

Old Time Radio Books: It's Not Just About the Recordings History of the Hobby By Ryan Ellett

Old Time Radio fandom has always recognized radio broadcasts, naturally, as the core of the hobby. Without the audio recordings there really is no hobby. But in addition to the programs there have developed some other pillars to which the hobbyists give considerable attention. Premiums have long been an area of interest, albeit an increasingly expensive one. Crossover appearances in music, film, and television by radio stars have also been of special interest to OTR fans. But next to the shows themselves, perhaps no aspect of the hobby is more appreciated and beloved by fans than the body of literature that has slowly grown over the past half-century.

Those getting into the hobby in the past ten years may not appreciate the abundance of radio-related publications now so readily available. Only those with a sizable checkbook could purchase all the old time radio-themed books currently being published. This is one benefit for the contemporary collector, but there has not always been such a rich book library. This body of literature is closely intertwined with the hobby itself, and it seems appropriate in chronicling the history of the old time radio hobby to examine this thread of the old time radio world.

As detailed elsewhere, the hobby's roots stretch back to the mid-50s, but old time radio didn't really become the hobby as we now know it - a group of individuals who enjoy listening to, learning about, and preserving for future generations, America's radio drama heritage - until the 1960's. Therefore, in looking at the books that have informed old time radio fans, we'll begin with the hobby's forefathers of the 60s, many of whom had close connections to the radio industry themselves. Those earliest hobbyists were coming to the realization that a whole part of American culture had quietly faded from existence and very likely would never reappear. These fans enjoyed shows on transcription discs and, increasingly, on tape, as well as on the air in the form of reruns which were still relatively common at that time. Fans of the day also had a strong collective memory of dramatic radio, a collective memory that is quickly disappearing except in a small circle of the hobby's most veteran members. While they were rediscovering programs, what fans lacked then was much in the way of books or magazines that helped them learn about these treasured programs.

The bulk of material available to the first generation of OTR collectors was the commercial publications and promotional works put out during the days of radio's golden age. Such material included *Here They Are - Amos 'n' Andy* (1931), *Jot 'Em Down Store: Catalogue and Game and Party Book for 1939* (1939), and *One Man's Family Looks at Life* (1938). These publications were of dubious value as historical readers but they offered a direct connection to the beloved shows and did offer some general information. Many of these books today can be found on internet auctions sites for a few dollars and are entertaining, if not highly informational.

First generation OTR hobbyists also had a surprising number of collections of scripts published during the 30s and 40s, such as *Thirteen By Corwin* (1947), *Obler Omnibus* (1945), and *National Broadcasting Company Presents Great Plays 1939/1940*.

The reason for publishing such works is not readily apparent to the contemporary reader. The best reason would seem to be that since most material was not rebroadcast and listeners during the 30s and 40 would not likely have ever heard a particular program more than once, those that were considered of sufficient cultural importance should be collected and made available. These books, too, are not overly difficult to find for the contemporary OTR fan.

Of course there were a fair number of general books related to the radio industry such as *Popular Radio Stars* (1942), *Radio Stars of Today* (1937), and *Radio Personalities* (1935). These are generally of limited interest to modern readers as they rarely offer new information about a favorite program or performer, the information contained within them having been mined in later years for some of the books that have become staples of the hobby.

In the 1960s, however, hobbyists began to see a few titles trickle out that were directed especially at them and that attempted to satisfy the growing curiosity in this recently lost entertainment medium. Perhaps the hobby's first was Buxton and Owen's freshman effort, *Radio's Golden Age*, published by Easton Valley Press in 1966. At 417 pages it was a hefty tome by any comparison for fans to feast upon. A year later came Jim Harmon's classic *Great Radio Heroes* and Irving Settel's *A Pictorial History of Radio*. 1968 witnessed the release of one of the classic OTR memoirs - and sadly one of the very few - *Mary Jane Higby's Tune in Tomorrow*. In 1970 a few other volumes were released. Harmon's *Great Radio Comedians*, Howard Koch's *The Panic Broadcast*, Curtis Mitchell's *Cavalcade of Broadcasting*, and Ron Lackman's *Remember Radio*. For the reader interested in old time radio, the published volumes dedicated to the history of classic aural programming were no more than a dozen or two, the above-mentioned titles among them.

