

African-Americans in Local Broadcasting: Kansas City, 1922-1982¹

by
William James Ryan

This year is the 70th anniversary of commercial broadcasting in Kansas City. From the beginning, African-Americans have been a part of this history. This paper examines the first 60 years of that part of this history.

Little attention has been given to local broadcasting in the study of radio and television in the United States. Studies range from the historical development of broadcasting to the social and psychological effects of electronic media on individual users. Issues of access to the media industry rarely mention local stations. Issues of race, gender, vocation, and cultural values in program content are almost exclusively based on nationally syndicated or network television programs.

Yet, the Federal Radio Commission (1927-1934) and the Federal Communications Commission (1934 to present) have always advocated the value of local broadcasting. Indeed, the Communications Act of 1934 contains that famous dictum for each licensee to program "in the public interest, convenience and necessity." Because all stations are licensed to serve a specific local or regional geographic population, it is important that local broadcasting be examined in the same way as has the national industry. For this reason, this study focuses on local broadcasting in Kansas City, one of the first major cities in the U.S. to develop a strong commercial broadcasting industry.

The thesis of this paper is that although relatively few African-Americans have been Kansas City broadcasters, Kansas City broadcasting has been an industry which has always had opportunities for persons of talent without regard for the usual racial, ethnic, and religious biases found in most other American industries and institutions. It would be a fallacy to make the hasty generalization that opportunities were available uniformly at all radio and TV stations in the industry throughout the 60 years, just as it would be the same fallacy to assume that there were no opportunities at all. Conditions were shaped by individual stations' programming needs and by the persons who made these decisions.

This, then, is a brief chronological history of representative roles played by African-Americans in Kansas City broadcasting, from the beginning of the city's commercial radio in 1922 to 1982.

¹ This paper is derived from a presentation to the 77th Annual Meeting of the Association for the Study of Afro-American Life and History, Kansas City, Missouri, October 9, 1992.

The method of this study is to identify representative individual examples of black broadcasters on Kansas City radio and television stations from 1922 to 1982 and to describe what may have been significant about their work. No attempt is made to document every individual.

Primary sources are interviews from the Kansas City Broadcasting Oral Histories² in the *William James Ryan (1940-) Papers* (KC0457) and the *Kansas City Jazz Oral History Collection* (KC0012); newspaper accounts, broadcast station promotional material and other contemporary published material and photographs. Selected secondary sources are used which contain original interviews and other material relevant to the study.

There is no published history of Kansas City broadcasting. Jazz histories and one trade book provide some first-person accounts. Otherwise, no published history of Kansas City has been found which mentions broadcasting.

The term broadcaster in this study refers broadly to a person who works for a radio or television station licensed by the federal government. Examples could be a station manager, an engineer, and an announcer. The term talent is used for a person who performs on radio or television, but who may or may not be an employee of the station, and, indeed, may not even be reimbursed financially for the performance. Both broadcasters and talent are included in this study because both indicate access to the broadcast media of mass communication.

BACKGROUND

The story begins with the first year of commercial radio in Kansas City, when the first five radio stations were licensed by the Department of Commerce between March and October, 1922.³

The first two were licensed to radio parts companies: WOQ, to Western Radio Company, and WPE, to Central Radio Supply Company. They promoted their own businesses and broadcast weather and market reports as well as occasional local musical talent. The Kansas City Star Co. used WOQ's experimental license, 9XAB, to sponsor concerts as early as February. WPE was run by Arthur B. Church, who had recently moved to the area to build a station for the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (RLDS) world headquarters in Independence, Missouri.

The third station, WHB, was owned by one Emory J. Sweeney and licensed to the Sweeney Automotive School, a trade school located across from Union Station. It was on air by May, also broadcasting weather and market reports as well as music by local dance orchestras. The next two stations were licensed to newspapers: In June *The Kansas City Star* had its own license, for WDAF, located in the Star Building; by October, WMAJ

² The Kansas City Broadcasting Oral History Collection (KCBOHC) and the Kansas City Broadcasting Oral History Project (KCBOHP) created by William James Ryan, then Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication at Rockhurst University, may now be found in the *William James Ryan (1940-) Papers* (KC0457), at the Western Historical Manuscript Collection-Kansas City (WHMC-KC).

³ For more on the pioneer Kansas City stations see: William J. Ryan, "Which Came First?—65 Years of Kansas City Broadcasting," *Missouri Historical Review* LXXXII [82] (July 1988): 408-423.

was licensed to the *Drovers Telegram*, a newspaper for cattle ranchers, located in the Kansas City Stock Yards. It, too, carried weather and market reports and had its own house band.

Station ownership is important for at least two reasons relevant to this history. In those early days, radio was a means of promoting the goals of the licensee. There was no advertising as we know it today. Rather, a station was identified with a particular business or institution which, in turn, financed the entire operation. Programs were designed to serve the needs of the owner. Most radio talent received no pay but were glad to get the free publicity on this exciting new mass medium.

Publicity for programs was generally done by newspaper or magazine and was a matter left to individual stations. Such printed matter is the only form of extant material about the early days of radio. WDAF had daily coverage in the *Kansas City Star* and *Times*. But, no other station in the city was mentioned in these newspapers. WPE eventually became KLDS, the broadcasting arm of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, so received publicity in RLDS church publications. WOQ and WHB had no regular publications of their own, but got publicity from the *Star's* only daily competitor, the *Kansas City Journal* and the *Kansas City Post*. As morning and evening counterparts of the *Star* and the *Times*, they gladly promoted stations which were competitors of the *Star's* station. In the competitive nature of the era, WOQ, WPE and WHB all were promoted by the *Journal* and the *Post* and it is from these two papers we know how African-American's participated in early Kansas City broadcasting.

