

Science Fiction Programs

Science fiction programming takes full advantage of radio's ability to transport us through time and space—at a fraction of the cost of a bus ticket. With a well-written story, good voice actors, a few inexpensive sound effects devices, and a willingness to suspend disbelief, we can easily find ourselves lost in *Dimension X*, refugees in a *War of the Worlds*, or leaping tall buildings with our pal *Superman*.

The genre, which traces its roots to the pulp magazines and comic strips of the 1920s, has most often been labeled “thriller drama,” but it has actually infused almost every type of fiction, from action-adventure to comedy. There have been sci-fi detective programs, sci-fi adventure shows, sci-fi comedies, sci-fi kids' shows, even sci-fi soap operas. Many programs such as *The Shadow* dealt, at least periodically, with science fiction themes. Regardless of the other elements of a program (or episode), to be science fiction, a work should integrate the relationship between humans and “futuristic themes” such as new technology or alien races.

Science fiction radio dates back to the earliest days of commercial radio. *Ultra Violet*, a program few people remember, was first syndicated as early as 1930. More famous, however, were programs such as *Buck Rogers in the 25th Century*, which was first broadcast in 1932 and is commonly credited as being the first science fiction radio program.

Based on a popular comic strip, *Buck Rogers* was a 15-minute serial that aired five times a week at 7:15 P.M. on the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS). Aimed predominantly at children, the series focused on Buck, a man from the present (the 1930s) who finds himself transported to the 25th century. The cast of characters included a very strong female character, Wilma Dearing, and the amazing scientist Dr. Huer. Interestingly, many of the fanciful technological devices invented by Dr. Huer in the show became commonplace technologies in the late 20th century. Good and evil were very clearly defined in *Buck Rogers*, and good always prevailed, but there were no truly memorable villains such as *Flash Gordon's* Ming the Merciless. Like all good serials, most episodes of *Buck Rogers* closed with a “cliff-hanger” ending that left many questions unanswered. Listeners had to “tune in tomorrow” for the next exciting installment. The series and sponsor also held the attention of their audience by allowing them to become “Solar Scouts” and to receive items such as “planetary maps” by responding to Kellogg's premiums.

Superman first arrived from Krypton on the Mutual Broadcasting System in 1940 and is a good example of how science fiction merged with other genres. In this show, also aimed predominantly at children, our superhero fought crime both as Superman and as his alter ego, mild-mannered reporter Clark Kent. “Girl reporter” Lois Lane and “kid photographer”

Jimmy Olsen, along with gruff editor Perry White, made up the rest of the regular cast. Often categorized as an action-adventure, crime, or thriller-drama program, the show's central character was an alien with superhuman powers.

Although most 1930s sci-fi radio programming was aimed at children, a few shows were designed for adults. Most of these were episodes of anthology programs such as *Mercury Theater of the Air*, which premiered on CBS in the fall of 1938. On 30 October, just a few short weeks after the premiere, this prestigious drama program, hosted by Orson Welles, pulled off the greatest hoax in radio history—the radio adaptation of H.G. Wells' “War of the Worlds.” The pre-Halloween dramatization of Martians landing in Grover's Mill, New Jersey, led some listeners to panic—and many to leave their homes.

Orson Welles' program played on the fears of an audience worried about war in Europe. When actual fighting broke out in 1939, more adult science fiction programs were broadcast as episodes of anthology shows. Series such as *Lights Out*, *Radio City Playhouse*, and *Escape* featured science fiction entries concerning time travel, alien invasion, and world conquest. America, including its radio audience, was becoming more technologically savvy, and more world-weary. Consequently, adult science fiction programs were becoming less reliant on horror and fantasy and more focused on actual science and technology.

