

Remembering the Radio Revolution

This year marks the centennial of KDKA, the Pittsburgh station that initiated regular programming and sparked a transformation in how we listen to music.

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Time. Space. Music. If the invention of phonograph recordings made musical sound repeatable across time, radio took it instantly across space to the masses. These did more to transform the human experience of hearing music than any others.

But it was radio broadcasting, launched in the U.S. 100 years ago, that made listening easier, more accessible, and more inclusive. You could tune into vast quantities of music without ever leaving your easy chair. Radio decreased the differences between what different communities—urban and rural, Black and white—could hear. For decades, stations were white-owned and mostly barred Black performers, but the radio airwaves themselves were open to all listeners.



Studios of KDKA in 1920

Initially, wise heads had thought that radio should be used for point-to-point national and naval telegraphy and that entertainment would be frivolous. Then in 1920, organized broadcasting of speech and music began in several U.S. cities. In Pittsburgh, Westinghouse Electric & Manufacturing Co.—a maker of radio receivers—established pioneering station KDKA. It became the first station to transmit a scheduled, previously announced program, of presidential election results, alternating with recorded music, on Nov. 2 (Warren Harding won). And to follow it with regular programming for the general public.

Radio exploded. “In all the history of inventing,” exclaimed Outlook magazine in 1924, “nothing has approached the rise of radio from obscurity to power.” As people

flocked to buy radios, sales of other music machines—pianos, player pianos, and phonographs—plummeted. Initially relatively few receiving sets were sold—190,000 in 1923. As stations multiplied—from 30 in 1922 to 556 the next year—the audience grew symbiotically. By the early 1930s, one-third of American homes had a telephone, but two-thirds had one or more radios.

One tremendous draw: You didn't have to buy "software"—sheet music, piano rolls, or records—to play on your hardware. And in the U.S. (unlike in Britain) once you bought your radio, you didn't need to buy a license. Radio became the "poor man's phonograph"—because after you purchased just one piece of equipment, you could listen for free.

Programming in the early years was chaotic, as stations desperately sought talent for the few hours they were on the air. Broadcasts offered drama and a heavy dose of live music, performed in the stations' studios or piped in from ballrooms, theaters or concert halls by local amateur musicians as well as touring professionals. Some Black jazz bands got picked up remotely—Duke Ellington and Cab Calloway from Harlem's Cotton Club, for example. It would take another 20 years or so before recordings overtook live music as the preferred format.

In March 1922, *Billboard* reported 60,000 homes in New York City were equipped to listen to "music entertainments and even entire Broadway productions and excellently programmed concerts from the studios." Sopranos, jazz-inflected dance bands, and all other performers were usually unpaid; they were lured by the publicity.

In 1925, WSM in Nashville began transmitting a barn dance, later renamed the *Grand Ole Opry*—95 years later, the nation's longest-running radio program. In 1926, RCA, headed by the Russian-born David Sarnoff, established the first coast-to-coast American network, NBC. A year later, what became the CBS radio network was established. Through radio, local artists went regional, and regional styles went national.

Prior to radio, musical sound was acoustic. Radio introduced a new kind of experience—electric sound, heard via microphones, vacuum tubes, and amplified loudspeakers. Singers began changing vocal production—instead of having to project their voices to the back of large theaters, they sang close to the



The KDKA Orchestra, led by Maurice Spitalny.

mic, a method that would be called “crooning.” In the early 1920s, audio engineers pioneered microphone techniques that were adopted a few years later by the recording and motion-picture industries. The full-bodied sound of a Duke Ellington record of 1930 would not have been possible without the advances created by radio professionals some five or 10 years earlier.

Radio fundamentally changed the promotion of music. Before, song pluggers worked theaters and song demonstrators auditioned sheet music in department stores. Radio took over as the most efficient way to widely promote a published song, musical act or recording. And radio created a medium for effortless listening of every sort, including music. Radio allowed you to listen to an orchestra or band playing multiple selections of any length without your having to go anywhere or do anything. In some instances, radio prompted a decline in home music-making. Why practice when you could let the professionals do it?

Radio democratized the consumption of American music, making pop crooning, swing bands, country music and opera available to all. Radio sparked the development of an American mass musical culture. Listeners in Tampa, Tulsa and Tacoma could hear the same song, square dance, or symphony simultaneously, through sheer air. With radio, as musical variety in American homes expanded, geography shrank but common experience grew. In today’s more fragmented culture, a product of technological innovations, we can feel the loss of that common ground.

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