

Appalachian Music Fellowship Final Activity Report

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My Appalachian Music Fellowship work at Berea during April and May 2009 was in furtherance of my research on how the arrival of radio, television, and the Internet has affected the lives of people in rural Appalachia.

Background

The oral histories I have collected create a valuable human diary that documents the importance of electronic media in this mountainous region of the U.S. My research resulted in my recent book, *The Electronic Front Porch: An Oral History of the Arrival of Modern Media in Rural Appalachia and the Melungeon Community*.

While traveling around Appalachia, recording the life stories of interviewees, I recognized that the inception of radio in the 1920s reaffirmed a sense of belonging to a national community for this region of the country. As Michele Hilmes observes, “radio seemed in its early days to lend itself to association with ideas of nation, of national identity, to the heart and mind of America.”¹

Because of their geographical isolation, some rural communities appeared to have much to gain from early electronic media. With the arrival of radio, especially in the 1930s with high-powered clear channel stations that broadcast from the “big city,” listeners in the most isolated regions of the country felt, as Susan Smulyan observed, a feeling of connectedness with the rest of the world.² By listening to newscasts on the radio, they learned how others coped with the Great Depression, and shared the pain, losses, and victories of World War II with other listeners around the country. Daily soap operas allowed radio listeners to learn “of critical values, of themselves, and of their fellow citizens. The premise of all soaps was the commonness of the American experience.”³ However, if there was one genre that almost every participant I interviewed mentioned listening to, it was the variety show featuring country, traditional, hillbilly, and gospel music, which was among the most popular regularly scheduled programs on early radio.

The strong identification with these radio programs was so very important to the many Appalachian residents who shared their stories with me. Most recalled listening to national shows like the *Grand Ole Opry*, but many I spoke to also listened to regional shows like *Wheeling Jamboree* and *Renfro Valley Barn Dance* and *Gatherin’*.

Work in the Berea Archives

While an Appalachian Music Fellow from April 15 – May 15, 2009, I was especially interested in examining the John Lair Papers, specifically the “Listener Mail,” since I have always thought it extremely important to include the voices of the “regular” listener when researching radio. Listeners’ thoughts regarding the programming on *Renfro Valley Barn Dance* and *Gatherin’* help elaborate the human diary that I have been working on by illuminating how early radio audiences chose their programs and the impact the medium had on their lives.

¹ Michele Hilmes, *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922-1952* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997) 1.

² Susan Smulyan, *Selling Radio: The Commercialization of American Broadcasting 1920-1934* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994).

³ Fred J. MacDonald, *Don't Touch that Dial! Radio Programming in American Life, 1920-1960* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1979) 239.

University of Kentucky - WHAS Listening Centers

Working in an archive is a lot like being a CSI investigator, or at least what CBS tells us being a CSI investigator is like. Each day I uncovered something new that took me down a different avenue. One of the first documents I examined was a file concerning the University of Kentucky-WHAS Louisville "Radio Listening Centers." The University of Kentucky, in association with WHAS radio in Louisville, set up radio listening posts for the people of the mountains of Kentucky. The plan was inaugurated during the first six months of 1933 and Radio Listening Centers were established around the region.

The university supplied the centers with radio sets and instructed the operators of the centers to tune daily to educational programs of worth. Community members were encouraged to come to the centers and listen on a daily basis. These listening stations were in Owsley, Leitcher, Knott, Leslie, and Martin counties and were placed in farm homes in the community, post offices, country stores, and the like. Some of the titles of the programs were "Engineering on the Farm," "History of Public Education in Kentucky," "Poultry Talks," "What Farm Folks are Asking?," "Living Kentucky Writers," and "Tips from the Cow Tester."⁴ In addition there were classical music programs.