THE PIONEERS

Emory Sweeney was an energetic Irish Catholic who moved to Kansas City in the early part of this century. His trade school was in full operation during World War I. He was not a part of the Old Guard Kansas City business establishment and in many ways seems to have been bold enough to challenge the status quo. His radio station, WHB, like the others, had no regular program schedule at first, although we know it had a women's show, a dance band and weather and market reports. It is not until August 1922, when WHB got a powerful new transmitter, that the *Sunday Journal-Post* began reporting WHB programming. And it was in August that probably the first broadcast by African-American artists on Kansas City radio occurred.

Indeed, one of the pioneer radio orchestras on WHB was Tutt's Colored Male Quartette and Jazz Orchestra, led by R.L. Tutt, who played banjo and sang second bass. Instrumentalists in the orchestra were Leroy Dennis, piano; Bob Williams, sax; W.L. Dawson, trombone; Ike Franklin, drums; and Walter Williams, mandolin and banjo. In addition to Tutt, vocalists were Robert Armstrong, first tenor; George Walker, second tenor; and J.W. Spalding, bass. Among their repertoire were such titles as "Song of India," "All or Nothing At All," "Massa's in de Cold, Cold Ground," and an original composition, "Forever Thine."⁴

⁴ *Kansas City Journal*, 10 August 1922.

Not much is known about this group. But it is presumed they were heard nationwide on WHB, as all Kansas City stations except WMAJ were picked up by listeners across the country in those early years.

What may be notable about WHB in those days is that from its first year its programming had the most diverse cosmopolitan list of artists of any station in the city. Not only did Tutt's Colored Male Quartette and Jazz orchestra perform that first summer, but WHB broadcast music by native Hawaiians, had the first women's show in Kansas City, carried religious services from a variety of different Protestant and Catholic churches and included Jewish talent on WHB during the Sweeney years—and this at a time when the *Kansas City Journal* ran a page-one headline reading:

K.K.K. Enters
State Politics

Emory Sweeney was a bold man in many ways.

Conversely, no other station seems to have included such sociologically diverse talent.

The 1920s were the years of experimental programming, particularly before national networks emerged in 1927. Local stations relied on local musicians and traveling artists who performed at local downtown theaters. It would not have been unusual for other African-American musicians to have appeared on WHB and perhaps WDAF in those years. WPE, which became KLDS in 1924, relied almost exclusively on members of the RLDS church until 1927, when Arthur Church bought it back and changed the call letters to KMBC. After that, this station and Church himself were notable for their devotion to local talent, including perhaps the most famous K.C. jazz musicians.

Two other stations emerged in the mid-20s which figure into this chronology: WLBF, the first station licensed to Kansas City, Kansas, the predecessor to KCKN (today's KFKE), and KWKC, which eventually became KCMO. On these stations, local musical groups performed for the publicity and usually for 15-minute segments whenever they could book the time. WLBF and KWKC, underfinanced and with weak transmissions and no network affiliation, relied heavily on free talent and, consequently, were stations for aspiring newcomers to test their talents.

KWKC became the brunt of jokes as it struggled through the Depression. When nationally famous band leader Ben Bernie came to town he appeared at the Main Street Theatre with artists sent by local radio stations. Bernie quipped: "WHB, KMBC, and WDAF each sent me some radio talent. Even KWKC sent a phonograph record." But quick-witted columnist Sam Glass responded in the *Kansas City Jewish News*: "The gag...is on Ben, for the four colored lads from WDAF were regular artists on KWKC until a few weeks ago when the station changed management. They are protégés of Al Crocker, station manager of the hundred-watter."⁵ This is one case of a group of black artists beginning on a small station, being discovered and moving up to a stronger one.

⁵ Sam Glass, "Mikrobs," *Kansas City Jewish News*, 17 November 1933.

It indicates that at least one unnamed group of African-American talent appeared on both KWKC and WDAF.

THE JAZZ AGE

In the 1930s, Kansas City became notorious for its wide-open night life. Jazz clubs were numerous throughout the downtown area and east to Vine Street. Mary Lou Williams, pianist for Andy Kirk's *Clouds of Joy*, remembered that for jazz musicians K.C. was not typical of American Cities during the Depression: "I found Kansas City to be a heavenly city—music everywhere in the Negro section of town, and fifty or more cabarets rocking on Twelfth and Eighteenth streets." Corruption had entered the police department and booze was no problem for many local nightspots. "Now at this time, which was still Prohibition," she explained, "Kansas City was under Tom Pendergast's control. Most night spots were run by politicians and hoodlums and the town was wide open for drinking, gambling and pretty much every form of vice. Work was plentiful for musicians, though some of the employers were tough people."⁶

A popular programming technique for stations during the city's hottest jazz era was to set up remote broadcasts at these local nightclubs and send the program over a dedicated telephone line back to the station for broadcast. It was with such pickups that black musicians again gained air time on Kansas City radio. One show, "Vine Street Varieties," was typical of these remote broadcasts. Because Vine Street was the heart of K.C. jazz nightclubs, this almost certainly was a program of African-American talent.

NBC and CBS networks now dominated nation-wide broadcasts and began moving away from live dance bands and toward radio dramas and comedy shows. At the network level, African-Americans had less opportunity than on local stations to perform on live broadcasts.⁷ It was on local stations, not networks, therefore, where live talent found access to the radio waves.

The two most successful Kansas City stations in the '30s and '40s were KMBC, owned by Arthur Church's Midland Broadcasting Company, and WDAF, licensed to the Kansas City Star Company. Both were network affiliates, KMBC with the Columbia chain and WDAF with NBC Red. Both had access to newspaper publicity. Both had successful talent pools and both made money.

Of the two, Church's KMBC spent the most effort developing local talent. KMBC was said to have operated like flagship stations of the national networks, and, indeed, originated network programs for CBS.⁸ KMBC even had its own booking agency and was the only Kansas City radio station with its own recording studio. WDAF, however, relied more heavily on NBC and spent less money and time on local talent.

⁶ Nate Shapiro and Nat Henthoff, *Hear Me Talkin' To Ya'*, 287-288.

