

INTRODUCTION: BEDTIME STORIES

IT IS EIGHT O'CLOCK ON A THURSDAY NIGHT IN THE MID-1940S. In a bedroom in Oakland, California, the Radio Kid tunes in to *The Aldrich Family* on his little red plastic time machine. He flings himself crosswise on the bed, head dangling over the edge, his finger tracing rosettes in the braided bedspread with the Red Ryder lariat motif. Between bites of Walnettos, he stares at the floor while Henry Aldrich, egged on by his pal Homer, quakes at the prospect of asking out Kathleen Anderson—much as the Kid himself fears telephoning the adorable Jean Anderson, his current fifth-grade passion, with her black bangs, freckles, green eyes, and sweetly lopsided smile.

We fade in now on a Sunday night at the Radio Kid's grandparents' compulsively tidy San Francisco apartment, smelling of cauliflower, chicken soup, liniment, and chocolate cake. The Kid is about to feast on one of Nana's sumptuous dinners while listening to her and Papa's bulky mahogany console radio, with its amber dial and a tuning knob the size of a ship's wheel. The radio brings the family urgent news bulletins from Walter Winchell's *Jergens Journal*, a teletype clattering nervously as Winchell chatters in his terse, hurried, lapel-grabbing New York-inflected big-shot voice: "Good evening, Mr. and Mrs. Nawth Americur and all the ships at sea. Let's go ta press!"

It is now a gloomy Monday afternoon. The Radio Kid, stricken with measles, is imprisoned in the house, the shades drawn, listening to the latest angst-ridden episodes of *Backstage Wife*, *The Romance of Helen Trent*, and *Young Widder Brown*. The Kid's mother putters downstairs fixing his lunch. Healthy again in a day or so, the Kid plans, like his cowboy heroes, to escape the room by tying two sheets together and lowering himself out of his bedroom window to a ledge over the

kitchen door. Or he might simply leap directly onto the top of the garage, make his way to the apricot tree, saddle up and, in the bough of the trunk, gallop into the gathering twilight with one of his faithful sidekicks—Jerry Hyman, Russell West, Kenny Johnson—as they help Red Ryder and the Cisco Kid and the Lone Ranger bring justice to the frontier. . . .

THAT FAR-OFF LAND is where I lived my youth, an arm's length from one radio or another—primarily a rectangular crimson table-model Motorola with a cracked top, split from all the times I smacked the Bakelite case to shake it free of static. From this small box with the diagonal speaker slots I learned much of what I knew about honor, romance, justice, evil, humor, manhood, motherhood, marriage, women, law and order, history, sports, and families. I was told how life was meant to unfold and what America was all about. As I stretched out listening to it, night after night for a decade from young boyhood deep into my midteens, the world seemed—sounded, rather—intimate, manageable, and coherent yet at the same time vast and mysterious and thrilling. I tuned in eagerly every night for more news of life beyond my own humdrum cosmos at 707 Trestle Glen Road.

Listening again to those old programs and twisting the dial once more to the memories and thoughts they evoke, I find they were more than mere radio shows. Nothing “mere” about them. For me, they were basic bedtime stories, more vivid than anything by Grimm, Andersen, or Milne, longer lasting, more indelible. They preserved and fleshed out my fantasies and, in ways both bad and good, protected me from the world beyond the backyard. It all remains locked in my head because I was not only raised with these shows but, in some essential sense, raised *by* them. They helped shape my generation's values and formed notions of what was funny, compelling, inspiring, sentimental, and patriotic.

There was—still is—a mystique to radio unlike that of any other entertainment medium. Its intimacy amounts almost to secrecy. People tend to listen to radio alone. Listening in—eavesdropping—is such a private, vaguely stealthy, literally undercover act. You can take a radio to bed (as I still do) and listen to it in the dark. As a boy, so as to shield the glow of the dial on school nights, I would throw the covers over the

radio while catching a late-night *Suspense*, or a distant extra-inning ballgame between the Oakland Oaks and a Pacific Coast League rival, or I might go nightclubbing at *The Chesterfield Supper Club*.

