

Group One: Radio in the 1920s

The first American radio station to make regular broadcasts was KDKA in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, founded in 1920. As more stations followed, people marveled at the wonder of radio, which brought the sounds of remote happenings such as political conventions and sporting events into the home, as well as to public gathering spots with access to a radio. Soon, radio networks, including NBC and CBS, connected dozens of stations together through telephone lines. This allowed listeners all over the country to take in the same programming simultaneously.



Live music dominated early broadcasting; many considered the sound of phonograph records broadcast over the radio to be of inferior quality. Some even thought that recorded music unfairly “tricked” listeners into thinking they were listening to live performances. The picture above shows the Victor Salon Orchestra preparing for a broadcast in the mid-1920s. Watch the clip clip of another orchestra, the Biltmore Hotel Orchestra led by Earl Burtnett, performing much as they would have done during a live radio show.

By the end of the decade, the first radio dramas and comedies—the forerunners of television dramas and situation comedies—began to appear. In 1926, WGN in Chicago aired the first episode of a show called *Sam ‘n’ Henry*, featuring two characters created by comedians Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll, who also performed comedic songs on the show. Listen to the clip of the pair performing “Kiss Your Little Baby Goodnight” in 1926.

Gosden and Freeman used *Sam ‘n’ Henry* as the basis for *Amos ‘n’ Andy*, which debuted in 1928 and became one of the most popular shows in the history of American radio—it ran through the 1950s and was later adapted into a television series. By the end of the 1920s, *Amos ‘n’ Andy* could be heard

on more than 70 stations across the country. Gosden and Correll, who were both white, played African-American characters. Their portrayals are widely considered racist by today's standards, but they reflect what was unfortunately acceptable in American society before the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s.

In his book *Unfair to Genius*, about lawsuits in the music industry in the 1920s–1940s, author Gary A. Rosen compares the early days of radio to the formative years of the internet, pointing out that it was relatively free from government regulation and thus a breeding ground for rapid innovation in the kinds of things that could be broadcast. Perhaps more importantly, it allowed listeners to hear music free of charge, without having to buy recordings.

Below is an excerpt of the listings for radio programming in Los Angeles from the *Los Angeles Times* of Thursday, March 21, 1929:

<p style="text-align: center;">12 noon to 1 pm</p> <p>KEJK – Luncheon concert. KFI – Reports, talk, music. KFWB – Studio. KHJ – Concert orchestra to 12:30; Los Angeles Times world-wide news at 12:30 KNX – Phonograph records; talks. KPLA – Classical recordings.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">8 to 9 pm</p> <p>KFI – Symphony to 8:30. KHJ – Sponsored. KFWB – Orchestra and sextet. KMTR – Symphonic. KNX – Sponsored.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">1 to 2 pm</p> <p>KEJK – Phonograph records. KFI – Miami speed boat races. KFWB – Music and talks. KHJ – Band; Charlie Wellman. KMTR – Program. KNX – Book talk at 1:30.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">9 to 10 pm</p> <p>KEJK – Symphony; U.S.C. at 9:35. KFI – Bob and Monte, and Nora Jorgenson. KFWB – Orchestra and soloists. KHJ – Studio to 9:30; surprise prog. 9:30. KMTR – Opera hour. KNX – Luboviski trio.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">2 to 3 pm</p> <p>KFI – Helen White and others. KFWB – Baseball at 2:15. KHJ – Dog talk to 2:30; Dorothy Cole. KMTR – Spanish program. KPLA – Talks; phonograph.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">10 to 11 pm</p> <p>KEJK – Cook, Light and others. KFI – Trocuderus dance orchestra. KFWB – Concert orchestra. KHJ – Earl Burnnett's dance orchestra KPLA – Studio dance band.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">3 to 4 pm</p> <p>KEJK – Hollywood Harmony Trio. KFI – Alma and Adele Howell. KFWB – Baseball. KHJ – Matinee melody masters. KNX – Phonograph records.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">11 pm to 12 midnight</p> <p>KEJK – Russian stringed ensemble. KFWB – Fox's dance orchestra. KHJ – Earl Burnnett's dance orchestra. KMTR – Vic Meyers' dance orchestra. KNX – Gus Arnheim's dance orchestra.</p>

Discussion Questions:

1. How do you think people got their news and entertainment before radio was invented? How would consuming news or entertainment over the radio be different?
2. What other new experiences might radio have provided for listeners in the 1920s?
3. Look at the radio listings from Los Angeles in 1929.
 - What types of broadcasts were the most common? What kinds of music seem to have been most popular?
 - At what time of day was music by dance orchestras generally broadcast? Why do you think this might be, and where do you think people were listening to this music? What evidence can you use to support your answer?
4. Historians have described radio as an important force in the creation of a “mass culture” in the United States in the 20th century. What might they mean by “mass culture”? Overall, what do you think was the impact of millions of Americans listening to the same thing at the same time? What technologies allow us to do this today?
5. In what ways was radio in the 1920s like the internet today? Based on what you have learned, do you think this is a valid comparison? Why or why not?