Birth of a Station: Broadcasting, Governance, and the Waning Colonial State

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“Let Jamaica get a move on,” wrote Mr. Walter Fletcher in a letter to the editor of the *Daily Gleaner* in December 1929. “We are behind the times in most things here but let us not be any longer behind the time in establishing our own Jamaica Broadcasting Station.”¹ As he pointed out, Havana and Port-au-Prince reverberated with the sounds of music, soap operas, news, and advertisements emanating from their radio stations built in the 1920s, while neighboring Kingston’s airwaves remained relatively silent.² A decade later, during the turbulent labor uprisings in the summer of 1938, anyone in Jamaica searching for news about the unrest would have had to get it from the newspapers, rumors, or gossip.³ Residents of the island might have received information via short-wave radio broadcasts from Europe or the United States, but that seems unlikely. Jamaicans could not have listened to local radio reports because there was still no station. The island’s first domestic broadcast did not take place until November 1939, and even then local news was broadcast for only

¹ “People Want Jamaica Radio Station,” *Gleaner*, 12 January 1929, 6.
eight minutes a week. Slowly, music and words emitting from radios became more commonplace, until, in the 1950s, twenty years after what historians have dubbed radio’s “Golden Age,” Jamaicans could listen to music, news, serials, and advertisements all day long, if they so chose.5

In my research on media in the Caribbean, I draw from case studies in Kingston, Havana, Port-au-Prince, Santiago, and Cap-Haïtien in an effort to think about the notion of region together with histories of technology. Region might best be understood as a historical artifact created by the texts and research designs of intellectuals and social scientists. As part of those formulations, regions have been, in the words of Sidney Mintz, “defined . . . in part by what the world takes from them and brings to them.”6 The translation of communications technologies, such as the telegraph and, later, radio both relied on old circuits of commerce and empire and created new ones. As a waning British colonial system and an ascendant US neocolonial context participated in and vied over the control of telecommunications, the wires and airwaves drew new cartographies of information and connection.7 My interest lies in understanding the ways the translation of electroacoustic technologies, sounds, and expertise recreated sonic territories that encompassed these Caribbean cities and both confounded and reinforced national and linguistic boundaries.8 Indeed, the study of radio undermines notions of neat imperial boundaries and instead points to multilingual zones of noisy transmission as well as of silence and isolation.9 The Caribbean, as a region produced in part through sound and the circuits of technology, is an outcome variably listened for.

In this space I cannot fully develop this claim. Instead I ask a narrower question that forms part of the story: What accounts for the peculiar history of Jamaican broadcasting? This essay considers Kingston as a sonic terrain and asks after the ways both colonial officials and residents of the islands engaged in a process of understanding Kingston’s place within an emerging electroacoustic soundscape with points in New York, Havana, Port-au-Prince, and London. It relies on a framework implicitly comparative (following the concerns of Mr. Fletcher quoted above) but also interested in following people and things as they traveled between these places and instigated new sonic routes.

In a provocative essay published in this journal, David Scott argues that the study of politics in Jamaica might usefully take into account Michel Foucault’s claim that “rule depends on the

4 “Broadcasting in Jamaica,” 1939, Gifts and Deposits, 7/199, no. 4, Jamaica Archives and Records Department, Spanishtown, Jamaica (hereafter cited as JARD).
disposition of things so as to enable active subjects to achieve certain ends.” Arguing that a continuing emphasis on ideology has proven sterile, Scott suggests moving to a different register, one that attends to the “strategies, technologies, rationalities and mentalities through which the conduct of conduct is effected.” In other words, in order to move beyond increasingly unsatisfying narratives in which political outcomes are the products of clashing ideologies, he seeks to ground the grammar of politics in examinations of the concrete and material stuff of everyday life. The notion of the disposition of things animates this preliminary exploration of the politics of broadcasting. With a literal take on Scott’s injunction, this essay stakes a methodological claim. The things at play are an assembly of objects through which wireless communication flowed. Concomitant with the reconfiguration of politics in the early twentieth century, the technologies that recorded and delivered information underwent a dramatic transformation, including, notably, the introduction of wireless. Receivers, transmitters, loudspeakers, words, and sounds become actants in this story. Taking the role of sound into account in colonial exchanges and encounters, I ask what difference communications technologies made in the waning moments of British rule in Jamaica.

Jamaica’s broadcasting system emerged in a context of colonial violence and repression. In the wake of political protest in the summer of 1938, government officials and social reformers imagined broadcasting as a medium for education and the inculcation of certain values and ways of life. A number of questions arise in asking after the relative success or failure of the use of media as instruments of governance. Does a history of postwar Jamaica entail not just a teleological account of the march toward decolonization but also a consideration of imagined and real spatial practices and a mapping of technologized spaces and information blackouts? Can we use this history as a way to get at the experience, on the ground, of struggles over the shape and sound of the state?