More than going to movies, then largely an adult pastime, I listened to radio from the moment I got home from school and tuned in to two hours of serials between four and six. After a quick dinner break, the radio chattered from seven to ten, often journeying to forbidden lands on *I Love a Mystery*, with its convoluted adventures in unknown places—its eerie mood and exotic locales contrived in a tiny studio in downtown Los Angeles.

When not nestled in deepest Radioland, I discovered the pleasures of reading and cartooning, adjuncts to listening. Radio made me a good listener. At times, I would creep out of bed and sit on the top landing of the stairs listening to the bright adult talk coming from below in our living room. It sounded like a live radio show. Radio was an entirely interior experience, closer to reading than anything else, a quiet, contemplative thing.

Radio was made of words. The comedy shows were almost all wordplay that tickled the ear, from puns to repartee. Radio was my indoor sandbox, where I learned to play with, and to love, language. From radio I grew addicted to stage plays, with their emphasis on speech, more than to movies. It was a verbal age, due mainly to radio, a universe constructed entirely of words.

Radio brought this world to me in fifteen- and thirty-minute chunks. I listened avidly, believingly, ceaselessly. It was all there in that bedroom with the blond knotty-pine wallpaper where I holed up for hours, books piled in a corner, and switched on the daily serials *Superman*, *Tom Mix*, *Captain Midnight*, *Straight Arrow*, and *The Green Hornet*, with its mesmerizing opening, a furious buzzing that accompanied “The Flight of the Bumblebee,” which, I later discovered—and which thrilled the classicist in me—was a famous composition and not just a schlocky radio theme. (Likewise Rossini’s triumphant *William Tell* Overture and the Philip Morris theme from Ferde Grofé’s *Grand Canyon Suite*.)

Radio was America, presented in tones of pure red-blooded wartime patriotism. Radio instilled in me an unabashed love for the idea of America, for its lore, lingo, and popular culture. Radio presented not

just programs but America itself, and we listeners bought it completely. Radio made me want to see the places I kept hearing about each night, sparking a wanderlust the way a passing train and paddle-wheeler might have for a boy a century before. Radio was a coming-of-age rite, my own *Life on the Mississippi*. Radio of the late 1940s and 1950s, like rivers and railroads of an earlier time, churned up the brain, the bloodstream, and the psyche.

RADIO AS THEATER VANISHED as swiftly and as totally as had silent films before it, for a similar but reverse reason: Sound killed silent movies, and television finished off radio. Yet whereas talk often enhanced silent movies, TV's pictures didn't necessarily add anything to radio, and usually detracted or distracted; radio isn't frustrated without visuals. Radio created its own visual language through sound effects, vocal theatrics, and music. David Mamet has claimed, "The best way to tell a story on stage is to imagine it on radio," to see if the words alone can carry it. Fred Friendly, the TV documentarian, once remarked, "Your ear, more than your eye, is what holds you to TV." Radio discovered what the human voice can do to the imagination. Joe Julian, a radio actor, insisted, "No other art form ever engaged the imagination more intensely"—movies for the ears, as someone put it. Radio made listeners collaborators in the truest sense. From a few simple sounds—a door closing, rapid footsteps down a cobblestone alley, howling winds and wolves, galloping hooves, creaking gates and gurgling rapids, screeching squad cars and wailing trains (countless trains!)—you could conjure up entire landscapes and skylines. Radio combined the power of novels, vaudeville, pop music, and movies. All it took was a rickety screen door closing on *Lum and Abner* or the "ding!" of a department store bell on *The Jack Benny Program* to conjure up an entire setting—a drowsy feed store, say, as opposed to a busy emporium. My little red Motorola was a genie's bottle: Rub the dial, and out popped flying men and woebegone widows and crazed killers and chortling thugs and laughing caballeros. Radio was interactive half a century before it became a cliché.

