

John Henry: Uncovering a Glimpse of Early Black Programming on Network Radio
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John Henry, also called *John Henry*, *Black River Giant*, was neither the first African-American radio series (that honor belonging to *The Floyd Calvin Hour*, later *The Pittsburgh Courier Hour*) nor the first black radio series on network radio (that honor belonging to Carlton Moss' *Careless Love* which ran from 1930 to 1932). It can lay legitimate claim, however, to being the first series with an all-black, or at least predominantly black, performing cast which gained a considerable amount of public attention.

The figure of John Henry emerged during the 19th century and various theories have been put forth to identify the original John Henry. His legendary race against a steam drill in digging a railroad tunnel has been placed in Alabama, Virginia, and West Virginia. It's possible he was a former slave and later a prisoner working on the rail-building project. Regardless of the speculation, both Leeds, AL, and Talcott, WV, claim John Henry as their own in civic promotions.

The roots of the *John Henry* radio program can be traced to Roark Bradford's novel of the same name published in 1931. Twenty-five woodcut illustrations by J. J. Lankes accompanied the original text. This work was not the first by Bradford to find its way to radio; an earlier story of his, "Ol' Man and his Chillun," was adapted by Marc Connelly for the stage in 1930 as *The Green Pastures*. This adaptation was in turn broadcast numerous times on radio, perhaps most famously on *Cavalcade of America* but also on *The Ford Theatre*, and *The Theatre Guild on the Air*. Many of the era's African-American radio artists made appearances on these productions.

The rights to *John Henry* were acquired by Robert Wachsman who was involved primarily with stage productions during these years. His credits include work with George Gershwin, Irving Berlin, and Jerome Kern, and Oscar Hammerstein. Evidence suggests Wachsman obtained the rights soon after the book was published in 1931 because it was reported at the time that he quickly convinced Juano Hernandez about the story's possibilities and the pair subsequently spent ten months hammering out a

script and pitching it to the major networks. Black programs were a difficult sell at this time and most of them never obtained a sponsor, sometimes even after years of broadcasting. As will be seen later, *John Henry* was not a standard dramatic program, even compared to its peers in the African-American genre, thus making it a difficult concept to sell.

CBS finally decided to take a chance on the project and okayed the production of an audition episode. Fortunately, the script of this audition has survived, giving us insight to the early style of *John Henry*. Dated August 1, 1932, the script, unfortunately, does not provide any information concerning cast or crew. Maruice Ellis, a black actor who worked steadily on network radio for two decades between 1933 and the early 1950s, is surmised to have been in this audition episode as his name is handwritten across a couple pages. Separate published accounts of the series from the era confirm that he did work on the show.

The audition opens with a chorus singing “Mississippi,” a tune written by Juano Hernandez according to reviews of the show. The announcer then intoned:

Ladies and gentlemen. We bring you the first in a series of programs called “John Henry” from Roark Bradford's book of that name.

In all the glorious south, never was there a mightier man than the legendary John Henry. Through the generations that have their root in the early days of slavery, John Henry moves with his enormous strides, his flaying arms, his powerful body, his slow but sure mentality overcoming every obstacle; a veritable god among the patient black folk, whose world is the muddy shores of the Mississippi.

The story begins with an elderly black man, Uncle Sim, and a black boy, Dink, sitting on a cabin porch on a cotton plantation, a white field of cotton stretching as far as the eye can see. The sounds of riverboat workers can be heard on the gently blowing breeze. Written in heavy dialect, Sim is recounting the birth of the legendary John Henry.

Uncle Sim: Lissen hyar, Dink, when I tells a story hits de truf.

Boy: But, gran'pappy dey ain't no nachal man weighs fo'ty fo pounds when he bawn, is dey?

Sim: Der wuz jes' dat one what weighed fo'ty fo pounds, and his name was John Henry...

The action then jumps to Henry's dramatic birth whereupon he demands to know "Who dat done wake me up?" and that his mother send out all the onlookers. He immediately insults "dat big ugly man" standing by the bed, a man who, it turns out, is his father. Henry insists they bring him some "breeches," "ovah-alls," and one of his dad's flannel shirts. While his mother and Aunt Effie praise the Lord for a healthy forty-four pound baby with shoulders like a riverhand Henry rejects their "preachin'," declaring he's got no use for it.

In hunger John Henry lets out a loud howl with such force that the bed slats break. Brushing aside his mother's offer of milk, Henry calls for "ham bones . . . cabbage . . . turnip greens . . . cawn bread . . . hog jowls . . . [and] red hot biscuits." Then, before anyone has a chance to bring him food, John Henry is out the door to go to work on the railroad line. With that Uncle Sim and Dink fade back in and the story comes to a close. The announcer closes the quarter-hour broadcast trumpeting mighty

John Henry:

There's John Henry a tower of strength, standing high above his fellow men, his voice booming out like the roll of a thousand drums . . . and all the women look at him and sigh.