These listening centers were especially important when radio first came to rural Appalachia, since many of the residents of the region were often too poor to buy radio sets. As one person I interviewed said "You know times was hard. Everybody worked hard at that time. I don't remember anybody back then who had a radio where we lived. I enjoyed it, yes I would have liked to have a radio, it's just we couldn't get it. Mom and Dad was lucky to have stuff on the table, there were nine children."⁵

Having listening centers were a great boon to the residents of the area. However, those running these listening centers sponsored by the University of Kentucky were instructed to make sure the radios were tuned to educational programming --- which perhaps created some tension. In the Listening Centers correspondence files, Elmer G. Sulzer, director of radio for the University of Kentucky sent a letter to Frank McVey, president of the University of Kentucky. He writes:

Our experience as regards fan mail is common with that of commercial stations -- that is, the fan mail does not represent in any sense the true criterion as to the worth of a program. For example, we could broadcast the worst sort of hill billy orchestra and immediately be overwhelmed with requests for tunes to be played. A symphony orchestra brings forth little fan mail and yet we believe we can determine this as a superior broadcast. The same thing is true of educational speech programs, and the fact that a certain program brings in a lot of fan mail is little indication of its success. Therefore, we must in the last analysis use our own judgment, keeping one ear to the ground, so to speak, and keeping alert for criticism, suggestions and improvements from responsible sources.⁶

Rating polls also showed that audiences preferred popular music to educational programming. In a letter to Mr. Sulzer, Robert Kennet, program manager of WHAS, addressed the results of a Gallup poll conducted in the what he called the "bluegrass area comprising twelve counties including the city of Lexington" along with small towns and farms. He states that the University's Thursday night program beginning at 9 p.m. entitled "Capsules of Knowledge"

⁴ University of Kentucky Publicity Bureau "Radio Programs" July, 1933 to December, 1933 inclusive (Lexington, KY. July 1, 1933) 1.

⁵ Dulcie Reinhart, interview with author.

⁶ Letter from Elmer G. Sulzer to Frank McVey, February 4, 1936. UK - WHAS Listening Centers Correspondences. Berea College Archives, Berea College, Berea, KY.

received an 8 percent rating. The preceding popular music program, starting at 8 p.m. on Thursdays, however, “commanded 80 percent of the audience.”⁷

John Lair

John Lair’s brilliance lay in his understanding of these listener dynamics. From what I uncovered, he read much of his fan mail and seemed to know what he was doing with his “hill billy” orchestras. As a researcher examining the John Lair archives, I felt my job was to get to know a man I had never met. I tried to uncover who he was by examining the columns he wrote in magazines such as *Stand By!*, the scripts from his shows, but mainly the fan mail he received, along with his responses. What I found was a multifaceted, enigmatic good ol’ country boy, savvy businessman, hawker, salesman, marketer, PR promoter, and performer.

John Lair was born in Rockcastle County where the Renfro Valley music complex is located. His keystone show, *The Renfro Valley Barn Dance*, premiered on October 9, 1937, but was originally staged at a Cincinnati music hall and broadcast over WLW.⁸ Lair finished building the Renfro Valley Music Center in 1939 and it became known as “the valley where time stands still.”

On November 4, 1939 radio listeners who were tuned to Cincinnati’s clear channel superstation WLW heard the radio announcer say, “Friends, the long-awaited moment has arrived and we are now about to take you down to Renfro Valley.”⁹ Following the theme song, John Lair took over the microphone, greeting listeners with “Howdy, folks! Welcome to *Renfro Valley Barn Dance*, coming to you direct from a big barn in Renfro Valley Kentucky - the first and only barn dance on the air presented by the actual residents of an actual community.”¹⁰

Along with being a radio personality, avid traditional music collector, and businessman, Lair was also the author of numerous songs. One of his most noteworthy was “Take me back to Renfro Valley” often performed on the *Renfro Valley Barn Dance* by Red Foley, who Lair was instrumental in helping become a radio star.¹¹ Many of the letters addressed to Lair requested that Foley sing other songs on the air. One listener from Michigan wrote, “Dear Mr. Lair, Am enclosing a copy of the song ‘Jerry, the Miller,’ and hope it will be possible for Red Foley to sing it some time.”¹² This is but one example of the interactivity between listener and medium that one thinks of with call-in radio programs of today.