Radio was life-size—not bigger than life, like the movies, or smaller than life, like television. Radio had no dimensions except, as in novels, the limitless boundaries of fantasy. People were linked to radio in a pas-

sionately personal way, took it more seriously, and totally trusted it, much as they did books and newspapers. The direct, unfiltered sound of the human voice, like voices over a telephone on some nationwide party line, compelled you to pay attention. There was no visual clutter to distract; the ear was more grounded, as focused as the eye. The ear was all. Hearing was believing.

No wonder so few radio shows made the successful leap to television—or, before that, to movies—where any illusion was exploded. Watching radio shows on TV was like sitting too close to the stage at a play, where you can see makeup lines, false beards, perspiration and, during big speeches, the spray of spittle. When asked which he liked best, radio or TV, one young boy replied, “Radio—the pictures are better.” Listeners also used to *watch* their radios, as if awaiting scenes to pop into view. It was a creative deceit, a kind of *trompe l’ear*, where whites played blacks, Hispanics, and Asians (and, occasionally, vice versa—the first use of “color-blind casting”); adults impersonated kids, dogs, horses, and birds; and men portrayed women, not to mention actors who played several roles within one show.

Our imagination wasn’t the whole of it, though. Radio relied heavily on the keenly observed, nuanced, and detailed descriptive powers of gifted writers, not to mention the Industrial Light & Magic wizards of their day—the sound-effects boys, broadcasting’s forgotten heroes. Writing and sound had to be punchy, succinct, and colorful. Most of the old shows, both comedies and mystery/detective series, had little fat on them.

Radio’s celebrated “intimacy” wasn’t simply a matter of its smaller scope, well-worn formats, and day-in, day-out familiarity, further nurtured by soap operas, which provided their own intense continuity. Radio’s power to charm lay also in the vast net (as in network) it first spread over the country, literally linking Americans to each other through a coast-to-coast web. It was yesterday’s Internet.

Radio did more than amuse America for thirty-five years. It wasn’t just something that happened after vaudeville on the way to television. It was an airborne bridge among all other mainstream entertainment forms. Joining theater, films, concert halls, comic strips, touring shows, ladies’ clubs, pulp magazines, news, and sports events, it brought together for the first time a tremendous variety of existing entertain-

ments—plus pure radio inventions like the quiz show, the talk show, the game show, the sitcom, and the newscast.

It became everyone's national town hall (Fred Allen even called one of his early shows *Town Hall Tonight*, and Alexander Woollcott called his program *The Town Crier*). Radio, which was virtually Depression-proof during the thirties (NBC's Radio City Music Hall itself was erected in 1932, in the heart of the Depression), became a coast-to-coast Chautauqua tent, plugged-in vaudeville circuit, and neighborhood theater all packed into one elaborate cathedral-shaped console of burnished walnut.

Radio grew into a powerful bully pulpit—or, in the case of the broadcast bigot Father Coughlin, a bullying pulpit. The little box doubled as a handy soapbox for Billy Sunday, Aimee Semple McPherson, Charles Lindbergh, health freak Bernarr Macfadden, and goat-gland “doctor” John Brinkley.

Just as John F. Kennedy later commanded TV, Franklin D. Roosevelt mastered radio, as did his wife, who had a weekly radio slot and who was described by one magazine as “the first lady of the American airwaves.” FDR's chummy *Fireside Chats* became his most popular domestic policy, bringing him closer to Americans than any previous president. He spoke to the country informally, as if he were in the same room with us, which in a sense he was. The news commentator Edwin C. Hill said of the chats: “It was as if a wise and kindly father had sat down sympathetically and patiently and affectionately with his worried and anxious children.” At one point, Roosevelt was voted radio's most popular personality, ahead of Jack Benny. When FDR met Orson Welles, he said, laughing, “We're the two best actors in America.” Radio implanted in the public mind FDR's personality (also Hitler's and Churchill's), through the power of his upbeat, swaggering, aristocratic voice. “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself” was the first sound bite.