Most notable about these early works is their broad scope; Most attempted to cover the entire scope of radio's golden age (Buxton & Owens, Settel, Lackmann) or a large swath of it (Harmon's two volumes). Koch's book is a notable exception to that trend, focusing just on a single episode, albeit arguably the most famous of the era. Overall, we do not find the kind of depth in these books that hobbyists would come to expect in later years. This does not diminish from these early efforts. A body of literature on any topic must begin somewhere, and books such as these which give the reader a big picture view of old time radio laid the foundation for future works that would drill further into a topic and correct and build upon the earlier works.

It's worth pointing out that Erick Barnouw's three-volume *A History of Broadcasting in the United States* was published between 1966 and 1970, directly overlapping with the genre's first hobby-focused books. Interestingly, it may be that Barnouw is more appreciated now by fans than in the hobby's early days. He is rarely mentioned in the earliest fan magazines and periodicals of the hobby. Why this is can only be a matter of conjecture, but in the sixties and seventies the average collector seemed primarily focused on the actual programs and getting hold of new material that was continuously surfacing. They wanted books that informed them about their favorite programs, which was not a central focus of Barnouw's work. Interest in a program's place in radio history and of the wider broadcasting industry - Barnouw's focus - was perhaps less than it is now.

While the focus of this article is the development of the hobby's body of reference books, it would be impossible to review the hobby's literature without highlighting three other important reference sources. First and foremost were the hobby publications, most prominent of them being Jay Hickerson's *Hello Again*, *Radio Dial* of the Radio Historical Society, and then the club publications that sporadically began popping up with each new group. These mimeographed publications frequently featured an article or two, usually on the more popular series, with varying amounts of research behind them. Length was frequently no more than a page.

Next were the radio and entertainment magazines of the 30s and 40s, including *Radio Mirror*, *Billboard*, and *Variety*. These publications are cited and reproduced frequently in the later hobby magazines. While such magazines now cost not insubstantial sums, they had yet to obtain such collector value in the early 70s. Similarly, newspaper back issues are frequently cited, though one can only imagine the time necessary to peruse back issues then compared to the relative ease with which database search engines can now do so.

Finally, for many fans the ubiquitous program log provided significant information in the form of dates and episode titles. For many hobbyists this was all the further they ever dealt in the detailed history of old time radio. Logs still circulate among old-school collectors, but most of them have gone online and fewer and fewer hardcopies seem to be for sale. The episode log has a special place in the hobby's heart, as can be seen from the significant number of contemporary OTR books that still include some sort of log/episode guide (albeit much more informational and detailed than their forebears).

For the average fan, then, the 60s produced a handful of books that were mildly informative, with many more books, premiums, and radio fan publications from the 30s and 40s rounding out their libraries. The succeeding decade, the 1970s, was good to the old time radio in many ways, notably the explosion of material that continually surfaced and the growth of clubs and conventions. It also witnessed the birth of two of the hobbies long time bibles, John Dunning's *Tune in Yesterday* (1976) and Buxton and Owen's revamped *The Big Broadcast* (1972). While tomes of such magnitude inevitably were found to contain numerous flaws, they were standard reference works for the next twenty years. Interestingly, before these was a book called *A Thirty Year History of Programs Carried on National Radio Networks in the United States 1926-1956* (Summers) released in 1971. It is rarely, if ever, mentioned in the OTR press during that time, indicating knowledge of its existence was slight. It is referenced regularly now, however.