Historians have overlooked broadcasting in Jamaica, particularly the early phases. It becomes part of narratives about music and popular culture beginning in the 1960s. For the most part, scholars remember broadcasting in Jamaica as the medium that brought sonic blackness and its attendant politics to the world via the sounds, most famously, of reggae and Bob Marley. This essay is a prehistory of that moment of emergence and coupling of radio and broadcasting to a black public sphere. It was not an inevitable pairing. To think about broadcasting as primarily a vehicle for music and emancipatory politics obscures a long and complicated history in which the colonial state and institutions affiliated with it attempted to use radio sets, shortwave receivers, transmitters, and relay stations as tools of governance. Radio can be a point of entry into Scott’s question about modes of effecting conduct precisely when conduct became a contentious political issue. Yet even as colonial officials and social reformers imagined wireless and broadcasting as

13 See Sheller, “Virtual Islands.”
crucial to maintaining their authority during the transition from colony to postcolony, they deployed these unevenly and, often, ineffectively.

The Scavenging State

The colonial state was slow to develop broadcasting in the West Indies. A higher priority, dating back to the turn of the century, shortwave radio had been used to communicate for military purposes. As Priya Satia argues, communications technology was entangled with imperial warfare and political strategies in the early years of the twentieth century. The British government, aided by Guglielmo Marconi, conceived of radio primarily for “long-distance, point to point communication that promised to bridge the emotional, political and commercial distances of empire.” And indeed, by 1927 the British had established wireless systems for point-to-point communications across the West Indies. Yet while they had by then begun to develop broadcasting in some parts of the empire, plans to do so in the West Indies did not materialize. Proposals to build higher-powered stations that might eventually have a range of capacities that included broadcasting remained a low priority. The less expensive, if less reliable, shortwave point-to-point systems would remain the principal infrastructural investment for years to come.

As radio stations began to spring up in Britain as well as the United States and other parts of the Caribbean, a variety of individuals and organizations began to pressure the colonial state to build a station in Jamaica. Local entrepreneurs requested licenses and permission to build stations, only to be ignored or turned away. In 1931 the chairman of the Jamaica Telephone Company, Lewis Ashenheim, submitted a proposal to the colonial secretary and the council, offering to cooperate with the government in building a station not, he claimed, so the government might gain commercial advantages but rather so it might “avail itself of the general advantages afforded by the presence of such a station in Jamaica.” When the Council met to consider this request, they were unimpressed, stating that “the time was not opportune to consider such a request.” Ashenheim’s was not the only request to build a station, but none were heeded.

Meanwhile, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) had inaugurated its Empire Service in 1932. Emissions from Daventry aimed across the “Dominions” were intended to create a sonic imagined community that would share and develop a sense of belonging through listening to British aural spectacles, such as the Royal Jubilee, the Royal Wedding in 1934, or the launch of the Queen Mary. But this sonic community was imagined in racially specific terms. As a BBC report stated rather baldly, “The service also included entertainment programmes of all kinds and they are, of course, essentially British in character, likely to appeal to ‘white’ populations in the colonies.”

17 “Wireless Broadcasting Stations, Jamaica Telephone Co. Ltd.” (1931), 1B/5/77/87, JARD.
18 “Introductory Memorandum on Broadcasting and the Colonial Empire,” confidential memo prepared by British Broadcasting Service, 5 in “Broadcasting and Radio Distribution in the Colonies and Policy for Development of” (1935), CO 323/1338/5, NA.
In Jamaica, the BBC’s audience was limited to those who could afford shortwave radios. By this time listeners in the United States, Latin America, and Europe had been tuning in to the radio for at least a decade, and many stations broadcast in shortwave. Depending on the quality of reception, Jamaican listeners could tune in to extensive programming that included popular music, variety shows, and radio plays. Along with schedules of the BBC’s Empire Service, the Daily Gleaner published schedules of several stations in the United States and Europe. Equipment and weather permitting, Jamaican elites could listen to Glen Miller’s Orchestra or the Burns and Allen show on a daily basis. Or they might capture the news from London or a “Good Neighbor” broadcast from Mexico to the United States. In this they were part of a transnational listening audience that had emerged around shortwave. Throughout the Caribbean, people were able to listen to faraway places long before they could tune in to local broadcasts. But this was a limited audience, constrained by the expense of the equipment and its relative scarcity as a commodity. By some estimates, out of a population of 1.2 million, under 100,000 had access to receivers by 1940.

In the context of increasing propaganda emanating from Germany and Italy during the war, the BBC urged the British government to create local stations in the colonies so as to better control programming. Still reluctant to pay for stations, the government did concede the importance of tighter controls over programming, and it directed colonial committees to explore the possibilities of building local stations. Nonetheless, officials remained mired in disagreements over cost and ultimate accountability. A committee created in Jamaica in 1934 issued a report in 1937 that estimated costs at about £53,000, rather than the originally projected £5,000. Colonial officials considered that exorbitant, but they also rejected any requests to combine public funding with some commercial revenues. In this they traded expressions of frustration, as each side blamed the other for the failure to move forward. Officials in Britain downplayed their role and blamed the Jamaicans. “All that remained to be done,” wrote one official, referring to Jamaican plans for a broadcasting station, “was for the Jamaicans to vote the necessary money and get on with it. Although, however, these arrangements were concluded a year ago we have had no report that any definite progress has in fact been made.”

