Group Four:
The Late 1940s and Early 1950s: The Birth of Television and the Rebirth of Radio

Transistor radio, 1954

The introduction of television into American households in the 1940s and 50s led many to predict the end of radio’s popularity. After all, people could now see the scenes they could only imagine when listening to radio shows. Many popular drama and comedy shows, including The Lone Ranger and Amos ’n Andy, left radio and were reborn on television, and many advertisers made the move with them. Listen to the short clip of the opening of the The Lone Ranger radio show, which is followed by a clip of the opening of the television series.

The major national radio networks, such as CBS and NBC, also shifted their focus to television in the early 1950s. As network radio programming went into decline, more of the programming decisions were made by local station owners. Many such owners realized they would have to drastically change their content to continue to attract listeners and advertising revenue. As a result, popular music became a major focus of radio broadcasting. By this time, the sound quality of recorded music had improved, and it could be broadcast with greater clarity than in the past. Artists and record labels also came to recognize the value of having their records heard on the radio, which could dramatically improve sales.

Technological developments also changed listeners’ habits. Portable radios were increasingly common in the late 1940s. These new radios replaced the fragile and clumsy vacuum tubes used in earlier radios with small electronic transistors, making radios smaller, lighter, and able to run on battery power. The first transistor radios, like the one shown in the image above, were sold beginning in 1954. Some new cars featured radios as well. Many households now owned more than one radio, making it easier for individuals to make their own listening choices—kids and teenagers, for example, could listen to different music from their parents.
In the early 1950s, a station owner in Omaha, Nebraska, named Todd Storz recognized that many listeners wanted to hear songs that were familiar to them. More people were using radio music as a background to other activities, like driving or cooking—radio, after all, remained better suited for multitasking than television. Storz pioneered a type of programming that would later come to be known as “Top 40” radio, under which radio stations played the same 40 popular songs over and over again throughout the week. In the second half of the 1950s, many stations throughout the country would come to adopt this format.

Around the same time, a small number of locally owned stations began to play Rhythm and Blues music performed by African-American artists, music that had not been widely heard over the radio before. In 1949, WDIA in Memphis became the first black-oriented station in the country; it featured black announcers and directed all of its programing toward black listeners. WLAC in Nashville saw its ratings soar as it began focusing on R&B in the early 1950s. As the radio industry and advertisers began to realize the value of what one trade journal called “the forgotten fifteen million” listeners, black radio continued to grow throughout the decade.

Listen to the excerpt from Elmore James’ 1951 hit recording of “Dust My Broom,” a song that stations such as WLAC and WDIA would have played.

Discussion Questions:

1. How is *The Lone Ranger* different on television and radio? Why might people have stopped listening to dramatic shows on radio in favor of watching them on television?
2. How did the decline of radio networks influence radio programming? What kinds of programming did local station owners need to replace, and what did they replace it with?
3. How did the rise of portable, transistor, and car radios change programming and listening habits?
4. Who do you imagine might have been listening to the types of music played on stations such as WLAC and WDIA? Do you imagine that their audiences were primarily African-American, or might they have included white listeners as well? What, if any, impact do you think increased airplay may have had on the overall popularity of Rhythm and Blues music?