

Pioneers of the Air: African-American Kansans on Early Radio

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The history of radio's development, both as an amateur hobby and then as a major commercial industry, largely excluded African-Americans, though their roles as performers, writers, and producers is gaining more attention. Similarly, the state of Kansas did not play a significant part in the development of radio. The biggest names of the early radio years, men such as Guglielmo Marconi, Lee de Forest, Edwin Armstrong, and David Sarnoff, did not come from Kansas nor was their work in radio ever located in Kansas. New York and Chicago would prove to be the centers of the radio industry during the 1920s and 1930s, with Los Angeles' supplanting Chicago's during the 1930s as coast-to-coast network connections were improved. The state does have a small place in the early annals of the medium with the founding of two stations by the U. S. Army Signal Corps at Forts Leavenworth (station FL) and Riley (station FZ) in 1908. Soon after, Wichita amateurs were experimenting with the new technology by 1910. Black Kansans can also claim a spot in early radio broadcasting history. A number of pioneering African-Americans who operated early radio technology and performed on network radio during commercial radio's Golden Age (approximately 1930 to 1960) called the Sunflower State home.¹

The earliest reference to black Kansas radio operators comes from an article in the prominent African-American newspaper *The Baltimore Afro-American*. In 1913 Sumner High School, Kansas City, KS, was described as the only secondary school in the country which had a program to train black students in radio (then referred to as “wireless”) technology. Sumner High School was founded just eight years before in 1905 as the Manual Training High School. Named after former abolitionist Senator Charles Sumner, the high school was considered one of the city's foremost black high schools for decades. J. M. Marquess was Sumner's principal from 1908 to 1916 and thus presided over the unveiling of this cutting-edge radio training course. Sumner was briefly closed in 1978 as a result of court-ordered desegregation but subsequently reopened as the integrated Sumner Academy of Arts and Science which continues to operate

today as a magnet school.²

Nine years later the Kansas Industrial and Educational Institute in Topeka was recognized for its early radio efforts. The earliest radio stations 1919 and 1920 though the first commercial radio station is widely recognized to be Pittsburgh's KDKA. There was a virtual explosion in the number of radio stations in the first years of the 1920s. Some, like KDKA, were founded by profit-minded enterprises while others were founded by churches, schools, and civic organizations. It's not clear if other African-American educational institutions were broadcasting by 1922 but the Kansas Industrial and Educational Institute was on the air that year due to the efforts of Professor M. W. Freeman. Unfortunately, the station's call letters are unknown as is further information about their broadcasts.³

A handful of other pioneering broadcasts by black Kansans have been uncovered. In August, 1922, the Reverend S. A. Williams of Salina's St. John Baptist Church was acclaimed as the first black minister in the state to preacher over the radio. Around the same time, some singers from the choirs of St. Paul and Calvary churches broadcast a short concert on WAAP, a short-lived station in Wichita's College Hill neighborhood. A Mrs. H. T. Geeder helped prepare the August, 1922, event. WAAP was sold in 1925 to John Brinkley, Kansas infamous "goat gland doctor." Several months later in May, 1923, Kansas City's Mrs. H. G. Dwiggins broadcast excerpts of a speech she'd given just days before in Washington, D.C. She was noted as being the first African-American to air on "Star Radio," a likely reference to WDAF owned by the Kansas City Star newspaper. That same year Leavenworth's Independent Church aired a 90-minute broadcast of classical music from their church on WDAF. Church leaders took a free-will offering after the program and "a neat little sum was realized." Another notable broadcast occurred in May, 1925, when members of Alpha Phi Alpha, a black fraternity at the University of Kansas, performed a program on the school's station KFKU. The station had first broadcast just six months before, on December 15, 1924, and only started regular broadcasts on January 25, 1925. So while it's not known if these were the first African-Americans to appear on the the

university's station, it is highly likely. In addition to performances by fraternity members, John Hodge, principal of Sumner High School gave a lecture called "Go to High School and College." With at least a dozen other stations airing on the same frequency as KFKU at the time it's difficult to discern how widely heard the fraternity was.⁴

