

DISK JOCKEY (noun): pundit, gossip, crusader, oracle,
and conman of the spoken word

SEERS FOR THE SLEEPLESS

Manny Farber

HELLO, GOOD MORNING, is it what? No. Australia's a continent, not an island, but I thank you for calling. My goodness me."

"Goodness gracious, everyone wants to win that ten-dollar bottle of perfume. Now, wait a minute, this isn't a contest. I want to talk at you a minute. Tell you what I want to do. Let's do a little helpin'. I was ridin' around in the car Sunday . . . lookin' around and seein' street signs. That's what I do . . . I find out where all you darlings live. You know . . ."

This strange assemblage of words is roughly what New Yorkers by the thousands listen to in the sickeningly

empty hours of the night: it is the babble of the omniscient disc jockeys. Plagued by loneliness in the vastness of an overcrowded city, these cosmopolites "hate to see the evenin' sun go down" as much as the blues singers who do their most passionate minor-key moaning about the isolation that comes with darkness. Things really get bad for the gregarious city-dwellers when the last chances for communing with other human beings are snuffed out by the closing of the neighborhood theatre, the corner saloon, the drug-store hangout with its warmth-spreading juke-box. These are the "after-hours" from midnight on,

when even sex isn't always enough to supply the excitement of companionship that Americans go after almost as hopelessly as dogs chasing after a phony rabbit in a dog race. The new cure-all for these nocturnal ailments is the disc jockey, the glibbest worry dispeller we have ever produced. By now, the musical discs have been almost completely replaced by this new opiate for the masses, this friendly, confidential talk, designed to bolster sagging psyches.

The non-stop talker, so popular that night clubs dump their girlie shows for his economical act (it requires only a mike and a telephone), is not necessarily a drug on the entertainment market. He has loosened up the slick gentility of U. S. broadcasting with an informality that radio needs badly if it is ever to get close to the sounds of real life. Some of them — Bill Williams, Barry Gray, Fred Robbins — are among radio's cleverest word jugglers. Their "happiness talk" actually gives the audience, including myself, a badly needed lift. But, in doing so, it makes them imbibe more sheer trash and nonsense in the name of spoken, sung, or written truth than the citizenry of any other country this side of the Iron Curtain. If they could supply the lift without the tricks, falsehoods, and silliness, the disc jockeys would be just about the biggest thing to hit American culture since Walt Whitman.

THE DISC JOCKEY (disc, now, for discourse) programs come in three sizes: there are the Message Boys who improve humanity, the "guest-in-the-nest" type that makes the listener feel like a cool Broadway celebrity, and the old-fashioned record twirler, who now turns along with the discs.

The disc-man sits hunched towards mike and telephone, willing to talk endlessly to any listeners, but apparently unconcerned with their messages. With smooth pompousness, he picks up the receiver, utters a curt, dictatorial "Yes," and then, after a few sociable remarks, pauses, gets off a type of snide crack that sounds like a pick-ax breaking-up humans instead of rocks, and hangs up in the manner of a man who has been talking to no one. The saloon customers listen half-heartedly, waiters drift by, now and then bringing him a note from a guest: "Mr. and Mrs. Goslin were married tonight and are leaving for Florida at 3:00 P.M." These announcements get a variety of treatments from a grunt to a reaction of great joy, as though the Korean war had just ended. Nothing has been said, of course, but at least this spiel offers lonelies and insomniacs listening at home the security of living in an atmosphere of human activity.

The odd thing about the disc jockey is that he has converted the oldest nuisance on the American scene into a beloved bedside com-

panion. At a cocktail party or club meeting, everybody instinctively shuns the speechifying super-salesman type. But the very same tactics work wonders on radio. These programs catch people at their lowest ebb, and offer them the confident abundance of chatter that elevates the spirits even of those people who would shun this sort of thing under ordinary circumstances. In exploiting this need, the disc jockey is part of a lengthy American tradition from which he has borrowed prodigiously. From the carny "talker" he has taken the non-stop delivery, and a brassy indifference to what the crowd thinks. He mugs and gags like a nightclub M.C. He takes what he wants from all sorts of big time entertainers; for example, he has gleaned his sincere soft-shoe delivery from Bing Crosby.

