

The History of Radio and its Influence in America during the 1920s and 1930s

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During the interwar years, Americans experienced dramatic social and cultural changes. No print media such as newspapers or magazines had the level of impact that electronic media such as radio and movies exerted during those two decades of the twentieth century. Though these types of media seemed to draw the nation together by blunting regional differences and imposing similar tastes and lifestyles, they also disseminated racial and cultural caricatures and derogatory stereotypes. It is the purpose of this paper to explain what mass media is, offer a brief history of radio, and document examples of how this electronic media medium influenced American culture in the 1920s and 1930s.

Mass media is a method of communication that uses technology to reach the vast majority of the general public. In the 1920s and 1930s, this media reached people in two different ways. The primary avenue was traditional print media, which included books, newspapers, and magazines. The new or electronic avenue consisted of radio and the movies.

By the first decade of the twentieth century, it was not just scientists who were experimenting with radio technology. American tinkerers began building their own sets to transmit and receive radio signals. Magazines even printed schematics. In spite of the fact that commercially available parts were scarce, amateurs forged ahead and often constructed their sets out of household objects and junk.¹

Initially, this hobby was pursued primarily for personal pleasure and interest. It grew more popular with the newly invented vacuum tube and the practice of “DXing,” in which wireless operators attempted to send their

¹ Clive Thompson, “Air Waves,” *Smithsonian Magazine* 45, no. 6 (2014): 41.

point-to-point signal as far as possible to as many wireless operators as possible. However, a second and more damaging activity received significant attention from the print media and the government. The harmful antics of pranksters threatened the state of amateur wireless. In addition to their use of airwaves to spread rumors, threats, and misinformation, they would send obscene, vulgar, and incorrect messages to ships to annoy the captains or to send the ships off course. These activities brought increased negative attention. The situation became even more serious with the tragic sinking of the *Titanic*. According to investigation documents, once distress calls had been received by the Marconi station in Newfoundland, amateur radio operators along the East Coast filled the air with questions, rumors, and most of all interference, which severely hampered rescue efforts.² These amateurs were nicknamed “hams,” a term coined as a slur by professional telegraph operators.³

These events spurred two efforts to remove the perceived threats that amateurs posed. The first was to have the federal government create laws to regulate this new type of communication. This was motivated by the Navy’s growing frustration with amateur interference. The second effort was the public commentaries about the future of this particular communication technology. Newspapers and magazines turned against amateurs using wireless devices, citing the rise in complaints, when in fact, they were fearful of the potential loss of their profits. The Radio Club of America, with its various chapters, organized across the country, lobbied extensively to protect the amateurs. After a couple of years, the House of Representatives finally passed the Radio Act of 1912. It did not eliminate amateur transmitters as some had wanted, but it did force amateurs to operate on restricted wavelengths.⁴

Frank Conrad, a Westinghouse engineer, generally gets credit for transmitting in 1920 the first regular AM broadcasts in the United States from

² Stephen Lippmann, “Boys to Men: Age, Identity, and the Legitimation of Amateur Wireless in the United States,

1909-1927,” *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media*, 54, no. 4 (2010): 660-661.

³ Gugliotta, “*Tireless Wireless*,” 27.

⁴ Lippmann, “*Boys to Men*,” 659 and 661.

his East Pittsburgh garage, station KDKA.⁵ His show aired every Wednesday and Saturday, with some sports scores and some talk, but mostly music. This marks the appearance of “broadcasting” as opposed to wireless telephony, where a voice or a piece of music is sent out from one location to multiple receivers.⁶ Furthermore, when Conrad played all his records from his personal collection, he struck a deal with a local store to supply him with more records in return for on-air promotions. This arrangement is believed to be the beginning of radio advertising.⁷

