

Uncovering Black Radio's Roots: 1927 – 1929

By
Ryan Ellett

The story of African-Americans on radio is still very much incomplete though scholars such as William Barlow, Mark Newman, Donna Halper, and Elizabeth McLeod continue to make contributions to the literature. One question that has remained unanswered for all these decades is what constitutes the first African-American radio series? For the purposes of this article a series is considered any regularly scheduled broadcast with some sense of theme or continuity from airing to airing, with or without regular and ongoing characters. Further, the creators and performers behind the program are expected to have been primarily African-American.

Evidence strongly indicates that the *Pittsburgh Courier Hour*, which traces its roots to 1927, was the first black radio series. On September 8, 1927, the prominent African-American newspaper sponsored a 15-minute talk over New York radio station WGBS, owned by the Gimbel Brothers department stores. The talk, given by Ruth R. Dennis who contributed religious features to the *Courier*, was “Some Notable Colored Women.”ⁱ Though the talk was not labeled the *Pittsburgh Courier Hour*, response was so positive that the paper and WGBS scheduled a follow up talk a month later.

WGBS, incidentally, had a history of broadcasting black men and women despite not being a station or a company (Gimbel Brothers) that catered especially to that audience. Before Dennis' talk, artists and writers such as Ethel Waters, Countee Cullen, and James Weldon Johnson had all appeared on the station.ⁱⁱ

Through Ms Dennis, Terese Rose Nagel, manager of day programs at WGBS met Floyd Calvin, the *Courier's* special features editor in New York. Dennis and Nagel were acquainted even before Dennis' “Women” talk, her having made various religious talks over the station.ⁱⁱⁱ Responding to the success of Ms Dennis' talk, Nagel offered Calvin the opportunity to discuss a topic of interest to African-Americans. Calvin seized the opportunity and wrote “Some Notable Colored Men” which was broadcast October 8, 1927, and covered black leaders in business, industry, education, the arts, and the press.^{iv} The talk was so successful that WGBS offered Calvin a monthly slot on which to discuss issues of importance to African-Americans.^v

Floyd Calvin was not a radio veteran (nor were many individuals in 1927). His background was in the press and he saw radio as a natural extension of that work. He was born in Washington, AR, to a farmer and school teacher. In 1920 he graduated from the Shover Street Teacher Training School in Hope, AR, where he had become familiar with all aspects of the print world while working for the *Southwestern Outlook*. Soon after graduating he took a job as a printer for the *New York Age* where he joined the paper's first African-American stereotyping crew. In four short years Calvin wrote and edited for various newspapers before arriving at the *Pittsburgh Courier*. The *Courier* assigned him to serve in New York City in May, 1924.^{vi}

Calvin almost immediately began preaching the power radio could have in the black search for equality. “Over the radio we can reach vast audiences,” he proclaimed, “a large percentage of whom have been hitherto untouched by the flood of literature on the subject [Negro achievement]. We should lose no opportunity to avail ourselves of this newest opportunity.”^{vii} And Calvin didn't lose the opportunity, following up his debut radio effort with a speech on November 26. In it he celebrated the 100th anniversary of the black press, bringing attention to John B. Russworm and *The Colored American*.^{viii}

Per the agreement, Calvin again brought the *Courier Hour* to the public on December 15. This time his topic was the Durham Conference, a contemporary meeting of black educators. Musical guests included Vivian Abbott, Ernest Hemby, and the Georgette Harvey Runnin' Wild Four, a quartet performing in “Porgy and Bess” and formerly on the Keith vaudeville circuit.^{ix} Whether due to less-

than-stellar public response, racial pressure, or some other reason, WGBS dropped the *Courier Hour* after the third edition, nearly bringing to a premature end the first black effort at an ongoing program.

