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WHEN RADIO WORE A KINDER FACE

RADIO SOMEWHERE

Gerald Nachman's book "Raised on Radio." File photo

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With shock jocks and enraged talk-show hosts puffing and hollering all over the airwaves, it's hard to imagine a time when radio actually sought to join rather than divide people.

Gerald Nachman remembers when. An author, journalist and host of the weekly radio quiz show "Minds Over Matter" on northern California's KALW-FM, Nachman combed through and analyzed every era's hit shows, including its characters and performers, engineers and sound men, for his book "Raised on Radio" (Pantheon, 1998). A bible for anyone who loves radio, the paperback, published by University of California Press in 2000, remains in print.

Nachman suspects there probably was a lot of injustice back in the '30s, '40s and '50s.

"But you didn't feel the terrible hostility you do today," he says. "The whole religious thing . . . there's a nastiness in the air now. Talk shows spew all that venom — even on non-right wing shows."

In reviewing Nachman's book, Publishers Weekly remarked: "American radio was the country's dominant cultural force." The reviewer credited the author for "not shying away from such issues as racism and sexism. Throughout he stresses the overarching theme that radio has served as a national conscience and a socioeconomic mirror."

With the possible exceptions of NPR affiliates and such great shows as Garrison Keillor's classic "A Prairie Home Companion" about the mythical Lake Wobegone, which is produced by American Public Media, could we say that about radio today without inciting loud guffaws? Nachman thinks not.

Speaking to him recently by phone at his home in San Francisco, the 69-year-old Nachman recalled that his first dose of racial reality was delivered via radio. He grew up in Oakland, Calif., which he describes as having had a "big black ghetto." Still, he never knew any black people except "the shoeshine boys and dishwashers. I never thought about blacks having a middle class life."

He found out they did by listening to "Amos 'n Andy" on radio. "Amos 'n Andy" originally aired in the early '30s, so many of the segments reflected the poverty of the Depression going on in the "real world."

"These characters were largely business owners," says Nachman. "Alvin Childress played Amos, a sensible cab driver; Algonquin J. Calhoun, played by Johnny Lee, was a lawyer."

Andy and George "The Kingfish" Stevens, played to his conniving best by Tim Moore, were always trying out the latest get-rich-quick scheme, very similar to TV's "The Honeymooners," which featured bus driver Ralph Cramden (Jackie Gleason) and sewer worker Ed Norton (Art Carney), two working-class white guys.

Ironically, "Amos 'n Andy" was forced off by critics who saw it as racially insensitive, during the '60s battles for racial equality.

Even better than "Amos 'n Andy" at dispelling the myth of white supremacy was, in Nachman's opinion, Jack Benny's hilarious relationship with his

butler, Rochester. Eddie Anderson, who played Rochester, "was always ridiculing Benny, turning the master servant dynamic on its head," he says. "Considering the times, the late '30s, it was quite progressive."

Anderson would subtly reference the racial stereotypes hidden in the ironic comments he'd drawl out in response to Benny's snobby requests. The racial slurs were much more prominent prior to WWII, Nachman points out in "Raised on Radio." After that, references to "watermelon, gin and razors" were pretty much declasse.

"The gags were really all about the relationship and Anderson being black," says Nachman.

There also are examples of how radio humanized immigrants through shows like "Life with Luigi," an Italian immigrant whose boss was always trying to marry him off to his big ugly daughter, or "The Goldbergs," starring Molly Goldberg, who created, wrote and starred in the show, which was based on her Catskills routines.

"The shows were about assimilation, really," says Nachman. " 'The Cisco Kid' was the only Hispanic show on then. It was very popular."

Nachman thinks the shows — there were only three or four major ones, he says — were popular because listeners were closer then to their parents immigrant roots.

Then there were the soap operas, such as "Mary Noble, Backstage Wife" and "The Great Gildersleeve."

But radio devours material. One vaudevillian turned radio talent noted that he could get 17 years out of 17 minutes of material. Radio used up 17 minutes of material in 17 minutes. A vaudeville act lasted 10 minutes, tops.

"There are no creative people in radio today," says Nachman, who has authored several other books, including 2003's "Seriously Funny," which also covers radio's golden age. "Radio is very cheap to do — the cheapest of all. It doesn't cost much to get people standing around scripts in hands."

Nachman is not convinced a rebirth of quality programming can't happen.

"There is still a lot of excellent programming in England over the BBC," he says. "Radio is still vital over there. To bring it back here would take really creative types, like Keillor."

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