school pageant, but with superior production values. The left-handed compliment may explain both its immense popularity and its credibility. Radio was regularly criticized for its lowest common denominator approach to programming. William Orton famously attacked the medium for diluting culture to “the level of a thirteen-year old.”⁹³ While cultural critics mourned radio’s low standards, there is much evidence that audiences were quite satisfied to be addressed in ways that didn’t challenge their mental powers. *The March of Time* did not patronize its audience; it infused current events with the excitement of drama, complete with all the sonic embellishments radio offered. It seems likely that many would not have listened to a more sober analysis of the implications of Hitler’s annexation of Czechoslovakia. *The March of Time* made complex political events accessible to millions. But it also brought its own slant to these events, steering listeners with a heavy hand on the tiller, selecting events, skewing portrayals, charging them with emotional performances, music and sound. Paul White’s admonition that sound effects and music should be used sparingly on dramatized news was utterly ignored. However, the radio artists of *The March of Time* demonstrated through their masterful command of the sonic palette that they could produce exciting and compelling listening out of the headlines of the day, delighting but not defrauding their mass

⁹³ William Orton, “The Level of a Thirteen Year Old” (1931), in *America in Search of Culture* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1933). Originally published in the *Atlantic Monthly*.

audience. Critics were not convinced. A study done at the Office of Radio Research at Princeton concluded that the need for mass appeal, conditioned by radio's commercial foundation, caused radio to proceed "by seeking the lowest common denominator through the dramatic and the emotional."⁹⁴ This was especially worrisome because "radio is supplying the new consumer with just the kind of elementary news diet he wants...when we consider that *people on the lower cultural levels are apparently more suggestible than those on the higher cultural levels.*" (Italics in the original.)⁹⁵

MURROW'S SONIC PALETTE

Influences on style

There are few recorded references from Murrow about how he developed his broadcast persona, performance style and production philosophy. As head of Talks in New York, he had been shocked at the applicants who were "willing to inflict untrained speech on a radio audience," considering them "radio's real amateur hour."⁹⁶ He counseled those whom he booked on how to approach the microphone.

[A speaker should] imagine himself standing before his own fireplace, perhaps leaning with one elbow in the mantel, talking to six or eight people in his own home. His visitors might include a business associate, a university professor, a couple of day laborers...The speaker, as the host, must engage the interest of all...He will engage the interest of millions if he can discover the essential intimacy of a medium which puts every listener within whispering distance of his lips.⁹⁷

⁹⁴ Lazarsfeld, *Radio and the Printed Page*, 213.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 256.

⁹⁶ Persico, *Edward R. Murrow: An American Original*, 103. Quoting from interviews with Helen Sioussat, his assistant at CBS, and from a CBS press release, "Murrow on Talks," December 31, 1936.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 102.

“Whispering distance” is not a common phrase in radio. Books for aspiring radio performers all address the idea of intimacy, contrasting radio performance to public speaking, speaking to people as if they are next to you, not across the room or in a hall. But “whispering” implies confidential speech or personal intimacy that is reserved for those closest to us. This is a curious image for a man whose on air style was rather formal, but it suggests an ideal to aspire to. It also suggests the level of trust between the whisperer and the auditor to permit such implied closeness.

Murrow was awed by Robert Trout’s extemporaneous speech capability, which he observed first hand at the Presidential National conventions in 1936. He had many discussions with Trout concerning radio technique compared to his own experience in public speaking.⁹⁸ We also know that he resented Kaltenborn’s analysis of one of his broadcasts on the eve of the war. Murrow expressed his doubts that the outcome of the talks with Germany would be anything but a temporary solution: “What prospects of peaceful solution the government may see is a mystery...If it is peace, with the price being paid by Poland, this government will have to deal with the passion it has aroused during the past few weeks.”⁹⁹ Kaltenborn, in a follow-on broadcast, predicted another compromise, citing and interpreting some of Murrow’s earlier comments. Murrow, furious, went on the air within an hour, restating his own views, clarifying what he had said and believed Kaltenborn had twisted. He ended with an oblique jab at Kaltenborn, which might summarize his views on commentators in general: “I have given you such facts as are available in London tonight,” he said, indirectly comparing his on-the-spot

⁹⁸ Ibid., 103.

⁹⁹ Murrow, *This is London*, 17. September 2, 1939.

information to Kaltenborn's long distance opinions, "I have an old-fashioned belief that Americans like to make up their own minds on the basis of all available information. The conclusions you draw are your own affair. I have no desire to influence them and shall leave such efforts to those who have more confidence in their own judgment than I have in mine."¹⁰⁰ This jibe was somewhat disingenuous. Murrow certainly tried to influence his audience, but he did object to Kaltenborn's very heavy handed approach and to his reliance on his instincts more than on first hand reporting. Murrow also revealed, through this broadcast, a clear territoriality about his own work.

Murrow's *oeuvre*

What we hear in Murrow's surviving broadcasts and read in the scripts tells us something about what he valued and rejected from all he heard on the radio. Was Murrow's voice simply a medium for delivering news and colorful human interest stories written in a compelling narrative style? Or did his voice, performance and production choices add materially to the aura which developed around him and his broadcasts? Because the vast majority of Murrow's output consists of his solo studio broadcasts unmediated by external elements, it is important to examine what, if anything, in his actual voice and performance contributed to his reputation. My study of his delivery explores the aspects of sonic coloration—timbre, pitch, inflection, tone patterns, diction, tempo and rhythm and others, drawing comparisons to the commentators of his time. Central to that discussion is how his performances drew, consciously I believe, on this sonic repertoire. Far fewer of Murrow's broadcasts add production elements: ambient sound, music, special locations, on-air guests, produced effects. Yet among those few

¹⁰⁰ Sperber, *Edward R. Murrow: An American Original*, 140-141. And Murrow, *This is London*, September 3, 1939.

are his most memorable works, some of which aired during the Blitz. We know he was always looking to harness radio's sonic capabilities in new and creative ways. William Shirer wrote in his diary during the weeks after the Munich crisis that Murrow was excited by the possibilities for radio. Shirer later expressed admiration for the innovative air raid broadcasts.¹⁰¹ I demonstrate through some of his more "produced" works of the Blitz, this acute consciousness of radio's dramatic sonic power and the ways they might have been inspired by dramatized news and radio plays.

Sonic Coloration

It is difficult to listen to Murrow's broadcasts for sound only and ignore the text. There is no question that Murrow's narrative style differentiated him in many ways from other commentators of the period. His poetic turn of phrase, rarely invoked ironic comments, and ability to spin tiny dramas from snapshot anecdotes set him apart from other storytellers of the news. Floyd Gibbons tabloid radio tales and Gabriel Heatter's inspirational stem-winders had an entirely different flavor. Murrow's philosophy of objectivity, which I shall go into in further detail later in this chapter, affected his choices made in the text, separating him not only from isolationists like Fulton Lewis, Jr. and Boake Carter, but also from H.V. Kaltenborn, who shared his views on the Fascist threat. However, this analysis focuses on his voice and performance characteristics to evaluate whether and how those sonic choices nuance the message of the script.

If one listens more for sound than for content, Murrow does not come across as substantially different from many of those broadcasting news—especially those who were not star commentators. Dispatching the most extreme first, he bears no aural

¹⁰¹ Shirer, *Berlin Diary*, 151, 491.

resemblance at all to the very artificial Boake Carter or the breathless rat-a-tating Floyd Gibbons. In vocal delivery, as well as in content, Murrow is calm, deliberate, sober and minimally inflected. He does not try to excite the listener by sound or content. Nor is he truly like Kaltenborn, whose stern intensity and emphatic diction not only make clear that he knows he is right, but that the listener should know he is too. Murrow's palette is much more subtle.

Rather, his voice and delivery have much more in common with Robert Trout, whose straightforward, unmannered, neutrally-accented delivery of extemporaneous reporting had so impressed Murrow when they worked together in New York. Trout was not an unnamed announcer, like many news readers on CBS, but he was not showcased on CBS like Kaltenborn and other commentators who had their own programs. He was a reporter. Trout "anchored" *The World Today* from New York on which Murrow and other correspondents appeared nightly from the Munich Crisis and thereafter throughout the war. Adopting that sound, Murrow aligned himself with "true" news reporters, those who did not really express their opinions vociferously.¹⁰² That doesn't mean they didn't express them at all, but their views were often carefully couched through word choice and indirection, subtly inflected. Murrow followed this path, as in this example.

Mr. Chamberlain's announcement of his resignation was entirely impersonal. Many people consider that it was the best speech [Pause] he has ever made.¹⁰³

Murrow was a master of this form of aural irony. He deadpans the ironic *double entendre* in the last line with a subtle, yet not broadly disrespectful, pause. Chamberlain's

¹⁰² Today Murrow is credited with originating that vocal style, but it is more accurate to say that he championed it.

¹⁰³ Edward R. Murrow, CBS News broadcast, May 31, 1940, <http://archives.museum.tv/archives>.

resignation may have been eloquent, but it was also welcome. One gets the idea that even if the Prime Minister had merely said “I quit” many would have regarded even that as “the best speech he has ever made.”

Murrow brought a sumptuous baritone voice to his broadcasts, the kind most admired and found most credible by listeners. This was a gift. Very few news analysts or commentators had such natural resonance and depth. Listening to Bill Shirer, who nearly didn’t get his job at CBS because his voice was soft and flabby, one recognizes the difference. Rich timbre communicates manliness. Radio studies had confirmed audience preference for deep male voices.¹⁰⁴ His colleagues felt that Murrow’s voice was unique and struggled to capture its essence. Some found it had movie star quality. D.G. Bridson, a BBC writer with whom Murrow collaborated said “I don’t know how to describe his voice. The nearest thing I think I can get it at, is a really incisive version of Jimmy Stewart...simply the timbre of the voice... if it had had more edge on it...had it been sharper, brisker, edgier, it would not have been unlike Ed’s.”¹⁰⁵ Another described its unrelenting quality “something of the voice of doom. I don’t mean the voice of doom in that he was giving evil tidings to us; this was the voice that was unsparing of our emotions...the timbre of the voice was deep and penetrating; it was abrasive,..There was no honey and wine and cigars about Ed’s voice...”¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ Studies fielded as early as 1925 confirmed audience preference for deep male voices. See Chapter 3, The Sonic Palette. See also Hadley Cantril and Gordon Allport, *The Psychology of Radio*, 1935, and Alfred Norton Goldsmith and Austin C. Lescarbours. *This Thing Called Broadcasting*, 1930.

¹⁰⁵ Smith, *Edward R. Murrow, the War Years*, 85. From an interview with Bridson in 1971. It is curious that Bridson didn’t compare Murrow directly to Jimmy Stewart, but the other way around. He suggested that Stewart, had he edge, and sharpness, would have sounded like Murrow. The example makes it appear that the only similarity is movie star quality, something that many of Murrow’s contemporaries said he had.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid. From an interview with Talbot in 1971.

Intensity, another quality of timbre, manifests aurally as a combination of self-propelled pace and crisp, distinct—but not harsh—edge. Murrow did not speak slowly, but he spoke more slowly than many commentators and he understood the use of pauses and breaths. He generally spoke in short phrases of six to ten words, with comfortable rests in between. This permits the listener to process what is being said without struggling to keep up. The quick, distinct phrases convey a sense of forward momentum to the narration, while the breaths keep it from sounding frantic.

This London was a strange city today, [Beat] filled with amazing people. Most of them know that the war is on [1/2 Beat] in dead earnest, but most of them are calm. [Beat] So calm and cool in fact that one almost wonders if they realize what lies ahead. [Pause] Lazy balloons drifted easily at the top of their steel mooring lines in a **sad** looking sky. [Beat] An errand boy rides his bicycle along the streets, [1/2 Beat] whistling the theme song from Pinocchio.... [Beat] an old soldier with a double row of medal ribbons on his breast says. [1/2 Beat] “This time the Hun won’t be facing half-trained territorials. Wait until our guards get at ‘em.” People buy their news papers and read them [Beat] without expression. I have seen no signs of panic in London today. [Pause] There is something to be an atmosphere of [Beat] *exaggerated casualness* today. These people *appear* to have their feet braised.”¹⁰⁷

In this lyrical description of London’s reaction to the beginning of real conflict and the end of the “phony war,” Murrow slows down his pace from the earlier part of the broadcast in which the grim facts detail that “history has been made too fast today,” with Hitler’s invasion of the Low Countries, Chamberlain’s resignation and Churchill’s ascent as Prime Minister. This two-part approach, the first factual and the second more lyrical and descriptive is a hallmark of his solo broadcast style. His voice does not change markedly from the first to the second, although one detects a slight decrease in tempo.

¹⁰⁷ Murrow, May 10, 1940. <http://archives.museum.tv/archives>. **Note:** In trying to portray aural texts in print I have developed a form of notation which I will use throughout the rest of this chapter. Beat: a rest equal to a normal breath. ½ Beat: a short breath. Pause: At least two beats. Boldface is used to denote verbal emphasis. Italics alone denote a drawn out word or phrases, similar to a *ritard* in music. Bold face and italics together mean emphasized and drawn out. Underscored text indicates a verbal caress.

There is rarely a change in intensity. What loosens up the delivery is the space he adds between phrases. He uses beats and pauses to set off a phrase or image, giving just enough time for the listener to visualize it. Here, balloons flying in a “sad looking sky” are a metaphor for the Britishers’ reactions. The carefree boy biking along is whistling the theme from *Pinocchio*. For Murrow to make a topical reference that is meaningful to Americans is also typical; the film had just been released in February of 1940. There is nearly always an anecdote which does double duty. It frames the reaction to the situation of the day through the voices of the common people who are experiencing them, and always in a way that shows their dignity and mettle. Only twice does he add aural emphasis in his words. At the end of the broadcast, as Murrow sums up the reaction of the British, he draws out the words “exaggerated casualness,” stressing those words which capture the behavior he has observed. There is a sense of tension carefully controlled. I suggest that his performances were all planned.

In *News on the Air*, Paul White instructed would-be radio news reporters on delivering their broadcasts that “some announcers...’score’ their copy” to denote emphasis. In passing he credited Murrow as being “a past master at this type of personal punctuation.”¹⁰⁸ Among the few Murrow war era radio scripts still existing are a handful of examples with this kind of textuality that provides us a direct link between how he sounded on the air and the careful preparation that went into this seemingly unstudied style. These take two forms. A number of these are scripts with typed indications for pauses. He uses ellipsis marks, but no other punctuation. There are a few broadcasts in all three forms— audio, published and type-script, making a kind of Rosetta Stone of

¹⁰⁸ White, *News on the Air*, 161. White also described the process of developing a five minute broadcast— something which typically took two hours to write, scan, and rehearse.

Murrow's process. The ellipsis dots denote pauses, breaths and beats. He varies the number of dots in the ellipsis—from three to six—based on the length of the pauses. By far the most frequently used are three and four dots. Five and six dots are reserved for major breaks in the text or great emphasis. Although no scripts like this have survived from the Blitz period, there are quite a few from as early as 1942. These all observe this convention. In addition, there are a few scripts which appear to have been used in broadcasts and are marked up in pencil. Most of these are not from World War II, but there is one from June 10, 1945; a few are later. The hand marked ones use "hash marks" or caesura notation (which, in music, means full stop) liberally in the scripts. Single hash marks seem to denote a beat; double suggests more emphasis. In the scripts which contain both hash marks and ellipsis, the manner of denoting emphasis is consistent: double hash marks are used over multi-dot ellipsis. Scripts also contain underscores, hand-written commas and quotation marks around words which appear to refer to a method of distinguishing the term, rather than referring to something that someone said. In rare cases, Murrow's handwriting appears, to change wording or add a line.¹⁰⁹ Based on the existing textual and audio evidence, it seems very likely that Murrow used this form of notation during the Blitz period.

The May 10 broadcast passage, referred to above, is characteristic of Murrow's aural delivery, but it is also instructive of his narrative style. He chooses his snapshots with great care, but one wonders whether they are all completely true. For example, although *Pinocchio* was released in early 1940, it wasn't released in England until after

¹⁰⁹ It is clear from studying the documents which handwriting belongs to Murrow and which to Janet Murrow or some other person. The source for all these documents is the Edward R. Murrow collection at Tufts University Archive. They can be found on microfilm reels 17, 43 and 44.

the war. Its theme “When You Wish upon a Star” would win the Academy Award for “Best Song,” but not until the following February. It is not at all clear that it had made it to England by May 10 when this broadcast was made. The song affirms that wishing on a star makes dreams come true. The image of a boy on a bicycle whistling this slow, dreamy tune is certainly one of exaggerated casualness—and seems almost too good to be real.

Unlike virtually everyone else reporting or commenting on news, as opposed to merely announcing, Murrow’s voice was trained. But it didn’t sound stilted; Eric Sevareid described it as having “the ease, the cultivation in his voice...coming from the Far West... [that] was difficult for me to believe.”¹¹⁰ Cultivated implies active attention to development. But semantically it also suggests education, and the authority that goes with it. Murrow carefully enunciated words, putting every consonant in the right place. One hears every “d” and “t” at the end of words. A listener understands when he or she knows where words begin and end. Murrow separated words, but not in the mincing fashion of Kaltenborn, who learned to speak in that manner when radio reception was poor and audiences had difficulty understanding on-air speech. Kaltenborn’s delivery was probably not just habit, but necessary because of his rapid, intense pace. Murrow, whose voice also conveyed intensity, rarely spoke quickly. His delivery was nearly always calm and deliberate. This lent gravity to his text, but it also exuded control. In wartime England, sounding “in control” was reassuring. He managed to sound that way even when in the very midst of a bombing raid or delivering bad news. Murrow’ studio broadcasts all sounded calm and controlled. Yet he was not really calm, as Charles

¹¹⁰ Persico, *Edward R. Murrow: An American Original*, 123. From an interview with Sevareid.

Collingwood remembered: “Ed, always, in a broadcast would perspire heavily...It was certainly tension, and besides that, the tension would be revealed the way his knee would jiggle; his knee and foot would jiggle up and down.”¹¹¹ This very controlled voice also sounded formal, another characteristic of a “cultivated” impression.

How does one convey formality and cultivation? Pacing, tone patterns and dynamics all contribute. There is an understated elegant rhythm to Murrow’s speech which I suggest is entirely conscious. His famous opening “This..is London.” provides an illustration familiar to many. Murrow’s biographers, historians and communications scholars do not all agree on what they hear. Some, like Culbert and Persico, say there was no break between “this” and “is,” insisting that Murrow’s distinct diction and pronunciation account for the effect. Others, like Fang and communications scholar Donald Godfrey, see it differently. They suggest that Murrow makes a dramatic pause between those words.

For clarity, Murrow needed to make a distinction. Analyzing the phonetics of the phrase, we see that the last letter of “this” is “s.” The first letter of “is” is a vowel. Singers and students of speech know that there is a danger of slurring the two words into “thisiz.” A break, however small, must appear between the words. There are two ways to accomplish this. One is a glottal stop, the conscious termination of a sound by shutting the glottis, the folds and space between them where sound is produced. One unfamiliar with this technique might approximate the sensation by swallowing. The other way is to put a space, a rest, between the words. The length of the rest helps determine the emphasis on the word or phrase which follows the rest. Many listeners hear a brief rest. I

¹¹¹ Smith, *Edward R. Murrow, the War Years*, 87. From an interview with Charles Collingwood in 1971.

attribute the effect to his adaptation to the pace and rhythm with which he delivers the phrase.

Listening to many, many examples of that opening to his broadcasts, I hear his delivery in musical terms, as if the phrase were a measure in 2/2 time. There are two syllables of equal weight and length—"This" and "Lon," the two main beats in the measure. The words are equivalent: "This" and "**L**ondon" mean the same thing. "Is" falls on the second part of the first beat. The distance between the end of "This" and "is" must accommodate the separation of the two words with almost no space between. The intonation varies for each syllable, but only slightly. "Lon" is the highest "note" in the phrase, slightly higher than "this." "Is" and "don" are both lower, and slightly less audible. Murrow thought about these opening lines; it was not a random choice. We know that he communicated to Ida Lou Anderson about it and that he claimed that she told him how to emphasize the words.¹¹² She urged him to use it as his signature, to differentiate himself from his predecessor in London, Caesar Saerchinger. She even scanned it out for him "down to the appropriate accent and stress."¹¹³ However, he spent four years under her tutelage and all his on air appearances, long before he became a news broadcaster, reflect the same, measured pacing and thoughtful diction which he surely acquired through his study of speech.