⁷ The few acting roles on networks open to black actors were for stereotypical roles created by white producers. See: Erik Barnouw, *The Golden Web—A History of Broadcasting in the United States, 1933-1953*, 110-111.

⁸ Alvin Young, Interview, July 10, 1991 in *William James Ryan (1940-) Papers* (KC0457), WHMC-KC.

WHB, probably the third most popular station of the day, relied almost exclusively on local talent. Without network affiliation until 1936, and allowed to broadcast only from sunrise to sunset, WHB scrambled to find popular talent. All three stations had their own staff musicians and studio organs.

KMBC's Arthur Church also was instrumental in founding First National Television School, a leading technical training school. As part of the school's on-hands training approach, it operated not only the city's first television station, W9AXL-TV, but also an experimental high fidelity radio station, W9XBY, which broadcast nationwide without the aid of networks.

It was on KMBC and W9XBY, and to a lesser degree on WHB, that African-American talent had the most successful opportunities during this period. And at least two stations, W9XBY and KCKN (WLBF's successor) broadcast worship services from African-American churches during the late thirties.

The *KMBC Blue Book*, picturing the station's most popular radio talent of the 1930s, included the Bennie Moten Orchestra in a photo taken at the Fairyland Park pavilion.⁹ And, it was in KMBC's recording studio that Mary Lou Williams first joined Andy Kirk's Clouds of Joy for a recording session with Brunswick records.

When Kirk's regular pianist didn't show up for an audition session, Mary Lou Williams filled in. When it came time for the recording session, Brunswick's Jack Knapp specifically asked for her to return. "He had thought her solo work one of the best features," wrote one jazz historian. "Thus began Mary Lou's thirteen-year tenure with the band and one of the most distinguished careers among women who have played jazz."¹⁰

But it was W9XBY which had the biggest claim to fame in the promotion of local jazz musicians. Bus Moten's orchestra was a regular feature on W9XBY. But the best-remembered and biggest success was the Kansas City orchestra of Count Basie.

Bill Basie, the New Jersey native temporarily stranded in Kansas City, played piano with the famous Bennie Moten orchestra. Basie's first broadcasts were probably with the Moten band at Fairyland Park over KMBC. Basie temporarily took over the Moten band after Bennie's unfortunate and untimely death in 1935, but soon formed his own group and played at a number of night spots, including regular gigs at the Reno Club, 12th and Cherry.

During this time, Basie also dropped into Jenkins Music Store downtown where customers could practice on the store's organ. "That was right down my alley," he said in his autobiography, "and that's how I met one of the VIPs at WHB radio station. He heard me playing and came over and asked me if I would like to have a little organ

⁹ *Blue Book of KMBC*. Kansas City, Mo.: August 1931, 40.

¹⁰ Ross Russell, *Jazz Style in Kansas City and the Southwest*, 164-165.

program on radio in the afternoons, and of course I said that would be beautiful, or something like that, and that was how I started broadcasting as a single.”¹¹

The best-known Basie broadcasts at that time, however, were late-night remotes over W9XBY, heard throughout the nation wherever the electromagnetic spectrum would carry it. Basie later recalled,

*You wouldn't actually know when you were going on. I guess they just liked to catch you when everything was just like it was. In those days it was no problem for them to put you on the air, because you didn't have to program anything ahead of time. They'd just come in there and pick you up, and you might be on for an hour or so any night. It was always late at night. There was no contract or anything like that. It was all arranged through the Reno, and we were just happy to be doing it, because it was good advertisement for the club and for us too.*¹²

Basie on W9XBY reportedly was heard all over the Midwest, much of the South and on the East Coast.

Basie himself gave conflicting stories of the origin of the name Count Basie. One version quoted him saying,

*Contrary to several conflicting stories, I got the name 'Count' right in Kansas City in 1936 while at the Reno Club. I was known as Bill Basie at the time. One night while we were broadcasting, the announcer called me to the microphone with those usual few words of introduction. He commented that Bill Basie was a rather ordinary name, and further that there were a couple of well-known band leaders named Earl Hines and Duke Ellington. Then he said, "Bill, I think I'll call you Count Basie from now on. Is that all right with you?" I thought he was kidding, shrugged my shoulders and replied, "Okay." From then on it was 'Count' Basie and I never did lose that nickname.*¹³

His other version says he already called himself Count before this but that the W9XBY announcer came up with the name “Barons of Rhythm” to go with Count.¹⁴

Basie also credited a W9XBY announcer with the motivation to name his theme song “One O’clock Jump,” the tune most often associated with Basie’s band.¹⁵

It was over W9XBY that two far-away listeners who would have significant impact first responded to the Basie sound. One was Lester Young, who left Chicago to be Basie’s tenor sax player, giving Basie just the sound he wanted.¹⁶ The other was John Hammond, *Down Beat* magazine music critic whose talent discoveries are legend (Bessie Smith, Benny Goodman, Bruce Springsteen, etc.).

¹¹ When asked about this in 1977, Basie seemed reluctant to add any details except to confirm that his WHB solo show was in the afternoon. Count Basie, Interview by Nathan Pearson and Howard Litwak, February 27, 1977. *Kansas City Jazz Oral History Collection* (KC0012), WHMC-KC.)

¹² Count Basie, *Good Morning Blues: the Autobiography of Count Basie as told to Albert Murray*, 160-161.

¹³ Shapiro and Henthoff, *Hear Me Talkin' To Ya'*, 300-301.

¹⁴ Basie, *Good Morning Blues*, 171.

¹⁵ Shapiro and Henthoff, *Hear Me Talkin' To Ya'*, 301.

¹⁶ Shapiro and Henthoff, *Hear Me Talkin' To Ya'*, 159-161.