The first black Kansan to entertain regularly over the air may have been George Hamilton, Jr., a native of Topeka. Hamilton was a 1922 graduate of the University of Kansas' law program and reported to be the first university debate team's first African-American member. After finishing at KU Hamilton worked for the university's extension department. His travels took him to Minnesota's Twin Cities where he and his wife settled; Hamilton eventually found his way on to radio. In 1925 was broadcasting a children's program every day at 5:30 over WCCO, a St. Paul station. The name of the show has not been preserved but its content included a variety of entertainment such as jokes, riddles, songs, and stories, fare typical of the era's broadcasts.⁵

Two musical performers with Kansas roots, Orlando Roberson and Eva Jessye, emerged on radio in 1927. The lesser known of the pair, Orlando Roberson, was a graduate of the University of Kansas reported writer Ralph Matthews in a 1932 issue of *The Baltimore Afro-American*. It's possible Roberson was born in Kansas; Matthews cites Kansas City as his birthplace but the Grove Music online database claims Roberson was from Tulsa, OK. Regardless, Matthews states that Roberson studied medicine at KU but didn't finish his studies, instead ending up in show business. Earl Morris of *The Pittsburgh Courier* confirmed this KU connection in a 1937 column.⁶

Roberson debuted on an unknown Kansas City station in 1927, just one year after the formation of NBC. During this time many African-American jazz musicians were beginning to find radio opportunities. Roberson eventually made his way to Chicago where he sang with Sammy Stewart's Orchestra. His most notable radio work came as a singer with Claude Hopkins' during the 1930s. The group was a regular on New York-area radio by 1932 and in 1934 was still

being featured on the program *Harlem Serenade* alongside Fats Waller on station WABC.⁷

Eva Jessye, perhaps Kansas' most famous African-American radio figure, was born in Coffeyville, KS, in 1895 and is best known as a leader of various spiritual-singing choirs. Her main radio years were from 1927 to 1934, a transitional period during which the radio broadcasting industry transitioned from a primitive, anything-goes entertainment medium in the 1920s to a sophisticated, network driven business which reaped massive profits during a time of general economic collapse in the 1930s.

Jessye's earliest known radio appearance came with the Dixie Jubilee Singers on October 29, 1925, over a sixteen-station hook-up originating from New York's WEAF. They performed "John Saw the Holy Number," "Stand Steady, Brethren," "Negro Love Song," "All Over the World," and "Down Yonder in Virginia." While many entertainers performed for free at this time, the Dixie Jubilee Singers received \$160 for this concert. They sang again on WEAF two days later, on October 31, and then on New York's WJZ on November 1. They were reported to be under contract to WEAF at the time indicating Jessye's group were regularly on the air.⁸

The Dixie Jubilee Singers sang "spirituals, jubilees and plantation melodies" on March 13, 1927, still over WEAF which had by this time become a part of the fledgling National Broadcasting Company (NBC) network. The evening's program included "Time to Stop Idlin'," "Lucy Anna," "Santa Anna," "Watchman, How Long?," "Kru Evening Song," "Spirit O' the Lord Done Fell on Me," and "I Stand and Fold My Arms." One month later, on April 10, the Singers were guests on Major Bowes' *Capitol Family* broadcast. The choir is known to have made further broadcasts during 1927 and 1928.⁹

In 1929 the choir received its own series, a weekly program called *Aunt Mandy's Children* on New York station WOR. In a change from prior radio work Jessye incorporated dramatic sketches into the broadcasts. One of these productions included a story about Oklahomans of African-American and Native-American ancestry. Other sketches were set in Virginia and Texas. According to Jessye the stories were intended to "raise the status of the

Negro in the minds of those who listen in from all parts of the world.” Four Dusty Travelers, a quartet directed by Jessye, received a weekly time slot on WOR for several weeks in 1930 and her entire choir continued on *Aunt Mandy's Children* concurrently.¹⁰

The onset of the Great Depression did not hurt Jessye's radio opportunities. Though *Aunt Mandy's Children* left the air in 1930, the choir continued to make multiple appearances in 1931 and 1932 on NBC. These broadcasts include a December 29, 1931, concert and a special Lincoln Day program on February 12, 1932. Jessye's choir sang over several Sundays during the fall of 1932 in addition to holiday broadcasts on Thanksgiving Day and Christmas Day. The Christmas feature included a nativity dramatization which starred Frank Wilson, one of the busiest African-American stage and radio actors of the era.¹¹

