ALL THE WAY LIVE
THE RISE OF THE BLACK RADIO DISC JOCKEYS
& THE ART OF VERBAL PERFORMANCE

A Thesis

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ABSTRACT

This study is primarily concerned with analyzing the performance technique and cultural significance of the post-World War II black radio disc jockeys who pioneered "personality radio" in the US. I begin by challenging some of the recent literature on the evolution of black-oriented radio which offers only cursory explanations as to how the black radio disc jockey came to define and era in commercial radio broadcasting. My primary concern is to situate the individual verbal performance styles of the black radio personalities, and the cultural institution of "the deejay" that arises from them, within the context of the localization of early radio during the early 1950s. I argue that the undeniable cultural and economic importance black disc jockeys on the whole enjoyed by the early 1950s was the result of a more dynamic confluence of issues both in structural (and ideological) changes in the national corporate broadcast media in general during the 1940s, and in the particular migratory patterns and aesthetic values of black communities as habits of consumption, geographic locations, trends in black popular music, and access to and interest in radio entertainment shifted after World War II.

I begin by explaining how minstrelsy as a whole, from the late 1800s through the turn of the century, shaped popular American impressions of black people and black behavior. I suggest that minstrelsy, in its portrayal of blacks as awkward, laughably illiterate, and generally of bumbling inferiority, established
a pattern of images and a language as comic formulae that the white American popular imagination had accepted as entertainment. Early radio entertainment, particularly the popular "Amos 'N' Andy" show, with "racial ventriloquy", necessarily carried these racist, minstrelsy formulae over into the aural blackface of network broadcast radio programming. The tenacity of this system of anti-black entertainment symbolism is an important feature in early radio entertainment, first because it was by these minstrelsy shows that the viability of regularly-scheduled programming was proven, which in turn enticed advertisers and fueled the continually escalating profitability of commercial radio. Second, many of the first black radio personalities during the 1930s and 1940s would struggle, either tacitly or explicitly, over these misrepresentations of black speech and behavior; this second point foreshadows arguments addressed more directly further on in this study – ideological arguments that arose between disc jockeys over the uses of language in racial-cultural representation.

I then offer a concise historical overview of the commercial development of American broadcast radio in order to establish the premises from which local radio stations, and the disc jockeys who emerged en masse on these stations, transformed from spaces concerned primarily with entertaining the "greatest common denominator" of the American popular imagination to media outlets scrambling for black listeners. This study traces the changing social significance of radio both in terms of corporate and advertising interests in commercial radio broadcasting, and in terms of the changing entertainment interests of the national audience that set off a chain of events that urged the localization of many radio stations in order to survive. Also, in the relationship between
national music publication interests and radio stations soured, local stations found it increasingly convenient to focus instead on more regional music talent that GIs and black migrant workers from the rural South had already begun to popularize in northern and western cities. Out of this confluence of events emerged the disc jockeys who defined personality radio from the late 1940s through the 1960s.

Through an in-depth contextual analysis, this study attempts a more vast and complicated understanding of the black disc jockey, while also positioning itself as part of the growing corpus of important work that is being done around this cultural figure. Because one of the chief premises of this study is that the disc jockey’s own particular understanding of the interests, desires, and language of his listening community critically shaped his personality and delivery style, I situate the disc jockey in terms of his “blind” perception of and relationship with his listening community. Then, using verbal performance theory, I analyze the specific techniques of the disc jockeys that resonated deeply with black listeners who held a pre-existing deep aesthetic appreciation for a strong “man-of-words.” I trace these aesthetic traditions and verbal performance dynamics from the sacred space of the Black Church as they were invoked in the more secular terrain of the “world of rhythm and blues,” especially in black radio, arguing that a dialectic of influence, on the grounds of verbal language and style, between the deejay and the listening allowed deejays to become intimate with his listeners. I then analyze explain how language becomes a contested symbolic terrain and the site of a struggle over racial representation and responsibility in which black disc jockeys engaged one another and the medium, suggesting that
radio, due to its aurality, became one more site at which many blacks sought to confront the racist traditions of radio by re-inventing the sound of blackness on the air while others utilized vernacular to counter the historic exclusivity of American radio and carve a massive niche of popularity for the black radio personality. The final chapter discusses speech play and the extra-literal communicative elements inherent in the specific techniques, rhymes and styles of the disc jockeys, explaining that the disc jockeys, in the postures and phrasing of their on-air patter, communicated a sense of style and a connection with their listening communities that was just as important as content (indeed, presentation often preceded content).
For the late, great Jockey Jack Gibson,

for Black Studies,

and for Clara May Screven.
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Beginning any listing of gratitude can be daunting, because of all the various individuals who have lent hands and minds towards helping make this thesis a complete and solid product. Of course, this study would not have been possible had it not been for the young, bold black men and women who, against all variety of social storms of a nature we are still studying to understand, defined an era in American radio as the nation’s premiere personality disc jockeys, and whose names will forever be indelibly etched in the annals of national broadcast history. Although many are no longer living, many of these men and women are still excited to tell their stories. I have had the pleasure of speaking to some of them. “Jockey Jack” Gibson, “Joltin’” Joe Howard, Eddie Castleberry, Robert “Honeboy” Thomas – thank you for all of your time, and for black radio.

I also must extend a simple and sincere thank you to my advisor Dr. John W. Roberts, for his rigorous attention, wisdom, and for his particular concern and example as a scholar throughout an invaluable mentoring relationship for which the conceptualization and writing of this study has been but a mere coda. My thesis committee – Drs. Demetrius L. Eudell and Ike Okafor Newsum - deserves a tremendous round of applause for that unique and difficult blend of stamina and careful, well-focused guidance through repeated drafts in order to guide my development in strong scholarship.
I also want to thank the staff of archivists and archive assistants at the Archives of Black Music and Culture at the University of Indiana, Bloomington, for all of patience and assistance in helping me identify and wade through dozens of disc jockey interviews from the Black Radio: Telling it Like it Was radio series produced by The Smithsonian Institution. In particular, I thank Macia P. Richards, head archivist; her genuine attention in seeing to it that my limited research time at the archives were used most efficiently was absolutely crucial in my ability to accumulate primary sources and develop a more sweeping sense of the ideas that most concerned, and the themes that most frequently outlined the lives of, the black personality disc jockeys.

Professor Kathy M. Newman from Carnegie-Mellon University, whom I approached in December of 1998 at the Modern Language Association’s 114th annual convention in San Francisco, played an important role during the formative stages of this thesis, using her own understanding of the many dynamics that informed this explosive era in national broadcast radio in urging me to critically consider and focus on particular aspects of black radio – technological dynamics, advertising and racial representation, the semi-anonymity of race and the fact of black radio in confluence - in order to gain a larger sense of the disc jockey’s real significance in his time. Her unique focus on sound theory also helped me to discuss race and radio in exciting and more revealing ways. I thank my Uncle Leroy Wiggins for supporting my research in San Francisco.

I must also acknowledge those who, before me, have chosen to detail this still under-studied history. In particular, I want to thank Nelson George whose
book *The Death or Rhythm and Blues* first sparked my interest in the disc jockeys and who convinced me that no student of black popular music and cultural history of the 1950s and 1960s can discuss rhythm and blues, soul, and racial consciousness without dealing with the deejays as an institution. I am also indebted to the work of William Barlow, Gilbert A. Williams and Mark Newman for their various in-depth approaches to situating the disc jockeys within particular social/racial, technological and historical moments; their consideration of the disc jockey not as an isolated phenomenon but as a very logical part of larger social and media developments in the US helped me tremendously in realizing the true weight behind the disc jockey’s emergence.

I must acknowledge fellow students Jeffery Bickerstaff, for also reviewing drafts and helping me carefully situate my ideas to embark on this challenging study, and Deborah Neves, for her appreciated assistance with my preparations to present this study to the Black Studies Department at The Ohio State University.

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CHAPTER 1

Slang Historical: Theorizing Black Disc Jockey Performance

Within The Currents of American Broadcast Radio

Between 1946 and 1955, the number of radio stations nation-wide featuring some black-oriented programming skyrocketed from twenty-four to 600. The era of the black-appeal radio had arrived, and it was truly explosive. In the years following the end of World War II, television began to seize the mainstream white American imagination just when radio stations were increasing across the US. Network broadcasters, reluctant to adjust to the interests of local non-white listening audiences, turned the bulk of their creative attention to TV programming, leaving open a wealthy, lucrative market of enthusiastic black radio listeners. Local stations, with weaker signals and supported by neighborhood businesses who could not afford advertising on larger radio stations, began to exploit the possibilities of black narrowcast radio as never before.¹

¹Mark Newman uses the term "narrowcast radio" to distinguish a particular kind of special interest radio programming that was designed especially to appeal to non-white and/or non-English-speaking radio audiences, and is used in comparison with the larger, commercial
Long a proven air-waves communicator with an astute sensitivity for the kind of masterful lyricism and musical selections his listeners valued and desired, the black personality disk jockey was finding increased on-air opportunities to hone his craft of "sweet-and-good" talking, fast selling, and good music selection. Black deejays pioneered legendary routines which became definitive of the institution itself, while conceiving ever-innovative ways of approaching the microphone and talking to the black listener "out there". By experimenting with and readapting studio technology to suit their own creative whims, by meshing aurality and visual liveness in ways which television could not imitate, the deejays highlighted the vividness and boundlessness of sound and voice, and invented new ways of hearing music. These black men and women of the airwaves empire proved the importance of radio's visibility amongst listeners (a tactic radio stations still employ nationally to promote themselves) and solidified radio's relationship with their surrounding black communities in part by invoking a canon of symbolism and playing on black appreciation for clever poetics, verbal contortions and language bending, world play, and rhyme.

In contemporary interpretive black cultural history, there remains a paucity in extensive intellectual work in studying the cultural icon of the black personality deejay as he once embodied prized black oral and vocal-performative traditions. Much of the work concerning the rise and

mainstream American broadcast radio that sought the "least common denominator" interests. See Entrepreneurs of Profit and Pride: From Black Appeal to Radio Soul. New York: Praeger,
importance of the black disc jockeys has fallen short of situating them, chronologically and artistically, in terms of the development of these traditions. Nelson George, Mark Newman, William Barlow and Gilbert A. Williams all allude to the deejay as a master of words with a keen sense of his technological space and listening audience. The allusions are vast, and the progressive history (Williams emphasizes black radio entrepreneurship, George situates the deejay in terms of the genesis, and "death", of the rhythm and blues world) is, within its scope, thorough. Yet, some details must be begged along the way. In particular, if the black disc jockey is going to be mentioned in the context of the black verbal performative traditions, it is critical to ask what exactly that tradition entails, and, more importantly, what is it about the deejay that makes him not just a player of records or an announcer but a good black talker worthy of ranking within this complex and precious cultural history. What does he borrow and honor? What does he contribute to the canon? What does it mean to be a cultural hero, and is that a relevant categorization of the black disc jockey?

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Gilbert A. Williams has done extensive work in describing the black disc jockey as a “heroic figure”. Besides the outside historical and technological factors which created a space for black-oriented radio to originate and thrive, Williams is sensitive to the particular skillfulness, creativity and talent of the early black deejays, illustrating both their own manipulations of language and technology and their importance to black audiences during and after World War II-era migrations. As Williams further claims, "[d]isc jockeys used music and language styles that helped the new urban residents adjust to their new surroundings, and made them feel at home". At the same time, the deejays themselves occupied an important symbolic space, representing blacks who had become successful in a previously all-white entertainment medium, but who, through their language and their choice in music, demonstrated the retention of their black cultural identity and sense of community.

Williams and William Barlow are both unclear and imprecise in their efforts to describe the cultural gravity of the disc jockey, as well as the tremendous newness in programming and in the character of radio which the era of the black personality jocks ushered into broadcasting. Williams refers to the disc jockey as a cultural hero, and as “an individual admired and respected for his work in the black community, his concern for his fellow

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6 Williams (1990), pg. 110
man, and his ability to effectuate changes in society." He suggests that this heroic function become manifest where the deejays, through their music and their language, facilitated a smoother transition for southern black migrants in northern cities. The deejay was a hero and a role model (terms which Williams indiscriminately conflates) because these migrants found in them voices and ideas with which they could relate, and which expressed the "joy and pain of the black experience". Williams fails to interrogate the more subtle, complex relationships which developed between the disc jockey and his audience or give much analytical reinforcement to his use of the term hero. Rather, vagaries multiply in Williams's essay, as he uses describes the importance of the heroic disc jockey in terms of "fellow man", "black community" and "black culture", without pausing to make especially clear any of these ideas.

Slightly less crammed with vacuous signifiers is Barlow's description of the personality disc jockey as an "audio trickster". Along with the quantitative data gathered during the late 1940s and into the 1950s which he uses to illustrate the growing number of black disc jockeys in radio, Barlow seeks an additional, qualitative reason to explain the growing importance of this new radio phenomenon that was taking national radio broadcasting by storm. In search of a way to summarily assess the various techniques disc jockeys invoked in their performances, techniques which defined and

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7 Williams (1990), pg. 109
animated their personalities, Barlow concludes that, "[i]n short, the first wave of black disc jockeys were audio tricksters; the more unique and outrageous their characters and stories, the larger their listening audiences." For Barlow, the disc jockeys' apparently "abundant enthusiasm and lack of professional pretensions" defined his trickster persona, which subsequently upset many of the conventions prevailing in broadcast radio and paved the way for a new kind of black radio personality. However, Barlow fails to extensively unpack the cultural contextuality of the trickster figure, and, more importantly, he does not illustrate the process or the logic inherent in the disc jockey's performance toward his accumulation of audience.

While Williams is in search of a lexicon to tackle the difficult task of identifying and describing the cultural importance enjoyed by the black disc jockey as he rose to prominence during the 1940s and 1950s, Barlow similarly seeks a language to encapsulate the tremendous, unmistakable impact this new figure had on radio where the disc jockeys broke traditional molds and barriers with a distinctly stylized language that resonated with listeners and invoked staple discursive processes. Yet, while they both extend the historical  

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8Williams (1990), pg. 109 
9Barlow (1990), pg. 215

10Later, in Voice Over: The Making of Black Radio (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999, pg. 104), Barlow does attempt a more thorough assessment of the cultural weight which gives currency to the disc jockey's performance. He uses Roger Abrahams's understanding of signifying as a cultural process having survived from African oral traditions to suggest that the disc jockeys are modern signifiers who have re-interpreted and readapted such traditions to modern contexts. Yet again, his treatment of signifying is rather brief, virtually a legitimating aside that does not fit harmoniously into his historical account, rather than a thoroughgoing theoretical model used to structure his analysis of the communicative processes invoked and
facts which describe in various ways the ascent of the disc jockey further towards a social history which suggests that the disc jockey rose both out of and because of specific cultural contexts, neither attempts to schematically detail the relationship which the disc jockeys necessarily cultivated between themselves and their listeners. Such relationships were, in fact, definitive in that they shaped the very importance and dramatic, transformative character of the disc jockeys.

Nelson George, In The Death of Rhythm and Blues, probes into the "personality" and cultural importance of the black personality deejay, discussing their individual linguistic and performative styles, their political postures from behind the microphone and on the streets, and detailing how the black personality deejay, as an institution, had a decisive impact upon what George refers to as "the world of rhythm and blues". In this respect, George discusses the deejay as part of an organic cultural maturation and expressive process. He sketches the disk jockey as a self-aware cultural pulse and illuminates with considerable depth the deejay's sense that they were a part of a tremendous movement in the celebration and redefinition of black cultural production. His analysis is far more attentive to both the men behind the microphone and the class- and taste-based conflicts which swirled around their vocabulary, choice in music, and political activism.

In particular, George offers a strong sense of the controversial and pioneering character of Al Benson. His "black everyman' style" proved

adhered to by the disc jockeys.
exceedingly problematic and laughable for critics who harped on his flawed, Southern-inflected English, particularly when juxtaposed with Jack L. Cooper. But it was exactly Benson's vocal honesty, his seemingly intuitive mastery of black urban vernacular, his undeniable "blackness," which earned him the keys to the young black listening kingdom. Businesses seeking to exploit the advertising power of radio often had to go through "The Midnight Gambler," as Benson was known on Chicago radio, to reach the South Side shopper. According to George, it was Benson who inspired a national sense of the profitability and appeal of the "black everyman" approach to radio hosting. His style became canonized, and his impression on the institution of deejaying led to "the era of the 'personality deejays'." Though George's reductive and essentialist understanding of "the personality deejay" is extremely problematic where it suggests first that the everyman persona is the only legitimate form of the personality deejay, and second that only a particular representation of blackness qualifies as authentic personality deejaying, his point remains rather salient where Benson has been "recorded" in deejay cultural history as the founding father of a style which influenced the vocal approach of many major disc jockeys who followed him.

This study is a divergence from much of the existing contemporary work on black radio disc jockeys of the 1940s and 1950s where it attempts to define and critically examine the essential processes of communication which under-gird the particular relationships the disc jockeys enjoyed with their

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11 George (1988), pg. 41
listening communities - relationships that directly informed the black deejays' popular ascension in defining an era in broadcast radio. The study works to complicate some of the assertions concerning the cultural relevance of the personality disc jockey's unique approach to radio performance. The disc jockeys and their listeners met at a discursive nexus, and such momentous "collisions" were defined by aesthetic codes dictating the flow of communication between the two ends. This study examines the dynamism which these codes bring to life at the site of this discursive nexus, and chooses the vantage point of the disc jockeys themselves precisely because their impressions of the relevance of their work directly informed the creative unfolding of their radio personalities.

