

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



THE CITYSCAPE ISSUE
NOVEMBER 11, 2020

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 Studio crew is ready from our homes along the Catoctin Range. Bert and Beverly are watching the sweep of the clock towards network feed; Fred has coaxed the creaking old sound board past its squawks and

hums, and he's piping in Max Steiner's Oscar-winning orchestral score for the 1942 film "Now, Voyager." The reeds and the strings exude optimism as they chart the cautious awakening of a beleaguered young lady to the glories of a life rich in possibilities.

ON THE AIR

Hello everyone and welcome to the broadcast! Beverly is signaling network feed. So I'll straighten my tie and pull up my chair. I'm sifting through the old courier pouch. It's chock-full. It's been sanitized, but we still call it Dusty. Lots of material to get to; plenty of folks sending things in, wonderful to see. Charles Niren has joined the Club; he sent us a nice note from the hinterlands of Kentucky. In a few minutes I'll be talking on the phone with Denis Roma, as he and I compare notes about recent performances of OTR scripts done by the Vienna theater folks. He attended a matinee at the theater, and I tuned in one evening on Zoom. That's a sign of these times we're living in.

Larry Maupin sent us a nice essay where he details the life of a city – Washington DC – on a day in September 1939. That month was so momentous for the world that I have used Larry's piece to frame events in two other cities as well. In Paris on September 10th of that year, Janet Flanner wrote a piece for *The New Yorker*, about the people of the city as they viewed the military threat from the east. And in New York, W. H. Auden expressed his own view of horror realized. He called his poem "September 1, 1939." Eighty years after, on Sept. 1, 2019, BBC Radio broadcast a documentary about Auden's poem, and the war. We shall listen to bits of that, in particular the reading of the poem on an NPR news broadcast on the evening of September 11, 2001.

CHARLES NIREN: HIS CLUBS, HIS PEOPLE, HIS RESEARCH

I knew that Charles had joined the Club, and I first saw him in his Zoom square at the October meeting. He followed up with a nice profile. His

abiding research topic these days, we learn, is a show called “Meyer the Buyer,” written by Harry Hershfield from 1932. I couldn’t find that title in my B.D.E. (*Big Dunning Encyclopedia*), but hopefully Charles will find further information. Charles has enjoyed working with Jim Cox, also of Louisville, and in years past with Susan and David Siegel. Recently he has been helped in his research by Karl Schadow, who is well-known in our pages and those of *Radio Recall*; and who has been featured in the Library of Congress newsletter.

Charles has been collecting OTR since the 1970s, and he has a large collection, in various formats, we assume. He attended OTR conventions in Newark, Cincinnati, and Kalamazoo, and we must here mention his affiliation with the West Coast club SPERDVAC.

Charles wants everyone in our listening area to know that he loves OTR and the people involved in its pursuit. These days he is semi-retired, he writes: “...working on a timecard reporting to the owner of a Best-One commercial tire dealership in the Louisville area.”

TINY DESK AND THE ROOFTOP TRADITION

Tiny Desk Concerts is an under-the-radar gem from the studios of NPR, where they actively search for new musicians. Tiny Desk is amazing, heartfelt, and eclectic. I found it in the archives of my NPR station out of Baltimore: WYPR-FM. The show continues, compelled by passion; and the producers are pandemic-driven to find artists in their homes, thereby encouraging them to play. They even awarded a contest winner, Linda Diaz, a lovely singer. Here is the NPR press release:

Linda Diaz is the winner of the 2020 Tiny Desk Contest. Due to the pandemic, we're not currently filming Tiny Desks at NPR headquarters, so we brought Diaz and her band to the top of New York City's Jacob K. Javits Convention Center and produced a socially distanced concert in front of the city's skyline. Here's the story of how this concert came together, in her own words.



Well who on earth has been there, the rooftop of the Javits Center? Sure enough they filmed Linda's performance, all 15-minutes of it, with her commentary.

Watch it here: <https://www.npr.org/series/tiny-desk-concerts/> October 5, 2020.