It seemed that everyone “jumped on the bandwagon” into broadcasting. Radio stations popped up everywhere sponsored by banks, cities and towns, creameries, hospitals, public utilities, universities, and colleges, among others. Stations were set up in manufacturing factories, newspapers, church basements, fire departments, and even businesses like Strawbridge & Clothier in Philadelphia. It was recorded that local politicians, dignitaries, and musicians broadcasted from a glass-enclosed studio on the department store’s fourth floor with an audience and curious shoppers as the spectators.⁸ Some other ventures were: the Palmer School of Chiropractic in Davenport, Iowa; the John Fink Jewelry Company in Fort Smith, Arkansas started WCAC; the Detroit Police Department began the mnemonic KOP, and the *Chicago Tribune* initiated WGN.⁹

Up to the mid-1920s, the federal government imposed few rules on who could broadcast and when. In order to bring some order to the growing number of stations and broadcasters who were appropriating their own radio wavelengths or frequencies, Herbert Hoover, as Secretary of the Commerce Department, claimed jurisdiction over the radio in 1922. He was mostly responsible for the limited government radio policy of the 1920s because he believed that free enterprise should regulate itself with a minimum of

⁵ Joannie Fisher, “The Radio Reinvented,” *U.S. News & World Report*, 131, no.15 (2001): 36.

⁶ Blin, “*The First Half Century*,” 19.

⁷ Gugliotta, “*Tireless Wireless*,” 27.

⁸ Noah Arceneaux, “A Sales Floor in the Sky: Philadelphia Department Stores and the Radio Boom of the 1920s,” *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 53, no. 1 (2009): 76 and 87.

⁹ Tom Lewis, “A Godlike Presence”: The Impact of Radio on the 1920s and 1930s,” *OAH Magazine of History* 6, no.4 (1992): 27.

government control.¹⁰ Hoover did not do much except grant licenses and assign specific frequency bands to radio users.¹¹

The more influential commercial companies like the Radio Corporation of America (RCA) and AT&T's National Broadcasting System (NBS) were given the lower frequency, and cheaper bands in the guise of making it easier for the public to locate their stations and amateur operators were given the higher numbered and more expensive bands in order to make it more difficult to continue as amateur operators.¹²

In 1926, a federal court ruled that Hoover was never given authority over the airwaves by either President Warren G. Harding or by Congress. Because of this ruling, broadcasters jumped to whatever frequency they wanted, and more disputes between amateurs and commercial stations erupted. Havoc reigned while RCA and AT&T and other large commercial stations lobbied Congress to pass laws that would end the disputes but give them preferential treatment.¹³

The National Broadcasting Company (NBC) had been established in 1926 and was the brainchild of Owen D. Young, board chairman of General Electric (GE) and Radio Corporation of America (RCA). Fifty percent of its shares were held by RCA, thirty percent by GE, and twenty percent by Westinghouse. The company's original purpose was to stimulate sales of radio receivers, for which all three corporations held patents.

By the following year, three events influenced the future of radio. NBC became the first national network with forty stations covering major markets in twenty-four states linked by telephone lines leased from AT&T.¹⁴ The Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) came into existence with a full news division and bureaus in major urban centers.¹⁵ In addition, Congress created the Federal Radio Commission, which was given the power to assign wavelengths and aggressively boot hundreds of small stations off the air to

¹⁰ Arceneaux, "A Sales Floor in the Sky," 78.

¹¹ Thompson, "Air Waves," 44.

¹² Blin, "The First Half Century," 19.

¹³ Thompson, "Air Waves," 44.

¹⁴ Lewis, "A Godlike Presence," 27.

¹⁵ Alice Goldfarb Marquis, "Written on the Wind: The Impact of Radio During the 1930s," *Journal of Contemporary History*, 19, no. 3 (1984): 386.

produce “clear channels” for the larger firms and where they could broadcast with no interference. According to Robert McChesney, a media historian, “It was . . . public policy to create economics that favored the big players. There were only a handful of channels and only some people were going to get them and become fabulously wealthy.”¹⁶

In 1934, the FRC was renamed to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). Its purpose was to regulate transmission and reception of all communications, internal and external, to grant licenses, and allocate frequencies. There was no mention of censorship, but indecency, vulgarity, false or deceptive signals were forbidden.¹⁷

