

Sounding Off on the Radio

By Jessica Kay Ruhle*

From *Tar Heel Junior Historian* 49:2 (spring 2010).

Images may differ from those in the original article.

Can you guess what these four things have in common: salt; a metal cookie sheet; a long, hollow tube full of pebbles or beans called a rainstick; and a sheet of high-impact polystyrene (a clear plastic)? Did you guess that, together, they can make the sound of a very impressive thunderstorm? Throw in a wind machine, and you practically have a hurricane brewing!

Sound effects like these brought a sense of authenticity and energy to the comedies, dramas, and westerns broadcast over the airwaves in the years before many families had televisions. It may be hard to imagine in today's world of high-definition television, complicated computer games, and IMAX and 3D movies, but in the 1930s, live radio was just becoming the hot new medium. It provided news, offered escape from problems, connected people in distant areas, and shaped public opinion.

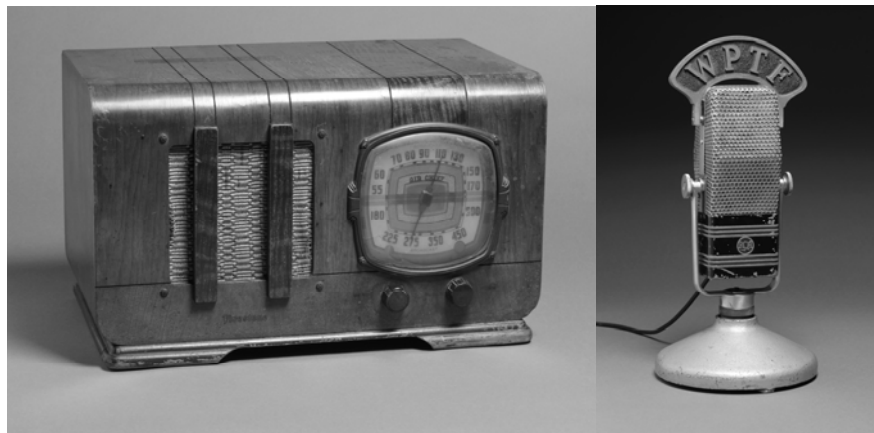
During the 1920s, radio broadcasts began transmitting news, culture, and popular entertainment. Before then, radio had mostly been used as a means of military communication. The first North Carolina radio station, WBT, started broadcasting in Charlotte in 1922. WPTF, an AM station founded in 1924 in Raleigh, began broadcasting sports, the State Fair, and political events in the 1930s. In June 1937, for example, First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt spoke to a large audience through WPTF, from the Strawberry Festival in Wallace.



Eleanor Roosevelt, wife of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, speaks to a large audience through WPTF radio during a June 11, 1937, appearance at the Strawberry Festival in Wallace. Governor Clyde Hoey is visible to her right. *Image courtesy of the North Carolina Museum of History.*

The first popular radios cost the equivalent of about \$600 today, and listeners had to use earphones. The cost went down, and the technology of both electric and battery-operated radios improved. By 1931, one in seven North Carolina families owned a radio, and the number continued to increase. Neighbors often gathered around one family’s radio. They listened to programs like President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s “Fireside Chats,” comedy show *Amos ’n’ Andy*, and Rocky Mount native Kay Kyser’s *Kollege of Musical Knowledge*. Children enjoyed hearing shows like *The Adventures of Superman* and *The Lone Ranger*. Some popular radio shows later became television programs. Radio grew in popularity and importance to the point that Orson Welles’s 1938 *War of the Worlds* program (based on the H. G. Wells book) convinced millions of terrified listeners that Martians were invading Earth.

As radio evolved, so did the sound effects that brought stories to life. The production of live sound effects became a fully developed technique and profession that continues to be part of the entertainment industry today. Radio programs of the 1920s did not have a great need for sound effects because most consisted of music, poetry, and preaching. The 1930s, however, experienced an explosion in radio sound effects. Most popular radio shows were dramas—detective shows, mysteries, soap operas, westerns, and science fiction programs. The audio required many realistic and recognizable sounds.



(Left) A family in Bertie County owned this Firestone radio, ca. 1935-1941. It was called a farm radio, because it used batteries, and many rural areas still did not have electricity. (Right) An RCA microphone used at Raleigh’s WPTF in the early 1940s but typical of the type used in the 1930s as well. The microphone could capture sound from both sides, including conversation between two radio broadcasters.

Images courtesy of the North Carolina Museum of History

So what actually made the sounds that listeners heard on live radio shows? The sound effects produced for radio during the 1930s included live sounds, as well as prerecorded sounds and music. The recorded pieces included sounds that were too large or expensive to be brought into the studio—things like car engines, airplanes, large crowds, or explosions. Some-times the

sounds of animals were recorded, although many of the best soundmen did their own animal noises, especially the sounds of dogs, cats, horses, or parrots.

Perhaps most intriguing are the ways that soundmen created live, manual sound effects. Need a galloping horse? Just use a set of coconut halves and a piece of plywood. Are there gunshots in the story? Simply gather some rubber balloons and a few pushpins. A body falls to the ground? That sound is easily made with a sack of flour dropped onto the floor or tabletop. Some techniques may seem obvious or commonsense. Others are surprising. For example, the push-and-pull of a stiff plastic bag sounds like unexpectedly realistic footsteps.

Who produced all of these sounds? The first soundmen in the 1930s had no formal training. They came from backgrounds as varied as theater technical crews, the percussion section of a band, or simply the most recent hire at the radio station. Those who succeeded in the business were those who proved their extreme creativity and exceptional problem-solving skills. Their talents enabled them to bring the stories of radio alive in homes all across the country.

The next time you are watching your favorite movie or television program, think about how important sound is to the viewing experience. And consider how far the entertainment industry has come in the past 75 years!

**At the time of this article's publication, Jessica Kay Ruhle was associate curator of education at the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University. She formerly worked at the North Carolina Museum of History.*