



Radio

by Tina Gianoulis

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Invented in Italy in 1895 by Guglielmo Marconi, radio became a major communications medium in the United States and Western Europe in the late 1920s, when commercial radio stations began broadcasting programs of news, music, and entertainment.

Because of its ability to send long-range messages with relative anonymity, radio has also been an effective tool of propaganda and subversion. From the World War II broadcasts of "Tokyo Rose" to the cold war-inspired Radio Free Europe broadcasts to contemporary microradio and computer webcasting, radio has long been a favored instrument of subversives everywhere.

Non-commercial Broadcasting

While most radio relied on commercial support from the beginning, non-commercial broadcasting has also been a part of radio's history since educational stations, often affiliated with colleges and universities, were founded during the 1920s.

Pacifica, one of the best-known non-commercial radio networks in the United States, was founded in 1949, by a non-profit group of citizens in Berkeley, California. Since the 1970s, it has been a leader in giving voice to glbtq people.

The social revolutions of the 1960s and 1970s, which included the civil rights, anti-war, women's liberation, and gay liberation movements, had an important effect on the broadcasting industry.

In 1967, President Lyndon Johnson responded to public pressure by signing into law the Public Broadcasting Act, which granted federal funds to support non-commercial public radio. It was on these public radio stations, many still operated by colleges and universities, that queer radio found its first comfortable home.

Early Radio

Early radio largely excluded any mention of gay men and lesbians, but there were some exceptions. For instance, in 1933 a San Francisco station began its evening by broadcasting a local drag revue titled "Boys Will Be Girls," only to end up airing the police raid on the bar presenting the show.

A rare gay male character was included in a 1947 ABC Radio broadcast of the Moss Hart play *Lady in the Dark*.

Lesbians on early radio were even rarer than gay men. One of the few was heard in a 1952 broadcast of a mystery show called *The Black Museum*. In "The Brass Button" episode, the murder victim was a mannish woman with "no use for men" who was killed off within the first two minutes of the program.

Early radio censorship rules were stringent, and almost any mention of homosexuality was forbidden. However, in 1962, New York's public radio station WBAI presented one of the first programs actually to air self-acknowledged gay men's voices, *Live and Let Live*.

The Aftermath of the Stonewall Rebellion

After the Stonewall Rebellion in the summer of 1969, gay men, lesbians, and other queers gained not only greater visibility, but also a greater sense of cultural identity. The gay liberation movement of the early 1970s exploded with expressions of newly discovered gay and lesbian identity. Books, newspapers, literary and political journals, films, clubs, coffeehouses, and music festivals were products of the movement.

Gay and lesbian radio programming was another important part of celebrating queer identity and culture, as well as spreading the movement. Relatively easy to learn and much cheaper to produce than television, radio was a popular and accessible medium. A radio show could spread the word of gay liberation far beyond the urban centers where gay communities existed.

The Stonewall riots and the political work that had preceded and followed them brought gay issues into public view, but most gay men and lesbians remained closeted. For those who were afraid to join organizations or even to enter gay bookstores to buy queer literature, radio was an excellent outreach tool.

Radio was free and private. Through gay and lesbian radio programming, closeted queers could find support and information about the movement in the safety of their own homes.

Early Gay and Lesbian Radio Shows

In the flurry of post-Stonewall activity, gay radio shows sprang up all over the country. KBOO, an Oregon public radio station, hosted one of the earliest gay shows, the *Homophile Half Hour*, which ran from 1971 to 1973. It featured interviews with gay activists.

Another early show, created by Seattle lesbian and gay radio pioneers Shan Ottey and Paul Barwick, began broadcasting in 1971 with the humorously blatant name, *Make No Mistake About It, It's a Faggot and a Dyke*.

Many of the early radio programs still exist, some having updated their names or changed to cyber broadcasting. *Closet Free Radio* on KZSC in Santa Cruz, California, claims to be the longest running gay radio show in the country, while another KZSC show *Breakfast in Bed*, produced by the Women's Radio Collective, has been broadcasting lesbian and feminist content continuously since 1975.

Two still-active Pennsylvania programs, both on WXPB in Philadelphia, had their beginnings in 1974. *Amazon Country*, one of the earliest programs focusing on women's music and lesbian culture, was founded by Roberta Hacker, Rose Weber, and Jesse Ford, among others.

Q'zine was founded by John Zeh as *Sunshine Gaydreams*, later shortened to *Gaydreams*. It featured an hour of music and issues of interest to gays. In the mid-1990s, Robert Drake took over as host of *Gaydreams* and gave the show a makeover, changing the name to the more modern *Q'zine*, and changing its format to a queer arts and culture magazine.

The show remains popular, but some listeners, including former *Gaydreams* host Alan Ross, regret the loss of the show's overtly gay name and political content.

