

## Return With Us Now: Rise of the Old Time Radio Hobby, 1967-1972

From the 1920s to 1950s radio rivaled motion pictures as the entertainment medium of choice for most Americans. Soap operas, childrens' adventures, private detectives, and comedians filled the airwaves from early morning to late at night. This immensely profitable industry came crashing down during the fifties, a victim of television's meteoric rise. Old time radio, or OTR, as hobbyists refer to this era of radio drama, has all but been forgotten by contemporary society and is little more than a fading memory to the shrinking Great Depression and World War II generation.

In the 1960s and early 1970s individuals across the country came to the realization that dramatic radio (a term used generically to encompass all the genres mentioned above) had quietly vanished and was not ever going to have the dominant hold it once had on the listening public. Transcription discs, large 16 inch records on which many of these programs were recorded, were saved by this handful of enthusiasts at a time when radio stations and the major networks were disposing of them as fast as possible, considering them storage hogs with no future potential for profit. The hobby is rich with legendary stories of discs saved from dumpsters, dusty and neglected warehouses, and archives with little interest in them.

Out of the efforts of a few dozen men (there are no known women among the earliest OTR hobbyists) to preserve these forgotten programs arose a niche hobby. Initially located primarily in southern California and the New York City metro area – home to the major radio networks – fans began cropping up across the country. In succeeding decades, tens and perhaps even hundreds of thousands of radio broadcasts from the 1930s, 40s, and 50s were recovered and converted to mediums (mainly tape) in which they could be shared and promulgated among enthusiasts.

The earliest pioneers in the hobby began to connect with each other in the mid-60s, discovering

they were not alone in their passion for old radio drama. A handful of books published during this time legitimized the hobby and fostered the development of a loosely organized fan base. With the rise of this semi-organized group of hobbyists came a body of periodical literature – primarily amateur – that provided outlets for research, discussion, and homages to a deceased but fondly remembered entertainment medium.

This print collection focuses on the books and fanzines published between 1966 and 1972, the very first publications of an emerging hobby. This literature would form the identity of the old time radio hobby community as it exists today. The books of this era are of mixed quality and rarely referenced today as authoritative. They have little appeal to readers outside the hobby and not much more appeal to hobbyists because of their dated research. These texts are readily available at used book sites. In forming this collection somewhat artificial boundaries must be delineated. Radio books have been published since the discovery of radio technology in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. To qualify for consideration as old time radio hobbyist books they must meet three general criteria. First, they must focus primarily on broadcasting within the United States. Of course other countries had their own dramatic radio traditions, but American enthusiasts have been mainly interested in American productions. Next, the books must have been published after 1962, widely regarded as the end of the old time radio era, though radio drama had been in sharp decline for years before that date. After this point, radio texts talk of the days of radio drama in the past tense, and frequently with a certain amount of nostalgic wistfulness. Finally, the books need to devote a significant number of pages to commercial radio productions, not just radio technology or the radio industry as a whole.

While the books are easily obtained, the periodicals included in this collection are not. Due to their scarcity, there is no market for this literature. Rarely, if ever, do these fanzines appear for sale. Rather, the yellowed and crumbling heirlooms are passed within the hobby, from old-timers to younger enthusiasts. These private exchanges make it nearly impossible to gauge how many of these periodicals may exist. Those experienced in the old time radio hobby estimate perhaps no more than one or two

dozen copies of any given issue are still extant out of printings of often no more than two or three hundred. Setting boundaries with these publications is easier than with the books. The criteria are the same but by 1970 both the fan base and publishers (fans themselves) had self-identified the hobby's periodicals and they referenced and promoted each other regularly.

The material contained in this collection has so far led to the publication of three papers focused on the history of the old time radio hobby, the only such papers on the topic. This author is the first to attempt to chronicle and analyze the old time radio hobby and these publications provide indispensable first-hand accounts of that history. There is much more information to be gleaned from their pages.