Murrow's pauses and a minimalist palette of pitch variation formed his chief methods of inflection. Sparingly used, they effectively added to his restrained delivery.

¹¹² CBS Broadcasting, "This Is Edward R. Murrow," Producer's biographical notes, Reel 17, Edward R. Murrow Papers, Tufts University Archive, Boston.

¹¹³ Persico, *Edward R. Murrow: An American Original*, 145. Searchinger, and others used to open links to the United States by saying "Hello, America, this is London calling."

Murrow intentionally delivered strong messages with a dry, almost flat-footed neutrality which produced “all the exaggeration of underemphasis” for which he became famous.

¹¹⁴ As counterpoint, and on rare occasions, a softness steals over a word or phrase to convey emotion, all the more effective because so rarely revealed. This softness manifested both in an almost imperceptible change in volume as well as a vocal caress, and a reduction in baritone resonance. In this broadcast Murrow recounted an anecdote about driving in the country when he got held up by a visit by the king to a small village.

The local constable waved us ahead and for fifty miles I drove a little ten-horsepowered car just behind the policeman who was behind the king. We made good time....I saw those country folk as the King saw them and he must have been encouraged. They were a calm looking, smiling lot of people and most of them know the hum of German planes overhead and the sound of exploding bombs. As I followed that small royal cavalcade over the rolling country (I gained on them going downhill), I wondered in what other country in this mad world can a King, a dictator, or a head of state travel with as little protection. The policeman on the motorcycle didn't even have a pistol.¹¹⁵

This is a classic Murrow tale, juxtaposing the classes, and filled it with little details that ennoble the common people. He delivers it in a matter of fact manner, letting the words do the work. Just a few inflections and caresses slip in. He gentles his voice when describing the “calm looking, smiling lot of people” who know fear, but do not show it. Murrow rarely makes a humorous comment, but he does so twice in this excerpt, and one can hear a smile in his voice when he talks about his ten-horsepower car which “made good time” because it was accidentally advantaged by following the King, and gained on him whenever they went downhill. Dry, deadpan delivery, with a smile in the voice was

¹¹⁴ Smith, *Edward R. Murrow, the War Years*, 93.

¹¹⁵ Edward R. Murrow, CBS News broadcast, August 16, 1940, Museum of Broadcast Communications, Chicago, <http://archives.museum.tv/archives>. And Murrow, *This is London*, 142-143.

as much emotion as Murrow would show in most of his broadcasts. They were all the more effective because they occurred so infrequently.

Formal and cultivated, educated and in control, Murrow sounded authoritative without sounding bombastic. The quality which Murrow's contemporaries used to describe his sound is authentic. "It was one of these good, virile North American voices."¹¹⁶ I would add that he sounded modern. He affected no accent, bore no marks of nineteenth century elocution, and exhibited no indelible regionalisms, except perhaps a Western burr, heard most prominently in his final "r's." But that characteristic contributed to his "American" sound, and perhaps to his manly persona. It also provided aural balance for his often eloquent and poetic broadcasts, keeping them from sounding too highbrow. Lacking the affectations and extremes of vocal delivery of other news commentators and announcers, Murrow heralded the new sound of the news. His many admirers, including the Murrow Boys, his reporter-acolytes, imitated him spreading the sound more widely. But they were not so successful. The broadcasts of Eric Sevareid, who had a better natural voice than the Shirer, for example, reveal a flat, uninflected delivery that suggests that he was not conscious of the effect it had on the listener. He might have been reading a laundry list, rather than reporting on the fall of France.

Murrow, for all his *appearance* of sounding unstudied, was anything but.

Producing the News: experimenting with dramatic effects

Murrow's solo, studio-based broadcasts make up the vast majority of his output and reflect a consciously applied rhetorical style. His two-part structure balanced the facts of "hard" news with reflective storytelling, lyrically described, all delivered calmly

¹¹⁶ Smith, *Edward R. Murrow, the War Years*, 85. Quoting from an interview with newsman and BBC broadcaster Godfrey Talbot in 1971.

and deliberately, sonically colored with his voice to convey meaning sympathetic to the British people and the war. This was a very narrow, but effective sonic palette. Murrow tempered his dramatic inclinations with an instinctive understanding of the needs of radio's intimate address. Just as mannered, gesticulating stage technique seen in early silent films gave way over time to smaller range of physical expressions which appeared much more natural to the audience, radio acting underwent a similar transition. Announcers and commentators, however, still usually spoke artificially. Murrow understood that tone of voice communicated meaning—even if the audience didn't understand the text. In one broadcast he told the story of a Southern (American) farmer who said he knew that one day the United States would have to fight Hitler. When Murrow asked him how he knew, he said that he had heard Hitler deliver a speech on the radio. Even though he didn't understand a word of German, he didn't like the way he sounded. "I figured anybody who shouted at people like that we'd end up having to fight."¹¹⁷ Murrow was aurally attuned to the need to speak with presence, but without aggressiveness or artifice. The events of the war carried the high drama; his narrative made it present and meaningful to the audience; his understated delivery conveyed truth through its simplicity.

Nevertheless, throughout the war, Murrow looked for new ways to infuse sonic drama into his broadcasts. I suggest that, in these efforts, he was influenced and perhaps inspired by dramatized news. His experiments reveal his creativity, but they also show the limitations of producing live news programming. They provide evidence of his intention to infuse aural drama into the news. Three Blitz efforts stand out: *London After*

¹¹⁷Edward R. Murrow, Broadcast transcript, December 1942, Edward R. Murrow Papers, Tufts University Archives, Boston.

Dark, an aural feature story; the rooftop broadcasts, which try to bring the audience to the scene of the bombing; and *London Underground*, an unproduced script for a documentary style program intended to bring to life the human experience of an air raid. Each of these programs draws on the traditions of dramatized news and expands the technical and narrative limits of news broadcasts. My analysis will focus primarily on *London After Dark*, a broadcast which, even today, is considered a landmark in communications history.

London After Dark

London After Dark, Murrow's most technically ambitious work, was conceived as an aural tour around London in the blackout, with nine reporters stationed at eight different locations acting as guides. Each of these locations required a full technical crew and remote broadcast truck to beam the short wave signals to the United States. The technical complexity and manpower requirements were immense, and the event had to be co-produced with the BBC. In addition, in wartime London, everything had to be approved in advance by the government. This was particularly sensitive because the broadcast was on location, at night, when radio frequencies could potentially be picked up by Nazi warplanes, providing them a signal to home in on. With only Larry LeSueur and Eric Sevareid on the CBS staff, Murrow lined up six additional speakers: the BBC's Raymond Glendenning, Michael Standing, and Wilfred Vaughn Thomas, Canadian broadcaster Robert Bowman, American newspaper reporter Vincent Sheean and British author J.B. Priestley who was also an extremely popular BBC commentator. An unnamed announcer, who sounds like Robert Trout, provided continuity and anchored the broadcast from CBS in New York. Nothing like this had ever been attempted before. The

closest analogy, from a technical standpoint, is the daily news roundup, which broke new ground in 1938 with its short wave broadcasts during the Anschluss. By 1940 these were a daily occurrence. Typically, however, those programs originated from studios. Live on-location broadcasts were regularly arranged but not on the scale required for *London After Dark*, which moves through eight locations in thirty minutes—none of them in a studio—and takes place under blackout conditions. The degree of production control involved in timing, aural effects, narrative and message is extensive, yet none of this is transparent to the listener. As a product of *news*, rather than entertainment, the degree of mediation is obscured, enhancing its credibility. What it lacked in polished production values, such as those found in *The March of Time*, actually may have enhanced its “authenticity,” yet it was as fully planned and produced (if not as well executed) as a program on that series.

The timing of the broadcast benefitted from numerous serendipitous circumstances. Murrow undertook the project in late August of 1940, just on the brink of the Blitz. Through Roger Eckersley, the BBC’s American Liaison, Murrow lobbied Frank Darvall of the British Ministry of Information for permission to broadcast on location during air strikes. The risk was worth taking, Eckersley persuaded, because it would bring the very presence of the war into American living rooms, aiding the British propaganda effort. Eckersley’s letter, however, makes clear that such a broadcast would help the United States government in its public opinion campaign in favor of intervention: [it would demonstrate] “that we are, for once in earnest when we say we want to do all in our power to help them.”¹¹⁸ The project was approved and arrangements

¹¹⁸ Sperber, *Murrow: His Life and Times*, 163. From a letter from Eckersley to Darvall August 21, 1940.

made for August 24. As it turned out, this was a night on which the Germans sent 1000 warplanes into English airspace, the first time such a force had been sent. They did no major destruction in London that night, but, remarkably enough the bombers arrived, as if on cue, exactly when the show was scheduled to start: 11:30 PM, London time. Their presence was felt from the start of the show when air raid sirens sounded, but no bombs disrupted the broadcast, so that the program was suspenseful but not deadly.

Audiences had never heard anything quite like this—nothing real at least. But they had been prepared by *The March of Time* reenactments. Plays like MacLeish's *Air Raid* and Corwin's *They Fly through the Air with the Greatest of Ease* used sound effects, reporter-narrators and music to infuse them with reality. Orson Welles' Halloween Eve 1938 broadcast of *The War of the Worlds* drew on these dramatic traditions and frightened a million listeners with its realistic sonic representation of radio's report of an invasion from Mars.¹¹⁹ An actual broadcast of an air raid had the potential to be even more effective both in reach and impact. The CBS audience for *London After Dark* was estimated at thirty million.

The eight locations were staged for situational, social and aural contrast. The announcer transports the listener from one location to another to witness scenes of life as they are taking place, reminiscent of the way Dickens' Christmas ghosts carried Scrooge around Victorian London. The show preserves the illusion of participation and geographical remove through address and frequent travel references. "**We** take you now to London" had long been a familiar phrase. But there was not yet general use of present tense in reports and the use of "we" and "you" to include the audience in the action was

¹¹⁹ Cantril, *The Invasion from Mars*, 55-60.

still rare in the news—if not in drama. The ideas of travel and establishing a personal connection with place were of critical importance to Murrow. In an article which he wrote for the BBC yearbook in 1943 he described the audience expectation:

Transatlantic broadcasting is becoming more and more a job of transportation: Transporting the individual listener from his home in Maine or Idaho by saying to him: Look, if you were over here this is what you'd find. This is the sort of thing you would hear, see and smell. The kind of food you would eat, the people you would meet...¹²⁰

Murrow felt that the era of audience satisfaction with the everyday miracle of sound traveling over vast distances had passed. They demanded “not only the news and speeches of statesmen. They expect to hear the authentic accent of their allies.... [and] the political, social and economic climate in which it [the news] is made.”¹²¹ In this BBC essay, Murrow illustrated the power of effect by referencing the sounds and sights of *London After Dark*.

Throughout the broadcast, the announcer provides the transportation while the reporters “interact” with the listener’s when they “arrive” at each scene. Situating the listener, the announcer lays out the itinerary, traveling to the first destination:

And now we take you into the streets of blackout London, down stately crescent shaped Regent Street, along Shaftsbury Avenue of theater fame, into Charing Cross Road, London’s Tin Pan Alley and so to Trafalgar Square.¹²²

Unlike Scrooge, the American audience probably has no idea what most of these streets look like and may not have heard of most of them, but quickly the announcer provides a

¹²⁰ Edward R. Murrow, "Transatlantic Broadcasting," galleys, 1943, Edward R. Murrow Papers, Tufts University Archive, Boston.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Edward R. Murrow and others, "London after Dark," August 24, 1940, http://www.archive.org/details/otr_cbsspecialbroadcast.

reference point. Regent Street is stately and architectural; Shaftsbury Avenue is the Broadway of London. However, it takes the sounds of the places to bring the broadcast to life.

“Come in Ed Murrow” calls the announcer from America. The next four seconds are filled with the shrill whine of air raid sirens, as if pre-planned, a dramatic opening worthy of *The March of Time*. Following this sonic prelude Murrow announces, in paraphrase of his famous opening line, “This... is Trafalgar Square,” building a distinct pause between the first two words. Murrow clarifies that the sound was an air raid siren. It is unlike those found in radio dramas. It is more distant and eerie, and it is accompanied by a whooshing sound which rises and drops off in volume. This might be the sounds of planes overhead, but more likely it is the odd sound that short wave transmission often leaks into the audible sound spectrum of the broadcast. In the context of the show, it is extremely effective because it seems to belong to the night sky that might be filled with warplanes. As Murrow sets the scene for the audience he places lengthy rests between short phrases, punctuating each comment with the siren sound which filters through. The unexpected air raid provides potent imagery and infuses tension into what might have been an utterly unremarkable situation.

A searchlight has just burst into action [Pause]off in the distance [Pause] one single beam [Pause] sweeping the sky above me now.[Pause] People are walking around quite quietly, we’re just at the entrance of an air raid shelter here and I must move this cable over just a bit so that people can walk in...¹²³

Murrow sounds entirely different in this broadcast than he does in the studio. His voice is much more inflected, and dramatic. The many lengthy rests between phrases infuse his speech with a kind of breathlessness, as if brought on by the intensity of the

¹²³ Ibid.

situation. His sound differs markedly from the deliberate formality of his studio delivery and seems propelled by immediate reactions: “Here comes one of those big red busses (sic) around the corner, double deckers they are,” has all the pace and excitement one might hear from a small boy. Murrow sounds taken aback, almost laughing as he tells the listener that someone just stopped to ask him for a light for his cigarette. His voice is lively, almost excited, and the listener feels “in the moment” with him.

Throughout this scene, the longest in the broadcast, Murrow is constantly aware of the sound possibilities, perhaps pre-planned. “I’ll just let you listen to the traffic and the sound of the sirens for a moment,” he says, followed by an eight second pause—an eternity on a broadcast.¹²⁴ Twice in the broadcast he tries to capture the sound of footsteps entering the air raid shelter. Neither of these is terribly successful, although they have been cited ever since as evidence of calm Londoners going in orderly fashion to the shelters. Nevertheless, additional background sounds, like car engines, coughing, occasional voices, and the faint click of footsteps filter through in counterpoint with Murrow’s speech and the persistent whine of sirens fading in and out. Murrow’s strength was not in extemporaneous reporting and this broadcast provides several examples of his uneven monologue. Not all his images are apt. For example, he says the eerie sound of footsteps on dark nights is “like ghosts shod in steel shoes,” which suggests a rather heavy banging rather than echoing click-click. Nevertheless, his disjointed descriptions give a suggestion of distraction that one might experience in such a busy place during an anxious time. The overall effect is spontaneity and authenticity furthered by the occasional clumsiness of the execution.

¹²⁴ On the broadcast this time is filled with dead air. It is not clear whether there was a transmission failure on the program or whether that sound was lost at some later date.

At the five minute mark, Murrow's segment ends promptly, fading out on the footsteps Murrow tried to produce. The announcer says "Farewell Trafalgar Square" and transports the listener to the Savoy hotel, where an upper class crowd dances behind blackout drapes in a ballroom, to "see what the reaction is after the air raid warning." This is the first of two scenes of merrymaking in *London After Dark*—one upper class and one of the common folk, classic Murrow juxtapositions. As in *The March of Time*, sound sets the scene in a remarkable unexplained montage of nearly thirty seconds. An orchestra plays a jaunty tune featuring a muted trumpet carrying the melody. A crowd murmurs in the foreground, nearer to the microphone. The sound is convivial. We imagine they are dancing. Suddenly the music stops and in the background someone makes an announcement in a cultured voice. One can clearly hear only "Ladies and gentlemen...there is an air raid siren now sounding" followed by what one imagines to be a jocular remark, because the crowd titters, and applauds a little. After a short silence, the drummer whacks the snare four times abruptly in rhythm and the band starts up again with a swing tune. We do not need commentary to understand that the upper classes are unconcerned and continuing with their evening's pleasures. After another thirty seconds of music, the scene shifts to the kitchens at the Savoy where CBC announcer, Bob Bowman backgrounded by the waiters calling out orders, carries on a non-stop monologue about the wonders of the Savoy menu, even in wartime. World famous chef Francois Latry, "in his tall white cap," is called over to say in a thick French accent, "I am very 'appy to say '**Allo**' ...and to tell them [Americans] that food is **plentiful** and the war has **not** affected my cooking." A short dialogue between Bowman and Latry fades out. This exchange between the reporter and the chef sounds scripted and artificial. It

may be real and spontaneous, but Latry's voice sounds exactly like an actor playing a Frenchman in a skit. The dialogue reinforces that effect. The sonic impression only underscores radio's power to create an image that is difficult to assess at face value. Latry's voice and words may be real, but sound phony. Just as easily, that which is phony may sound real. Such is the effect of the sonic palette on the ear of the listener who, in 1940, was still very credulous.

The announcer whisks the listener away to the next stop, where "not all London is enjoyment." Raymond Glendenning is stationed at an anti-aircraft gun post "somewhere in London," a phrase imbued with the mystery and romance of adventure stories. This segment, however, has no false drama. In fact, it has no drama at all for the first several minutes. Glendenning, our first BBC reporter, clearly speaking extemporaneously, describes the job of the anti-aircraft workers in detailed but uninflected terms. He might as well be in a studio. But, suddenly and effectively, in the background, an officer starts barking orders, as a plane appears on the "predictor" machine. We cannot understand him, but Glendenning, speaking faster and faster to keep up with the action, describes the bustling scene, as the team organizes to line up the guns for action. This brief vignette surprises us with its rapid, purposeful transition from "waiting" to "action," as the military responds to the threat.

The next scene shows how the organized civilian corps goes into action, its placement in the broadcast reminding us that everyone has a duty in wartime. The announcer takes us to an ARP, Air Raid Precaution mustering point. CBS's Larry Lesueur reports from "one of the largest apartment houses in the world [where] around me are 100 people, just a small section of London's Air Raid Precaution force." Like the

prior segment, this too has its technical descriptions of gear and clothing worn by the many volunteers who help Londoners get into air raid shelters. But here the scene is filled with the ambient sound of workers in the background. And, as in the previous segment, there is a rapid shift into action. We are told that a demonstration has been arranged for the listening audience, as if bombs were dropping nearby, so the sound of the response would register on the broadcast. LeSueur tells the play-by-play “There goes the telephone now.” A voice calls out orders; we hear pounding feet. A dispatcher calls out the address: “140 High Street.” A woman, in the far distance, echoes his command, naming the cars which are assigned to go. Other voices mingle in controlled confusion. We hear several car doors slam, engines rev up and roar out. Lesueur, who had dropped out and let the participants tell the story through their calls and sounds, says “They’re out of the station already,” as we hear the sound of cars accelerating in the distance. It took exactly one minute, nearly all pure sound. Then, silence emphasizes the efficient deployment of the support teams. This sonically exciting event was staged for us, the audience, timed and executed as perfectly as in a radio drama. However, we know there is a real air raid going on, which adds to the atmosphere. Real and staged merge.

“Let’s get back to the bright lights away to the west ... [to] Hammersmith’s Palais, London’s giant dance hall,” the announcer tells us. “We’ll see and hear what’s happening out there, now that the sirens have sounded.” The music comes up precisely at the show’s seventeen minute mark, and plays for a full fifteen seconds. The orchestra is playing the newly popular song “A Nightingale Sang in Berkeley Square.” As the music plays, low in the background, and the sound of happy voices filters through, Eric Sevareid tells the us that we are now on the biggest dance floor in England, where 1500

people are dancing...we're a long way from Berkeley Square," he tells us suggesting social as well as geographical distance. Surely the playing of this song, too, cannot be another coincidence. The lyrics, well known in America at this time, tell how "dining at the Ritz," the singer found his love and a nightingale burst into song in that very posh Mayfair square. This reminder of class differences, just at the right moment, makes for ideal narrative contrast, but it seems unbelievable that the Severeid or Murrow, in arranging the location for the broadcast, didn't specify the song to be played. Left to their own devices, the band might just as easily been playing "the Woodpecker Song" or "I'll Never Smile Again," both immensely popular too, but hardly as appropriate. Severeid tells how the crowd of women, soldiers and sailors, and "a couple of Texans now in the RAF" whom he met, cheered when the management extended the dancing into the air raid, postponing their normal closing time, a kind of celebratory defiance of the German bombers overhead. The listener might be aware that the men will soon be fighting the Nazis, Americans included, like the Texans. Whether at the Savoy or at Hammersmith's, Londoners dance their way into the night despite air raid sirens in the background.

