



Wednesday, 2 August 2017

What's That Sound?

Who invented radio sound effects?

Reader Peter Drysdale (at least I think he's a reader) put that question after reading Irving Fein's biography of Jack Benny, wherein Fein claimed sound effects were "seldom, if ever used" on the air before Benny came along. He wondered if it were true.

Benny regularly appeared on radio starting in 1932. Large chain network radio was barely five years old at the time and radio itself became a fad only ten years earlier. In the beginning, radio stations generally broadcast music (live or recorded) or talks. When the networks came along in 1926/27, they had more money for bigger stars and live pick-ups of scheduled events outside the studio, such as sports or political speeches. There wasn't much of a need for sound effects. Comedy-variety shows became the fad starting in 1932. They originally consisted of jokes, music, singing and announcers reading commercial copy. Again, there wasn't much of a need for sound effects. It's only when comedy shows evolved to start including sketches that sound effects came in handy.

But the sound effects were already there.

This post isn't a definitive answer to Peter's query. It merely passes on random clippings about sound effects from one publication. But it certainly shows noises created in-studio pre-dated Benny by several years.

What's On the Air magazine from November 1929 reported that at least one network already had an effects department, as primitive as things may have been. The issue reveals:

NBC production managers are hailing a new genius of their craft. He is John Wiggin. In the weekly "Whispering Tables" program the script called for the merry tinkling of ice in a glass. The production managers scratched their heads. How were they to reproduce that sound for the microphone? For pistol-shots they used drums, for clashing swords they used table silver, but what could they do about ice in a glass? "Why not," asked Wiggin, "get a glass and some ice?"

Harry Swan, radio-effects man for the Columbia Broadcasting System, has been presented with a title, and now sports the avuncular prefix. The young thespians who broadcast during the children's dramatic periods from WABC have decided Harry shall be known as uncle, despite the weird noises he turns out on short notices for the broadcasts. Incidentally, "Static," the studio cat, not long ago happened on a loud-speaker in the control-room just as Harry was imitating a particularly active dog, and since that one dreadful moment, when it seemed her doom was upon her, pussy hasn't been seen about the studios.

Sound effects were already being used on broadcasts in foreign countries. From March 1930:

Cecil Lewis, former manager of programs of the British Broadcasting Corporation, is spending a few months in America, studying our radio-program technique and incidentally giving American program directors and the listening public a glimpse of his own. While here he will personally direct the broadcasting of several of Bernard Shaw's plays over the NBC chain. For some of the plays he will use four or five studios simultaneously. The British fashion requires that actors, music, sound effects, etc., originate in separate studios, and that the producer at the control panel blend the resultant sound output. Mr. Lewis has been a prominent figure in British radio since the BBC was organized in 1922.

In the same issue, an example of the ingenuity of sound men:


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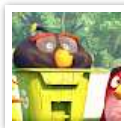


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ON Sept. 17, 1929, a program appeared on WJZ and associated stations proving to listeners that there was something new before the microphone. It was the first installment of the Johnson & Johnson Musical Melodramas, in which Jimmy Otis, hero reporter of the Clarion; Dorothy Brent, student nurse — she's a full-fledged Red Cross nurse now; Rawley Rawson, funny English



newspaperman, and Detective Sergeant McCarthy, started the seemingly hopeless task of tracking down a sinister figure of the underworld, known only as "The Chief." Although they've never caught the villain — and probably won't, at least for a long time — their efforts have supplied radio listeners with some new thrills and some unique sound effects. ... The Musical Melodrama, which the sponsors, incidentally, recommend hearing with the lights turned low, is a unique radio production in that it requires as many sound-effect and production men as it does actors. For instance, it takes two men to make a noise like an airplane — one to manipulate an electric fan, which has leather instead of metal blades, the other to hold the tomtom against the blades. One of the most elaborate effects ever used during the Melodramas was that which produced the sound of water rushing from a hydrant. A tank of gas, a long hose and an old-fashioned wash-boiler partly filled with water were obtained. The hose was placed in the water and the gas slowly turned on. The effect was excellent.

