

## **Radio remotes and the nightlife of the big city.**

Tim Wall, Birmingham City University, UK.

So called 'remote' broadcasts from night clubs were a notable feature of early broadcasting practice, and they were a key characteristic of the emerging commercial stations by 1930. These were classic cases of intermedia relations between the emergent music industry, radio and the nightclub, as well as having ambiguous relationships to Hollywood film and recorded music. This paper explores the reasons for the rise of this type of broadcasting – a combination of cheap content, the popularity of jazz and dance musics, and a move to target specialist audiences in low listener dayparts – and the ways that these programmes were integrated into the cycle of daily broadcasts. By comparing late 1920s remotes with those of the early 1930s a sense of radios developments can be explored.

In many ways these remotes contained a number of the ingredients and cultural resonances of later forms of music radio, but in this earlier form it is strongly linked to the romance of the nights club, the jazz band, and dance music. It is no coincidence that this period is at the overlap between the 'jazz age' and the 'radio age'. Much is made in jazz histories of the role of radio in propagating jazz as a new music, and its artists as American national stars. This narrative is based upon the assumption (and implicit proposition) that jazz was a coherent musical genre, that radio gave the dance bands and their leaders extensive exposure, and that radio as a national system of communication established a continental reach. I will show that this is an over-simplification at best, and a post-hoc mis-characterisation at worst.

It is certainly the case that from the mid-1920s onwards dance became a key element of public entertainment, and the nightclub evolved as a space in which new forms of public entertainment would evolve. They offered a distinctive, but connected, forms of entertainment from the variety stage along with elements of burlesque, but centrally they enabled the development of the dance band (and the band leader) as a new form of musical 'star', along with the development of new forms of vernacular dance as a participation activity. Although much of this form of cultural communication was visual, the centrality of the music as an index of the exoticism of the urban nightclub, and as an aural experience in its own right, made the sounds of the clubs technologically, logistically, economically and culturally ideal for off-peak broadcasting. The clubs were in the same neighbourhoods as the radio stations, reached their peaks when the radio stations had their lowest listenership, and offered a glimpse of a world usually out of the reach of many outside the central urban world of the city entertainment districts.

However, this also meant that these broadcasts attracted a very specialist, very male, listenership. They were characteristic of small, entrepreneurial stations and radio groups, rather than the emerging major networks more strongly linked to Hollywood. The band most strongly associated with the radio remotes in jazz histories – Duke Ellington's – I will argue, was atypical of most bands involved in remote broadcasting, and his later international success was the result of other changes in music and stage entertainment,

and the repositioning of jazz as an American vernacular art. The radio-jazz link was a tentative and momentary one in the development of these two new forms of American popular culture, and the remote became a far less significant part of radio quite swiftly.

Using recently accessible archives of station programme schedules, the traditional stories of jazz on radio, and insights into the process of radio networking that came to dominance during this time, the paper will map out some of the issues which are central to our understanding of the radio, music and popular culture of the early 1930s.

**Tim Wall** is Professor of Radio and Popular Music Studies, and Director of the Birmingham Centre for Media and Cultural Research, at Birmingham City University in the UK. He has written and presented widely on the relationship between the media, and particularly radio, and music (including jazz) culture.