The announcer takes us "on another long hop back to London's West End....to the hub of the universe....Piccadilly Circus," perhaps the landmark most familiar to Americans, at least by name. Newspaper man Vincent Sheean, a close friend of Murrow, provides a two minute vignette accompanied by a few car motors in the background. The plaza is bare of people, because they have gone into shelters. This is a mostly quiet scene. Sheean tells of dinner in a restaurant close by where Austrians and Hungarians play their music because "they can't do it in their own countries anymore," reminding the audience of the Nazi takeover of Europe, the reason behind the air raids that now threaten England.

This is perhaps the least effective segment, without action or sonic interest. Perhaps that is simply coincidence, or it may be that Sheean wasn't used to broadcasting and didn't bring much to the segment.

Quickly, at the twenty-two minute mark, the announcer removes us to Euston Station, London's first inter-city railway depot where "it only costs a penny to buy a platform ticket which allows us to mingle with the travelers who are about to leave for a night ride north." With that introduction, the travel image is doubly reinforced. "We" are going to stand on the platform, while the train departs for a long journey. Michael Standing and Winford Vaughn Thomas, both of the BBC, are there to broadcast the departure of the 11:55 in just three minutes, another ambitious plan for sonic variety. Because of chugging in the background, we can hardly hear Standing, at Platform 13, who boasts that the air raid siren has had little effect on the operation. He is joined by the station master who affirms that they are extra busy and have added many troop trains. While waiting for the train to depart, Standing joins Vaughn Thomas in the YMCA Canteen where there is a "constant stream of men in uniform" who are served with top efficiency by Mrs. Lee, an American who runs the place. "Everybody in services turns up here sooner or later," she says. Perhaps this brief interview was added to show the listeners that some of their compatriots are already helping out with the war effort, another subtle reminder, like the Texans in the RAF from the Hammersmith segment. But the train is scheduled to depart so we all "walk" back to the platform. Unfortunately, it does not depart on schedule, spoiling the anticipated sonic magnificence of a train leaving the station. Unfulfilled promise hangs in the dead air.

We cannot wait, and the announcer takes us to “our final port of call. “Standing in the shadow of the Cenotaph monument to the fallen in the last Great War is someone who needs no introduction....To close our tour of London... [pause]...After Dark in an air raid warning is J.B. Priestley.” After a four second delay, he begins to speak very slowly and with many pauses. He contrasts greatly in his delivery with all the other reporters of the broadcast. We have the sonic sense that something has changed. This is no longer a reporter but a declaiming commentator, someone who has a Message to deliver. The location on Whitehall is filled with meaning, we are at a memorial: “Just opposite me is the tall, grey ghostly shape of the cenotaph...one million dead, many of them friends of mine, boys that I played with as a boy. Men who might have been leaders now...” Not a single sound, other than the voice of Priestley, is heard during the segment. In a show rich with sonic coloration and imagery, surely this is no accident, as if silence must be observed in the presence of those whom the monument honors. Priestley draws our attention to the many nearby sights, symbols of empire and Britain’s heritage. He says twice that they are on historic ground. “Elizabeth saw Shakespeare’s plays and the masques of Ben Jonson near here.” That’s not exactly true; the Globe Theater was on the other side of the Thames, two miles away. “Charles I was executed just a few yards away.” That’s more accurate, since he was beheaded at the palace of Whitehall. But to American audiences, it probably didn’t make a difference. He ends with a rather obscure vision of a better world.

It’s historic ground [Pause]...it’s probably more deeply sunk in our world history than ever[Pause] because it’s the very center[Pause] of the hopes of free men everywhere...this bastion, this great rock that’s defying the dark tide of invasion....Soon I hope [Pause]the old fear will come [Pause] soon I hope London should work hard all this week...to go quietly to bed [Pause] to go to sleep [Pause] I hope [Pause] it will dream [audible sigh]of a better world [audible

breath]Dream that dream and not sleep too long but make that dream of a better world. [Pause] come true. Good night.

This closing, quasi poetic in tone, sounds somewhat like Churchill in evoking powerful images and emphasizing the nobility of the fight. It certainly makes an interventionist case. Priestley reminds the audience of England's great literary heritage, one it shares with Americans. Even his mention of Charles I execution is an oblique reminder of England's commitment to democratic rule. Ending the broadcast on Priestley's sober prayer-like invocation is a well-intentioned dramatic moment, but it weighs down an otherwise vibrant aural presentation. Precisely on cue, the bells of Westminster sound in the distance, another testament to split-second production timing. The announcer summarizes: "And that's *London After Dark* in the blackout. London in the midst of an air raid alarm....you were taken from point to point in this London under alarm. The defenses were manned, but the nightlife continued and the dance bands played on."

London After Dark takes the idea of dramatized news to an entirely different level. It takes from that genre its production complexity and showmanship. It has a cast of thousands, dramatic aural and musical effects, and staged scenes. It has tremendous variety, rapid pace, and plenty of entertainment. Its voices are genuine, although they don't always seem so. What it lacks in smoothness of execution it makes up for in realism. Its aural montages do not always succeed, but the ones that do need no narration, like the dance at the Savoy and the muster scene at the ARP. Although not as tightly scripted as *The March of Time* there is clearly a purposeful, defined sequence and a scenario for each segment. Some scenes, such as Chef Latry's, seem almost parody. Every segment was planned for its sonic potential.

Murrow's opening scene is remarkable in its aural drama. It is truly amazing that the air raid started as if on schedule. Certainly there were enough alarms in the days leading up to the broadcast that there was a very good chance that they would broadcast during an air raid. Nevertheless, the fact that the broadcast opens with four seconds of actual, not dramatized, air raid sound sets the emotional tone of the entire broadcast. It sweeps all the planned effects and sonic demonstrations into its reality. The Trafalgar Square scene sets the tone for the rest of the show. Murrow's recognizable voice is charged with an unfamiliar excitement, underscoring the true-to-life drama not in its words, but in its timbre and pace. It is more than twice as long as the average scene so we react to the sounds and adjust to the program. He is also the star attraction, so he hooks and holds the listener, an essential function in radio drama. Subsequent scenes are shorter and, although not all equally exciting, they contrast with each other. The show makes the most of its musical segments, giving them plenty of air time. The orchestras are pleasant to listen to, but the music carries meaning, which, at least in the Hammersmith vignette, seems programmed to reinforce a message. *The March of Time* regularly used this technique.

The two air raid preparedness segments get off to slow starts, with some of the duller narration of the program. But both take off when the action begins, one real and one staged. It doesn't seem to matter; from a standpoint of aural drama both are extremely effective. The best plans do not always come off. The Euston Station segment, planned as the penultimate episode could have been sonically exciting and carried the transportation theme one step further. But uncontrollable delays prevented that. Perhaps

the subordinate vignette, in the YMCA canteen, was intended to substitute for potential glitches. This is simply more evidence of anticipation and production savvy.

There is clearly a storyline to the program: Determined Londoners carry on with life even as they steadfastly resist attack. Many dramatized news programs were purely episodic, but others, like the one on Czechoslovakia described earlier in this chapter, were themed. From a narrative standpoint, *London After Dark* is the aural equivalent a photo essay in *Life* magazine (another Luce enterprise). Each vignette stands on its own. There is a logical presentation order for these brief sonic snapshots but it is not determinative. The final scene, at the Cenotaph, is of the sort that seems very strong in planning but perhaps doesn't come off as well in reality. Yet it too has something in common, dramatically, with *The March of Time* Czechoslovakia program. Both end with a single voice, delivering a message. One, Hitler's, is sinister—a prophetic reading from *Mein Kampf*. The other, hopeful—a lyrical expression from a literary figure. Neither has any effects, only the slow, meaning-laden voice of its speaker. Each show ends with a musical figure which underscores its intention. The storm motif from *Die Walküre* tells the listener of the coming war, but the Westminster chimes signal something different—steadfast, reliable continuity, hour after hour, for centuries. That they are church bells also carries meaning.

There is one final similarity to the tradition of dramatized news and that is the role of the narrator, who is analogous to the Voice of *Time*. The breezy conductor of our journey provides continuity, orienting us to the next stop, summarizing what just occurred. He is no Voice of Fate. Nevertheless, his continued presence connects the loose structure and makes sense of what is happening.

London After Dark benefitted dramatically from the air raid, in part because it added tension and sonic reality. But it also helped the program because the bombs *didn't* come. The fact that the broadcast had no on-air tragedy kept it from being overwhelming—too much to believe or bear. But it also meant that it aired in its entirety allowing the maximum control over what was heard by the audience. So the message was delivered intact: Britains were brave, prepared, regular folks doing regular things “just like you,” and had a historic heritage and homeland worthy of protection. The late August timing had another benefit which could not have been anticipated; the actual full force of the Blitz began only a few days after *London After Dark* aired. By the first week in September London was bombed nightly and with fierce deadly intensity. The millions of Americans who were “present” on August 24 clearly visualized the effects on the city and on its plucky, determined people. They were, in a sense, primed to identify with the unfolding disaster. It is unimaginable that Murrow could have staged such a production during the height of the Blitz. There were other “round London programs,” according to Murrow, but none seem to have survived either in audio or script form. It seems hard to believe that anything requiring this much production could have occurred very often.¹²⁵ BBC resources and reporters were stretched in other directions. The bombings’ devastation and human toll changed the narrative in as well. Never again was the levity of *London After Dark* depicted. The people of that broadcast were in a bubble of unreality at that moment because the bombing hadn’t really started. The blasé tone of optimism changed to one of determination.

¹²⁵ Murrow, “Transatlantic Broadcasting.”

Other Explorations in Sound

The onset of the Blitz changed the tone and inspired other portrayals of London and of the unfolding war. Murrow's creativity found different, but much less elaborate aural outlets. His rooftop air raid broadcasts provided live sonic drama, but from a safe remove—safe for the listener. Although Murrow may have been threatened by bombing at any moment, there was no human sound of distress, as might have been true had he broadcast in the East End. Screaming victims and collapsing buildings might have truly brought the sounds of war to the living rooms of America, but this was too much for the sensibilities of the era.

There is evidence that Murrow wanted to continue to develop the sonic essay form further during the Blitz. Two versions of a script exist for a program called *London Underground*, which developed a storyline of what life is like in the air raid shelters. This idea seems to have drawn even further on the idea of dramatized news. In its draft form, the program appears intended for a thirty minute broadcast, with Murrow as the sole narrator. The voiceover text has much in common with his regular broadcast, telling snapshot stories of things said and done by real people. In the second draft of the script, however, he wrote extended passages of multi-voice dialogue in which people told their own stories “in their own words.”¹²⁶ Scripted dialogue seems perilously close to *The March of Time*, yet Murrow's radio texts frequently used direct quotes in his anecdotes. Whether or not those are accurate representations, or constructed versions we will never know. We do know that, in some situations, he was completely comfortable with

¹²⁶ Edward R. Murrow, "London Underground," Script drafts, 1940, Edward R. Murrow Papers, Tufts University Archive, Boston. Note: These scripts first surfaced in 2005 in an office at CBS.

mediating words and performance. In 1942 he collaborated with Norman Corwin on the series *An American in England*, an “American-built series originating abroad for the express purpose of sending back to this country programs synthesizing in dramatic form the story of life and times of the common people of another country.”¹²⁷ For the production of *Cromer*, a show about war in the life of villagers living on the North Sea, Murrow sent Robert Trout along with D.G. Bridson, the BBC’s editor for the series co-production to Lancashire to interview the population. Bridson described the program as an “actuality” broadcast, by which he meant documentary-style.¹²⁸

The procedure: pick local people in the area, listen to and record their speech, write a script---using the same words and accents---for them, rehearse and record them in their own homes.¹²⁹

They trained the same people to deliver their words in the broadcast so they could be understood by American audiences. But no mention of this is made in the documentary. It appears spontaneous. Murrow went with Trout to the North, to Oldham, for the two day rehearsal and broadcast, and was apparently “delighted with the idea.”¹³⁰ CBS apparently wasn’t. According to Bridson, management, which may mean Paul White, “howled that the BBC’s claim that these were everyday ordinary folk was a fraud.” According to Bridson, Murrow defended the program, saying that the people “had merely been trained to talk in their own words.”¹³¹ Corwin’s work frequently blurred the line

¹²⁷ Norman Corwin, “Cromer,” in *More by Corwin* (New York: Henry Holt, 1944), 50. Production notes on *Cromer*.

¹²⁸ Smith, *Edward R. Murrow, the War Years*, 36-37. Quoting from an interview with Bridson in 1971.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid.

between drama and documentary; *Cromer* was such a piece. It isn't clear how audiences received these works, but they were presented as if they were real.

We also know that Murrow scripted "interviews" with servicemen. There are at least two broadcasts which still exist in which it is completely clear to this listener, from the unnatural tone and delivery, that the soldier is reading—not telling—an account of his own exploits. In one, the soldier recounts a harrowing tale of his unit's retreat from Belgium, under fire from the air and by land for three days, then under torpedo fire as they escaped in a boat.¹³² It's a tremendous story but he reads it at a pace as if the Nazis were still chasing him, but with the expressionless inflection of reading the phone book. Perhaps it was necessary to script such stories, to pass the censors. Or perhaps Murrow was concerned that he couldn't rely on the soldier to tell the story in the time allowed. Either way, scripting interviews seems to have been an accepted practice. However, if the words are presented as the speaker's own, and they are not, there is some question—today at least—as to the ethics of this mediation. Clearly Murrow wanted what the audience heard to come across as true. How much does it matter that the things that were not precisely true? Where does that fit into Murrow's reputation for integrity?

Murrow, objectivity and the war

Murrow returned to the United States in late November of 1941 to a hero's welcome artfully staged by William Paley. Murrow hadn't been home since the end of 1938 but the trip was not just a home leave. He had a three month book tour planned to promote the just-published *This is London*, a compilation of his broadcasts from the start of the war through the Blitz. His return was heralded by a black-tie testimonial dinner,

¹³²Edward R. Murrow, CBS News broadcast, May 31, 1940, <http://archives.museum.tv/archives>.

planned by Paley, at the Waldorf and attended by a thousand guests on December 2. The keynote speaker was arch-interventionist Archibald MacLeish, whose views on truth form a useful context for a discussion of Murrow's objectivity.

Poet MacLeish, a close friend of FDR, was already the head of the Office of Facts and Figures, the pre-war government agency which would form the core of the Office of War Information. He was the standard bearer for what he would call a few months later, the Strategy of Truth. Contrasting the needed course of action for the United States with pernicious Nazi propaganda, he argued that "a democratic government supplies truth and not lies," holding up a noble ideal not only for the government but for the press, radio and film. Although he acknowledged that the memory of the Creel committee's excesses in World War I had made the public skeptical of propaganda, they couldn't be relied on to discern truth. He held that the press had an obligation "to perform a wartime duty...to police itself."¹³³ The safest course to public credibility was to resist the impulse for propaganda by following a course of delivering plain truth.

On the eve of World War II, at the banquet in his honor, Murrow was held up as the exemplar of that ideal, perhaps the first time that he was publicly acclaimed for his integrity and objectivity. "They [Americans] were not afraid when you, Murrow, told them the truth about London in the terrible winter of '40-'41. So long as the American people are told truly...they will face it."¹³⁴ His great accomplishment, MacLeish claimed was that he won the belief of Americans "without rhetoric, without dramatics, without

¹³³ Archibald MacLeish, "The Strategy of Truth," in *A Time to Act* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin Company, 1943), 29. Text of an address given to the Associated Press annual luncheon, April 20, 1942.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

more emotion than needed be.”¹³⁵ One has to question MacLeish’s definitions to see how Murrow’s broadcasts lacked rhetoric and drama. As I have shown in this chapter, in language choices, incidents portrayed and sonic devices, Murrow’s reports had much in common with MacLeish’s plays, something the poet might have noticed. In that audience of notables from the networks, the press, and government were there many who really believed anything MacLeish said? Or did they merely accept his words as public cover for their justified, honorable, rather measured, but nevertheless interventionist, expression of their beliefs.

What, then, of Murrow’s much vaunted objectivity?

An official policy of editorial neutrality had been in place in radio since 1939. In an effort to stave off FCC action precipitated by controversial commentators like Father Coughlin, Boake Carter and others—not incidentally all foes of the Roosevelt administration, the NAB published its guidelines to comply with the provisions of the Communications Act of 1934. CBS’s own policy of objectivity in news reporting was written the same year by executive Edward Klauber, modeled after that of the *New York Times* where he had been City Editor before coming to CBS. According to Paul White, who later published it in his book *News on the Air*, this written policy supposedly formalized existing practice. Among its provisions were that “Columbia’s announced policy of having no editorial views of its own and not seeking to maintain or advance the views of others will be rigidly continued.” News analysts were enjoined from not only from expressing opinions but from “a microphone manner designed to cast doubt, suspicion, sarcasm, ridicule...on the matter they are presenting.” Further, they were to

¹³⁵ MacLeish, “A Superstition is Destroyed,” in *A Time to Act* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1943). Text of the speech given at the banquet to honor Edward R. Murrow, December 2, 1941.

“point out the facts on both sides, show contradictions...and to help the listener to understand, to weigh and to judge, but not to do the judging for him.” Yet, tellingly, the policy acknowledged the impossibility “within any reasonable limits, to define completely this last-mentioned aspect of new analysis.”¹³⁶ Murrow and many others slipped through this equivocal loophole.¹³⁷

Well before the Blitz it was no secret that “All the networks...have accepted Roosevelt’s foreign policy,” and that CBS was much more liberal than NBC.¹³⁸ Murrow certainly adhered to that part of CBS’s policy which prohibited the language or tone of sarcasm and ridicule to convey his views. On the contrary, his approach was the reverse—to persuade through aural and textual selectivity. Even his trademark opening, “This is London,” is subtly suggestive, the product of conscious suasion. Communications scholar Donald Godfrey points out that, in a 1945 radio interview, Murrow “suggested the words had a far greater meaning. When the blitz (sic) began the people were doubting whether London would survive and the words implied there was still a London...in three words the state of men and the world was communicated and reality was observed.”¹³⁹

¹³⁶ White, *News on the Air*, 199. Quoting from CBS’s 1939 news policy.

¹³⁷ For an analysis of the tactics of another CBS news man during the pre-war era, see Alfred Haworth Jones, “The Making of an Interventionist: Elmer Davis and CBS News, 1939-1941,” *Pacific Historical Review* 43, no. 1 (February 1973): 74-93.

¹³⁸ Quincy Howe, *The News and How to Understand It* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1940), 187. Howe’s book went to press in September of 1940, and so was prepared in advance of the London Blitz. Howe names a number of reporter’s of foreign news, notably Raymond Grant Swing of Mutual and Major George Fielding Eliot of Columbia, but not Murrow. This is further evidence that Murrow’s reputation was made and his influence felt specifically because of his broadcasts during the Blitz.

¹³⁹ Donald G. Godfrey, “Ethics in Practice: Analysis of Edward R. Murrow’s WWII Radio Reporting,” *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* 8, no. 2 (1993): 107.

We know that from early on Murrow was concerned about his objectivity in reporting. In a letter to his old friend Chet Williams in March of 1938, he wrote that he was “worried about not doing an honest job...I am finding it more and more difficult to suppress my personal convictions.”¹⁴⁰ Godfrey’s analysis of Murrow’s reporting finds that he maintains objectivity by segregating his emotional, dramatic descriptions into “feature stories,” which elaborated on the more terse news reports. I disagree. Not only did Murrow’s news reports stylistically provide for dramatic, evocative anecdotes as reactions to the dry facts of the news, but it seems extremely unlikely that the listener discriminated among Murrow’s many, many daily broadcasts. The wash of sound was all Murrow, and as such it all blended into a single impression. Once war was declared, in September of 1939, Murrow’s broadcasts reflect the British side of the picture, despite America’s formal political neutrality. After Dunkirk and especially during the Blitz, his broadcasts were filled with tales of survival, pluck and defiance against the attackers. When he was able to add external sonic elements, like the sounds of air raids and bombs exploding, and vivid aural productions like *London After Dark*, his words were buttressed by the power of the actual sounds of war.

The continuity of expression through all these broadcasts was his voice, which carried his twin intentions: to sound objective but, nevertheless, to influence the listener. Calmly delivered and subtly inflected, his voice presented a tone of objectivity and distance that was not usually reflected in his words. The voice lacked overt drama, which only enhanced the credibility of his message. Yet, as my analysis has shown, his performance was studied and modulated for effect. Its absence of histrionic declamation

¹⁴⁰ Sperber, *Edward R. Murrow: An American Original*, 123. Quoting from a letter by Murrow to Chet Williams, March 28, 1938.

stood in for objectivity, contrasting not only with other commentators of his time, but with the relentless aural harangues of the Nazi leaders.

