

## Destination: Radio, A Look at Some of Chicago's African-American Radio Pioneers Ryan Ellett

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Few cities have a history as intertwined with early radio as Chicago. Such legendary stations as WMAQ, WLS, and WGN all date to the early 1920s and the city's stations were second only to those of New York in producing original broadcast dramas during the 1930s. Less well known is the contribution that African Americans made to the city's broadcasting scene as writers, producers, actors and newsmen. In addition to the countless musicians who filled Chicago's airwaves with legendary jazz tunes nearly from the beginning of the era of commercial radio, the city could boast of a number of dramatic, variety, news, and talent programs through the 1930s and 1940s aimed at a black audience.

Black Chicagoans, in fact, were on the air even before commercial radio emerged after 1920, communicating with Morse code over the airwaves as professional and amateur operators. History may never reveal the very first Chicago-area African American wireless (as radio was referred to then) user, but Harry Daily must be among the earliest. Daily honed his radio skills while serving in the navy and then in 1914, after multiple rejections for government radio jobs due to his race, he applied successfully for a wireless job with the Red Star Line. Daily was subsequently denied the position when he showed up for work and the Atlantic liner discovered he was black, a fact which had not been clarified on the job application.

Another early operator who broadcast as an amateur and not a professional like Daily was 17-year-old Robert Crawford. While a student at Wendell Phillips High School in Chicago he built a fully functioning wireless station which included a homemade transmitter, receiver, and telegraph key. In 1916 he was identified as the only black member of the local Wireless Club.

Chicago's first black broadcaster of the post-1920 commercial era was Jack Cooper, widely regarded as the dean of African American radio professionals. Considered the first African American to make a career in the radio industry, Cooper spent most of his years on the airwaves creating and promoting radio content aimed at black listeners for their enjoyment and edification. After a short job with Washington, D.C.'s WCAE Cooper returned to Chicago where he debuted *The All-Negro Hour* over WGBS on November 3, 1929. Drawing on his years in vaudeville, Cooper created one of the first black-oriented entertainment programs for the medium. Audiences approved and the series ran weekly until 1935.

Building on the success of *The All-Negro Hour*, Cooper began creating additional shows by 1933. His formula was so successful that by 1935 Cooper was responsible for the content of 1/6<sup>th</sup> of WGBS' broadcasting time. Nevertheless, Cooper biographer Mark Newman emphasizes that the would-be radio mogul struggled for years to get programmed on the station's prime time hours. He was consistently relegated to late night and weekend slots. Among his numerous creations in addition to *The All-Negro Hour* during the early to mid-1930s were *The Colored Children's Hour*, *The Defender Newsreel*, *Midnite Accomodation*, *Timely Tunes*, *Midnite Ramble*, and *Nite in Harlem*.

Cooper managed to produce so much programming by using prerecorded music instead of live performers, a gimmick he didn't originate but one that he eventually used to his immense benefit. As early as 1931 he came to the realization that playing so-called race records (which were exempt from the ASCAP ban on playing such recordings) was considerably cheaper than paying live talent. The format was so successful that even his flagship show, *The All-Negro Hour*, cut most of its live singing, skits, and serials (only "Horseradish and Fertilizer" lived on).

Despite Jack Cooper's apparent success as measured by airtime, financial security was elusive as long as he was blocked out of the best broadcasting times. In 1938, fourteen years after his first radio work and celebrating his 50<sup>th</sup> birthday, Cooper finally caught a break and had the opportunity to buy mid-afternoon time on WSBC and WHFC. He immediately programmed some new disc jockey shows called *Rug Cutter's Special*, *Gloom Chasers*, and *Jump, Jive, and Jam*.

In June, 1947 he debuted *Wardrobe Derby* on WAAF sponsored by National Credit Clothiers. Participants competed for items of clothing including a complete wardrobe for the grand prize winner. He had two other shows at the time including *Jivin' With Jack*, a daily record program. That year, according to Newman, represented the highpoint of Cooper's radio enterprise whereupon he was weekly selling 40 hours of air time across four stations. Between 1946 and 1952 he produced *Listen Chicago* over WAAF, a public affairs program focused on topics of interest to black listeners. Other series created by Cooper over the years included *Bible Time*, *Know Your Bible*, *Song of Zion*, *Songs By Request*, *Tomp Time*, *Evening Heat Wave*, and *Tips and Tunes with Trudy*. *Your Legal Rights* offered legal advice to listeners. Another show, *Missing Persons*, claimed to have helped reunite thousands of black families separated during the migrations of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. It took two decades but his tireless work paid off and in the final years of his career Cooper enjoyed a new level of financial prosperity, pulling in a reported \$200,000 per year.

Though not known to have appeared on any of Jack Cooper's programs, James Mitchell is recognized as one of the very few black child actors during this era. While a student at Chicago's Dunbar Junior High School he used his radio paycheck to support his family during the mid-1930s. Mitchell made his broadcast debut on *Uncle Quin's Day Dreamers* in January, 1933, as the character Wishbone. A group of children (all white except Mitchell) would make a wish on

Wishbone's magic wishbone and were then whisked anywhere they wanted to go. The program was aimed at children and featured historical stories while being aired from Chicago's WGN.

