The First Transatlantic Radio Broadcast (March 14, 1925)

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Essay by Cary O'Dell

Milton Cross

David Sarnoff

For Americans in 1925, there was nothing unusual about the presence of dance music on the radio. Every night couples in every state of the Union could sway to the sounds emanating from their in-home receivers. But these selections, no doubt, came from area hubs, from local radio stations, not from across the Atlantic.

Today, that we can watch or listen to news or sporting events happening live in Iraq, Iran, China, South America or some other far-off place is all but taken for granted. But, not so long ago, at the early part of the last century, even after regular US radio broadcasting seemed to decrease the distances between America's people and places, it still had not breeched the oceans.

This, however, all changed on March 14, 1925 with a revolutionary, hop-scotching broadcast that, in the words of one author, created an "invisible link" between Britain and the US.

The broadcast in question was one of orchestral music, some live from an orchestra in London's Savoy Hotel and some from an English musical duo, set up in a studio, playing piano and violin. The broadcast began its partial circumnavigation of the Earth at station 2LO in London. 2LO was Britain's second fully operational station, having signed on the air in May of 1922. (Britain's first was station 2MT.) Via land wire, the sound then traveled from 2LO to station 5XX in Chelmsford, England, before, miraculously, being sent by longwave through the air to the US, specifically to an RCA receiving station in Belfast, Maine. The signal was then retransmitted, by shortwave, to an experimental station set up in Van Cortlandt Park before, finally, being sent out over Western Union landlines to stations WJZ in New York and WRC in Washington, DC.

Perhaps not surprisingly considering its circuitous route, the overall audio quality of this landmark broadcast was quite low. Though supposedly the signal in Belfast was loud and clear, by the time it reached New York and Washington, much of its clarity had been lost. Indeed, listening to the original recordings today, much of the original broadcast is unintelligible. In fact, it is almost exclusively static occasionally broken up with short bursts of music (like a few strands of "Alabamy Bound") and a few faint, distant-sounding voices. (Though, allegedly, a well-tuned ear could hear a bit of Big Ben in the background during one section.)

Actually, at the time of its original airing--other than its unfortunate less-than-optimal sound quality--there was nothing to distinguish this program from the dozens of other transmissions also being broadcast out that night; nothing about its content necessarily screamed historic or important. Had it not been for a short, American-based, crystal-clear statement made

approximately half way through by announcer Milton Cross (later the long-time voice of the Metropolitan Opera), who explains the faraway origins of that night's program (and even goes into a point-by-point description of its transmission), most listeners would have had no idea that this evening's entertainment differed from anything else on the air that night.

Still, the program's historic significance was not missed by the media at the time, or by the radio industry, or by US-based radio tinkerers and fans. On March 15th, the "New York Times" reported on the unique bi-national event that had occurred the night before, "While hundreds of English couples danced to American jazz music last night in the ballroom of the Hotel Savoy in London, thousands of radio enthusiasts in the United States from the eastern seaboard as far west as Milwaukee listened to the same music, brought to their home by the first successful experiment in double radio relaying." And David Sarnoff, then president of RCA, showed even greater reverence and gratitude with his statement: "The people of the United States have received a new gift from radio, the culture and music of London have come to them through the air."

Thankfully, someone listening to the broadcast that night also foresaw its importance and made a primitive yet viable "test pressing" of the original broadcast on 78rpm wax masters. The discs existence today forever documents the first implementation of this then forward-looking technology and also provides us with one of the few transcriptions of a full broadcast from that era of radio history. (Hampered by technology and other issues, few other radio programs of that time, regardless of their origin or content, were recorded for prosperity; they disappeared into the ether as soon as they were sent out.)

Just over six months later, on January 1, 1926, a second ocean-spanning broadcast was staged. Again originating from 2LO, this broadcast, which was also carried over WJZ, included dance music from London's Ciro's Club and the sound of the Westminster Chimes from the House of Parliament.

It is also worth noting that this March of '25 event (named to the National Recording Registry in 2007) was not radio's first experiment or experience with transatlantic communication. Earlier, in 1901, radio's recognized inventor, Guglielmo Marconi, claimed to have received, in Newfoundland, Canada, a test signal—the letter "S"—via radio waves from Cornwall, England. However, subsequent historical and technological investigation has cast some doubt on this possibility. Later, still, on January 19, 1903, King Edward VII of England sent a coded message to US President Theodore Roosevelt via radio waves between Cape Cod, Massachusetts, USA, and Cornwall, England. And in 1923, according to several sources, an early transatlantic transmission of a human voice, sent point-to-point, was sent between Manchester, England and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in the US.

However, what the 2LO to WJZ/WRC broadcast does represent is the medium's, the technology's, first successful attempt at *broadcasting* (in a traditional sense), transcontinentally, therefore laying the groundwork for full global communications, for an electronically interconnected world, that would, very soon, become the new norm.

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