This collection has two areas of strength and one glaring area of weakness. The book portion of this collection is complete, representing every old time radio hobby text published during the formative years 1966-1972. Similarly, the fanzine portion of the collection is considered generally complete, with at least representative issues of nearly all publications that are known to have been printed between 1970 and 1972. The collection's primary area of improvement is in the selection of representative periodicals predating 1970, of which there were a few. Old time radio hobby-oriented fanzines are known to have existed as early as 1967 or 1968. Some of the publications represented here began publication before 1970. Absolutely none of them have been acquired by this author; issues from this time have not even been seen by the author or rumored to exist here or there by the author's network of radio enthusiasts. Still, it is likely copies exist; the recent death of one of these original publishers may lead to the surfacing of some scarce material. This is the direction this collection must go, closing the three to four year gap prior to 1970. This author continues to hunt for these earliest magazines and individuals with decades of experience in the hobby also assist in the hunt.

The old time radio hobby is very small and the number of hard core enthusiasts, likely numbering only a few thousand, continues to decline as the generation with first-hand memories of radio dramas dwindles. Digital technology has enabled the rapid and effortless spread of these radio programs to an extent unimaginable to the first collectors. There is little chance that these recordings

will now be lost to the public as there was when they were confined to tape. However, there is a very real chance that an organized fandom, with the accompanying body of knowledge, memories, and lore, will disappear within a decade or two. Thus it is imperative that as much material as possible from fandom's earliest years be collected and preserved for future reference and study.

## Bibliography

### Books

Buxton, Frank and Bill Owen. *Radio's Golden Age: The Programs and Personalities*. New York: Easton Valley Press, 1966.

Buxton and Owen's original text is considered by many hobbyists to be the first book written for fans of old time radio. It is an encyclopedic-style work with information on hundreds of dramatic radio programs aired from the 1920s up to 1962. Its details are limited primarily to cast, director, and writer information. The occasional series will have a few sentences speaking a bit of the general storyline of the series and interesting facts. Subsequent books would greatly expand on the barebones information provided here, thus rendering this book basically obsolete for research purposes.

– *The Big Broadcast 1920 – 1950*. New York: Viking Press, 1972.

Buxton and Owen's follow-up work, published after the nostalgia craze (which encompassed old time radio) of the late 1960s and early 1970s was well under way, greatly expanded their initial effort and was the hobby's bible until the 1976 release of John Dunning's *Encyclopedia of Old Time Radio*. This volume contains considerably more background information and at least basic timeframes for many of the shows.

Harmon, Jim. *The Great Radio Heroes*. New York: Ace Books, 1967.

While *Radio's Golden Age* and *The Big Broadcast* were the most fact-filled volumes available to old time radio hobbyists until the mid-70s, Harmon's book on classic radio crime fighters is one of the most beloved of all time. What it lacks in straightforward data and breadth of coverage it makes up for in absolute passion for the lost world of dramatic radio. In-depth research is combined with golden memories in a rich narrative that vividly recalls a time of larger-than-life radio heroes such as the Shadow, the Lone Ranger, and Superman.

– *The Great Radio Comedians*. New York: Doubleday & Company, 1970.

Though not nearly as historic as his first volume, Harmon's sequel to *Radio Heroes* was still the first in-depth researched look back on radio's comedians, a radio genre that is perhaps more fondly remembered than any other. This particular edition is special because it still contains the original miniature vinyl record containing portions of a George Burns and Gracie Allen program.

Higby, Mary Jane. *Tune In Tomorrow or How I Found The Right to Happiness with Our Gal Sunday, Stella Dallas, John's Other Wife, and Other Sudsy Radio Serials*. New York: Cowles Education Corporation, 1966.

Higby's memoir of her years as a radio actress was perhaps the first such account looking at a radio career in retrospect. A very few memoirs were published during the age of dramatic radio so their

reflections are on a then-living and evolving industry. Higby's reflections are of a by-gone time, a perspective that would have been shared by contemporary hobbyists. It is one of the few first-hand accounts left to radio historians by a performer of any stature. Few radio stars wrote about their time in radio, choosing instead to write about the film and/or television work many of them were involved with outside radio.

Koch, Howard. *The Panic Broadcast*. New York: Avon Books, 1970.

Koch wrote perhaps the only book ever devoted to a single radio broadcast, albeit one still widely referenced today. The book provides a unique perspective of this historic broadcast by the writer of the play and offers commentary only one so intimately associated with the story could offer. The book includes the entire script which would have been a novel offering at a time when radio scripts were much harder for the average fan to access than they are now.

