

GATHER 'ROUND THE RADIO
E-NEWSLETTER FOR THE METROPOLITAN
WASHINGTON OLD-TIME RADIO CLUB
THE GRTR STUDIO EDITION



THE EDWARD ELGAR ISSUE

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THE SET-UP

Hello fine listeners, and welcome once again to the mythical confines of the GRTR Studio where we broadcast information and inspiration about radio, music, nostalgia, personality, books, and beyond. Terry Gross continues to be our inspiration. Listen to her “Fresh Air” radio show, live or podcast; check your NPR listings for a station where you can tune in.

OUR NEW VENUE

We're living on a hilltop now, in Wilkes-Barre PA, overlooking the Susquehanna River Valley.

For months, you recall, we broadcast by remote along the Catoctin Range in Maryland. Now we have set up our tinpot studio in a cottage just south of here on the hillside road to Hazelton. Our studio team remains the same – Fred, Beverly, and Bert; and they've been busy finding space for our gear. They fashioned space for a Mud Room, too!

We've signed a new contract; couldn't give our loyal crew a raise, but they can put in for mileage, since this place is quite a distance north. The good news is that the Dayton Dragons are picking up the tab for the commute, and for the coffee and rolls in the Mud Room. The Dragons are in first place and feeling the love. We're also watching the Beloit Snappers, who are playing hard but struggling a bit. It's all in the family, everyone is back in business!

ON THE AIR

Beverly has been watching the sweep of the clock on the wall and has signaled network feed.

Hello everyone, and welcome to the broadcast. The signal's pretty good from our Pocono hillside and we're happy to have landed on our feet.

Fred is piping in a recording from the 1960s; it's the late Jacqueline du Pré playing Edward Elgar's cello concerto, recorded as well in 2019 by Sheku Kanneh-Mason.

We're sifting through the dusty courier pouch here in the Mud Room. Jim Cox, OTR researcher and author called us the other day to talk with us about his interests, his books, and his career. Fred recorded the conversation, so he will play it for us. Also, Bert has gotten in touch with Jack French, who is waiting patiently on the phone. He and Bert will talk about the way that Chicago holds an important place in the history of network radio. And I'll tell you what I found in the BBC Radio archives. It's a documentary about Sir Edward Elgar, his wonderful music and his love of cycling.

Bert signals that Fred has cued up my phone interview with Jim Cox.

JIM COX AND HIS PURSUIT OF ALL THINGS INTERESTING

GRTR:

Jim, this is fantastic, like renewing an old acquaintance! You've written so many books on so many aspects of OTR, but you also had a career as a college professor. When was the big change from college professor to OTR author?

JIM:

No short answer for that one! I was teaching much of this time that I was also researching OTR. But the logic of writing and teaching goes back to my childhood. At the tender age of seven I received a second-hand Smith-Corona typewriter. Instant fascination with those keys! An early interest in writing found new expressions. Soon I was pounding out neighborhood newsletters on whatever was available - onion skin paper, ditto, mimeograph, joined by teen aspirants who shared publication fever. And since I was an early radiophile, I gave endless hours to the tubes of an RCA Victor set. Dual addictions meshed, adding radio columns in newsletters. After penning a few tomes on non-radio topics, I waited for someone to offer a new definitive guide to daytime radio drama. It didn't happen. I yielded. My 1999 release gained mild recognition. There were more underreported niches and I filled them with 18 of 23 published volumes.

GRTR:

I've heard that you became interested in soap operas while still a young lad. True?

JIM:

True. My into occurred when home from school (summers, holidays). Mom listened to *Wendy Warren & the News* while fixing lunch. She tuned in for Douglas Edwards' headlines she said. But terroristic intrigue in the subsequent storyline about America's international enemies never let her turn off the radio as Edwards finished. She listened intently; so did I. In time I found more

anarchy and evildoers on *Perry Mason*, *David Harum*, *Front Page Farrell* and *Just Plain Bill* that held me at rapt attention as the culprits and chases evolved. Another dimension occurred as I carried an afternoon newspaper route in those years before air-conditioning. Housewives kept screened windows raised in hot months and radios blasting *Backstage Wife*, *Stella Dallas*, *Lorenzo Jones* and *Young Widder Brown*. As I threw papers on front porches from my bike, I heard dialog from house to house without missing much. By then I was addicted to drama by installment (serials).

GRTR:

Among your many published books, which one was the toughest to research ... and why?