Music is an integral part of the show. As mentioned above, the audition opens with a hum than transitions into Hernandez's "Mississippi." Between the announcer and the first scene the singers return again with a gentle hum and then as Sim's voice fades to that of the action of John Henry's birth the ensemble is back with "Mighty Day Stomp" and "Ain't Dis a Mighty Day." At one point Hernandez himself melds his lines with that of the ensemble and later breaks into chant when he declares himself a "rivah man." The ensemble again swings into action as John Henry departs for the rail with the song "He's goin' Down into the Valley." Soft singing and humming forms the background for two scenes within the script and they bring the episode

to a close, giving way to the CBS sign-off.

John Henry debuted on CBS Sunday, January 15, 1933, at 8:00, originating from the WABC New York studios. In an unusual scheduling decision, one episode aired from 8:00 to 8:15 and then a second from 8:45 to 9:00. A half hour of music by Andre Kostelanetz's Orchestra was sandwiched between the two broadcasts. While it's possible some of these split programs were one single story, contemporary reviews of the show make clear that most, if not all, were stand-alone stories. Cast members during the program's run included Juano Hernandez as John Henry, Rose McClendon, Richard Huey, Georgia Burke, and the aforementioned Maurice Ellis. Others were Emmett Lampkin, Ralph Ransom, and Jack McDowell. Hernandez's son, 15 year-old-son Ivan, is credited with parts as well. It is believed that Alston Stevens served as announcer and Geraldine Garrick handled directing duties.

The series writing duties resided with Hernandez and Garrick. Some sources indicate they co-wrote the scripts while other sources indicate Hernandez wrote them and Garrick prepared them for broadcast. Hernandez took his writing seriously, taking three days to write the week's scripts and referring often to lists of local folk medicines, foods, and figures of speech.

The dedication and attention to detail of all those involved paid off in considerable critical acclaim. Considering most black series of any serious nature were virtually ignored by the mainstream press, the compliment speak highly of the quality of *John Henry*. A reviewer from *The New York Daily News*' sang the show's praises, claiming the debut “made [him] forget all about [competitor] Eddie Cantor.” *The New York Sun* similarly lauded the show, declaring it the “best program on the air.” According to *Radio Guide* magazine *John Henry* was “thoroughly American, brilliantly performed” and *Billboard* was sure that “if there was such a thing as a Pulitzer Prize for the best radio dramatization of the season, this series of programs would have had a strangle hold on it from the first broadcast.”

Contents for all but a very few episodes are unknown. One involves a “Conjure woman” and spirits while another focuses on an “organ-voiced braggart loaded sugar by thousand pound loads and led his men in lusty songs of the river.” Outside of the audition episode, the only complete script that has surfaced is for episode #35 which aired Sunday, May 14, 1933 at 10:00. The script is untitled but opens with a chant by the ensemble and a Reverend Culler: “Sinner yo' bettah git ready” over and over.

Immediately Culler lays into a parishioner, berating her as one of the “souls dat is gwine be citizens in de devils city o'fiah.” Others, including a Sister Jackson, implore the pastor to go easy on Sister Belzona but he'll have none of it. Two pages of ranting later and Culler adds John Henry, “de gre't big giant goat,” who is in the back of the church, to his list of sinners. Back and forth go the reverend and the ensemble until Henry can take no more and bellows at them to shut up. He demands that Belzona ignore Reverend Culler, the “ol' big mouf hypocrite.”

John Henry then launches into his own speech, proclaiming a more compassionate religion than that espoused by the reverend. Henry's brand of religion is more humble and forgiving than Culler's, more charitable and inclined to brotherly love. He builds to a crescendo before breaking into a song that begins “Wheah will us be when dat fust trumpit soun?” The church joins in as the scene fades to Dink and Sim on their porch.

The fifteen-minute episode is startlingly short of action; the entire broadcast is little more than the trading of theological accusations between two men of significantly different religious philosophies. One must assume that the music and skill of the actors involved brought the dry script to life.

During the summer CBS split the two episodes between Sunday and Thursday but returned to the twice-Sunday schedule in the fall. *John Henry* aired for nine months until September 17, 1933. During that time and despite the positive press, the series never acquired a sponsor. African-American writers complained this was yet another example of fine black

programming being snubbed by fearful sponsors. However, in a 1934 letter to prominent black choir leader Eva Jessye, Hernandez insisted that CBS had not sought a sponsor for the show and intentionally retained it as a sustaining series. Why this would be is not clear, but all cast members indicated they were paid a salary comparable to what a sponsorship would have provided so the sustaining status was not detrimental to those involved. Further, Hernandez publicly stated that the show started with a nine-month contract and everyone involved agreed to end bring it to an end after the expiration of that original contract. Several cast members took *John Henry* on a tour of East Coast theaters under the auspices of the CBS Artist's Bureau.

John Henry was one of the first African-American programs to get the attention of historians interested in black radio, dating back to Fred MacDonald's classic book *Don't Touch That Dial!*, yet surprisingly little information has been published about the series. Various misconceptions have been published about the series, the most egregious of which is that the nine-month series was actually only a single episode! These two scripts and the handful of accounts referenced here give us more insight into this classic program as well as a keener understanding of what dramatic black programming on a major network sounded like.