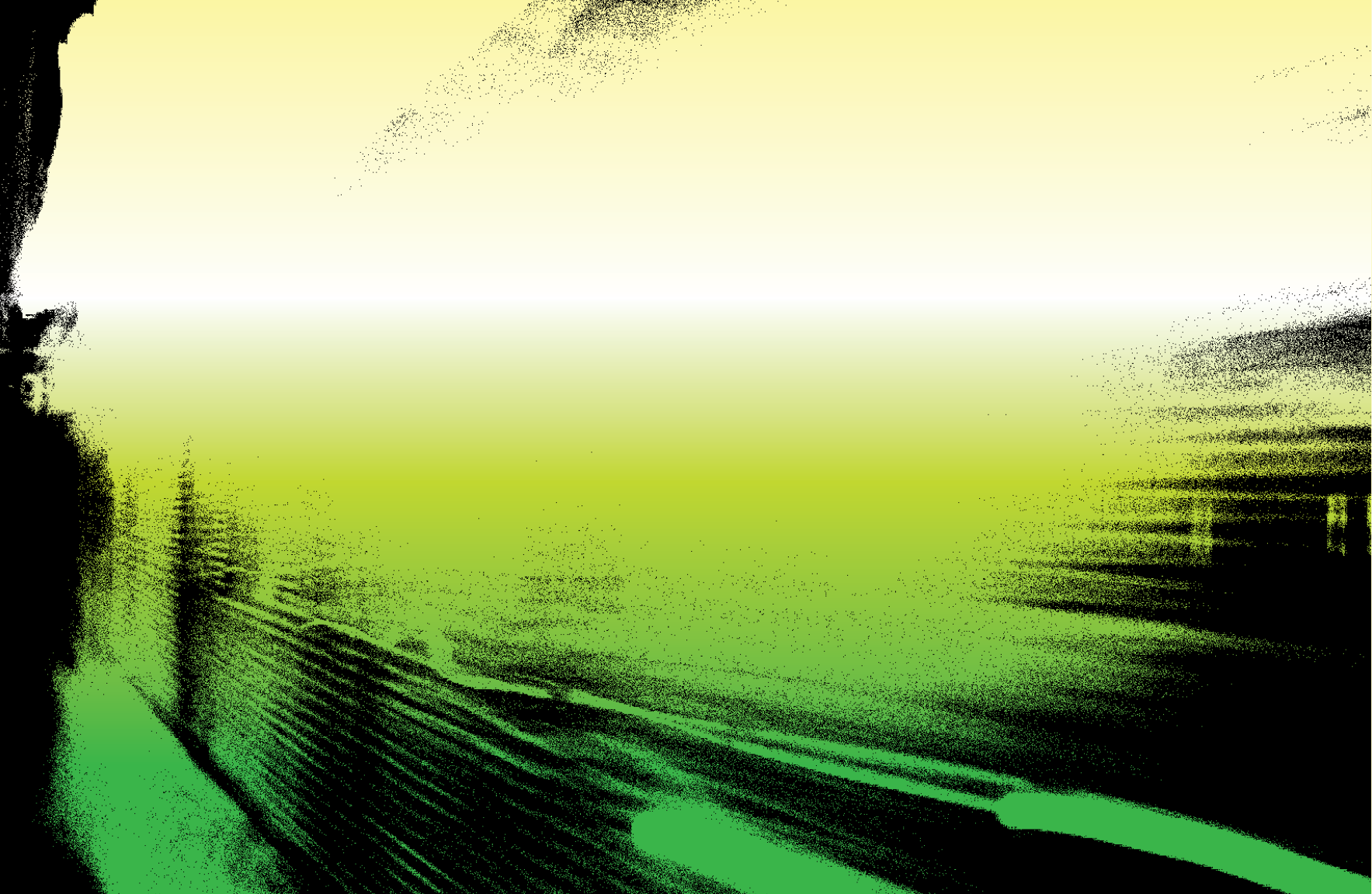


A New Theater of Sound  
by Arthur Yorinks

Sound

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## Author's Note

It's simple what this brief booklet is NOT—it is not a complete history of radio, nor is it a comprehensive text on the origins of radio or audio drama. This is not a textbook and it isn't an academic treatise on America's first mass market medium. There are several fine books on the subject and there are people far more knowledgeable than I who have offered their thoughts on this topic.