Radio defined the twentieth century as much as the automobile. Of all the new appliances or devices that were bought during the 1920s, none had a more revolutionary impact than the radio. This was the first modern mass medium that made America into a land of listeners. It not only entertained and educated, it delighted and sometimes angered, but more importantly, radio moved different generations and groups into what seemed to be a common culture. This new craze encouraged the feeling of intimacy when it enabled listeners to experience an event as it happened. For example, rather than waiting and reading about the results of the Harding-Cox presidential election in 1920 in a newspaper, people witnessed it first with their ears and imaginations. Broadcasted by Frank Conrad, it is remembered as the first nationwide broadcast.¹⁸

Brisk radio sales were part of the wave of the post-World War I prosperity that was spreading across the nation. Their sales soared from \$60 million in 1922 to \$426 million in 1929. By the end of 1923, there were 556 stations in large cities dotting the nation’s map, and an estimated 400,000 households had a radio. Also, in that year’s spring catalog, the Sears Roebuck Company offered its first line of radios, while Montgomery Ward was preparing a special 52-page catalog of radio sets and parts.¹⁹ In 1927, the most popular model was the Radiola 17, which cost \$157.50 and ran on house

¹⁶ Thompson, “*Air Waves*,” 44 and 45.

¹⁷ Gugliotta, “*Tireless Wireless*,” 27.

¹⁸ Lewis, “*A Godlike Presence*,” 26.

¹⁹ Lewis, “*A Godlike Presence*,” 27.

current instead of a large battery. Demand for it continually exceeded production for much of the decade.²⁰

Radio, as a mass media, also knew no geographic boundary and drew people together as never before. It both molded and mirrored popular culture with common speech, dress, and social behavior. Soon, people wanted more of everything—music, talk, comedy, and drama. Radio stations began broadcasting not only popular music but classical music, not only religious stories or events but political commentary, and not only lectures but book talks. Listeners wanted bigger and more powerful sets. They also wanted greater sound fidelity. The radio console became a necessary piece of furniture in America's living rooms.²¹

By the early thirties, commercials became the standard way of financing broadcasts. While the commercial sponsors brought the networks and stations money, these companies were finding new markets across the country and were growing into nationally known corporations. It was a win-win situation for everyone. Convenience goods, consumed by millions, became the most popular products to sell, accounting for 86 percent of the network and 70 percent of the non-network advertisements in 1934.²² Cigarettes (Lucky Strikes and Chesterfields), cigars (There's no spit in Cremo cigars!) brands of toothpaste (Ipana and Pepsodent) coffee (Maxwell House and Chase and Sanborn) and laxatives (Haley's M-O) proved especially popular.

For the first time in history, radio meant that one person with a microphone could speak to many, influence them, and perhaps change or reinforce their views and prejudices by sowing seeds of information, propaganda, entertainment, political and religious fervor, culture, and even hatred across the land during broadcasts. For instance, beginning with the election of 1928, radio began to have a profound effect on the way politicians conducted their campaigns. The managers for Herbert Hoover declared that he planned to campaign "mostly on radio and through the motion pictures."

²⁰ Lewis, "A Godlike Presence," 28.

²¹ Alan Douglas, *Radio Manufacturers of the 1920s: Volume One* (New York: The Vestal Press, 1988), 27.

²² Lewis, "A Godlike Presence," 29.

Personal appearances by candidates were being considered a thing of the past. "Brief statements as to the positions of the (political) parties and candidates which reach the emotions through the minds of millions of radio listeners, will play an important part in the race to the White House."²³ In other words, listeners were not willing to suffer through long and oratorical speeches anymore; they welcomed the brief pronouncements called sound bites!

From the moment that radio first broadcasted the presidential election returns in 1920, radio demonstrated its value and advantages as a news medium. Broadcasting provided an immediacy of dissemination of news throughout the land without the loss of time involved in print news. Other advantages associated with radio broadcasting were that the listener received the news without any cost (besides purchasing a radio) and with a minimum of effort. Just turn on the radio and turn the dial.²⁴

Beginning in the 1920s, press associations supplied their news directly to radio networks and also allowed their newspaper subscribers to turn over their news directly to individual stations. The growth of news programs on individual stations was also increased when they cooperated with local newspapers.

