

Pioneers of Early Black Radio

In the early days of radio, broadcasts by bandleader Duke Ellington, singer Paul Robeson, and others exposed predominantly white radio audiences to the work of Black artists. But while Black artists often appeared in early radio broadcasts, radio shows did not have Black announcers, actors, or masters of ceremonies.

On November 3, 1929, white-owned radio station WSBC in Chicago premiered “The All-Negro Hour,” the first radio program to feature Black performers exclusively. The program, hosted by former vaudeville performer Jack L. Cooper, featured music, comedy, and serial dramas. “The All-Negro Hour” went off the air in 1935, but Cooper continued to host and produce Black-oriented programming for WSBC.



Richard Durham, Harsh Research Collection

One such program was “Search for Missing Persons,” a series launched in 1938 that reunited Black migrants from the south with lost friends and relatives. This success, along with a general trend toward expansion in the radio industry, led to a rise of Black-oriented radio stations following World War II.

In 1949, station WDIA in Memphis, Tennessee, became the first to employ an all-Black on-air announcing staff. Later that year WERD in Atlanta began broadcasting as the first Black-owned radio station. Powerful AM stations such as WLAC in Nashville began broadcasting Black-oriented news and “rhythm and blues” music across entire regions of the United States, drawing both Black and white audiences.

Between 1948 and 1950, the radio series called Destination Freedom aired on WMAQ, a local Chicago NBC station. Richard Durham created Destination Freedom in an attempt to profile significant African American historical figures and their contributions to American democracy and freedom. Durham was an African American journalist, poet, dramatist, labor organizer, and one-time Communist Party member, who began his career as part of the Writer’s Project of the WPA and later worked as a writer for The Chicago Defender. In an era when African Americans were increasingly visible in the arts, though not always in positive roles, Durham’s scripts attempted to reclaim a triumphant narrative of African American history.