What this is meant to be is the expression my particular passion, my pitch for a second look at what was once a vital theatrical form, now all but disappeared. It is a call to arms. No, not to defend or return to what once was. There are reasons that theater on the radio and audio theater has been relegated to a tiny, nostalgic and often amateurish corner of the arts firmament in America.

This is a call to arms to join and expand upon a vision of what theater based on sound can be—a vision that asks for collaborators whose passions align and who would like to evolve and revolutionize (if those two actions can reside together) an early to mid-20th century form and establish it in this century, in this time, for a 21st century audience.

You might refer to this booklet as simply an opinion. Disagree, perhaps, with this opinion, but do not fault it for its paucity of historical facts. My intention is not so much to inform but to inspire—to urge you to consider this medium from a new perspective—and then form your own opinions and ideas. For only in a collective soup pot of opinions and ideas will the birth of a *new theater of sound* take place.

Arthur Yorinks  
New York City

# 1.0 Some Background

## Radio was a mistake.

*It* wanted to be a wireless form of spoken communication—a wireless telephone. *It* wanted to enable one person to reach another person. Instead, radio enabled one person to reach millions.

In the worldwide invention fever of the 19th and early 20th centuries, there were many threads leading to the creation of radio. Many figures and many ideas combusted to conceive this invention. A partial list of contributors include David Hughes, Heinrich Hertz, Jagadish Chandra Bose, Nikola Tesla, Guglielmo Marconi, and Lee De Forest to name only a few. Of course, to name any is to inherently leave out many, so I hope you will be interested enough to follow any one of those names into the patchwork origins of radio.

In its early day, radio was referred to as wireless telegraphy. Initially, it was not meant for entertainment. Creating a mass audience for music, variety, theater, and culture was not the initial driving force for the creation of this technology. The significant point, and it seems almost infantile in simplicity, is that radio, in the early part of the 20th century, was born. Regardless of how it works and regardless of who were the actual mothers of this invention, the historic cultural milestone is that radio was born. It happened.

Before then, and dwell on this for a minute, before then the only way to communicate to many people at once was the printed word. Whether it be reading newspapers, books of nonfiction or fiction—print in all its forms was once the only means of mass communication.

# 1.5

## Reading is a singular and private experience.

You pick up a newspaper or a book and as you read printed words on a page your mind develops images and thoughts and feelings all melding into a running and ongoing ride. Your imagination is actively engaged.

As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect.

The power of Kafka's opening sentence in his short story *The Metamorphosis* is but one example of what the printed word can conjure up. For centuries reading was the dominant communicative force throughout the world. Then came radio.

At first, radio served niche purposes, such as its uses in the military. But soon, this new technology was grasped by enterprising and visionary people who recognized commercial opportunities. Long before the ubiquitous spam e-mails attempting to sell Viagra, there was a quack "doctor," Dr. John Brinkley, on the radio selling his unique cure for impotence. This rise of radio, from a military tool to a mass-market medium, is well documented in many books including Anthony Rudel's *Hello, Everybody!* which charmingly charts radio's early path.

In a rapid amount of time radio became a necessity and almost everybody in America had at least one in their home. By the latter part of the 1930s, 4 out of 5 households had a radio. Nothing in America or the world would ever be the same. For the first time in history, a so-called mass audience was created. The printed word now had competition. And that competition was wireless sound.

In its early days, radio content was hugely haphazard. Selling hardware, the radio itself, was the core of radio's business model, so airing content was just a means toward an end.

From the renegade radio broadcaster, at times setting up his own little station, to the powerful networks of CBS or NBC, the frenzy to come up with and produce content in order to sell radios was intense.