To make up for the lack of radio-specific books, radio fans could buy any number of biographies of radio figures, including *Ozzie Nelson* (1974), *W.C. Fields* by himself, *The Son That Rose in the West* (Jim Bannon), *This Was Radio* by Joseph Julian, *Live it Up* (George Burns). Jack Benny's death inspired a spate of material, notably three books: *Jack Benny* (Irving Fein), *Jack Benny* (Mary Livingston), and *The Jack Benny Show* (Milt Josefsberg). At least two additional overview books were released by 1976, *The Old Time Radio Book* (Ted Sennet, 1976) and *The Golden Years of Broadcasting* (Robert Campbell, 1976). The first of what would be a long line of material on the Lone Ranger was released by Dave Howe. Charles Stumpf, a regular contributor to OTR periodicals of the time, released his first book, *Ma Perkins, Little Orphan Annie and Heigh Ho Silver* in the early 70s. The most important books of the 70s, aside from Buxton & Owens' book and Dunning's encyclopedia were probably *Golden Throats* and

Silver Tongues (Ray Poindexter), Radio Comedy (Arthur Frank Wertheim), Don't Touch That Dial (Fred MacDonald) and The Mighty Music Box (Thomas DeLong). All of these are regularly cited by contemporary radio authors and represent some of academe's first attempts to analyze the era of dramatic radio.

The decade saw a considerable number of publications emerge and die off, including World of Yesterday, National Radio Trader, Milwaukee club newsletter, The Big Bandwagon, Collectors Corner, Return With Us Now, NARA News, Illustratd Press, annual Sperdvac magazines, On the Air, Airwaves, Radio Dial, Nostalgia Digest and Stay Tuned. With the dearth of OTR-related books on the market, these fanzines became an important source of new OTR writing and scholarship, some of which has stood the test of time better than others.

With the nostalgia craze of the early 1970s passed, the late-70s to the late-80s was a relatively dry period for old time radio books. The periodicals asserted themselves as the primary source of OTR literature and hobby's tradition of self-publication (not uncommon to any niche hobby) was cemented.

Vincent Terrace added to the "encyclopedia" genre of OTR writing with his Radio's Golden Years. Along with Buxton & Owens and Dunning, the hobby now had a trilogy of encyclopedia-style reference books which was not added to until Dunning's updated work in the late 90s. Terrace's book was not as heralded as the preceding two and is the least referenced of the three by modern writers.

A second notable book was Dick Osgood's WYXIE Wonderland, a retrospective of the famous Detroit station WXYZ and his 50 years of work there. This book serves as the cornerstone of the hobby's subgenre of WXYZ literature, which includes an impressive number of works about the station's three big shows, The Lone Ranger, The Green Hornet, and Challenge of the Yukon. Announcer Fred Foy's later book and presence at OTR conventions added to the station's outsized popularity among OTR buffs.

Outside of these two volumes, the early and mid-80s primarily saw the release of small press or self-published OTR works, the most prominent being Tom Price's Fibber McGee and Molly work, which also included thorough coverage of the Jordans' other radio work. The tome is massive, over 1,000 pages and provided the hobby much of its information on the pair's work. Unfortunately it was not widely distributed even when released at the beginning of the decade and is not all but unknown except to most hobbyists who have discovered OTR in the last fifteen years. Later in the decade Price would write (with Charles Stumpf) the only published biography of the Fibber McGee Show, Heavenly Days (1987).

Other notable small press efforts were another Lone Ranger volume by David Rothel (Who Was that Masked Man? 1981) and The Sound of Detection: Ellery Queen's Adventures in Radio by Francis M. Nevins, Jr. and Ray Stanich. This represents one of the very few book-length works by Stanich, who was a prolific producer of logs stretching back to the early 70s (and is the namesake of an FOTR award). Another small-press release that still gets an occasional reference is Stuart Silver's and Isidore Haiblum's Faster Than a Speeding Bullett (Playboy Paperback, informal history and quiz on many early radio shows)