Frustrated, it would appear, by sonic glimpses available over shortwave, several activists were impelled to act, and they took up the cause of broadcasting. Women were among the most vocal. Journalist and novelist Esther Chapman and social reformer Violet Allwood published calls for broadcasting to take a prominent role in a new Jamaica. Allwood, known also for her work in family planning and educational reform, conducted a public campaign for a local station in Jamaica because, as she remembered later, of her feelings during a trip to Cuba: “My embarrassment was

21 “Broadcasting and Radio Distribution.”
22 “Wireless Broadcasting Scheme—Jamaica—Report of Committee” (1937), 1B/5/77/205, JARD. In August 1937 Ashenheim once again appealed for a local station, this time on behalf of the Gleaner, offering a semiprivate scheme that would generate revenue, but British officials again turned him down. “Wireless Broadcasting Station, Gleaner Co. Ltd.” (1937), 1B/5/77/192, JARD.
23 “Jamaica 1938, Miscellaneous, Sir S. Cripps,” CO 137/823/7, NA.
considerable when I admitted we had no broadcasting station.”24 She struck a deal with the Cuba Transatlantic Radio Corporation: from a Cuban station that received transmissions directly from the United States, they would rebroadcast “the best NBC programs” to be heard via shortwave in Jamaica. She was particularly interested in programs such as RCA’s Metro Opera and Magic Key. In 1938, Esther Chapman also skirted around the “embarrassing” lack of a local station in Jamaica by collaborating with station HH2S in Haiti to broadcast every evening English-language programs intended for Jamaica and the British West Indies.25

Jamaica was also home to a number of people with equipment that could transmit as well as receive radio signals. Dubbed radio “amateurs” or “aficionados,” these men (and they were mostly men) began to experiment shortly after World War I with sending and receiving their own voices and recordings at hand as well as electronic codes. In the United States, amateurs tended to be middle-class hobbyists who tinkered with their equipment in their basements in their spare time.26 In the Caribbean, these tinkerers tended to be elite men often tied to plantations or sugar interests; they used their equipment to receive important information such as prices and shipping times as well as to engage in leisurely exchanges with fellow amateurs.27

John Grinan, who had grown up in Kingston and New York City and whose father owned a sugar estate in Jamaica, was among the most prominent Jamaican aficionados.28 According to the registry book of wireless licenses in the Jamaican National Archive, the colonial government granted Grinan his first license to operate wireless equipment on the island in 1926. (Until that point, the government had granted only a few licenses, but beginning in 1930, dozens of wireless operators were receiving licenses to operate in Jamaica.)29 By the time Grinan was licensed, he already possessed a reputation as an active and innovative wireless amateur. He had begun to play with sending and receiving radio signals in 1911, when he was a boy living in New York City, then gained the attention of the wireless world as a member of a team that transmitted the first transatlantic signals from Connecticut to Scotland in 1921.30 Soon after receiving his Jamaican license, he transported equipment from the United States and built a station from which he transmitted signals to and from faraway places. In one of the more frequently recounted tales of his transmitting prowess, Grinan received broadcasts from the 1928 Tom Heaney boxing match from the United States, and then relayed them to Heaney’s hometown in New Zealand.31

Increasingly fluid distinctions between private and state communications technologies shaped Grinan’s career as a wireless operator in Jamaica. In their aversion or inability to invest

24 “Outstanding US Radio Programmes to be Relayed to Island from Cuba,” Gleaner, 29 March 1939.
27 Who’s Who Jamaica (Kingston: Gleaner, 1945), 499.
28 “Wireless Telegraph Licenses, 1923–1935,” 1B/14/8, JARD.
30 N2JZPZ in Kingston, Jamaica BWI. This station, later known as VP5PZ, grew to be one of the most famous amateur stations in the world; www.radioclubofamerica.org/history.php?page=1922-2.html (accessed 31 October 2007). Radio Club of America, *Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Year Book* (New York: Radio Club of America, 1939), 39, in Gifts and Deposits no. 5, 7/199, JARD.
in infrastructure, colonial officials came to depend on private individuals who controlled certain communications technologies to assist them in naval administration.\(^{32}\) Local officials arranged for wireless and telegraph trials to test the equipment on Her Majesty's ships as they passed through Jamaican waters. In a 1934 letter to the acting governor, the vice admiral requested that “amateur experts” be notified and prepared to conduct tests with passing ships. He set conditions and listed the desired experts by name: J. F. Grinan, C. L. Isaacs, C. M. Corinaldi, C. M. Lyons, and L. B. Fletcher. The trials were to take place over the course of nine days, the navy had a right to cancel or curtail them, and communications were to be restricted to test messages during this period.\(^{33}\) In another context, these trials might have been run entirely with navy personnel and equipment. That they were not suggests straitened circumstances and a blurring of boundaries between private individuals and equipment and the work of the state. Correspondence from the Jamaican archives documents that these trials took place over the course of at least five years, between 1934 and 1939.\(^{34}\)