Then, to a handful of imaginative minds, it became clear one could, through radio, reach masses of people to sell not just the radios themselves, but other products—cleansers, soup, soap, or cigarettes. The advertising die was cast. Here was a technology that could reach millions of people at once. And a collective lightbulb turned on. Politicians, musicians, retailers, reporters, anyone and everyone who needed and wanted to communicate embraced the radio.

There are apt comparisons to be made between the advent of radio and the advent of the Internet and I'm not the first one to make such an observation. The birth of radio is an incredibly important moment to comprehend. Think of it. In America, **listening** was becoming the dominant mode of experiencing the world in the first half of the 20th century.

# 2.0 RADIO DRAMA and THEATER ON THE RADIO

The word broadcast dates back to the 18th century. The etymology of adding “er” to the word to form *broadcaster* dates to the early 1920s. Yes. Radio! As the history of the invention of radio is a mosaic, so too is the origin and history of theater on the radio. Though theater on the air cropped up in England, Canada, and other countries around the world in the 1920s, I think it’s safe to say that it was in the United States that it had its true beginnings. To start with, there were several experiments in producing theater across a number of commercial stations. Operas were broadcast from Chicago; Broadway musicals with original casts aired from Newark; plays were presented here and there throughout the country. As early as 1922, radio drama was broadcast on a regular basis from a station in Schenectady, New York. Like wildflowers in a fertile field, theatrical works on the radio bloomed.

But what really is radio drama? Loosely, it is scripted work with dialogue, music, and sound effects combined to tell a particular story. In the wide-open landscape of 20th century radio, theater was a catch-all phrase to describe stage plays read over the air, docudramas created for the medium, serials, comedies, soap operas (yes, these were dramas sponsored by soap companies to sell soap); even popular films were adapted for the radio.

But let’s step back for a moment. To begin to understand what it means to communicate a story solely by the use of sound, we have to broaden our lens a little. Let’s start with the nature of sound itself. At the risk of being a bit philosophical, I would say that rhythm is at the core of all artistic work. Yes, I could argue that this theory holds true even in the field of visual arts, but that’s for another time. In sound, rhythm is key. I once had a Fred Astaire recording that included long sections of only his tap dancing. Why would anyone listen to (rather than watch) someone tap-dancing? Well, the evocative and compelling nature of the sound of those taps told the tale. Pure exhilaration. Primal rhythmic ecstasy.

We are moved by the things we hear. The wind. Thunder. A fire truck siren. A scream. A footstep. A symphony. We compile, throughout our lives, experiences, emotions, and images in our mind that we associate with sounds. Radio drama utilizes those associations, those visceral responses to certain sounds to drive narrative and mood in a theatrical form. Punctuate the sound of the human voice in dialogue with evocative literal effects and then wrap it all up with appropriate music; direct and edit this whole goulash with rhythm and you have radio drama. But wait! One missing ingredient must be mentioned here. A critically important ingredient. Silence.

No theatrical tool could be more potent in audio than silence, the total absence of sound. I’ll mention here a genius practitioner of silence—Jack Benny. Listen to the priceless clip from his weekly radio show in which the question is asked: “Your money or your life?” to Benny’s legendary skinflint character. And then note the silence, the long silence . . . interrupted by first a wave, then a tsunami of laughter. Laughter is evoked from no sound at all. From silence. You see nothing. You hear nothing. But you are convulsed all the same. That is rhythm . . . that is theater on the radio.



## Radio, in the beginning, was a free for all.

Whatever someone with access to the airwaves could throw up into the ether was broadcast, and hence the airwaves were cluttered with all sorts of basic ephemera. Trying to program for 365 days a year, 24 hours a day, there were many slots to fill.

