

A YEAR'S LISTENING TO U.S. RADIO

AFTER a year's listening to American radio, and three months' broadcasting on the largest non-commercial network in the United States, I returned to New Zealand convinced that, for all its shortcomings, New Zealand radio is by no means so benighted as some of its local critics believe. I found it difficult to explain to American commercial radio executives, who distrust every kind of "state" control, that commercial radio could exist within a state system, that a government department could control radio without continually exploiting it for party propaganda, and that a country as small as New Zealand could provide such variety in programmes as copies of *The Listener* revealed to them. Directors of tax-supported educational radio, on the other hand, have so accustomed themselves to being poor relations in a highly-competitive commercial set-up that they regard a situation in which commercial stations are outnumbered five to one as Utopian.

My chief impressions of commercial radio in San Francisco, Chicago, Boston, New York and several Mid-Western States were of the mediocrity of the material, the vulgarity of the "compères," the triviality of content, the lack of good taste in presentation, and the hideousness of radio advertising, although on television, where monsters juggle cigarettes, beer-cans explode in your face, and synthetic blondes coo over cosmetics, it is even worse. The technically excellent CBS and NBC network programmes reminded me of Hollywood films, with immense know-how and resources directed to turning out trivial programmes based on inept and imaginatively poor scripts. The most damp of soap-operas, stereotyped crime plays, hill-billy sessions, give-away features, raucous variety shows, throbby male and female crooners, and jazz bands, predominate, while the semi-deified Arthur Godfrey draws his folksy way through several (to me) quite inexplicably popular hours daily.

I tired quickly of American radio humour, with its insult-gags, its wisecracks and its monotonously similar situations. The home-town humour of

Fibber McGee and Molly, the impromptu acidities of Groucho Marx, who runs a quiz-show to end all quiz-shows, the frenetic personality of Jimmy Durante, and, occasionally, the suave under-statements of Jack Benny, were pleasing; but I found myself nostalgically sighing for the wit and subtleties of *TIFH*, the homely fun of Ted Ray, and the healthy "jellied-eel" vulgarity of *Variety Bandbox*.

Dragnet, a crime series, is probably the best documentary on American radio; but both this, and such CBS documentaries as *The Fakers*, an exposé of medical charlatans, I found inferior in smoothness to BBC documentaries, which are, incidentally, widely admired and imitated in the United States. Such "cultural" sessions as *Invitation to Learning* and *The Author Meets the Critics* are "gimmicked" down to a "popular" presentation.

Serious music is rarely heard on commercial radio; most music above the "pops" level is inaccessible save to owners of FM (Frequency Modulation) radios. Classical music is broadcast all day by an enterprising Chicago commercial station; and in New York by the *New York Times* station, WQXR, where it is interrupted only by hourly newscasts and decorous advertisements for mink coats and diamond rings. Mid-Western commercial stations confine themselves to brief Sunday afternoon CBS and NBC symphony concerts. Greater New York, with its population of eight millions, has 32 AM and FM stations; but on any one evening, the total amount of serious music broadcast is somewhat less than that from 1YC and 2YC combined, and the greater part of this comes from WQXR and WNYC, the non-commercial municipal station. From educational stations, however, I heard much fine live music, and a wider variety of recordings than the NZBS offers; looser copyright regulations apparently make it possible to play many works unknown in New Zealand. For instance, by diligent searching, I was able to hear most of the tone-poems of Messiaen, and works by Pijper, Gliere, Koechlin, Martucci, Dandelot, Janacek and others. I was surprised to find how little American music is broad-



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cast; save for some pieces by Bernstein, Ives and Piston, I heard scarcely any.

News summaries and commentaries, chiefly of local news, and giving, like most American newspapers, the scantiest attention to world affairs, are popular. Commentators range from the intemperate red-baiting rabble-rouser Fulton Lewis, Jr., to the admirably balanced Edward R. Murrow ("Listen to Murrow tomorrow"). Religious programmes are featured on most stations, and vary from the "old-time" revivalist frenzies of Billy Graham to the dignified Fulton Sheen programme. Although Bishop Sheen, both on radio and television, is a shade too studied and theatrical for my taste, his simplifications do not completely conceal an unusually fine mind.

I found myself driven gradually to an almost total reliance on "educational" (which is roughly equivalent to "non-commercial") radio. These stations alone consistently supply a type of programme like that of the New Zealand YAs and YCs. There are about 80 such stations, AM and FM, operated mainly by universities; the largest group is the tax-supported Wisconsin State Radio network of eight stations centring round WHA, the University of Wisconsin station. I had the pleasure of broadcasting a weekly talk on this network for three months, and also of recording several other programmes, and found from the listener response, not only that American non-commercial listeners are much quicker to express their appreciation by letter than New Zealanders are, but that New Zealand broadcasting technique is evidently acceptable there.

