

Radio's Golden Age: The genres, the programs, the people, and the impact

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Moderators: Neil Novik and Tyll van Geel

The new medium of radio was to the printing press what the telephone had been to the letter: it allowed immediacy. It enabled listeners to experience an event as it happened. Rather than read about Lindbergh meeting President Coolidge after his flight to Paris, people witnessed it with their ears and imaginations ... Soon the human ear and imagination became insatiable: people wanted more of everything-music, talk, advice, drama ... Radio became a "godlike presence" ... which had taken over American lives and homes.

from *Empire of the Air* by Tom Lewis

The Golden Age of Radio, roughly 1925 -1950, was a time of great change, some might say upheaval. It spanned four distinct periods in American History: The "Roaring Twenties," the Depression, World War II, and the post-war years leading up to the television age. What role did radio play in American life during that time? Conversely, how was radio affected by events shaping our communities and the nation? Whether you have memories of being glued to the radio for the next episode of your favorite adventure, or watching your family listening intently to the evening war news, this seminar will be an opportunity to consider the Golden Age of Radio in a broader context. But even if you grew up in the television age without experiencing the novelty of radio, this seminar may provide new insights into how the world's first electronic mass medium set the stage not only for television, but for all the other kinds of media which followed.

In this seminar, we'll be looking at old-time radio genres, programming that cut across more than one genre (e.g., wartime radio, women in radio, etc.), significant programs and broadcasts, and the entertainers and broadcasters of this wildly popular medium, and discuss how they might have impacted us and our families, the lives of average Americans, as well as American culture in general.

Each week, we will consider a different aspect of The Golden Age of radio. Participants will introduce clips or longer segments of programs, helping to recreate those "thrilling days of yesteryear." These audio materials will serve as the anchor for our discussions of the significance and impact of radio in the first half of the twentieth century. The history of this era, from the 20's to the birth of the boomer generation, will be the backdrop for many of our discussions.

Both before and during the seminar, the moderators will be available to assist in locating audio clips, and getting them into a format that can be used during the seminar. In addition, we will make available a large number of books, articles, and web resources to enhance our discussions and for participants to use in making their selections.

TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

The specific topics we cover in this seminar will depend in large part on the interests of the participants. However, we will be striving to highlight a wide range of genres, programs and people in order to provide the best possible framework for our discussions. Some of the areas we expect will be covered include the following:

The Rise of Comedy: From the stunningly popular, albeit controversial, *Amos 'n Andy*, one of the first syndicated radio comedies, to the great stars making their way from vaudeville to radio in the early 1930s, such as Jack Benny, Burns and Allen, and Eddie Cantor, to the more sophisticated shows of the 1940's, such as *Our Miss Brooks*, radio succeeded in making people laugh through some very tough times.

Mystery and Suspense: Emerging in the late 20's, mystery and suspense programming was relatively easy and inexpensive to produce and air, and by late in the Golden Age, had become one of the most prolific types of radio shows. Programs such as *The Shadow*, *Suspense*, *Mr. District Attorney*, and *Dragnet* all had listeners glued to their radio sets.

Westerns and Adventure: For most of the Golden Age, radio westerns were geared toward children. But heroes such as The Lone Ranger, Tom Mix, Sergeant Preston, Jack Armstrong and others were the stuff of fantasy for kids and adults alike.

Specific Programs: An example of a specific broadcast that may deserve discussion is Orson Welles's *War of the Worlds*, which aired in 1938. Although the program may not have terrified nearly as many people as was once believed, it remains a hallmark demonstration of the power of the new medium to influence modern culture.

War Reporting: WWII brought with it a new era of news broadcasting. Pioneers such as Edward R. Murrow, K.V. Kaltenborn and others brought the war home in ways never before imagined.

Women in Radio: Often invisible and too often forgotten, women had major roles at all levels of radio programming in the Golden Age.

News Broadcasts: Throughout the 1930's, radio battled for a share of a business that had been solely owned by the print media. At first, using the same sources of news as the newspapers, but then seeing those sources cut off, radio developed the art of the live, on-the-scene broadcast that would forever change the way people received information on current events.

Quiz Shows: *Professor Quiz*, the first radio quiz show, debuting in 1936, started a genre that grew in popularity throughout the Golden Age of Radio. Its participatory nature allowed listeners to imagine themselves competing with on-air contestants, thus interacting with the radio in new and, for them, thrilling ways.

The Soaps: By the mid 1930's, advertisers were in firm control of much of radio program development. Daytime dramas, targeted to women—mostly housewives—and earning the name *soap operas* because they were mostly sponsored by soap manufacturers, dominated weekday afternoon scheduling, and successfully acquired a large and loyal listener base.

These are just some of the subjects we hope to be discussing in this seminar. A list of other possible subjects areas will be distributed soon after the enrollment is announced.

RESOURCES

Web Resources

The internet has many websites dedicated to The Golden Age. Many sites have radio shows available for downloads, as well as articles on specific genres and programs, as well as profiles of stars, writers and producers.

If you're searching for audio clips, we recommend:

www.youtube.com (many radio clips are posted here, with photos, etc. as the video.)

<https://archive.org/details/oldtimeradio>

The following websites have articles, downloads, photographs etc, which we hope you will find interesting and helpful in thinking about old time radio.

www.earlyradiohistory.us

www.jfredmacdonald.com/prologue.htm

www.otr.com

www.goldenageradio.com

Books

On the Air: The Encyclopedia of Old-Time Radio, by John Dunning 1998

John Dunning is one of the world's foremost authorities on Old-Time Radio. This volume is a compendium of facts, anecdotes and histories of every old time radio show from the earliest days of the medium through the 1950's. Arranged alphabetically by the show's title, readers can learn about a show's origins, stars, sponsors, and popularity, as well as "behind the scenes" glimpses into the making of the programs. For fans of old time radio in general, and especially for fans of specific radio programs, this book is a must-read. The book is available through interlibrary loan and through the used book market. In addition, the moderators may be able to copy some pages on specific programs.

The Great American Broadcast by Leonard Maltin, 1997

This book brings to life the golden age of radio, profiling its great actors and characters and offering behind-the-scenes anecdotes on the shows of the Golden Age. Available on the used book market as well as through inter-library loan.

A complete list of book recommendations will be made available to participants.