

# **Imagination: The Real Art of Radio**

**By Barry Blesser with Geoff Steadman @2008**

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The Golden Age of Radio in the 1940s and 1950s was a magical period worthy of nostalgia for those who are old enough to remember it. I am. It was a special period for many reasons, most of which were historical accidents that cannot be duplicated in the media environment of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Why then should we take another look at this forgotten time? History, while considered boring by many of us who suffered through mundane high school courses, is also a wonderful teacher of fundamental principles that are both universal, and just as applicable today as they were a half century ago. Radio of this period attracted some of the most creative artists and personalities because it was novel, innovative, and without competition. But more importantly, the mood was that of playful creativity without a massive commercial bureaucracy. Rules and formulas had yet to be invented.

Everything was new and there were no imprisoning traditions that required blind obedience. People were creative because they were inventing and having fun doing so. Recreating playful creativity is still possible, albeit on a smaller scale. Some people actually still make a successful career and significant money by being creative—taking a modest risk by deviating from the rigid main stream.

So much for my soap box; now on to substance.

## **Cue the Mountain**

This article began at 3:00 AM when I suddenly awoke with the vivid recollection of a radio spot that I last heard 40 years ago. That spot made a permanent impression because it contained the essence of radio: the power of imagination. For those of you who have not heard Stan Freberg's 1-minute spot promoting the power of radio, you can listen to it on my web site at [www.blesser.net/downloads/RadioSpot.mp3](http://www.blesser.net/downloads/RadioSpot.mp3). In this spot, Freberg describes an imaginary event:

“All right. Watch this. Okay, people, now when I give you the cue, I want the 700-foot mountain of whipped cream to roll into Lake Michigan, which has been drained and filled with hot chocolate. Then the Royal Canadian Air Force will fly overhead, towing a 10-ton maraschino cherry, which will be dropped into the whipped cream, to the cheering of 25,000 extras. All right, cue the mountain.”

This little radio theater continues with sound effects and the cheers of extras. You can hear the cherry dropping into the whipped cream. Even with the relatively primitive sound effects of the period, the images are compelling and funny. Sound effects created a

vivid soundscape, including spatial acoustics. The listener is projected into Freberg's imaginary world of Lake Michigan as a giant bowl of hot chocolate; he concludes with the essence of this media: "Radio stretches the imagination." Stan Freberg is perhaps the most famous and still living representative of that period. Michael Landry and Richard Stone chronicled his creative life in an article "Theatrics of the Mind: Stan Freberg and the Art of Radio," which appeared in *Journal of Radio Studies*, May 2006. During his long life, Freberg has been a satirist, comedian, musician, lyricist, writer, radio and television performer, author, and advertising man. In 1995, he was elected to the Radio Hall of Fame.

There were many other creative talents of the era who also understood the power of imagination. As a kid, I can remember being glued to the living room radio listening to Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall in the syndicated radio drama, *Bold Venture*; Milton Cross transported me into the live performances at the Metropolitan Opera; and the sounds of the Lone Ranger still rattle around in my head. There is very long list of famous radio programs and personalities, fortunately preserved on reissued CDs. Albert Einstein said it clearly. "I am enough of an artist to draw freely upon my imagination. Imagination is more important than knowledge. Knowledge is limited. Imagination encircles the world."

### **Imaginary Worlds**

Except for the passionate fans of the Golden Age of Radio, the average 21<sup>st</sup> century listener is unlikely to get swept away by any of these historic programs. However, in analyzing the period we see several key elements: (1) listeners were transported into a truly virtual world of people and events, and (2) listeners were drawn to the enthusiastic and playful creativity of those who were making these imaginary worlds. From our perspective, these are the two elements that could rejuvenate radio instead of following mass culture towards the lowest common denominator.

While we know that there are some exceptions, the radio announcers of commercial radio are "talking heads" with floating voices in a spaceless recording studio. When received, those voices are projected from dashboards into boring spaces of the listeners' automobile, which is probably stuck in a frustrating sea of traffic. Where is the imagery? There is none.

Doctors listen to the narrative story of their patients; we used mini-stories in this article; teachers use anecdotes to educate their students. Stories can be about real events or imaginary worlds of virtual realities. Radio was the first electronic media of virtual worlds based on sound. It follows the ancient traditions of orators, poets, and story tellers. Yet now that multi-media technologies have advanced the art of virtual world, radio has abandoned its ground breaking innovations of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

What an odd paradox. Multi-media technologies are actually more limited than pure audio because less imagination is required when multiple senses are stimulated. The programming on those technologies spoon-feeds us with a sensory "conclusion." We are not asked to supply imagery, because everything is already complete. We are passive

receivers, not active participants. Imagination engages; imagination is an active process; imagination is compelling. Sound leverages, challenges, and expands our unique human ability to imagine.

Well trained sound engineers believe that they understand sound; successful radio program directors believe that they understand listening. After 40 years in the audio, acoustics, and broadcast industry, I too thought that I was well educated on the essence of my craft. But I had only scratched the surface.

Sound and listening are far more than the physical details of sound waves. We think of sound as the means for understanding language and enjoying music, but more importantly, sound connects us to dynamic events and provides us with social cohesion. As a species, we evolved an auditory system that is deeply wired to a large number of brain substrates. Sound can soothe or agitate; sound communicates emotional nuances. Sound is automatic: always entering our consciousness even as we sleep because we have no earlids. Sound provides a sense of place and space; sound flows around obstacles without respecting private property; sound contains information about temporal sequences; and sound can transport the listener to imaginary worlds.

Sound anchors us in the present, and contributes to our emotional and psychological stability. A half century ago in England, Dr. Roth reported that undiagnosed hearing loss was the primary cause of mental illness in the elderly, and more recently, Dr Zimbardo at Stamford University demonstrated that simulated deafness in normal individuals produced symptoms of paranoia.

Indeed, when we “scratch the surface” we find that sound is far more than audio engineering and wave physics. Sound sustains life.