Yet the educational stations have very small and poorly-paid staffs by comparison with commercial stations and even with New Zealand stations; they rely heavily on BBC transcriptions and on voluntary broadcasters. Hardly any local material or services are paid for; plays and poetry-readings are recorded by student-players, for "experience"; visiting lecturers are recorded in lecture-

halls, and many courses are broadcast direct from university classrooms. One broadcaster has done a weekly session from WHA for twenty years without payment. Without the public-spirited co-operation of the university staff and citizens interested in using radio for a better purpose than commercial programmes, such stations could not survive.

In a commercially-dominated system, a licence-fee is a virtual impossibility. Since educational stations are financed by State legislature appropriations, their resources are limited, and, although the script-writers and producers are talented, many of the best go into the commercial field, where the financial rewards are greater, where the technical resources are first-class, and the actors of high calibre. Although I have listened to such stations as WHA, WILL (University of Illinois), WOI (University of Iowa), and KUOW (Washington University), I have heard no drama to compare with the NZBS *Fire on the Snow* or *Moby Dick*, no poetry-readings equal to the best NZBS product, and few discussion panels as free and as lively as some of our own. It is an ironical consequence of the fanatical "free-enterprise" system that while the sponsor-dominated radio with limitless funds at its disposal is grinding out adolescent-minded entertainment, the educational stations are turning out superior programmes with the barely-adequate aid of endowments and what the commercial executives call "socialist" (i.e., tax-supported) assistance.

The National Association of Educational Broadcasters, founded in 1950, is attempting to improve the scope and variety of non-commercial programmes. Through the NAEB, 62 member stations exchange their best programmes, and with the aid of funds from the Kellogg and the Ford Foundations, several series of programmes are co-operatively produced for national use. Since 1950, the NAEB has distributed 30 regular series, including 297 individual programmes, which, however, include BBC and Canadian Broadcasting System features. The general standard of NAEB productions is very high. At the same time, I do not think it is insularity which makes me feel that the NZBS is doing equally good work on a wider scale.

I am convinced, however, that on the regional level, as well as on the national one, there are possibilities for exchange of programmes, and that many American programmes not distributed by the NAEB would be acceptable in New Zealand, just as several locally-made New Zealand features would be welcomed by individual stations in America. The non-commercial stations, continually engaged in struggles for air-space against commercial interests, who lobby tirelessly against "totalitarian" radio and tax-sustained "propaganda" (which means, apparently anything above teen-age level), are always seeking material. I feel sure that New Zealand producers and script-writers are doing work equal to that of the NAEB, and thus that New Zealand would gain a good deal in prestige by making the best NZBS programmes, not only in substantial series, available to American educational stations.

I remain keenly aware of the limitations of our own service, and of arguments against retaining radio as a department of the Civil Service, yet, after exposure to the horrors of American commercial radio and television, I am better able to appreciate the blessings of New Zealand planned variety and of our relative freedom from the insidious blandishments of the huckster.

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out-of-the-way places as Waitangi they made available the number of lines we asked for."

Describing the extensive technical staff movements which will be made during the tour, Mr. Johnston said that at Whangarei, for example, the technical staff of four or five would have to be doubled for the day of the Queen's visit and the day before. "The extra staff will move up from Auckland a day or so before the broadcast with the extra outside broadcasting equipment they need," he said. "When their job in Whangarei is finished they'll go to Hamilton, Rotorua and Gisborne before returning to Auckland. From Gisborne their equipment will be air-freighted to Christchurch. That's what we call a district movement, and there will be about 20 of these by separate parties during the tour."

The technicians chosen to work with the three special commentators who will

travel throughout the country are R. L. Miller, of Auckland, and K. W. Frank and B. W. Major, of Wellington. Mr. Johnston said they were considered to be calm, experienced, resourceful men capable of doing any technical work assigned to them. Working with the producers will be N. K. M. Keen, of Wellington, and A. R. Lewis, of Christchurch, both men with a particular flair for production work. These technicians will come together in Wellington on December 14, when the three chosen to work with observers will draw their vehicles and equipment, and after a final briefing do some short, sharp practice runs in the few days left before the tour itself begins.

Mr. Johnston added that every man on the technical staff of the NZBS, from the most experienced to the most junior, would be used on the big job that the Service had to do while the Queen was in New Zealand.