First, the black disc jockey must be situated within a larger context of the development of commercial radio. The specifics of American radio's early commercialization, the rearrangement of the networks' broadcast interests, and the subsequent rise of local programming all led to a commercial interest in and cultural space for the development of black-appeal radio. The grand scheme of commercial broadcast radio's shifting conception of its audience leads, during the 1940s, to the industry's interest in and increased "ability" to appeal to black listeners. The sudden "discovery" of the black consumer made available opportunities throughout the 1950s for the rapid rise of the black personality disc jockey.
Second, to know the very mechanics of the relationship which
developed between the black personality deejays and their listeners requires
examining the formulation of these listening bodies - both actually
(migration, musical tastes, income and radio receiver ownership), and as they
were imagined by the disc jockeys themselves. By virtue of the radio
medium, the deejays' visions of community determines the form and
content of his performance, and these performances in turn established the
prominence of the disc jockeys in the popular imagination.

Third, this study seeks a more specific understanding of the
fundamental discursive process by which the disc jockey operated in his effort
to link himself with his listeners and to be esteemed in accordance with a
particular aesthetic criterion of verbal performance. How the disc jockeys
negotiated the bounds between individuality and canonical, community-
determined aesthetic priorities led to the individual style. Personality
germinated at the site of the confluence of established codes and individual
finesse, and for the disc jockeys, the modern communications medium of
radio invites additional factors which critically nuance his performance of
language in this discursive relationship. This study attempts to understand
the deejay's specific application of vernacular forms of communication to
suggest that the disc jockeys became relevant cultural figures because of their
systematic use of complex logical discursive processes.
Fourth, while probing into the deejay as black verbal performer, this paper will also look at the different ways in which the deejays negotiated and made use of the tension between "good English" and "bad black dialect" on the air. In so doing, I try to make sense of why certain deejays, stylistically and strategically, chose certain approaches to speech at certain times. As the disc jockeys gained unprecedented access to the airwaves, they struggled to challenge many of the racist representations of blackness which had solidified in popular radio entertainment. This early sense of black professionalism in radio came into tension with other, vernacular conceptions of radio performance. Disc jockeys often held divergent opinions over how to represent blackness on the air, and this subtle tension surfaced in the very moment the so-called "era of the black personality disc jockey" was fomenting. The social history of black disc jockeys during the post-World War II black appeal radio boom highlights the ways in which sound and orality become contested grounds, with voices vying for footholds over authenticity and how to appropriately sound out blackness.

Finally, nothing more epitomizes the era of the black personality disc jockeys than their uses of language in building long narrative raps, quick and witty rhymes, unforgettable catch phrases, or even more subtle but no less stylized shifts in tone, pitch, or cadence. With their trademark on-air verbal patter, the black disc jockeys of the blues, R & B, and soul music soundly established their unique position in the history of American radio. Yet, again,
theoretical devices help delve beyond less critical assertions about the meaning of the deejays' performances to the more definitive, base-level substrata and disclose the social and extra-literary uses of language. The deejays' performances played specific roles in declaring their connection with listeners, and the performances verified and celebrated the intimacy established between these two entities, not despite but by directly way of the medium of radio.

II

Disenchanted Dials: The Construction Racial Types in Blackface Radio

As a point of departure in investigating the racist, anti-black environment of early American broadcast radio, and in understanding how national radio existed as a part of larger popular conceptions of black people, it must be made clear the tremendous sway that particular images and ideas created and perpetuated by popular media and entertainment can have over national consciousness. Sylvia Wynter, in her essay "Disenchanting Discourse - Minority literary Criticism and Beyond," argues that narrative discourses such as fiction writing or story-telling, which develop in accordance with the larger cultural conception of the human and which give an accessible discursive logic to the grander epistemological structure which governs a society, employ "rhetorical conventions" to establish and become part of the normative collective understanding of being to maintain a
particular social order. These "narrative orders of discourse" utilize culture-specific conceptions of Man\textsuperscript{12} and indoctrinate them into the collective, popular social consciousness to proscribe the bounds of normalcy. "The discursive system of each human order functions as the enculturating machinery by and through which the motivational system which dictates the behaviors needed if a specific mode of the human is to be brought into dynamic being and stably replicated.\textsuperscript{13}" This argument for increased attention to the potent, decisive affect of symbolic modes of human representation upon actual human behavior and social intercourse - indeed upon entire social structures, collective world-views, and culture-specific human/non-human categorizations (what Wynter refers to as a "knowledge of categories") - can be extended beyond literature to show that theater, television, photography, print media, and radio (along with other forms of mass media), employ rhetorical devices to inculcate into the popular imagination of the audience a particular set of normative values which codify appropriate renditions of humanness and otherness.\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{12}This is "Man" as in the Foucauldian Figure of Man - the socially idealized model of the human (of enacting humanness) within a particular cultural epistemology that distinguishes between Man and the non-human.
\textsuperscript{13}Sylvia Wynter. "On Disenchanting Discourse: 'Minority' Literary Criticism and Beyond". \textit{Cultural Critique} (7) Fall 1987. pgs. 207-244.
\textsuperscript{14}Similarly, Emile Durkheim has suggested, in his study of totemic systems of human/social representations, that the totemic symbol itself serve its primary function as a visual, material articulation of the larger, less tangible dynamic social structure and its attendant mores - respect for elders, collective obligation, altruism and fraternalism, etc. - which weigh upon and dictate the thoughts and behaviors of the social individual. For Durkheim as well, symbolic systems do represent the larger governing ethos of a society, and enjoy a tremendous social gravity, becoming "real" where they compel human thought and action. See \textit{The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life}. NY: The Free Press, 1965.
In *Entrepreneurs of Profit and Pride - From Black-Appeal to Radio Soul*, Mark Newman studies the development of black-appeal radio in America in terms of a dual black entrepreneurial agenda. According to Newman, the first major efforts to establish a black presence in radio and to utilize the then relatively young commercial communications medium to create programming by, for and about black people were urged on by the particular evolution of social impressions and disposable wealth in white business-black consumer relationships. Such efforts were also characterized by a felt need to challenge the representations of blackness then (and still) inherent in and transmitted by broadcast entertainment.\(^\text{15}\)

Beginning with the minstrel show in the early nineteenth century, Newman first discusses the blackface image as it became indelibly etched into the performative ethos of white American popular entertainment by white and black exaggerated renditions of the black body and cultural behavior, illuminating the derogatory, anti-black system of representation that the first pioneers of black-appeal radio were striving to counter.

As the "entertainment expression" of Jacksonian democracy, the minstrel show celebrated the white common man in his triumph over both a vampirous aristocracy and the black underclass occupying the bottom rung of the social strata. The earliest minstrelsy scene was predominantly a northern one, where blacks still composed a relatively small percentage of the

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\(^{15}\) Newman (1988), pg. xv

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population. The minstrel show helped to solidify white racial and class identity by portraying the awkward, bumbling inferiority of black people. Thomas Dartmouth Rice is recognized as one of the premiere minstrel performers, establishing his ragtag blackface character as the prototype for "performing black" which would inspire white performers from the minstrelsy semi-circle to the radio show.\textsuperscript{16}

Newman argues that a fundamental feature of minstrelsy entertainment's impressions of blackness was precisely that it was a white construction.\textsuperscript{17} When considering the pronounced effect blackface imagery has had on American entertainment in establishing both a canonical meaning of blackness and a reservoir of symbols for properly caricaturing black bodies and behaviors, such racist renditions do not achieve their tenacity in the popular imagination by the mere fact of projection alone. There was a more complex problem with minstrelsy. White entertainers enjoyed an authority granted by their audiences in that white performer impressions asserted an authenticity to white audiences which celebrated their human superiority in addition to the comic effect. As Newman explains,

\begin{quote}
[t]he minstrelsy image was a white creation. It was a part of a larger white mind set and campaign dedicated to proving black inferiority that was translated into political and social terms by the strict color line that kept
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{16} Newman (1988), pgs. 20-23

\textsuperscript{17} Newman (1988), pg. 24
blacks separate but unequal. These white-inspired caricatures sent a strong message to blacks regarding their worth as human beings.¹⁸

Indeed, white symbolic representations of blackness in entertainment have helped to decisively stabilize the canon of legitimate blackness in popular media while "translating directly into social and political terms" which drew the liminal line to prevent blacks themselves from entering into or being appropriately addressed by radio in particular, except where they would perform "in blackface".

By the 1920s, the minstrel show had engrained and stabilized an entire pattern of images in popular entertainment to which radio was no exception. The success and embraces²⁰ of the blackface image had conditioned the way blacks must be represented by the entertainer, and prescribed the way they ought to be perceived by the audience. The white media had created its own representational world, its own symbolic table, one which seemed to so immerse the senses of the popular imagination that traits made popular in aural-visual entertainment (the stage) were necessarily carried over into a medium where blackface had to be entirely vocalized - broadcast commercial

¹⁸Newman (1988), pg. 24

¹⁹Kalamu ya Salaam uses the term "embracement" to qualitatively describe black cultural processes of revisiting older expressive forms (a virtual reaching back), respectfully harnessing them and rearticulating them through contemporary forms, new technology, etc. The term is used here simply to suggest a similar process of embracing older, resonating forms of popular entertainment, and channeling them through a modern medium, and the curious merging of old and new that results in the final product of the radio blackface shows. As with black music, the key to radio blackface programming's success was dependance upon and manipulation of older forms. See Kalamu ya Salaam. "It Didn't Jes' Grew: The Social and Aesthetic Significance of African American Music." in African American Review. Summer 1995. Pgs. 351-16
radio. The popularity of Gosden and Correll's "Amos and Andy", which debuted on national radio during the late 1920s, is but one of many examples of the continued success of the racist, minstrelsy formulaic rendition of black speech, packed with mispronunciations, malapropisms, ostensibly authentic black superstition, and a general sense of classic black juvenile foolishness as the two white radio performers, and their white listening audience, understood blacks.

After their initial success with the "Sam and Henry" show on WGN, a small independent Chicago station, Charles Correll and Freeman Gosden moved their blackface minstrel radio show to WMAQ-Chicago, where they renamed the program "Amos 'n' Andy". The show was syndicated and later purchased by the NBC network. Within four months after the 1929 purchase, "Amos 'n' Andy" soared to national popularity, drawing 60% of all radio listeners, or approximately forty million people tuning into the fifteen-minute show Monday through Saturday. The rapid success that "Amos 'n' Andy" drew, and the clamor of eager sponsors who followed, impressed upon broadcasters the serious potency of regular programming, with listeners setting their work and recreational schedules around the show. The celebrity of the show rest in Gosden and Correll's innovative manipulation of a new medium to achieve the full comic effect of an old entertainment

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30Barlow (1990), pg. 177.

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tradition - blackface minstrelsy filtered through radio sound, and broadcast rapidly and simultaneously to millions of homes nation-wide. The show struck a familiar chord in American popular culture which held on tenaciously to remnants of classic 1800s vaudevillian entertainment formula well into the next century, where fragments re-appeared to them via the exciting new media of radio and television. Invoking classic images and familiar humorous tropes, broadcasters lulled listeners' enthusiasm toward their programs. The expansive possibilities of radio as it developed depended upon familiar forms of entertainment (variety shows, minstrelsy, music programming) revealed that the success of new technology is often contingent upon its exploitation of images and ideas familiar to its audience. "Amos 'N' Andy" is merely the earliest evidence of modern media's dependence upon traditional entertainment forms to enjoy a level of familiarity between broadcasters and audiences.

The blackface tradition was so tenacious and had so successfully made the transition to radio that black entertainers, eager to break into radio, were also confined to these derogatory roles of pre-fabricated, aural blackness. The white popular imagination controlled not only the images, but by extension, limited blacks' access to the airwaves to the pre-established terms of "popular entertainment". Because both the minstrel stage and radio offered many entertainers their first attempts at the proverbial limelight, many blacks were especially drawn into blackface roles in an effort to escape the bounds of racial

segregation and poverty to achieve even semi-celebrity and to make money. Into the 1940s, black actors such as Hattie McDaniel ("The Marlin Hurt and Beulah Show") and Eddie Anderson ("Jack Benny Program") were part of a historical corps of black entertainers who accepted less than flattering, anti-black character roles on the radio simply for a chance to perform.22

III

*Broadcast Exclusive: Advertising, Commercialism and the Bounds of Early Radio*

Radio rapidly became the dominant medium of national popular entertainment, catering to, and often shaping, the interests of a perceived majority of national listeners. And although blacks and Eastern European immigrants in early twentieth century America looked to radio as a major source for information and entertainment, broadcasters were not interested

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22Some of these men and women had to learn and rehearse white minstrelsy-constructed ideas of black vocabulary, speech patterns, phrases and vocal mannerisms in order to replicate across the airwaves the blackface claim to authenticity; some lost their jobs or never made their auditioned parts for simply not sounding 'black enough' to white program management and audiences. However, some of these black radio actors defended their roles which had been labelled by critics as anti-black buffoonery. Eddie Anderson, who played Rochester on the "Jack Benny Program", argued that, just like white characters, Negro characters do not represent the entire black race, but are merely individuals who are taking part in the equal opportunity finally offered them in modern entertainment media. See J. Fred MacDonald. *Don't Touch That Dial! Radio Programming in American Life, 1920-1960*. Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1979. Pgs. 358-
in ostensibly non-lucrative ventures such as specialized foreign language programming or in advertising and radio shows sensitive to black listening interests. Since its inception in the 1920s, the heart of commercial radio had been advertising. "Commercial radio" is based, in part, upon the premise that advertising was the staple and purpose of broadcasting. Radio was an advertising off-shoot, a billboard of the airwaves, and programming was initially designed around advertisements for products, especially ads for radio receivers. Corporate strategy was to figure out how to make the consumer think of the radio, in its present form still a relatively new piece of technology, as a necessary household utility, and how to reach an entire national population in a single broadcast. Pioneered by the Radio Corporation of America's National Broadcasting Corporation (essentially the radio advertising division of one of the nation's largest radio manufacturing companies), the network broadcasting system ushered in the golden age of radio just towards the end of the Depression years.

The virtually hegemonic dominance of corporations over the rapidly growing airwaves empire, and the tremendous popularity of commercial radio by the 1930s, reveal a reshaping of the popular imagination in new, radio-based habits of listening. The process of intense commercialization in American radio began in earnest during the 1920s, the outcome of which proscribed many of the definitive features of post-World War II radio broadcasting. In 1922, the American Telegraph and Telephone corporation

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(AT&T), in an attempt to solve the growing dilemma over how to fund radio, linked with other stations across the US and formed the first national broadcasting network, with toll broadcasting as it's main source of revenue. Toll broadcasting began as an experiment in which advertisers hired the company's radio facilities at WEAF-New York, purchasing airtime and paying AT&T to use their frequency and run their ads. The Department of Commerce, in charge of the distribution of radio frequencies, gave WEAF a clear channel to conduct its business.\textsuperscript{23}

Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover himself, both in private and during the series of four conferences he organized in 1920 to clear up the airwaves chaos created by a rush of radio entrepreneurs following the lead of Westinghouse's KDKA (the nation's first regularly broadcasting station), clearly showed his favor for commercial broadcasting over all others. He consulted frequently with major radio corporations, and allowed for the sale of stations and wavelengths. For the first time, radio channels were becoming private property.\textsuperscript{24} Congress passed the Comprehensive Radio Act in 1927, establishing the temporary Federal Radio Commission (FRC) to create order after Hoover had begun to grant licenses without assigning


\textsuperscript{24} Issued by Congress in their first official efforts to control the cacophony and unpredictability of transmissions coming across receivers at the turn of the century, the Radio Act of 1912 gave the Secretary of Commerce powers to assign wavelengths and grant licenses to all who wanted them. While the contradictory terms of this act would reveal themselves by the end of the decade, the early emphasis on public access to broadcasting on the airwaves began to diminish under Hoover. See Czitrom (1982), pgs. 68-76.
wavelengths, allowing stations to broadcast on whichever wavelength they chose.25

Radio thrived during the depression with the help of advertisers' dollars and the now sweeping control of a few networks over the bulk of the national airwaves. As networks and other broadcasters came into competition with one another, the demand for talent increased, and broadcasters required more reliable sources of revenue. Advertisers immediately filled this need. During the 1920s, radio advanced increasingly toward a commercial agenda, maneuvers supported by both the radio corporations and the federal government. By 1930, all the key features defining modern American broadcasting had taken shape in radio, including a strong union between advertisers and broadcasters, a monopolistic domination of the radio equipment manufacturing industry, impotent federal regulation, and a huge spread of radio receivers across the US and into the center America homes and family recreation. "The growth of radio broadcasting in the 1920s," Daniel Czitrom narrates, "created a giant industry in less than a decade. By 1930, more than six hundred stations were broadcasting to more than twelve million radio homes, about 40% of the total number of American families".26

25In 1934, the FRC became the permanent Federal Communications Commission (FCC). Czitrom (1982), pg. 80
26Czitrom (1982), pg. 77
Radio broadcasting and manufacturing executives during the thirties argued that the power of radio was that it had succeeded in conquering one of advertising's ostensibly final and most formidable frontiers - the home. Not only did radio penetrate into the physical space of the household, but radio also became the hearth of family life, welcomed into the filial fold as a normative part of family recreation and daily living. While relaxing, the family was soothed and entertained by radio's voices and music, and exposed to airwaves advertising. Listeners were learning to make associations between shows and the advertisers supporting them.\(^{27}\) The new habit of listening was one based on the centrality of the radio in the social, recreational home; radio became a major "locus" of family social interaction for blacks and whites. Clarifies Czitrom, "[b]y the late 1930s, radio was the most intimate and accessible for of mass communication and had become a central feature of black and white at-home life.\(^{28}\)" During the Thirties, radio became a staple in America daily life like no communication medium prior. Such intimacy was being defined increasingly in terms of listening, sharing favorite broadcasts in common, and participation in a conceptually massive community of listeners nation-wide. "Through entertainment and news programs, (radio) became a household necessity by linking the private sphere with the world 'out there'.\(^{29}\)"

\(^{27}\)Czitrom (1982), pg. 80

\(^{28}\)Savage (1995), pg. i

\(^{29}\)Czitrom (1982), pg. 83, my emphases
At the same time, new technological innovations helped to accelerate the popularity of radio. By the late twenties, radio manufacturers had changed their emphases from distance to design; aesthetics began to take priority over developing maximum range in an attempt to build good-looking radios to become furniture that would please and be easily integrated into the family lifestyle. Changes in receivers helped further the transforming dynamics of listening, as radio made its transition from amateur experimental communications technology to a slick, professionalized commercial broadcasting medium successfully wedging its way into normative American popular living. Where commercial agendas eclipsed those of social redemption and the uplift of popular culture, broadcasters were able to pursue an explosively new and extremely lucrative enterprise which had taken firm hold of the popular imagination.