For a change of pace Jessye took an acting role in April, 1933, on a comedy-drama called *The Townsend Murder Mystery* which aired on NBC. This Octavus Roy Cohen-penned series also featured African-American actors Frank Wilson, Ernest Whitman, and Tim Moore. Cast as the character Magnesia, Jessye did not become a regular on the program (which only aired a few months), nor did she become involved in other dramatic radio programming.¹²

During the last months of 1933 and into 1934 Eva Jessye and her choir made most of the rest of their known radio broadcasts. These appearances included *A Tribute to Negro Soldiers*, July 4, 1933, *The Capitol Theatre Family*, November 5, 1933, and a weekly Sunday afternoon program of spirituals and quiet philosophy, all on NBC. During 1934 Jessye's singers were guests on the Hudson Motor Company's *Terraplane Travelcade* in May and again on *The Capital Theatre Family* with Etta Moten and Bob Hope later in the year. A notable performance came on July 8 when the choir broadcast to Russia alongside radio singers Eva Taylor and the Southernaires.¹³

Two broadcasts from later years are known, one from 1937 and another from 1943. On August 31, 1937, Jessye's choir were guests on Ben Bernie's show which was sponsored by the American Can Company. In the 1940s, when black programming was increasing, the choir

provided music for the National Urban League's March 20, 1943 episode of *Heroines in Bronze*, a series on WABC.¹⁴

Though Jessye's prime radio years during the medium's Golden Age were over by World War II, she continued to lead the Eva Jessye Choir for years to come and later made some film appearances. Jessye continued to be engaged in musical endeavors during her later years and in the 1970s and early 1980s she was associated with the University of Michigan and Pittsburgh State University in Kansas. She died in 1992.

The most famous of Kansas' Golden Age radio actors might Ruby Dandridge, the mother of Vivian and Dorothy Dandridge, the latter of whom made a considerable name for herself in film. Her birthplace varies depending on the source but the most authoritative, Dandridge historian Donald Bogle, provides convincing evidence that she was born in Wichita, KS, on March 1, 1899. Sometime around her twentieth birthday Dandridge moved to Cleveland, OH, to escape the limitations she felt in central Kansas. In Cleveland she married Cyril Dandridge and gave birth to both daughters. The marriage would not last, nor would her satisfaction with Cleveland. With the onset of the Great Depression Dandridge, her friend Geneva Williams, and Dorothy and Vivian headed west and settled in Los Angeles where African-Americans were finding parts in motion pictures.¹⁵

Dandridge claimed in the early 1950s to have started on radio with the WPA during the 1930s but supporting evidence for this assertion has not yet been discovered. She did do considerable stage work in the Los Angeles area during the 1930s and it's possible some of the productions were broadcast. The first and most popular radio series on which she was hired was *The Amos 'n' Andy Show*, a comedy which debuted in 1928 and featured two white men – Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll – as two African-American men in Harlem. During the 1940s the radio program included numerous black performers in addition to Dandridge, including Ernest Whitman, Hattie McDaniel, and Amanda Randolph.¹⁶

Black radio actresses frequently portrayed domestic servants on network radio and

Dandridge found steady employment in such roles. She can be credited with playing at least four different aural maids and cooks. The first was that of Geranium, an overweight maid on *The Judy Canova Show*. The series starred Judy Canova, a white actress who had created a female hillbilly persona, and entertained listeners for ten years from 1943 to 1953. Geranium was Dandridge's first long-term radio role and the next year she accepted the part of Mammy Brown, a similar part on *The Gallant Heart*, an NBC soap opera which ran during 1944. While providing steady income, such demeaning characters provided ammunition for black critics who were increasingly irritated by the servile roles to which so many black radio artists seemed relegated. In 1946 *Afro-American* writer Richard Dier slighted the part of Geranium as an "Uncle Tom maid." If Dandridge had reservations about such roles it didn't affect her career choices as she began starring as Oriole, a maid on *The Beulah Show*. Beulah, portrayed over the years by white actors Marlin Hurt and Bob Corley and then black actresses Hattie McDaniel, Lillian Randolph, and Amanda Randolph, was a maid herself. Dandridge played Oriole the entire run of the series, from 1947 until 1954. Yet another similar part came her way in 1949 on *The Gene Autry Melody Ranch*. This role was Raindrop, a "Rochester-meets Aunt Jemima" character according to Autry historian Holly George-Warren.¹⁷