This relationship among “amateur experts” and the state proved essential to the perpetration of state violence in the 1938 rebellion. During the spring and summer of 1938, Jamaica experienced a series of protests and riots that originated as the expressions of discontent and frustration by under-employed laborers on a single sugar estate but expanded to include episodes of urban violence and the proliferation of strikes and protests throughout the island.\(^{35}\) If this moment proved pivotal to the practice of politics and the constitution of a “people” in Jamaica, it was also crucial in the histories of sonic technologies. One year prior to the major episodes of violence (perhaps in response to similar incidents in Trinidad and Barbados), colonial officials had selected and trained several men to assist police communications if necessary. In May 1938, according to a report issued by the post office, licensed radio amateurs formed the Radio Organization, which operated eight stations “at strategic points across the island.” These stations, activated at the first signs of unrest, maintained open lines of communication at the worst moments of violence, which frequently included “malicious interference” with telegraph cables. Grinan was called away from his duties receiving signals from ships to the more urgent matter of policing the uprising.\(^{36}\) The documents hold little regarding the precise workings of Grinan’s crew and, more important, of the rebels’ strategies of interference with cables. But they do commemorate Grinan’s role in the organizational and repressive feat, for he was singled out by name in the post office report: “I cannot refrain from expressing the Department’s special thanks to Mr John F Grinan for his invaluable services in this connexion.”\(^{37}\)


\(^{33}\) Letter from vice admiral to acting governor, Jamaica, 8 August 1934, “Wireless-Telegraph Trials—H.M. Ships and Amateur Experts in Jamaica,” 1B/5/77/252, JARD.

\(^{34}\) “Wireless-Telegraph Trials”; “Colonial Wireless System, Report of the Sub-Committee of the Imperial Communications Committee” (1927), CO 323/980/11, NA.

\(^{35}\) See Holt, \textit{Problem of Freedom}; Post, \textit{Arise Ye Starvelings}.

\(^{36}\) Letter to captain of HMS Orion from acting colonial secretary, 3 August 1938, “Wireless-Telegraph Trials.”

In the wake of the rebellion the press deemed John Grinan a hero for his help in its repression. He subsequently sold his radio equipment to the government. That equipment became Jamaica's first local broadcasting station, ZQI. Narratives about Jamaica's route toward independence obscure the story of this birth, facilitated by a scavenging colonial state and the use of technology as an instrument of violence. The Gleaner's historical account of Jamaican broadcasting remembers Grinan as the “father of broadcasting” who donated his equipment so that Jamaica could finally fall in step with contemporary broadcasting practices. But this episode could just as easily serve as evidence of Jesús Martín-Barbero's injunction that we must analyze the media under the rubric of “domination as communication.”

“A Means of Intimate and Direct Touch”

The events of 1938 forced colonial officials to turn their attention to conditions in Jamaica. A flurry of analyses proclaimed the problem stemmed from the uneducated Jamaican “masses,” whom reformers envisioned as immoral, lacking civic responsibility, and much too given to reproducing and then neglecting their offspring. As Anthony Bogues has argued, creole anticolonialism coincided with colonial voices such as the Moyne commission to condemn the state of the “peasantry” and endeavor to shape working, respectable bodies as the principal goal of governance. Most elites, regardless of ideological leaning, agreed that “a certain kind of citizen was to be created, one who would be Caribbean, who would be Creole, who would accept middle class leadership and values, who would wear respectability like a Sunday-best outfit, who would develop a nuclear family, labor in the factory or on the banana and sugar plantations, vote in elections, speak properly and softly, listen to good music.”

If proper speaking and listening would constitute a refashioned citizenry, broadcasting might play a key role by offering unprecedented access to the ears of those most in need of reform. In Britain, officials turned away from previous claims that broadcasting was intended for the “white and educated brown” population in the colonies and began to imagine ways radio might contribute to the civilizing process. After a visit to Jamaica, Sir Stafford Cripps was among the strong advocates of a local broadcasting system. Warning against labor leader Alexander Bustamante and his pro-clivities as a “mob-orator,” Cripps understood the problem to be a gullible peasantry: “They simply have no background of culture, so all sorts of petty movements engage their attention.” The remedy, according to Cripps, was a broadcasting station, which would “deliberately set out to encourage the cultural side of life to the coloured population, and to make this culture characteristically West

40 See Holt, Problem of Freedom.
Indian. Incidentally a proper broadcasting system would enable a proper news service to circulate in the island.”

Local reformers were swayed by the power of broadcasting as well but with greater emphasis on controlling rather than merely “encouraging” nonelite culture. A memo written in October 1938 by the electrical inspector and intended for submission to the visiting Royal Commission made the following observations: “Recent local events and more especially events happening at this immediate period, both overseas and local indicate the desirability, if not indeed the urgent necessity, of government having a means of intimate and direct touch with all classes of the population, whereby the correct situation may be presented to as large a number of them as possible.” The early years of programming by ZQI reflected the concerns of the colonial government and social reformers. The outcome was a combination of offerings that made the radio the voice of government with gestures toward inculcating a sense of Jamaica as part of the empire and fostering “indigenous culture.” In addition, local elites like Esther Chapman contributed programming intended for education and uplift. From November until June 1939, talks by government officials, including the trade commissioner and the materials board; news about the war; and gramophone recordings filled one hour per week. Once the broadcasts became daily, they comprised both local and foreign news, cricket scores, and classical music. The weekly schedule featured talks by Esther Chapman (“It Happened Last Week”), banana recipes, and religious broadcasts. Some programs were clearly directed at rural Jamaicans, such as talks on specific diseases like typhoid fever or diphtheria or on farming advice (“How to Feed Cattle”). Others aimed to inculcate a sense of imperial citizenship, such as the broadcast of the reading of the proclamation introducing the constitution of 1944. The music was almost exclusively classical, and the poetry league contributed frequently.