WHICH REMINDS ME

In January 1969, The Beatles played a 42-minute performance on the rooftop of their Apple Studios building on Savile Row, London. The weather was 45 degrees with a wind blowing. The blokes were wearing any warm coat they could find; their fingers were freezing on the frets of their guitars. Their keyboard player was none other than Billy Preston, who was sitting in fresh off playing a concert in town with Ray Charles.

The band played and played and played. Word has it that the city police were rather tolerant, re: noise abatement. But they finally climbed up and put a stop to the extraordinary event. Memorable to this day is John Lennon's comment from the rooftop:

"I'd like to say thank you on behalf of the group and ourselves, and I hope we passed the audition."

Rolling Stone Jan. 29, 2016. "Beatles Famous Rooftop Concert."

MUSIC BRIDGE AND COMMERCIAL

Well, we're still in touch with the Dayton Dragons front office about their continuing sponsorship of our broadcasts. It's on track, they assure us; nor can they forget the Club's appearance at the park for Heritage Day, a few years ago. They will get in touch. Minor League Baseball forever, with its friendly parks and family appeal!

Beverly has chosen our bridge music. It's a lovely song from Renée Fleming's 2018 album of Broadway favorites. Renée sings "So Big So Small" about the reckoning of a mother and child, from the recent hit musical *Dear Evan Hansen*.

DENIS ROMA ON THE LINE

We're back! Bert has gotten us a phone line with Club member Denis Roma.

GRTR

Hello, Denis, are you on the line?

Denis

Yes, Mark! Thanks for having me on!

GRTR

I saw the Vienna Theatre Company OTR production on Zoom. I take it from your notes that attending the performance live was rather more complex.

Denis

That's right. Protocols were in place: masks and a questionnaire about our health and our contact-tracing in the past few days.

GRTR

In these months of the pandemic limiting performances, how different was the space from what you were used to?

Denis

It was really different! The community center auditorium generally seats about 200 people, but they had to comply with social-distancing; so, 21 chairs were spaced around, and I was one of only 7 people in the audience.

GRTR

And the performers, did they keep their distance from each other?

Denis

Each had a chair spaced around; there were nine actors; and each was wearing a plastic face shield, necessary, for sure, but kind of uncomfortable, I thought. Their energy may have lagged a bit, plus, they were playing to a small house.

GRTR

I imagine that still, they soldiered on!

Denis

Yeah, you know the old saying that runs thick in the blood of theater people: "The show must go on!"

GRTR

I saw the Zoom performance; and they seemed very much within themselves, each in their own square. I knew the shows were famous, but really, I couldn't tell you a storyline from any of them. That's why I was very intent on following the plot lines and the characters. The Zoom site counted 42 participants, though the only squares visible were the actors.

Denis

Did the producer introduce each show?

GRTR

Yes, she did: *Gunsmoke*, *X Minus One*, and *Sam Spade*. Same order?

Denis

Yes, and the whole thing was called "In Living Sound," a clever play on the early NBC television broadcasts..." brought to you in living color!" But, you know, I thought there were certain weak points, like in *Gunsmoke*, the guy doing Matt Dillon sounded more like Roy Rogers than the deep-voiced William Conrad.

GRTR

Well, I just thought that each actor was finding their own voice to advance the character. The first voice I really noticed was the German settler who came into Dodge on the train. Lovely accent in expressing himself and his intentions. And in the X Minus One, the townsfolk turning sinister, those actors brought out startling voices, I thought. Good writing, too, I always like good writing.

Denis

For me, X Minus One was the best for me. I couldn't say much about the *Sam Spade* episode because I hadn't listened to any of that series, so I couldn't compare the Vienna rendition to the original radio show.

GRTR

Sounds like you're an originalist. I thoroughly enjoyed the whole performance. With the Zoom there were some glitches with the SFX feed, but still the Vienna troupe put on a great show.