Murrow was acutely aware that radio was a determinative force in the war and he made it absolutely clear to his listeners what his position was. His April 7, 1940 broadcast, right at the end of the “phony war” warned that:

If you believe that this war will be decided on the home front, then you must believe that radio used as an instrument of war is one of the most powerful weapons a nation possesses. If you believe, as I do, that this war is being fought for the control of men’s minds, it is clear that radio will be a deciding factor.¹⁴¹

Murrow’s report that night was on the overtly propagandistic uses of radio by the Nazis, but his words can just as easily be applied to the subtleties which characterized his work. And if his listeners were on notice that there were subject to persuasion, they nevertheless responded predictably. Public opinion in favor of intervention nearly doubled during the months of the London Blitz, to 53%.¹⁴² We cannot be sure that all were swayed by Murrow’s broadcasts, but the London Blitz was the single most momentous event of that three month period.

In his 1942 book on the use of radio for war propaganda, University of Chicago professor Sherman Dryer grappled with the ambiguous meaning of truth in the context of fighting a war. He criticized MacLeish’s *Strategy of Truth*, which first came to light at the *University of Chicago Round Table* in March of 1942, with respect to its implications for radio. Dryer said: “The global aspects of this war require an exposition of innumerable interrelationships necessary to the orientation, enlightenment and inspiration

¹⁴¹ Murrow, *This Is London*, 76. April 7, 1940.

¹⁴² Cantril, Rugg and Williams, “America Faces the War: Shifts in Opinion,” 652. It would take the bombing of Pearl Harbor, more than a year later, however, to swing the rest of the country in favor of war.

of the public....Radio cannot employ its full potential to these ends if its creative function is hamstrung by a literal application of the Strategy of Truth.”¹⁴³ The simple telling of “facts” as “truth” did not “automatically elicit the desired response and resolution.”¹⁴⁴ Dryer clearly found this to be naïve and impractical. He concluded that “This was is not a paper and ink war. It is more than anything a war of spoken words and the packaging of words in the paraphernalia of broadcasting. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say this is a war of sounds—the human voice set on a stage of music, sound effects and other devices.”¹⁴⁵ Murrow had long before figured that out.

¹⁴³ Sherman H. Dryer, *Radio in Wartime* (New York: Greenberg Publisher, 1942), 81.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 92-93.

Chapter 6

Opening Our Ears: Representation and Conflict on the Home Front in *An Open Letter on Race Hatred*

By the summer of 1943, the momentum of the war favored the Allies. The war in Africa was over. The Russians had won back Leningrad and Stalingrad, revealing the Wehrmacht's weaknesses. The defeat at Guadalcanal had undermined Japanese morale. Although the war was only at midpoint, there was confidence that the eventual outcome was not in doubt. But on the Home Front, widespread racial violence revealed the fissures in American society. The Detroit riots of late June, 1943, in which 36 died and 700 were injured, and which seriously disrupted war production, were quelled only by Federal troops. This shattered national self-confidence, exposed the deficiencies within the American system and challenged our high-minded claims of democracy.

There was a leadership vacuum during the months of the crisis. FDR was silent on the subject of the riots and on the racial discrimination which had precipitated them, turning down requests to address the nation on radio.¹ Roosevelt's Fireside Chats had been effective in keeping the nation calm during the Depression. At the start of the war, he had won admiration and support in his great address following Pearl Harbor. The racial crisis was an opportunity to bring his position and personal popularity to an issue which troubled the nation on the medium which had influenced so many. But government's only response was sending troops to keep the peace. Equivocation was characteristic of the Administration's approach to racial policy. Instead, the call for

¹ Harvard Sitkoff, "Racial Militancy and Interracial Violence in the Second World War," *The Journal of American History* 58, no.3 (December, 1971):677.

tolerance came from within radio itself. On July 24, only a month after the Detroit riots, CBS broadcast *An Open Letter to the American People*, a thirty minute program which confronted the riots and their causes with rare candor.² Doing what radio did best, it dramatized the events and causes of the violence with sonic brilliance and emotional power, in the hope that its message would penetrate the hearts of its listeners and begin to bring about social change.

CBS took on a daunting task in deciding to address this previously untouchable subject. Deciding how to approach it was equally challenging. A lecture would only reach the ears of those already persuaded. Previous efforts to create programming favorable to African Americans had avoided controversy and probably appealed only to blacks themselves.³ What kind of program would have mass appeal and yet still present truths unpalatable to the 90% of Americans who were white? Advocates for African Americans framed the issue.

It is axiomatic of radio that programs must be entertaining, must occupy the attention of the listener or the public will not listen....No matter how worthy the cause or how much in sympathy they may be, it is never...to the advantage of a station or network—or the cause—to put on a program merely to discharge an obligation to or go through the motions of meeting public responsibility without insisting upon as high a degree of excellence in the programs as can be achieved.⁴

Yet who better to tackle the problem than the creative liberals at CBS?

Unimpeded by the committees which bickered about every element of the government-

² Originally called *An Open Letter to the American People*, the program quickly became known by its subject.

³ Barbara Dianne Savage, *Broadcasting Freedom: Radio War and the Politics of Race, 1938-1948* (Chapel Hill: the University of North Carolina Press, 1999.), 57. Savage refers to an analysis of letters from those who listened to *Americans All*, *Immigrants All*, "The Negro," which showed that most of the audience was comprised of African Americans.

⁴ Lyman Bryson and Dorothy Rowden, "Radio as an Agency of National Unity," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 138.

backed programs intended to raise black morale, the network gave free rein to William Robson, a writer-director with an essential blend of artistic sensibility, commercial instinct and progressive political credentials. He crafted a show that entertained without flinching from the issues and indicted the listeners for their prejudices while offering hopeful solutions, a seemingly impossible assignment. I suggest that only radio could have produced such a result. Print could not generate the same immediate, visceral response, nor did any single publication reach a large enough audience.⁵ Film, despite its visual impact, lacked radio's personal address, which black activists understood: "The dramatic power of radio may be less than that of the movie, which combines both sight and sound... [but] radio programs come directly into the home. This gives them convenience and intimacy that no other communication agency has."⁶ Taking advantage of radio's intimacy, *Open Letter* took listeners to task in their homes, where they were not subject to public pressure.

This chapter has two tasks. To properly frame the cultural and, consistent with the goals of this work, *aural* impact of the response to the Detroit riots made by *Open Letter* requires an understanding of what cultural and sonic conventions of black representation preceded it. Although many scholars have discussed representations of race in radio and other media, none has looked specifically at what it sounded like and how those sounds perpetuated cultural stereotypes before and during the war. This chapter revisits radio representation of blacks in that context and it is with that in mind that I consider

⁵ Hadley Cantril and Gordon W. Allport, *The Psychology of Radio* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1935), 260.

⁶ L.D. Reddick, "Educational Programs for the Improvement of Race Relations: Motion Pictures, Radio, the Press and Libraries," *The Journal of Negro Education* 13, no.3 (Summer, 1944.): 386.

Robson's approach in *Open Letter*. I demonstrate how the program used aural imagery to evoke listeners' subliminal response through three major elements of the sonic palette: narrative technique, voice characterizations and music. First, I believe Robson drew on listener familiarity with the format of radio crime dramas both to entertain and to subtly link the show's message with concepts of right and wrong. Second, Robson used distinctive voice coloration to support the texts and channel listener reception. Different narration techniques denote shifts in location, time and tone. And perhaps most remarkably of all, *Open Letter*'s many black and white characters and characterizations tell the story almost entirely without the sonic markers which had helped perpetuate racial stereotypes from the earliest days of the medium. Finally, he supported the text with an unusual degree of musical partnership, not only underscoring emotions and scenic atmosphere, but facilitating listener understanding of the show's many rapid shifts in action and guiding the emotional response to its difficult message.

RACE ON RADIO: CULTURAL REFRACTIONS OF SOCIAL CONDITIONS

Radio and "the Negro Problem"

Robson's achievement is all the more remarkable by its contrast to cultural and aural representations which reflected African Americans' treatment in the society at large. Even well-intended efforts were miscalculated and either reinforced stereotypes or dodged realities of the black experience. As the nation's primary form of mass communications, radio was enlisted to ameliorate race relations long before the war began. Its role, however, was fostering racial harmony, not provoking debate or advocating social change. The initiative for these programs came entirely from outside the networks. In the late 1930s the Office of Education spearheaded the earliest of these

efforts in the series *Americans All*, *Immigrants All*, collaborating with CBS on 26 programs which celebrated the many nationalities and cultures which made up the American “melting pot.” Episode 6, “The Negro,” was intended to treat African-Americans on a par with other immigrants, while recognizing that blacks were the only group which came to the country involuntarily. However, the approach and realization were only half successful, plagued by the kind of cultural misunderstandings and social attitudes which were typical of race relations in the ‘30s and ‘40s –even when they meant well. William Robson was the director of “The Negro,” but critic Gilbert Seldes, the playwright for the entire series, wrote the script and brought a perspective that reflected his own somewhat patronizing views which certainly didn’t meet the goal of fairly treating the subject without offending white audiences. The two African American consultants to *Americans All*, Alain Locke of Howard University who was the editor of the acclaimed book *The New Negro*, and W.E.B. DuBois, were severely critical of Seldes’ script, which they felt elided tough issues like slave revolts and any discussion of the Civil War.⁷ Seldes incorporated many of Locke’s and DuBois’ recommendations to forthrightly admit to difficulties that blacks had in 20th century society, but those were limited to the mention of poor housing and labor bias, and entirely avoided discussing such volatile topics as Jim Crow or lynching. Since Seldes, who was not really a radio writer, was the final authority on the script, the dramatizations tip-toed around major issues. The program reflected this tentativeness.

The structure of “The Negro” is similar to other episodes of *Americans All*, with musical passages, narration and dramatization. It establishes a formal tone with an

⁷ Savage, *Broadcasting Freedom*, 38-39.

introduction by a very mannered narrator who rolls his r's. The first vignette discusses the origins of the slave trade blaming Great Britain and not the colonists, which indirectly suggests that guilt is not laid at the feet of the listener. Early Americans appear to be forced to import slaves because the mother country demands that America produce more and more cotton to ship to England. The major theme of the show is that, although brought against their will, blacks nevertheless supplied the labor to build the country, enduring slavery with "magnificent patience."⁸ Unfortunately, the theme does not evolve from there. Over and over the script declares that whenever and wherever labor was needed "the Negro answered the call." With education and emancipation blacks could "move about," and "the Negro was asked to come north" for jobs but met with competition from immigrants. The unspoken implication is that blacks were permitted to do little other than labor with their hands despite strides made in primary and higher education.

One wonders how much control Robson had over the production, which sounds like a poor man's *The March of Time*, impoverished by a wooden script, amateurish acting and what sounds like limited musical resources. Although music is the primary connective tissue of the show and black contributions to America's music were considered an asset when the program was planned, it is somewhat disappointing to hear a small choir singing the many spirituals and folk songs with piano accompaniment or none at all. Orchestral interludes, like the one which quotes Dvorak's Symphony *From the New World*, are played by a small string ensemble with none of the power that the

⁸ Gilbert Seldes, "'The Negro,' Americans All/Immigrants All," CBS Radio broadcast in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Education, December 18, 1938. Quoted references from this program come from this source.

network orchestra might have brought to improve the aural richness of the program. With these handicaps Robson brought little of his abundant creativity to the show. However, on one point, he resisted convention and had an important aural impact. Black speakers differ very little in timbre, accent and vocal inflection from white ones. Where blacks speak with an accent, they are geographically placed in the south on plantations. They are differentiated from their accented white masters only by markers of their roles within the scene. Slaves may refer to their owners as “Massa,” but they have no slow, exaggerated drawl or raspy utterances heard so often in radio. The script is respectful on this point and does not call on blacks to speak fractured English. In several important scenes blacks speak with no accent at all. The first of these is the vignette which introduces Frederick Douglass. He is portrayed as speaking unaccented English, and, if anything, the performance attempts to echo in sound the great eloquence and formality of Douglass’ writing. Other segments are not so successful. One scene tries for a kind of choral effect in which black workers respond to want ads from newspapers around the country:

Narrator: The Negro went into the camps, the mines, the mills. And railroads were being built. [Choir sings “Steamboat Down the River” and other folk melodies under dialogue.]

Railroad recruiter: I can use 500 men in Missouri. Good pay.

Male chorus: [shouting] Here we come!

2nd Recruiter: Thousand men in Kansas. Good pay and good food.

Male chorus: Here we come! [louder each time]

3rd Recruiter: 5000 men, in the mines.

Male chorus: Here we come!!

Four more pairs of call-and-response lines follow these. There is an “Oh boy! What fun!” sound of growing excitement in the antiphonal response of the black workers. Seldes’ script may deserve most of the blame, but Robson does not seem to have found a

way to spare the scene from sounding silly and trivial. At least the male chorus shouts in plain unaccented English.

In the on-air performance, the show's balance was significantly disrupted by a performance by Jules Bledsoe, the original Joe in *Show Boat* and a renowned baritone. Bledsoe sang "Black Boy" which Alain Locke later described as a "Mammy interpolation," taking up nine of the program's thirty minutes.⁹ This lengthy piece tended to support, rather than revise, traditional views of African Americans and dominated the latter segment of the show. Bledsoe's singing style also aurally marked the performance, since he had a melodramatic delivery, artificial diction and "classical" affectation, complete with rolled r's. His performance cut out the portion of the program which credited black achievements, which might have saved the show from the embarrassing single note of "labor calls, the black man answers."¹⁰ However, the program ends, very effectively, by praising the efforts of James Weldon Johnson and a rendition of the great hymn the Johnson brothers wrote: "Lift Every Voice and Sing," which had already in 1938 become associated with the struggle for civil rights. *Americans All, Immigrants All*, and especially "The Negro," broke new ground in attempting to foster greater inclusiveness, because "the illumination of cultural differences tends to diminish social

⁹ Savage, *Broadcasting Freedom*, 41. Locke's upset over the incident is reflected in his letter to Rachel DuBois, the series' creator: "How on earth did you let them put that over on 'us'." Savage quotes from a letter he later wrote to CBS that "the sentiment of the song was mis-representative of contemporary Negro feeling and attitude.... [T]his sabotage of the positive tone and effect of the rest of the program" was no less of an upset because it had been Bledsoe's own idea.

¹⁰ The recording of the program, which was made for school distribution and is the only documentary version available today, restores the original script. In it, scientists, educators, writers, actors and musicians names are read out. Curiously, in the litany of musical achievements the emphasis is almost entirely on classical artists such as composers William Grant Still and Harry Burleigh. Singers like Marion Anderson, Jules Bledsoe and Paul Robeson "delighted concert audiences around the world with their voices. European opera has welcomed the greatest voices of our Negro singers." American opera had not, the script fails to mention. W.C. Handy stands alone to represent contributions to popular music, an omission that demonstrates a tendency to pretension and a misunderstanding of the audience.

difference,” but it also established a timid model which future programs followed, and exemplified the persistent cultural/social divide between white and black in America.¹¹

War era efforts to improve African American morale

As war approached, the Department of Education stepped up cultural efforts to foster better black morale and championed a series of programs on NBC which showcased African American contributions to the nation’s culture. Typical of all such programs, *Freedom’s People* was produced by the network in consultation with the Department, “blue ribbon” contributors, critics, and artists, both white and black. But this series, too, was born in controversy, which reflects official and societal attitudes of the time. Each episode was planned to highlight black achievement in different fields. Everyone agreed on the first program, which traced the many black musical accomplishments and contributions to American culture. But network executives didn’t want to make a series, suggesting that the idea couldn’t be sustained past a single program. They doubted that blacks had made enough contributions in other fields to fill out full broadcasts. Additionally, they didn’t want to be associated with something which could be considered propaganda favoring a single ethnic group or advocating social agendas. NBC’s reaction from its head of public service, Dr. James R. Angell, was typical: “...we could probably get a really first-class musical program; the others would be more doubtful. I fancy none of them would be popular south of Mason and Dixon’s line.”¹² Although Ambrose Calilver, the series advocate from the Department of

¹¹ Bryson and Rowden, “Radio as an Agency of National Unity,” 141.

¹² Michelle Hilmes, *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922-1952* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 252. Quoting from a letter from James R. Angell to Niles Trammel, February 7, 1941. (NBC archives.)

Education, expressly guaranteed that they would avoid any controversial topics, only a push from the publicity department of the U.S. Army, which feared the escalation of racial tensions surrounding the aborted March on Washington in 1941, persuaded NBC to move forward with the series.¹³

With the start of the war, the Office of War Information took on responsibility for morale building programs across all media, including those addressing racial issues. Washington was concerned blacks would not support the war, evidenced by resistance to induction and militancy for civil rights fostered by the African American press.¹⁴ The emphasis was on cultural programs—morale building publicity which would foster positive interracial relations, acknowledge black contributions to the war effort and avoid divisive issues. It is an important distinction that the OWI, and by extension the government and the military, were concerned with building loyalty, commitment and a belief among African Americans that they had a stake in the outcome of the war. Social justice and improving conditions for black Americans were not priorities; stability was. Their guidelines on how to portray blacks on radio were driven by these goals, which they expressed in the pamphlet “When Radio Writes for War.” Its frank directives show the problems of representation which were seldom articulated.

When portraying a Negro on a radio program, avoid the Stepin Fetchit type, the minstrel man, the stooge, the dumb domestic, the guy always being chased by ghosts. And Negroes have names as commonplace as John and Mary. Seldom are they colorful as “Eight-ball,” “Ironhead,” “Blackboy,” or “Razor.” When Negro characters appear in a script, try to have them played by real Negroes—straight

¹³ For a full discussion of this and other important programs concerning African-Americans before and during the war see Savage, *Broadcasting Freedom: Radio, War and the Politics of Race, 1938-1948*.

¹⁴ Sitkoff, “Racial Militancy,” 666. For a fascinating discussion of the OWI’s approach to African American morale, see Lauren Rebecca Sklaroff, “Constructing Joe Louis: Cultural Solutions to the ‘Negro Problem’ during World War II,” *The Journal of American History*, 89, no. 3 (December, 2002): 958-983.

and intelligently—if Negro actors are available. And they *are* available in all large radio production centers.¹⁵

That such a recital of insulting characterizations and names had to be formally enumerated testifies not only to pervasive cultural attitudes of the 1940s but also to radio's shameful record of promulgating racial stereotypes and slurs. L.D. Reddick, Atlanta University's chief librarian and prolific writer on civil rights issues identified nineteen separate disparaging characterizations that were common in American culture and perpetuated in the media.¹⁶

Radio's heritage of aural demarcation of race

The sonic palette was replete with aural conventions which signified race. Names, accents, dialect, voices and character types had become ingrained in the American consciousness. Most often these characters were portrayed by whites in "blackvoice" which was comprised of aural and textual elements that combined to reinforce existing stereotypes and confirm difference. Concerned social activists observed that the effect of open ridicule of minorities in the media gave permission to do so in society: "Where minorities are not segregated or discriminated against by law, the informal codes or mores achieve virtually the same result."¹⁷ Radio, the most trusted medium in America,

¹⁵Office of War Information, Radio Section, *When Radio Writes for War* (Washington, D.C.: Office of War Information, 1943)

¹⁶ Reddick, "Educational Programs for the Improvement of Race Relations," 369. "The principal stereotypes of the Negro in the American mind are (1) the savage African, (2) the happy slave, (3) the devoted servant, (4) the corrupt politician, (5) the irresponsible citizen, (6) the petty thief, (7) the social delinquent, (8) the vicious criminal. (9) the sexual super-man, (10) the superior athlete, (11) the unhappy non-white, (12) the natural-born cook, (13) the natural-born musician, (14) the perfect entertainer, (15) the superstitious churchgoer, (16) the chicken and watermelon eater, (17) the razor and knife "toter," (18) the uninhibited expressionist and (19) the mental inferior. These stereotypes supplement each other, though they are sometimes mutually contradictory."

¹⁷ June Blythe, "Can Public Relations Help Race Prejudice," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 11, no. 3 (Autumn, 1947): 345.

gave tacit approval to racial stereotypes through scenarios which caricatured blacks and the recurrent use of deprecatory aural conventions. Comedy, the most popular form of radio drama, was a persistent model for these sonic stereotypes through programs like *Amos 'n Andy* and other mock-minstrel fare, the long running *Aunt Jemima*, and by the Beulah character who appeared on a succession of shows. Their popularity confirmed social acceptance of these representations. Stock characters, such as black maids and cooks, gardeners and handymen also appeared on many soap operas and dramas, portraying their “place” in society.