Another means of communication between Lair and his audience was Lair’s ongoing music collecting. In addition to writing songs, Lair collected folk songs, sheet music, and old song books which were sources of long forgotten compositions that found new life on his programs. It was at WLS in Chicago that Lair began his career-long dialogue with his listeners. His sources for music derived from when he was a producer at WLS and would ask people to send in their favorite old songs and poems.¹³ Lair would also request old music in his “Notes from the Music Library” column in *Stand By! Magazine* distributed by WLS.¹⁴ As a result, Lair’s

⁷ Letter from Robert Kennet to Elmer G. Sulzer, Jan 23, 1940. UK – WHAS Listening Centers Correspondences. Berea College Archives, Berea College, Berea, KY.

⁸ Wayne W. Daniel, foreword in, Stamper, Pete, *It All Happened in Renfro Valley*, University Press of Kentucky (1999), p. xii.

⁹ “Musical Heritage of Renfro Valley,” Undated one-page typescript. Courtesy Mrs. Ann Lair Henderson, in Stamper, Pete, *It All Happened in Renfro Valley*, University Press of Kentucky (1999), p. xiii.

¹⁰ Wayne W. Daniel, foreword in, Stamper, Pete, *It All Happened in Renfro Valley*, University Press of Kentucky (1999), p. xiii.

¹¹ “Take me back to Renfro Valley,” performed by Red Foley on the *Renfro Valley Barn Dance* originating from Renfro Valley, KY over Cincinnati Radio Station WLW, November 18, 1939. (<http://152.97.110.20/Berea/image/2277.mp3>).

¹² Letter to John Lair, March 9, 1936. Folder 6. Box 70, Series VII, John Lair Papers, 1931-1941, Listener Mail. Appalachian Sound Archives, Berea College, Berea, KY.

¹³ Wayne W. Daniel, foreword in, Stamper, Pete, *It All Happened in Renfro Valley*, University Press of Kentucky (1999), p. xiv.

¹⁴ *Stand By! Magazine* is similar to viewer guides of today that list weekly broadcast schedules.

readers and listeners were quite generous in their response and sent in volumes of old songs. Listeners would also send in songs or poems written by themselves or the lyrics to songs they remembered hearing as children. Others, if unable to find published sheet music of the songs in question, would send Lair hand-written lyrics and request that one of their favorite performers sing the song on the air. For example, one listener wrote, "Dear Sir: As you stated in *Stand By! Magazine* some time ago that anyone could submit songs to your department I am sending in a couple of songs composed by my husband in hopes that some of the WLS entertainers can make use of them on some future program."¹⁵

Many of the titles of songs that listeners sent in dealt with miners, millers, mothers, and of course, the South: "Louisiana Lou, Louise," "Legend of the Dogwood," "I am longing for my old home on the old Virginia shore," to name a few. But there were also songs from other parts of the listening area, for example, "Dreamy Minnesota Moon," which reflected Appalachian migrants in the WLS listening footprint. Other titles, many of which were emotionally fraught and demonstrate the personal character of the correspondences with Lair, include: "The Dying Miner," "The Prison Evangelist," and "Five Years in Prison." And of course, there were love songs: "Oh Won't You be Mine," "Be My Valentine," "I'll go on Loving You," "Mother's Boy," "A Mother's Beauty will never Fade," and "Mother Dear (I love you)." These motherly songs were in contrast to my favorite: "We All Go to Work but Father," originally published in England by Frances, Day and Hunter, written by Leslie Reed.

"Oh, we are a happy family and I mention it with pride.
There's father, mother, me, and sister Fan.
It would be quite a model group that meets round our fireside.
But father he is such a lazy man.

He has not done a day's work since the morning he was wed.
And that is five and twenty years ago.
No tho't of work, in fact, has ever got into his head,
He's the laziest man I ever yet did know.

Chorus

We all go to work but father, and he stays at home all day.
With an old clay pipe and a can of beer, he passes the time a way.
Mother she takes in washing, so does my sister Fan;
I've met lazy men in my time, now and then, but a champion is our old man."

These lyrics were handwritten (as were many other lyrics and letters sent to Lair) and further demonstrate the personal aspect of communication Lair had with his audience.