IV

Radio Freedom?: Black-Appeal and the Pioneer DJs

Into the 1940s, while the nation was witnessing a boom in household ownership of radios, blacks and immigrants (namely those from Eastern Europe) found little radio programming or advertising attempting to shed derogatory images and dialogue or making any overt efforts to appeal to their listening interests. 1930s statistics nonetheless suggested the impracticality of black-appeal radio. According to these statistics, black listenership and radio
ownership was reportedly relatively low, particularly throughout the black South, which lowered national figures. At the same time, the 1930s witnessed failures in some black-appeal efforts. As a result of these statistics and failures, and due to a general success in broadcast radio based on assumptions about the mainstream listening audience (namely, that it was predominantly white), broadcasters were reluctant to make black-appeal attempts, since blacks were not seen as a legitimate population that would make the investment in specialized programming a profitable venture.

However, statistics reflected only one, and in broadcasting terms, misleading, angle of reality. As Newman illustrates, blacks had proven their affinity for and ability to support radio, particularly where programming made efforts of specialized appeal. Low ownership did not necessarily indicate low listenership, and it certainly did not reflect the appeal of radio to black people nationally. Certain broadcasts, such as a Joe Louis boxing match, attracted perhaps the singularly most ideal listenership for broadcasters and advertisers - a large cross section of ages and, to a certain extent, income, as well as gender representation. This kind of broadcasting, and others which delivered information and entertainment of particular interest to black listeners, revealed that blacks, if appealed to correctly, could be a major source of revenue for businesses advertising on the radio. Yet, as Newman still quite soberly points out, "[r]ace ... was not a criterion so much as a secondary
assumption ... White-appeal was the primary consideration.30"

By the late 1940s, however, several factors had emerged to affect drastic changes in broadcast radio’s relationship with and interest in black listeners. First, throughout the 1940s, intellectuals and those in positions of influence in radio industry placed constant pressure on broadcasters to integrate the airwaves and to remove many of the derogatory, anti-black stereotypes which dominated what little representation of black people existed on the air. In 1946, the Institute for Education by radio at the Ohio State University an assembly of educators and political activists - decried the menial positions occupied by blacks in radio, and even called for the desegregation of radio trade unions and the technicians staffs. Though the post-war anti-Communist witch-hunt led by the House Un-American Activities Committee stymied much of the protest momentum against radio, J. Fred MacDonald argues that such reform efforts did have an impact on the networks' integration of their programming, as well as the alteration of it’s racist overtones.31

Another important factor was the decline in radio listeners by the early 1950s. For over twenty years, radio had prepared the popular imagination for centralized, convenient and regularly-scheduled entertainment in the home, and had equipped Americans with certain "skills" for receiving information,

30Newman (1988), pg. 48

31MacDonald (1979), pgs. 356-357, 364-365, 367
such as associating visual entities or events with certain sonic references. Yet, by the end of the 1940s, 3.5 million American homes had at least one television; by 1952, eight times as many televisions had been sold in the US. Television had, in half the time as radio, captured a listening audience's attention and had turned its attention towards the audio-visual. In terms of broadcast marketing in the middle of this century, television diverted the attention of the single largest market - the white American target audience. Since the mid-1930s, networks had been conceptualizing the television and television broadcasting to add an extra dynamic to the advertising advantage radio had offered businesses. Broadcast radio was still growing into the 1950s, but the American mass audience was turning to television.32

TV's challenge to radio was more of a network dilemma than a technological showdown per se. Because the networks had secured a firm foundation in radio, television was considered a risky endeavor having yet to prove itself as a lucrative mass medium. Nonetheless, the potential for TV to pull large audiences and significant profit was enticing for the broadcasting networks, who wanted to exploit both media but to resolve what would amount to being in competition not only with one another, but in splitting audiences between the familiar radio and the exciting new television. Network radio stations worked with a low-cost strategy - zero local sales staffs, and no local affiliate facilities. National broadcasting was not flexible enough

32Newman (1988), pg. 50
to specialize and adapt to new programming formats to meet the shifting
tastes of audiences, or to appeal to newer and different listener markets. The
networks therefore negotiated this radio/TV dilemma by cutting costs in
radio even further while still holding the interest of businesses in the
opportunity of radio advertising. The networks cut their more expensive
shows, but rather than leave that potentially valuable time idle, they offered
it to their local affiliates to program as they chose. As television became
increasingly popular and the networks turned their attention towards that
new medium, broadcasters began to lose or forfeit their foothold on more
local airwaves.

Independent stations, regional enough to cater to local tastes and serve
area businesses, had the creative teams and technical spaces to cultivate
programming that would appeal to "formerly untouchable territory;" independent stations were strategically positioned to become increasingly
relevant to area radio audiences, a locational advantage and regional
knowledge which national broadcasters could not boast. And now, with the
networks' reprioritization in broadcasting, local stations gained increased
control over the cream of all air-time slots - the evenings. Stations scrambled
to fill time, with much of the earliest evening broadcasts being experiments
with drama, call-in shows, and recorded music programs. With weaker


34Newman (1988), pg. 111
transmissions, smaller financial bases, and heavy competition offered by larger, more powerful broadcasters, local stations found a need and had the facilities to diversify their programming and to specialize for local audiences, especially for black listeners.

During the 1930s, over a decade before the dawn of the black-appeal boom, many blacks had already begun challenging both the racist, "foolish" representations of blacks in radio as well as the white exclusivity in broadcast entertainment which had seriously regulated who gained access to the airwaves. By virtue of their entrance into radio as the nation's first black announcers doing black-appeal radio, these early hosts broke through a variety of barriers, taking control of both black representation and images on the air, and gaining unprecedented access to radio resources to establish a new black presence in national radio as the first disc jockeys. Among the most influential pioneers was Jack L. Cooper. Mark Newman's historical account and assessment of the on-air life of black-appeal radio pioneer Jack L. Cooper is useful for looking at the initial efforts of black-appeal radio in its efforts to counter entrenched racist impressions about both performance and black audiences. Newman also illustrates the foundational formulas for successful black radio that Cooper helped canonize, and which subsequent generations of black radio personalities would challenge and imitate. His small Jack L. Cooper Presentations was a sincere effort to build a black broadcast team of announcers, writers, actors and other on-air personalities. Though Cooper
never completely realized his vision of an "all-black effort" radio show\textsuperscript{35}, his two most significant contributions to the history of black-appeal were (1) gaining some control over the voice and ideas reaching from behind the microphone across the airwaves, and (2) demonstrating the viability of variety programming specialized for black listeners.

In 1929, five days after the stock market crash, Cooper first aired his "All-Negro Hour" radio show on Chicago's 250-watt WSBC, and replaced with himself the white announcer who opened and closed the show\textsuperscript{36}. The success of the "All-Negro Hour" show, which survived on WSBC until 1935, relied heavily on Cooper's understanding of, respect for, and intimacy with his black listening audience. Early in black radio Cooper established as axiomatic the critical importance of a radio personality's sense of the desires and needs of his or her listenership in order to survive on the air. Cooper was among the first to permanently legitimate and secure the presence of the radio personality through the ears and in the lives of black people. Capitalizing on the novelty of black-appeal radio to black radio audiences, he pioneered the idea of the radio personality who would demonstrate a unique

\textsuperscript{35}According to Newman, Cooper's first radio show, "All-Negro Hour," was broadcast on the white-owned and -operated Chicago station WSBC, the technical staff was all white, and the bulk of Cooper's advertisers were white businesses in the black community. The critical distinction for Cooper and his listening audience was that the messages sent across the air were now sent by a black radio personality. As Newman explains, "the institutional, technical, and financial support was largely in white hands, but what went out over the air was black-controlled" – a fact that opened up a large receptive audience amongst black listeners simultaneously weary of radio programming insensitive to their needs and eager to hear blacks gaining footholds in white-dominated entertainment industries. Newman (1988), pg. 60.
and unprecedented sensitivity for black listeners by programming what blacks wanted to hear - from black serial dramas to jazz music - inflected with a humanizing approach to listener address. Though many of Cooper's shows employed proven vaudevillian comic formulae, the "All-Negro Hour" show was not associated with blackface minstrelsy images, suggests Newman, because the scripts were the work of a black mind and designed for a black audience. Unlike the minstrelsy, Cooper's show offered wide-ranging entertainment and a multiplicity of images and characters in a single one hour time-slot - entertainment which featured black actors and personalities sometimes employing self-parody and comic formulae, but performing in a range of other modes on the air.

By 1938, Cooper had expanded his enterprise to time slots purchased on two additional stations - WAAF and WHFC - while he simultaneously expanded his narrowcasted black-appeal services to listeners to additional popular and gospel music shows (he hired three deejays for three new pop music shows on WSBC); on-air live broadcasting from Sunday local church services; public service narrowcasting, featuring Cooper's pioneer show "Search for Missing Persons" in 1938; and news discussion shows such as "Listen Chicago" on WAAF and WHFC. Cooper's career, which lasted until he retired from radio in 1947, had helped expand radio from the anti-black broadcasting of the gilded age to a thorough, conscientious narrowcasting

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36 Newman (1988), pg. 60
medium fully capable of "entertaining, informing and serving the black community.\textsuperscript{38}"

Other jocks like Cooper surmounted tremendous odds in national radio well before the black-appeal boom had generally legitimated a black vocal presence on the air or more affirmative programming catering to black listeners. During the 1930s, a number of black radio personalities (though they were not referred to as such) broke through the Jim Crow barriers that seriously limited opportunities for blacks on the air, gaining new access to the airwaves and striving to transform the bitter legacy of black representation through radio which blackface radio minstrelsy helped etch into the popular listening imagination. A Howard University graduate, Hal Jackson worked as play-by-play announcer for the Homestead Grays before he was laughed out of the all-white office of WINX-Washington, DC, in 1937 after trying to get a job as a sportscaster. Undaunted, Jackson hired a white advertising agency to purchase time for him on WOOK in DC. He then entered their offices with the formidable entourage of Drs. Mary McCleod Bethune and Charles Drew. Wanting to avoid confrontation with these two prominent figures in the black community, WOOK hired Jackson, whose show, "The House That Jack Built", soared to local popularity virtually overnight. Other black deejays, such as Eddie Honesty (WJOB-Hammond), Bass Harris (KING-Seattle), Ed

\textsuperscript{37}Newman (1988), pgs. 62-65

\textsuperscript{38}Newman (1988), pg. 69
Baker (WJIB-Detroit), and Van Douglas (WJBK-Detroit), were among the modest but influential pre-black-appeal tide of radio hosts who began to prove the viability of programming black-interest radio, particularly music programming, while simultaneously extending the bounds established in national broadcasting regulating what blacks could do on the air, and challenging derogatory racial ventriloquism with original, professionally motivated on-air personas.

The contributions of these pioneers notwithstanding, the latter half of the 1940s ushered in an era on black-appeal broadcasting. The local-interest

39 Barlow (1999), pgs. 95-96

40 Mel Watkins (1994) uses the term "racial ventriloquy" to describe the new, sound-based dynamic of white imitations of blackness in the new medium of radio. Watkins stresses the fact that such white enactments of perceived (stereotyped) black behavior were nothing new to popular American entertainment. Radio, however, brought a new dynamic to such lampoons because it forced the concentration of image-portrayals into the sole realm of sound; where racist blackface caricatures had a physical/visual obviousness, such visual prioritizations in representation were razed, and the voice and language became the primary sites for the display of white popular impressions of blackness. Racism extended beyond the phenotypic, as radio quickly proved. See On The Real Side. Mel Watkins. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994. Pg. 271. See also Barlow (1999), pg. 1.

41 This is not to suggest that these men were the first blacks in radio who challenged many of the traditional representations of blackness in mainstream radio. Other blacks during the 1920s and 1930s developed radio programs which directly confronted the larger national climate of racial injustice, sought to re-tell history in terms of the contributions of great black men and women, and developed entertainment which, while still in the minstrel tradition, spoke to black realities and experiences in ways mainstream broadcast programming developers rarely cared to prior to post-war radio. Floyd J. Calvin pioneered black-interest radio journalism in 1927. Carlton Moss, Canada Lee and Richard Durham were two tremendously prolific radio documentary drama script writers and producers who pioneered airwaves-based resistance by dramatizing black experiences living in racist America, while Pigmeat Markham and "Crackshot & Company" did minstrel radio comedy that parodied real social issues relevant to black listeners. However, the first disc jockeys broke into radio as unique personality voices, backed with black music, and often generating their own sponsorships, and they set precedents for the personality jocks who thrived during the post-war blackappeal boom. See Barlow (1999), pgs. 67-89. See also Barlow (1990), pgs. 184-185; MacDonald (1961) pgs. 358-362; Bernard
shift in attention by many radio stations at this time was encouraged by two major, simultaneous forces. The first impetus, as discussed above, was that triggered by the major networks' profound interest in television programming, which left many affiliates, and other small, short-range independent stations, with the responsibilities of generating sponsors and developing programming to attract listeners within their transmission vicinities. The second important impetus behind the black-appeal boom was the discovery of the so-called "forgotten fifteen million". In 1949, Sponsor, the trade magazine for the nation's radio and television advertising industry, published a study entitled "The Forgotten 15,000,000: Ten Billion a year Negro Market is Largely Ignored by National Advertisers", which made three critical arguments inspiring an explosion of black programming nation-wide. First, the article illustrated that black income and radio receiver ownership had risen dramatically since the last years of World War II. Also, a number of these blacks were now living in US cities. The authors estimated the gross income of this population to have reached $10 billion.42

The article's second assertion was that advertisers had largely allowed this tremendous resource to go untapped. Indeed, advertisers and broadcasters had long avoided making any particular appeal to black listeners for fear that white audiences would abandon any station or product associated

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42Barlow (1990), pgs. 183-184
with blacks. This "product-identification' stigma" carried over into programming. Prior to the late 1940s, networks consistently argued that their programming catered to popular tastes, that sponsors were unwilling to support all-black or even mixed-cast shows if this would risk loss of their white audiences, and that southern affiliates frequently and dramatically protested some of the most modest non-confrontational programs hosted by black artists.43

Third, the article observed that, while the larger stations were avoiding "black-appeal advertising", local radio and smaller businesses had already begun to reap the benefits of black-interest programming.44 In 1943, only four stations nation-wide were doing weekly black-appeal programming. A small number of independent stations in New York City, Chicago, and across the South led the way during the late forties towards the promising future of black radio. The lure of the black consumer as a fresh resource of revenue effected dramatic changes in the relationship between American broadcast radio and black listeners in particular.45

Broadcasters were becoming increasingly aware of the specifics of black America's previously ignored interest in radio. Particularly important to

43In 1933, NBC's southern affiliates forced the ending of the "Ethel Waters Show", and in 1946, the network cancelled Nat King Cole's variety show under similar threats of dis-association. Affiliates protested integrated airwaves, while networks and businesses also feared losing their "least common denominator" audiences. Sponsor's ten-year annual series on black-oriented radio helped change much of this. See Barlow (1990), pgs. 183-184; MacDonald (1961), pg. 357

44Barlow (1999), pg. 125
radio stations was the fact that, by 1953, nine out of ten US black households owned radios. Blacks were not tuning into television to the degree that white America was. Historically excluded from and/or abused by mainstream recreation and entertainment media, by the 1940s many black Americans still pursued much of their amusement close to or in the home. Despite the national rise in black income and disposable wealth, businesses and entertainment were infrequently making efforts to transform the content of their advertising or the representations in their programming to appeal especially to black people. Television did not offer the kind of relevant, black-interest programming that radio was just learning to. Despite the post-World War II nation-wide proliferation of broadcast radio outlets, audiences were now segmented and targeted by independent stations who could thrive with narrowcasting strategies.46 Between 1946 and 1955 - the era Newman refers to as "the black-appeal boom" - the number of stations with some black-oriented programming exploded from twenty-four to six hundred.47 J. Fred MacDonald agrees that "[i]ndependent narrowcasting is what made the national dimension of the boom possible. The local emphasis of the outlets meant that even in isolated areas where the black population

45MacDonald (1961), pgs. 365-366

46Mark Newman (1988, pg. xi) uses the term "narrowcast radio" to distinguish a particular kind of special interest radio programming that was designed especially to appeal to non-white and/or non-English-speaking radio audiences, and is used in comparison with the larger, commercial mainstream American broadcast radio that sought the "least common denominator" interests.

47Newman (1988), pg. 10
was relatively small but significant locally, black shows would be aired.48

Black-appeal narrowcasting was adopted by local stations due to a felt need to modify programming to appeal to local black listeners - terrain for which larger broadcasters could not, or were not willing to, compete. Prior to WDIA-Memphis, black-appeal programming occupied only a part-time space on the programming schedule of small white-owned and operated radio stations, and under the time brokerage system the earliest black radio personalities had to buy air-time and sell the advertising timeslots to local businesses. These black personalities were pitchmen as much as they were disc jockeys, and much of the finesse of their "verbal patter" was honed precisely as they created lines to promote their shows and sell products to listeners. Crucial to an understanding of the black-appeal boom was that the radio personalities themselves generated the popular interest in black radio programming. The stations often merely offered part-time and at-cost the technical facilities and production staff. Finally, local businesses, void of the capital needed to advertise on the larger stations, supported black-appeal efforts because they could be more sure by the very nature of narrowcasting that a particular target audience was being reached. The black personality deejay became the focal point of black-oriented radio. With lyrical dexterity and a keen sense of the musical tastes and aesthetic priorities of the listening culture, the deejays spoke to and performed across the air for attentive black

48Newman (1988), pg. 88
audiences captivated as much by their creative verbal contortions and hip innovative phraseology as by their playlists. Independent narrowcasting strategies may have made the boom possible, but the disc jockeys themselves made black-appeal radio work.
CHAPTER 2

This One Goes Out to You and You and You:

Disc Jockeys Contact Community

What an instrument is the human voice!

