

U.S. RADIO HAS COME OF AGE

DISHES and diapers drive the undomesticated slowly in the general direction of drinks and drugs. Somewhere on the brink of both disasters I fell in with Radio, a diversion no less habit-forming and almost as pernicious.

We solved the housing shortage in Salt Lake and at our naval station 30 miles away, by taking a flat at Bountiful, midway between. Intensive irrigation has salvaged it from the desert along the edge of the Great Salt Lake. Its pious name was justified more by human ingenuity than divine generosity. But after the barren winter the countryside grew green and gentle and had there been wheat where there was corn, apples in the orchards instead of cherries, I could have imagined myself in New Zealand.

And bred New Zealand-fashion on the idea that a view is more to life than physical comfort, I insisted against the quiet advice of the natives on choosing the top flat facing the Lake. Deep in the winter when the snow held off the view was fine; spring, with the cherries in bloom, tempted me out into the great outdoors until I came on a snake under one of the trees and retreated upstairs to the safety of my view. But in a summer hot beyond endurance, with the temperatures never under 90 degrees and rarely below 95, I realised in great discomfort that we faced south, had no cross-ventilation, could not prevent the hot air rising from the water-heater in the well of the staircase and could never cool the flat off day or night. I pulled down all the blinds. Deprived of my view and faced with undiluted domesticity I draped the windows with wet sheets, set a fan behind them, left the baby to her own devices on the floor, sank comatose on the bed—and turned on the radio.

Eighteen Hours a Day

Those who defend radio in the States are insistent that its critics must be constant, conscious listeners. There are houses where the radio plays so steadily as a background, that people only notice it when it is turned off. But with a husband gone to camp most days and some nights of every week, I had 18 hours of radio a day. The following winter in Portland, where all the view I had was of rows and rows of housing units and where it rains as steadily as it blows in Wellington, I turned to radio again. Not until I began to know my neighbours, as we emerged from our small flats on to the lawns in the reasonable Oregon summer, did radio lose its all-day fascination.

Just as soon as radio lost its hold as a diversion, my latent powers of discrimination began to stir. At this distance it seems extraordinary that anyone should spend a whole year listening with even half an ear to repetitious heavy-handed advertising, gift-wrapped with quiz sessions, household hints, soap operas, and popular recordings.

Daytime is no listening time in America. The networks reduce the housewife to the common denominator of a moron and beam mediocre sob-stuff

at her for eight hours of absolute escape. Two or three writers like Elaine Carrington, who turns out three serials a day, and the Hummerts, who are supposed to supply at least a dozen, make a merry fortune weaving fantastic dramas of domestic intrigue round the lives of incredible heroines who go Pollyanna-like through complex situations of danger and despair. There is, for example, *Helen Trent*, who has been proving for so long that life is worth living at 35 and EVEN BEYOND that she has reached a ripe 48 in the process: there is *Portia*, who Faces Life with an ardent herd of followers who would die for her and sometimes do rather than embarrass the code of soap operas, which does not allow divorce or an illicit affair.

These heart-rending tales are interrupted at intervals by sober news-casts and more challengingly by programmes whose sponsors value their products so lightly that they tuck a pair of nylons or a refrigerator into the hands of their eager studio audience. All these fortunate females need do is have the right combination of cranky things in their handbags, the largest waist-line of the week, or the greatest number of Siamese cats in their apartments.

It's Better at Night

But if I was bored with week-day radio there is less to complain of at night. Wednesday evenings last winter presented in rapid succession, the half-hour shows of Dinah Shore and Sinatra. Clifton Fadiman's intellectual gang of know-allis on *Information Please*, the Crosby Show, and radio's newest and most devastating satirist, Henry Morgan. This charming fool holds down his job by ridiculing his sponsors and poking fun at the props and pillars of American society from the *Reader's Digest* to the soap operas of his own network. And besides the network programmes the local stations use the evenings for their own dramatic and musical productions, which are almost the only radio vehicle for developing new talent.

