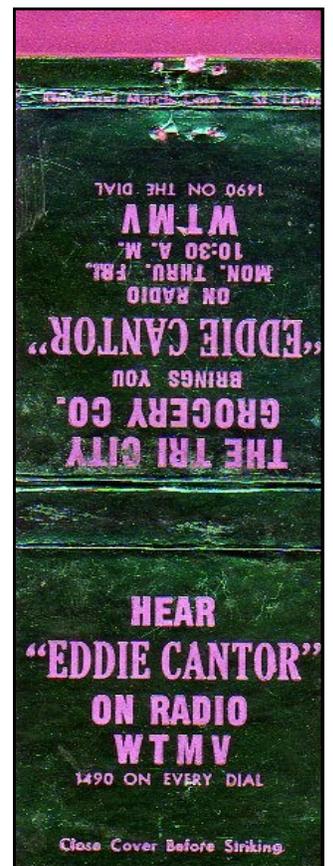
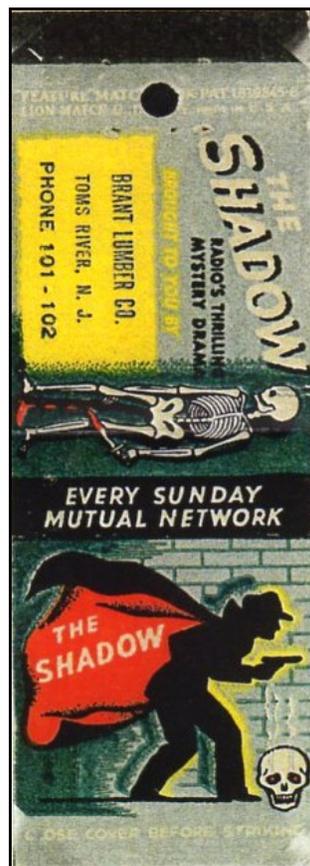
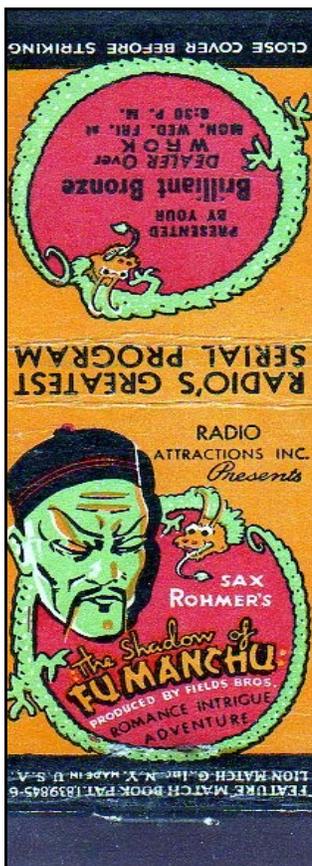


Old Radio Shows

by
Mike Prero

The old-time radio era, sometimes referred to as the Golden Age of Radio, was an era of radio



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programming in the United States during which radio was the dominant electronic home entertainment medium. It began with the birth of commercial radio broadcasting in the early 1920s and lasted until the 1950s, when television superseded radio as the medium of choice for scripted programming. The last few scripted radio dramas and full-service radio stations ended in 1962. During this period radio was the only broadcast medium, and people regularly tuned into their favorite radio programs, and families gathered to listen to the home radio in the evening. According to a 1947 C. E. Hooper survey, 82 out of 100 Americans were found to be radio listeners. A variety of new entertainment formats and genres were created for the new medium, many of which later migrated to television: radio plays, mystery serials, soap operas, quiz shows, talent shows, variety hours, situation comedies, play-by-play sports, children's shows, cooking shows. Since this era, radio programming has shifted to a more narrow format of news, talk, sports and music.

The broadcasts of live drama, comedy, music and news that characterize the Golden Age of Radio had a precedent in the Théâtrophone, commercially introduced in Paris in 1890 and available as late as 1932. It allowed subscribers to eavesdrop on live stage performances and hear news reports by means of a network of telephone lines. The development of radio eliminated the wires and subscription charges from this concept. On Christmas Eve 1906, Reginald Fessenden is said to have broadcast the first radio program, consisting of some violin playing and passages from the Bible.

It was not until after the Titanic catastrophe in 1912 that radio for mass communication came into vogue, inspired first by the work of amateur radio operators. Radio was especially important during World War I as it was vital for air and naval operations.

