

By Mail: The Radio and Television Institute of Chicago

By
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The 1930s saw a wave of radio institutes and training programs come into existence, some at recognized universities and others of the mail-order variety. Of the latter examples include the National Radio Institute and Sprayberry Academy of Radio, both located in Washington DC, and RCA Institutes, Inc., Write-Way Radio and Television Institute, Chicago Radio Institute, YMCA Radio Institute, and the Radio and Television Institute.

Little remains of these for-profit organizations seeking to cash in on the rapidly growing popularity of radio. Some literature remains, especially among antique radio enthusiasts, and of course advertisements in newspapers of the time. One unique relic of this study-at-home phenomena are two episodes of a series called *Radio and Television Revue*, associated with the aforementioned Radio and Television Institute in Chicago.

Beyond an air date sometime in 1931, nothing seems to be known of this program. Jay Hickerson identifies two episodes in circulation. The program runs fifteen minutes, consists primarily of musical numbers, and is “ostensibly one long advertisement for a home-study course.” The program’s house band is Paul Specht and his Orchestra, no small achievement for the new Institute.

Specht recorded extensively through the 20s on a variety of labels and with a number of different backing orchestras. His band plays four different numbers during the show: “Strike up the Band,” “On the Beach With You,” “There’s No Other Girl,” and “The Answer is Me,” all typical “sweet” songs. Interspersed between the tunes is an unnamed announcer extolling the benefits of studying with the Radio and Television Institute of Chicago. It’s the only course of study, he proclaims, that is indorsed by top manufacturers (all unnamed) and supervised by quailed men in the radio industry (also unnamed).

The earliest advertisement found for the Radio and Television Institute is January 22, 1931 in the Chicago Tribune. The ad reiterates their broadcast: that the Institute is “recommended by 13 [unnamed] leading radio mfgs.” and students are “supervised by [unnamed] engineers.” The program cost five dollars a month, or “pennies a day” per the announcer. If the Institute’s course of study was like that of other home radio courses the student received a number of softcover pamphlets, each focused on a particular aspect of radio broadcasting. Notice the ad advises readers to listen to KYW Sundays, 8:15; WENR, Mondays, 8:30; WBBM, Wednesday, 9 p. m. What the listener might have heard is unknown; the radio listings to which I have access don’t give any insight.

The National Radio Institute (NRI), a competitor of the Institute of Chicago, had a few dozen booklets in its study-at-home course. They began with simpler topics such as “How Radio Programs are Sent From the Studio to Your Home” and “Simple Radio Circuits and Meters” and progressed to more challenging lessons like “Low-Frequency Amplifiers for Sound and Television Receivers” and “How Signal Currents are Kept in Correct Paths.” After each booklet was digested the student completed a paper test which was submitted to the company for grading. The courses were not insignificant; one could get a good grasp of radio concepts with them. I’ve learned much about radio technology - especially 30s and 40s era sets from my collection of NRI material. However, how useful

the learning would be for a man seriously interested in a radio career is debatable. It was a different world then, and formal training may not have been a prerequisite for entry to the industry.

The final advertisement for the Radio and Television Institute of Chicago this author could find was in the October, 13, 1931 edition of the Tribune. It's possible the Institute adjusted its name after that point, or perhaps the company spent all its capital financing the Revue and Paul Specht's band and really did disappear both from Chicago and from the ether.

Sources:

Kay, Brad, "Dream Radio Shows from 1931," *The Old Radio Times*, no. 19 (June 2007), 3-4.

www.mgthomas.co.uk/dancebands/American%20Visitors/Pages/Paul%20Specht.htm

National Radio Institute, Washington D.C. *Pioneer Home Study Radio School*. Copyright 1941; 1949 edition.

Audio copy *The Radio and Television Institute Revue* from Old Time Radio Researchers Singles and Doubles Collection found at http://www.archive.org/details/OTRR_Certified_Singles_Doubles

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