The most famous of Chicago's black radio performers is unquestionably Richard Durham who was born in Raymond, MS, on September 6, 1917 but spent most of his childhood in Chicago. One source claims he studied first at Wilberforce and Central YMCA College before attending Northwestern University in suburban Chicago where he participated in the first NBC-Northwestern University summer radio institute in 1942. Some of Durham's earliest writing work came as a dramatist with the WPA's Writers Project and as national editor for the black newspaper *The Chicago Defender*.

Durham's first known radio work was a weekly series entitled *Democracy – USA*, aired on Chicago's WBBM beginning May 4, 1946. It was a fifteen-minute series of Sunday morning broadcasts that dramatized the life of prominent African Americans. Sixteen months later in September, 1947 while *Democracy – USA* was still on the air, Durham's second effort, *Here Comes Tomorrow*, premiered on WJJD. Considered the first black soap opera, this story followed the Redmond family and their son, Milton, who returned home with amnesia after fighting in Italy during World War II. Both *Democracy – USA* and *Here Comes Tomorrow* went off the air in the spring of 1948.

*Destination Freedom*, Richard Durham's most enduring radio legacy, debuted June 27, 1948 over WMAQ. The basic premise of *Destination Freedom*, dramatizing the lives of individuals of African descent and prominent events in black history, was an extension of his original work *Democracy – USA*. *Destination Freedom* ran for two years, an impressive run for a program that never attracted a commercial sponsor, was not picked up by a network, and focused on the interests of African Americans. In 1956, six years after the program left the air, Durham filed suit against NBC for \$250,000 claiming the network had continued to air episodes in the years since he had left despite his claims to all copyrights concerning the show.

The extent of Durham's post-WMAQ writing is less clear. In a 1983 interview with John Dunning, Durham recalled leaving *Destination Freedom* to work on the Ina Phillips show *What's New?* starring Don Amecki. According to Durham, the pay differential between the sustained *Destination Freedom* and a sponsored Phillips work was too much to pass up. He also commented in the same interview that frequently his name was not associated with scripts in order to avoid causing problems with Southern sponsors. One other known Durham script was the August 31, 1957, episode of *CBS Radio Workshop* which featured a story concerning Denmark Vesey, a slave who led an uprising in 1821. Vesey had been the subject of *Destination Freedom* on its July 18, 1948, broadcast. The extent of Durham's radio writing may never be fully realized.

During the 1950s Durham worked for the Packinghouse Workers' Union doing publicity and in 1958 served as the press agent for GOP Congressional candidate Dr. T. R. Howard. He followed these jobs with an editorship at *Muhammad Speaks* through most of the 1960s. In 1969, while he continued to work for *Muhammad Speaks*, Durham returned to writing for the electronic media. He was hired to script *Bird of the Iron Feather* (originally called *More From My Life*), an African American soap opera set in the Chicago ghetto that was broadcast over WTTW, Chicago's public television station, beginning in January, 1970. Bill Quinn, assistant writer at *Playboy*, worked as an associate writer on the project. The effort lasted just seven weeks before going off the air due to a premature and unexplained disappearance of funds. In the late 1970s Durham worked with Mohammad Ali on the boxer's autobiography which was released in 1977. Richard Durham passed away April 27, 1984, and was inducted into the National Radio Hall of Fame in August, 2007.

About the time that Richard Durham was hitting his stride with *Destination Freedom*, Vernon Jarrett and Oscar Brown, Jr., were teaming up on *Negro Newsfront*, a daily fifteen -minute radio news program broadcast over Chicago's WJJD. Though historical records indicate the news show aired from 1948 to 1951, in a 1996 interview Brown recalled airing the newscasts from 1947 to 1952. Thus, it's possible Jarrett was not involved with *Negro Newsfront* during its entire run on radio. A native of Tennessee, Jarrett made his career as a journalist in Chicago, first with *The Chicago Defender* beginning in 1946 then later with *The Chicago Tribune* and *The Chicago Sun-Times*. He provided news for Chicago-area television as well. Jarrett died May 24, 2004. The first known black news program in Chicago, *Negro Newsfront* was also one of the first African American radio newscasts in the country. Oscar Brown, Jr., claimed to have started the show in 1947 over WJJD, and subsequently took it to WVON then WHFC.

One final program of interest was created to promote local black talent. *The Chicago Defender* and station WBBM teamed up to sponsor *Star Quest*, a contest for amateur performers, a concept which transitioned easily to television and remains popular to this day. *Star Quest* (referred to as *Star-Questers* on at least one occasion) seems to have run just a few weeks from March to May of 1947 on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Finalists were chosen from each broadcast who then competed for the grand prize, a thirteen-week contract on WBBM which paid \$100 a week. Over 450 men and women auditioned for *Star Quest* and some of the finalists included Harriet Clemons, Delores Baker, James Hampton, Gladys Beaman and Ira Burton but the grand prize winner is unknown.

By the late 1940s the black drama and variety programs of Cooper and Durham were waning and disc jockeys were taking their place. Some of Chicago's first record spinners – beyond Jack Cooper himself – included Al Benson and Eddie Honesty both of whom had long radio careers.

Never representing more than a tiny fraction of the programming going out on Chicago's airwaves, these pioneering African Americans, from Jack Cooper to Richard Durham to Oscar Brown, Jr., carved out a space where the

city's black citizens could listen to music, news, and serious drama created specifically about and for them.

The material in this article was adapted from entries in Ryan Ellett's book *Encyclopedia of Black Radio in the United States, 1921-1955*, published by McFarland Press in October, 2011 and available on their website [www.mcfarlandpub.com](http://www.mcfarlandpub.com).