However, by 1933 radio broadcasting had grown so successful both as a news medium and as an advertising medium that press services and newspaper publishers became fearful of the competition from radio networks. They not only began to discontinue their news service to radio stations, they launched political lobbying, an economic boycott, and legal actions to prevent news from being broadcast on the radio, but it was not enough. A meeting was called by William S. Paley, President of CBS, in December and held at the Biltmore Hotel in New York City. It was attended by newspaper publishers, radio network executives, and wire service representatives. A truce was reached, and under *The Biltmore Agreement*, the press associations agreed to supply the radio networks with five-minute summaries of the news in the late morning and the late afternoon. In addition, news flashes or bulletins of

²³ Lewis, "A Godlike Presence," 28.

²⁴ Theodore C. Streibert and Fulton Lewis, Jr. "Radio as a News Medium," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 213 (1941): 54.

important news would be immediately available for broadcast when received.²⁵

However, this agreement did not extend to stations independent of radio networks and this was a major disadvantage for them until Transradio Press Service, a news service geared to independent stations, was created and made publicly available in November of 1934. WOR, a radio station in New York City, became a major outlet for Transradio. The growing demand from listeners for more news on the air beyond the twice-a-day, five-minute broadcasts, and the success of Transradio, forced the International News Service (INS) and the United Press Association (UPA) in 1935 to resume service to networks and actively solicit the business of independent stations. By 1939, the Associated Press decided to make its news services available to the radio networks for noncommercial and non-sponsored purposes and also to provide its news to stations for commercial sponsorship by arrangement with member newspapers of the Associated Press. Therefore, from 1933 to 1939, attempts to block the radio as a news medium failed completely.²⁶

The news made available to radio stations was almost the same news provided to newspapers by the press services and the delivery of news on the air resumed with renewed vigor. Some stations that were outside the large metropolitan centers made an effort to gather local news and add this to the news from the regular press associations. United Press provided these stations with a news wire specifically edited for broadcast as distinct from its newspaper service. Except for stations using Transradio, radio in the 1920s and 1930s was dependent upon news services that were either controlled by newspaper publishers or which derived their principal income from newspapers.²⁷

In addition, specialized news reports from overseas in the late 1930s began appearing more regularly as tensions mounted in Europe. These direct news broadcasts were originating from European capitals and were being presented by Americans such as Edward R. Murrow, a CBS reporter. He was the first to report the German invasion of Austria in March 1938, and his

²⁵ Streibert and Lewis, Jr., *"Radio as a News Medium,"* 54.

²⁶ Streibert and Lewis, Jr., *"Radio as a News Medium,"* 55.

²⁷ Streibert and Lewis, Jr., *"Radio as a News Medium,"* 55.

broadcasts from Europe during World War II cemented his career as a radio correspondent.²⁸

News broadcasts were not the only type of news radio stations offered. Radio announcers who reported the news and also provided analysis were called commentators. This was especially true with sports. Besides supplying sports news in regular five-minute or fifteen-minute segments late in the afternoon or early evening hours, they offered highlights of major sporting events of national and local importance such as baseball, boxing, football, horse racing, tennis, and track and field meets.

There were no regularly scheduled sports broadcasts, but major events were covered. For instance, the Jack Dempsey-Georges Carpentier heavyweight championship bout was broadcasted on July 2, 1921. The first baseball game broadcast was between the Pirates and the Phillies and was presented by KDKA Pittsburgh on August 5, 1921. The first World Series broadcast also came in 1921. Additionally, the first coast-to-coast broadcast was on January 1, 1927, when the Rose Bowl football game was played in California.²⁹

Still, when it came to broadcasting an entire event like a major league baseball game, a boxing match between Joe Lewis and James J. Braddock, or a prestigious horse race like the Kentucky Derby, owners and promoters were full of apprehension. For instance, Major League Baseball (MLB) owners feared that the involvement of radio would reduce park or stadium attendance and compromise their symbiotic relationship with the newspaper industry. East Coast and American League teams were anti-radio, while some clubs in the Midwest, especially the Chicago Cubs, were pro-radio. As a matter of fact, a few owners saw radio as a positive promotional device that could sell baseball to new customers. Since games were played during the day, the major groups in the radio audience were women and children. Besides, as the 1930s dawned, the Great Depression forced other owners to consider new options

²⁸ Charles Kuralt, "Edward R. Murrow." *North Carolina Historical Review*, 48, no. 2 (1971): 167.