Listening on his car radio in New York one evening, Hammond heard Basie from the Reno Club on W9XBY. Unable to get a response to mailed inquiries, Hammond traveled to Kansas City to hear Basie at the Reno Club in May 1936.¹⁷ Basie recalled seeing him again at KMBC, where Basie performed on the studio organ. Hammond recommended the Basie broadcast to Benny Goodman who picked up W9XBY on a portable radio in Chicago.¹⁸ Goodman recommended the Basie band to MCA for a recording contract and his fame spread from there—all starting with radio broadcasts from Kansas City.¹⁹

Basie recalled that W9XBY broadcast other Kansas City jazz musicians, including Joe Turner and Pete Johnson at Piney Brown's Sunset Club.²⁰ And Mary Lou Williams remembered that jazz pianist Art Tatum had a Kansas City radio show in addition to his regular club bookings.²¹ Bus Moten's orchestra was on W9XBY in fall 1935.²²

However, broadcast of local bands, live on location, decreased after W9XBY changed from an experimental station to the commercial KXBY and then changed management. A few stations were beginning to play recorded music at this time and, together with network dominance, local band shows waned on Kansas City radio by World War II. When the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers (ASCAP) raised the rates radio stations had to pay to play records of their artists, the broadcasters in the National Association of Broadcasters founded Broadcast Music, Inc. (BMI) as a separate performance rights licensor. Because ASCAP had all the major pop musicians, BMI was left with less popular artists and music not yet popular with mass audiences, namely country and western music, then called hillbilly music, and rhythm and blues, sometimes called race music. However, as radio stations began playing BMI records, and thereby introducing black R&B music to a broader public, there was less demand for local talent on live programs.

At least two stations apparently broadcast worship services from churches with African-American memberships. David Butler, until his death in 1990, the announcer of worship services at Metropolitan Baptist Church, got his start on KCKN announcing the Highland Avenue Baptist Church for the Rev. C.S. Stamps, from 1939 to 1941, when he entered the Army.²³ And, W9XBY broadcast services from the Metropolitan Spiritualist Church.

POST-WAR: FROM LIVE PERFORMERS TO RECORD SPINNERS

After the war, independent stations competing with network affiliates could not keep up with the strong programming of situation comedies, soap operas, action-adventure shows, and other top live entertainment. So, some like KCKN, Kansas City,

¹⁷ Basie, *Good Morning Blues*, 165.; Russell, *Jazz Style in Kansas City and the Southwest*, 138.)

¹⁸ Shapiro and Henthoff, *Hear Me Talkin' To Ya'*, 300.

¹⁹ Count Basie interview in *American Masters: John Hammond—from Bessie Smith to Bruce Springsteen*.

²⁰ Basie, *Good Morning Blues*, 160.

²¹ Shapiro and Henthoff, *Hear Me Talkin' To Ya'*, 294.

²² "Radio Schedule," *Kansas City Journal-Post*, 19 September 1935.

²³ David L. Butler and Chuck Moore, Joint interview, December 31, 1986 in *William James Ryan (1940-) Papers (KC0457)*, WHMC-KC.

Kansas, and KIMO, Independence, Missouri, resorted to a steady diet of recorded music, played by announcers with lively personalities.

One of the first and most popular Kansas City record-playing announcers—or “disc jockeys” as they later became known—was Lawrence Barry, known as the “King Spinner,” on KIMO.²⁴ Herschel Connor was his contemporary at KCKN, which had the biggest staff of pop music announcers in Kansas City. It is not known which began first but together Barry and Connor were the first black DJs in Kansas City.²⁵

Barry was hired October 17, 1948, by KIMO owner Craig Siegfried. His rhythm ‘n’ blues show on the thousand-watt station made him perhaps the best known music announcer on area radio among teenagers of all races and social status. His may have been the first R&B show in Kansas City in the post-war era, setting an early precedent for pop music shows aimed at teens throughout the metropolitan area.

Ed Harvey, long-time Kansas City record distributor who knew most all local disc jockeys of the fifties, sixties, and seventies, confirmed that Berry set the pace for Kansas City R&B record sales at the time. Harvey’s first job was in 1949 as a branch manager for Milner Record sales, a distributor of independent labels, mostly rhythm and blues, and jazz. Promoting records at retail record stores and at radio stations, Harvey had a finger on the pulse of popular music in the city. What was popular then, he said, were “a lot of rhythm and blues records, a lot of pop records and country records.”

Harvey, who was white, remembered growing up in Oklahoma where radio stations did not play the music he and his friends liked best—Fletcher Henderson, Count Basie and Duke Ellington—so they scraped up their pennies to buy their records. He said that most Kansas City radio stations would not play records by these artists either. A WDAF staff member in the 1940s recalled playing an Ella Fitzgerald recording, only to be reprimanded the next day by the program director who told him never to play her recordings again.²⁶

Harvey remembered Barry, “The King Spinner,” doing a two-hour show Saturday afternoons at KIMO. “And he had a very good local listening audience. When he would play a new record the retail stores which sold black music would get on the phone and call us or call the other distributor.”²⁷ It was a time when R&B music was popular among teens across racial and economic identities and prepared the way for the Top 40 radio format which began in 1954, and rock ‘n’ roll, a few years later.

At the same time, in Leavenworth, Kansas, station KCLO introduced two new broadcasters to the region. Although KCLO was not significant to Kansas City broadcasting at the time, these broadcasters would be. Harvey arrived in Kansas City a little over a year after KCLO signed on and remembered: “Two guys named Andrew Carter and Ed Pate came to town...and they bought two hours [of radio time] daily every

²⁴ William J. Curtis, *A Rich Heritage: A Black History of Independence, Missouri*, 1985.

²⁵ David L. Butler and Chuck Moore, Joint interview, December 31, 1986.

²⁶ Harold Glazer, Interview, June 5, 1985 in *William James Ryan (1940-) Papers* (KC0457), WHMC-KC.