JIM:

Not an OTR work. It was the exhaustive *Rails Across Dixie: A History of Passenger Trains in the American South* (2011). It's the thickest book, expansive, delineating contributions of numerous carriers: Atlantic Coast Line, Central of Georgia, Chesapeake & Ohio, Illinois Central, Louisville & Nashville, Seaboard Air Line, Southern, and several more. I started traveling by train at 3 months and never quit. From the mid-1990s to 2017 my wife and I crisscrossed America by Amtrak on long-distance ventures twice annually, often traversing the same domestic routes a dozen times. We traveled nearly every mile of Amtrak's routes in the U.S. It was another of my passions beyond radio and writing.

GRTR:

You wrote an entire book on Frank and Anne Hummert. What made this couple so special in OTR?

JIM:

By sheer numbers alone they manufactured more radio series than their competitors, you know, they did serials, juvenile drama, music productions, mysteries, and the like. I found over 125 shows they aired. It allowed them to control a huge segment of radio time, to readily attract sponsors and artists,

and carry a lot of weight in patronizing the industry as differing opinions surfaced. They developed efficient methods to streamline production and keep costs to a minimum too.

GRTR:

Pretty amazing, a good story in themselves! A few years ago you disposed of your entire library of OTR books. Any regrets now about that?

JIM:

No because just about anything I'd care to hear again is online. We are fortunate to have technical provisions and people who saved stuff making it possible. Otherwise, I might never have parted with 50 years of books, tapes, records, photos, autographs, and a lot of memorabilia. One more thing ... if it matters at all and likely doesn't ... 17 of my best-known books were released by McFarland & Co. There was an 18th, *Historical Dictionary of American Radio Soap Operas*, published by Scarecrow Press (2005).

GRTR:

Another book that you researched was *This Day in Network Radio* which came out in 2008. That's certainly a different way of looking at a calendar. And when you mentioned *Rails Across Dixie*, I remember your telling me about your trips to Florida and the beaches of the Gulf Coast.

JIM:

Those trips were lovely; I remember wiggling my toes in the sand near St. Pete! So in a way it's curious that when I wrote about Florida in my book about railroads, my interest there was Florida's east coast and that rascal Henry Flagler who undertook the arduous task of building a railroad some 128 miles north to south across such a difficult, shifting landscape.

GRTR:

That's wonderful to hear Jim. A few minutes ago you used a phrases that really struck me, and it probably rings true for most of us: that you looked to find "underreported niches." That's such a nice way to look at what keeps folks going.

JIM:

Words to live by, my friend, words to live by.

GRTR:

Thanks so much for talking with us. Take care!

MUSIC BRIDGE AND DAYTON DRAGONS UPDATE

Beverly is tapping her clipboard, we're a bit late for the break. Bert is signaling that Jack is still on the line. Tell him we'll be just a minute longer, Bert!

Fred is piping in a song cycle by Sir Edward, five poems called "Sea Pictures," sung here by mezzo-soprano Elina Garanča.

As we mentioned at the top of the broadcast, the Dayton Dragons continue as our sponsor. They're playing good ball, on the road now and winning a game in Lansing against the Lugnuts the other night.

The team continues to host recognition nights at the ballpark for Hometown Heroes and activities for the Dragons Kids Club.



CHICAGO RADIO AS DESCRIBED BY JACK AND BERT

CHICAGO RADIO

BERT:

Thanks, Mark; Jack didn't mind a bit, waiting like that.

JACK:

Not at all Bert, and I've got a leading question for ya...
You're a big OTR fan, right?

BERT:

You bet I am, for sure!

JACK:

Okay, can you tell me which city in 1935 produced the largest number of
the dramatic shows ? New York or Los Angeles?

BERT:

Ah, trick question.....it was actually Chicago.

JACK:

Rats! How did you know that?

BERT:

Because we apparently read on-line the same issue of the Chicago
Tribune....the one dated December 8, 1935, with the headline: CHICAGO
LEADS NATION IN RADIO DRAMATIC SHOWS."

JACK:

You got me again, Bert. That's what I'm reading on my computer screen
right now.

BERT:

If memory serves, over 40 different radio dramas originated in the Windy
City.

JACK:

Right-O....and the article also says that the listeners' favorite actors were nearly all in the Midwest. Only one actor in New York and another in Hollywood were named as top favorites in a recent poll.

BERT:

My college English professor would have said that related to the manner of their speech. The Midwestern dialect became the American standard on the airwaves.