Radio indeed was an advertiser's nirvana. To reach that many people at once created a Coney Island-like landscape of the radio dial. Everywhere you turned, there was something different to listen to. In various years, turn the dial one way and you had a hugely successful variety show hosted by Rudy Vallee. Turn it another way and you had the extremely popular ventriloquist, Edgar Bergen, and his dummy. Or preachers screaming out virulent propaganda. Or the president holding virtual fireside chats. Concerts. Comedies. Ongoing serials. There seemed to be something for everyone. And a lot of "cotton candy."

It's fascinating to note that the popularity of radio in all its garishness had a firm anchor in Chicago where the notorious *Amos 'n' Andy* show originated. Though the show had an earlier incarnation in the 20s, it premiered with the title *Amos 'n' Andy* in 1929, and by 1931 this situation comedy—characterizing (and grossly stereotyping) a slice of Harlem life—was listened to by fully one-third of the entire American population. George Bernard Shaw, after visiting the U.S., is famously quoted as saying, "There are three things which I shall never forget about America—the Rocky Mountains, Niagra Falls, and *Amos and Andy*." In 2009, some 80 years later, radio addresses from the White House are given by another quite famous Chicagoan. Radio, and America, have come a long way, though assuredly not far enough.

In its early decades, as the radio airwaves became congested with rampant commercialism, network executives wanted to forestall brewing government interference in the running of their stations. The government had begun to make noises about regulating this new medium, and this regulatory buzz motivated the networks to put some "classy" programming on the air. For that reason, and to help round out holes in network schedules, an entire category called "sustaining" programs (basically programs without sponsors) started appearing in the listings.

These sustaining programs were not about the lowest common denominator. In fact, one could look at this part of radio as a gigantic workshop where passionate writers, performers, and directors experimented with a brand new form—a form forged by the technology of radio itself.

Out of this corner of radio came people like the poet Archibald MacLeish, Norman Corwin, and of course, Orson Welles. In 1936, Irving Reis, a former engineer, along with William Robson, a director, premiered a weekly dramatic series called *Columbia Workshop*. Reis and Robson firmly believed in using all the tools that radio technology had to offer. They experimented with sound to push and twist and actually invent a theatrical form. And in this workshop, this laboratory, experiments abounded. MacLeish took the elements of poetry and applied them to radio drama in pieces such as *The Fall of the City*. In the 1937 broadcast of *Fall*, starring Orson Welles, one can easily see the antecedents of structure (the “on the scene” fictional reportage) for Welles’s *The War of the Worlds* broadcast of 1938.

Orson Welles, by some accounts a theatrical prodigy, came to radio first as an actor. He gave voice to countless characters, none more famous than the title character of the program *The Shadow*. An intensely energetic and fearless artist in his youth, Welles was perfectly suited to bring his theatrical talents to the radio. As with Reis and many others, Welles took to embracing the current technology to create radio drama.



After much success on stage with his Mercury Theater company, Welles was given a radio slot by the Mutual company in 1937 in which he presented a multipart adaptation of Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables*. CBS, in the summer of 1938, brought the Mercury Theater (Mercury Theater on the Air) to its network for a weekly dramatic series. It was here that Welles, along with John Houseman, the writer Howard Koch, the composer Bernard Herrmann, and a repertory cast, created radio drama out of classic and contemporary literature. From *Dracula* and *Treasure Island* to *The Magnificent Ambersons* and *Jane Eyre*, Welles and company delivered radio drama to a small radio audience. That audience, and the entire country, took notice when part of the American population thought Martians had landed in New Jersey after listening to the iconic radio play *The War of the Worlds*.

Later in life, in a conversation with Peter Bogdanovich, Orson Welles dismissed the notion that he innovated anything original on film. (That statement is surely debatable.) But what he did give himself credit for was the invention of the use of narration in radio drama. Indeed, *First Person Singular* was the original name of Welles's dramatic efforts on radio.

This theatrical conceit, and perhaps all of radio drama, was brought to the very heights in the form of Lucille Fletcher's radio scripts—most notably *Sorry, Wrong Number* and *The Hitchhiker*. Created for the series *Suspense* (William Spier, producer and director), Fletcher's works are definitive examples of radio drama in the 20th century.