How wonderfully responsive to every emotion of the human soul!

-Nathaniel Hawthorne

The black-appeal boom was facilitated by two black listening communities in dialogue - the actual and the imagined. Black war-time migratory patterns and the post-war influx of blacks into US cities shuffled and re-situated black Americans into new listening audiences with specific interests and needs that black-appeal radio sought to satisfy. During and after World War II, black migrant workers urged out of the South by lynch mobs and tenant farming and searching for jobs in war-time industry swelled the population figures of northern and western cities. At the same time, southern blacks were reaping some of the fruits of a revolution in agricultural technology, which brought many from rural areas into southern cities.

Black urban migration made significant contributions to the rising
popularity of the black disc jockey. Southern migrants who had moved to larger metropolitan areas in the North were eager for the sounds of home - "gut-bucket" blues and raw, southern dialect- inflected voices that would help them situate themselves in their new, potentially alienating environment. "The disc jockeys," Gilbert A. Williams summarizes, "used music and language styles that helped the new urban residents adjust to their surroundings, and made them feel at home.⁴⁹" Actual, physical communities were developing as key supporters of the cities' new black deejays, and as interested and eager recipients of familiar uses of language through the modern technological medium of radio (and the even more contemporary phenomenon of black radio).

Where the blues and other earlier forms of recorded "race" music had defined and established loyal listening communities early in the development of post-war black-appeal radio, by the second half of the 1950s, rhythm and blues was dominating much of the black radio airwaves. This exciting new amalgam of rock and roll, the blues, and gospel music traditions (particularly influenced by the gospel quartets) further solidified black radio enthusiasts as a guaranteed community of listeners, as the disc jockeys were quite often a major black music outlet for listeners.

Changes in radio's relationship with music programming had tremendous implications for the rhythm and blues disc jockeys' ability to secure their positions as major music outlet and to cultivate a mutually

⁴⁹Williams (1990), pg. 110
beneficial discursive relationship between growing groups of R & B fans and the increasingly popular disc jockey. During the 1930s, music programming in radio declined, but during and immediately following World War II, the presence and importance of music shows soared, paving the way for the age of the personality deejays. "After World War II, musical shows once again became the backbone of radio, this time in the form of the disc jockey playing phonograph records.50" Such a change implies shifts in the larger world of broadcast radio, because the deejay often necessarily took radio from the massive national network focus appealing to the least common (white American) denominator to a personal, locally sensitive, community-based emphasis in music choices (and in advertising, news, dramas, and other radio-based services as well).

Radio lent an immeasurable boost to the American music industry by giving previously unheard of local musical artists broader exposure and followings. The local music emphasis was encouraged partly by the conflict over royalties that the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers (ASCAP) felt was their due from "performance rights" agreements made with radio broadcasters playing copyrighted music, and the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB), who protested ASCAP's 1940 doubling of licensing fees. In 1941, NAB boycotted ASCAP publications, and instead formed Broadcast Music Incorporated (BMI), who, taking advantage of

50Czitrom (1982), pg. 85
ASCAP's routine exclusion of many black musicians from their "Broadway-Hollywood monopoly on popular music", developed a significant catalog of their own featuring numerous local, "grassroots" artists. As a six hundred station organization, BMI was able to set a precedence for the success in programming locally popular "race" music, and help resuscitate the "race" record market in general. Radio itself depended on both the cross-fertilization of music styles and tastes aided by the movement of GIs, and over one million blacks who brought their music with them as they migrated out of the South during the Forties - both of whom established national audiences for local music, and spread the germ that would develop national tastes toward the coming of rhythm and blues in the next decade.

The accelerating popularity of rhythm and blues, and the eager enthusiasm of R & B radio fans established guaranteed listening communities for many early black personality disc jockeys. As supporters of local recording artists who were the roots of and the energy behind rhythm and blues, the disc jockeys, as outlets to those communities, were part of major changes occurring in radio programming throughout the 1950s. "[I]n terms of program impact the most significant development was the appearance in the mid1950s of rhythm and blues as a national music phenomenon relying upon radio for its mass dissemination through scores of"

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radio disk (sic) jockeys. Rhythm and blues whet the popular music appetite, while black radio brought R & B fans into particular listening communities which the disc jockeys supplied and sustained through their music selections as well as their own trademark on-air linguistic animation, marking the era of the personality deejay.

The black disc jockeys, with audiences who had been primed for years and had become accustomed to the dynamics of radio listening, resurrected a significant portion of the community connection that defined largely unrealized early radio idealism. In general, by the late Forties, the black personality deejays found their niches with listening bodies eager to hear what specialized programming could offer them. The jocks helped to reconnect the medium as a whole with local audiences, and black radio grew exponentially not simply because white station owners were willing to program black, but because the black jocks made use of man's dynamic relationship with radio-colored sound and language to proscribe and reach communities defined in the ether - an imagined black listenership before whom the jocks came to life "out of thin air".

While migration patterns and changing musical tastes from the late 1940s through the 1950s helped disc jockeys acquire increasingly reliable and attentive listeners, the disc jockeys played a crucial role in establishing and cultivating these aggregates and making them loyal black radio fans. The disc

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Garofalo (1990), pg. 60
jockey's communicative work in establishing such loyalties was often determined by the particular ways in which the disc jockeys envisioned their listening audiences - their language, their needs and interests, their enthusiasm for black radio, and their desire to be a part of a listening body. Black radio proved the ability of sound to define and mobilize communities. In the semi-racially anonymous space of the airwaves, the disc jockeys built a visuality, a world alive with sensorial manipulation by way of the radio voice and music, and, by virtue of the chosen medium, and simultaneously pulled away from the expressly visible. Disc jockeys challenged the ostensible rigidity of the "aural/visual hierarchy", by imagining that communities could be sonically represented and appealed to, and that one could insert one's self into such communities as much with sound as with physical/visual representation.

Kathy M. Newman suggests that post-World War II black radio had the powe financially and to establish itself as a novelty amongst black listeners who appreciated and responded to ads conscious of the black consumer.\textsuperscript{54} Without denying the importance of Newman's unique perspective on the counter-hegemonic effect of advertising and its agency in the growth of black radio as a cultural space, the genesis of radio's ability to define and rally communities can be found in other, more elemental places, such as the

\textsuperscript{53}MacDonald (1979), pg. 367 (my emphases)
imagination of the disc jockey himself.

Much of the disc jockey's work - his uses of sound and language, his negotiation of racial semiambiguity and the quest for authenticity - extends from his perception of both the nature of the medium and of his listening audience. Such perceptions of the potency of the voice and of the breadth of the listening community impacted the deejay's view of the efficacy of his work on the airwaves. Disc jockeys often imagined listening communities in such a way that dictated the flow of their message, the "color" of their voice, and even the pleasure they found in their work. They envisioned "the deejay" as one with particular powers to shape words and sounds in order to connect with the reality of their community - an idealized welcoming space amongst into which the jock could insert himself and his words. Disc jockey Eddie O'Jay understood the tremendous ability of the disc jockey to manipulate sound and language in finding a comfortable niche within the listener's imagination. More fundamentally, he was able to envision a particular receptive community space, and this vision was the creative energy behind the personality of the disc jockey. "The disc jockeys that we worked with," O'jay explains, "would talk about the artists just like they knew them ... The personality disc jockey could place that man in somebody's living room.55" The disc jockey's ability to conceptualize a listenership on the other side of his transmission significantly inflected the direction of his message.

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55 conventio, San Francisco Hilton.
The deejays transmitted themselves and their imaginations from within the confines of the broadcast studio into the midst of attentive listeners, and created an imagined collectives in the ether. Deejay and listening community were conceptually united by the texts of sound and language, which ultimately materialized in the form of a dialectic between the disc jockey and his listeners. Communities had to be conceptualized before they could be addressed, and the disc jockeys imagined communities anxious for their brand of communication, which inspired the efforts of the jocks themselves to connect with listeners and to strive toward becoming a part of their daily routine by invitation into the comfort of the listening space. WDIA-Memphis deejay legend Rufus Thomas envisioned his listeners in their work routine, and imagined his ability to use words to grab their attention.

By entering into this imaginative zone, Thomas's passion to connect with this conceptual audience, to defy the constraints of the broadcast studio walls, to confound the limits of time and space by uniting in his imagination with listeners, drove his love for disc jockeying. This feeling - as though one connected, through words and music, with that community - was a definitive aspect of radio. Thomas explains

I just loved being a disc jockey...I could sit there with those four walls was like I had an audience there with me. I could always feel like I'm talking to at least one person out there. Maybe the lady is washing dishes or she is sweeping or she's mopping or she's sewing or she's ironing - she's doing something, and I could do something or say something to make her stop, or make him stop, and listen to me. And that's what it's all about. And I feel like I did that.56

This scenario is a particularly salient reflection of the disc jockey’s ability to imagine a very real, vivid set of circumstances in which his listener exists, circumstances which dictate his passion behind the microphone. By the late 1940s, a major change had taken place in the dynamics of engagement between the listener and his radio. Radio went from the central hearth to the daily accompaniment of listeners who went through their regular routines accompanied by radio sounds in the background.57 For blacks, the greater appeal of radio to working class listeners (as opposed to middle and upper class blacks who often shunned black radio) was two fold. First, black radio was making large-scale entertainment appeals to black listeners. Second, because working patterns often restricted the leisure time of blacks in factories, domestic service, etc., radio could accompany work, and stations learned to modify their broadcast schedules around the common work routines of their audiences. Ear-absorbing channels of news and entertainment took precedence over visual media in such circumstances. Radio was consumable during work, somewhat "blurring" the lines between

56Rufus Thomas. interview. 6 January 1996.

570’Hara (1961), pg. 111
labor and leisure. As mentioned above, the tremendous reach of radio, which was greatly extended by mid-century advances in radio technology, was crucial to its continued appeal. Radio’s reach and versatility made it possible for the medium to be with the listener throughout the day in ways visual media could not occupy their individual attention-space. Americans, black and white, learned their daily routines and excursions to the rhythm of radio sounds, and radio was an extension of the daily routine sensory operations, occupying his places and acts of habit, becoming habitual in itself. Rufus Thomas’s ability to perceive the place of radio in the daily reality of his audience facilitated his specific ability to understanding and manipulation of the medium. His concept of community informed a performing compulsion to insert himself into that reality.

Radio has the ability to penetrate the most formidable of fronts - racial, municipal, topographic, emotional -transporting, among other things, the balm of the human voice, and, for effective black radio, in the form of familiar language and sound. Deejay Jack Gibson explains that, for the black personality disc jockey, "[y]our voice is the one that carries that message." Though invisible, fleeting, and ethereal, radio brings live, full-bodied voices

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58Kathy M. Newman. "The Sound of Civil Rights: Black Radio, the 'Negro Market', and Consumer Power in the Post-War Era". Also, "Sounding it Out: Sound Theory and Adorno." Paper presented at "Sound In and As Culture I: Sound and Theory" panel, arranged by the Division on Literature and Other Arts, 28 December 1998. Modern Language Association convention, San Francisco Hilton. This is not to suggest that labor became leisurely, but simply that radio as an established medium of entertainment, in its ability to traverse or penetrate several types of boundaries, was able to bring mass-media entertainment into the routine of the work space as no other mass medium could.
into the deadness of silent air, and is well received where radio sound in the form of the disc jockey's voice proceeds from the established, the concrete (language) into the vast unknown - the frontier of the air. 60 As Newman suggests, much of the power of radio rest in sound's capacity to defy, even dissolve, the relevance of time and space restrictions, therefore giving sound, by its very definition, the ability to fathom, to reach and explore. 61 For black disc jockeys, their ability to imagine sound in the form of the human voice reaching out into the ether and finding some receptive listener on the other end of their transmission, and the potential effect of their message on the human condition, was a goal in itself. An amorphous, ultimately anonymous listenership became to the disc jockey a distinct, receptive organism towards which the deejay was compelled to reach out with sound, with the voice of personality and intimacy, to make contact. "Joltin'" Joe Howard of WERD-Atlanta, engaged his records with commentary and encouragement to the singing voices of the recorded artists, and he imagined that he was joined intimately with his listeners in his broadcasting booth performance. "Once I found something in the record that really grabbed me, I'd call attention to that grabber to my audience, and really empathize (sic) until they would get caught up in it. So, their response was directly traceable to my enthusiasm." 62 This

59Jack Gibson. Personal interview. 4 March 1999.


62Joe Howard. Personal interview. 2 March 1999.
was long after the practice of having live audiences at radio stations had ceased as a trend, so their was little occasion for Howard to immediately know that his listeners were "caught up" in his unique, engaging disc jockeying, or to gauge the tenor of their response. Yet, it is the fact that he imagines such a community that compels him to reach out; that Howard thought he would be received by listeners seems to be a key mechanism in his drive to entertain.63 Jack Gibson narrates such an imagined receptive space, explaining that the ultimate facts of distance and anonymity are subsumed by the disc jockey's mission in the drive to touch, impact and serve the listener in the vast "out there":

When I hit ... that microphone, the air - I'm ready. 'Cause I know that my voice is gonna reach somewhere that needed to be reached. Maybe somebody's sick and cannot hardly walk, and yet when I say something funny or just say something off the wall, it'll bring a smile to their face, and for a moment, they've forgotten their illness, or they've forgotten their unhappiness. I don't know who it is, but I imagine every week I reach somebody some where and create a little positive feeling in their lives. Like I said, even if it's only for a moment, that one moment would be my reward ... I feel the vibrations.64

63 Of course, disc jockeys were made well aware of the specific nature of their following through call-ins, public appearances, and the general reputation of a famous local jock. This argument makes a distinction between the imaginary (the utterly fantastic or fabled) and the imagined, where the imagined and the 1-actual are certainly in dialogue, but the idea of the "imagined" stresses the importance of the radio dynamic where an audience, though not immediate, is no less real, and how that real audience is perceived and addressed from within the broadcast booth, across the airwaves. Laurence A. Breiner, in his discussion of radio-cultivated nationalism, argues a similar distinction between the potentially "utopic" and disconnected implications of the imaginary community, and Jamaican and Trinidadian use of radio to proscrible new national identities by articulating new origins and geographic solidarities - the reshuffling and re-arranging of a particular group based on their imagined cultural potential. The fact and nature of a perceived community, fertile and ready for the broadcaster's message to take root, compels the specific message of the broadcaster. From "Caribbean Voices on the Air: Radio, Poetry and Nationalism in the Anglophone Caribbean." Paper presented at "Radio Culture" panel, arranged by the Division on Literature and Science, 27 December 1998. Modern Language Association convention, San Francisco Hilton.

64 Jack Gibson. personal interview. 4 March 1999.
Gibson's reflection is clearly community-conscious, both in terms of an imagined receiver and in his commitment to service and to healing his potentially ailing listeners with radio - a mission which is in no way thwarted by opaque physical distance between himself and his presumed audience.

Early personality radio was defined stylistically as the move away from the dry, impersonal "rip and read" style of broadcasting which dominated white radio well into the 1940s, towards a more personalized, overtly listening-community-conscious delivery. In this sense, the first black personality disc jockeys probably came to radio during the 1930s. Jack L. Cooper and his wife and radio partner Gertrude "Trudy" Cooper created dialogues with their listeners.\(^6^5\) Further, Cooper became, in 1931, the first radio disc jockey. By the mid-1930s, recorded music was replacing live performance on "All-Negro Hour". Recruiting and paying live talent, keeping musicians steadily employed, and an actual argument between Cooper and a piano player over money all informed the first transitions to predominantly recorded music on his show at WSBC. While radio personalities had been playing records well before recorded music replaced live performances on the air, the dispute between Cooper and California radio personality Al Jarvis concerned who had in fact been the first definitive "deejay". As Mark Newman clarifies, "[t]he question was who was ... the first

\(^6^5\)Jack L. and Gertrude Cooper, aircheck, WSBC-Chicago
to intersperse the playing of records with the now familiar disc jockey patter that links the music with the talk of the person behind the microphone.\textsuperscript{66} By fluidly blending his on-the-air "patter" with the sounds of massive swing, gospel and spiritual 78s, Cooper created the axial tenets of deejaying.

Hal Jackson, who has been argued as the nation's first black full-time radio announcers\textsuperscript{67}, became famous across Washington, DC and surrounding areas for his program "The House That Jack Built", during which Jackson played swing and popular vocalists, talked intimately to his listeners, and constructed with his voice a journey around the studio and the city encountering famous artists.\textsuperscript{68} The personality deejay was more than the fact of his on-air antics, his unique handle, or his clever raps and rhymes. These were merely specific texts under-girded by and executed in accordance with a particular process. Such a process was that of opening rather personalized lines of communication with listeners, with the agenda of proscribing and reaching a listening community. Al Benson's black everyman style\textsuperscript{69} may have ushered in the era of the personality disc jockey\textsuperscript{69}, but such an era relied on the fits and starts of earlier attempts in black radio to prove the viability of broadcasting directly to entertain and inform black listeners. William Barlow

\textsuperscript{66}Newman (1988), pg. 66

\textsuperscript{67}Bernard E. Garnett (1970, pg. 9) explains that this fact is still open for debate.

\textsuperscript{68}Barlow (1999), pg. 95

\textsuperscript{69}Nelson George (1988, pgs. 41-42) suggests that Al Benson's rise to radio fame marks the beginning of the black personality deejay's heyday.
explains that the "personality disc jockey" was a title the black jocks of the 1950s adopted for themselves.

