

Radio's Golden Age Was Short...But Grand

It is difficult for the modern reader to appreciate the effect of radio upon the pre-television audience, because the functions and the impact of radio differed from those of television in fundamental ways, not the least of which was the fact that the radio audience was innocent and receptive to a degree unimaginable today.

Introduced on the eve of the Age of the Consumer, television quickly became a throw-away narcotic for the reality-stunned. Its messages bypass the censorship of the brain and are injected directly into the viewer's central cortex. It is a babbling background irritant to modern life, always present, never significant, except to the lonely, the dim, and the damaged. Radio, on the more joyful hand, engaged us, busied our imaginations, and obliged us to paint its images on the walls of our minds. On radio, a handsome man was your personal image of a handsome man, a brave woman was your idea of a brave woman, and a beautiful sunset was your sunset, your beauty. News broadcasts were gritty, immediate, and potent, science was fascinating and significant, humor was side-splitting, drama touched our hearts, and the adventure programs, particularly those directed at children, were the very stuff of daydreams — absorbing, involving, challenging, frightening, and totally satisfying (If you were a boy, that is. It must be admitted that radio drama arrived in an era when the female character was still limited largely to romantic and domestic settings, which is too bad, because few women look back on radio with the affection men feel, and one cannot blame them.)

I used to stand before our Emerson for hours, one foot hooked behind the other ankle, my eyes defocused, thoughtlessly tearing up little bits of paper as my imagination batted on the radio as on an unending flow of ambrosia, food for the mind and the soul that sustained you when you needed support, exercised you when your emotions or intellect were flabby, and cosseted you when you needed rest and escape.

The scintillating golden age of radio lasted only about 25 years, from the late Twenties to the early Fifties, before the mind-numbing medium of television reduced radio to two functions: that of a mere

envelope for popular music; and the ubiquitous call-in Talk Show in which the Lonely, the Loony, the Lost, and the Ludicrous share their ignorance, their complaints, their rages, and their desperate need to be listened to by somebody...anybody at all...even at the masochistic cost of being ridiculed by some wise-assed interlocutor. But during its relatively short 25 years of dominance, radio informed and illuminated America. The novelty and impact of hearing news when it was happening coming from where it was happening induced a level of concentration and deliberation on the part of the listeners that was hitherto unknown.

At the same time, radio broadcasters were experimenting with new modes and new methods. There were comedies in which the punch line was a sound effect (Fibber McGee's closet or Jack Benny's vault) and new kinds of drama in which sound not only carried the dialogue but, through sound effects, established the locale and created the emotional

ambiance for the play, like the innovative mystery dramas of Arch Oboler. (The sound effect of an unanswered telephone ringing and ringing was the effective punch ending of radio's most impactful drama, *Sorry Wrong Number*.)

Television programming, on the lesser hand, began with worn-out vaudeville hacks plus Hopalong Cassidy films; then, after a brief creative moment of live television drama, its economically in-built impulse towards mediocrity rapidly reduced it to predictable, formulaic situation comedies, cop shows, "celebrity" panels featuring people who were famous for being on celebrity panels, and quiz programs for the meagerly informed, finally descending to revolting voyeuristic

orgies in which coprophagous afternoon viewers watch geek shows in which social rejects confess ghastly acts and attitudes in a pitiful desire to be on nationwide television for three minutes, while the program's ego-maniacal presenter baits and urges them to debase themselves yet further.

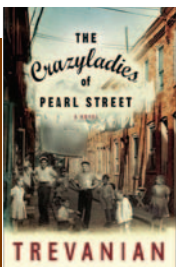
Exploiting the lowest-common-denominator nature of television, the bottom-feeding slime merchants who present these shameless feasts of nastiness become rich and famous. Then some of them clean up their acts a little and re-launch themselves as social crusaders. Some have even become ego-bloated media mega-stars, telling their mindless viewers how to decorate their houses, how to dress, what to eat, how to "make contact with their inner selves"...even what books to read, for the love of God.

[But] radio was a liberator. For me, radio was the quickest way out of North Pearl Street... ☑

Trevanian is the best-selling author of *Shibumi*, *The Eiger Sanction*, and *The Summer of Katya*.



Fibber McGee and Molly — aka Jim and Marian Jordan — epitomized the golden age of radio with its comic situations and closet full of sound effects.



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