Political disagreements also caused division in an early lesbian radio show on Seattle's KRAB-FM public radio station. Founded in 1974, the Lesbian Feminist Radio Collective produced the show *WE--Women Everywhere*, which featured a format of women's music, news, and interviews.

However, the collective could not come to agreement on the volatile issue of lesbian separatism, and, in 1975, it split into two groups, each producing a show that reflected the differing views of its founders. *WE--Women Everywhere* continued to feature feminist programming while *Amazon Media* offered more lesbian-focused programming, including discussions of such topics as animal rights and non-monogamy.

Harassment and Defiance

While listeners of these early gay shows may have been safe in their homes, those broadcasting were not necessarily so. Threatening letters and phone calls, lawsuits, and interference from station management and the government were common occurrences for producers of queer radio.

One Seattle lesbian producer received a visit from the FBI when she played the Alix Dobkin song "A View From Gay Head" on an early evening program. Agents informed her that she had unknowingly broken a Federal Communications Commission decency rule prohibiting the use of the word lesbian more than six times in an hour before 8 p.m.

The Dobkin song, which featured a chorus repeating the word lesbian six times between each verse, earned the station a stiff fine from the FCC and cost the producer her broadcaster's license.

Often, however, the impetus for queer programming comes as a result of the recognition of the blatantly unfair treatment experienced by glbtq people. Radio station KGAY, for example, began offering support for queers in Colorado Springs, Colorado, in 1993, immediately after state lawmakers repealed legislation protecting gay rights.

Queer Radio Today

Radio continues to be a significant source of entertainment and information for the queer community. Currently, there are approximately eighty radio shows around the United States focused on gay and lesbian issues. These include *LesBiGay Radio* in Chicago, *GAYCNY* in New York City, and *Queer Music Heritage* in Houston, among many others, including some mentioned above.

Queer shows are also produced in countries around the globe, from Australia to the Netherlands, including a show for queer Arabs called *AHBAB* in Beirut, Lebanon.

Some programs are syndicated on many different stations, such as the long running *This Way Out*, which airs on 185 stations around the world.

Commercial Broadcasting

Most gay programming is still carried on public radio stations, but queers have made some inroads into commercial broadcasting. The Chicago program, *LesBiGay*, begun in 1975, claims to be the only drive-time program in the U.S. that focuses on a queer audience.

On Los Angeles commercial station KFI-FM, an openly gay couple hosted *Karel and Andrew*, a popular talk show that did not deal exclusively with gay issues. After the death of Andrew, Karel embarked on a solo career. He currently hosts the *Karel Show* each Saturday and Sunday on KGO AM in San Francisco, a 50,000 watt member of the ABC Radio Network. He also streams special segments via the Internet through karelchannel.com and contributes a column to *The Advocate*.

Until his death in December 2004 from complications of AIDS, David Brudnoy was the most recognized voice of Boston talk radio for more than a quarter century. Brudnoy revealed his sexual orientation and HIV status in 1994. While his show was general in nature, he did not hesitate to use it to bring glbtq issues to the fore.

Microradio and Cybercasting

Recent technological developments have made radio broadcasting even more accessible. Microradio uses low power FM transmitters to broadcast over a limited range, creating a very localized radio audience and opening the door for grassroots alternative radio programming.

Once illegal underground operations, microradio broadcasting stations are now permitted under FCC rules issued in January 2000 and are being used by queer activists nationwide to create new, smaller communications communities.

Cybercasting has also broadened access to radio production and transmission. With computer broadcasting, virtually any individual with access to the Internet can broadcast a radio program, and queer programming is plentiful.

Cybercast shows range from *Gay Hit Parade*, offering popular gay music, to *Alternative ChristStyle*, a gay Christian station. The Internet site www.outletradio.com offers an extensive listing of queer cybercasts.

Satellite Broadcasting

At the other end of the spectrum from microradio is satellite broadcasting, which aims for a large national audience. Currently two companies dominate subscription satellite radio, XM and Sirius, both of which offer a large number of channels, many of them commercial free. These satellite broadcasters feature channels devoted to music, talk, news, and sports.

Sirius Satellite Radio has been in the vanguard of programming specifically for the glbtq community. Launched in April of 2003, with John McMullen at the helm, Sirius OutQ currently provides the only national, 24-hour broadcasting schedule targeting the glbtq community. The OutQ schedule features a number of programs, ranging from a news show presented in collaboration with *The Advocate* to talk shows hosted by Michelangelo Signorile and McMullen, respectively, to entertainment shows such as the *Frank DeCaro Show* and *Last Call* with Jeremy Hovies and Charlie Dyer.

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Tina Gianoulis is an essayist and free-lance writer who has contributed to a number of encyclopedias and anthologies, as well as to journals such as *Sinister Wisdom*.