Though the pre-1950s black jocks may not have been known as "personality deejays", critical components of their performances utilized certain processes of communication and specific ways of reaching black listeners which (1) defied the impersonality of mainstream (white) broadcast radio announcers, and (2) made a concerted effort through specialized commercial copy and regionally-based daily programming to draw black audiences and work against some of the broadcasting which had historically offended and alienated (or simply not interested) black audiences. They established much of the stylistics later deejays would employ to build their reputations. Many of the earliest black radio deejays helped restore to radio the initial faith in the medium to be personal, community-based, connected directly with and being in responsible service to the needs of local listeners. They did this principally by defining through their on-air methods of address a close, intimate and interested listening black community.

II

From WDIA-Memphis, to the "Poppa Stoppa Show" in New Orleans, black disc jockeys during the 1940s and 1950s were setting the pace and declaring the terms for personality radio in America. Besides proving to the radio broadcasting industry the profitability in developing programming to
appeal to blacks, the early black deejays demonstrated a verbal artistry, a mastery of performance in spoken language that was the mainstay of their legendary status amongst black listeners. Because the "personality" of the black disc jockeys is a highly-stylized component of a larger, complex black communication process, it is necessary to deconstruct, based on a theoretical framework, the fundamental elements of this process, describe them and their dialectical relationship, and finally to focus on those key aspects of the individual verbal performer. Such a theoretical framework helps in observing the central communicative aspects of verbal expression in general, and the personality deejay's style in particular.

The use of language in verbal contests, the individual manipulation of linguistic forms in the confrontation of words to demonstrate expressive verbal finesse and to acquire social status, is not a practice unique to black Americans. However, as Roger Abrahams suggests, the visibility of black oral culture in America, along with the persistent lack in critical understanding informing the dynamic nuances of black discursive performance, warrant complex analyses of such performances as they occur in a variety of social milieus.70 Despite the saturation of American popular culture with key aspects of black discursive forms - from elemental lexicon, to expansive verbal performance patterns and flourishes in nonverbal converisive gesture - even in areas where such forms have been the most influential in forging

and defining norms for popular entertainment and mass communication, the complex nature of such forms, and their contributions to the standard, remains largely misunderstood.

In order to understand the intricate process of communication and performance by which black radio disc jockeys established themselves amongst a community of listeners and thus cultivated their on-air personalities, it is important to probe the axial terms by which the aesthetic table of black verbal artistry functions. First, it is important to demonstrate the most critical aspects of black oral performance in general, and then seek to critically analyze the discursive relationship between some of the earliest black disc jockeys and black listening communities (a relationship forged to an important degree on the basis of their mastery of black aesthetic priorities concerning the appropriate modes of performed language). To know the social dynamism of verbal performance of the deejays demands an emphasis on the specifics of black verbal artistry and the aesthetic systems of valuation as determined by a generalized listening community. Verbal artists (men-of-words) are evaluated by such systems for their excellence or failure at manipulating linguistic forms, and approval and status in the black popular imagination are determined through these processes of critique. The debate over individual style, over originality and authenticity, becomes a particularly germane one in order to understand how the man-of-words in general, and the black disc jockey in particular, establishes himself and his
personality as an *individual* singularly worthy of acceptance and approval amongst black listeners based primarily upon his capabilities as a talker. Such a problem in theorizing verbal performance brings to the surface the relationship between community-determined aesthetic rigors of verbal performative excellence, and the individual's development of a unique, personal speaking style by which he gains distinctive fame.

In his folkloristic discussion of individual style, Roger Abrahams argues that individual linguistic style rarely ambles especially far outside of the culturally-determined traditional structures of linguistic expression. Rather than emanating from any single speaker, stylistics in expressive language are pre-patterned entities. Stylistics epitomize different modes of expression being established by a speaking community well before any one person steps forward and selectively utilizes elements of such a canon for his own purposes. Style must not be understood, according to Abrahams, in terms of the literary romantic conception as the individual writer triumphantly finding his lyrical personality, and as a maverick user-of-language who has broken free from the stifling ties of static traditions to blaze his own unique path with his own "true voice". Instead, Abrahams theorizes that "[s]tyle is rather the recurrence of linguistic entities, which provide an objectively describable pattern in terms of sounds, words, rhythms, syntactical constructions and even perhaps units of meaning."71 Not that there is no

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place for the individual's input and manipulation of such patterns, for the individual voice does develop to a certain degree. But his proximity to the set modes of linguistic performance suggests the tenacity of a tradition that overshadows the efforts of any individual. A culture then is clearly inserting its traditional expressive modes into the present re-enactment of past ideals to be absorbed into the culture and continually re-transmitted.\textsuperscript{72}

For Abrahams, the \textit{orthodox table} for the performative uses of language must be understood before situating the \textit{individual variations} on tradition in terms of their meaning and importance to a larger social group. Siting Roman Jakobson, Abrahams stresses his emphasis on culturally-determined terms of style, as well as his reluctance to give credence to the individual's creative capacities in contributing something unique to the performance-style canon. According to Abrahams, as in staged dramatic performance, in language there are, for every "stereotyped style", corresponding "stock types" (\textit{emplois}). The individual speaker's personality must not be over-valued beyond the parameters of a set tradition or performance mode by which the speaker works. A speaker's likelihood for adopting his linguistic moves from a set canon of approaches reduces the theoretical uniqueness of his individual imprint, critically limiting the movement of individual style beyond the rigors of a common tradition. Thus, for those seeking to understand culturally-mandated terms of

\textsuperscript{72}Abrahams (1963), pgs. 89-91
performative style, knowledge of such *emploi* in verbal artistry will be far more revealing than a multiplicity of probes into individually divergent forms of linguistic expression.\(^{73}\)

While Abrahams's reluctance to understand style solely in terms of an individual innovativeness is well-founded, his somewhat one-sided emphasis on group-determined patterns rather than the creative evolutionary processes in the development of linguistic expression fails to examine the critical role of the individual in contributing to canons of expressive style norms. It is true that equally the individual man-of-words operates within a tradition, employing systems of understood and established signs to achieve a particular effect amongst the listening community. However, equally important in the expressive process is the individual actualization of such traditions at the point of live performance which provides such unique contours to the orthodox forms as to definitively nuance the terms of style and render such individual stylistics as more the work of the man-of-words than may have been previously considered. Ceola Ross Baber, in her discussion of black verbal artistry and communication\(^{74}\), looks at the process by which the individual invokes various accepted communicative forms in his verbal performance, and the ways in which the individual makes his own stylistic imprint on such traditions (and upon his

\(^{73}\) Abrahams (1963), pg. 92

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message) as he enacts them. For Baber, the individual makes significant contributions to the "art of speak" precisely by his own stylized interpretations of the set performance tradition. His input is as important to transforming the terms of the traditions as such traditions are in supplying him with the sign-pool to orchestrate his lyrical maneuvers. "Black communication behavior is found in the particular way individuals execute different forms of delivery to achieve their goals". 75 While traditional forms supply a linguistic performative symbology in black discursive enterprises, individual style is the defining feature of black communication. Therefore, studies of stylistics in black verbal artistry, without denying the influence of traditional forms, must also critically account for the dynamic operations of the individual speaker who actualizes a discursive process, which, by virtue of its stylistic uniqueness, unites performer and audience into a single speech community.

Geneva Smitherman similarly stresses the importance of process in defining the specific uniqueness and mode of operation of black verbal expression. From this approach, individual stylistics must also be given consideration where the man-of-words organizes sounds, tropes, words, phrases, etc., from a particular aesthetic tradition to secure his niche, and to


75Baber (1987), pg. 76 (my emphasis)
articulate his own style of verbal display.\textsuperscript{76} "It is obvious that to get back to the original sources is much too difficult for any group to claim very much as a certainty," asserts Zora Neal Hurston in her attempt to define the specific nature of black creativity, and to reconcile the relationship between a vast corpus of established performance modes and the individual's creative display. "What we really mean by originality is the modification of ideas.\textsuperscript{77}" Creativity and originality - major tenets of personal style - are determined by the individual's own "treatment of the borrowed materials.\textsuperscript{78} Therefore, the terms of style are not based solely on the verbal-artistic emplois, but also on one speaker's resituating of expressive forms into an entirely new lyrical collage. This is the difference, explains Hurston, between imitation and mimicry — mimicry being, amongst black verbal performers, the "higher art" of art of fresh, original re-interpretation such that the individual man-of-words straddles the "bounds" between an approving community, and the space for his individuality as a single, unique good talker.

Although this expressive process is compelled by an active dialectic between individual and community (where the speaker shapes an evolving community-based canon that then cyclically influences his own style and that of other "men-of-words"), in many instances of black verbal performance, the


individual man-of-words takes center stage. His personal skills are on display for the group, and while the group is clearly the living reservoir of the aesthetic valuation systems, it is the speaker who effectively enacts tradition. He does so by such a personal process that this dialectical relationship cannot be understood without examining the individual's creative role in cultivating his style.

Seven years following his discussion of creative linguistic style in *Deep Down in the Jungle*, Abrahams wrote with increased concern about the individual speaker (or, "the man-of-words") as a primary player in the language game, one whose reputation precedes him and is transmitted through the language community in terms of the talker's stylized ability in manipulating words. The social group's stress is less on the specific direction or the degree to which one talker takes his talk in a particular contest, and focuses more on the talker himself and the process by which he uses language to gain control over his surroundings and perhaps also his opponent. Therefore, the individual is the ultimate focus where his personal style either shines as justification for his lofty social position as a man with a strong rap, or flickers and is drowned out as indistinct amongst the mass of competing styles.⁷⁹

In his study if the play of words, Peter Farb agrees with Abrahams that the individual has a strong tendency to contour expressive traditions for his

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⁷⁸ Hurston (1995), pg.230
own purposes, and even if those purposes fit well within a tradition, this does not detract from the importance of authentic, individual renditions of the set forms, for therein lies the key to style and the other half in the dialectic of verbal aesthetic formations. As Farb explains, "[l]anguage is both a system of grammar and a human behavior which can be analyzed according to theories of interaction, play, and games." Linguistic virtuosity is the individual's ability to move creatively through and manipulate a set grammatical system, as well as a culture-specific system of signs and referents, in order to exploit the existing system with new linguistic combinations towards new possibilities, fresh ideas and approaches to communication.

In her exploration of the communicative process of shouting amongst blacks, Hurston explains that the most familiar forms of shouting are what receive the greatest audience response. There is no place for excessive obscurity or for invoking irrelevant traditions. In an expressive space where communication with God Himself is at stake, community involvement in the process of verbal communion is a must. Working within a tradition is certainly as vital as any individual's stylistic meandering or inventiveness. Responsibility to established performative traditions and individualistic expression operate not in antagonism, but rather serve as fluidly co-dependent features of a larger single process. Shouting both traverses the physical space and resolves the conceptual distance between the single

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shouter and his surrounding group of co-participants and listeners by bringing each person into the performance. Verbal artists, men-of-words, find themselves in dialogue with linguistic traditions as they simultaneously employ their own verbal style to manipulate such traditions and establish themselves as a first among equals in the mastery of words.

III

Questions concerning the nature and source of style in verbal performance provide a useful map, then, for navigating the complicated subject of the black personality disc jockey’s radio performances and his significance within particular listening communities. In particular, because it is style to a great extent that defined the “personalities” and the cultural impact of the black deejays of the 1940s through the 1960s, it is critical now to examine how the specific forces – community and individual – that informed the style of the deejays shaped and manifested themselves in the verbal performances on the air. Now, we must trace the flow of influences as they moved from the “speech community” out to the deejay, as well as the deejays’ in turn impacted the communicative tendencies and verbal creative expressive ideas of their listeners. Finally, rather than over-emphasizing either side of the complex discursive relationship between the individual

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verbal performer and the creative (or, aesthetic) community as a whole, it is important instead to examine the dynamic dialectical process that exists between the two – in particular, to trace that process from the core of the “expressive community” towards those aspects of that process that became a tremendous part of the rise and popularity of the black radio disc jockey.

In her study of black radio gospel announcers, Debra Barney argues that several of the early black gospel disc jockeys relied on many of the familiar performative elements found in the Black Church to develop their on-air personalities. She explains that in the personal stylistics of the black gospel announcer’s performances there is evidence that these deejays drew from black Christian musical and oral traditions, suggesting that these deejays were intimately familiar with the nuances of community-based black verbal performance aesthetics which informed the craft and display of the black preacher and the gospel band. "Because of the announcer's connection with Black gospel music tradition," Barney maintains, "their performances can generally be seen as reflective of a distinctly African American world-view, spirituality, and aesthetic, including musical forms and preaching styles, that are characteristic of the Black Church.\(^{82}\) The announcer's invocation of such musical and preaching styles reveals a larger conceptual intimacy with the aesthetic codes and expectations of the listening community. In the Black Church, an appreciation for the good talker, for a man-of-words, manifest in

sacred form in the body of the black preacher, pre-dates the coming of the gospel deejay, making ripe the opportunity for the deejay to manipulate and re-order established codes with his own unique use of words. The gospel disc jockey is allowed and embraced into a strong, pre-existing critical community. His permanence is predicated precisely upon his masterful execution, or Hurstonian mimicry, of those elements which define verbal artistry in the collective imagination. The gospel disc jockey has an audience that has been reared and well-versed in the verbal performance of the pulpit, and is pre-disposed to the moving possibilities of talented orality. As in Hurston's argument for the essential groundedness and relevance of shouting before a church community, so Barney posits that the gospel announcer relies to a great extent upon the priorities set by the listeners for his own tools of verbal display, where originality is hinged tightly upon the mastery and skillful invocation of an idiom.83

Several of the earliest black disc jockeys, in both sacred and secular music programming, relied heavily upon their black listeners and upon tendencies in popular black orality for their own clever material. The radio stations' surrounding black communities supplied the black jocks of the late 1940s and 1950s with the basic lexicon and assortment of phrases, as well as the over-all complex systems for creating and executing original verse (raps and rhymes) consistent with the popular idiom of the day. Eddie Castleberry,

83Barney (1994), pgs. 5-6
who worked at WEDR-Birmingham, explains that the raps, rhymes and phrases for which many of the first personality deejays became the most famous "was stuff from everyday life. We got that from the black community." Deejays were attentive to the casual talk and rapping styles of the street corners, bar tables, and "race" records, hunting for ideas that would help them demonstrate their command of the idiom, and therefore their closeness with the precious oral aesthetic traditions of the community. The well-educated art history professor from Dillard College, Vernon "Dr. Daddy-o' Winslow, whose famous handle alone betrays his familiarity with the popular phraseology among black youth during the Forties, admits that his brain-child, Poppa Stoppa, was conceived by his application of a process he refers to as "rhyme-talking" which he acquired from his work with the *Louisiana Weekly* local newspaper. Winslow frequented New Orleans's

84Eddie Castleberry. personal interview. 1 March 1999.

85Eddie Castleberry. personal interview. 1 March 1999.

86Winslow attended both Morehouse and the University of Chicago, and received an advanced art degree from the Art Institute of Chicago before he went on to teach art history at Dillard University in New Orleans while writing for the *Louisiana Weekly* and "coaching" white jocks on the "Poppa Stoppa Show" at WJMR. See Barlow (1999), pgs. 165-166.

87Initially, the "Poppa Stoppa Show" was submitted to WJMR as Winslow's attempt to utilize radio in reaching black listeners with important information and entertainment. Poppa Stoppa, Winslow admits, was also used to conceal his true identity from directors at Dillard who would certainly not approve of such a "low class" enterprise as disc jockeying. the station management eagerly accepted the proposal and some of the test scripts they asked Winslow to write. Through the end of his job interview, the station manager was convinced of Winslow's whiteness (a conviction also fed by his stellar resume), but upon asking, found that he was indeed a Negro, after which revelation he was soundly dismissed from the station facilities. Eventually, he was asked back to write scripts for white jocks, which he accepted.
Dewdrop Inn on his rounds in search of information for his column on the city's night life. Here, he admits to studying copiously the speech and slang of young black patrons, rehearsing his material then testing his skills in the midst of a highly critical crowd. "I would just sit down and talk to the people," Winslow narrates, "just listen to them and try to use the language that I was newly using...I just didn't want them to feel as though I didn't know how to handle it. I would try to carry on with them...I had to listen and know what they were doing." He made concerted efforts to walk through black neighborhoods, mingling with young crowds in order to extract pieces of black slang, slivers of phraseology, or distinct rhyme patterns. Here, Winslow also became familiar with the names of musical artists especially popular among black music lovers. As a consultant and commercial writer for the Jackson Brewing Company, Winslow depended on black linguistic vernacular as a creative resource, and his interactions in the black community helped him to stay abreast of the issues and language at the forefront of the black popular culture. With the aegis of the ever-evolving, "cool" new talk guiding his sales pitches, Winslow developed advertising to target those black consumers tuning into his "Poppa Stoppa Show", which took over "Jam Jive and Gumbo Show"'s time-slot on WJMR. "It was just a matter of identifying with the market...As I could figure, it was the kind of

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88Vernon Winslow. interview with William Barlow. 4 January 1996

89Vernon Winslow. historic interview. 12 March 1994
urbanity that they were reflecting...They would just develop this (sic) own hep talk...I'd pick up the phrases and put them into the script.\textsuperscript{90}

After being refused the announcer's job for the show he proposed for WJMR's black appeal programming, on the premise that sponsors would surely pull out of supporting the all-white station if they were to find their commercials being done by "a nigger", the station manager offered Winslow the opportunity to train white deejays for the "Poppa Stoppa Show".\textsuperscript{91} Winslow coached white jocks in the hep phrases and cool black talk of the day, writing their scripts, prompting their "cool cat" lyricism from inside the studio, correcting their mistakes and encouraging their "mastery" of the idiom. Winslow himself was never to be heard on the show. Winslow read the scripts aloud, enacting black verbal performance strictly in terms of \textit{spoken} language, to help white jocks \textit{hear} the language in action. White Poppa Stoppas came and went, while WJMR profited from Winslow's strong sense of the mechanisms of verbal artistry he found through his intimate interactions with black New Orleans. He also listened closely to the black popular idiom that filled the earliest rhythm and blues records. "(The music) was just sort of laced with neighborhood inflections." For Winslow, "[p]laying

\textsuperscript{90}Vernon Winslow. historic interview. 12 March 1994

\textsuperscript{91}Vernon Winslow. interview with William Barlow. 4 January 1996; Vernon Winslow. historic interview. 12 March 1994
close attention to and imitating the black linguistic vernacular forms was "[j]ust something that was part of my job.²²

Winslow was eventually approached by the Jackson Brewing Company to write and host a black music show featuring ads for Jackson Beer in order to help them capture the untapped black listening audience in Southeast Louisiana. WWEZ-New Orleans, won rights to broadcast his new "Dr. Daddy-o Show", broadcast live from Cosmo's Recording Studio. The show became so popular Winslow was sent around to other regional stations by Jackson to correct the language, coach the black theatrics, and generally train other deejays in "authentic" black behavior and teach them to "talk that talk" to reach and hold loyal black audiences. He also distributed his instructional pamphlet "How to be a Doctor Daddy-o".²³ Vernon Winslow turned the rapping and rhyming, toasting and running down lines, the hep vocabulary and ubiquitous verbal histrionics he learned directly from studying the cool-talking black masters-of-words in clubs and on the streets, into a profitable science.