Dandridge never achieved her own program, a rare feat for any African-American during this era, but it wasn't for lack of talent. The producers of *Lux Radio Theater*, one of the most prestigious radio programs of the era which adapted popular Hollywood films for the air between 1934 and 1955, cast her on eight different episodes between 1941 and 1945. More often, however, she had to settle for guest appearances on the programs of several white celebrities, including *The Hoagy Carmichael Show*, Bing Crosby's *Philco Radio Time*, and *The Jimmy Durante Show*.¹⁸

Financial security is not a luxury afforded to many actors and despite Dandridge's years of steady network employment, she couldn't retire when performing opportunities dried up in the early 1950s. Beginning in 1954 she went to work as an agent for Dorothy Foster Real Estate in

Los Angeles. This second career lasted until at least 1960. Tragedy struck in 1965 when her famous daughter Dorothy died unexpectedly. Ruby herself passed away in 1987, her ten-year network radio career all but forgotten.

Like his contemporary Ruby Dandridge, Roy Glenn was both a Kansas native and prolific actor on network radio during the 1940s and 1950s. Glenn was born June 3, 1914 in Pittsburgh, KS, but his family moved to Los Angeles when he was six. He was cast in various stage performances during the 1930s and in later years claimed that he made his first radio appearances during this time as well, starring on the bi-racial *The Gilmore Gasoline Show* in 1936. Records indicate this was his only work on the medium until 1946 when he earned a part on *The Amos 'n' Andy Show*. He was one of several black radio actors that was cast on this show and, later, *Beulah*. There is no evidence that Glenn ever had long-running roles as did Ruby Dandridge. However, as a journeyman actor he is credited with parts on some of old time radio's most popular and fondly remembered series.¹⁹

Glenn's radio-ography is headlined by guest appearances on *The Jack Benny Show*, a perennially top-rated radio comedy program during the 1940s and early 1950s. He earned spots on eight broadcasts of *Suspense*, a weekly anthology series which ran from 1942 until 1962 and attracted Hollywood headliners for the lead parts. No less impressive are seven appearances on *Yours Truly, Johnny Dollar*, a private-eye program which aired between 1949 and 1962. He joined Cary Grant on a broadcast of the marquee series *Lux Radio Theatre*. Mystery shows were a good fit for Glenn's voice talents and, in addition to *Johnny Dollar*, he was cast at times in *Richard Diamond, Private Detective* (1949 - 1953), which featured Dick Powell in the title role, and in *The Adventures of Ellery Queen* (1947 - 1948). Glenn's resume could also boast of appearances on *Pete Kelly's Blues*, featuring Jack Webb of *Dragnet* fame (1951), *Crime Classics* (1953 - 1954), and *Rocky Jordan* (1945 - 1947), co-written, incidentally, by Gomer Cool who broke into radio on Kansas City's KMBC. During the heyday of Glenn's radio work from the mid 1940s to the mid 1950s his talent landed him on individual episodes of the police show

Broadway is My Beat (1949 - 1954), *Tales of the Texas Rangers*, a western, (1950 – 1952), the experimental *CBS Radio Workshop* (1956 - 1957), *Romance* (1943 - 1957), and *Hallmark Hall of Fame* (1948 - 1953).²⁰

With the demise of dramatic radio in the early 1960s Glenn transitioned to television and continued with film roles, his most prominent parts coming in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* and *A Raisin in the Sun*. He died prematurely of a heart attack in 1971 at the age of 56.

Kansas may not be able to claim the radio heritage of states such as New York or California, but the early accomplishments of African-American Kansans in the field are an area in which the state may be proud. From the efforts of Sumner High School staff to get students engaged in the emerging wireless technology to George Hamilton's daily broadcasts in 1925 to the dramatic roles of Roy Glenn in the mid-1950s, black Kansans had a steady presence on the nation's airwaves.