After the war, numerous radio stations were born in the United States and set the standard for later radio programs. The first radio news program was broadcast on August 31, 1920 on the station 8MK in Detroit. This was followed in 1920 with the first commercial radio station in the United States, KDKA, Pittsburgh. The first regular entertainment programs were broadcast in 1922, and on March 10, *Variety* carried the front-page headline: "Radio Sweeping Country: 1,000,000 Sets in Use." A highlight of this time was the first Rose Bowl being broadcast on January 1, 1923 on the Los Angeles station KHJ.

The earliest radio programs of the 1920s were largely unsponsored; radio stations were a service designed to sell radio receivers. By the late 1920s, radio had reached critical mass. The sponsored musical feature soon became most popular program format. Most early radio sponsorship came in the form of selling the naming rights to the program, as evidenced by such programs as The A&P Gypsies, Champion Spark Plug Hour, The Clicquot Club Eskimos, and King Biscuit Time; commercials as they are known in the modern era were still relatively uncommon and considered intrusive. During the 1930s and 1940s, the leading orchestras were heard often through big band remotes, and NBC's Monitor continued such remotes well into the 1950s by broadcasting live music from New York City jazz clubs to rural America.

Classical music programs on the air included The Voice of Firestone and The Bell Telephone Hour. Texaco sponsored the Metropolitan Opera radio broadcasts; the broadcasts, now sponsored by the Toll Brothers, continue to this day around the world, and are one of the few examples of live classical music still broadcast on radio. Country music also enjoyed popularity. National Barn Dance, begun on Chicago's WLS in 1924, was picked up by NBC Radio in 1933. Radio attracted top comedy talents from vaudeville and Hollywood for many years. Radio comedy ran the gamut from the small town humor of Lum and Abner, Herb Shriner and Minnie Pearl to the dialect characterizations of Mel Blanc and the caustic sarcasm of Henry Morgan.

Some shows originated as stage productions: Clifford Goldsmith's play *What a Life* was reworked into NBC's popular, long-running *The Aldrich Family* (1939–1953) with the familiar catchphrases "Henry! Henry Aldrich!," followed by Henry's answer, "Coming, Mother!" Moss Hart and George S. Kaufman's Pulitzer Prize-winning Broadway hit, *You Can't Take It with You* (1936), became a weekly situation comedy heard on Mutual (1944) with Everett Sloane and later on NBC (1951) with Walter Brennan.

The first soap opera, *Clara, Lu, and Em* was introduced in 1930 on Chicago's WGN. When daytime serials began in the early 1930s, they became known as soap operas because many were sponsored by soap products and detergents. The line-up of late afternoon adventure serials included *Bobby Benson* and the *B-Bar-B Riders*, *The Cisco Kid*, *Jack Armstrong*, the *All-American Boy*, *Captain Midnight*, and *The Tom Mix Ralston Straight Shooters*.

Radio dramas were presented on such programs as *26 by Corwin*, *NBC Short Story*, *Arch Oboler's Plays*, *Quiet, Please*, and *CBS Radio Workshop*. Orson Welles's *The Mercury Theatre on the Air* and *The Campbell Playhouse* were considered by many critics to be the finest radio drama anthologies ever presented. They usually starred Welles in the leading role, along with celebrity guest stars such as Margaret Sullavan or Helen Hayes, in adaptations from literature, Broadway, and/or films. They included such titles as *Liliom*, *Oliver Twist*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Lost Horizon*, and *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. It was on *Mercury Theatre* that Welles presented his celebrated-but-infamous 1938 adaptation of H. G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds*, formatted to sound like a breaking news program.

During the 1940s, Basil Rathbone and Nigel Bruce, famous for playing Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson in films, repeated their characterizations on radio on *The New Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, which featured both original stories and episodes directly adapted from Arthur Conan Doyle's stories.

Some old-time radio shows continued on the air, although in ever-dwindling numbers, throughout the 1950s, even after their television equivalents had conquered the general public. One factor which helped to kill them off entirely was the evolution of popular music (including the development of rock and roll), which led to the birth of the top 40 radio format. A top 40 show could be produced in a small studio in a local station with minimal staff. This displaced full-service network radio and hastened the end of virtually all scripted radio drama by 1962. (Radio in and of itself would survive, thanks in part to the proliferation of the transistor radio, making the medium far more portable than television.) Full-service stations that did not adopt either top 40 or the mellower beautiful music or MOR formats eventually developed all-news radio in the mid-1960s. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Golden_Age_of_Radio]

You can still listen to most of these great old radio shows! Just google "Old Radio Shows", and you'll get lots of web sites where you can download the programs of your choice. I started my own private collection years ago—*Suspense*, *Dragnet*, *Lights Out*, *Sam Spade*, and *Sherlock Holmes*, among others. Try listening to an episode of *The Whistler* or *Nightmare*!

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