The modern age of old time radio writing and scholarship began in the late 80s, when the hobby began to see a sudden increase in the number of radio-related volumes,

the quality of scholarship behind them, and the variety topics focused upon. 1988 saw the release of at least three volumes that received generous attention in the OTR press and continue to be referenced today. These volumes are Carlton E. Morse *The One Man's Family Album: An Inside Look at Radio's Longest Running Show*, *From out of the Past: A Pictorial History of the Lone Ranger* - Dave Holland, and *That's not All Folks! My life in the Golden Age of Cartoons and Radio* - Mel Blanc and Philip Bashe. The next year saw the release of two texts by university-based scholars, *Children and Radio* by Marilyn Lawrence Boemer (University of North Texas) and *Norman Corwin and Radio: The Golden Years* by R. LeRoy Bannerman (Indiana University). The flood gates opened with a new decade and the old time radio book catalog has grown practically exponentially since. A sample of 1990 books exemplifies the growing diversity in the field: *Fred Allen's Radio Comedy* by Alan Havig, *Sunday Nights at Seven: The Jack Benny Story*, *Robert Mott's Sound Effects: Radio, TV, and Film*, and *Gunsmoke* by Suzanne & Gabor Barabas. The last book exemplified what would become a common format for old time radio books; focusing on a single radio show with a comprehensive program history accompanied by exhaustive episode guide.

Thanks in large part to McFarland Press and, later, Bear Manor Press, radio-centric books proliferated. The second half of the 90s witnessed the release of two new Bibles of the field, Jay Hickerson's self-published *Guide to all Circulating Shows* and Dunning's revised *Encyclopedia of Old Time Radio*. Even now those two books lie at the core of the hobby's literature canon. The books of the 90s are almost too many to mention. From *Religious Radio and Television in the United States, 1921 - 1991* (McFarland, 1992) to *Radio's Morning Show Personalities* (McFarland, 1995) to Anthony Tollin's *The Shadow: The Making of a Legend* (1996), the hobbyist could read about nearly any aspect of their beloved old time radio. The decade also saw the debut of two of the genre's most prolific and respected authors, Martin Grams, Jr. with and Jim Cox with the *Soap Operas* (1999 McFarland).

Old time radio also hit the mainstream market again with a few volumes issued by the major presses. Major press releases included Cloud and Olson's *The Murrow Boys: Pioneers on the Front Line of Broadcast Journalism*, Tom Lewis' *Empire of the Air*, movie guru Leonard Maltin's *The Great American Broadcast*, and Gerald Nochman's *Raised on Radio*.

Radio-related books hit the new century with a full head of steam; on the most dedicated fans (and those with deep pockets) can add every volume to their personal library as they are published. For the OTR hobbyist, Cox and Grams continue to define the genre's literature, each producing at least one volume a year. Cox, in general, makes broader sweeps of the genre with his literary pen, while Grams, in general, has specialized in creating authoritative volumes on specific series. Both approaches have their place and the results have been invaluable to the hobby. The presses noted above, McFarland and Bear Manor, continue to put out enough radio-related books to keep even the most devoted reader satisfied.

In addition to the rapidly increasing book base, the club magazines continue to put out a quality crop of researched articles every year. Comparing a contemporary issue of SPERDVAC's *Radiogram* or *Nostalgia Digest* to their ancestor of 30, 25, or even 20 years ago shows how much expectations have been raised among OTR fans for quality in both research and writing prowess. In reviewing the growth of the old time radio

literature, especially that in book form, one cannot but accept that modern readers are experiencing a golden age of research and writing in the genre. If contemporary OTR hobbyists miss the olden days when the biggest stars still appeared at conventions and on the interview circuit, they can't miss the olden days literature that was so narrow and sparse compared to that of today.

The second Midwest convention of old time radio, CORE II, was held June 23rd at Oakbrook, IL. About 45 people attended. Guest speakers were Chuck Schaden and Phil Bowman. HA SEPT 73

Bill Blalock made first rade, not by mail, in 1954. Hd Sears and friends recorder. Bought tape from Sears and Lafayette (Irish). Hugh Carlson had a catalog with 700 reels in 1968. Joe Hehn started his collection in 1963. (Dec 1980 HA)
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