They are not "high art" pieces of theater. They are not, in the classical sense, poetry or literature or landmarks of playwriting. But if you want to get a sense of what listening was all about in the heyday of radio, if you want to understand both the simplicity and minimalism of radio theater as a form, if you want to hear the elements of this medium put together seamlessly, then you can do no better than by listening to Lucille Fletcher's plays.

Ms. Fletcher, in speaking about *Sorry, Wrong Number*, gives a typically concise description of a successful radio play: "This play was originally designed as an experiment in sound and not just as a murder story, with the telephone as its chief protagonist. I wanted to write something that by its very nature should, for maximum effectiveness, be heard rather than seen."

**Theater of the Imagination**—it's a nickname that has been used, and perhaps overused, to describe what radio drama strives for. It is also an apt description of *Sorry, Wrong Number*. In Ms. Fletcher's script you know who the protagonist is, what she wants, what her condition is, where she is, what time it is, what her problem is, and ultimately what becomes her fate; all of it constructed—sound by sound—to engage the listener's imagination, to lead the listener to interact and be an active participant in the theatrical experience.

The process of creating this kind of work is unique. Playwrights are not natural radio writers, nor are authors or screenwriters. This is a distinct medium with unforgiving rules. If you turn silent filmmaking inside out, you might come nearer to what it is like to create radio drama. And in listening to this work, take note that some of it was done live in front of an audience. The director had to edit on the fly and end precisely on time—be it 22 minutes or 56 minutes or whatever the radio "clock" allowed. Racing across a tightrope while carrying a stopwatch, could be an appropriate metaphor.

There was a wealth of radio drama produced in the 1930s and 40s and even into the 50s in America. And this brief mention of a few works cannot do justice, by a long shot, to the entirety of what was created. Some of the work is now dated. Some of it wasn't all that good when first produced. Some of it is brilliant. I encourage you to listen, for only by looking (and listening!) to the past, can one move forward.

Even with this great body of content, and it is hard to overemphasize radio's centrality to American life in the first half of the 20th century, radio drama began to wither in the 50s. And with the exception of a valiant effort by Himan Brown to resurrect it on CBS in the 70s, it was basically gone from any serious commercial distribution by the second half of the century.

There are many reasons for the demise of radio drama in this country. One could argue that America is not all that heavily invested in the theater arts to begin with, certainly not in comparison to England, for one example. And when television came on the scene and the pace of life inevitably quickened, taking the time to listen to something on the radio without distraction, without multitasking, faded from our experience. There is, at least in part, a cultural component. Evidence of this is in the fact that radio drama is alive and well in other parts of the world.

Radio drama is actively created, produced, and listened to in many countries. England's BBC and Canada's CBC are examples of ongoing radio theater programming.

Maybe due to the long tradition of theater in England, it is not uncommon for playwrights to cut their theatrical teeth on radio plays there. Tom Stoppard wrote many radio plays from the 1960s into the early part of the 1990s. In those plays (some more "radio" than others) Stoppard is clearly experimenting with this form of writing. With the spoken word being one of the basic elements of radio drama, Stoppard's masterful use of it makes for compelling listening.

Yet, there seems to be no such tradition in the United States. It's my belief that radio drama is looked down upon (I suspect it is the stepchild of theater in England as well) as something old, something "lesser" than real theater. If writing for film is one rung down from writing for the theater, and writing for television is one rung down from film, writing for radio is off the ladder completely. Today, if you told someone you wrote plays for the radio, most wouldn't know what you were talking about.

## 2.75 What Happened

**Here we come back to that all important factor—listening.** Yes, it's true that we have collectively lost the skill of listening. That we have become a visual society (where television sets and tablets are used as babysitters for young children) is without doubt. It's also true that the economics of commercial radio and even public radio have, of late, prohibited any real ongoing production of theater on the radio. Radio was always a medium for the masses, and to sustain cultural endeavors within that sphere is not an easy task. Maybe it's impossible.