²⁷ Ed Harvey, Interview, October 11, 1986 in *William James Ryan (1940-) Papers* (KC0457), WHMC-KC.

afternoon, remote from KCLO, Leavenworth. And they broadcast to the black population of Kansas City. And these guys really sold records for us, for the distributors." Harvey knew he was one of the first to give them records to play. "They did a tremendous job promoting what they came to offer," said Harvey, "music for the black population of this area."²⁸

Meanwhile, station KPRS in suburban Olathe, Kansas, was struggling unsuccessfully to survive. It was first licensed to the Johnson County Broadcasting Corporation at 1590 kilocycles and began broadcasting Friday, July 22, 1949. It generated little advertising income and consequently lasted barely over three years.²⁹

To the rescue came a partnership consisting of husband-and-wife Ed and Psyche Pate and Andrew R. "Skip" Carter, who applied for and received the construction permit for KPRS, the first legal step toward acquiring a Federal Communications Commission license.

Born in Boston, Carter was a World War II veteran and attended Savannah State College, Savannah, Georgia. In 1947 he received his FCC radio license following study at the RCA School of Electronics. He was a radio engineer in West Virginia and Chicago before coming to Kansas City.³⁰ Ed Pate came to Kansas City after receiving his MBA degree from the University of Chicago. He began in radio brokering time for KCLO. His first advertiser, Wholesome Bread, sponsored his two-hour show which soon expanded to four hours.³¹

The Pate-Carter group was a privately owned corporation with each of the three majority owners holding equal shares. The name of the new licensee was Twin Cities Advertising Agency.³² They paid the Olathe group \$40,000 for the station, including the tower and transmitter which was moved on a flat-bed truck to a site near Kansas City's Municipal Stadium.³³

KPRS went back on air November 2, 1952, as the first black-owned station in Missouri.³⁴

Although some locals have believed that KPRS was either the first or second commercial station owned by African-Americans in the U.S., stations in Atlanta and

²⁸ Ed Harvey, Interview, October 11, 1986.

²⁹ Murray Nolte, Interview, May 29, 1986 in *William James Ryan (1940-) Papers* (KC0457), WHMC-KC.

³⁰ Carter died in Fort Lauderdale, FL, January 2, 1988. ("Skip' Carter, KPRS owner dies," *Kansas City Times*, 4 January, 1988: C9.)

³¹ David L. Butler and Chuck Moore. Joint interview, December 31, 1986.

³² *Broadcasting Yearbook*, 1954.

³³ David L. Butler and Chuck Moore, Joint interview, December 31, 1986; Michael L. Carter, Interview notes, June 25, 1991 in *William James Ryan (1940-) Papers* (KC0457), WHMC-KC.

³⁴ KPRS was followed closely by KATZ, and KWK, St. Louis. ("The Role of the Negro in Missouri History," 31.)

Cincinnati were older.³⁵ Michael Carter, Skip Carter's grandson, who became vice president of the business at age 18 and is now president, clarified that it was the first black station west of the Mississippi. Mildred Carter was quoted in 1987 (when the AM station's call letters had changed to KPRT), it is "the oldest continuous-operating black-owned station in America...."³⁶

The Kansas City version of KPRS was first located at 2814 E. 23rd Street. The transmitter was housed in a building which Michael Carter remembered looked like "a parking lot toll booth." "One day the tower fell down," he said, "and my grandfather strung a line from the transmitter building to the top of the old Municipal Stadium so the station could continue transmitting until the tower was rebuilt."³⁷

David C. Butler and Chuck Moore were two early KPRS announcers. Butler returned to Kansas City after the war looking for radio work. He filled in for Lawrence Barry at KIMO, and attended the Pathfinder Radio School for announcers. He later had his own R&B show on KIMO. Moore, a Topeka native, attended Washburn University, then worked in a Topeka sound recording studio, where his boss told him that he would never make it in radio because "no station would hire a Negro."³⁸

When Moore began at KPRS in December 1952, Ed Pate announced the morning show, followed by Butler from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m., and Jimmy Jones in the afternoon. Moore recalled that in those days programming for urban blacks was called "Specialized Programming" and not very popular. Butler also served as KPRS news director, the first African-American to hold this position in Kansas City. KPRS eventually used the Associated Press news wire and was one of the few Kansas City stations with mobile news cruisers with two-way radios for direct reports back to the station.³⁹

THE SIXTIES

The sixties were filled with excitement, some glorious and hopeful, bringing long-over-due social and cultural change; some turbulent and tragic, bringing destruction and the dashing of hope.

Unfortunately, KPRS no longer had a news director or its mobile news cruisers of the previous decade and was ill-equipped for reporting when civil disorder erupted in Kansas City following the assassination of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in Atlanta.

Neil Poindexter, then in the insurance business but with more interest in radio, happened to be at KPRS the day of Dr. King's funeral. "The program director of KPRS was a woman by the name of Millie Carter," he explained.

³⁵ Frank W. Johnson, Jr., gives Rufus P. Turner's amateur license, 3LF, for Washington, D.C., as the first radio station licensed to a black broadcaster in the U.S. (Frank W. Johnson, Jr. "African-American Pioneers in Amateur and Commercial Radio," 6.)

³⁶ Barry Garron, "KPRS-FM gets ready to rejoin ratings battle," *Kansas City Star*, 5 May 1987: 2C.

³⁷ Michael L. Carter, Interview notes, June 25, 1991.

³⁸ David L. Butler and Chuck Moore, Joint interview, December 31, 1986.

³⁹ David L. Butler and Chuck Moore, Joint interview, December 31, 1986.