Soon after the announcement by WGBS, Andy Razaf, a popular African-American song writer and recording artist, arranged for Calvin to meet with J. P. Coulon, the general manager of WCGU. It didn't take long for Coulon to say "yes" and Calvin moved his program WCGU on the corner of Broadway and 48th St. in New York. While his hour was cut in half, he now would go on the air every other week instead of just once a month. WCGU, owned by Charles Unger, broadcast a modest 500 watts; nevertheless, Calvin didn't miss a beat and was back on the air January 12, 1928, at 5:30 to talk about "The Negro in Art," with music was provided by Ernestine Covington and Elizabeth Sinkford. For the rest of the program's run it would be known as the *Floyd J. Calvin Program* (or *Hour*).^x

At nearly the same time Calvin was starting over on WCGU, WABC announced on January 26, 1928, a new program entitled *The Negro Achievement hour*. WABC was another New York station, this one owned by the Atlantic Broadcasting Company. Arthur Clark, WABC's station manager, received credit for getting the new program off the ground.^{xi}

In the meantime Calvin continued on, nonplussed. His January 26 program featured his own lecture on Negro History Week and musical entertainment by Vivian Abbott. For a change of pace he also brought in actor Richard Huey, then starring in stage's "Porgy and Bess," to do a dramatic reading of "Creation," a piece from James Wheldon Johnson's "God's Trombones."^{xii} In this manner Calvin settled into a routine for the next several months, sandwiching a serious lecture in between generous musical numbers.

In September, 1928, WCGU program manager William Melia notified Calvin that his show was being granted a weekly slot at 5:30, its regular time since January. While Calvin took pride in the "high type" of artists used on his show, he was very excited to use the broadcast as a vehicle to promote new black talent and actively encouraged performers to contact him about getting a chance to go on the air.^{xiii} His first musical guests as a weekly host included Millard Thomas, W. C. Handy, Jr., and Vivian Abbott.^{xiv} The weekly format apparently did not boost the program as was envisioned. *The Floyd J. Calvin Hour* disappeared from the radio listings in the black newspapers in October, 1928, just one year after its debut without the slightest mention of Calvin's historic broadcasting effort.

In the meantime, WABC's *Negro Achievement Hour* rolled on week after week. Contemporary accounts indicate the program was not significantly different from Calvin's. Though sponsored by Who's Who in Colored America, the content of each weekly episode was the responsibility of a different club or organization, each of which provided the spoken and musical content. For instance, one of the first broadcasts on March 15, 1928, featured Dr. P. M. H. Savory, vice-president of the Victory Life Insurance Company who spoke on the life and struggles of one Anthony Overton. The company also arranged for musical entertainment by the Schubert Musical Club.^{xv}

January 11, 1929, provided an opportunity for the broadcasters behind *The Negro Achievement Hour* to celebrate a milestone; the program's fiftieth consecutive weekly show. Because the *Floyd Calvin Program* was not broadcast weekly until late in 1928, it did not accumulate the number of broadcasts that did its competition, the *Achievement Hour*. The evening's show was a gala event, stretching over two hours – twice its normal length – and featured multiple speakers, each of whom was allotted five minutes for their topics ranging from medicine to journalism to business. In recognition of the *Hour's* achievement, a painting by Harlem Renaissance artist Aaron Douglas was presented to WABC. Thus the series chugged strongly into its sophomore year.

By October, 1929, the series appears to have been losing steam. Weekly previews of upcoming programs were decreasingly publicized and the *Hour* was eventually handed off to station WAAT after eighty consecutive weeks on WABC. WAAT managing director, Rudy Horst, Jr., was a one-time sales director of WABC and a former announcer there. H. Hampton, another WAAT staff member, also formerly worked at WABC. Surely these two had a significant impact on WAAT's picking up the *Achievement Hour*.^{xvi} Joseph Boris, long-time director of the *Hour*, made the move with his production.

At the same time the series moved from a late night weekday slot to a Sunday afternoon air time at 1:45.^{xvii}

About the same time that the *Achievement Hour* was switched to WAAT, Chicago station WSBC debuted the *All-Negro Hour* (originally *The All-Colored Hour*) November 3, 1929. This third African-American series was produced and hosted by Jack Cooper, a black announcer who many consider to be the first African-American to make a career in radio. This *Hour* was notably different than its predecessors in that it does not appear to have contained a lecture or other informative presentation. The December 9, 1929, broadcast included “everything from 'pop' and novelty to grand opera.” J. Berni Barbour, who was associated with Ziefffield, Arnold Wiley, Turner and Hanks (Bud and Buddy), and others provided the entertainment. Cooper himself took care of announcing duties.^{xviii}