¹ Lynn R. Osborn, *Commercial Radio in Kansas, 1908 – 1945* (Radio-Television Research, University of Kansas, 1963), 6 - 7.

² “Work of Sumner High School,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, March 29, 1913, p. 7, accessed online through ProQuest Historical Newspapers Baltimore Afro-American (1893 – 1988).

William W. Boone, March, 1986. “The History and Culture of Wyandotte County: A History of Black Public Education in Kansas City, KS,” 25 – 30, unpublished.

³ Rae Morgan Harris, “Over and About the City,” *Topeka Plaindealer*, June 2, 1922, p. 3, accessed online through Readex Online Database: African American Newspapers, 1827 – 1998. Two of the best overviews of early commercial radio are by Erik Barnouw and Tom Lewis. Erik Barnouw, *A Tower in Babel: A History of Broadcasting in the United States to 1933* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1966), 61 – 124. Tom Lewis, *Empire of the Air: The Men Who Made Radio* (NY: Edward Burlingame Books, 1991), 160 – 179.

- ⁴ Winifred Travis, "Church Notes," *Wichita Negro Star*, August 25, 1922, p. 2, accessed online through Readex Database: African American Newspapers, 1827 – 1998. "Are You Aware?" *Wichita Negro Star*, September 1, 1922, p. 1. "Broadcasted Over Radio," *Kansas City Advocate*, May 11, 1923, p. 1, accessed online through Readex Database: African American Newspapers, 1827 – 1998. Ernest F. Jones, "Among the Churches," *Wichita Negro Star*, June 29, 1923, p. 3. "Kansas Vocational School Radio Concert," *Topeka Plaindealer*, May 15, 1925, p. 3.
- ⁵ "Topeka Boy Broadcasts Daily Children's Hour Over WCCO," *Topeka Plaindealer*, July 24, 1925, p. 1.
- ⁶ Ralph Matthews, "Looking at the Stars," *Baltimore Afro-American*, May 21, 1932, p. 18. Earl J. Morris, "Orlando Roberson Gives Praise to His Dashing Band Maestro," *Pittsburgh Courier*, June 19, 1937 p. 20, accessed online through ProQuest Historical Newspapers Pittsburgh Courier (1911 – 2002). "Robeson, Orlando [Roberson, Orlando Hurbert]" Grove Music Online accessed via Oxford Music Online.
- ⁷ Charles I. Bowen, "On the Air," *Baltimore Afro-American*, May 5, 1934 p. 9. "Claude and Don On Air," *Pittsburgh Courier*, December 31, 1932 p. 6.
- ⁸ "Dixie Singers are Big Radio Favorites," *Baltimore Afro-American*, November 7, 1925, p. 4.
- ⁹ "Radio Notes," *Baltimore Afro-American*, March 19, 1927, p. 9. "Radio Notes," *Baltimore Afro-American*, April 16, 1927, p. 9.
- ¹⁰ "Dixie Jubilee Singers on Station WOR," *Baltimore Afro-American*, August 10, 1929, p. 13. "Eva Jessye Aggregations Still in Forefront," *Baltimore Afro-American*, January 25, 1930 p. 8. Richard L. Baltimore, "Radio News," *New York Amsterdam News*, September 26, 1928, p. 8, accessed online through ProQuest Historical Newspapers New York Amsterdam News (1922 – 1993).
- ¹¹ Richard L. Baltimore, "Radio News and Programs," *New York Amsterdam News*, February 3, 1932, p. 9. Richard L. Baltimore, "Radio News and Programs," *New York Amsterdam News*,

February 10, 1932, p. 9. "To Broadcast Nativity," *New York Amsterdam News*, December 21, 1932, p. 7. Roi Ottley, "Are You Listenin?," *New York Amsterdam News*, May 17, 1933, p. 16. Bill Chase, "All Ears," *New York Amsterdam News*, March 13, 1943, p. 8. "Urban League Job Campaign Will be Aired," *New York Amsterdam News*, March 20, 1943, p. 11. Raoul Abdul, "Music: Miss Eva Jessye Honored," *New York Amsterdam News*, November 13, 1976, p. D16. Aileen E. Eckstein, "Wave Lengths," *Pittsburgh Courier*, December 26, 1931, p. 1. Floyd J. Calvin, "Calvin's Digest," *Pittsburgh Courier*, February 27, 1932 p. 2. Aileen Eckstein, "Wave Lengths," *Pittsburgh Courier*, November 5, 1932, p. 7. Billy Jones, "Stars That Shine," *Pittsburgh Courier*, November 26, 1932, p. 16.