Radio drama, in the later part of the 20th century, all but disappeared. Significant efforts here and there sprang up on public radio, but faded quickly. For the most part, radio theater (if listened to at all) carried a patina of nostalgia, like riding in an antique car. Sure, the car moves you from one place to another, and sure you can appreciate its beauty. But it can never escape its fate of being of another time.

Radio theater or audio theater suffers from the same affliction. Audio theater and the experience of listening to it now is one of distance. It just seems quaint, and sadly most of those interested in working within the medium approach its creation covered in that old-time glow.

Hence, even though there are cultural and economic reasons for radio drama's demise, there are also artistic reasons as well. Producers of radio drama, for example, think that if it is performed in front of a live audience, one must bring in foley artists with coconut shells and bendable saws for sound effects as a sideshow. Would Welles or Corwin still use such tools now if they were producing radio theater? I think not.

The art of doing theater on the radio has also faded because we have lost the artists to make theater on the radio. True radio writers, actors, composers, and directors, are very hard to find. There are hardly any stations producing radio drama and hence the education of professionals has become, at best, an academic exercise. Radio theater has withered on the vine. Even the description "radio theater" has ossified. When we admire radio theater, we admire it like looking at a bug frozen in amber. Lastly, the largest loss suffered by this genre (and the major reason for its petrification) is the loss of bravery to break new ground, essential to any art form.

If you simply place plays on the radio that are meant to be or can be staged, then you are not evolving the medium. In this case, you are simply building an audio archive of adapted stage plays. In the 1930s, Lux Radio Theatre introduced the notion of presenting abridged movies (the program's original conceit was the adaptation of Broadway plays) to a radio audience. Though quite commercially successful, it did nothing to advance the medium of audio theater. There's basically no reason for theater on the radio unless the medium itself evolves to accommodate not only a new age, but a new audience and new technologies.

Sure, there is room for extremely well done audio theater. And by that term I mean skillful and moving pieces, well-produced adaptations of other work created especially for the radio without the wink and nod to another time has its place. Let's call these works classical audio theater. Yet, and this is crucial, these pieces—whether they be adaptations of literature for the radio, such as those done by the Mercury Theater, or other writing—must be attuned to the rigors of audio theater. They must be high quality productions and must utilize sound—dialogue, effects, and music—to propel the narrative and compel the listener. Otherwise, the work is simply a reading. And as such, it is not theater. Unadorned readings—be they scripts or stories captured on audio as in audiobooks—may be of interest but, I would argue, they are not theater.

# 3.0

## What is Next Within The Renaissance of Listening

So, is there any future for audio theater? There are many who thought it was never theater to begin with and there are those who have happily attended its funeral and burial. Yet amazingly, in the early years of this new century, we find ourselves at the grand opening of **a renaissance of listening**. And just as invention in the early part of the 20th century brought about a new experience of listening, this current *renaissance of listening* has been fueled by technology. A current wave of technological invention has brought about another cultural explosion evidenced in how we now live with new ways of listening in the 21st century.

Americans “go” places. We run, we walk, we drive, we train, we fly, we commute, we're always moving. And though there have been portable methods of listening as far back as the transistor radio, none of the previous methods of audio listening (and distribution) have had a greater impact than the mp3 player, the iPod in particular, and now the smart phone.

Suddenly, we listen again. And with a fury. With billions of downloads from iTunes and billions of phone subscriptions around the world, this

*renaissance* is undeniable.

Now, it is true—the act of sitting around a large piece of radio furniture and listening to hours of audio entertainment is gone. And to attempt to re-create that is not only impossible, it further pushes the medium of sound toward a museum-like living death; a medium left only to be studied and appreciated from afar. But, a window has opened for redefining and reinventing, if you will, audio theater.

Let's step back for a second to where we started—we spoke of print and reading being the form of mass communication before radio. Reading is an intimate act. It's personal. It utilizes the imagination. Now, notice how this *renaissance of listening* even includes listening to books. Is that theater? No. I don't consider so-called full-cast readings to be theater. But it is another undeniable example of how listening has returned to our cultural life.