As for comedy shows with effects, the same issue gives an example from the satirist who hosted *The Cuckoo Hour* on NBC Blue. It's not quite on the box-of-gravel-for-footsteps level of manufacturing an effect, but it's funny:

Raymond Knight, NBC production man, who is becoming known as the Ed Wynn of radio, has developed a new sound effect. By rights, Knight's body should be kept in the sound-properties room at NBC. Knight was trying out all the stock devices in an attempt to get the sound of a dog wagging its tail against the floor. Finally Knight put his head near the microphone and thumped it gently with a piece of wood. The studio engineer signaled success. And that was the way the effect was worked in the program.



It would make sense that the early detective and mystery shows would require the creation of special sounds. More again from March 1930 of *What's On the Air*:

ONE of the swiftest-moving radio features, the True Detective Mysteries program broadcast over CBS every Thursday evening, owes much of its popularity to the action which takes place in the studio. Reproducing as it does true stories of various police cases, it is often impossible to go into every detail of the story, and so far no one has actually been murdered in the broadcast; but when a struggle is indicated in the script the actors proceed to struggle; when the gong and siren on the police-cars are heard, there are sirens and gongs in the studio.

Staged under the direction of Charles Schenck, one of radio's pioneers in stagecraft, "True Detective Mysteries" utilizes approximately the same cast each week to dramatize the most thrilling story in the current issue of the magazine from which it takes its name. Much of the program's success is due to the fact Mr. Schenck has been able to assemble the cast which his experience has shown him possesses really ideal voices for the microphone, as well as dramatic ability. The sound effects, pistol shots, slamming doors, crashing glass, speeding autos — every conceivable noise, in fact — are all produced by one man, who sets up his apparatus before his own special microphone, and, working from his own copy of the script, follows his cues as carefully and promptly as do the actors.



The April 1930 edition profiled Edwin King Cohan, technical supervisor of CBS, who was credited with "constantly surprising the broadcasting world with new methods of production and sound effects" when he was at WOR in New York the previous year. But the real highlight is the picture of the odd apparatus you see to your right, accompanied by the following article:



about the spelling Walt Disney. Today, I'll be talking about

Hanna and Barbera. We all know that William Hanna and Joseph Barbera defi...
2 days ago

Fernando Llera Blog Cartoons



Trump is high on gun reform chances despite NRA resistance.

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fernandolleracartoons.com
2 days ago

Way Too Damn Lazy To Write A Blog



Sunday String Swing - "Continuing the thread from last Sunday's

post, as the following caricature of Django ...
2 days ago

Yowp



Hanna-Barbera Fans Write Back - Is it possible to fairly compare

cartoons made by Hanna-Barbera and the Jay Ward studios? I don't think so. The two studios had a different attitude and p...
3 days ago

The World of Knight



LAST NIGHT - The sky was a beautiful color last night.

1 week ago

Mark Kausler's CatBlog

Racketty Ann's Mystery Flight! - Here are pages 5 through eight of "Racketty Ann and the Lost World". There's delightful fantasy here as Racketty Ann and Bla Bla take a ride on the back o...

3 weeks ago

Peter Gray's Comics and Art



New blog on my Art work...Original art...prints for sale petergrayart

ist@gmail.com for prices etc... -
https://petergrayart.blogspot

THE scenery of the radio drama is its sound effects. Consequently, supplying sound that accurately portrays a setting that can not be seen (at least until television arrives) is a serious part of preparing the dramatic broadcast. Thus it happens that A. W. Nichols, of the Judson Radio Program Corporation, and the weird and wonderful "sound" table pictured on this page are in constant demand by the production managers of dramatic features broadcast from New York studios.

The script may keep him busier than the terrible tempered Mr. Bang would be were he compelled to scratch out the seven-year itch, but so far no call for sound effect has bluffed Mr. Nichols long. The table took him nearly a year of steady work, averaging from ten to fourteen hours per day, to build, but it seems equal to every call dramatists can make on it. The more popular sound effects are keyboard controlled. One button releases the ocean surf; another, the thunderstorm; another, gales of variable intensity. Then there are buttons for train effects (steam and motorized); aviation fields, fire department, automobiles, motorcycles, city street, riveting-machines, trolley cars, machine guns, crashing glass, revolver or rifle fire, and a myriad others and combinations of all.