To be sure, not only blacks were caricatured on radio. Hillbillies, Jews, Italians, and many other ethnicities and social groups were fodder for radio’s aural comedy, although official policy stood against it. This example, from Mutual’s “Program Standards,” is typical of the network position: “Because America is made up of peoples of all races, colors and nationalities, Mutual accepts no program which misrepresents ridicules or attacks any of them.”¹⁸ The language of this policy, so careful and earnest, still leaves room for cultural interpretation. White America in the 1930s and ‘40s did not see racial or ethnic characterizations as misrepresentation, quite the contrary. For example, fans and professional writers from both north and south considered the characters on *Amos 'n Andy* authentic and realistic in both sonic and situational representation. The Baltimore *News Sun* noted that both Correll and Gosden, the originators of this cultural and entertainment phenomenon, “spend as much time as possible among Negroes making a study of accents and witticisms and garnering ideas for situations....their picturization of Southern negroes (sic) transplanted to the North

¹⁸ Bryson and Rowden, “Radio as an Agency of National Unity,” 137. Quoting from Mutual Network “Program Standards.”

[might be] the most realistic ever accomplished.”¹⁹ The northern press was similarly minded; New York *Telegram* claimed Freeman Gosden’s “Southern birth instilled him with an inherent understanding of the Negro [which would be] inherently truthful in his delineations...of the Negro psychology.”²⁰ Respected journals like the *Christian Science Monitor* reflected the ambivalence of liberal Americans, essentially defending the series. One of its writers felt that *Amos ‘n Andy* moved beyond insulting stereotypes of minstrelsy because Correll and Gosden avoided “wise cracks ...and cheap vaudeville methods,” praising the show for its universality of theme through “human talk...and character... [as opposed to] mere caricature.”²¹

Models of racial signification on radio

A sub-segment of the sonic palette evolved which represented the sound of blackness on radio. First, the text situated blacks in traditional roles and in scenes which drew on Reddick’s infamous 19, perpetuating the public’s “mental picture of the Negro as an ugly, awkward, foolish, good-natured idiot.”²² Then grammar, dialect and word choice were added as markers of ignorance and class for whites as well as blacks, but blacks had a unique lexicon born of the minstrel tradition and prototyped on radio in scenes like these vignettes compiled from several *Amos ‘n Andy* episodes.²³

From an episode about Amos’ girlfriend Ruby—

¹⁹ Melvin Patrick Ely, *The Adventures of Amos ‘n Andy: A Social History of an American Phenomenon* (New York: Macmillan, 1991), 127.

²⁰ Ibid., 137.

²¹ Ibid., 142.

²² Reddick, “Educational Programs for the Improvement of Race Relations,” 383.

²³ These examples were culled from several sources, including undated programs streaming on the Radio Internet Archive, http://www.archive.org/details/AmosNAndy_384 and those excerpted in Ely’s and MacLeod’s books.

Amos: We was talkin' den she say—I A-Dore you. Whut do dat mean. A-Dore?

Andy: Dat means she think you is a blockhead. A door. A door.

From an episode about getting a job at a mortician—

Andy: It's mo' hants in a undertaker's place dan anyplace in de world.

Amos: Sho' nuff! I'se scared o' hants too...I ain't goin' fool 'round no morgue.

From an episode about buying shoes—

Amos: He ain't gonna be able to jam his foot in that shoe.

Andy: I'se reskusted! Lissen niggrah, Doan you nevah put nothin' like that ohn mah feet agin.

Dialogue with grammatical errors of person and/or number is meant to stand for dialect, such as the recurring use of expressions as “I’s,” “do” for “does,” “we was” for “we were,” and persistent use of double negatives. Such language use carried over from minstrel tradition and became standard on radio and in film. Malapropisms were commonly used in comic dialogue; Gertrude Berg sustained many years of humor on Molly Goldberg’s immigrant misuse of English. At least she had an excuse—English was her second language. Blacks were simply ignorant. Using “words” like “reskusted,” “hants” for “haunts,” which one must assume means ghosts, mistaking the word “adore” for “a door” may be intended to indicate dialect but really end up making blacks look dumber than the rest of the world, and certainly dumber than the listener.

Ambiguities of racial and ethnic humor

The near universal appeal of *Amos ‘n Andy*, even among African Americans, bears some examination. It was a made-for-radio success. Aurally recognizable to listeners both because of its familiar brand of minstrel-inspired comedy and the sonic specificity of its representation, it enabled people to visualize the characters because they had probably seen minstrel shows or vaudeville acts. Of course, the show would not have succeeded if it had to depend only on those conventions, but sound was an important part

of its humor.²⁴ Its success spawned many other sound-based ethnic and regional comedies, like *The Rise of the Goldbergs*, *Lum and Abner*, and *Ma Perkins*, which were similarly popular with the groups caricatured. In our era of hypersensitivity to how different groups are represented, many have been tempted to criticize these programs. However, it might be more useful to consider what made this genre a successful form of comedy and why it appealed to diverse audiences.

From earliest times, philosophers have seen ridicule and disparagement at the core of mirth, in which the foolish are brought down by their vanity, self-aggrandizement and other faults and foibles. In the early 19th Century William Hazlitt somewhat acidly observed that “We grow tired of everything but turning others into ridicule and congratulating ourselves on their defects.” But comedy also assumes a friendly reception dynamic which suspends for the duration of the performance all seriousness, and approaches the material in that frame of mind.

More recently, psychologist Dolf Zillmann has tried to understand racial and ethnic humor and its relationship to what is generally considered funny. He described the many studies which support that it is funnier “to see one’s own ethnic group triumphant over a rival group than...to suffer humiliation at the hands of the rival group.”²⁵ But, he observed, humor is more widely appealing when the premise is confined within a single group. *Amos ‘n Andy* fits this profile because the jokes are all confined to the large black

²⁴ Even today scholars find much to praise in the innovation of the program, which influenced the development of radio drama and the situation comedy, with its distilled dialogue, plot and sub-plot flow, use of sonic coloration to present different characters and its format which suspended the story from day to day. See Elizabeth MacLeod, *The Original Amos ‘n Andy: Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll and the 1928-1943 Radio Serial* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 2005).

²⁵ Dolf Zillmann, "Humor and Comedy," in *Media Entertainment: The Psychology of its Appeal*, ed. Dolf Zillmann and Peter Vorderer (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Publishers, 2000), 40.

community of characters created by Gosden and Freeman. There are no cross-group insults which might take on a confrontational tone. In radio, at least, so long as the humor remained within the group being portrayed it was widely accepted. Racial and ethnic stereotyping seemed to cross the line from being funny to everyone, to patronizing and offensive when the social balance was disrupted with more obvious inferences of superiority and inferiority.²⁶

Sounding black

Bad grammar and poor pronunciation which are the hallmarks of accent were written into the text of the *Amos 'n Andy* scripts and that tradition carried forward into the scripts of other radio comedies and dramas, many of which did portray cross-class and/or –race situations. Black and white actors portraying African American characters were expected to exaggerate the sound of their dialogue in order to clearly convey their race. When African Americans were employed to portray blacks, they were often asked to mimic stereotypical dialect and voice types which had become the most offensive part of sonic convention.²⁷ Actors who refused were not hired. Given the few jobs available for blacks on radio, many suppressed their humiliation and perpetuated the practice. Radio

²⁶ However, that does not explain the appeal of ethnic and racial humor to the group which is the subject of the joke. In a study addressing this seeming contradiction, psychologist Russell Middleton found that there was virtually no difference between the perceptions of blacks and whites as to what each group found humorous, particularly with respect to jokes which lampooned blacks. In other words, blacks were able to laugh at their own race as much as whites did, with no distinction by class or education within the group. Whites did not find as funny those jokes which ridiculed their own race, with the difference coming from lower class whites. The reason may be found in the acceptance of the stereotypes which were the basis for the humor. Both white and black test subjects found things funny in direct proportion to their acceptance of racial stereotypes portrayed. The condition for comedy is that it is not real life, and therefore not an attack on others. Zillmann believes this must be inherent in the presentation itself, that it be zany and preposterous, which gives the audience permission to laugh. Russell Middleton, "Negro and White Reactions to Racial Humor," *Sociometry* 22, no. 2 June, 1959, 180. Zillmann, "Humor and Comedy," 41.

²⁷ "Commercial and Non-Commercial Radio," in *Split Image: African Americans in the Mass Media*, ed. Jannette L. Dates and William Barlow, 2nd ed. (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1993), 197.

comedian Wonderful Smith, who had a recurring part on *The Red Skelton* show in the 1940s, later claimed that he was dropped in 1947 because he didn't sound sufficiently "Negroid."²⁸

Accent was a universal signifier on radio and film of race, ethnicity and class. Social scientists Lyman Bryson and Dorothy Rowden highlighted the question in an article written in 1946. They noted that "an impressively large group [of directors still] says 'But how can you tell a character's French, if he doesn't use a French accent?'" They cited Arch Oboler, one of radio's great masters of the sonic palette, who observed "even as with Tabasco, just a drop of accent is more than enough."²⁹ Most radio programs, especially comedies, were content to pour it on however, milking ethnic and racial representation for humor. What evolved was not just broad pronunciation (or mispronunciation) but, I suggest, a standardized set of specific aural voice colors which became associated with African Americans in comedic roles. Some of these were modeled in *Amos 'n Andy* as noted in the excerpts cited earlier, and others in film. For example, men's voices often had a distorted sound, gravelly or rasping. Amos had this kind of voice, but so did Eddie Anderson's portrayal of Rochester on *The Jack Benny Show*. Anderson's aural characterization became one of the most recognized sounds on radio and he was known to be defensive about the idea of portraying a racial stereotype.³⁰ He insisted that the character he played was an individual and a powerful foil to his boss, despite the rasping voice and dialect that marked his race, and the scenarios which

²⁸ J. Fred MacDonald, *Don't Touch That Dial: Radio Programming in American Life from 1920 to 1960* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall Publishers, 1979), 331.

²⁹ Bryson and Rowden, "Radio as an Agency of National Unity," 142.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 198.

portrayed him as lazy, womanizing and superstitious which perpetuated popular and denigrating images of African Americans. But, one can hear similar vocal representations in others. Even Wonderful Smith, who supposedly didn't sound black enough, used that voice in his skits with Skelton.³¹ Not all black male voices affected this gravelly accent. In contrast, the slow, deep-toned delivery, similar to that used by Gosden, represented a different kind of voice, which was used for black characters to denote laziness or dim-wittedness. At best, it also aurally evoked the ambivalent association of the spiritual, which seems always to have been sung by "dark" low voices—basses, baritones and contraltos. Few black characters had tenor range speaking voices.

There were female stereotypes too. The black female voice was often pitched high and sounded thin. The Beulah character was typical. Played on radio by a succession of men until the late 1940's, Beulah arrived on *Showboat* 1939 and migrated to two other shows, arriving at *Fibber McGee & Molly* in 1943 before getting "her" own show in 1944. The male Beulah had a fluttery voice and a silly, high-pitched giggle not at all dissimilar to Butterfly McQueen's voice. Beulah also spoke with poor grammar and malapropisms of the sort found since *Amos 'n Andy* entered the radio scene in 1929. An excerpt from a 1943 program illustrates the fact that representations of blacks were essentially the same fourteen years later. The combination of a white man in "blackvoice" and the cross-race-and-class differences highlighted in the scripts provide a good example of the more offensive race-based humor.

³¹ Even in the "enlightened" 1970's this voice type continued in use. For example, Red Foxx's Fred Sanford, in *Sanford and Son* rasped in a manner not dissimilar to Amos, although not as broadly as Rochester.

In an early appearance on *Fibber McGee and Molly* Beulah asks the McGees to direct her to her new place of employment where she will be the cook, telling them. “I’m a foreigner in this neighborhood.” Thanking them for directions she says she can return the favor when they visit for dinner “If I shakes mah haid doan eat it.” Later the conversation turns to other neighbors:

Beulah: Dr. Gamble? Does he reside in this neighborhood? He’s a fine man, Dr. Gamble. He operated on my third husband for gladstones.

Molly: Gladstones, Beulah?

Beulah: Yassum. He was a Red Cap at Union Station and six Gladstone bags fell ohn his haid. [High silly laugh]³²

In these short excerpts Beulah shows that she makes grammatical errors, is silly, has the loose morals of a thrice married (and presumably three times divorced) woman, and—we think at first—mistakenly calls gallstones “gladstones.” Calling herself a foreigner is a double joke; she has chosen the “wrong” word. “Stranger” would have been more apt. But she is a foreigner, in the sense of not belonging, which the audience understands. Her soprano voice is pitched far above Molly’s and she laughs in the same high range, sounding rather foolish. In 1947 when Beulah was played on radio by Hattie McDaniel, she turned into a warm mezzo. Perhaps McDaniel didn’t need special signals; her voice was well known for her many Mammy-like film characterizations from *Show Boat* and *Gone With the Wind* to *When You Went Away* and *Song of the South*. But the high pitched silly character reappeared in the guise of Beulah’s best friend, Oriole, played by Ruby Dandridge, who took over the silly soprano voice.

Only stars who appeared on radio were not subjected to emphasizing racial signifiers. With rare exceptions, these occasions were primarily limited to guest spots on

³² <http://www.archive.org/details/TheBeulahShow>

variety shows, where the entertainer appeared as him or herself. Cab Calloway, Louis Armstrong, Paul Robeson and dancer Bill Robinson were among those whose fame accorded them respectful treatment if only because they performed songs and dances rather than comedy or drama. The variety format allowed them to speak in their own voices.

The OWI at mid-war

Because music and variety had long been a safe and respectful haven for black entertainers, it was natural for the OWI and the networks to turn to that genre when policy dictated better treatment on radio in the interest of improving race relations. But they did not just turn to this format, they clung to it. Music was the most popular form of radio entertainment, and the tunes of Tin Pan Alley or Negro spirituals presented a palatable format acceptable to mass audiences. Nearly every program, beginning with the “The Negro” episode of *Americans All, Immigrants All* in 1938, to the 1941 series *Freedom’s People*, to the black-produced *My People* in 1943, chose musical formats. Many used and reused works with racial identification, like “Go Down Moses,” and “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot.” The showcases presented by the different branches of the Armed Forces, such as *America’s Negro Soldiers*, and the Urban League Extravaganza sponsored by the War Department, did the same. These shows took no risks, steering clear of divisive issues and political minefields.

By 1943, OWI activity to improve racial attitudes and raise black morale was in retreat. This can be traced to the overall retrenchment with respect to civil rights and resistance to black efforts to make gains during the war. The agency had never advocated a progressive racial agenda, despite the liberals in its ranks, many of them from the press

and radio. Their attitudes and behavior were completely consistent with White House policies. They were ambivalent and indecisive in making official decisions regarding “the Negro problem” despite the fact that they considered it of crucial importance to address. A survey conducted early in the war by the OFF suggested that African Americans felt deeply bitter “towards Army and Navy exclusion” and that the war had only “brought [these attitudes] into sharp relief.”³³ The main concern, the study warned, was that “This group may include many who are prejudiced against the White (sic) race as a whole, and who see no distinction between the American system and the German system.”³⁴ Despite these serious issues, the OWI had promulgated a cultural rather than political approach which fostered black morale and interracial harmony but did not address underlying causes of racial tensions or suggest solutions.³⁵ They promoted publicity campaigns, print, film and radio programs which avoided controversial racial themes and emphasized things which evoked positive impressions of African Americans. They had tried to please many constituencies, not least their chief “client,” the Armed Forces which enforced discriminatory policies. But the mass audience was always the main consideration, a large part of which consisted of biased or at least traditionalist listeners. The reasons for

³³ Savage, *Broadcasting Freedom*, 114. Quoting the OFF study “The Negro Looks at the War: Attitudes of New York Negroes toward Discrimination against Negroes and a Comparison of Negro and Poor White Attitudes toward War-Related Issues.” May 19, 1942.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ The OWI had no policy making function at all. Throughout the war it was at the behest of many masters as Elmer Davis described in the first of a series of articles in an issue of *The Public Opinion Quarterly* devoted to a description of the organization and mission of the OWI. “Our job at home is to give the American people the fullest possible understanding of what this war is about...This means, first of all, giving the people the news....[and] the background information that will help them understand what the news is about....We are to review, clear and approve all proposed radio and motion-picture programs sponsored by Federal departments and agencies....we are directed to coordinate the war informational activities of all Federal departments and agencies for the purpose of assuring an accurate and consistent flow of war information to the public. That is a large order and we can never execute it perfectly.” Elmer Davis, “The OWI Has a Job,” *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 7, no. 1 (Spring, 1943): 5-8.

this reticence are clear; most people, liberal or otherwise, believed that war goals should supersede social and personal agendas.

Representative of this band of liberals was Archibald MacLeish, who had been one of the most vocal and prominent of interventionists. His liberal credentials extended to bridge building with African American civic leaders and he had actively supported black history projects at the Library of Congress. His opposition to addressing social change during wartime was vehement and uncompromising from the beginning of the war. He had opposed the March on Washington, because it “might incite the Negro population” to push for reforms and that blacks would ask for “everything in the book.”³⁶ This might upset the balance in the South and tip its people towards the Axis. His friendship with FDR, his prominence in the OWI and leadership of its predecessor the OFF, his stature among liberals and intellectuals gave him great credibility and perhaps influenced many others who were not so well placed. While these social progressives may have felt deeply troubled by deferring civil rights issues, they nevertheless held firm to the belief that the war had to come first.

Even before the riots, the agency was subjected to great criticism for its equivocation and reticence on racial issues, particularly with respect to radio.

³⁶ Sitkoff, “Racial Militancy,” 962. Quoting from correspondence in OWI files: Archibald MacLeish to Francis Biddle, April 24, 1942. Interracial tensions, always apparent, had been aggravated by the circumstances of war. A year and half into the war, the inequality so vigorously contested by the black press in the Double V campaign had brought few tangible gains on the Home Front or in the military. Lee Finkle, *Forum for Protest: The Black Press during World War II* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickenson University Press, 1975), 108. Civil rights concessions by the Roosevelt Administration on the eve of the war had come to nothing. Executive Order 8802, which barred discrimination in hiring practices in the defense industry, had been issued in late June of 1941 to avert the national embarrassment and divisiveness of a March on Washington organized by activist A. Phillip Randolph, president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. In characteristic fashion, Roosevelt created a government agency to oversee complaints and redress grievances, the Fair Employment Practice Committee. But it had little power, was overwhelmed with the volume of complaints and was opposed by organized resistance, almost entirely from protectionist unions which barred black membership. Frank Winn, “Labor Tackles the Race Question,” *The Antioch Review* 3, no. 3 (Autumn, 1943): 352.

Responding to widespread concern, *Public Opinion Quarterly* founder George Gallup asked Robert J. Landry to answer the charge that the OWI had failed to take advantage of its position to influence attitudes on racial and ethnic bias during the war. Landry, who covered radio for *Variety* for many years before joining CBS as Director of Program Writing and was a member of the Writers War Board, did not work for the OWI. His response, in an article published in the spring of 1943, months before the riots, defended the agency against the charge that it had run “the very real risk of enkindling rather than quenching the steady burn of prejudice.”³⁷ Critics had indicted the OWI for its “timidity” and greater concern for “instruction, exhortation and constant reminder” of many humdrum obligations of citizens in advancing war goals, like giving blood, collecting scrap metal and volunteering for civil defense.

Landry led his rebuttal by “granting that it is not inspiring to see the Army and the Navy and the OWI dancing nervously on the periphery of the Negro problem.”³⁸ He acknowledged that hopes had been high in 1942 that the war would be “a great speeder-upper of processes and trends,” advocated, presumably by the many liberals who joined the OWI. But Landry stood with the majority. Radio was expected to deal with “infinitely complex problems,” not only racism, but the attitudes of “British-damning, Russia-fearing, Europe-scorning Americans.” He insisted the industry had done a creditable job, focusing on the most important issue, winning the war, with “extremely effective, straightforward, and hardhitting” programs that had to resonate with mass audiences. For example, Norman Corwin’s *We Hold These Truths*, the tribute to the Bill

³⁷ Robert J. Landry, “The Impact of OWI on Broadcasting,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 7, no.1 (Spring, 1943): 111.