Denis

I guess the energy level of the cast was a bit low, but that may have been because of the health protocols. I know I'm nitpicking, but I like to do the research. I've researched another aspect of distance theater; would you like to hear about it?

GRTR

By all means! What have you been looking into?

Denis

I recently learned that the drama department of a high school in Colorado has been doing OTR re-creations in lieu of their normal school productions, recording them and then streaming them as podcasts on the drama department's website, as well as broadcasting them on three local radio

stations. An organization called Project Audion has also gotten into the act, gathering a group of community theater actors from across the country and Canada to perform re-creations over Zoom; these re-creations can be found on YouTube, on the group's Facebook page, and on:

<http://www.genericradio.com/projectaudion>. And, as you know from the previous issue of this newsletter, our own club tipped its toe into those Zoom waters last month with a pair of re-creations that were well received.

GRTR

That's good information, Denis. Good talking to you. Now Fred will pipe in some bridge music. It's Renée Fleming singing a Stephen Sondheim song about theater folk juggling family, ambition, and responsibility:

"This Glamorous Life," from *A Little Night Music*



THREE CITIES, THE WAR, AND RADIO: SEPTEMBER 1939

Washington D. C.

Beverly signals that we are good with time before network feed. Larry Maupin walks us through D. C. on September 21, 1939. The station is WJSV 1460AM, and the log of its programs is available at The Internet Archive. Larry imagines for us a citizen listening to Arthur Godfrey reading neighborly tidbits and news

reports from the Arrow News Reporter in the morning; then there are soaps and news reports during the day, and the Columbia Workshop in the evening. It's a leisurely day and Citizen DC strolls and looks in the shops, perhaps buying something at the legendary Kann's Department Store and stopping for ice cream at Liggett's Drug. Then it's back home, which is fortunate because at 2:30 PM President Roosevelt is just concluding an address to a Joint Session of Congress. WJSV carries it; the subject is the question of how the United States is to treat the declared combatants in terms of military assistance, trade policy, and other weighty matters. The US is still an undeclared neutral party.

Roosevelt is aware that public sentiment is on the side of Britain and France against Hitler's Germany.

After the Major Bowes show our citizen settles in for a 9 PM broadcast of the *Columbia Workshop*, a light story called "It's Summer," last of a festival of stories. I was browsing my Mp3 collection of *Columbia* episodes, and found an interesting sidelight to the September entries. On the episode of 9/7, the announcer intones that the Norman Corwin play "They Fly Through the Air with the Greatest of Ease" has been postponed indefinitely. Corwin's play detailed "the aerial bombardment of civilian populations." It had originally aired five months earlier, in April, and was scheduled again due to popular request. The announcer continues to say that "...since that time the war tactics that the author indicted with such emotional force have become an actuality, and we are reminded only too vividly every day of the point of the play."

We learn that the play to be presented that night was also written by Corwin, the fifth in a CBS series called "So This is Radio." The announcer concludes with "It had been scheduled for last Monday night, but had to be postponed due to our European schedule."

Paris

Janet Flanner, a journalist, published her “Letter from Paris” in *The New Yorker* January 16, 1939. It appears in an excellent compilation called *The New Yorker Book of War Pieces: London 1939 to Hiroshima 1945*. New York: Schocken Books. 1988, 1947 ff.



Note: This illustration is from the BBC collection of covers, 1928; still, I think it conveys the watchful sense of life in Europe during the war years.

In her letter dated January 10, 1939, Flanner writes:

Since it started a week ago today, Paris has thrice been visited by enemy planes, but not bombed...News does not arrive, or maybe it does not exist...the comments we try to make are very soundly and strictly censored here. *Gringoire* has come out with a picture of a pair of scissors occupying a blank column on its front page....As the most pleasant phase of the unreality in which everybody seems to be living, the French seized on the incredible flight of the British fliers over Germany and their gallant and dangerous distribution of pamphlets.

Flanner surely has her finger on the pulse of the French, their anxiety, their hopes, and their stalwart way of carrying their gas masks "...slung ready over your shoulder in its little khaki case".