It shouldn't be surprising. You see there isn't any other experience that is the same as listening. Listening, like reading, is intimate, private, personal. It uses the imagination, it is interactive, it is not passive. True enough, the attention span for listening has diminished. That is a fact. But young and old, we download huge numbers of songs, we listen to books and podcasts; we are plugged in. Sound still has enormous power to move and compel people.

For those who are interested in making theater with sound at its core, we can learn from history, we must learn from history. We shouldn't throw the baby out with the bathwater. There are useful lessons to learn from classical audio theater. Yet we cannot make "old-time radio drama" anymore and expect to engage audiences in the 21st century. We must experiment with new tools, new theatrical devices, new ways of looking at narrative to bring this **new theater of sound** to the fore.

In addition, the entire distribution of this **new theater of sound** cannot exist on radio alone. It must be found online, on mp3 players, on smart phones, in new places, and without restriction to time and to the dial.

This brings me to another point. Live performance. Presenting a *new theater of sound* in front of a live audience is a compelling component for this form of theater to grow. It has the potential of being another form of laboratory. We must move toward an innovation of experience—multiplatformed, multidimensional, multimedia—BUT, with sound at its core. This means, ideally, not retrofitting existing theaters to create the look of a recording studio, or even worse, the décor of a radio station from 1939. It means creating spaces to redefine what it means to perform this specific kind of work.

The presentation of this *new theater of sound* must explode with new and fresh theatrical ideas. If audio theater arose from an early 20th century technology, then a *new theater of sound* should utilize 21st century invention. No, we don't need to abandon the basics. This *new theater of sound* must tell stories, for in the end storytelling is at the heart of theater. And it must compel an audience to think and to feel something. But remember—sound is at the heart of this form of theater; it is where this theater begins.

**SOUND.** There is a language of sound. Take, for example, the thump of a heart. To most, it is the sound of life. Yet, in the hands of Poe, it meant terror. Or wind. Is it the sound of foreboding or is it the establishment of a new day, a clearing away of the old? We must learn this audio language. And then we must explore associations do various sounds make now; and how can we engage and grab an audience within their sphere of listening in this time, in this age.

This call invites not only interested writers and directors and actors and critics to help shape this *new theater of sound*, but it encourages and implores sound designers and engineers and computer enthusiasts and even gadget lovers to join in and push the envelope of what's possible—to make the improbable and the startling happen. Let us reject the acceptance of audience members leaving the theater wrapped up in the nostalgic buzz of "oh, that was just like old radio."

**So, I bring this to a close with both declarative statements as well as open-ended questions. My mission and my devotion is to not only to illuminate a path but to also inspire you to contribute to this *new theater of sound*. We must explore and define the boundaries and rules of this medium, and then be courageous in hammering at those boundaries and breaking those rules to create a vital and new theatrical horizon.**

## Reference Works

There is a dearth of readily available works that cover adequately the history of radio and the history of radio drama. And unfortunately, there isn't just one volume that completely tells the whole story. Instead, I suggest these works to peruse, but by no means is this a complete or exhaustive list. The following is just a small sample of references:

### BOOKS

*The Encyclopedia of American Radio*  
by Ron Lackmann  
Checkmark Books

*Great American Broadcast*  
by Leonard Maltin  
New American Library

*Hello, Everybody!*  
by Anthony Rudel  
Harcourt

*A History Of Broadcasting: Volume 1, Volume 2*  
by Erik Barnouw  
Oxford University Press

*The Rise of Radio*  
by Alfred Balk  
McFarland & Co.

*Raised on Radio*  
by Gerald Nachman  
University of California Press

*This Is Orson Welles*  
edited by Jonathan Rosenbaum  
Da Capo Press

### CDs

*The 60 Greatest Old-Time Radio Shows of the 20th Century*  
selected by Walter Cronkite  
Radio Spirits, Inc.

(Don't limit yourself to only these works. Read and listen to as much as you can.)