She came down the stairs in a frenzy and she said, "They're burning and they're shooting and we're the only black radio station in town and it's happening in our neighborhoods and we can't tell the people what's going on because we only have two DJs on duty, one is on FM and one is on AM. NEIL! Can you operate a tape recorder?" I said, "Yes, ma'am." So I put my insurance book down and picked up a KPRS jacket and hit the streets covering the events of that day. I was tear-gassed twice, once in front of City Hall and once in the basement of a church where a KPRS DJ had taken a lot of kids who could have caused trouble.⁴⁰

Many young people began hitting the streets following televised coverage of Dr. King's funeral. "Now we're talking hundreds of kids who had left school," Poindexter recalled, "...and were just stirring around on the street between City Hall and the County Courthouse, downtown." As police became tense, a popular KPRS DJ tried to redirect the teens' energy. Poindexter recalled:

John L. Frasier, a DJ, grabbed a microphone on the steps of City Hall and said, "I don't know about you. But that WALL of policemen over there, with flack jackets, masks, riot guns, and tear gas guns frighten me. I think I want to party."⁴¹

Many of the kids started to follow him to the church but apparently some in the crowd made obscene gestures at the police, who responded by firing tear gas canisters into the crowd. As Poindexter remembered, "...all hell broke loose." Eventually, however, Frasier did get most of the teenagers to the church where music and hamburgers and soft drinks were ready. But hooligans outside, not a part of the high school crowd, taunted the police, who then rushed the church, pumping tear gas into the social hall, destroying Frasier's attempt to calm the situation. After that he had no more control and the next 48 hours in Kansas City brought out the National Guard to enforce a metropolitan-wide curfew. Frasier appeared that night on a WDAF-TV panel to assess the situation.

Poindexter's reports were the only ones on KPRS, all directly from the scene, telephoned to the station. He brought back a tape which was used on the next day's broadcast. He followed armed personnel carriers into the most dangerous areas. He felt that he could get closer to the situation than his white counterparts at other stations, many of whom, he recalled, were being harassed by members of the black community. "When I came back to the station that night they offered me a job—in sales!" he exclaimed. His dislike of sales was what was driving him out of insurance. "But I said, O.K., because I had been told in visits to other stations that the toughest thing about this business is getting in it and any opportunity to get in, take it."⁴²

He later became an on-air announcer and disc jockey and later moved to KMBZ, a Bonneville International station.

⁴⁰ Neil Poindexter, Interview, January 11, 1987 in *William James Ryan (1940-) Papers* (KC0457), WHMC-KC.

⁴¹ Neil Poindexter, Interview, January 11, 1987.

⁴² Neil Poindexter, Interview, January 11, 1987.

Meanwhile, commercial television had begun in Kansas City. WDAF-TV, Channel 4, licensed to the Kansas City Star Company, was the first Kansas City TV station in the modern era. WDAF-TV flashed on in 1949 just before the FCC's license freeze, giving Channel 4 a four-year monopoly. In that period, WDAF-TV's management staff got a head start over the rest of the field with experience and prestige. The *Star* was forced by a Justice Department anti-trust suit to divest its broadcast properties in 1958. With new owners, Bill Bates, former program director, became general manager and Walt Bodine became news director. During their tenure, WDAF-TV developed one of the strongest news operations in Kansas City television history.

A new face appeared on channel 4 newscasts August 5, 1967, as Lena Rivers Smith became the first female news reporter and the first African-American journalist on Kansas City television. First recommended by Bodine and Bill Leeds and hired by Bates, she began as an editorial writer at WDAF-TV in April 1965. Although not the first woman to work in a K.C. television news room, she was the first to go on air. "I can recall," said Bodine, "when it was an absolute article of faith among news directors and network chieftains that women could not do news. They held that women's voices were unpleasant, high pitched, and, above all, didn't seem to carry the necessary authority." Bodine credited WDAF-TV's general manager with the change. "Each of those steps was done only because a courageous general manager, Bill Bates, was willing to break fresh ground in TV news and to shatter old customs and barriers. We proposed the changes. He okayed them and they came to pass."⁴³

Rivers Smith was hired through normal hiring procedures. A graduate of Kansas City's Lincoln High, Lena Rivers Smith received an English degree from Lincoln University, Jefferson City, in 1943, and attended Northwestern University during the 1947 academic year. She came to WDAF-TV as a seasoned journalist, having served the previous 15 years as society editor, crime reporter and city editor of *The Call*.

At WDAF-TV, she became respected as a general assignment on-air reporter, focusing attention on the Kansas City public school system. She developed particular interest in the development of the Kansas City Federation of Teachers union (AFL-CIO Local 601). But her news director in 1968, Ken Robinson, noted that no matter what her assignment, "She was capable of getting the human element into the story; that was her forte."⁴⁴

During her career at WDAF-TV, Rivers Smith worked tirelessly, it seems, for the cause of civil rights. She was one of 36 women in the city on the interracial, interfaith Panel of American Women, and gave frequent public speeches in support of racial integration, representing this organization. She also was a member of the Council for United Action, the NAACP, Alpha Kappa Alpha, and Theta Sigma Phi, the professional organization for women in journalism.

⁴³ Walt Bodine, "The Changes on Your Screen," *The Squire*, 25 July 1985: 8; Walt Bodine, Interview, January 15, 1987 in *William James Ryan (1940-) Papers* (KC0457), WHMC-KC; Martha Spalding, Interview, August 16, 1985 in *William James Ryan (1940-) Papers* (KC0457), WHMC-KC.

⁴⁴ "Lena Rivers Smith," obit., *Kansas City Star*, 19 November 1968.

But, at age 46, the apparently indefatigable Lena Rivers Smith suffered a heart attack and died at home November 18, 1968. In spite of her popularity and public acceptance throughout the community, in a speech shortly before her death she had said, "I was born in a segregated hospital and chances are I will be buried in a segregated cemetery. Most Americans don't realize what life is like for me. Discrimination is not a thing you can see. It's a thing I feel, like a hair or a cobweb across my face. It's distracting, degrading and destructive."⁴⁵ Her funeral at St. Augustine's Episcopal Church was attended by an interracial and interfaith audience who heard the rector, the Rev. Edward Warner, say: "By her life, Lena built bridges which brought people and classes and creeds together. If then you honor this woman and her memory, if you value her life among us, you will continue to build bridges."⁴⁶ She was buried at Blue Ridge Lawn cemetery.⁴⁷ Events which followed testify to the respect the community held for her.