This personal level of contact with his listeners through music lyrics flowed over into other aspects of communication about peoples' lives and experiences. For instance, listeners would send in death notices from newspapers about loved ones hoping that their passing would be announced on the radio. Sometimes the radio personalities would send back condolence letters to those who sent notices. Lair even felt comfortable enough to speak about the passing of his father on the radio and share his grief with his radio family. In return, many of his listeners responded by sending him letters of condolences. One was addressed "Dear Mr. Lair..." and

¹⁵ Letter to John Lair, January 12, 1936. Folder 6. Box 70, Series VII, John Lair Papers, 1931-1941, Listener Mail. Appalachian Sound Archives, Berea College, Berea, KY.

signed “from me and two of your unknown radio friends.”¹⁶ Another listener wrote Lair saying she had skipped her evening walk or boat ride to take time to write a letter of sympathy. She even felt compelled to apologize for having “put it off” because of her busy schedule, as one would apologize to a good friend or family member. The letter was signed “a radio friend.”¹⁷ It is noteworthy that some personal notes of sympathy were sent anonymously, from “unknown radio friends” in the vast ether network that pre-dates Internet virtual communities such as “Facebook,” “My Space,” and “Twitter.” These listeners acknowledged both their personal relation with Lair as well as the anonymity of older mass media, in contrast to modern communication technologies focused on individual identities.

In addition to responding to listeners’ mail in the show’s content, Lair also wrote personal responses to many letters writers. Specifically, letters from listeners dated from late 1940 usually had responses from Lair which were attached to the original correspondence. These were not form letters, as each one addressed the letters sent to him. For example, Mrs. Ida C. Berkley wrote Lair stating, “I am writing you in regard to some old song books I have. When you were on the WLS staff [this was years earlier] I heard you say one day that you would pay a good price for old song books, such as may be found in old organs, etc. I have on hand two music and song books in good condition....”¹⁸ She lists the titles and asks that he contact her if interested. Lair replied several days later stating that he could not use them as he already had the music in one form or another. He thanked her for remembering him. This response is especially impressive in that it had been years since Lair was on WLS yet his loyal listeners followed him from his early years in Chicago to Renfro Valley.

This personal interaction helped listeners mediate the anonymity of early mass media. Mrs. Cora Knife wrote to Lair, “Dear friend, I say friend because I think you are friends to everybody.”¹⁹ Other correspondents sought to close the gap by sharing the details of their lives, almost like on “Facebook.” For instance, Mrs. D. E. Shaw of New Mexico simply writes about her adopted state, its foods, culture, and people, after the requisite compliments on the wholesomeness of the *Barn Dance* shows and her old Kentucky home, which she left decades earlier.²⁰

There appeared to be an amalgamation of idealism and promotionalism that made up Lair: the country boy longing for the good ole days, and the businessman - almost snake oil salesman - asking people to send in their songs and poems and sometimes offering to pay a small fee for material. These requests created a flood of mail to Lair and a huge following. Lair got what he wanted, original and old traditional music which he added to his vast collection, and a loyal, personal, listenership. The listeners were able to communicate with Lair and establish a virtual friendship (via old fashioned mail). They also received pictures of their favorite performers when they ordered *the Renfro Valley Keepsake Pamphlet*, which Lair hawked on the radio and at the *Renfro Valley Barn Dance*. On occasion, listeners would receive a few dollars from the sale of their music collectables or prize money for their poems.

Lair often encouraged listeners and correspondents to physically bridge the gap created by radio by inviting them to Renfro Valley. In the process, he brought paying listeners to the

¹⁶ Letter to John Lair, May 4, 1931. Folder 8. Box 70, Series VII, John Lair Papers, 1931-1941, Listener Mail. Appalachian Sound Archives, Berea College, Berea, KY.

¹⁷ Letter from Frances FitzGerald to John Lair, May 8, 1931. Folder 8. Box 70, Series VII, John Lair Papers, 1931-1941, Listener Mail. Appalachian Sound Archives, Berea College, Berea, KY.

¹⁸ Letter from Mrs. Ida C. Berkley to John Lair, January 17, 1941. Folder 9. Box 70, Series VII, John Lair Papers, 1931-1941, Listener Mail. Appalachian Sound Archives, Berea College, Berea, KY.

