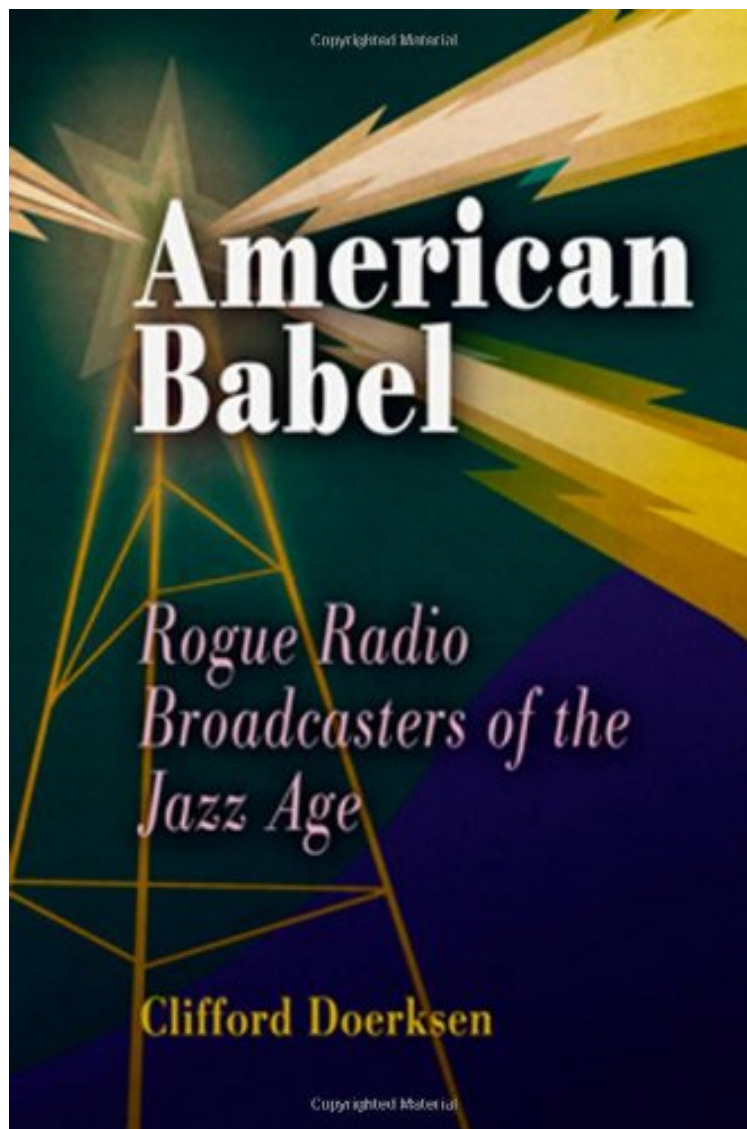


(Free download) American Babel: Rogue Radio Broadcasters of the Jazz Age

## American Babel: Rogue Radio Broadcasters of the Jazz Age

*Clifford J. Doerksen*

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**Clifford J. Doerksen : American Babel: Rogue Radio Broadcasters of the Jazz Age** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised American Babel: Rogue Radio Broadcasters of the Jazz Age:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Fascinating book. Even in radio there is nothing new ...By Duke the DJFascinating book. Even in radio there is nothing new under the sun. Shock jock formular created in the 1920s in the Deep South!!! Who knew?2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. A terrific readBy Michael B. GillThis is

an extremely entertaining, compulsively readable book. Doerksen mounts a compelling case for his view that early radio involved much much more than the non-commercial high-brow recordings of the national networks. But the great joy of reading this book is in the stories. Doerksen gives us robust, full-bodied descriptions of the people who filled the airwaves of the 1920s, of the (sometimes craven, sometimes wacky) things they cared about and how they tried to use radio to promote them. Whether or not you think you're interested in early twentieth century broadcast history per se, I can guarantee you'll be enthralled by the outsized on-air personalities Doerksen brings to life.<sup>1</sup> of 1 people found the following review helpful. A Forgotten Chapter in the History of American Broadcasting By Thomas C. O'Rourke Doerksen uncovers the fascinating yet neglected histories of the independent stations that operated in the dawn of radio broadcasting. He details their (sometimes) humorous battles with the corporate players and the Federal Radio Commission and the ultimate demise of these stations under re-written rules and "consolidation". I was surprised to learn that it was the populist stations -broadcasting hillbilly music or vaudeville acts or ultraconservative diatribes or "smutty jazz"-- who pushed broadcast advertising, not the "Big Four" corporations or the advertising industry. A concise and easy read.