But who was listening? Teasing listening practices out of historical documents yields a few fragments. Taking into account as well the longstanding silences surrounding many aspects of the lives of nonelite Jamaicans renders this a speculative, if intriguing, exercise. Sources drawn from the Jamaica Social Welfare Commission and Colonial Office records speak to the distance between the imagined power of broadcasting and radio’s irregular and unpredictable audiences. Numerous obstacles hindered widespread listening to local broadcasts. As identified in a report about broadcasting in 1956, one problem was Jamaica’s terrain: “Before 1947 the listener suffered acutely from the difficulties of obtaining good quality reception in an area subject to severe atmospheric and other interference.” Jamaicans lost out in particular because of both “difficult mountainous terrain” and frequent “interference by foreign stations encroaching on the allotted frequencies.”

42 “Jamaica 1938, Miscellaneous, Sir S. Cripps,” 7–9, CO 137/823/7, NA. Cripps was a leader of the British Labour party, which supported Jamaica’s nationalist movements.
43 “Memorandum of Communications and Transport for Presentation to Royal Commission,” submitted by the electrical inspector, October 1938 (285–1938), 1B/5/77, JARD.
44 ZQI Log Book, 1938–39, Gifts and Deposits, 7/199 no. 1, JARD.
45 ZQI Log Book, 1935–41, Gifts and Deposits, 7/199 no. 1, JARD.
47 Ibid., 53.
Technicians began to address this in the 1950s, but for the first decade or so radio reception seems to have been uncertain and inconsistent.

The rural nature of Jamaica’s population also posed an obstacle. According to a study conducted in 1960, people living in the parishes outside of Kingston and St. Andrew made up nearly 75 percent of the population in 1943. By 1960, despite internal migration toward the cities, the percentage of rural inhabitants remained at about 75 percent. The listening practices of people living in rural settings have not been particularly well studied, but one might imagine that they were less conducive to the kinds of collective listening practices that developed in the early stages of broadcasting in other parts of the Caribbean. In Cuba, for instance, the few receivers present at the initiation of local broadcasting were placed in public places—cafés or shops that were open to the street, so that pedestrians could hear, or where people could gather to listen to particular broadcasts. Although it requires further exploration, the social geography of Jamaica seems to have made that kind of listening much more difficult.

Finally, the sheer difficulty of obtaining radio sets proved daunting. D. T. M. Girvan of Jamaica Welfare imagined that radios would assist their work and tried to obtain some inexpensive radio sets to distribute among villages. However, the documentation reveals a long series of delays. For six months Girvan tried to persuade the colonial secretary that broadcasting would deliver a vital service and searched for someone who would manufacture and sell small radio sets. His attempts proved disappointing. In January of 1946, the colonial secretary postponed the project indefinitely, claiming, “[Because] the whole question of broadcasting is at the moment under consideration . . . no speedy action is possible just now.”

Once acquired, the radios needed maintenance, and that required funding. Guy’s Hill Community Center inherited a station in 1942 from the Gayle Community Center, which was unable to pay for the repairs. At Guy’s Hill, the radio broke twice and was repaired, but the third time it required a new valve. Stanley Motta, the distributor for RCA in Jamaica and owner of a radio repair shop, indicated that the valve was unlikely to arrive while there was a war on. Two years later, the radio was repaired, but by then Guy’s Hill could not afford the cost. Motta sold the radio to a third party. This may have been a common scenario. Weather might interfere as well, as several of the JSWC reports noted that participation in the community centers dwindled during the rainy season. If the war expanded radio audiences elsewhere, it seems to have had the opposite effect on Jamaican listeners, since the lack of funds and unavailability of receivers and parts limited the size and types of audiences. A British survey estimated about fifty thousand listeners in Jamaica in 1942 and assumed that broadcasts were for elite audiences, dismissing the potential popularization of radio

49 See Bronfman, “”Naciente público oyente””; López, Radio en Cuba; González, Llorar es un placer.
50 See, for example, Herbert George de Lisser, In Jamaica and Cuba (Kingston: Gleaner, 1910), on the contrasting uses of public space in Havana and Kingston. I am grateful to Faith Smith for bringing this reference to my attention.
52 JSWC, 2077: Guy’s Hill Community Centre, Semi Public 3/24, JARD.
53 Report of the Trinityville Community Centre, 28 December 1952, JSWC, 1365: Affiliated Centres, Semi Public 3/24, JARD.
with the argument that “talks in simple English were not only unnecessary, they would probably be resented.”

Despite the impediments, some Jamaicans do seem to have been listening. Beginning in 1941, ZQI broadcast a program called John Canoe two or three times a month. This program was in “dialect,” and the title refers to Jonkonnu, a dance and musical form traditionally performed in street parades. Una Marson’s popular BBC program Calling the West Indies ran for five years, beginning in 1940. By 1945, listeners could tune in to the first all-Jamaican music program. Cricket matches took up longer and longer time slots (in fact the only reason broadcasting hours were ever extended was for cricket). Although listener surveys are missing for these early years, the programming indicates attentiveness to the listening tastes of ordinary Jamaicans. By 1946, some evidence points to the increasingly interactive nature of radio, with announcers responding to song requests and announcing birthdays on the air.