¹² "Eva Jessye in Radio Play," *Baltimore Afro-American*, April 22, 1933, p. 10. Charles I. Bowen, "On the Air," *Baltimore Afro-American*, April 29, 1933, p. 10. Eva Jessye, "Radio Rambles," *Baltimore Afro-American*, July 15, 1933, p. 10. Ottley, p. 16.

¹³ Eva Jessye, "Radio Revue," *Baltimore Afro-American*, September 16, 1933, p. 19. Eva Jessye, "Radio Revue," *Baltimore Afro-American*, November 4, 1933, p. 19. Julia Buckner, "Radio Revue," *Baltimore Afro-American*, May 26, 1934, p. 8. Thomas Anderson, "Radio Review," *Baltimore Afro-American*, June 30, 1934, p. 8. J. B. Brown, "Radio Rambles," *Baltimore Afro-American*, August 18, 1934, p. 8.

¹⁴ Sally Bell, "On the Air," *Baltimore Afro-American*, September 4, 1937, p. 11. "Loyalty of Colored America Told on Air Program," *Baltimore Afro-American*, March 27, 1943, p. 10. Chase, p. 8, "Urban League," p. 11.

¹⁵ Donald Bogle, Dorothy Dandridge (NY: Amistad, 1997), 2 - 18. Dandridge gave various accounts of her early years, muddying the historical record.

¹⁶ Estelle Edmerson, "A Descriptive Study of the American Negro in United States Professional Radio, 1922 - 1953" (Masters thesis, University of California at Los Angeles, 1954), 27 - 28. Elizabeth McLeod, *The Original Amos 'n' Andy: Freeman Gosden, Charles Correll and the*

1928–1943 *Radio Serial* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2005). See McLeod's book for a review of the various African-American performers who appeared on the show over the years.

¹⁷ Holly George-Warren, *Public Cowboy No. 1: The Life and Times of Gene Autry* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2007), 246. Jim Cox, *The Great Radio Sitcoms* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2007), 71 – 85. John Dunning, *Encyclopedia of Old Time Radio* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1998), 83, 276, 321, 377. Richard Dier, “In the Big City,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, October 19, 1946, p. 19.

¹⁸ Connie Billups and Arthur Pierce, *Lux Presents Hollywood: A Show-by-Show History of the Lux Radio Theatre and the Lux Video Theatre, 1934 – 1957* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 1995), 267, 286, 295, 318, 321, 326, 331, 340.

¹⁹ Edmerson, “A Descriptive Study,” 34 – 35. Bill Lane, “Funeral Services Held For Actor Roy Glenn,” *The Los Angeles Sentinel*, March 18, 1971, p. 1, ProQuest Historical Newspapers Los Angeles Sentinel (1934 – 2005).

²⁰ This overview of Glenn's most prominent radio work was compiled from a variety of sources. John C. Abbott, *Yours Truly, Johnny Dollar, Volumes 1 – 3* (Duncan, OK: Bear Manor Media, 2010), 300, 315, 557 – 561, 566 – 568, 941 – 942. Martin Grams, Jr., *The History of the Cavalcade of America* (self-published, 1998), pages unnumbered. Martin Grams, Jr., *Suspense: Twenty Years of Thrills and Chills* (self-published, 1997) pages unnumbered. Martin Grams, Jr., *Radio Drama: A Comprehensive Chronicle of American Network Programs, 1932 – 1962* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2000), 80, 116, 423, 469, 472, 475, 477, 484, 486. Billups & Pierce, *Lux Radio Theater*, 496, 600. Cox, *Radio Sitcoms*, 33. Cox, *Crime Fighters*, 86, 247. <http://www.radiogoldindex>.

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