When American radio broadcasting began in the early 1920s there was a consensus among middle-class opinion makers that the airwaves must never be used for advertising. Even the national advertising industry agreed that the miraculous new medium was destined for higher cultural purposes. And yet, within a decade American broadcasting had become commercialized and has remained so ever since. Much recent scholarship treats this unsought commercialization as a coup, imposed from above by mercenary corporations indifferent to higher public ideals. Such research has focused primarily on metropolitan stations operated by the likes of ATT, Westinghouse, and General Electric. In *American Babel*, Clifford J. Doerksen provides a colorful alternative social history centered on an overlooked class of pioneer broadcaster—the independent radio stations. Doerksen reveals that these "little" stations often commanded large and loyal working-class audiences who did not share the middle-class aversion to broadcast advertising. In urban settings, the independent stations broadcast jazz and burlesque entertainment and plugged popular songs for Tin Pan Alley publishers. In the countryside, independent stations known as "farmer stations" broadcast "hillbilly music" and old-time religion. All were unabashed in their promotional practices and paved the way toward commercialization with their innovations in programming, on-air style, advertising methods, and direct appeal to target audiences. Corporate broadcasters, who aspired to cultural gentility, were initially hostile to the populist style of the independents but ultimately followed suit in the 1930s. Drawing on a rich array of archives and contemporary print sources, each chapter of *American Babel* looks at a particular station and the personalities behind the microphone. Doerksen presents this group of independents as an intensely colorful, perpetually interesting lot and weaves their stories into an expansive social and cultural narrative to explain more fully the rise of the commercial network system of the 1930s.

"A significant step forward in revising our understanding of radio's initial decades. . . . Doerksen should be commended for his thematic emphases, his thorough archival research, and his wide-ranging review of 1920s radio publications. Together they provide a vivid portrait of these stations, their audiences, and the reactions of mainstream corporate broadcasters." *Enterprise and Society* "A lively, well-written, deeply researched book that will significantly further our understanding of both radio history and American cultural history. Doerksen lays out precisely how stations and entrepreneurs previously dismissed as marginal to the emerging corporate consolidation actually helped shape American broadcasting with their innovations." Daniel Czitrom, author of *Media and the American Mind: From Morse to McLuhan* "Well-written. . . . Provides a wealth of information regarding the social context of early radio. . . . The concluding chapter reveals Doerksen's brilliance in summarizing the major issues that faced audiences during the 1930s." *Journal of Radio Studies* "A freshly written, accessible, and engaging tour across the dial of early American radio. Doerksen successfully combines archival material and various obscure sources to reconstruct the programming of these long-forgotten stations." *Technology and Culture* "A vigorous and well-documented revisionist argument . . . subtly hilarious . . . elegantly researched and written." *Journal of American History* "An intriguing blend of music and ad history, *American Babel* uses archives and source materials to examine stations, radio personalities, and their social influence." *Midwest Book* "A vivid and exciting detective tale. . . . An important intervention into the scholarly debate about the origins of the American system of broadcasting." *American Historical* "This book is the secret history of everything I've always wanted to know about my own medium. I read this book hungrily, turning the pages fast." Ira Glass, host of Public Radio International's *This American Life* About the Author Clifford J. Doerksen is a film critic for *Time Out Chicago*. He earned his Ph.D. degree in history from Princeton University. Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. Preface When I began the research that led to the writing of this book my intent was to write about border radio stations, the high-powered pirates that cropped up on the southern side of the Texas-Mexico border in the 1930s to bombard the United States and Canada with hillbilly music, fundamentalist preaching, populist politics, seedy mail-order merchandising, and advertisements for quack medical treatments. The border-blasting tradition was started by Dr. John Romulus Brinkley of Kansas and Norman Baker of Iowa, pioneer broadcasters whose licenses were