³⁸ Ibid.

of Rights which aired just a week after Pearl Harbor, “evoked a rather amazing response from the American public.” He argued that its “passionate eloquence” was something “they could at least feel” in those first days when most were still numbed by the attack.³⁹ He praised the series *This is War*, its episodes written and directed by Corwin and a host of radio luminaries including William Robson. He also singled out the OWI’s syndicated series *You Can’t Do Business With Hitler*. In choosing his examples, Landry emphasized programs with a universal message applicable to all the people, underscoring his support for national goals over the short term. Civil rights issues needed to be deferred. Landry’s stand was typical of liberals of the war era. In acknowledging that race issues were important, but not of immediate importance, he was not just paying lip service to African Americans. He was truly troubled about race relations and continued to actively fight prejudice. In his work for the Writer’s War Board he argued against the practice that “writers of the United States because of the habitual employment of ‘stock characters’ were unconsciously fostering and encouraging group prejudice.”⁴⁰

Auguries unheeded, violence erupts

Activists understood that the cultural public relations efforts to build morale among African Americans were insufficient and ineffective. Early in the war, Charles H. Thompson in a 1942 commencement address at Virginia Union University warned that “a democracy has the very difficult task of winning the war and saving its own soul at one

³⁹ Ibid., 113.

⁴⁰ Blythe, “Can Public Relations Help Race Prejudice,” 346. Quoting from Landry’s report for the Writers’ War Board, *How Writers Perpetuate Stereotypes*, based on a study by the bureau of Applied Social Research of Columbia University, NY, 1945.

and the same time.”⁴¹ He had a simple directive for improving black attitudes towards the war effort: “understanding what we are *for*...and comprehend *why* we are fighting.”⁴² The OWI’s most visible attempt to address those issues was a complete failure. In early 1943, two million copies of the booklet *Negroes and the War* were distributed, which paired dozens of photographs of blacks participating in the daily life of America with a text that warned African Americans that life for them would be worse under Hitler. “[It] pleases no one. White Southerners consider it insulting to them—the picture of Negro achievement is impressive to the naïve. Negroes resent its implications of possible group disloyalty and its half-truths.”⁴³ By comparison, radio’s musical tributes to black culture were inoffensive. The OWI, and by extension, the government, simply tried to yield tangible results with intangibles: propaganda in lieu of policy.

Tensions continued to build. Race riots broke out in Army bases throughout the country. Soldiers, especially those from the North, resisted the social segregation practices they found when stationed at training camps in the South, fueling tensions between black soldiers and local civilians as well as with white soldiers. These episodes, too, often sparked violence in which black soldiers often were not protected from local attacks by military or local police. Nor did the military tolerate the protest of racist

⁴¹ Charles H. Thompson, “The Basis of Negro Morale in World War II,” *The Journal of Negro Education* 11, no. 4 (October, 1942): 460. Thompson was Dean of Howard University and Editor-in-Chief of *The Journal of Negro Education*.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 461.

⁴³ Mary A. Morton, “The Federal Government and Negro Morale,” *The Journal of Negro Education* 12, no. 3 (Summer, 1943): 454-455. This pamphlet was highly controversial in part because of its high cost and its very poor reception. It was cited as a prime example of wasted resources in the Republican effort to shut down the OWI in 1943. Although the OWI was not completely dismantled, it was dramatically scaled back, cutting more than half its employees and cutting its budget to a quarter of its prior level. “Domestic OWI dropped 777 out of 1269 to meet Congressional Slash in Budget,” *New York Times*, August 11, 1943, 21.

practices. Black soldiers who complained were labeled as discipline problems and were often transferred or even discharged dishonorably.⁴⁴

More voices were raised in alarm. In an impassioned essay, Langston Hughes pointed to the essential problem:

All over America...there has been against the Negro an economic color line of such severity that, since the Civil War, we have been kept most effectively, as a racial group, in the lowest income brackets. Statistics are not needed to prove this. Simply look around you on any Main Street of any American town or city. There are no colored clerks...street car conductors or bus drivers...no colored girls at the switchboards of the telephone company. From Boston to San Diego, the Negro suffers from job discrimination.⁴⁵

Unable to work in their home states and lured by jobs in plants throughout the country, hundreds of thousands of African-Americans migrated to cities where they thought they could get war work. Instead, they confronted union resistance. Even when they were able to get jobs, they often encountered a hostile work and social environment. Perhaps most egregious were the living conditions forced on blacks by the rapid influx of so many workers to factory towns and cities and the de facto segregation which limited their ability to find decent housing. Resentment, dislocation and crowded tenement living provided fertile conditions for the racial conflict which erupted in the hot summer of mid-1943. Riots broke out in 47 cities in a total of 242 separate violent incidents.⁴⁶ Federal troops were brought in to Detroit and Los Angeles, among other cities, to control the situation.

⁴⁴ Sitkoff, "Racial Militancy," 667.

⁴⁵ Langston Hughes, "My America," *Journal of Educational Sociology* 16, no. 6 (February 1943).

⁴⁶ Sitkoff, "Racial Militancy," 671. The situation in Detroit illustrates the problem at its most severe. The black population expanded by 100,000 after the entry into the war, crowding new arrivals into areas that had housed 40,000 only twenty years before. Arna Bontemps and Jack Conroy, *They Seek a City* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran and Company, 1945), 224.

Ultimately, it was interracial tension in war industries which incited most of the riots of 1943.⁴⁷ 20,000 white workers walked off the job in Mobile when twelve black men were upgraded in a shipyard. In Pennsylvania, Maryland, New York and Ohio there were similar incidents. Finally, in late June, the worst of the riots broke out in Detroit, which called itself in the war years “the Arsenal of Democracy.”⁴⁸ The summer riots came as no surprise. As early as August of 1942, *Life* Magazine profiled the city in an article titled “Detroit is Dynamite.” In its pages a series of headlines told the story in capsule:

About racial and ethnic tensions:

“Factions: they breed hatred and strife in Detroit.”

About an inability to house its exploding population

“Housing: Detroit still bickers over its sorest problems.”

About the union leaders:

“The men: They are not pulling together.”⁴⁹

In photos and text the article illustrated the conditions for riots. It was “a city of violent extremes...flush with new prosperity but seething with racial, political and economic unrest.” The ’43 riots had a precursor in February of ’42 when angry whites protested the housing of 200 black families in the new project named for Sojourner Truth.⁵⁰ But for all the warnings, Detroit was unprepared and on June 21, 1943 two days of uncontrolled violence broke out.

⁴⁷ A major exception to this is the so-called Zoot Suit riots in Los Angeles, which was sparked by gangs who attacked zoot-suited blacks and Hispanics.

⁴⁸ Sitkoff, “Racial Militancy,” 672.

⁴⁹ “Detroit is Dynamite,” *Life*, August, 17, 1942, 15-23.

⁵⁰ See Arna Bontemps and Jack Conroy’s chapter “Detroit, Arsenal of Democracy” in *They Seek a City* for a full, contemporary description of the events and causes leading to the riots of 1943.

AN OPEN LETTER ON RACE HATRED

Origins

Although not popularly remembered today, William Robson's blunt documentary on the Detroit riots and racial prejudice stirred considerable attention at the time it was broadcast. By 1943 Robson was a CBS writer and director with hundreds of programs to his credit. He had been producer/director of *Columbia Workshop*, and personally directed and wrote or adapted dozens of shows in the two years he was at the helm. Robson brought impressive credentials to the task as a committed liberal, writer and artist of the sonic palette. He had been the special effects producer on the landmark production of Archibald MacLeish's *The Fall of the City*, and was responsible for the orchestration of the crowd scenes staged remotely from the Armory. Robson had earned the privilege of working on CBS's prestigious sustaining series by serving a lengthy apprenticeship on the long running crime drama, *Calling All Cars*. Throughout his career his productions bore the mark of his experience in creating aural suspense. In 1938 Robson began to work as director on sustaining programs which fostered patriotic values supportive of FDR's interventionist agenda, beginning with the *American School of the Air's* Democracy series. In 1939 he directed at least a dozen of the episodes of *Americans All*, *Immigrants All*, including "The Negro."⁵¹ After Pearl Harbor, Robson appears to have devoted all his time to programs in support of the war until at least the end of 1944. Among those efforts he both wrote and directed the series *The Man Behind the Gun*

⁵¹*Radio Goldindex*, [http://radiogoldindex.com/cgi-local/p4.cgi?ArtistName=Robson, William N.&ArtistNumber=43934](http://radiogoldindex.com/cgi-local/p4.cgi?ArtistName=Robson,William&ArtistNumber=43934). This is a private radio archive which contains tens of thousands of radio broadcasts, among them a dozen from the series, all directed by Robson. It may be that Robson directed all the episodes of the series, but there is no easily accessible supporting evidence that he did. He is not mentioned in the discussion of *American's All*, *Immigrants All* in Savage's book *Broadcasting Freedom* or other scholarly references to the series.

which creatively reenacted heroic feats of men in the Armed Services. An April, 1943 broadcast recounted the efforts of the all-black crew of the U.S.S. Campbell, a Coast Guard Cutter credited with sinking no less than four enemy submarines and rescuing hundreds of survivors from U-Boat attacks just a few months before.⁵² This may have been the first program which treated African-American acts of valor on the same footing at those of whites, that is, not simply as a public relations vehicle for black morale.

Robson was a natural choice to write and direct *Open Letter*, selected after a group of concerned African American and white civic leaders turned to the network for support when Roosevelt refused to go on air in the wake of the riots. William Paley apparently took a personal interest in the project upon reading the script and made the decision to officially sponsor the show, as opposed to merely giving air time.⁵³ Robson claimed that the most difficult challenge was “to throw the light of truth on the Detroit incident, without inciting either whites or Negroes to riot elsewhere.”⁵⁴ But little else is known of the circumstances of the production or the rest of the creative team. The narrator was Jackson Beck, who worked frequently on Robson programs, including *The*

⁵² MacDonald, *Don't Touch That Dial*, 354. Also, U.S. Coast Guard, <http://www.uscg.mil/lantarea/cgcCampbell/history.asp>. The Campbell was a Coast Guard search and rescue vessel, which accounts for its assigning African Americans to active combat-oriented positions. In 1943 the Navy still assigned blacks only as messmen.

⁵³ Sitkoff, “Racial Militancy,” 675.

⁵⁴ Erik Barnouw, “Introduction to ‘An Open Letter on Race Hatred,’” in *Radio Drama in Action*, by Erik Barnouw, ed. Erik Barnouw (New York: Rinehart & Company, 1945), 60. Quoting from an interview with Robson. There are two published accounts of the origins of *Open Letter*, Robson’s, referred to here, and that of Walter White, in his autobiography, *A Man Called White* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1948), 231. White’s account differs from Robson’s in that he claims to have approached Robson before going to CBS, and to have been a co-author of the script. I have used Robson’s version since he is credited as the program’s creator, both in copyright and for the Peabody Award which the program won.

Man Behind the Gun. The program aired on July 23, 1943, just over a month after the Detroit race riots. It was a Friday night.

Theme and structure

Open Letter's unambiguous premise is that racial intolerance and violence must stop before they destroy the nation. Although it certainly advocates interracial cooperation and tries to elicit empathy for the victims of the riots, the show does not try for too much—not brotherhood nor radically altered personal opinions. It is a large enough task to ask white Americans to accord African Americans their right to work and live peacefully. Interracial violence is a national disgrace, undermines the war effort and threatens the future of the country, a theme repeated throughout in many contexts. The responsibility, the show argues, falls squarely on white people. Robson's daunting task was to present this highly provocative message forthrightly but in a way that people would remain tuned in for the entire program. He did it with a hybrid format structured in two parts: a twenty minute docudrama of the incidents in Detroit, wrapped in narration, and an eight minute speech by Wendell Willkie. The docudrama, which is of greatest interest in this analysis, is a highly entertaining show within a show. Although the program calls itself a letter, the form is more complex, combining several styles of narration and many dramatized vignettes.

In its barest outlines, *Open Letter* traces the story of the Detroit riot and its aftermath. The narrator introduces the program's topic and then sets the stage for dramatized scenes which chronicle the events. The immediate trigger of the Detroit riots was a public argument on a Sunday afternoon which sparked rumors and fighting, but the root causes were discriminatory hiring and housing practices surrounding the explosive

wartime population expansion to fill defense jobs. Scenes of rioting are offset by examples of individual acts of kindness. A message of hope and redemption keeps the program from spiraling down too far. The end of the riots is marked by the arrival of Federal troops who restore order to the city. The terrible toll of the violence, in lives lost and injured, in war production disrupted is recounted by the narrator, who suggests that many Americans will die overseas because of equipment delays caused by the riots. This cannot be permitted to happen again, he warns; it will be exploited by our enemies in propaganda deriding America's claims to democracy. The show closes by providing the audience with an example of how one city, Houston, successfully avoided incipient race rioting. Its final words instruct us on how to treat fellow citizens of every race.

Issues of Textuality

This bare synopsis underrepresents Robson's masterful and compact realization of a complex set of facts and moral lessons. He manages to make this message not only palatable, but engaging and entertaining in a mere twenty minutes. It is a tribute to his writing talent and virtuosity with sound in its many manifestations and illustrates the interdependency of text, music, effects and performance as vividly as any in radio history. *Open Letter* is uniquely *radio*, something which is effective only in sonic realization and looks bare on the page, like the musical notation of a score waiting to be performed. The textual elements which frame the program, particularly structure, address, and genre, cannot be separated from the sonic elements. Robson uses voice, music, crowd scenes and aural signifiers of race and class to enable the listener to quickly grasp his meaning and react to the message with empathy and understanding.

Both the original broadcast and a published text exist; I have not been able to locate an original manuscript. The performance version differs from the published text in a few ways which are significant, and I will point these out where they occur.⁵⁵ During the radio era it was quite common to publish a play with annotations and directions for production for local or educational broadcast. For example, all of Norman Corwin's published works are notated in this manner, including directions for casting, sound effects and music. It is not clear whether the differences between the performance and the published text result from this intention. However, my reading, which is about what the broadcast sounded like, relies entirely on the performance and what Robson directed into that performance. It follows, then, that what the audience heard is what affected their reception.

Form and Address

Open Letter appears to depend on a single narrator to navigate the story's many scenes—both contemporary and flashback, to lead us from commentary to action and back again and to guide our understanding and reactions.⁵⁶ He manages this feat with three separate characterizations, all differentiated by voice coloration. I will give a name to each of them, which will better represent how Robson used sonic choices as a device thoughtfully and comprehensively throughout the docudrama. When standing in for CBS's editorial position, the narrator sounds like a news commentator: brisk, articulate,

⁵⁵ One immediate difference is the title. The broadcast called the program *An Open Letter to the American People*, but the name was changed for the published version. It may be that Robson formally renamed it to correspond with what it was being called by others. For example, as early as mid-1944, Reddick referred to it in his article "Educational Programs for the Improvement of Race Relations" as *An Open Letter on Race Hatred*."

⁵⁶ The text version indicates more than one narrator in several places. However, in nearly all instances my ear detects a single voice, modified in performance based on the requirements of the drama. That single voice is male, baritone range, differentiated only by subtle alterations to timbre and sonic coloration.

focused, informative, authoritative and somewhat dispassionate. This person moves the action forward and advises us what to think, as when he tells us that “we cannot command the respect of mankind with the blood of fellow Americans on our hands.” I call him the Voice of Reason, in a nod to the narrator, the Voice of Fate on *The March of Time*.

Much of the program is dramatized with lead-in narration. But the narrator is also an actor in the drama, dropping in to interfere with events as well as comment on them. In these scenes he takes on the guise of a man in the street, adopting the diction, accent and speech pattern of those around him. This is the narrator’s dominant role in the docudrama, and in tone, dialogue and manner, gives the production the sound of a crime drama of the sort Robson wrote for *Calling All Cars*. This characterization allows the listener to enjoy the production while absorbing the serious message. I call him the Voice of the Street. He tells us what we ought to know. He tells us that “rumors, more dangerous than dynamite, more deadly than a plague” precipitated the trouble, but that the root of the violence “goes back more than a quarter of a century.”

When the text pleads a case for tolerance the narrator takes on a softer, more compassionate tone. At the mid-point of the documentary, the Voice of Judgment recounts the toll of the violence and attempts to teach a lesson of reconciliation and understanding from the horror of the riots. His voice is calm but sad which we hear in slow pacing and a quiet delivery. His voice is sometimes low and sepulchral and full of accusation: “How many of your sons will die for lack of tanks and planes and guns which Detroit did not make?”⁵⁷ In addition to describing carnage from the riots and the threat to

⁵⁷ In the published text, this short passage is assigned to a second narrator.

the war effort, he tells us the dire consequences of race prejudice. In this mode, he is telling us how we ought to feel. Robson weaves these narrative voices through the program, sometimes in lengthy passages, sometimes making quick shifts, but always with sonic clarity from timbre, speech patterns, diction, dynamics, rhythm and pacing.

The Opening

It is a classic tenet of radio during its heyday that a show has five minutes, often much less, to interest the audience before they turn the dial to something else. As Arch Oboler put it “by the end of that time he must have reached out and grabbed the listener so irretrievably that it will be impossible for him to turn the dial.”⁵⁸ Our feelings can be affected and our behavior influenced only if we hear the entire docudrama. A study of *Open Letter*’s first two minutes reveals how Robson crafted the program for maximum understanding and interest drawing us in so that we will stay, despite its potential to offend and disturb the listener. By the use of several forms of narration he entices us even as he exposes collective guilt.

Robson unfolds the narrative in an imaginary letter. Addressing the audience as if by written letter softens the approach to this volatile subject and attempts a non-confrontational communication. It is somehow friendlier than an editorial, not as preachy as a sermon, nor as dry as a lecture. It anthropomorphizes the network, as if speaking one person to another on the same level, as FDR so successfully did in his Fireside Chats to erase the barrier of rank and officialdom. Indeed, the opening words, “Dear Fellow Americans,” borrow FDR’s own form of address. It attempts to invoke the same credibility that the president enjoyed. The use of friendly address also plays to the

⁵⁸ Arch Oboler, “The Art of Radio Writing,” in *Fourteen Plays*, by Arch Oboler (New York: Random House, 1940), ix.

audience's trust. Radio was still the most trusted form of mass communication in America, in part because of its intimate address.⁵⁹ The Voice of Reason opens the show, following a long brass fanfare—a full twenty seconds—which sounds both serious and vaguely patriotic, hymnlike. Following the letter salutation, the Voice of Reason prepares the listener for a shock:

What you are about to hear may anger you. What you are about to hear may sound incredible to you. You may doubt that such things can happen today in this supposedly united nation. But we assure you, everything you are about to hear is true...[There is] a danger so great that if it is not met and conquered now, even though we win this war, we shall be defeated in victory and the peace which follows will for us be a horror of chaos, lawlessness and bloodshed. This danger is *race hatred*.⁶⁰

The narrator warns the audience in unemotional tones, almost without inflection or dramatic pauses. The words are so powerful that theatrics would diminish them. Only at the end of the speech does he add emphasis, resting for a half beat between the words “chaos, lawlessness and bloodshed, with the slightest pressure on the syllable “blood.” He stresses final words: *race hatred*. The first musical interlude bursts in with an intense trumpet call, as if sounding an alarm, as we absorb the weight of the words. The music modulates, with bass trombones sliding and spiraling downward, clearly taking us to an anxious scene. Bass trombones, we will soon understand, represent black people and their circumstances in *Open Letter*.

⁵⁹ Cantril and Allport, *The Psychology of Radio*, 260.

⁶⁰ William Robson, "An Open Letter to the American People," Radio broadcast, July 22, 1943, Museum of Broadcast Communications, Chicago, <http://archives.museum.tv/archives>. Subsequent quotes from this text refer to this citation and are not separately cited. I specifically identify each reference to the published text. William Robson, "An Open Letter on Race Hatred," in *Radio Drama in Action: Twenty-Five Plays of a Changing World*, ed. Erik Barnouw (New York: Rinehart & Company, 1945).