²⁹ Judith S. Baughman, ed. *American Decades: 1920-1929*, (New York: International Thomson Publishing Company, 1996), 312.

for replacing revenues lost from declining attendance at games. At the same time, some sponsors, General Mills in particular, aggressively promoted the sponsorship of baseball on the radio to sell breakfast cereal to children. By 1935, most owners realized the benefits of live broadcasting and actively sought commercial sponsors.³⁰

Other forms of specialized services to the radio audience also developed. A few of these were local weather forecasts, traffic reports, market updates, and broadcasts designed particularly for farmers.³¹

During the 1920s and 1930s, it was clear to many that radio was changing the life of the nation. It was quickly binding the country together as never before. This electronic technology was unintentionally nationalizing and transforming “a provincial land consisting of agricultural outposts into a modern nation woven together by the listening and buying habits of suddenly connected consumers.”³² Radio was giving people more of a national identity. They were increasingly referring to themselves as Americans and not primarily as New Yorkers, Pennsylvanians, or Virginians as they had done since colonial times. A single event, be it an inauguration, a concert, a sermon, or a comedy sketch, gave the American people the chance to share in a common experience. Whether a show originated from Chicago, New York, San Francisco, or Washington, broadcasts crossed regions or state lines in part because of the policies of the Federal Communication and Radio Commission that allowed the establishment of national network programming.³³ Radio allowed listeners no matter where they lived in the nation to be part of the event.

Through the economic turmoil of the Great Depression, radio was one of the most important forces keeping the nation together. By the 1930s, radio had pervaded the consciousness of most Americans, subtly changing the way they thought and lived. There were over 19 million radio sets. Even though a quarter of the nation was unemployed, the radio continued to grow in

³⁰ James R. Walker, “The Baseball-Radio War, 1931-1935.” *Journal of Baseball History and Culture*, 19, no. 2 (2011): 53.

³¹ Streibert and Lewis, Jr., “Radio as a News Medium,” 55 and 56.

³² Michael T. Bertrand, “Out of the Dark: A History of Radio and Rural America.” *North Carolina Historical Review* 88, no. 1 (2011): 117.

³³ Bertrand, “Out of the Dark,” 117.

popularity. Social workers found that Americans would sooner sell every appliance or piece of furniture than part with their radio. It connected them to the world and it was cheap entertainment during a time when it was extremely important to have some relief from economic woes. They did not feel as isolated as they once did; they felt a part of the nation's fabric.³⁴

However, this feeling of unity was not felt in all regions of the country. According to the 1930 U.S. Census, a majority of white households and only a small number of African- American households in the Northeast and Midwest were radio-equipped. In the nation's poorer regions, this was not true for residents in rural areas in the West and African-Americans in the South.³⁵ It was not just poverty that slowed the acquisition of radios; it was the lack of electric lines yet to be installed in these areas.³⁶ As a matter of fact, there was a smaller number of radio stations in these areas than in the Northern and Midwest urban areas. In 1928, Atlanta had only three radio stations, New Orleans only had seven, and several large rural states had fewer than six radio stations.³⁷

Initially, broadcasters faced two challenges. The first was to convince audiences that radio listening as a leisure activity had value. Listening to the radio was not only pleasurable, but it could also be productive and educational. The second challenge was to create entertainment that audiences would tune into and for which sponsors would be willing to place their product or service advertisements.³⁸

However, one of the problems that faced programmers had to do with gender. Besides music and news, what other types of day programs would women primarily be interested in while they cooked and cleaned their homes? Programmers came up with a new genre of programming known as the episodic drama or as it is more popularly known as the "soap opera." This type of show appealed to women's interests and also showcased beauty products

³⁴ Lewis, "A Godlike Presence," 29.