During World War II, radio announcers would constantly “interrupt this broadcast” to bring news flashes, often via the somber John Daly. It was from the radio, not the newspapers, that most Americans first heard of such calamities as Pearl Harbor, the Hindenburg crash, and Roosevelt's death, and such triumphs as D-day. The war bonded Americans to their radios as propaganda popped up all over the dial. It

seemed as if everyone from Beulah and Baby Snooks to Superman and Fibber McGee had enlisted in the war effort, instructing listeners to save cooking fat and tinfoil, plant victory gardens, buy war bonds, and share rations.

Radio invited you in. Listening to the radio became America's national indoor pastime. A radio-bound nation was regularly transfixed by such crazes as "the Mystery Melody" on *Stop the Music* or the "Mr. Hush" or "Miss Hush" contests on Ralph Edwards's *Truth or Consequences*. When Jack Benny and Fred Allen's mock feud made headlines after they met face-to-face at the Hotel Pierre in New York in an insult duel, it climaxed a decade of intraprogram sparring. One year, much of the country went searching for Gracie Allen's fictitious "lost brother." Radio was not just a time killer. It was a way of life.

Radio gave me, as it did the country as a whole, a center. It connected us by the welcoming sound, drifting out of windows on summer nights, of Eddie Cantor ("I love to spend this hour with yoo-oo. /As friend to friend, I'm sorry it's throo-oo-oo . . .") or Charlie McCarthy ("I'll clip ya, Bergen—so help me, I'll *mow-w-w* ya down!") or Gene Autry ("Ah'm back in the saddle aginn . . ."). The shows told us what time it was; clocks were reset and movie times juggled to accommodate *Amos 'n' Andy*. Even more than vaudeville, movies, or pop songs, radio created national jokes, jingles, characters, and whistleable theme songs.

Old radio shows are not nostalgia pills, they're time capsules.

RADIO BECAME THE ultimate populist medium—entertainment by, for, and of the people. It helped give the country a unified sense of itself. It created a common culture no matter what your class, city, or heritage; immigrants learned English by listening to the radio. The history of radio in the 1930s and 1940s is an informal history of pop Americana. Like the automobile, it changed us in fundamental ways. Moreover, the volatile chemistry of car + radio + ballads even altered the country's courtship habits.

Radio changed the face, and upped the stakes, of not merely show business but news, politics, media, promotion, and, most glaringly of all, advertising. Radio was the first information superhighway, but it began as a dusty one-lane back road that, within a decade or two, had become a sprawling, coast-to-coast entertainment turnpike. Radio also

subtly homogenized the country—it gets the credit, or the blame, for partially smoothing out regional dialects by broadcasting a standard speech via velvet-toned announcers, speaking in a pleasant but unplaceable voice. Suddenly, everybody tuned to the same shows and heard the same jokes, was pitched the same pills, soaps, soups, cereals, and cake mixes, fell in love with the same stars, and got the same news the same night. Noted Gilbert Seldes: “Radio—cheap, accessible, and generous in its provision of popular taste—has come to be the poor man’s library . . . his club. Never before has he met so many famous and interesting people, and never before have these people been at once so friendly and so attentive to his wishes.”

Sepia photos show families grouped around a Stromberg-Carlson, gazing at the squatting console. Radio of the thirties and forties was an invited guest, unlike that pushy fifties interloper, television. Nobody was embarrassed to claim radio as a proud piece of the decor with a rightful place in the living room, alongside the sturdy, handsome Victrola and the homey, wholesome family piano, even though Fred Allen’s crusty New Englander, Titus Moody, once observed, “Well, bub, I don’t much hold with furniture what talks.”

UNLIKE OLD MOVIES, OLD SONGS, and even old plays, old radio shows have been mostly dismissed, washed aside by TV’s tidal wave. Yet radio lives on now not merely in memory but, here and there, like traveling ghost bands of Tommy Dorsey and Glenn Miller; it springs up wherever radio buffs gather. This vibrant, burgeoning subculture meets at conventions where fervent believers re-create old shows. People dial in reruns on one of the hundreds of stations that play old shows or run *When Radio Was*, a nightly hour syndicated to three hundred stations and hosted by Stan Freberg, vintage radio’s last star.