**Commercial Radio: “A Snare and a Delusion”**

Regardless of increases in listenership, the station proved untenable as a government-owned enterprise. In 1949 the colonial government began searching for a way to divest itself of the cost while retaining some control over broadcasting. After considering several proposals, they decided to give the concession to the Jamaica Broadcasting Company, which would operate on a commercial model. The government was wary enough to impose a series of conditions on the new owners, including free access for public service announcements, free access to BBC programs, and a promise to distribute inexpensive sets and create a series of “listening posts” in communities and in schools, clearly an effort to increase listenership. That they needed to impose these conditions implies that Jamaica had not experienced an explosion of listening over the previous decade and that the project of governing through sound remained tenuous. Instead, an audience still needed to be sought out and cultivated.

Critics raised their voices and worried about the commercialization of radio. Colonial officials viewed advertising as a necessary evil that ought to be “deprecated” but endured if it meant the colonies would receive British broadcasts rather than programming from other European countries. With more pointed concerns, Una Marson understood the commercialization of radio as an affront to Jamaican material culture and social practices. Marson, a local celebrity because of her work as a BBC announcer and producer, imagined the possibilities of radio in romantic terms: it could lead to the “spiritual, physical, mental, and economic betterment of the people” and “open

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54 “Broadcasting: M. of I. Questionnaire on Radio Listening in the Colonies” (1942), 22, Public Relations, General, CO 875/3/9, NA.
55 ZQI Log Book, 1935–41, Gifts and Deposits, 7/199 no. 1, JARD.
57 ZQI Log Book, vols. 6–8, 1944–47, 1B/5/99, JARD.
59 “Broadcasting West Indies, North American Regional Broadcasting,” pt. 2 (1949), 158, CO 875/38/2, NA.
the eyes of the aesthetically blind and the ears of the deaf Philistines[,] . . . bring joy to the hearts of little children and cheer and inspiration to the old.”

But, she warned, none of this would happen if commercial interests controlled radio. “It is all well and good,” she wrote, “for American Radios to herald the merits and demerits of bathsalts or champagne mintsticks or chewing gum, but in Jamaica where at present and maybe for years to come the economy of the country impels us to turn over a penny a dozen times before we spend it, gay and glamorous advertising coming into our cornmeal porridge and salt-fish fritters for breakfast can only be a snare and a delusion.” Marson lost this particular battle, and the Jamaican Broadcasting Company came to control Jamaica’s local station in 1950.

By the time commercial radio entered the scene, Jamaicans had already incorporated an alternative form of electronic sound into their listening practices. As Norman Stolzoff has shown, the ubiquitous and popular sound systems provided music and shaped forms of sociability as Jamaicans gathered in yards or clearings to listen to recordings produced by local musicians. Having begun as a gramophone attached to a roaming truck, by the early 1950s the sound system enjoyed widespread popularity. In that regard, broadcasting would have to prove itself an appealing alternative to the dancehall culture fostered by sound systems.

Radio programming did change drastically as a result of the change of ownership, with the addition of sponsored music, variety, and serials, but the tone ran somewhat counter to that of the ludic sound systems. Programmers were able to present popular shows from the United States and were obligated to run some of the BBC programming daily. The educational and reformist impulses remained influential, as local organizations sponsored talks on public health or citizenship.

Despite the changes in programming, social reformers clung to their plan to use broadcasting in the interest of uplift and education. The Jamaica Social Welfare Commission (JSWC), lured perhaps by the promise of free radio sets for community centers and schools, used the commercialization of radio as an opportunity to try to expand their mission of reform. Their proposals abounded with optimism about the role of broadcasting in enhancing the lives of nonelite Jamaicans. A project to alleviate conditions of people living in tents in Trench Town following the hurricane of 1951 included a large community tent in which they would install a “listening post . . . so that news [could] be related to folk and they [could] know what [was] happening.” Merely “knowing what was happening,” they intimated, would attenuate the harshness of their situation. Access to broadcasting would foster aural citizenship.


61 Marson, “Why Commercial Radio?”


While the Trench Town project was suspended for lack of funds, eventually the JSWC found opportunities to distribute radio sets.\textsuperscript{65} Although scant, the records of the commission present some evidence on the question of audience. By 1952 some communities had received radio sets, accompanied by a measure of fanfare: “Occasion was taken to unveil and open the radio installed by the Broadcasting Company of Jamaica. This was done by Miss Osborne who spoke appropriately and read a message from the broadcasting company which had been sent over the air a few minutes before the beginning of the meeting.”\textsuperscript{66} At Woods Park and Scott’s Run, Listening Groups met weekly to listen to particular broadcasts.\textsuperscript{67} In Trinityville, the radio set installed at the school “often served as entertainment . . . at parent-teachers meetings, agricultural meetings, community association meetings, etc.”\textsuperscript{68}