³⁵ Steven Craig, "How America Adopted Radio: Demographic Differences in Set Ownership Reported in the 1930-1950 U.S. Censuses," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 48, no.2 (2004): 179.

³⁶ Craig, "How America Adopted Radio," 189.

³⁷ Craig, "How America Adopted Radio," 179.

³⁸ Lippmann, "Boys to Men," 658.

and home-goods retailers. By 1933, there were twelve soap opera programs, including the classic *Ma Perkins*. By 1935, there were nineteen, and two years later, there were thirty-one, among them *John's Other Wife*.³⁹

Another problem was the fact that radio programs, reflecting societal norms, did its share to reinforce racial stereotypes like Italian gangsters, Jewish spend-thrifts, and African-American slow wittedness. Almost all of the radio stations aimed their broadcasts at white audiences. This occurred during the peak of the "Great Migration" of African-Americans from the rural South to the urban centers in the North and Midwest, where radio was concentrated.⁴⁰

Less than 25 percent of radio stations were independent and to attract an audience, these stations specialized in programming that was not offered by the four major networks—NBC, CBS, ABC, and Mutual Radio.⁴¹ Residents in different parts of the country had different music preferences. Depending on the region, one could hear a preponderance of jazz, country music, or gospel. For example, the South displayed a cultural distinction in its concentration of gospel radio stations. New Englanders did not favor country music to the same degree as Southerners and Westerners. Also, Westerners appeared to shun religious broadcasts.⁴²

There was a time when the voices of African Americans could barely be heard over America's airwaves. One of these independent stations was WDIA in Memphis, Tennessee. It was one of the first radio stations in the United States to develop programming by African Americans for African-Americans. Since the 1920s, African Americans have been involved in the development of popular music in night clubs, on records, and in radio studios, but the same could not be said of drama, comedy, news, quiz, and variety shows. Black characters, whether portrayed by black or white actors, were stereotyped as butlers, maids, or buffoons. According to its records, no radio station ever assembled a more diverse and talented cadre of black disc jockeys and

³⁹ Marquis, "Written on the Wind," 405.

⁴⁰ Lippmann, "Boys to Men," 659.

⁴¹ George T. Wilson, "When Memphis Made Radio History," *American Visions Magazine* 8, no.4 (1993): 24.

⁴² J. O. Joby Bass, "The Geographic Diversity of Radio Formats Across the U.S.," *American Geographical Society's Focus on Geography* 53, no. 4 (2010): 148.

entertainers. A typical weekly schedule was as follows: a collage of black adult music of current favorites were broadcasted from Monday to Friday; the Blues were played on Saturday, and Gospel music was played on Sunday.⁴³

However, most companies feared that they would alienate their white customers if they advertised their products with programming aimed at African Americans. Nevertheless, the ever-soaring ratings confirmed that there was an audience for these music styles, and immigrant and African American entrepreneurs took notice, saw their sales rise, and continued to sponsor WDIA.⁴⁴

Finally, a history of radio during the 1920s and 1930s would be incomplete without mentioning a few of the classic programs and entertainers whose performances were broadcasted nationwide. As Vaudeville theaters and shows were closing due to the dwindling audiences during the Great Depression, radio offered new opportunities for performers. Eddie Cantor, the Marx Brothers, Jack Benny, George Burns, and Gracie Allen, and Ed Wynn successfully made the transition to the new medium.

But the most popular program that brought the most laughs was the *Amos 'n Andy* show that NBC broadcasted at 7:00 each weekday evening. Charles Correll and Freeman Gosden were white song-and-chatter performers in minstrel shows who were hired in 1926 by the WGN station in Chicago to perform a ten-minute show about *Sam 'n Henry*, two Southern black men who had moved to Chicago. Described as a “radio comic strip,” it was the first radio program with a continuing storyline. Before this, every broadcast was expected to complete its narrative.