For the acutely radio afflicted, however, nostalgia is not a leftover seventies fad or a passing trivia game but an ongoing condition. We long for old radio, real radio—not just call-in shows, soapbox radicals, fragmented pop music formats, and twenty-four-hour news loops that dominate the airwaves and hog the spotlight. With its politicized talk-show hosts and factionalized music stations, radio now separates us where it once united us. What remains stored in the cramped studios of

memory is more vividly current and forever. Nothing that today's hard-breathing Hollywood wizards can concoct is able to impress those of us for whom the pinnacle of virtual reality was reached half a century ago with *The Shadow*.

Old radio tells us where we came from, who we were and are today, and how we got this way. All kinds of phrases, now imbedded in the language, came from radio: "gangbusters" (as in, "He came on like gangbusters"); "B.O." (body odor, as banished by Lifebuoy); "soap opera," "Fibber McGee's closet"; "the hit parade"; "the \$64(000) question"; "Just the facts, ma'am" and, to be sure, *dum-de-dum-dum*; also, "amateur hour"; "stop the music"; "the Shadow knows"; and "truth or consequences."

Other phrases still resonate: "Only the names have been changed to protect the innocent"; "Who was that masked man?"; "Faster than a speeding bullet"; "Happy trails"; "Say good night, Gracie"; "Stay tuned" and "Don't touch that dial!"; "On, you huskies!"; "Meanwhile, back at the ranch"; "Have gun, will travel"; "Keep those cards and letters coming in"; and "Can you top this?" The prototypes include such lingering legacies as Ozzie and Harriet (terminally wholesome couple or family), straight arrow (square and incorruptible, from the Indian hero Straight Arrow); Tonto (devoted sidekick); Jack Armstrong, the all-American boy (young male jock do-gooder); the Bickersons (squabbling twosome); and Mortimer Snerd (hopelessly stupid). Merely hearing the old NBC chimes is like biting into a Proustian cookie. Yet despite radio's remarkable hold on the nation for three decades, it's thought of now almost as a frivolous, faintly embarrassing craze somewhere between pinball machines and marathon dances.

Television buried dramatic radio with a finality from which it never recovered. TV absorbed radio, simply gulped it whole—its personalities, formats, methodology, sponsors, and audience. Radio survives now in packs of cassettes (*The Our Miss Brooks Collection*, etc.) available in Wireless or Signals catalogs and from mail-order houses (from Radiola, Radio Spirits, Radio Yesteryear, and others), curios for curious yuppies or for their sentimental parents and grandparents, who refuse to kiss off the past. The recordings capture a vital show business era that is no more—ancient vaudeville acts, excerpts from famous for-

gotten Broadway plays and movies and musicals on thousands of dramatic broadcasts, rare big-band air checks, and the debuts of unknown voices who became epic names.

Of course, it is possible to make too grandiose a claim for radio, which was, after all, simply cheap entertainment, much of it silly and trashy. Radio was a toy that grew up from a World War I message-sending device into a gadget, then a fad, and, finally, into what one broadcasting historian labeled an “empire of the air”—a lost empire now, whose influence has been underrated, largely ignored, and almost forgotten. The author of a Mary Pickford biography argued that silent films are the only art form to be invented, developed, and abandoned by the same generation, but surely radio also qualifies for this unhappy distinction. Today, speeding along the traffic-clogged superhighway of fax machines, cellular phones, computers, E-mail, cable television, and CD-ROMs, it is as if radio’s golden era had never existed. In obituaries of show biz celebrities, lengthy radio careers are often passed over in a line or omitted entirely. That entire wireless world, a vast, vivid, bustling culture, a true vox Americana, is as remote today as the Incas and the Druids, evaporated into the night air.

Tuning in again to these old shows, reading about them, or talking to many of the people who created the real radio city—actors, announcers, writers, directors, musicians, and sound men—has been a little like reconstructing a once-mighty civilization, long buried, from unforgettable fragments of memory that, half a century afterward, still reverberate in the air. *Listen!*