By the 1950s, television was pulling a significant number of listeners away from radio. In order to hang on to adult audiences, the radio networks experimented with science fiction series aimed at adult audiences. Several adult anthology series devoted exclusively to science fiction premiered in the early 1950s, including *Year 2000 Plus* on Mutual and *Dimension X* on the National Broadcasting Company (NBC). Later known as *X Minus One*, *Dimension X* was one of the first radio drama series to be recorded on tape rather than broadcast live. As a result, programs could be more involved and could be post-produced to clean up mistakes. As an anthology, stories changed from week to week. Some shows were quite serious, but one of the most famous is an ironic comedy titled “A Logic Named Joe.” Originally broadcast on 1 July 1950, this humorous tale is about a world where futuristic computers, or “logics,” can do “everything for you.” The logics are interconnected in a worldwide web of computers that exchange information. “A Logic Named Joe” takes a comic look at a common theme in science fiction: humanity's fear that technology will take over and corrupt society. Unlike the adult-oriented anthology programs, most series science fiction of the era was limited to such children's shows as *Tom Corbett*, *Space Cadet*, and *Space Patrol*.

As U.S. radio comedy and drama moved to television, science fiction on the radio declined but did not disappear. Later series such as *CBS Radio Mystery Theater* often included science fiction, as well as fantasy and horror themes. National Public Radio stations also imported programs from the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC). One of the more famous imports, originally aired in England in 1978, was *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* series, which later spawned a BBC television series, several novels, and an interactive computer game.

Radio science fiction programs are actually more plentiful today than they have ever been, thanks to cassette sales, the internet, and a variety of interest groups. Not only are episodes of many classic programs such as "A Logic Named Joe" available for audio streaming, but original programming is being produced, such as the Sci-Fi Channel's web "radio" program, *Seeing Ear Theater*. Thanks to continued interest in the

form and some very fantastical technological advances, science fiction radio is not only alive and well, but its future is very exciting.

PHILIP J. AUTER

See also Children's Programs; Hoaxes on Radio; Shadow; Sound Effects; Star Wars; War of the Worlds

Further Reading

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Sevareid, Eric 1912-1992

U.S. Journalist and Radio Commentator

One of the first "Murrow Boys" at Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) news, Arnold Eric Sevareid reported many aspects of World War II and then became well known for his radio and television commentaries that surveyed the several sides of various controversies, often leaving the final conclusion up to the listener. He spent his entire broadcast career of 38 years with CBS.

Origins

Sevareid grew up first in North Dakota and then in Minnesota, graduating from high school in 1930. That same year he undertook an arduous 2,200 mile canoe trip with a friend, Walter Port, traveling from Manitoba all the way to the Atlantic Coast. Five years later he wrote his first book, a children's tale about the trip called *Canoeing with the Cree*. He spent a few months in the summer of 1931 out in the California gold fields, gaining useful experience, though little gold.

While in college at the University of Minnesota, he first entered journalism, working as a reporter on the student paper, the *Minnesota Daily*. He was active in and reported on the university's move to drop compulsory military training. But his radical views and activities probably cost him a chance for the

paper's editorship. Before graduating in 1935, he had begun working as a reporter at the downtown *Minneapolis Journal*. After graduation he helped organize the local chapter of the Newspaper Guild at the paper, which led to his being fired soon thereafter, supposedly for a minor error in a story.

In 1937 Sevareid and his wife sailed to Europe on a freighter, seeking a change of scene and new challenges. He studied for a time at the London School of Economics and at the Alliance Française in Paris. At this point he began using his middle rather than his first name and again became a reporter (and eventually night city editor) for the *Paris Herald*. He also worked part time for United Press in Paris. His writing soon attracted attention.

Radio Years

Sevareid's broadcast career began with a telephone call from London. Edward R. Murrow called him in mid-1939 to offer him a CBS radio job. Murrow noted that while he knew little of Sevareid's background, he liked his writing and ideas. The radio career nearly ended at its beginning when, nervous and with a halting delivery, Sevareid underwhelmed CBS officials in New York on his first broadcast in August 1939 just before

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