The Voice of Reason returns, this time without music, a cue that this is the CBS editorial position. We understand that he is referring to those listening when he tells us that we are about to hear the story of the Detroit riots which “no sensible, fully informed American would allow to happen again what we are fighting against all over the world.” A harp glissando floats over ominous descending trombones in dissonant stepwise progression. This is the music of suspense, so familiar because similar in tone to the hundreds of radio detective dramas, many by Robson. Nearly all radio programs had musical signatures to introduce them which aided the listener not only in recognizing his or her preferred show, but in setting the atmosphere. Crime and suspense dramas were among the most memorable. This first “crime show” passage transitions us out of the editorial mode and into the drama, confirmed by the transformation in the narrator’s delivery. We now hear the Voice of Street, whose diction, timbre and tone, hard bitten and weary, remind us of detective Philip Marlowe. The Voice of Reason has told us that everything we will hear is true, but now, it is clear that we are about to hear a dramatization of events as they *might* have happened. This is probably undisturbing to the audience which is used to recreations from *The March of Time* and its many imitators.⁶¹ The Voice of the Street, contrapuntally with the orchestra’s dissonant commentary, sets the scene of crowded trailer parks and tent cities on the edge of the city. “Sunday, June 20 was hot... in the Negro district the heat pressed down like the sweaty hand of John Henry,” he says, now using the more figurative language of radio drama. The bass trombones answer in lethargic patterns, holding steadily over tense jabs from the

⁶¹ Robert J. Brown, *Manipulating the Ether: The Power of Broadcast Radio in Thirties America* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1998), 152. Brown cites a study done at Kansas State College which confirmed listener preference for and belief of dramatized news.

trumpets. People try to escape the heat and crowded spaces “to lovely Belle Isle in the Detroit River and a breath of fresh air.” A clarinet obbligato bubbles up, sonically evocative of Debussy’s *Ondine*, as if rising from below ground into open spaces. The narrator tells us that the setting sun brought no relief, and, in descending wah-wah’s, the clarinets signal the drop in spirits of the crowds as they work their way back into the city, when “...something happened there. No one is quite sure what, but something happened, something quite trivial, something like this.”

In just two minutes, through aural shifts in narrative voices and musical punctuation, the program has transitioned from editorial introduction into the drama of the events, hooking the listener with aural cues that the docudrama is really a detective story, with the Voice of the Street as the gumshoe. Crime stories were among the most familiar and popular forms of radio entertainment, as they were in all forms of popular culture. But some have argued that they had greater societal significance, especially on radio, serving a moral purpose and reinforcing the triumph of good over evil. It modeled a “stability, emotional and material... [which] was to be found in such triumph.”⁶² MacDonald notes that “realistic detectives,” one of three in his typology, in particular served the social good because of “their deep commitment to the process of reason” in overcoming the problem at hand. Among the several archetypes of this genre, MacDonald cites Robson’s *Calling All Cars*. War era social scientists, like Howard Rowland, were well aware of the phenomenon. He categorized crime dramas into “superheroes,” who operated outside the law, “supersleuths,” who operate within it and

⁶² MacDonald, *Don’t Touch That Dial*, 159.

“anti-social villains” who “perpetrated weird and mysterious crimes.”⁶³ Both the “superhero” and “supersleuth” “struggle to overcome evil,” although the “superhero” is “more concerned with abstract ideals of justice” and is “a symbol, rather than an actual person.” Robson’s *Voice of the Streets* is cast in the mold of the relentless detective—the “supersleuth,” trying to get to the truth, acting as a force for good.⁶⁴ But, because he is unidentified, he also has the persona of the “superhero.”⁶⁵ Supported by familiar aural imagery evocative of the detective drama, these characteristics make him credible, and the dramatizations the audience is about to hear, believable, countervailing the admission that the scene is imagined.

Aural Representations of Race and Racial Conflict

In a radio drama, establishing who the characters are is accomplished through text and voice. Because the listener has to be oriented quickly many aural conventions developed creating stereotypes, like those of race discussed earlier in this chapter. Age, gender, role, class and ethnicity also had their markers. Those portraying African Americans are among the most offensive. But, even to those writers sensitive to the issues, the necessity of distinguishing characters by their sound had to be accommodated. The text provided some guidance through sentence structure, grammar and word choice including the use of slang. Voice characteristics like timbre, accent, dialect, tone and even dynamics brought these to life and differentiated characters among themselves. As a dramatic program about racial issues, *Open Letter* could not avoid dealing with these

⁶³ Howard Rowland, “Radio Crime Dramas,” *Educational Research Bulletin* 23, no 8 (November 1944): 211.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 212.

⁶⁵ The published text calls this voice “Mr. Reason,” who appears only in two scenes in the text. However, his voice is clearly that of Jackson Beck, and the detective-style delivery is woven throughout the story.

problems. We need to know black from white. Because the narrator is the only continuing character, all of the characterizations take place within crowd scenes, of which Robson was a master. It is also through these scenes and the way the roles are played by whites and blacks that we learn about who is responsible for the problems and who is a victim.

Throughout the production, the crowds vividly and entertainingly set the scene, each distinct and evocative of the moment, saved from generic representation by precise orchestration that suggests the number and composition of the crowd (few participants or a mob? ratio of male to female? rioters, bystanders or police?), emotional tone (angry? out of control?), action (violent or just threatening? clubs and pipes or guns?) With careful pacing and timing, the action unfolds with its dramatic arc. For example, the first dramatic vignette, on the Belle Isle bridge where all the trouble started, builds only once tempers flare while a later scene in which sailors rescue a black man getting a beating, begins at a fever pitch. But what makes the crowd scenes most effective and even believable, are the many individual performances by featured players in the scene and supporting extras who break out with sounds and lines which punctuate the action. There are many characters and few lines in each scene, making immediate recognition of the actor's race, character and position in the production essential. The narrator never identifies the speakers as black or white. The listener has to make sense of their identities from the context and the characterizations. Conventional aural cues are irresistible in such fast paced scenes, and *Open Letter* does not completely escape them. Yet, with some embarrassing exceptions, these portrayals are not caricatured, which would have undermined the entire work and its message, making it simultaneously laughable and insulting.

Race is established from the first dramatized scene as is the prejudicial nature of the conflict. A chorus of car horns, some sustained, some blasting in rhythm, sets the scene for the first vignette, which imagines the circumstances that triggered the riot. From inside one of the cars a woman gives advice to her companion to change lanes. That's a scene familiar to listeners. Their flat Mid-Western accents and undignified speech tell us they are working class white people. The man has a nasal, reedy tenor timbre: "Shaddup, shaddup. Here, now I gotta break." He is rude to his companion, which suggests ill breeding. Sound effects tell what happens next: more vigorous beeping, the revving of a jalopy engine and finally screeching breaks. The first confrontation between white and black commences. "Ya pulled out right in front of me...ya stupid jerk," says the white man. "What's the big ahdea?" responds the black, whose dark voice and inflected speech tell us his race. Provocation comes, as it does throughout the entire drama, from the white man, and, as here, it is only about color: "Oh, a niggrah, huh?" he says as his female companion yells at him to stop. "Get outta that car and ... [voice lost in crowd sounds]," he challenges. These few speeches establish class, race and the unjustified basis of the conflict.

Although consistently cast as the victims, African Americans are not always portrayed positively. The audience recognizes blackness through language and accent. In spreading the rumor which is Robson's conceit for the start of the riot, a black woman says: "a baby throwed off the Belle Isle bridge." One signal of blackness in this production is incorrect grammar. The white folks are coarse, but their grammar is correct more often than that of African Americans. In this case, the grammar is correct in the text—"thrown," but inaccurate in performance—"throwed." Robson must not have found

his convention demeaning given the topic of the broadcast, but to our ears it clearly signifies inferiority.

The most unsettling example of this is a flashback which provides the context for racial unrest in Detroit. The scene takes advantage of radio's suspension of time and place, itself a hallmark of crime drama, and removes us temporally and geographically. As Rowland points out, "Vagueness and strangeness" are "companions" in radio crime drama and "space relationships and furious action necessitate rapid locomotion."⁶⁶ The Voice of the Street drops in on a labor recruiter who is traveling around the country looking for defense workers. In a few lines the listener follows them throughout Ohio and Pennsylvania, finally ending up in South Carolina.

The scene clearly blames the unions, which refused to hire black workers to fill defense jobs, by demonizing the union recruiter. When challenged on his hiring practices the recruiter tells the Voice of the Street: "Listen, Bud, we're not hiring any Negroes." An underling interrupts the scene with a message we can't hear, but it causes a change in strategy because the supply of other workers has dried up. Suddenly we hear the recruiter, portrayed as part-Mephistopheles, part-carpetbagger, approaching a Southern black man in a scene that squarely indicts whites in industry, particularly union officials, for luring blacks to Detroit with deception and false promises. The scene is effective and clearly makes the point, but, in an effort to dramatize and clarify this explosive topic, Robson falls, for the first time, into the trap of sonic stereotyping. This scene is broadly written, invoking multiple stereotypes: city slicker and country bumpkin, swindler and dupe, carpetbagger and newly freed slave.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 212.

Recruiter: Hey, boy.
 Man: Yassuh,
 Recruiter: Want a good job?
 Man: I sho' do! What do I have to do fo' it?
 Recruiter: Nothing. Just come to Detroit...work in the war plant, making tanks and guns.
 Man: Sho' 'nuff?
 Recruiter: On the level.
 Man: But I'm a field hand. I don't know nothin' 'bout workin' in no factory.
 Recruiter: Well, we'll teach you....nothing to hold you back in Detroit. And if you make good, you might even get promoted to straw boss.
 Man: You ain't just joshin' me, are you?
 Recruiter: No, and you'd be living in Paradise in Detroit.
 Man: Paradise!
 Recruiter: Well, Paradise Valley.
 Man: That sounds too good to be true.

We know who the villain is in the scene; he is the con man who offers the black worker life in Paradise, which refers, in truth, to Paradise Valley, the ironically named Detroit ghetto to which blacks were consigned—if they were “lucky” enough to find housing at all. Robson again draws on crime drama conventions where “villains, too, are creatures of auditory stimuli [in which] accents and vocal inflections are exaggerated and stereotyped.”⁶⁷ His voice is a mix of smoothness and snarl.

But the broad, unmistakable characterization of the black prospective worker sounds as if it was modeled on dialogue from *Gone With the Wind* and underscores racial difference. It is clear that the recruiter is speaking to a black man, because he calls him “boy,” a typical patronizing form of address whites used with blacks to establish their superior position. But the dialogue of the black man is in the worst traditions of minstrelsy. Responses like “yassah” and “Sho' nuff” for “yes, sir,” and “sure enough,” connote “Negro” dialect in radio as they did on stage and screen. Earlier in the scene, the exchange between the recruiter and his white prospects do not invoke dialect or incorrect

⁶⁷ Ibid., 212.

grammar, even though the white South Carolinian worker he addresses speaks with a slight southern accent.⁶⁸ This excerpt, drawn from the performance, corresponds closely to the written text, including phonetic dialect. The response the black worker makes disclaiming his qualifications to work in a factory is perhaps the most disconcerting: “But I’m a field hand. I don’t know nothin’ ‘bout workin’ in no factory,” echoing Prissy’s famous speech in *Gone With the Wind*. It is delivered with the same ingenuous ignorance, but also with the same implied racial deprecation.⁶⁹ Grammar and dialect stereotypes were also added in performance, replacing with “no” the article “a” in the phrase “workin’ in a factory.” And, in the text, the man’s final words to the recruiter “You sure can. You sure can,” both clearly sound like “Yo’ sho’ can.” While the audience understands that the black man is clearly the victim of deceit and manipulation, he is also presented with all the aural trappings of social and racial inferiority.

Robson used dialect, grammar and speech patterns to differentiate whites as well as blacks, right from wrong. In the sailor scene an aural melee is at its height, with shouting and sonic movement from background to foreground. The voice of the black man under attack begs while his attacker throttles him:

Man: Let me go. I ain’t done nothin’. I’m just comin’ home from work.
 Thug: Aaaa shaddup, ya dirty---- [Bop sound, much hitting. Yelling ensues.
 From the rear and over the top of the voices a clear tenor voice emerges, obviously white because it is unaccented and with perfect enunciation]
 Sailor 1: Hey, let that man go.
 Thug: Weeeel, the U.S. Navy to the rescue? Hey, ya got friends, Eight-ball?
 Sailor 1: No, please let him go.
 [Cut]
 Thug: What’s it to ya, sailor?

⁶⁸ The South Carolina man is denoted as “hillbilly” in the published text.

⁶⁹ “Lawzy, Miss Scarlett, I don’t know nothin’ ‘bout birthin’ babies.”

Sailor 2: I'm just paying off a debt. There's a colored guy on my ship saved the life of one of my buddies. [grumbling in the background]
Thug: Aaa, ya got me weepin'

Here again he resorts to detective drama conventions by exaggerating the negative characteristics of the white attacker. In quick aural succession we have a black victim, whom we recognize because of his accent and poor grammar; a white rioter, who is rude, has a harsh, nasty voice and street dialect; a white sailor, who speaks like a middle-class American—he even says “please” to the thug; and a second white sailor who sounds like he's from the streets somewhere, too. The sailor dismisses his defense of the black man as mere payback perhaps so he doesn't come across too artificially as a Good Samaritan. This seems to be a message to the audience that you don't have to “love your neighbor” to do the right thing. Nevertheless, it is based on fact. Sailors broke up an attack on blacks by a gang in Cadillac Square. According to press reports they responded to the toughs who told them to mind their own business by saying “That's just what we're doing, punk. We're doing this for a colored boy in our outfit that saved a couple of white lives over in the Pacific. He lost his own while he was doing it.”⁷⁰ This blend of documented events with fiction is somewhat troubling to 21st century ears however. The radio audience was expected to accept everything, whether it was actually true, similar to truth or what we'd like to be true. And, in the 1940s, there is considerable evidence that they usually did believe what they heard.⁷¹

The scene ends with the thugs backing away from a confrontation with the sailors because “we ain't pickin' no fights with whites we're after colored guys.” Then the

⁷⁰ Bontemps and Conroy, *They Seek a City*, 231.

⁷¹ Paul F. Lazarsfeld, *Radio and the Printed Page* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1940), 257.

sailors give a tough-voiced lecture about them “stirrin’ up the kind of trouble we went to war to stop...” and to get out “before the Army comes and uses you for target practice.”

A fanfare confirms the sentiment, closes the scene and transitions to the next. It’s a glory-type brass fanfare, with a rising trumpet answering with a fragment of “Anchors Aweigh.” It gives the impression of approval of their words and actions by a higher authority.

Musical narrative

Open Letter is a concerto for narrator, crowds and orchestra in which all instruments are interdependent. One of the essentials of the sonic palette, music provides information, atmosphere and emotional color throughout the docudrama as it typically would in most radio plays. However, musical integration with the text and consistent use of thematic scoring and leitmotifs set this program apart.⁷² Although the script notes the place of music throughout, it only rarely calls for a specific effect. The partnership with the narrator is particularly close, coloring his words with meaning, supplying the appropriate emotion and, especially, clarifying which of the three narrative voices is speaking. Each of the three Voices is identified with its own musical style. Brass is the dominant orchestral ensemble, highly adaptable to the emotional tone of each scene. For example, the Voice of Reason is often supported by fanfares. In major keys, these herald the network editorial position or patriotism and sound vaguely derivative of great patriotic and populist works by Copland like *Lincoln Portrait* and *Fanfare for the Common Man*. Minor modes or dissonant passages suggesting racial discord resemble

⁷² No music director is named on the program and it seems unlikely that Bernard Herrmann scored the show, since he had been working in Hollywood beginning in 1941. However, he had worked on many *Columbia Workshop* programs with Robson, who had an affinity for his music, and the orchestrations appear to bear the mark of Herrmann’s distinctive sound.

programmatic works like Rogers' *Slaughter on Tenth Avenue*. When the Voice of the Street speaks, his presence is marked by contemporary brass motifs, evocative of crime dramas, helping us orient ourselves aurally to the suspenseful situation.

The similarity to the scoring of detective shows is striking. The sonic conventions which crime shows developed depend on instrumentation. Brass instruments, especially trombones, were commonly used in signature figures and transitional sections. Examples of shows using this type of scoring up to the mid-'40s include *Mystery Playhouse*, *Mr. District Attorney*, *Suspense*, *Richard Diamond*, and *Border Patrol* to name just a few.⁷³ Highly versatile, they provided dramatic or intrusive contrast with secondary instruments and were often scored to connote modernity. Sometimes jarring, sometimes blaring they can suggest a harsh or urban environment. Slower brass passages might underscore nighttime scenes like a dangerous street or a smoke-filled bar. As one travels with the Voice of the Street, the musical passages help the listener visualize each disturbing scene.

Silence plays a part as well, for dramatic contrast. For example, when the Voice of Judgment indicts the American people for their collective role in the race riots, he invokes powerful war images, unaccompanied by music. "We lost Bataan gallantly. We surrendered Corregidor with honor. We were defeated in Detroit by ourselves. In shame and humiliation." His voice rises through each sentence, becoming harsher at each indictment, pausing for emphasis before the words "gallantly," and "with honor" and with double beats before "by ourselves." Only then does music enter. In a very long musical passage, reminiscent of "Siegfried's Funeral March" from Wagner's *Die*

⁷³ This aural convention continued. Many detective shows in the late '40s on radio and later in television as well as films noir continued to use modern brass scores that seemed inseparable from the urban crime drama.

Götterdämmerung, the bass trombones pace slowly in a descending melody. Under the trombones, querulous clarinets zig-zag aimlessly before coming to a halt. It is as if all have sat down in hopeless dejection. In this scene, in particular, music and vocal coloration merge to instill a sense of shame and guilt in the listener.

Contrary to stereotype, strings are not used to evoke sentiment. Their use is more sophisticated and provides an example of how music infuses the show with drama and emotional tension. Invariably suggesting upset, rapid violin scales are a musical metaphor for fear and confusion in half a dozen instances. For example, they underscore the rumors that precipitate riots. This is one of the few places in the script which specifies a particular motif, referred to as “agitato rumor,” and “rumor cue.”⁷⁴ Blaring trombones belie the casual banter of the rumor mongers represented by violins nervously race up and down the scales like viruses that can’t wait to infect. And in black neighborhoods, as the rumor spreads, becoming more outrageous with every successive mutation, the viral violins agitate beneath the dialogue. The Voice of the Street confirms “that’s how the rumor spread in the colored section...last month. Here’s the white version.” The racing violins repeat their assault under the white dialogue. The violin figure returns again during the riot. As if speaking for the violins, the narrator talks faster and with increasing intensity over the orchestra, telling the audience “That bloody Monday...Woodward Boulevard...became a hunting ground upon which no Negro was safe,” while the orchestra supports his monologue with riffs which dart out in asymmetrical patterns like wild rioters, and repeated staccato patterns in brass describe the gunfire. The orchestra takes over the description of the street fighting as the Voice drops out, with fast string

⁷⁴ Robson, “An Open Letter on Race Hatred,” 64.

scales rising ever higher and shriller, the rat-a-tat trumpets sounding the gunshots, followed by strings in contrary motion, as if the crowds were scattering to escape the violence. This section, in particular, owes as much to Rogers' famous ballet from *On Your Toes* as it does to scores by Bernard Hermann for series like *Suspense*.

Robson's music director showed considerable restraint in using musical quotations, choosing only three to evoke specific images. The most subtle is in the first of three dramatizations of acts of interracial kindness and courage. A black physician helps his friend, a white druggist. The physician's dark, dignified voice and unaccented speech indicate his education and status, while the druggist has a nasal, ordinary voice and delivery. Yet they share a common humanity. Trombones in slow thirds signal approval. The instruments underscore this dialogue of harmony with a quiet, slow rendering of the last line of *Ballad for Americans*, that which affirms the article of faith in democracy: "And I have always believed it, and I believe it still." As the narrator's line tells how the doctor drove his friend "through the no man's land of Woodward Avenue," we can hear, if we listen carefully, even slower, the trombones trace out tune of "and you know who I am," and the final word "A_me_ri_ca." Is it likely that the listener would pick up this quotation from the era's most beloved musical portrayal of unity? Some might. In any event, Robson and his music director must have felt its inclusion an important reference, a fragment of meaning for those who would catch it.

The other two interpolations are much more conventional. In the sailor scene the orchestra plays the title phrase of *Anchors Aweigh* as if it were a hymn of praise for their defense of the black man as noted earlier. And, in the final vignette, "black and white voices blending," as an integrated high school graduating class sings "America," the only

musical work specified in the script. This diagetic use of music, though traditional, is effective since it rings out in ironic contrast with the narrator's description of the gangs waiting outside the gymnasium to start a fight as the troops, with their "fixed bayonets," arrive just in time to prevent a further outbreak of violence.