Lackmann, Ron. *Remember Radio*. New York: Putnam Publishing Group, 1970.

Mitchell, Curtis. *Cavalcade of Broadcasting*. New York: The Benjamin, Co., Inc., 1970.

Settel, Irving. *A Pictorial History of Radio*. New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1967.

### Periodicals

*Radio Dial*, Published by Radio Historical Society of America, Cloquet, MN

*Radio Dial* Spring (1970). Print.

*Radio Dial* Summer (1970). Print.

*Radio Dial* Autumn (1970). Print.

*Radio Dial* Spring (1971). Print.

*Radio Dial* Summer (1971). Print.

*Radio Dial* Autumn (1971). Print.

*Radio Dial* Winter (1971). Print.

These issues of *Radio Dial* have special significance for old time radio hobbyists. They represent the only surviving record of the Radio Historical Society of America (RHSA), believed to be the first dramatic radio fan club which was founded in 1959. This author has yet to meet anyone with first-hand experience with the RHSA though a few individuals have vague memories of its founder, Charles Ingersoll. It is believed that Mr. Ingersoll passed away in the mid- to late-1970s, so details of this pioneering group beyond what is found in these scarce issues may never be uncovered.

*Epilogue*, Published by George Jennings, Little Rock, AR

*Epilogue* 1 Oct.-Nov.-Dec. 1970. Print.

This issue contains the first instance of the term "old time radio" so far discovered in print. As older fanzines are uncovered perhaps the coining of the hobby's now-standard name will be moved further back in time.

*Epilogue* 3 Undated, approx. late spring, 1971. Print.

*Epilogue* 4 Undated, likely mid to late 1971. Print.

Issue 3 of this short-lived publication has a short but notable submission by one Marvin Bensman. In it he seeks input from other radio fans about a proposed old time radio archive. This germ of an idea would come to fruition at Memphis State (now the University of Memphis) in what is now the Bensman Radio Program Archive. Correspondence with Dr. Bensman (now retired) in recent years underscores the state of these old publications. When asked if he had any he'd like to pass on, Dr. Bensman informed the writer it was too late; he had trashed all he had in a move not long before.

*Stand By . . . On the Air*, Published by Bob Vito

*Standy By 5* Undated, evidence suggests late 1969/early 1970. Print.

This issue is believed to be the oldest issue in this collection and the only to predate 1970. Though there is no date the cover picture and an internal photograph are both dated 1969 and one article covers the 1969 New York State Fair at which some old time radio programs were played. Text includes references to other publications (most notably *Radio Dial*) and demonstrates a connected fandom by the end of the 60s.

*Stay Tuned*, Published by Sound Tapes of the Past, Inc., Webster, NY

*Stay Tuned* 1.4 (April 1971)

*Stay Tuned* 1.5 (May 1971)

*Stay Tuned* 1.6 (June 1971)

*Stay Tuned* 1.7 (July 1971)

*Stay Tuned* 1.8 (August 1971)

*Stay Tuned* 1.10 (October, 1971)

*Stay Tuned* 1.11 (November 1971)

*Stay Tuned* 1.12 (December 1971)

*Stay Tuned* 2.1 (January 1972)

*Stay Tuned* 2.2 (February 1972)

*Stay Tuned* 2.3 (no date)

*Hello Again*, Published by Jay Hickerson, North Haven, CT

*Hello Again* 3.7 (July 1972)

*Hello Again* 3.8 (August 1972)

*Hello Again* 3.9 (September 1972)

*Hello Again* 3.10 (October 1972)

*Hello Again* 3.11 (November 1972)

*Hello Again* 3.12 (December 1972)

Hickerson's publication is legendary within the oldtime radio hobby. Founded in 1970 it continues to be published on a bi-monthly schedule to this day. Produced and published by one man for forty years, the history of the hobby can, to some extent, be traced through the pages of this fanzine. These six issues represent the earliest entrants of this publication to this collection. Each issue contains the names of other hobbyists, events, publications, and most importantly to fans of the era, newly discovered radio broadcasts. Older issues are known to exist but have yet to be acquired and added to this collection.