The Panel of American Women established a scholarship fund in the name of Lena Rivers Smith. It was co-chaired by Mrs. Clark Murray, Jr., of Mission Hills, Kansas, and Mrs. Leonard S. Hughes, Jr., of Kansas City. It was to help black youths enter the field of journalism with a four-year college scholarship. This goal was modified so that when the first scholarships were awarded they were for students who had completed two years of college and who showed promise as journalists and evidence of financial need.

Seven days after her death the fund had \$1,000 and before Christmas it got a \$4,000 boost from the Kansas City Association of Trusts and Foundations. At about the same time, the three-judge Jackson County Court passed a resolution commending the work of Lena Rivers Smith, saying, "The whole community has lost a fine citizen." As the new year began, the Presbyterian Interracial Council gave WDAF-TV a commemorative award in her name. By February, the scholarship fund had reached \$11,000 and by April the following year the first scholarship applicants were received.⁴⁸

RADIO'S SIXTH DECADE

When the Hallmark Company's Crown Center development forced KPRS to move, KPRS moved into the new Crown Center office complex. The Carter family eventually bought out the Pate interests in the company and Skip Carter, as president of KPRS Corp., moved the station's headquarters to Florida. John Carter stayed in Kansas City as station manager.

KPRS continued with live talent until about the mid-1970s when the station became automated. KPRS added an FM license in 1963 and simulcast on two stations for a number of years until the FCC disallowed the practice for more than 50% of the time on

⁴⁵ "Lena Rivers Smith," obit., *Kansas City Star*, 19 November 1968.

⁴⁶ "Lena Rivers Smith Tribute Paid at Funeral," *Kansas City Star*, 22 November 1968.

⁴⁷ "Miss Lena Rivers Smith Rites," *Kansas City Times*, 20 November 1968.

⁴⁸ "Establish Fund as a Memorial to Newswoman," *Kansas City Star*, 19 November 1968; "Fund is Past \$1,000," *Kansas City Times*, 20 November 1960; "Lena Rivers Smith Fund Grows by \$4,000," *Kansas City Star*, 22 December 1968; "Church Group Honors Lena Rivers Smith," *Kansas City Star*, 1 January 1969; "Lena Rivers Smith Fund Donations Pass \$11,000," *Kansas City Star*, 19 February 1969; "Lena Rivers Smith Fund Scholarships are Offered," *Kansas City Star*, 12 April 1970.

jointly-owned AM-FM stations. The AM call letters changed to KPRT in 1975, leaving KPRS for the FM license. Though they continued to make money, the automation system did not always serve the community well.

An exception was in church programming on KPRT, which included several area worship services broadcast Sunday mornings from remote facilities at various churches in the metropolitan area. David Butler, notably, was the announcer at Metropolitan Baptist, whose pastor was the Rev. Wallace S. Hartsfield, and later at St. Stephen's Baptist, one of the city's largest and most prominent churches.⁴⁹

Meanwhile, Neil Poindexter moved to KMBZ, then was lured to WIP, Philadelphia, and soon had offers from National Black Network and by WMAL, Washington, D.C. "Philadelphia was a great town, but I was born and bred Midwest," he said. "The wife and I just simply decided that the East was not for us. So we packed our three little daughters and drove back to Kansas City with no prospect for a job." But KMBZ rehired him in the news department in 1973.⁵⁰

One day president Art Mortinson called Neil into his office and told him KMBZ would be opening a public affairs department and wanted Neil to head it. With some hesitancy Neil asked, "If it doesn't work can I come back to news?" Mortinson wanted it to work so Poindexter created the public affairs department which, in the course of the next eight years, received awards from community service organizations for the station's interest and involvement in the social and cultural well-being of Kansas City.

Poindexter threw himself into his work and found himself not only working a regular 9:00-5:30 day at the station but also going out to meetings and community activities, giving speeches and meeting people throughout the metropolitan area. It was literally a one-man operation, without even the benefit of secretarial help.

Six years after the public affairs program was cancelled, Poindexter sat in a KMBZ announcer's booth and reflected back on the operation.

It was an excellent operation. My role was: I was really a KMBZ/KMBR ambassador in the community. Prior to the department, these two radio stations...had no profile whatsoever in the black community.... So I made it my business to first of all become involved. I was on two or three advisory boards of community organizations. Every opportunity I received to give a talk somewhere about this business or to MC some program, I took. It started out as a job; but I became caught up in it and started enjoying what I was doing. It became more than a job.⁵¹

⁴⁹ In recent years, when Michael Carter came to Kansas City from the company's Florida headquarters to become station manager, KPRT and KPRS again hired disc jockeys and announcers for live shows and became more visible and active in the community. By April, 1992, KPRS ranked fourth among listeners in the Arbitron Company's ratings survey of 24 commercial stations in the Kansas City market. It had its best winter ratings in ten years and moved to new studios in south Kansas City.

⁵⁰ Neil Poindexter, Interview, January 11, 1987.

⁵¹ Neil Poindexter, Interview, January 11, 1987.

Poindexter's on-air show, "Assignment Mid-America," Sundays 6-10 p.m., was a talk show on community issues. "It was fast," he recalled. "You'd open up the phone for questions of the guests that had something maybe a little controversial, or any comment whatsoever. We let people talk. I enjoyed that." It won the second annual Jim Monroe Award issued by the K.C. Jaycees, named after the late KCMO news director. The show was so successful the station manager renamed it "The Neil Poindexter Show." It, too, won awards.⁵²

Through his community contacts, Poindexter became the Kansas City broadcaster to whom the other stations turned when it came time for their annual ascertainment studies, once required of radio stations. The FCC's goal was to assure local programming which was relevant to the needs and concerns of the community. For stations to maintain their licenses they needed to ascertain the interests and needs of the community by interviewing representative community leaders. Poindexter's file of his talk show guests was so extensive that when ascertainment time came, he could pull names of significant community leaders from the file and invite them to the Kansas City broadcasters' cooperative broadcasting ascertainment interviews.⁵³ That procedure lasted until about 1981, when the FCC dropped the formal ascertainment process required for radio stations.