¹⁹ Letter from Mrs. Cora Knife to John Lair, March 17, 1941. Folder 10. Box 70, Series VII, John Lair Papers, 1931-1941, Listener Mail. Appalachian Sound Archives, Berea College, Berea, KY.

²⁰ Letter from Mrs. D. E. Shaw to John Lair, March 3, 1941. Folder 10. Box 70, Series VII, John Lair Papers, 1931-1941, Listener Mail. Appalachian Sound Archives, Berea College, Berea, KY.

Barn Dance, as well. For example, Lair replied to one letter which simply praised him but requested no reply. Perhaps Lair noticed the return address was from Monticello, Kentucky, about 56 miles from Renfro Valley. In his reply Lair thanked Mrs. John Tate for her kind letter and ended with “Since Monticello is such a short distance from Renfro Valley, we hope to have you with us on some broadcast in the near future.”²¹ Such a letter would almost obligate the writer to make the trip, perhaps in hopes of meeting her new friend, John Lair. Another listener wrote asking to purchase a piece of saltpeter from Lair who had mentioned the saltpeter mines in Rockcastle County. Lair wrote back offering to send her a piece at no charge “providing you will pay the postage at that end.”²² Always the consummate promoter, Lair encouraged the listener to visit Renfro Valley so “you can go in (the mine) and prow around to your heart’s content.”²³

However, some listeners wanted more than friendship out of their relationship with Lair. He constantly received letters from people asking for auditions or informing him of some undiscovered talent in the neighborhood. Usually, Lair would respond with a letter saying he would be glad to listen to the performers but would “not be in a position just now to add anybody else to our staff.”²⁴ Although quite clear there were no positions available, he was often encouraging, with phrases like “maybe we can get together some time in the future.”²⁵

One listener, asking for a job, suggested the following as an enticement to being hired. Attached to the letter was a picture of his horse. “Dear Mr. Lair, I will make you an offer. If you will give me a position as a musician on your show the horse is at your service at no extra charge. Only furnish my gasoline for pickup truck when using the horse any place other than the Valley. He would really add to your off the air shows.”²⁶ The writer was referring to the traveling shows Lair would sponsor during the summer months. Although an enticing offer, Lair returned the photo of the writer’s horse saying his cast was full.

Conclusions

After a month in the Berea College Archives I came away with a better understanding of this complex radio pioneer and am producing a conference paper and journal article that examine the work of John Lair. I hope to further examine similarities and differences between Lair’s mail correspondences with radio fans and fan interactivity today on social networks like “Twitter,” “Facebook,” and “My Space.” Lair’s fans saw him as a friend, but he also acted as a patron to his radio community. On the one hand, he gave voices to his listeners through the inclusion of their contributions. On the other, he benefited greatly from the lyrics and music he received from them. His historical identity is formed via his radio personality, his articles in magazines like *Stand By!*, and his appearances on the *Renfro Valley Barn Dance*...all of which contributed to the interactive community he constructed with his audience.

Lastly, I would like to thank Harry Rice, Sound Archivist, and all the wonderful people in the Hutchins Library Special Collections & Archives for their invaluable assistance. I remain ever grateful for the opportunity the Appalachian Music Fellowship afforded me.

²¹ Letter from John Lair to Mrs. John Tate, March 17, 1941. Folder 9. Box 70, Series VII, John Lair Papers, 1931-1941, Listener Mail. Appalachian Sound Archives, Berea College, Berea, KY.

²² Letter from John Lair to listener, April 10, 1941. Folder 9. Box 70, Series VII, John Lair Papers, 1931-1941, Listener Mail. Appalachian Sound Archives, Berea College, Berea, KY.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Letter from John Lair to listener, March 12, 1941. Folder 9. Box 70, Series VII, John Lair Papers, 1931-1941, Listener Mail. Appalachian Sound Archives, Berea College, Berea, KY.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Letter to John Lair, March 17, 1941. Folder 9. Box 70, Series VII, John Lair Papers, 1931-1941, Listener Mail. Appalachian Sound Archives, Berea College, Berea, KY.

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