But some centers never acquired radios at all. In 1952, a member of the Jamaica Agricultural Society lamented the absence of access to broadcasting in rural Jamaica: “Mr Broderick expressed the view that it was unfortunate that more farmers would not have the opportunity of hearing these broadcasts. He felt that the community listening centres should be established more widely and in thickly populated areas where there were no radios. . . . In places like Smithville, Clarendon, no listening set had been allocated.”\textsuperscript{69}

Speculations about Time, Space, and Sound

Beyond tracing the distribution of radios, a closer look at the schedule of programs may offer clues about radio publics. After the commercialization of radio, programming ran from the early morning until late at night. These programs came to fill time in a specific way that followed and produced certain kinds of norms about gender, work, and domestic space. The program from December 1954 reads as follows:

- 6:15 to 7:30 Wake Up Jamaica, Breakfast Club
- 7:30 Local News
- 9:05 Listen Ladies
- 10:00–12:00 Man in the Kitchen, or Nurse Jane’s Advice
Music, News and Housewives’ Choice
- 1:30 Caribbean Voices, or West Indian Diary
- 3:00 News
- 4:30 Tea time Tunes
- 5:30 Nursery Song Sing, or Jr. Center Magazine, or Citizens’ Listening Post
- 6:10 Local News

\textsuperscript{65} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{66} Wood Park, Bagnolds Spring, Pembroke Hall, copy of minutes of annual meeting, 9 July 1952, JSWC, 1365: Affiliated Centres, Semi Public 3/24, JARD.
\textsuperscript{67} Report of the Wood Park Community Association for August–October 1953; Scott’s Run, April–June 1953, JSWC, 1365: Affiliated Centers, Semi Public 3/24, JARD.
\textsuperscript{68} Report of the Trinityville Community Centre, 28 December 1952, JSWC, 1365: Affiliated Centers, Semi Public 3/24, JARD.
\textsuperscript{69} Meeting of the Jamaica Agricultural Society, Information Committee, 9 July 1952, item 6, JSWC: 3/24/914, Semi Public 3/24, JARD.
This schedule carved up time and space in specific ways. The imagined day was one in which people awoke early and breakfasted as they listened to the news. Once the men and children had departed for work or school, women in domestic spaces would be accompanied by a series of programs intended for them. As the day progressed and the family reconvened, men and children could listen to programs aimed at their perceived needs or interests. In the early evening the radio offered serials for the whole family and then, once the children had gone to bed, educational programs to enlighten the adults. Finally, families might all go to sleep to the sounds of “sweet music.”

This assumed a predictable schedule with gendered divisions of labor, meals at regular times, and domestic listening, which required a room for the radio in which the whole family could sit comfortably for extended periods of time. A colonial state searching for ways to control its population might have imagined this routine as taming unruly behavior and preempting presumably dangerous activities such as listening to “mob-orators” or engaging in sexual promiscuity.

Edith Clarke’s 1957 ethnography *My Mother Who Fathered Me* offers another point of entry into the question of audience. Her attention to the ways people inhabited space and time allows for speculation as to the ways broadcasting aligned itself with the practices of ordinary people. Given the paucity of records documenting the listening practices in rural Jamaica, I use this text to map the uses of space in everyday life and to match that up with the ways programming assumed certain kinds of listening spaces and segmented time into discrete hours. Clarke’s study of three communities points to a range and diversity of ways of life in 1950s Jamaica. Some of these were better suited than others to radio’s imagined inhabitation of gender roles, daily routines, and domestic practices. I offer this as a methodological experiment in historicizing radio.

Clarke observes the lives of people in three different settings: Orange Grove, a fairly prosperous town of farmers and citrus producers; Sugar Town, a place dominated by the sugar mill and “surrounded by thousands of acres of cane”; and Mocca, a village without visible sources of employment in which most people practiced subsistence farming and found irregular work to supplement their incomes. As Clarke demonstrates, each of these places shaped family structures in particular ways. The book aims to relativize and explain family structures that differ from the two-parent-plus-offspring household, and in so doing it pays attention to the ways different economic structures produce spatial practices and regulate time.

As Clarke notes, more than merely delivering entertainment or information, radios marked status. In describing the relatively prosperous Campbell family of Sugar Town, Clarke writes, “Mr Campbell was very conscious of his social status.” The family enjoyed a measure of comfort: their

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The house included a “sitting room, two bedrooms and a hall with a verandah overlooking a trim, well-kept flower garden. The house was expensively equipped with shop furniture and a radio” (49).

The prospects for radio listening look best in Orange Grove. Clarke conveys prosperity, a sense of order, and a fairly rigid division of labor. When one comes to Orange Grove, she writes, one encounters “neat citrus groves and solid, well built houses, often with an upper story, set among flower and vegetable gardens” (26). Among her subjects was the Wright family, who arose at 6:00 a.m. and did chores before breakfast, which they ate together at 7:30. Afterward, the men went to work, the children to school, and the women stayed home. Everyone returned home for lunch at noon. In the afternoon, women “took things easy and tidied up for evening,” while the men went back to work (143). In another Orange Grove family, “after dinner the husband stayed home and played his saxophone for the children and amused himself and his family until about 8 pm, when they went to bed” (145). Although people sometimes went to meetings on weeknights, for the most part “after dinner there was nowhere to go” (146). As a technology of the family imagined to apportion space and time in specific ways, radio might have been successful in this context. The house, the gendered division of labor, the parental roles in raising children, and the stability and proximity of work all fit with Radio Jamaica’s scheduled programs. If theirs was a typical regime for the inhabitants of this town, they would have been the likely targets and beneficiaries of the extended programming.