A short profile of *The All-Negro Hour* written ten months after its debut included a list of creative staff and performers. They included Estella Patton-Cooper, executive secretary, Lonnie L. Stratton, program director, and Claude Rhodes as musical director. Performers included Buddy Burton, David Mozee, Catherine Wade, Lucretia Knight, Odella Nelson, E. Milton Johnson, James McQueen, Gernell Grumley, Ann Cooper-Edwards, Baby June Rhodes, Ezra Shelton, “Big Boy” Edwards, Myrtle Allen, A. B. Brooks and others.^{xix}

One interesting feature of Cooper's *Hour* was a sketch devoted to two characters named Luke and Timber which debuted February 27, 1930. Historian Mark Newman, perhaps the authority on Cooper, convincingly argues that Cooper's duo lacked the crudeness, dialect, and stereotypes that many African-Americans found disturbing about Amos 'n' Andy and represented a more authentic picture of African-American life. Later that year two more serials were introduced on the program, “Mush and Clorinda, the Alabama Sunflowers” and “Horseradish and Fertilizer.” Whether these qualifies as the first black-written radio sketch remains unconfirmed.^{xx}

Radio historians who proclaim that Cooper's series was the first black series are not entirely correct, as evidenced by the two series described above. If one prefers to proclaim it the first African-American series that incorporated non-musical and non-lecture elements via the serial sketches, then the claim may have strong merit. It is very possibly the first black production that attempted to compete with white productions on pure entertainment value, as noted by Newman. *The All-Negro Hour* was a slick production with professional entertainers borrowed from vaudeville and the legitimate theater and writing that was geared to the black mass market.^{xxi}

While the *All-Negro Hour* built up an audience at the end of 1929, the New York-based *Negro Achievement Hour* was winding down after nearly two years on the air. Radio schedules of the time indicate the *Achievement Hour* left the air for good in December, 1929. Its loss was quietly overlooked just as was the demise of the *Floyd J. Calvin Program* the year before. General references indicate Cooper's original *Hour* lasted six years, far longer than its two predecessors. Radio listings indicate the show finally left the airwaves in March, 1935. At the time Cooper had multiple broadcasts including *Midnite Accomodation*, *Midnite Ramble*, *Nite in Harlem*, and a thrice-weekly *Timely Tunes*. Jack Cooper continued in radio until the 1950s.^{xxii}

It appears the three programs explored here represent the first African-American series (as defined earlier) so far discovered and documented that focus on black issues and use primarily, if not entirely, black casts. It is impossible at this point to determine to what extent whites were involved in these three productions. Even Cooper's *Hour*, which was proudly billed as all-black utilized the station's white technicians.

There is no evidence that recordings of any of these programs exist or even that they were recorded to begin with. Further, documents concerning the *Floyd Calvin Hour* and the *Achievement Hour* have yet to turn up in any notable quantity leaving contemporary scholars with second-hand sources – especially black newspapers – to reconstruct these pioneering radio efforts. Jack Cooper's papers at the Chicago Historical Society provide some scripts from his series so more analysis has been done on that series than either of the first two. As more information is uncovered on early black radio,

we can only hope the data will lead to further discoveries, thus enhancing our sketchy understanding of the field.

Copyright 2010 – Ryan Ellett

- i PC 9/10/27 p. 8
- ii PC 11/26/27 p. 13
- iii PC 11/26/27 p. 13
- iv PC 10/8/27 p. 1
- v PC 11/5/27 p. SM1
- vi PC 10/15/27 p. 8
- vii PC 10/15/27 p. 20
- viii PC 12/10/27 p. 1; PC 11/19/27
- ix PC 12/3/27 p. 3
- x PC 12/31/27 p. 1; PC 01/28/28 p. 2
- xi PC 1/5/29 p. 2
- xii PC 02/04/28 p. 1
- xiii PC 9/8/28 p. 1
- xiv PC 9/15/28 p. 4
- xv PC 03/17/28 p. 6
- xvi NYAN 9/4/29 p. 11
- xvii BAA 10/19/29 p. 8
- xviii CD 12/14/29 p. 7; CD 1/25/1930 p. 6
- xix CD 8/2/30 p. 5
- xx Mark Newman, p. 62.
- xxi Newman, p. 62-65;
- xxii CD 4/13/35, p. 10

BAA – Baltimore Afro-American

CD – Chicago Defender

NYAN – New York Amsterdam Newspapers

PC – Pittsburgh Courier

Newman, Mark. *Entrepreneurs of Profit and Pride: From Black-Appeal to Radio Soul*. New York: Praeger, 1988.