And this timeline of radio broadcast news: "Only radio can act quickly enough...it was staggering to listen to European news that had gone out to America and returned before it had been announced in Europe itself."

She writes further:

The C.B.S. and N.B.C. broadcasts in French rendered as an unforgettable - although sometimes, static being bad, inaudible - service to listeners all through this land on those anxious days. It is our impression that at first, anyhow, the news from the French and British stations was infinitely less voluminous not because of censorship, as now, but because their organizations being neither so expansive nor expensive, lacked the enormous and ubiquitous personnel of the American companies.

Roosevelt's neutrality in those early days did not go unnoticed; and people were asking: "Will the *Athenia* be like the *Lusitania*? Will the Americans come in?"

Much the way Norman Corwin describes the airfield in his "They Fly Through the Air," as a meadow where just before dawn birdsong gives way to men scurrying about and the throaty rumble of engines, so Janet Flanner concludes her letter: "Never have nights been more beautiful than these nights of anxiety. In the sky have been shining in trinity the moon, Venus, and Mars. Nature has been more splendid than man."

New York, 1939 and 2001

In a radio documentary broadcast on September 1, 2019, the BBC took on the 80-year problem of “the Auden poem” and wrestled with its “difficult edges and stark paradoxes” almost to exhaustion. A panel of experts was supported in their commentary by news clips, jazz singers, ambient SFX, control tower audio, and most of all, introspection.



It is a tumultuous 28 minutes, discussing life as it is encompassed in Auden’s 99 lines. To wit: nine stanzas of eleven lines each. That is the most orderly aspect of the entire proceeding. A lounge piano is heard. Then the title: “September 1, 1939,” and a reader begins with lines from the last stanza: “Defenseless under the night / Our world in stupor lies.” Then, a clip from a BBC news broadcast: “These are today’s main events. Germany has invaded Poland and bombed many towns.”

The studio scholars say variously that this is a war poem, but a war poem about civilian life. It is also a confessional poem, if we like the idea of Auden the elite classicist traveling to join the popular front in 1930s Spain; then

wondering how he can connect with the “dense commuters” working in “authoritarian skyscrapers.” (stanza 7)

Nicely personal, we say. Then about 3 minutes in, we hear the control tower audio, tracking United Flight 93. We are jolted into thinking about events larger than ourselves. We contemplate democracy and its fragility; and now looking back through the long corridor of time, we can “only connect” our fears and responsibilities. Auden quotes Thucydides (stanza 3) and a panelist says that Thucydides wrote about war and saw it as a “eulogy for democracy,” because dictators see the path to power: destroy democracy, and step right in.

A quote from Stanza 3.

Analyzed all in his book,
The enlightenment driven away,
The habit-forming pain,
Mismanagement and grief:
We must suffer them all again.

The panelists track Auden and his “cry for veracity,” One says that it’s great because “poetry is a clear expression of mixed feelings.” He is a scholar and yet he still wants to relate, get to know: “...the strength of Collective Man.” He comes to America and helps make patriotic films for the U.S, government. He calls the populace “the Just,” and the final lines are: Stanza 11.

May I, composed like them
Of Eros and of dust,
Beleaguered by the same
Negation and despair,
Show an affirming flame.

The program is brilliant, a primer in sound mixing. The final four minutes are given to further reading of lines, lounge singers, the insistent clacking of telegraph keys and the screeching brakes of a subway train. Comments are breathless; and Scott Simon speaks about “the Auden Broadcast,” on NPR, where he read an abridged text of the poem on September 11, 2001.

MUSIC BRIDGE AND NETWORK FEED

Fred is piping in a song by David Byrne, the legendary songwriter of folk, rock, and world music. It’s called “I Dance Like This,” from his 2017 album *American Utopia*.

That’s it from your studio friends here on the Catoctin Ridge. Thanks for tuning in, and keep those cards and letters coming! Soup and sandwiches in all our kitchens? We’ll manage!

Thanks ever,

Mark Anderson

Frederick MD