One side wall is devoted to whistles of every description. The center back is capable of reproducing the sounds of barnyard or zoo, or of any individual denizens of either. The right side wall is for bells, buzzers, telephones, wireless instruments, machinery sounds of many types. Room has been provided also for Old Dobbin and the buggy, anvil, door slam, clock ticks, fireworks, baby cry, chain rattle, sleigh-bells, board squeak, sword duel, flies, bee buzz, cork pulling, falling trees, various types of saws, blow-torch, real cloth tearing, nose blower and a hundred and one varieties of percussion instruments. Last week William B. Murray received the following telegram from Mr. Nichols: "Ruined my ocean waves stop won't be at studio to-day."

All of which goes to show that the business of producing sound on the radio is a very sad and serious one.

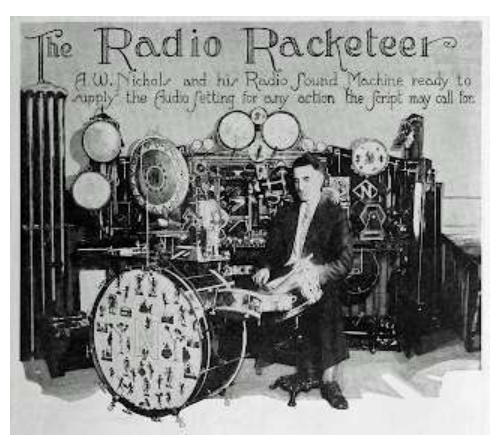
Jack Benny's first broadcast had a sound effect in the opening and closing—a steam train whistle (I think it had to do with the theme song title). Ed Wynn used a siren (for Texaco Fire Chief gas). But before them, in 1930, Phil Cook had a signature opening with effects. You can read about it to the right (click on the photo to make it bigger).

What's On the Air, full of pictures and beautiful examples of calligraphy, talks about sound effects men on some of the shows. Vernon Radcliffe was responsible for the waterfront noises on NBC's *Harbor Lights*. At CBS, Al Sinton replicated the sounds of a night-time showboat on the Mississippi River on *Mardi Gras*. Bill Mahoney on *Tower Health Exercises* every morning on NBC used a collection of 50 sound effects. *Rin Tin Tin* from NBC Chicago got assistance from F.G. Ibbett. And it was even reported that C.L. Menser on NBC's *Miniature Theatre* was careful not to use effects that might be misinterpreted by the listener. In fact, female performers at NBC could be the bane of the network's engineers. Moving while wearing a beaded dress came across the air as if it were machine gun fire.

So Jack Benny may have been an influential pioneer in radio comedy—situation comedy, even—but sound effects departments were established in radio well before he cracked his first joke for Canada Dry in 1932.

Posted by [Yowp](#) at [11:51](#)

Labels: [Jack Benny](#)



.com/ Will update it like I do on facebook.
5 weeks ago

Supervised By Fred Avery: Tex Avery's Warner Brothers Cartoons



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2 months ago

What About Thad?

Chris Reccardi Interviewed

- I don't want to start a practice of publishing an interview every time someone from Ren & Stimpy dies, but Chris Reccardi (1964-2019) was too important a f...

2 months ago

Likely Looney, Mostly Merrie

That's all, folks! - My posts have gotten thinner over the years. I'm aware of that. I've been hopeful for a long time, that I can remain active with blogging and sharing forth...

6 months ago

Kids, Eh?

#1288: *Bird Call* - #1288: Bird Call

10 months ago

Cartoons, Model Sheets, & Stuff



Pete Hothead Model Sheets - Here are a few model sheets from

the first Pete Hothead short. Released in 1952 and directed former Tom & Jerry animator Pete Burness. Ted Parmelee was the...

1 year ago

Dr. Grob's Animation Review

Paranoia (Paranoia) - "Paranoia" is a short film (lasting only four minutes) about a young man who thinks he's followed on the street.

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rimga 2 August 2017 at 21:42

Arthur Nichols, spotlighted in the "Radio Racketeer" article, built his elaborate gadget for use in theaters, according to Leonard Maltin in his "Great American Broadcast" book. When the "talkies" came in, Nichols repurposed his invention for radio, and came up with several other sound-effect devices, assisted in their operation by his wife, Ora. After Arthur died following a heart attack, Ora Nichols carried on alone.

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