Aural contradictions: race, ethnicity and the winning the war

Open Letter stated from the beginning that race hatred from within could sabotage the war effort and the future of the country. Its final scene makes the point with internal sonic contradiction. As was typical throughout the war, America's foes are disparaged through "comic" mimicry of their voices. This show follows that convention, even as the Voice of the Streets warns listeners that we may lose the respect of the rest of the world—people of color and different ethnicities—by the disgraceful example at home. He tells us that the Detroit riots are at an end and forgotten by most. "But not the rest of the world," he snarls with his best Bogart edge in his voice. There is a coda. Two short vignettes portray Nazi and Japanese propaganda which exploits the American disgrace. Through the hollowness of a long distance line enemy "reports" mock American democratic values by accented newsmen who seem to have been schooled in *The March of Time* tradition of mimicry. "Hallo, this Radio Berlin calling....there is no doubt... that the problem of labor and capital cannot be solved by the present rulers of the U.S.A." a clipped "German" voice snidely says. Then, a "Japanese," with generic "l-less" and "r-less" Asian diction denounces Americans: "...hundreds of Negroes were sacrificed to the altar of American white superiority complex which was nothing than the latest of appearance of acts of intolerable cruelty of the people who pay lip service to democracy." The narrator warns that millions of "black and brown and yellow" listeners may hear a

“ring of logic” in this propaganda and look at us with “justified suspicion...We cannot command the respect of mankind with the blood of fellow Americans on our hands.”

However, it is difficult to imagine how, in a post-war world, sonic ridicule will be forgotten by those millions.

Finale

The docudrama is finished, but the program has not ended. Introduced as a closing post-script is an eight minute speech delivered by Wendell Willkie. In 1943, Willkie was still in public life and contemplating another run for the White House, which may explain how he came to speak on the program, since no one from within the government was willing.⁷⁵ Acting as an Ambassador-at-Large, he had traveled the world advocating international cooperation among peoples and this was the essence of his message on the *Open Letter* broadcast. Delivered without any of the drama or musical accompaniment of the program, Willkie’s talk, nearly half the length of the docudrama, bravely criticized both Republican and Democratic responses to racial issues as bankrupt.

One has a tendency to ask the Negro for his vote as recompense for an act of simple justice done eighty years ago. The other retains political power by, in effect, depriving the Negro of his right to vote in one part of the country while seeking his vote in another on the plea of great friendship for his race. Both attitudes must be changed.

Understandably, Willkie may have seen his appearance as a political opportunity, but his courageous position had the potential to alienate nearly everyone by speaking out against both political parties and for civil rights. He argued that “two-thirds of the people who are allied with us do not have white skins...and have long hurtful memories of the white man’s superior attitude in dealings with them...Will promises [made today] mean

⁷⁵ A year later, Willkie was dead, at 52, from a massive heart attack. He was much mourned by the black community whose rights he had advocated throughout his public life.

anything when the war is over?...Race riots in Detroit, Los Angeles and Beaumont, Texas do not reassure them.” He warned that “Fascism is an attitude of mind...which causes men to seek to rule others by economic, military or political force, or through prejudice. Such an attitude within our own borders is as serious a threat to freedom as is the attack without.”

Willkie’s powerful language and plain delivery reinforced the seriousness of message of the docudrama. Over and over, in vignettes, narration, music and orchestrated crowd scenes, a single theme tied the program together. Racial violence, bred by contempt for African Americans’ rights, brought us national disgrace and threatened our future. Few had the courage to say it, much less on national radio.

Reception and aftermath

Open Letter stands virtually alone in radio history for its courage and creativity in dealing with race relations. Although networks had donated time and produced programs in cooperation with the government, like *Americans All*, *Immigrants All* and *Freedom’s People* which indirectly fostered race relations, they took no ownership for them. Occasional public affairs programs like *The University of Chicago Round Table* had panel discussions on race issues but these were rare and had met fierce opposition from the OWI and specifically from Archibald MacLeish.⁷⁶ This was the first time that a network had taken an editorial position on the topic of race relations. But what impact did it have? What was the reaction? Did it change anything?

⁷⁶ Sherman Dryer, moderator of NBC’s *University of Chicago Round Table* and author of *Radio in Wartime*, had advocated panels on racial issues from as early as 1939, but the network had resisted these as too volatile. In 1942, he raised it again, approaching Archibald MacLeish, the head of the OFF, who had discussed in an closed-circuit address to the radio industry that low black morale was a danger to national security. MacLeish would not support him. In 1943, with racial tensions boiling over, Dryer was permitted to schedule two programs, the second of which aired on July 4 as reminder of the need to support democracy for all, just days after the riots in Detroit. Savage, *Broadcasting Freedom*, 191.

Remarkably, the broadcast was heard on 96 CBS stations, including 25 in the South and Southwest, all of which had an opportunity to refuse the program.⁷⁷ According to William Robson, the public responses were “as varied and violent as the point of view of the listener... Indiscriminate applause and vile condemnation came from the same locality.”⁷⁸ That unsurprising finding corroborated the research just about to come to light which would profoundly influence cultural thought on race relations in the United States. In January of 1944, Gunnar Myrdal’s *An American Dilemma: the Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* was published, charging that the “American Creed” which guaranteed equality to all citizens was systematically undermined by white economic and social oppression of African Americans. He said that “The need for race prejudice is...a need for defense on the part of the Americans against their own national creed, against their own most cherished ideals.”⁷⁹ As each layer of justification for treating blacks as inferiors was discredited, he observed, first by biological science and then by social science, the “split in the American soul” was revealed for what it was—near universal prejudice.⁸⁰ Myrdal’s point that “There is no doubt that the overwhelming majority of

⁷⁷ "Outspoken Radio," unsigned review of *An Open Letter to the American People*, by William Robson, CBS Radio, *Time*, August 9, 1943. In the introduction to the published version of *Open Letter*, Robson tells how a complete run-through of the program was performed on closed-circuit radio for all the affiliates prior to airing it. Few refused it. Erik Barnouw, "Introduction to 'An Open Letter on Race Hatred,'" in *Radio Drama in Action*, by Erik Barnouw, ed. Erik Barnouw (New York: Rinehart & Company, 1945), 60.

⁷⁸ Ibid. Robson’s account again differs from Walter White’s; he claimed that the “overwhelming majority of comments were favorable.” White, *A Man Called White*, 231.

⁷⁹ Gunnar Myrdal, “Excerpt from *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*,” (1944), in *Theories of Race and Racism*, ed. Les Back and John Solomos (New York: Routledge, 2000), 91

⁸⁰ Ibid., 93. Myrdal outlined the many supposed scientific justifications for slavery and later for social segregation and other forms of discrimination. These included theories of biological and physical difference, a presumption of inferior intelligence among others.

white Americans desire that there be as few Negroes as possible in America,”⁸¹ shocked and angered many, but it reinforced Robson’s portrait of polarized listener reaction to *Open Letter*.

Audiences moved to anger, resentment, shame or relief that the real problems were now being aired, quite literally, merely reflected the pervasive cultural divide in the United States. The program itself probably had little direct social impact, as the *New York Times* radio critic, John K. Hutchens noted a week later.

[The show] must have annoyed those to whom the Detroit conflict was all in black and white. Its scorn for mass cowardice must have disturbed the uneasy conscience, its plain talk about the economic causes of strife could not have missed the ostrich-minded, and its plea for freedom from prejudice was clearly a challenge to demagogues who foster hatred for their own dark purposes.⁸²

Hutchens was under no illusions that the show changed many minds but “it possibly shook the complacency of listeners who had not thought about the subject...and if it reached only a fraction of these, it did its job.”⁸³ In other quarters the program helped pave the way for change.

***Open Letter* heralds a new role for radio**

The immediate reaction from the *New York Times* provides a glimpse into the character of the show’s media reception. This was not front page news. But it was considered news. An article in the first section in the *Times* carried a 600 word Associated Press piece—about three-quarters of a column—which focused on Willkie’s speech terming it a “plea for the elimination of what he [Willkie] termed a ‘Fascist

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² John K. Hutchens, "Radio Notebook," *New York Times*, August 1, 1943.

⁸³ Ibid.

attitude of mind” which denied black people their “means to supply [their] ‘human needs.’”⁸⁴ Its timing, length and position between an article about Vice President Wallace’s speech attacking “American Fascists” and one crediting the President for averting a rail strike in California indicate that it was of national interest and importance. Willkie was quoted verbatim for most of the article and the docudrama received almost no notice suggesting the hierarchy of meaning between a reenactment and a speech from a national figure known for his support of internationalism and racial tolerance.

The article quoted much of the speech including sections which criticized both parties, but it did not comment on them or discuss whether the program had any greater significance. That came a week later in John Hutchens’ column: “...now and then there comes a program that ought to be noted for the record, always with the hope that it will not have vanished into thin air.” But his real point was recognizing that something had changed for radio, noting that the “courage it took to broadcast a realistic program about race hatred [said more] about the radio than it does about the ‘Open Letter.’”⁸⁵

Referencing radio’s mandate from the FCC, he observed, “This was radio in the public interest. It does not happen every day.”⁸⁶ Two weeks after the broadcast, *Time* magazine described *Open Letter* as “one of the most eloquent and outspoken programs in radio history”—on any topic—echoing Hutchens’ praise. That CBS “had the courage and took the time” to deal with a racial crisis was “big radio news.”⁸⁷ Both the *New York Times* “Radio Notebook” article and *Time* observed the importance of *Open Letter* as a

⁸⁴ “Help for Negroes Urged by Wilkie,” *New York Times*, July 25, 1943.

⁸⁵ Hutchens, “Radio Notebook.”

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ “Outspoken Radio.”

landmark in the role of radio itself, and that was perhaps the most important legacy of the program. “The ether has been broken,” said *Time*. Radio was emboldened to speak out publicly against prejudice, and other issues: free from the OWI, the government, unaligned with church, civic groups or any organization. Radio, that disembodied, enigmatic authority figure, took a stand and couldn’t be accused of being influenced by special interests.

Civil rights activists embraced *Open Letter*’s candor. In 1944, L.D. Reddick cited it as one of only two programs which he believed made “The nearest approach to a straight- forward discussion of ‘the Negro question’ or advocacy of the rights of Negroes.”⁸⁸ Reddick lamented that fact that the history of broadcasts intended to raise black morale had avoided the issues and he urged that “More and better dramatizations of the Negro’s cause should occur. These dramatizations are much more effective than straight speeches.”⁸⁹ Two years later, social scientists Bryson and Rowden still remembered *Open Letter* as “one of radio’s most timely efforts to lessen tension by speaking plainly.”⁹⁰

In 1943 *Open Letter* won the Peabody Award. But it won, not for Public Service, but for Outstanding Entertainment in Drama, which accords it somehow an ambiguous status that comments on its production values rather than its social stand. Perhaps that is a compromise made by the awarding body, the University of Georgia. But in radio’s production centers liberal writers and directors were not ambivalent; they esteemed and

⁸⁸ Reddick, “Educational Programs for the Improvement of Race Relations,” 385. The other program was a dramatization of Ottley’s *New World A Comin’*, but that was only broadcast locally in New York on the avowedly progressive WMCA.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 386.

⁹⁰ Bryson and Rowden, “Radio as an Agency of National Unity,” 141.

remembered *Open Letter* more than anyone. CBS News vice president Paul White cited it in his book, *News on the Air*, as the quintessential documentary program both for the importance of the of its stand and its manner of production.⁹¹ Erik Barnouw included it in his volume *Radio Drama in Action: Twenty-five Plays of a Changing World* as an example of the socially responsible activism radio should undertake. These writers were in the advance guard, however.

In the months that followed *Open Letter*, radio began to deal more directly with racial issues, especially on public affairs programs. Langston Hughes's participation in an interracial panel discussion on *America's Town Meeting of the Air* (NBC) in 1944, in particular, is still remembered for his bold attack on Jim Crow conditions in the armed forces and other forms of social and economic oppression of blacks. Also in 1944, *These Are Americans*, a six part dramatic series written by Chet Huntley for the western affiliates of CBS, dealt with the problems different racial or ethnic groups, including African Americans, encountered in the United States. Robert Landry, in his capacity as a member of the Writers' War Board, continued to urge writers to use a "little ingenuity in devising new types of characters for minor roles... and the eschewing of the cut-and-dried minority group types will not only save you from the serious offense of fostering group prejudice; it will also benefit your writing."⁹² Although more and more programs spoke out against racial prejudice, it would take another several decades before the media would make real progress to abandon racial stereotypes.

⁹¹ Paul White, *News on the Air* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1947).

⁹² Bryson and Rowden, "Radio as an Agency of National Unity," 143. Quoting a memo by Landry.

Sound, medium and meaning

Unsettling listeners, emboldening radio's liberal creative community, encouraging advocates for civil rights and remembered today as a pivotal moment in racial discourse, *Open Letter* certainly demonstrated its impact on different constituencies. But how much is traceable to the boldness of the effort and how much to the sonic power of the show, which this chapter argues is essential to its effect? It seemed apparent to *Time* which recognized that, "With no bombast and with a great deal of level, direct statement, CBS told the story of Detroit's recent race riot and told it with the *special impact possible in radio*." [Emphasis added.]⁹³ That "special impact" is not an observation about the reach of mass communications or the importance of the message. It is a comment about the drama of sound. Certainly the shock of the story plays a major part. The show dramatizes "truth" and the events were still in the headlines. The riots were far from over, although they were over for the summer in Detroit. And part of the aural shock is the fact that no program like this had ever been aired. War era Americans were used to a radio diet of patriotic rhetoric, a diet which avoided controversial subjects. But Robson suited this incendiary topic to radio by a kind of sonic prestidigitation. He imbued the program with the aurally familiar —detective dramatics, class-denoting speech patterns, musical atmospherics and realistic crowd scenes. Yet because of masterful handling of the sonic palette, the effect is neither hackneyed nor trivializing; it is engrossing. We are simultaneously entertained and repelled. Some may have even been moved. Many never forgot it.

⁹³ "Outspoken Broadcast."

Epilogue

When, in 1942, *University of Chicago Round Table* commentator Sherman Dryer observed that radio must be put “to use creatively as a wartime weapon,” he articulated a widely held belief.¹ Politicians, critics and scholars already knew well that radio’s reach and intimate address were effective in influencing audiences and would be an important tool during the war. What they didn’t know at the time was how its role would play out. American suspicion of blatant propaganda and public horror at Fascist extremes in the use of media assured that the country’s approach would be very different. Even though it had the right, based on long standing legislation, the Roosevelt Administration did not seize the airwaves; radio in wartime retained its model: independent and commercial. These conditions shaped the way information, policy and propaganda were presented.

The barrier between the government and the networks, however permeable, created a reassuring psychological distance between war messages and the public, despite the fact that the source of the hundreds of daily reminders to save scrap metal, grow Victory Gardens and that “loose lips sink ships” must have been obvious. Programming favorable to war goals was seamlessly integrated into the commercial mechanism of broadcasting, what Dryer wryly called “peacetime radio fare dressed up in khaki.”² Radio adapted successful advertising techniques, using celebrities to endorse war bonds and jingles to sell rationing to the public. Shows like *The Army Hour* and patriotic musical extravaganzas used music and variety to boost morale. When soap operas and comedies embedded war stories into their plots and dramas revolved around espionage,

¹ Sherman Dryer, *Radio in Wartime* (New York: Greenberg Publishers, 1942), 47.

² *Ibid.*, 22.

sacrifice and American values, propaganda drew on radio craft to capture the listener. Daily news reports from foreign correspondents kept those at home abreast of developments with a speed and technical transparency not possible only a few years before, and did it with editorial distance from the government.

Using these methods was not only well known at the time, but was encouraged. Even social scientist and critic of radio Charles Siepmann urged that war “be superimposed... on the peacetime pattern of programs.”³ The strategic use of radio during World War II has been of interest to scholars in recent decades, but the discourse has almost exclusively concerned content. And yet, creative sound was so much a part of the listening experience, was so well understood by the industry, its writers and directors, and was a constant source of admiration or derision by those who wrote about programming. It is not clear why it has been overlooked in our time. Certainly Dryer advocated for the use of the emotional and dramatic power of sound to “exploit the listeners’ imagination” in the interest of winning them over to supporting war goals.⁴

In this work I have discussed only a few programs and genres which employed the sonic palette which I believe was in daily use in the creation of programming to “rape” the audience and keep it willingly in thrall, to paraphrase the radio-era journalist Robert West. Programming supportive of intervention, the war effort and social policy advocated by the Administration was subject to the same techniques and creative processes as all other shows. There are hundreds of programs favorable to these

³ Charles Siepmann, "American Radio in Wartime, an Interim Survey of the OWI's Radio Bureau," in *Radio Research, 1942-1943*, ed. Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Frank Stanton (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1944), 118.

⁴ Dryer, *Radio in Wartime*, 93.

objectives which could have been the subject of my analysis and in which the same aural conventions or innovations would be found at work. Many of these were emotionally and dramatically effective in swaying the American people.

I believe this consistent stream of creative, indirectly propagandistic radio programming, aurally evocative and suitable for a mass audience, was only possible in the commercial environment of the 1940s networks and, most particularly, at CBS. It is probably not a coincidence that the works closely studied in this volume were all produced at that network. This is not to say that NBC's two networks and Mutual Broadcasting contributed little to the radio war effort. But CBS was the acknowledged creative powerhouse of the radio industry; it was a competitive necessity forced on them by their marketplace position. From its beginnings as an underfunded David to NBC's RCA-backed Goliath, CBS, under William Paley, built an entrepreneurial organization which championed innovative programming and rewarded risk-taking, especially in its sustaining program incubators like *Columbia Workshop*. Most of the great talents of radio worked on that series, including Irving Reis, William Robson, Norman Corwin and Orson Welles. Using that platform and others, before the war, CBS pressed liberal politics that in some cases anticipated FDR and in others gave voice to his views. The plays of Archibald MacLeish and Norman Corwin spoke obliquely, through verse, against Fascist-like regimes. And *Ballad for Americans* echoed Roosevelt's call for unity, rallying millions, just as war broke out in Europe.

NBC, richly endowed with the best facilities and deep pockets to pay for headliners, led the industry in popular variety, comedy and musical programming. They didn't need to take creative risks to stay on top and were conservative in their politics as

well, another contrast to CBS. Paley's liberal politics and warm relationship with FDR also supported an atmosphere in which interventionist views flourished in spite of an official policy of editorial neutrality. Murrow's broadcasts from London are examples, but so are the daily news reports by Elmer Davis. Once war broke out, many of CBS's gifted writers, news analysts and executives populated the OWI, working congenially with the creative artists who remained behind who made the memorable, sonically rich and war-supporting programs like Corwin's *American in England* and Robson's *The Man Behind the Gun*.

When Roosevelt couldn't commit himself to political controversy, radio spoke in his stead. At least once, in *An Open Letter on Race Hatred*, it spoke advocating social policy when the President refused, and did so as only radio could. Although a presidential voice carried authority and, in FDR's case, the force of his personality, to win over the audience to his views, *Open Letter*, like many other war era programs, went much further. It enlisted the drama and power of music, sound effects, and other forms of sonic coloration that exerted emotional influence in ways that words alone could not.

After the war was over, Charles Siepmann considered radio's future, not knowing that it was really an epitaph. His volume *Radio's Second Chance* was intended to inspire a rededication of radio in the post-war era, critiquing its shortcomings, offering remedies, urging that it realize its potential to contribute to democracy. But he began with its central strengths, which he believed had demonstrably added to the war effort.

Our commercial system, whatever faults it may have, is the most efficient and, with due care, democratically the safest system functioning anywhere in the world....The radio industry has good reason to be proud of [its] role before and specially during the war. They cooperated with the government. They brought the war itself to our doors. They kept our spirits high and our attention fixed on realities. They gave us some first-class commentary as the mere mention of the

names of Edward Murrow and Raymond Swing recalls. They have always given us better entertainment than radio offers in any other country in the world.⁵

But Siepmann saw radio turning further and further away from its potential to serve the public good, with programming increasingly influenced by advertiser demands and educational and sustaining efforts, like those which had given rise to the idea of a radio art, disappearing from the schedule. Although he did not consider the threat to radio posed by television, it was hovering on the horizon, and the pressure that would bring radically altered radio in just a few years. The role radio played during the war, with its appeal to the imagination of the listener, and its invisible call on the emotions, was a thing of the past.

⁵ Charles Siepmann, *Radio's Second Chance* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1946), ix.

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