But as Clarke points out and other reformers despaired of, Orange Grove proved an exception rather than the norm. The other two settings she chose to examine organized families and domestic spaces in very different ways. In Sugar Town, most of the dwellings consisted of small, one- or two-room huts. In these, Clarke argues, “decent home life is impossible for the majority of the population. They lived mostly outside in the yard, going inside only to eat in “tiny smoke blackened wattle kitchens” (23). In this setting it would have been unlikely for people to own radio sets. Moreover, Sugar Town residents adhered to schedules very different from those in Orange Grove. “In Sugartown homelife . . . centering in the home, and continually renewing itself in a daily routine of cooperative tasks, did not exist. The father, if he was employed, left the home early in the morning and spent much of his leisure in the shops or taverns, returning home late in the evening” (147). If women and children tended to be home more, they spent most of their days outside. Radio time would have been at odds with the use of time in these settings, and programs might have fallen on deaf ears, if any at all.

In the town of Mocca, economic conditions configured space and time in ways that differed from Orange Grove or Sugar Town. With few sources of employment and no land for commercial farming, residents lived mostly from what they could grow on small plots of land. As these plots tended to be far from their homes, they spent the majority of their day walking back and forth. Not only were they unlikely to be able to afford radio sets, but the rhythms and demands of life would have allowed little time for regular listening.

Moreover, the kind of programming offered may have failed to compete with well-developed networks of news and information. In Sugar Town, “washing of clothes was done at the spring or river. It [was] done unhurriedly because it [was] an opportunity for meeting friends or exchanging
news.” Similarly, Clarke’s observations about Mocca provide a glimpse of dense networks of exchanges of information and entertainment: men “did odd jobs in the yard or sat about gossiping together” (148). As Lucius Watson noted, recalling the way he learned of an upcoming Bustamante speech, “Mouth radio is a very hell of a radio.” In this regard, the introduction of wireless technology seems to have had little to do with creating political consciousness, which likely worked through traditional circuits of talk, rumor, and conversation. The streams of words and knowledge so crucial to the making of a public seem radically divorced from the well-intended but tone-deaf efforts of early broadcasting. There is not space here to track the vibrant political cultures of the 1930s and 1940s as labor unions and anticolonial activists mobilized allegiances, challenged the status quo, and built relationships and alliances. Moreover, my claim is that the initial years of radio programming effectively excluded, or at least failed to engage, the Jamaican multitude. Whatever rumbles of public life and politicization occurred took place beyond the purview of, or counter to, the radio’s feeble forays into the lives and cares of ordinary Jamaicans.

Elusive Publics

In this preliminary inquiry, which I hope has opened new questions about the politics of media in Jamaica, what emerges from the mapping of radio time onto quotidian time is the uneven and differentiated mode in which broadcasting made its way into everyday life. The very early uses of wireless radio technology enhanced the interdependence between the state and private wealth that was ultimately used as part of a repressive apparatus. As amateurs assisted the state in obtaining and delivering information that would help quell unrest, they performed as an extension of the state rather effectively. But when the state embarked on projects of social reform, broadcasting, as part of a project of governance, flailed and faltered. To be sure, the radio was imagined as a way to “effect conduct” through the sounds, accents, and rhythms of propriety, making Jamaican peasants want to emulate their presumably tamer counterparts in other colonies as well as in Britain itself. This essay has demonstrated how difficult that was in practice.

By failing to acknowledge and respond to material circumstances, radio remained inaccessible to most Jamaicans. Commercial broadcasting upheld inequalities even as it expanded the soundscape. Despite Peter Abrahams claim in 1957 that “radio was bridging the gap between the Two Jamaicas,” broadcasting followed, and perhaps reinforced, the routes of inequality already in place. Not by ideological domination, but rather by imposing the possession of a thing as a

73 Although it demands more research, the question of language must have been relevant here. As Carolyn Cooper and Kamau Brathwaite (among others) have argued, Jamaicans speak two languages: Jamaican patois, or what Brathwaite calls “nation language,” and English. See Carolyn Cooper, Noises in the Blood: Orality, Gender, and the “Vulgar” Body of Jamaican Popular Culture (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995); and Kamau Brathwaite, “History of the Voice,” in Roots (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993). The evidence I have gathered so far suggests that the majority of broadcasts were in English. How appealing the English broadcasts may have been to people who lived mostly surrounded by Creole all day is a question I explore in the book-length study in progress, which examines in particular the role of Louise Bennett in broadcasting in Creole.
condition of cultural inclusion. If the wealthy and urban were able to participate in the audible cir-
culation of consumerist fantasies and racial marking, Jamaicans in rural settings remained largely
outside these as they filled their soundscapes with music and talk from other sources. It was only
in the 1960s, when radio began to listen to them as well as to speak more frequently in Creole, that
broadcasting generated broader publics.

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