There is even less to complain of at the week-ends. Saturday radio is especially good for children when the Superman melodramas of the week-day dinner hour give way to Junior Concerts, local library programmes, half-hour dramatisations of fairy stories and fables, and to

programmes designed for 'teen-agers. There is at least one symphony orchestra broadcasting on a Saturday and from the Metropolitan Opera House in New York there is a matinee performed especially for the radio audience.

Sundays are Excellent

But on 52 days a year American radio reaches an extraordinary pitch of excellence, using to the full its variety of talent and its wealth of experience. If it is jazz you prefer, the best jazz is played on Sundays; if it is orchestral music there are three live orchestras to choose from, each playing for an hour with the very least interruption for advertisement; if it is drama the Theatre Guild is on the air, with the best talents of Broadway and London in the hits of this year and the favourites of the last 50 years. Fred Allen scoffs, Jack Benny fools, Charlie McCarthy reduces radio personalities to absurdity. Choirs sing, the great churches of the nation broadcast across the networks; controversial political issues, both domestic and foreign, are aired on forums and at round tables. Sunday listening is adult fare.

It is no longer easy to break into radio as a performer. Here, as in the movie industry, the star system keeps a firm lid on the upward surge of talent. Radio is also still young enough to have among the first flight of performers and announcers people who were in it at the very beginning, when the same man made the sound effects, wrote the scripts, changed the records, announced the news and sold the advertising time. The only place to start now in American radio is in a small station where the budget does not provide for a roomful of continuity writers, a workshop of sound experts, a newsroom, and a select and highly-paid élite of announcers, production managers, directors, and superfluous vice-presidents.

Spoken Words Must be Written

But the performers are the smallest minority among the industry's staff. Behind every performer there are writers of one sort or another. Almost every spoken word, however effortless and spontaneous it may sound, is written down, from variety shows through the continuity for recorded music, up to newscasts. Serial writing is already in the hands of small syndicates of writers. Serious radio writers of any reputation

The third of a series of articles for "The Listener" by BEATRICE ASHTON, who recently returned to New Zealand after three and a-half years in the U.S.A.

and with any bulk of their work in print are few and far between. Men like Arch Oboler, Norman Corwin, and Millard Lampell are an extreme minority, in face of the fact that the industry lives by delivering millions of words indiscriminately into hundreds of microphones. In 1944 it was estimated that 17,000 radio programmes across the Continent absorbed twenty million words a day.

News falls into two categories. News-casts giving the bare bones of the news of the district, of the nation, and of the world are compiled in the newsroom of each station and are read by the local announcers. News analysts compare somewhat easily with J. B. Priestley and Wickham Steed, of the BBC. But they are in very strong competition among themselves. There are reporters like Walter Winchell and Drew Pearson who take to the air for 15 minutes every Sunday: various and reputable men like Raymond Swing and Martin Agronsky, who used to be heard here during the war: popular conservative idols like H. V. Kaltenborn and the noisy, dangerous sensationalists like Upton Close and Fulton Lewis Jr. After the war the chorus of antagonism against Soviet Russia rose so sharply in the U.S. that men like Orson Welles and Fiorello La Guardia were too progressive for sponsored support. Even CBS, which has a good record where controversy is concerned, did not keep the author of *Berlin Diary*, William L. Shirer, on sustaining time when his sponsor refused to renew his contract.

American Radio is Many Things

American radio is easy to tear limb from limb and not so easy to put together again. But it is more than quiz programmes and soap suds, more than diversion and beamed to a wider audience than the housewives of America. It is a source of news, a means of propaganda, a channel for religious beliefs, a first-rate source of entertainment and whether it likes the role or not, a force for education.

Technically, it is lively, smooth, and alert. Returning to New Zealand newspapers was a pleasure after years of front-page crises, scandal, and sensation. But listening at first to New Zealand radio was not so easy. If there was ever a sluggish silent second from an American station I did not hear it; if the news analysts stumbled and stammered I did not notice it; if there were affected and pedantic announcers they were in the minority. No one was worrying about standard English. If a man was clear and his voice authentic it did not matter whether he came from the Bronx or Alabama.

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RAYMOND SWING

"On 52 days a year American radio reaches an extraordinary pitch of excellence"



FRED ALLEN