In the 1930s, before becoming a disc jockey, Lavada Durst moonlighted on weekends as a blues pianist and singer at house parties, working by day as a play-by-play announcer for Negro League baseball in Austin, Texas. His unique rhyming commentary earned him a job in 1948 at white-owned and operated KVET-Austin, where Durst transformed into Doctor Hep Cat.

²²Vernon Winslow. historic interview. 12 March 1994

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Despite the racist harassment Durst received from the KVET staff, "by the 1950s, Doctor Hep Cat was the hottest DJ in the Austin market." Because of his wide-spread appeal to both black and white listeners, particularly amongst the student body at the University of Texas's Austin campus, Durst became a dominating force in Austin radio throughout the 1950s and into the Sixties. Much like Winslow, Durst paid particular attention to the hep talk of the young men he met while he worked as the athletic director at Austin's Rosewood Recreation Center. In the cool language of the black youth, Durst found the lyrical voice he needed to establish himself as a personality distinct amongst white radio announcers during the mid-1940s. As Winslow explains,

[\textit{w}hen I started on the radio show, I had to be different, I had to come up with something different from the white boy. So, I let the world know about our language that we use on the street, called hep talk...I knew all about it and (for) a long time I was associated with the recreation department as an athletic director...I met a lot of youngsters, so I knew their phrases...We called it hep talk, you know? So, I knew it from top to bottom, so I just called myself Doctor Hep Cat, because I was well aware of what was happening.]

Because the budding of the radio personality's popularity depended not on a one-way flow of influence from the individual out to the community, but instead relied upon a discursive relationship, the disc jockey's influence upon the language of his listening community also deserves consideration. Black deejays also significantly contributed to the contemporary popular

\footnote{Vernon Winslow. interview with William Barlow. 4 January 1996}
\footnote{Barlow (1999), pg. 106}
\footnote{Barlow (1999), pg. 106}
discourse, absorbing ideas from specific music cultures and re-inserting them as something fresh and exciting to extend their reputations and keep listeners tuned in for the thrilling spontaneity of performance. The disc jockeys contorted sounds, bending words, rearranging common phrases, scatting words to a be-bop-type rhythm, and pushing the bounds of propriety for post-World War II broadcasting. These men and women sought to make a lasting impression upon the ears of their listeners; with each word, their reputations were at stake, so black jocks experimented with the true effectiveness of total performance condensed into sound to influence the language and ideas of those tuning in. "It's just the idea of catching a phrase or something that stays with people," explains master radio rhymer "Jockey Jack" Gibson. Doug "Jocko" Henderson, one of the most listened to and well-remembered Philadelphia and New York City deejays of the 1960s, remarks that he frequently heard his radio raps being recited on the streets of cities. Confident of the powerful impact the deejays had on their listeners, Novella Smith, a major woman disc jockey and a historically significant force in changing the depersonalizing naming practices at KYOK-Houston, affirms "[w]e set the pace. We told our listeners what to do, and they did listen to us."

97Jack Gibson. personal interview. 4 March 1999.
98"Black Radio: Telling it Like it Was" show 5, "Rappers and Rhymers". The Smithsonian Institution, 1996.
The black disc jockey perhaps most well-known for concocting his own lingo to influence the popular discourse of the time was Holmes "Daddy-O Daylie" Bailey. According to fellow Chicago disc jockey Sid McCoy, Bailey's drink serving technique at the Beige Room where he tended bar often featured a dramatic array of flamboyant gestures, all accompanied by his clever raps, drawing an admiring celebrity crowd. Bailey brought his performances to radio in 1948 with his jazz show on Chicago's WAIT - the first show of its kind in the area. The show was called "Jazz from Dad's Pad," based on his new radio handle, which itself reflected his intimacy with the controversial new jazz culture, be-bop. Bailey both supported the transformative intentions of this assertive young sound, and, as noted by master trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie, made major contributions to the "unique jazz vernacular" of the be-bop hipsters. Daddy-O Dailey was a major presence in Chicago jazz radio from the late 1940s well into the sixties, where he influenced not only the hip lingo in general, but also where he built a personality that received accolades throughout the black deejaying community in America. His confident, original rhyming fluidity inspiring other jocks who would rise to be pioneers in their own right during the Fifties.

99Novella Smith. interview. 4 January 1996
100 Barlow (1999), pg. 104
101 Barlow (1999), pgs. 104-105.
102 Eddie O'Jay. interview. 15 May 1996
Yet, no emphasis on either the communities' influence on the language of the disc jockey or the jock's personality where he contributed products of his own imaginative lingo to the hep talk of the jazz scene in US cities can sufficiently capture the true nature of vernacular communication shared between black radio personalities and their black listeners. Rather than either side of the dynamic dominating the dialectical relationship between the jocks and their audiences, many of the jocks ultimately understood their work as a balanced dialogue - a fluid two-way conversation, constantly generating and exchanging new ideas, where the jocks possessed the lyrical capacity to influence the thoughts of their listeners, but also accepted with a degree of humility and obligation input from without. As Portia Maultsby explains, deejays invoked traditional modes of expressive oral performance to achieve a conversational tenor in their relationship with listeners. Such modes were critical to the work of the black jock seeking the undivided, loyal popular ear because their lyrical techniques appealed to community aesthetics of "rappin' and stylin' out".

(The black deejays) connected with the community. They shucked and jived with the community. In spite of the microphones, deejays were committed to having a personal conversation with their audiences, which they did. So the oral tradition of story-telling, speaking in rhythm and rhyme, speaking in an improvised style, as well as an animated delivery, is a cultural expression that was familiar to the masses, which is why so many people enjoyed personality radio.\textsuperscript{103}

\textsuperscript{103}"Black Radio: Telling it Like it Was" show 5, "Rappers and Rhymers". My emphasis.

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Martha Jean "The Queen" Steinberg, who followed after Willa Monroe, one of the first female personalities on Memphis’s legendary WDIA-AM, maintains that such a dialogue was possible between radio jocks and black listeners primarily because of the novelty of black radio during the late 1940s, which meant the deejays were venturing into new, unexplored terrain, making direct appeals to black listeners – an audience who had never been specifically considered by US radio broadcasting interests.\textsuperscript{104} The first black jocks, therefore, had a major impact on the radio industry not simply because they themselves were black, but because the very nature of their efforts was a concerted vocal outreach to establish contact with broadcasting's conceptual wretched of the earth. "We were talking to the people that no one wanted to talk to - everybody was talking about, but no one would talk to\textsuperscript{105}." For her part, Steinberg spoke across the airwaves to encourage her female listeners in a self-affirming, both independent and hearth-conscious, husband-adoring womanhood that was to be attentive to both personal beauty and household business. "Be sexy and official" was The Queen's message to young black women, whom she convinced to calmly but firmly assert their bold womanhood in their marriages.\textsuperscript{106}

Jack "The Rapper" Gibson, who brought WERD-Atlanta, the nation's first black-owned radio station, into its debut broadcast day in 1949, sought to

\textsuperscript{104} Martha Jean Steinberg, interview with Jacquie Gales Webb. 13 June 1995.

\textsuperscript{105} Martha Jean Steinberg, interview with Jacquie Gales Webb. 13 June 1995.
modify the impersonal "rip and read" style of broadcasting that was dominating radio during the 1940s by utilizing the capacities of radio to establish a strong individual presence with his stylistic lyrical "power of personality". Gibson introduced the news segments of his show, shifting into a conversational mode where he literally leaned back and, aloud, selected and read from the Atlanta Daily World black newspaper only choice stories he felt directly interested his black listeners. Gibson thus modified and even lampooned traditional methods of information transmission - "rip and read" dullness, and dry, straightforward the newspaper format - while simultaneously entertaining and informing the public with his inventive brand of radio conversation. Gibson achieved both the literal transmission of information, and activated a process of performed conversation which struck loyal chards in his listeners. "(My unique approach) got across. And that was what my people liked to hear. In other words, I was talking to them - not down to them or around them or trying to be something else. Just straight on out talking." 108

WDIA's "Joltin" Joe Howard similarly sees the distinction between the early black jocks and their white counterparts based upon a common use of language that reflected a larger shared experience. The deejays worked to convey this sense of a common experience by establishing a conversational

tone. The ability to share a language was a reflection of a larger empathy the black jocks felt with the average working class black listener in and around Memphis (for example) in the 1940s and 1950s. "We talked more trash (than the white announcers). We could relate to our listening audience", explains Howard\textsuperscript{109}, because the jocks saw themselves as men and women of the community, having undergone much of the same economic difficulties and racial injustice as those tuning into "The Goodwill Station".\textsuperscript{110} Another WDIA veteran, Robert "Honeyboy" Thomas, argues more directly that the appeal of black radio rested in the racial con-specificity of language, which served as a group marker and a beacon inviting leery but radio-enthused black listeners to trust their new black jocks. "We were talking their talk," clarifies Thomas, "and speaking primarily to them. And that's why it was a black station. That's what we did - black programming. We spoke as blacks so blacks could understand us.\textsuperscript{111}"

By the very nature of radio, spoken language became the chief living means of communication - the principal symbolic terrain, by which the earliest black disc jockeys sealed their legendary, intimate discursive covenant, exploiting the power of words to pull closer a community that might be scattered for several miles. If the transmissions could reach

\textsuperscript{109}Joe Howard. Personal interview. 2 March 1999.

\textsuperscript{110}Joe Howard. Personal interview. 2 March 1999.

\textsuperscript{111}Robert Thomas. Personal interview. 10 February 1999.
individuals, then the appeal of masterfully-executed good-talking could proscribe a community. The black personality deejay, for all his blackness and his individual style in linguistic, communicative finesse could draw such a community conceptually nearer as loyal listeners.

IV

Starting Static: Tensions Over The Sound of Blackness in Radio

The post-World War II era brought major breakthroughs on so many fronts for blacks in radio, and many of the pioneer personalities saw the airwaves both as a vital space to challenge many of the prevailing stereotypical representations of blackness and black speech on the radio, as well as a potent tool the personalities themselves felt they could utilize to aid blacks in the larger national struggle for self-sufficiency, racial justice and respect, and moral resilience. Language as a mechanism for qualitatively different kinds of racial representation became a highly-contested terrain, and there were conflicts over how historic radio racism ought to be confronted by the drive behind each deejay’s own manner of speech. Because it was, in the final analysis, the deejay’s own sense of his role and responsibility with such a powerful apparatus as radio in redefining (or, reifying) this important aspect of racial identity – language, and its link to character – it is from the disc jockeys’ vantage points and criticisms which this section proceed.
By all accounts, Nat D. Williams was among the premiere pioneering forces in the history of American radio. The godfather of the black jocks at WDIA, Nat Dee secured his fame and gargantuan status in radio initially as "the first black announcer in the mid-South to play the popular rhythm and blues records of the day over the airways." However, Williams had, even several years prior to his work for WDIA, been recognized as a tireless, focused and well-rounded intellectual, a devoted educator, talented journalist and speaker, and endearingly gentle human being. Before he began as a disc jockey, Williams had been teaching at Booker T. Washington High School in Memphis, where he helped edit the school newspaper, assisted with student performances, and taught a rare, alternative brand of black history that inspired a generation of civil rights activists and black state congressmen. Additionally, at different points in his life, Williams wrote for Memphis's World and Tri-State Defender newspapers, while his articles were also sometimes carried in the Chicago Defender and the Pittsburgh Courier. He also performed as the enigmatic and profoundly talented entertainer-host for "Amateur Night on Beale" held live at the Palace Theater. Williams recruited from among his own array of students, encouraging talented young blacks to display their entertainment wares at one of the very few venues in Memphis promoting such an expressive forum.

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Once he was hired by Bert Ferguson to host WDIA's first ventures into black-appeal programming, Williams continued to recruit, bringing two of his colleagues from the high school, Maurice "Hot Rod" Hulbert, Jr., and A.C. "Mooha" Williams, onto the air at WDIA, where they would find their own respective legendary niches in black broadcast radio. Williams's programming designs, recruiting efforts, and targeting genius helped catapult the WDIA black-appeal project towards apex status - a giant among southern radio stations. However, despite Nat Dee's extensive academic training,\footnote{Williams graduated valedictorian from Memphis's Kortrecht High School, received both his bachelor's and master's degrees from Tennessee A & I, and attended several summer courses at the University of Chicago, Northwestern, and Columbia University. See Cantor (1991), pgs. 32-33.} business savvy and prominence at WDIA, and his indelible trademark charm, Williams himself has divulged that there were some in the black community who disapproved of his self-admittedly colloquial approach to his radio personality.\footnote{Nathaniel D. Williams. Historic interview.} This conflict brings to the surface a classic tension within black America over appropriate, \textit{black-orchestrated} representations of blackness in popular entertainment. Concerning his radio performance, Williams has discussed at length the class-conscious opposition he faced opposition that deemed his jocular, vernacular persona behind the studio microphone backwards and an inappropriate way for an educated black man to represent himself (and, therefore, the black race) on radio. Williams explains that
some two or three top Negro leaders...resented the idea of a clown being on the air to start them off. By that I mean I started with my humor and laughs and things like that, and most of our leading people felt there should be more dignity, and an expression and a show of more intelligence and education than I was demonstrating. The only excuse that kept me there was that they knew that I had finished high school and knew I had finished college, and they knew I was supposed to be an officer in my church. And a lot of church people really despaired of me...But I did it because I was having a good time.116

Though Williams is unclear concerning which "Negro leaders" he is referring to, his remarks are no less poignant. Based on the high moral expectations of some black cultural critics demanding virtue and erudition from their "Negro announcers", Williams was apparently a troubling deviation. His performance was viewed as a gross defamation of his extensive academic training, the waste of a sound Negro mind who could do so much to uplift the race by utilizing radio to its greatest civilizing capacity. Just as some organizations and cultural critics during the dawn of national broadcast radio held a faith in the moralizing power of radio to restore a civilized, well-educated quality to American culture as a whole, based on the testimony and beliefs of many deejays of the 1950s and 1960s, many blacks also saw a larger redemptive power in black radio. Black radio, and the men and women who rode the airwaves, was apparently meant to be the new technology for disseminating new knowledge concerning upward-mobility consciousness, which began with a sense of social responsibility on the part of the jocks that could only be demonstrated through certain more "proper" forms of speech and diminished "clowning" dramatics. Whatever the
criticisms, it seems Nat Dee (sometimes affectionately referred to as Nat Daddy) and other jocks like him who preferred a more animated, colloquial approach to broadcasting were taken most seriously by some precisely when they reached the height of flamboyant lyrical performance.

Eddie Castleberry has reflected upon the fact that the debate over the proper linguistic representations of blackness by blacks on the air, that of proper English vs. bad English, and how a deejay ought to sound, has always loomed over the work of the black radio personalities.\textsuperscript{117} Jack Gibson echoes this sentiment, revealing that some had argued black announcers should sound like their white counterparts on the air.\textsuperscript{118} Nothing more appropriately epitomizes this conflict over appropriate language, performance, and economics in all its complexity and at the core of the entrepreneurial mind and pride-driven heart of black radio than the relationship between Jack L. Cooper and Al Benson.

By the late 1940s, Jack L. Cooper Productions had earned millions for Cooper. At the end of the decade, Cooper owned a broadcasting studio and an advertising agency. At this point, Cooper had purchased forty hours worth of radio air time across four Chicago area stations, for which his ad agency hired a team of deejays to write and host a variety of shows. Cooper had secured a loyal black audience not only by his cross-city coverage, but by the content of

\textsuperscript{116}Nathaniel D. Williams. Historic interview.
\textsuperscript{117}Eddie Castleberry, personal interview. 1 March 1999.
his programming, which included spinning records by the most popular
dance bands and vocal acts of the day.119

Jack L. Cooper, a former vaudevillian, saw radio as an entertainment
medium where blacks could exercise an unprecedented amount of control
over every aspect of writing, hiring, production and performance. Cooper
rejected minstrelsy idealism and symbolism along with the racist hiring
practices of radio management. Cooper designed more sober programming
that tried to accurately appeal to the tastes and interests of a black middle class
listening audience.120 Though unmistakably a black announcer, Cooper
epitomized his middle-class idealism in his music selections (big band), in his
target audience (Chicago's "aspiring black bourgeoisie"), and in his tendency
toward proper English diction.121

What most revealed Cooper's class allegiances and sensibilities was
what he chose not to do on his shows. A flourishing black southern migrant
population in Chicago during and after World War II would have made blues
programming a feasible option, and Cooper certainly could have leaned more
towards even an imitation of black southern dialect vocal tones and phrases.
However, Cooper's middle-class idealism permeated his programming
agendas, perhaps revealing his attempt to move away from the clownish

118Jack Gibson. personal interview. 4 March 1999.