SUMMARY

A representative sample of roles played by African-Americans on Kansas City broadcasting since the beginning of commercial radio in 1922 have included live musical talent (Tutt, Moten, Williams and Basie) in the era of live radio in the 1920s and 1930s, record playing—announcer (Barry, Conner, Butler), sales representative (Carter, Poindexter) and station ownership and management (Pate, Carter) after World War II. The latter opened more roles in on-air announcing (Moore, Johnson) and news directing (Butler). Social consciousness-raising in the 1960s resulted in expanded responsibilities in radio and television news reporting and community service programming (Poindexter, Rivers Smith) in the 1970s. Announcing church broadcasts has been perhaps the most consistent role (Butler), beginning before World War II and continuing through the period examined here.

CONCLUSION

African-American broadcasters and talent, while numerically in the minority in Kansas City broadcasting throughout the industry's history, nevertheless have been a part of that history from the beginning. In the first two decades, the participants were musicians performing on live radio and later on recordings. After World War II, a broader range of opportunities emerged. Their individual contributions have been recognized, for the most part, as notably successful.

⁵² Neil Poindexter, Interview, January 11, 1987.

⁵³ Neil Poindexter, Interview, January 11, 1987.

WORKS CITED

- American Masters: John Hammond—from Bessie Smith to Bruce Springsteen*, directed by Hart Perry. PBS, 20 August 1990; WETA-TV, 31 August 1990; CBS Music Video Enterprises, 1990.
- Barnouw, Erik. *The Golden Web—A History of Broadcasting in the United States, 1933-1953*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1968.
- Basie, Count. *Good Morning Blues: the Autobiography of Count Basie as told to Albert Murray*. New York: Random House, 1985.
- _____. Interview by Nathan Pearson and Howard Litwak, February 27, 1977. *Kansas City Jazz Oral History Collection* (KC0012), Western Historical Manuscript Collection-Kansas City (WHMC-KC).
- Blue Book of KMBC*. Kansas City, MO, August 1931.
- Bodine, Walt. "The Changes on Your Screen," *The Squire*, 25 July 1985.
- _____. Interview, January 15, 1987. *William James Ryan (1940-) Papers* (KC0457), WHMC-KC.
- Broadcasting Yearbook, 1954*.
- Butler, David L. and Chuck Moore. Joint interview, December 31, 1986, *William James Ryan (1940-) Papers* (KC0457), WHMC-KC.
- Carter, Michael L. Interview notes, June 25, 1991. *William James Ryan (1940-) Papers* (KC0457), WHMC-KC.
- "Church Group Honors Lena Rivers Smith." *Kansas City Star*, 1 January 1969.
- Curtis, William J. *A Rich Heritage: A Black History of Independence, Missouri*. Atlanta, GA: Traco Enterprises, 1985.
- "Establish Fund as a Memorial to Newswoman." *Kansas City Star*, 19 November 1968.
- "Fund is Past \$1,000." *Kansas City Times*, 20 November 1960.
- Garron, Barry. "KPRS-FM gets ready to rejoin ratings battle." *Kansas City Star*, 5 May 1987, 2C.
- Glass, Sam. "Mikrobs," *Kansas City Jewish News*, 17 November 1933.
- Glazer, Harold. Interview, June 5, 1985. *William James Ryan (1940-) Papers* (KC0457), WHMC-KC.
- Harvey, Ed. Interview, October 11, 1986. *William James Ryan (1940-) Papers* (KC0457), WHMC-KC.

Johnson, Frank W., Jr. "African-American Pioneers in Amateur and Commercial Radio." Paper presented to the American Journalism Historians Association, Lawrence, Kansas, October 3, 1992, in the *William James Ryan (1940-) Papers* (KC0457), WHMC-KC.

Kansas City Journal, 10 August 1922.

"Lena Rivers Smith," obit. *Kansas City Star*, 19 November 1968.

"Lena Rivers Smith Fund Donations Pass \$11,000." *Kansas City Star*, 19 February 1969.

"Lena Rivers Smith Fund Grows by \$4,000." *Kansas City Star*, 22 December 1968.

"Lena Rivers Smith Fund Scholarships are Offered." *Kansas City Star*, 12 April 1970.

"Lena Rivers Smith Tribute Paid at Funeral." *Kansas City Star*, 22 November 1968.

"Miss Lena Rivers Smith Rites." *Kansas City Times*, 20 November 1968.

Nolte, Murray. Interview, May 29, 1986. *William James Ryan (1940-) Papers* (KC0457), WHMC-KC.

Poindexter, Neil. Interview, January 11, 1987. *William James Ryan (1940-) Papers* (KC0457), WHMC-KC.

"Radio Schedule." *Kansas City Journal-Post*, 19 September 1935.

"The Role of the Negro in Missouri History." *Official Manual of the State of Missouri*. Jefferson City, 1971.

Russell, Ross. *Jazz Style in Kansas City and the Southwest*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971.

Ryan, William J. "Which Came First?—65 Years of Kansas City Broadcasting." *Missouri Historical Review* LXXXII [82] (July 1988): 408-423.

Shapiro, Nate and Nat Henthoff, ed. *Hear Me Talkin' To Ya'*. New York: Rinehart & Company, Inc., 1955.

"'Skip' Carter, KPRS owner dies." *Kansas City Times*, 4 January 1988: C9.

Spalding, Martha. Interview, August 16, 1985. *William James Ryan (1940-) Papers* (KC0457), WHMC-KC.

TV news item on KPRS anniversary, January 1990, videocassette recording, *William James Ryan (1940-) Papers* (KC0457), WHMC-KC.

Young, Alvin. Interview, July 10, 1991. *William James Ryan (1940-) Papers* (KC0457), WHMC-KC.