JACK:

Indeed it did....the growl of New Englanders, the Bah-stun accent, the Southwest drawl, and the harsh Nu-Yawk vocalization all lost out to the pure Midwestern vocals.

BERT:

Of course the time zones contributed to many shows relocating to Chicago from New York and thus the cast and crew avoided performing the same episode three hours later for the West coast.

JACK:

Sure, Chicago would just air it one time; so the East coast would hear it one hour later, their time....and only a two hours difference for the West coast.

The Tom Mix Show, as well as *Empire Builders*, were just two of the dozens of shows that debuted in New York but later moved to Chicago.

BERT:

And there were many series that originated in Chicago and ran for years there. I'm thinking of *Amos & Andy*, *Jack Armstrong*, and many of the soap operas too.

JACK:

Oh goodness, yes, the Chicago soaps...*Ma Perkins*, *Backstage Wife*, *Romance of Helen Trent*, *Bachelor's Children*, *Story of Mary Marlin*, etc.

BERT:

Both CBS and NBC, who aired most of the soaps, filled the afternoon with these 15-minute domestic serial dramas. And Proctor & Gamble sponsored a lot of them.

JACK:

As a kid, I listened to the juvenile shows that were produced by Mutual, but their productions were divided among many cities. Chicago produced the *Tom Mix Show and Captain Midnight*, but *Adventures of Superman* aired from New York City.

BERT:

Yup, and Mutual's *The Lone Ranger* was produced in Detroit, as everybody knows.

JACK:

Chicago radio was also responsible for one of broadcasting's most compelling and chilling series, *Lights Out*.

BERT:

And don't forget the series that virtually everyone thought was coming from Manhattan....*The First Nighter Program*. Despite the opening with the sounds effects of Broadway and 42nd Street, the series always aired from Chicago.

JACK:

Bert, I'm going to have to end this chat now.....Cathy and I have some errands to run and they can't wait.

BERT:

Okay, 'bye for now...and stay safe. Always good to talk to you.....

JACK:

You too, ol' buddy....Goodbye.

Thanks very much, Jack, and nice presentation, Bert.

Beverly signals that we are approaching network feed and that I'm next.

BICYCLES AND MUSIC IN A GRAND STYLE

We are indeed back in business! Now we can take a look at a documentary from the BBC Radio 3 Archives. It's 22 minutes and was played at the intermission of a live concert at Barbican Hall in London a few years ago. It details the inspiration that Edward Elgar felt as he was cycling the roads and country lanes around his home near Great Malvern in Worcestershire.

Ambient sound is one of the best innovations used in sound recording. It lends an immediacy to the voice and the place. The creak of shoes on an old staircase begins the audio, and the BBC host opens a drawer and takes out a map, describing how Elgar had penciled in the routes that he and his friends had taken in good weather. The swoosh of cars driving by on a country road is the next audio, as a music scholar from Cambridge remarks that the beauty of the landscape surely had an energizing effect on the composer. The tinkle of a bell on the handlebars is next as our two hosts start out on the road.

They visit with a social historian who tells them about the advent of cycling in the early 20th century and the ensuing change in leisure pursuits, the fashions that riders wore (heavy tweeds and knickerbockers), and the relatively high cost of one of those new machines. Elgar called his bike Mister Phoebus, since it was a Royal Sunbeam, and he paid for it with a large sum from the fee he had received for his choral masterpiece "Dream of Gerontius."

He loved his bicycle and his daughter was there as well!

Photo from the <https://www.elgar.org> website.



Our hosts are rather breathless as they pause roadside. They compare Elgar's inspiration in being outdoors to Beethoven's taking a notebook along when he was strolling in the Vienna Woods. That's an apt comparison because of the beauty and grandeur that those composers poured forth over the years.

The cars continue to swoosh by and we can hear the sound of a light rain falling. Our hosts have returned to the gate of Elgar's house. They remark that even in his day the country lanes were becoming busier, and Elgar made fewer excursions. Our host tells us that they are quite close to the churchyard which is Elgar's final resting place. The rain persists and we can hear birds chirping. The Cambridge music scholar says that she imagines that these lovely sounds of nature have always been timeless in comfort and inspiration.

MUSIC BRIDGE AND NETWORK FEED

Fred is piping in a stirring piece from the "Enigma Variations," and this takes us to network feed. Thanks to Bert, Beverly, and Fred, and to all our listeners who are tuning in. Keep those card and letters coming, always a pleasure. Soup and sandwiches in the Mud Room? But of course!

Thanks ever,
Mark Anderson
Wilkes-Barre PA