119Barlow (1990), pg. 185

120Newman (1991), pgs. 62, 82

121Barlow (1990), pg. 207
blackface representations of blackness which had plagued broadcast radio when Cooper was just beginning his broadcasting career. Cooper had an alternative agenda for his shows, and among them was, besides making practical business decisions, to re-cast sonic depictions of blackness in an intelligent, serious, respectable light. By 1945, Jack Cooper - a radio personality with a (Booker T.) Washingtonesque sense of black self-help, with strong black middle class proclivities, and with no audible Southern accent - refused to pander to the blues tastes of the young black radio listeners recently arriving in Chicago.

With failing health and an increasing detachment from the new listening audiences, Cooper was succeeded in his reign over black-appeal in Chicago by Al Benson.122 Though not quite Cooper's antithesis, Al Benson offers a timely counterpoint to Cooper's own class-inflected language choices. By the end of the Forties, Benson had soundly eclipsed Cooper's fame on Chicago radio. A former Mississippi minister-turned-radio mogul, Benson steadily positioned himself as the gatekeeper to the popular ear in Chicago's South Side. Like Cooper, Benson finessed the time brokerage system prevalent in northern broadcast radio. He established a production company of his own and hired black radio aspirants eager for an opportunity to control

the microphone. Benson leased time at several stations around Chicago, disseminating his influence and spreading his reputation.123

However, unlike Cooper, Benson played and adored the delta blues, and he quickly became the talk of the town and at the epi-center of controversy for his raw, often muttled vernacular delivery peppered with malapropisms and colloquial gesticulations that were the rage for many young black listeners, and enraged some cultural watchdogs. Moses "Lucky" Cordell, who once worked at WGES under Benson's production company, described Benson's success as partly stylistic, part opportunism, countering Cooper's middle class proclivities and his refusal to play "gut-bucket blues". "Jack L. Cooper was a classier kind of guy," Cordell relates. "Benson was a lot of flash. He wore the loud suits and the flashy jewelry and the big cars. Jack L. was a more subdued personality. That, of course, was his downfall...Most of his stuff was jazz, and that's how Benson beat him out.124" Jack Gibson has succinctly summarized Benson's negotiation of business savvy and so-called inept stylistics, claiming that "[h]e was just a...self-made, ignorant type of man, but what he did - he made it happen.125" Former WUFO-Buffalo program director and star deejay Eddie O'Jay (who also named and managed the black soul group of the same name) has dismissed the potential appeal of Benson's personality, and explained his success instead in terms of his

123 Newman (1988), pgs. 84-85

shrewd management of the time brokerage system and his control over the South Side's airwaves.\textsuperscript{126}

Benson's own sense of his controversial personality illuminates the difficulty in dismissing him as merely ignorant, his intentions being unlike many of the other black jocks who would follow him. Benson explains,

\begin{quote}
[when I got into radio, it was my very ambition and intention to let people know who I was. I did not identify myself by...bad English. But I used certain terms that we black folks were accustomed to using - slangs, and so forth. So, that alone picked up my identity. And my approach to the people was one of down to earth. Not one of up here and, 'I'm talking to you down there.'...[I]t was on a level that made them...say that he is one of us.\textsuperscript{127}
\end{quote}

Were it not for Benson's mass appeal, perhaps his explanation could be dismissed as an attempt to cover for his own thoroughgoing ignorance, and his refusal to acknowledge the troubling stain some may feel he has left on the history of black radio. Ironically, Eddie O'Jay himself admits that the southern migrants who came to Chicago rather personally embraced Benson, who made a direct appeal to them in music and in his personal oral stylistics, such that the listeners "opened their arms and (said), 'He's one of us'.\textsuperscript{128}" Sid McCoy, who worked with Benson at WGES, recognizes that, besides Benson's flair for business and his ability to work with the companies in and around

\textsuperscript{125}Jack Gibson. personal interview. 4 March 1999.

\textsuperscript{126}In describing his radio role models and influences, O'jay explains he "never wanted to be like Al Benson, because I felt like Al Benson...was killing the King's English. But, you couldn't get a record played in Chicago without seeing Al Benson...He had all the businesses tied up...You name it, he had it. And he was still Talkin' flat. But he was rich, and he knew what he was doing." From interview.

\textsuperscript{127}Al Benson. Interview. 23 June 1990
Chicago seeking black consumer attention, the "Ol' Swing Master" had a charismatic mass appeal that endeared him to his *listening* audience. The fact is, if anyone ever lived up to the notion of *black-appeal* radio, Benson, transmitting predominantly from WGES, made skillful business maneuvers and used his sense of southern black colloquialisms to amass a loyal black following. Businesses who wanted to tap the "newly discovered" market understood the sway Benson's name and voice held over the popular imagination of many young black Chicago consumers. "There was a need," says Cordell, explaining the draw of Benson's blues programming. "Jack L. was first on the scene, but he didn't fulfill it. Benson (was) shrewd enough to see there was this need, and filled it." by cornering a market and offering a sound that had little competition by that point in black Chicago radio.

In early black radio, there were places for many different approaches to the microphone art, and, according to several jocks, there were also audiences who accepted, in fact desired, such a variety in their daily programming. If he or she were strong enough a personality, each deejay had a following, a loyal listenership, and erudition was not always the primary concern, as Benson proves. Besides the Ol' Swing Master, however, Gibson recalls another "crude and ghettoish and country" deejay, Roosevelt "Roosie" Johnson of WERD, who was loved by listeners who did not on the whole express their

128 Eddie O'Jay. Interview.

129 Sid McCoy. interview. 19 June 1995
preferences for jocks on the basis of the good/bad English tension. In the days prior to the broadcasting schools, professional training grounds that grew out of and fed radio’s changing professional direction during the late 1960s and 1970s, deejays seized the opportunities available to them. Many went onto radio and utilized what sense of performance they had, the tools that were available to them, and emphasized those which would strike the most receptive chord amongst listeners.¹³¹

Nonetheless, some jocks saw themselves as more than mere announcers, but also as activists championing the struggle to confound many of the anti-black representations of black people on broadcast radio. A graduate of Samuel Houston College in Austin who joined the WERD disc jockey staff in 1955, Joe Howard is known for his “proper” articulation and his command of the English language, which he feels never impaired his performances behind the microphone nor hindered his ability to connect with black listeners. "I felt that you could get down and be just as hep (sic) using correct English as you could just screwing up the King’s English."¹³² Howard wanted to help craft a new image of black people, or at least destroy the prevailing images supported in the mass media which racial ventriloquism and linguistically-constructed misrepresentations of blackness

¹³¹Jack Gibson. personal interview. 4 March 1999.

¹³²Williams (1988), pg. 103
had contributed to the popular imagination. He especially wanted to be a black jock who resisted verbal auto-degradation through self-parody.\textsuperscript{133}

Howard was not alone in his efforts to "re-sound" blackness in American radio. Novela Smith feels that one of her greatest gifts to black radio in Austin, Texas, and to black audiences, was clear, sincere, "jive-free" diction. She had long hoped to enter into Houston radio in order to remedy the "butchering of the King's English" for those who wanted clear, quality news.\textsuperscript{134} "Chattie" Hattie Leeper, who started as a disc jockey during the 1950s on WBIV, the first black-appeal outlet in Charlotte, says she has been frequently mistaken as a white jock, taking pride in her diction and her refusal to "crack slang". "I wasn't on there just being a monkey, you know. I wasn't an Uncle Tommy on radio," Leeper says, seeing her job in radio as an extension of her commitment to education which she pursued also as a communications professor at Gaton College in Dallas, North Carolina.\textsuperscript{135} In fact, many black radio personalities saw their opportunity in broadcasting as a contract of obligation to the black communities as role models with the duty to challenge airwaves racism.

The second in a line of Dizzy Lizzies when she joined KYOK-Houston in the early 1960s, Smith took her cue from WWRL disc jockey Tommy "Dr.

\textsuperscript{133} Joe Howard. Personal interview. 4 March 1999.

\textsuperscript{134} Novela P. Smith. interview. 4 January 1996.

\textsuperscript{135} Barlow (1999), pgs. 151-152.
Jive" Smalls, who inspired her to be a black radio personality whom young listeners would look up to. Because radio management gave their jocks little coaching in the post-war years and even into the Fifties ("they didn't tell you how to be a radio star"\textsuperscript{136}), Smith found some latitude to choose her own mission and cultivate her personality as she saw fit. Ironically, her first hindrance drew the lines for her first major battle, and victory, at KYOK. The OK Group, who owned a chain of stations across the South, franchised the "handles" for many of their jocks, giving their black deejays names such as "Diggie Doo" (WXOK-Baton Rouge) and "Miss Mandy" (WGOK-Mobile). "Dizzy Lizzy", "Hotsy Totsy", and "Zing Zang" were all used at KYOK. Any black deejay who brought those names to life over the airwaves was free to leave the station when he was ready, but the handle remained with KYOK for another jock to fill. This arrangement effectively neutralized the ability for a deejay to establish himself should he leave KYOK, because an OK jock could not bring his personalized handle to another station. Only the name, and not the personality behind it, would become famous.

Filling the position of KYOK's first "Dizzy Lizzy" Gladys Hill, Smith protested not only to the excessive restraints placed on her personality, but she rejected the derogatory names themselves, which smacked of the blackface minstrel radio shows that exploded during the 1930s, and generally forced a lampooned caricature onto black deejays who took their jobs quite

\textsuperscript{136} Novella D. Smith. Interview. 4 January 1996.
seriously. Smith was so confident that she was "not Dizzy Lizzy material."\(^{137}\)

She felt that she had a right and an obligation to herself and her listeners to resist management policies by standing out individually as an intelligent black radio announcer. Eventually, she opted for her own name while making the transition between a news segment and the "Jive, Jam and Gumbo Show". Eventually, she convinced her station manager to allow her to use her own name, arguing that "we needed to stand up and be counted, and our children needed to know who we were, and those people that we programmed to needed to know that we were not Dizzy Lizzies and Okey Dokies (WAOK-New Orleans) and what have you.\(^{138}\)"

Even during radio's heyday in the 1930s, when blacks were largely excluded from central positions and programming considerations in broadcast radio, black activists and organizations believed in the medium's ability as a tool for "positive racial propaganda". Through the 1930s and 1940s, black writers, producers and intellectuals who developed educational documentary-drama series, either independently or in collusion with the US government's War Department and the Department of Education, used radio to compliment the messages of mass struggle against racial injustice in the US, and to encourage a popular rethinking of race in the American consciousness. For example, radio programming was intended by Richard Durham, Canada Lee and other black script writers and producers to

\(^{137}\) Barlow (1999), pg. 152
compliment the work of black activists in a divergence from the derogatory representations of blacks in the larger public sphere of white-controlled mass communication. Radio was used to uncover the previously apocryphal contributions of blacks to history, and to educate the public about the work of great black men and women, both past and present, who had contributed to the struggle for freedom and racial equality.\textsuperscript{139}

Black radio personalities had a similar confidence in the capabilities of radio to overcome historically infuriating and embarrassing stereotypes and present to the public a new Negro, capable as a member of civil society. Motivated by two main factors - the paucity of female representation, and the poor English of Birmingham's earliest, seemingly "uneducated" black deejays - Peggy Mitchell-Beckwith vied for and received an announcer's position on WEDR, a tiny daytime station. Her foremost gripe was the "misuse" of English on the part of the black jocks.\textsuperscript{140} Mitchell-Beckwith felt an obligation to black listeners, to use "proper" English and diction as a reflection of commitment to a community who looked with pride to black radio as an example of race progress towards dignified representations of themselves in major mainstream entertainment venues which had historically denied blacks any but the most superficial and degrading roles. Mitchell-Beckwith

\textsuperscript{138}Novela D. Smith. Interview. 4 January 1996; Barlow (1999), pg. 152.


\textsuperscript{140}Peggy Mitchell-Beckwith. interview. 24 April 1995.
used language to bring a bourgeois dignity to black speech at WEDR. "I think the impact of the show was to create a desire for other disc jockeys who were on the air to upgrade what they were doing...I'm not saying that I was the best, but at least I spoke correct English.\textsuperscript{141}" Her model of the "positive image" black personality disc jockey, one with proper diction and articulation, was revealed on the sonic premises of radio. Sound and language were performed through this new, exciting medium to depict a specific, "racial uplift" commitment to black Birmingham.

Shows like "Amos 'N' Andy" were an affront directly against the growing black middle-class to ameliorate white fears of blacks encroaching on resources and status that ought to be reserved exclusively for whites themselves. Barbara Savage suggests that

"Amos 'N' Andy" parodied the black middle-class for emulating the white middle-class, in effect chiding blacks for aspiring to be more than they were or ever could be - financially independent, successful, virtuous, white. It did that by relying on an (sic) set of beliefs held so universally as to remain unstated - that black character was permeated by slyness, ignorance, and incompetence.\textsuperscript{142}

Often, then, the keepers of those middle-class sensibilities in black radio responded most directly and aggressively to counteract those particular language-based signifiers of blackness promoted by the radio minstrelsy shows. Mitchell-Beckwith, Leeper, McCoy, "Joltin' Joe" and others may have been only the latest attempt by blacks in radio at a class-based aesthetic

\textsuperscript{141}Peggy Mitchell-Beckwith. interview. 24 April 1995.

\textsuperscript{142}Savage (1995), pg. 14.
redemption to weed out the last vestiges of verbal buffoonery in black radio talk, and to surmount a twisted, seething legacy of images that still oozed sour across the pallets of many blacks in entertainment. Although early radio relied heavily upon black people, either directly for their immensely popular music or more inadvertently for inspiring Gosden and Corell and their successors, blacks remained at the margins of cultural production via the mass medium. Further, "Amos 'N' Andy" represented through sound and through language what could not be visually perceived. The show packed radio language with indicators and codes to signify blackness on the air. Black radio still had the responsibility, many felt, to unpack, indeed to jettison, the linguistic symbology of racial ventriloquism for a better, brighter black personality voice.

Sid McCoy was embarrassed by deejays who used the black idiom not only to impress a listenership with their clever mastery of black oral-verbal forms, but also to test the bounds of their ability to "sound colored." Indeed, the question of sounding out blackness on the air, of representing race through this "new" semi-veiling medium, was concern many early black jocks had to come to terms with. In the absence of phenotypic representations and the ostensibly greater obviousness of visual blackness, the line between (1) authenticity and how to build allegiances with black audiences semi-distrustful of broadcast radio, and (2) the effort to utilize radio and the dawning of unprecedented black access to the airwaves to
broadcast a more cultured, erudite and dignified "new Negro", was handled in a variety of telling ways by different deejays. Novela Smith had a difficult time convincing her black Houston listeners she was black. While taking pride in her proper diction, Smith struggled to verify her blackness, and by extension her racial legitimacy to black audiences. A native Brooklynite, Smith's crisis was increasingly frustrated by her thick Flatbush, New York, accent. She recalls many of the first responses to her voice as hostile, with requests hurled at KYOK to "get that white woman off the air." Eventually, the station had to step out of the bounds of the ether, because black-appeal radio could not mitigate the chaos it had created by encouraging narrowcasting and promoting the racialized terms which held their black programming together. The fact that a jock's blackness was crucial to listeners is easy enough to see. Yet, that there was also a sound to blackness that appealed to black listeners eager for a personal space on the air that seemed to be initially missed by Smith. KYOK was forced to rely on another form of racial identification - the visual - to account for what Smith could not provide through sound - proof of her blackness. The station erected a billboard with her face on it, also printing postcards featuring Smith after having cut her mid-back length hair (she was frequently mistaken for Mexican). Smith and KYOK went to such lengths in an effort "to say, 'Hey!, I'm a sister!'".

144 Novela D. Smith. Interview. 4 January 1996.
145 Novela D. Smith. Interview. 4 January 1996.
Other deejays understood the dynamics of sound and race where they collided at the crossroads of black radio. They understood the importance of invoking devices of oral representation which announced, if not blackness, than a comfortable familiarity with the black idiom such that listeners would decide if one had mastered the techniques well enough to be welcomed into their ear-space. For those who knew how to use the medium, radio presented a tremendous opportunity to reach an untapped population who transmitted so much of their cultural value systems, their aesthetic priorities, and their notions of entertainment and social pleasure, by way of processes of verbal engagement and artistry. WDAS's Georgie Woods recognizes that certain jocks, in an effort to directly reach and gain the confidence of black listeners, did take advantage of the aurality of radio by colorfully invoking the rich systems of verbal artistic display and performance tropes available in black communication. "What we tried to do in the beginning, so that people would know we were black, is try to use language that would identify (sic) with our constituents. We had Doctor Jive, we had Jocko Henderson...You had a person you could identify as being from the African American community.\(^{146}\)" Perhaps the most common and celebrated way for a deejay to display his expert verbal skills, to flex his control of words and his hip awareness of the social world of young listeners, was to put it all in rhyme.

\(^{146}\)Georgie Woods. interview. 15 September 1995.
CHAPTER 3

_Fresh Air: Rhymes, and the Reasons_

_We kinda got to the kids. The kids kinda belonged to me during that time, you know? Because of the rhyme..._

_Doug "Jocko" Henderson_

Speech play is the pleasure of using language purely for the sake of process, where the linguistic acts of "getting there" - the verbal gestures, uses of tone and inflection, the structuring and pairing of phrases, pitch bending and kinesics - do not delete but certainly tend to overshadow the supposed "destination" of transmitting information or data. The point of such play is to explore the possibilities of language beyond the relation of raw data. The theory of speech play is based upon the notion that there is something inherent in the actual structure and expressive modes of human language which, regardless of the _literal_ content of the information being sent by the language, lends it to playful experimentation which are harmonious with a culture's larger sense of true creative expression. Speech play itself may be an intrinsic, normative part of different human cultures' methods of expressive
communication. As Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett has explained, "[b]asic to speech play is the expressive, stylistic potential of language," where the means in and of themselves are the ends, and the fact of play itself is the point of a performed code in speech play. The emphasis in word play is specifically on the aesthetics of the glorious, unpredictable unfolding of language, rather than on a particular goal.147

The idea of "phatic speech" further debunks the notion of linguistic frivolity, looking instead for more systematic application and purposeful intentions in the use of even the most ostensibly non-sense forms of speaking. In the 1920s, anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski found that speech served more than a literal function, suggesting that language was also used to bind together societies by helping individuals maneuver through social situations. Language has an "extra-literal" function, where the meaning is not as inherent in the literal text as much as in its application. Such words and phrases Malinowski called "phatic speech" - the linguistic devices by which people discern and articulate their relationship to groups.148 "Phatic speech" may be used to describe not merely actual words and stereotyped phrases, but stereotypical modes of patterning language to achieve

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147This of course is not to suggest that there is no place for speech play in mechanistic conversation, or that even in dialogue where the stress is on the play, information is not being sent. The point here is to look at speech play as a specific practice among many different ways of communicating, and to see that speech play exists along a continuum between pure process (gibberish) and "purely instrumental talk" (such as air traffic controller transmissions), existing more across the domain of the former. See "Introduction." Speech Play. Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett and Joel Scherzer, eds. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1976. Pgs. 2-8.
the same effect. Phatic speech agrees with the idea of speech play where they both concede the dense meaningfulness to be found in the extra-literal possibilities in language.