among the first to be revoked by the Federal Radio Commission on the grounds that the programs their stations provided were at odds with "the public interest, convenience, and necessity." I came to this subject as a fan of the Carter Family, the seminal protocountry-music act who spent much of the 1930s making prerecorded programs to be broadcast by Brinkley's ultrapowerful border station, XERA. As I traced the careers of Baker and Brinkley back to the days before they were pushed off of the airwaves by federal regulators, however, I lost interest in the border blasters in favor of a general study of independent radio broadcasters in the 1920s, some of whom made the border pirates look fairly staid. The field, I was happy to discover, was seriously underdeveloped. Almost all of the scholarship on early broadcasting was narrowly focused on the "Big Four" corporate players: Westinghouse, General Electric (GE), American Telephone Telegraph (ATT), and the Radio Corporation of America (RCA). By and large the early 1920s were treated as a messy prelude to the rise and consolidation of the tidy network systems: it was a period of undifferentiated chaos to be covered as quickly and efficiently as possible in order to get to the big players and the main events in which they starred. The five hundred or so independent stations on the air at the time were generally treated as bit players, if not mere background scenery. To me, they soon came to represent something more significant. An apocryphal tradition has it that when asked why he robbed banks, the bandit Willie Sutton answered, "Because that's where the money is." Historians operate on similar principles: they gravitate toward the largest available troves of documents. As Michele Hilmes acknowledges in her *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922-1952*, there are drawbacks to this approach. Hilmes writes: "Many—the vast majority—of broadcast hours are lost forever. What does exist tends to privilege the dominant and centralized sources. I have drawn heavily on NBC records for this study because they make up a very large proportion of what has been preserved and is accessible to the historian. Records and accounts of the larger and more successful stations, programs, and performers are more likely to survive than those that actually may be of more interest to the post-structuralist scholar: those small stations providing a different service to a more marginalized audience, those programs deemed of specialized interest or least appeal whose scripts and records have long been destroyed, limited regional and local broadcasts, those efforts that never made it to realization precisely because they went against the grain of dominant practice. Much research needs to be done in these lesser-known areas to bring them to other scholars' attention and to reflect more fully our diverse and conflicted media heritage." In a sense, this book is my attempt to fulfill the research mandate proposed by Hilmes except that I am not a poststructuralist and I take issue with her assumption that small stations were necessarily marginal. I have found, to the contrary, that many of these were among the most successful and popular stations of the day, and that many of the commercial and cultural practices that eventually came to dominate and define American broadcasting originated among them. Obviously the profiles of independent broadcast pioneers in this book are just as dependent on documentary sources as any previous history was (I have heard the recorded voice of just one of the broadcasters profiled here, William K. Henderson of station KWKH, Shreveport, Louisiana). Turning up information on these largely neglected stations was partly a matter of persistence and partly one of dumb luck. Had I not spent a week in the basement of Christ Community Church in Zion, Illinois, I could not have reconstructed the story of WCBD, a phenomenally popular midwestern station dedicated to gospel music and flat-earth geophysics. But I also got luckier than any historian can reasonably hope to be when I met Maureen Walthers, editor and publisher of the *Times Newsweekly*, a neighborhood newspaper in Queens, New York, formerly known as the *Ridgewood Times*. I telephoned Ms. Walthers in 2001 to ask her if she knew where I might look for papers relating to WHN, a hugely influential vaudevillian radio station founded eighty years earlier by her predecessor at the helm of the *Ridgewood Times*, George Schubel. "Oh, I've got a whole box of papers from the radio station," she told me. "I was going to throw them out the last time we moved our offices, but I said to myself, 'No, you should hang on to this because someday a historian is going to come looking for them.'" The box she saved included documents that provided invaluable insight into the minds and motives of key but forgotten contributors to the commercialization of the American airwaves. Most of the papers inside were about eighty years old, but one was dated 1980. It was a short but highly informative memoir typewritten by WHN's original engineer, William Boettcher, who was just a few years out of his teens when the station took to the air in 1921. In 1980 the octogenarian Boettcher apparently felt a need to record and register his participation in what he correctly saw as unheralded historic events. Walthers was unable to tell me how Boettcher's brief testament found its way into the business papers of George Schubel. Probably, she reckoned, he simply mailed it to the *Times Newsweekly* office and some thoughtful person dropped it into the box. The flipside to the story of the fluke preservation of George Schubel's papers and Boettcher's memoir is my distant brush with the recovery of equivalent files of another New York station, WHAP, which in 1925 presented itself to the city as a nonprofit broadcaster dedicated to the highest cultural and civic values, but which was actually a propaganda front for a rich, racist, ultraconservative cult of heretical Christian Scientists. In 1998 I met the daughter of WHAP's primary announcer, Franklin Ford. It turned out that I had discovered a lot about her father's life that she had never known. "He was known as 'the Strange One' in our family," she told me. "He was always very secretive. We knew he had some sort of background in radio, but that was all. Although as I grew older I did learn enough about his politics to think they were repugnant—he was a big admirer of Joe McCarthy, for instance." She further recalled that a filing cabinet full of her father's radio-related papers had sat unopened for decades at an industrial plant owned by her family, but that it

had been hauled away to the dump some eight or ten years earlier. Finding that filing cabinet became the subject of a recurring dream that still visits me from time to time. The first purpose of this book is to provide a sense of what these forgotten radio stations were like and what they meant to the people who listened to them. But in the course of my research, I kept bumping into material relating to the issue of broadcast advertising that seemed at odds with a premise common to several recent contributions to the historiography of early radio. Much of this literature treats the commercialization of the American airwaves as something engineered from above by corporate interests and consolidated in the face of universal public resistance. But the longer I looked at the independent stations and their audiences, the clearer it became that attitudes toward broadcast advertising were strongly conditioned by socioeconomic standing. Antipathy toward commercialization was strongest among the well off and well educated. People lower down the economic scale minded it less or even liked it. It was the latter class of listener that was served by the independent stations, who were thoroughly and brazenly commercialized at a time when corporate broadcasters were eschewing advertising in the name of good taste and high cultural ideals. In other words, commercial broadcasting originated at a grassroots level, as a populist deviation from polite corporate practice. In airing this thesis in various forums over the years, I have found that it strikes different people in different ways. A minority embraces the idea that hostility to broadcast advertising was essentially bourgeois as intuitively, even self-evidently correct; another minority vehemently rejects it as a slur on the virtue of the working classes and a justification of the cultural crimes of present-day media conglomerates. I hope that readers belonging to the first category will not find my frequent returns to matters of class redundant, and that those belonging to the second will keep an open mind in relation to all the various proofs I have piled up.