The show was a success from the start, but in 1928, WMAG, also in Chicago, hired the comedy duo away. However, because WGN retained the rights to the *Sam 'n Henry* characters, Correll and Gosden created Amos Jones and Andrew H. Brown, two residents of Harlem. *Amos 'n Andy* was now broadcast six nights a week in fifteen-minute installments.⁴⁵ The effect of the show was unique. Restaurants and movie theaters found that they had to broadcast the show over loudspeakers if they were to keep their customers.

⁴³ Wilson, “When Memphis Made Radio History,” 23.

⁴⁴ Wilson, “When Memphis Made Radio History,” 25.

⁴⁵ Baughman, ed. *American Decades: 1920 – 1929*, 317 - 318

President Calvin Coolidge let it be known that he was not to be disturbed in the evening when this program was on the air.⁴⁶ By 1933, they earned \$100,000 from NBC. This was more than Babe Ruth; more than the President of NBC; indeed, more than the President of the United States.⁴⁷ By the way, in the era of blackface entertainment, there were no protests against the material of *Amos 'n Andy* until decades later.

Other long-running programs that originated in the 1920s and 1930s. For country music fans, the *Grand Ole Opry* began in 1925 and featured music from WSM in Nashville. After all these decades, it is still going strong on Saturday nights. The longest-running serial, *The Rise of the Goldbergs*, began on NBC in 1929. It was the first major Jewish comedy on radio and was still running a quarter of a century later on television.⁴⁸ Finally, there was the CBS early morning program, *Arthur Godfrey Time*. It was known for its talk, variety, and music. Godfrey progressed from a one-night stand in 1937 to becoming a top network star who was the most powerful man in broadcasting. CBS estimated that he was heard by 40 million people a week. Furthermore, the most striking statistic of all was the sales of Chesterfields and Lipton Tea that soared during their sponsorship of this show. *Time* magazine stated, "He is the greatest salesman who ever stood before a microphone." His different variations of the show lasted until 1972 on television.⁴⁹

Then there are the musicians, singers, and comedians who became famous because of exposure on the radio during the 1930s. Band leaders such as Artie Shaw formed one of the best swing bands. Benny Goodman had an innovative hot swing on the cutting edge of popular music. And of course, there was Glenn Miller, who was the epitome of the big bands.⁵⁰ *The Kate Smith Show* was a musical variety program that was broadcasted from 1931 to 1947. She had a powerful contralto voice and *Time* magazine nicknamed her "the first lady of radio." Besides, she and Jack Benny had the only contracts in

⁴⁶ Tom Lewis, "A Godlike Presence," 33.

⁴⁷ Tom Lewis, "A Godlike Presence," 29.

⁴⁸ Baughman, ed. *American Decades: 1920 – 1929*, 314.

⁴⁹ John Dunning, *On the Air: The Encyclopedia of Old-Time Radio*. (New York: Oxford Press, 1998) 43.

⁵⁰ Dunning, *On the Air*, 65 and 67.

radio that could not be canceled. Another fact is that Abbott and Costello were launched as radio and film stars because of their two-year run on the *Kate Smith Show*.⁵¹ Another performer was Bing Crosby, who was a major star by 1935 when he took over as host of *The Kraft Music Hall*, a variety show, and stayed ten years while working at his recording and movie careers.⁵² Finally, Bob Hope became a radio headliner after a long career on the vaudeville stage. Like Crosby, Hope came to radio early and stayed late. He shared with Crosby an ability with words, a glibness, and keen intelligence. After being a guest on some of radio's most popular variety shows, Hope was offered his own half-hour comedy series in the fall of 1938. *The Pepsodent Show* quickly became a Tuesday night giant on NBC.⁵³

Radio's Golden Age was a remarkable time. Radio changed how information was spread from print to electronic media. It changed and validated leisure time. It allowed people to experience a broadcast event simultaneously, no matter where they lived. But most important, radio helped create a more unified and unique "American" culture!

⁵¹ Dunning, *On the Air*, 382-383.

⁵² Dunning, *On the Air*, 91.

⁵³ Dunning, *On the Air*, 106.