Yet, Malinowski seems to take the argument a step further, where he suggests that this extra-literal meaning is embedded in the larger social function of certain forms of language - language specifically as a set of tools to help one define his relationship to a particular speaking group (and to gain and affirm acceptance in such a group). If speech play is generally rooted in "the expressive, stylistic potential of language"149, then phatic speech is specifically the manipulation of extra-literal values found in certain language communication systems to establish particular social relations with a language community. The black disc jockeys clearly invoked specific forms of speech play in an effort to connect with their listeners on the common grounds of language, and to impress their listeners with their own mastery of a certain idiom and popular, highly-stylized forms of speaking, suggesting the disc jockey's interest in and familiarity with the larger social reality of the listeners. The disc jockeys embodied the classic men-of-words and exercised their craft through modern technology and the relatively recent trend of black radio. Their "speech play" performances reveal much about their particular understanding of phatic speech as a device for the initiation of the deejay's voice and ideas into the sanctified realm of the social group so tightly knit

148Farb (1974), pg. 23
together by its language and its culture-specific aesthetic sense of appropriate uses.

No one understood the full potential of the performed word-at-play than the black disc jockeys from the 1940s through the Sixties, from Baton Rouge to Buffalo, who built their entire personalities primarily upon the fluid, effective, and profitable possibilities of verbal style, and none of these personalities was better at the craft of speech play than "Jockey" Jack Gibson. Gibson, a self-described "light-skinned Negro who could talk shit\textsuperscript{150}, acknowledges that his raps were an extension of a "street corner" aesthetic where the exercise of verbal artistry is essential in winning rewards and gaining social status. "That's what rapping is - rapping is smooth talking. In my day, when you was talking to the sisters in the neighborhood, you became a rapper, you laid a rap on her. So, I was a smooth talker, so I became Jack the Rapper.\textsuperscript{151} And much like the man-of-words in the neighborhood, Gibson chose his raps carefully based on the situation or the context of the radio moment; transitions between program segments, opening a show, over parts of a record all became ripe opportunities for Jockey Jack to unleash his rapping cleverness.

Jocks used rhyme patterns not only to send information textually, but also to convey their familiarity with the idiom, and, by extension, their

\textsuperscript{149}Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1976), pg. 2
\textsuperscript{150}Jack Gibson. Personal interview. 4 March 1999.
\textsuperscript{151}Jack Gibson. Personal interview. 4 March 1999.
proximity to the aesthetic priorities of the listeners. Lavada "Doctor Hep Cat" Durst certainly lived up to his handle, with rhymes steeped in the hippest idiom fresh off the streets, employing phatic speech patterns such that the content of his message took a backseat to his fluid, jiving play with the words themselves in creating intrinsically colorful lyrical pieces, just to put himself on display and catch his listeners:

    My hepcat friends should see me somewhere.
    I stash with them to cop a nod,
    I lay my mellow frame upon the sod.
    If I should cop a drill before the early toot,
    I lay a spiel on the headknock to make everything alroot.
    So, with that, fly cat,
    I chill my chat,
    and fall back to my righteous pad
    and cop a nod like mad.\textsuperscript{152}

Another of Dr. Hep Cat's masterfully colorful rhymes, taken from an air-check on KVET-Austin and narrating the hip peacockish early evening convergence of some party-goers upon a dancehall, warrants quotation at length:

    From the top of the hill stroll the mellow frames,
    threaded on down and nobody be lame.
    There's Sue from Vine Nine, Rocket Kitty and O'wee Fine,
    Dottie Dee, Mabel and Jan, the Martin Sisters with their
    terrible tan.
    Yes the Gators are slidin' in, draped in their mud fronts,
    so sharp and fly don't nobody grunt.
    Zig zag pockets on one button rolls,
    bolero jackets strictly for strolls.
    All the cats are hip to the tip and draped on down,
    here are a few of the crazy cats who came to town.
    There's Daddy Rabbit with the do-rag habit,

\textsuperscript{152}From "Black Radio: Telling it Like it Was" show 5, "Rappers and Rhymers." The Smithsonian Institution, 1996.
and Ice Cube Slim in his pork pie brim.
My man Jivin' Joe with Charlie the Blowtop,
check out Frantic Fred and Heavy Hiphop.
The stash begins to rock, the band starts hopping,
the real gone Gators hit the floor and start bopping.
Now if there's no rootin' and tootin',
won't be no cuttin' and shootin'.
Don't start no slippin' and slidin'
won't be no ambulance ridin'.

This piece reveals Durst's familiarity with several popular images at the forefront of the hipster culture imagination in the 50s, namely his meticulous portrayal of the clothes (do-rags, zig-zag pockets and pork pie brims), names (Ice Cube Slim and Jivin' Joe) and events (cuttin', shootin', and ambulance ridin') surrounding the dance. His flawless finesse of rhyme scheme, taking advantage of lyricism inherent in the elements of the dancehall imagery, undoubtedly joined Durst and his cool listeners in an airwaves union of familiarity, trust and respect (he clearly understood the significance of out-of-town visitors, as well as the commonplace nature of physical confrontations, as such dances). Moreover, from complexions to walking styles, from music to dancing, Durst reaches beyond the exclusively aural/oral space of the radio by using visually-textured language to develop a colorful, living three-dimensional narrative that explores those possibilities of the idiom that lend a more thorough tangibility (and, therefore, increased legitimacy and proximity) to the radio personality's scenario.

Another master of on-air rhyming, Douglas "Jocko" Henderson of Philadelphia's WHAT, signed-off from his renowned Rocketship Show with
the following rhyme which left his mark indelibly on the minds of inner-city radio listeners:

Once again its rocket ship time
and those not on board must be outta their minds.
The rocketeers are lined up side-by-side,
ready to take their most exciting ride.
From Earth to the Moon you gotta go!
with your rocketship commander, Jocko!
We'll be on the Moon if the feel will last,
so let's leave the Earth with a big bad blast...
(rocketship launch sound effects)
And way up here in the stratosphere,
we gotta holler mighty loud and clear.
Eee-tittly-ock, ho! - this is Jock.
and I'm back on the scene with the record machine, sayin'
Oo-poppa-doo,
we'll be swinging for you.154

As "the rocketship commander" signifying heavily on the contemporaneous age of space exploration, Jocko linked with rhyme the contemporary theme of space-age pioneership and the down-to-earth music reality inside the booth at WHAT; like Dr. Hep Cat's reference to his "man Jivin' Joe", Jocko personally inserts himself into the narrative, joining his rocketeers in orbit and in fact leading the launch into the rhythm and blues stratosphere. As a personality jock, Henderson brags, toasts, and relies on the aurality of radio in his use of phatic speech patterns and sound effects to construct an imagined universe where the importance of message content exists alongside the unspoken message that is in his sheer manipulation of rhyme - a finesse that forges a

153William Barlow (1999), pg. 91

154From "Black Radio: Telling it Like it Was" show 5, "Rappers and Rhymers." The Smithsonian Institution, 1996. See also Barlow (1999), pgs. 141-142.
bond with his listeners in order to bring them into an imagined outerspace with him.

The deejays were by no means limited in their personality to the domain of rhymes. Many used smaller phrases or hooks to express their originality and distinguish themselves in the popular ear. Others interacted with their music and engaged their audiences in such ways that radio programs, under the guidance of the personality jocks, became genuine performances. Whatever his catch, the fact was, in the early days of black radio, "[w]hen you're a black disc jockey, you had to be a performer." Deejays also used more subtle, "paralinguistic techniques" to achieve a similar intimacy and to amass their followings. Explains Peter Farb, "[t]he array of vocal phenomena that every speaker commands is known as 'paralanguage', and it consists of such things as pitch, intensity, stress, tempo, and volume." The subtleties of paralanguage become far more intense in radio, where every tonal gesture or particular cadence lend a definitive stroke to the sonic collage developing in the listener's imagination. Nat D. Williams is still remembered for his "infectious laugh" - his trademark that was with him from his first nervous sign-on at WDIA. His warm personality

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155Eddie Castleberry. Personal interview. 1 March 1999.

lived up to WDIA's nickname "The Goodwill Station", as Nat Dee invited his listeners to join him tomorrow "cuz I'll be lookin' for you, you hear? 157"

In 1958, Jack Gibson accepted the position as a wake-up man on WCIN-Cincinnati, where his voice accompanied many in the southern Ohio city through their morning routines. Gibson charmed listeners with his smooth, mellow excitement, drawing his audience close to him with the wave of his magic wand of words:

Hey, Tiger! Look out now! We're gonna get together here and jam...This is the morning mayor of Cincy, jockey Jack on this ol' happy morning. Let's get together and jam one time, huh? Oh, let's throw all the blues and the worries out the window and come in here with a lot of good things. Got somethin' for your little swingin' ears, so if you're ready, then - look out! Here we go! 158

Hal Jackson dominated Washington, DC-area radio during the 1940s. His show, "The House That Jack Built", won him fame around the region, and Jackson was later approached by Annapolis and Baltimore stations who also wanted to carry the program. When a listener tuned into Hal's show, he was reminded that he was indeed at home, welcome, and "relaxin' with Jackson". On the other hand, Jackson used language to ostensibly defy the confines of the studio, verbally packing up his show, and his listeners, and going for an imaginary ride around town. 159 Jackson (and many other jocks) manipulated the synesthetic potential in sound that radio was known to take advantage of,

157 Nat D. Williams. Historic interview.

158 From "Black Radio: Telling it Like it Was" show 5, "Rappers and Rhymers." The Smithsonian Institution, 1996.
using the aurally perceived to depict imagined visuality. Lavada Durst reached beyond the microphone to attract and entertain listeners. Dr. Hep Cat's radio fans became readers when Durst published a booklet entitled *The Jives of Doctor Hep Cat*, a quasi-lexicography compiling many of the rapping jock's most famous excursions into hep poetic verse. After the book was released, his listenership soared.\textsuperscript{160}

Eddie "Castle Rock" Castleberry was a lyrical home-wrecker, using radio to penetrate the walled-boundaries of the happy home, coming across the radio waves and announcing himself to young female homemakers as "the housewife's boyfriend, Eddie Castleberry. Good mornin', baby. I sneak into your bedroom every mornin' after your husband goes away." Of course, if the sound embodied the man, if the voice was the living representative of the personality, then Castleberry was indeed finding his own welcome way into the households every morning.\textsuperscript{161} Another on-air flirt, Robert "Honeyboy" Thomas, who got his name at WDIA from his program director who wanted him to "talk sweet" to the women, was encouraged to speak to his microphone like he was sweet talking a young lady, and rapped about buzzing "in the beehive with the honeybees.\textsuperscript{162}"

\textsuperscript{159}Barlow (1999), pgs. 95-96; Hal Jackson. Interview. 11 April 1995.

\textsuperscript{160}Lavada Durst. Interview. March 1995.

\textsuperscript{161}Eddie Castleberry. Personal interview. 1 March 1999.

\textsuperscript{162}Robert Thomas. personal interview. 10 February 1999.
Deejays ruptured the ostensible dichotomy between the deadness of recorded music and the liveness\textsuperscript{163} of the active human voice by verbally interacting with the music, while the music itself, as Barney suggests, enhanced the voice and the performance of the jock.\textsuperscript{164} Some jocks, like Jack Gibson, carried on dialogues with recorded singers, lending insight and giving advice to the lonesome calls and pleading croons of rhythm and blues records. The record became more than wax; it was an extension of the deejay's personality, part of his entertainment routine, a veritable playground thick with opportunities for stretching the normative parameters for broadcasting. "We didn't just play a record, we became involved with a record. We sang with the record, we talked with the record, we answered back...". Castleberry popped his fingers loudly, cut in and had his say, and even coaxed recorded singers with church-like encouragement.\textsuperscript{165} "Joltin'"

\textsuperscript{163}This notion of a tension or dichotomy between "liveness and deadness" in popular culture performance arenas comes from "The Burden of Liveness," presented by José Esteban Muñoz. "Performance, Popular Culture, and Liveness" panel, arranged by the Division on Popular Culture, 28 December 1998. Modern Language Association convention, San Francisco Hilton.

\textsuperscript{164}Barney's perspective is a refreshing alternative to the notion dominating format radio today that the skilled disc jockey could ever be a nuisance, disturbing the music. From Barney's perspective, the deejay, and not the music, was at the center of the show; records were but one of the elements which enhanced the focal point of the show - the personality jock. Though deejays may only interject words here and there, the point remains that, if he was talented at what he did, if he had a genuine appeal to a listening audience, he could rarely be a disturbance to the music, because he was at the center of his program. See Barney (1994), pg. 218.

\textsuperscript{165}Eddie Castleberry, personal interview. 1 March 1999.
Joe "talked over, around, and in-between the records", while improvising many of his catch phrases throughout his show.\textsuperscript{166}

Personality deejays developed because many jocks were given their time and creative space to interact with both their music and with their audiences the way they saw fit. Their air time was their canvas, a chance to shine their own personal light across the airwaves and set themselves apart from the other voices and shows on the radio. Joe Howard and Rufus Thomas became involved with their shows and with the music to the point that disc jockeying transcended work, surpassed the status of a mere job. By using their personalities and the resources available to them in the studio, deejays tried to incorporate the listener into the show, to visualize a scene of mutual enjoyment. The studio was converted into a performance space where language was at center-stage and held at premium value, where the confines of the studio were expanded by the boundless flexibility of words. The black deejays of the 1940s and 1950s were devoted men-of-words, committed to exploring the dimensions of this complex, socially cohesive medium. Immersed in their work as performers, disc jockeys sometimes saw their performances as transcendental, while they remained simultaneously grounded and obligated to an anticipating community to deliver only choice material. "See, when I get to cookin' when I'm on the air, I fall in a groove

\textsuperscript{166}Joe Howard. personal interview. 2 March 1999.
and I'm not thinking about anything but just entertaining and taking care of business on the air."\textsuperscript{167}

Of the gospel radio announcers in her study, Debra Barney suggests that there was a generally understood importance of the complimentarity between being visible to listeners and being a radio voice. Physical appearance and live performance buttress orality where gestures, dress, and the general live personality give increasingly distinct color and definition to sound and to the voice. Proper attire and proper live physical gestures demonstrate mastery of an aesthetic much as language in performance does.\textsuperscript{168} For the disc jockeys, being seen did not compromise the integrity of their voices, nor did it challenge the stability of loyal listening communities. Rather, visuality was an important buttress to the aural. Since the disc jockeys operated primarily as radio personalities whose characters existed in terms of what is heard or sonically presented, face complimented and invigorated voice. This nearness enhanced the deejay's on-air performance and the dimensions of his personality. Live appearances gave disc jockeys a greater arena and a more expansive textual field to display their proximity and familiarity with the codes that govern cultural production and display amongst their listeners. And because visuality, like aurality, was presented in a dialogic atmosphere, the disc jockeys also relied on a visual proximity to their fans to help the jocks

\textsuperscript{167}Jack Gibson. personal interview. 4 March 1999.

\textsuperscript{168}Barney (1994), pgs. 196-202
better conceive and imagine their listeners. Nat D. Williams continued to host "Amateur Night on Beale" after he began broadcasting for WDIA, and Al Benson, Jack Gibson and many others hosted sock hops and juke joint dances. These instances, like "Daddy-o Daylie" Bailey's bartending theatrics, put the jocks in intimate physical proximity with radio fans, and provided spaces for the deejays to use the potency of the visual to enhance the effect of the sonic radio personality.

A strong example of confluence of the visual and the oral toward strengthening the celebrity of the radio personality was Jocko Henderson's "Rocketship Show", which was not only broadcast five afternoons per week on WDAS-Philadelphia, but during the mid-1950s was also eventually made into a live R & B revue hosted by Jocko himself at Harlem's Apollo Theater. The hour-long Apollo revues, which ran for one week at a time (Friday through Thursday), most likely drew many of the fans Jocko had acquired through his show on WLIR-New York City (which kept Henderson commuting between Manhattan and Philadelphia daily), and though the revues featured many of the foremost R & B stars of the time, "Jocko Henderson was a star attraction himself, and his appearance at the Apollo concerts were as eagerly received as the R & B acts he introduced." He sported an astronaut's suit and helmet donated by the United States Air Force, and was lowered onto the stage in a rocketship built by the Apollo props crew, which would create sound effects and stir up smoke, with Jocko
emerging dramatically out of the vessel, through the artificial haze, and up to the front of the stage, rhyming "Eee-titty-ock, this is the Jock!" Though his show was exceedingly popular, Jocko was best known for his on-air raps and his tendency to "rhyme up everything". Despite the popularity of his shows, radio was Jocko’s most successful and profitable venture. The live shows gave a visual texture to what Henderson represented strictly in terms of sound on his radio show, and Jocko’s on-stage flamboyance and the rocketship itself enhanced the primacy of the on-air radio performances.

\footnote{Barlow (1999), pg. 144}
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