Tops in mush is "Happiness Exchange," a two-hour friendship orgy, containing quickie quizzes, periods for prayer, fund-raising sessions to buy guide-dogs or radios for the afflicted. The audience phones in whatever is demanded by jockey "Big Joe," who answers their calls before the mike. "Meet Me at the Copa," which issues from a famous night club, relies chiefly on heavy glamor. In this one Ted Lawrence interviews celebrities and takes calls from bobbysoxers who just want to say "hello" and mention wistfully that they have been roller-skating all evening or seeing their

drafted boyfriend off at Grand Central. He doesn't give them a bad deal. For a ten-cent phone call and only a little embarrassment, a worried girl can get a feeling of importance that can keep her going for almost four days. It's a lot cheaper than Elizabeth Arden.

BIG JOE is one of the most peculiar lingo-throwers in history. He has broken all existing records for the wholesale use of kindly and friendly language. He seems to regard his audience as slices of bread, using speech that butters the phoner's face, and then spreads strawberry jam all over it. "Oh thank you darling, thank you darling, God Bless you" is one of Joe's harsher greetings. A voice ringing with earthy virtues gives him immediate entry into listeners' hearts. He talks at a slow, climbing crawl which, like the revivalist's shriek, becomes high and hysterical as he tries simultaneously to be neighborly, Godly, and natural. His burlesqued New Orleans accent is one ear-catcher in a rich performance that consists of musical incantations, sudden shrieks of jovial harrassment (HUSH, PHONE!), heartwarming dissertations on the Ten Commandments, and explosions of laughter that sound like a six-year-old being tickled under the armpit. His unrestrained exhibition loosens up his listeners, not only emotionally but economically.

The program is constantly being assailed by a flood of small change, wrinkled bills, and used bric-a-brac pouring into Big Joe's favorite charities. Big Joe's talk may make sense to the habitués; to a casual listener, it is apt to sound like a cross between a Mississippi steamboat, Kate Smith, "Red" Barber, and the Reverend Harry Emerson Fosdick: "Please, won't somebody please guess this ole question. Ah've got these eight radios foah Bellevue. Good Moooooorning, Happiness Exchange . . . no, not croquet, you silly, not tiddly-winks, not parchesi, not chess, Tommy Fleming first world champion of this sport . . . no, no, Choo-choo wanted to know if it was squash."

"Symphony Sid" is a monstrously shrewd fellow. As a pioneer in the chattering disc jockey program, he was the most indifferent of all jazz-loving announcers, including razzmatazz linguists like Fred Robbins, Leonard Feather, "Jazzbo." Each of these lads believed in a special type of jazz and presumed to know as much about it as those who played it. But Sid was an esthete who showed no erudition: he simply babbled ecstatically and importantly, plying his talk with "real" sentences as though he were making the listener a guest at a wild frolic, i.e., "things are really jumping," "Man, we're having ourselves a real ball." Still one of radio's most original "sound men," he grabs your ear by suggest-

ing a lethargic lizard so activated by benzedrine that he has taken to galloping around the terrain like a happy giraffe.

Sid was the first disc man to prove that midnight listeners don't want information — all they want is the sound of cheerful strutting life about them. People probably think they want information, but instead Sid gives them the sounds of an exciting world, which he perpetrates with vocal tricks and the enthusiasm of a man who is on the inside of something very big. His spiel dwells on topics that link the listener to the noisy, carefree world of the jazz orgy. Even his laxative commercials are read with the ecstatic excitement of one who has just promised you four uninterrupted days of hearty merrymaking. Another plug with this ragged rhythm: "I want you to *dig* my friend Al . . . he has all the *new sounds* of Jazz . . . you'll find the *blues*, the great *mamba* sides, the great *Dizzy Gillespie*, the great *Charlie Parker*. . . ." This transports the listener from an empty room across the city to a small, brightly lit record shop that is jumping with wild sounds and zany characters. With vocal color and his weird placement of emphasis, Sid removes all problems from conversation, and puts you where you can enjoy the gaudy social pleasures consummately without exercising a brain cell, moving a muscle, or leaving your chair.

ANOTHER PROFESSIONAL “friend” is Cookie (of Cookie’s Caravan). This hero sounds like a broth of a farmer’s boy, not very bright but strong on homey sentiment. In the key moments of his program, he breaks into long verses of chin-up philosophizing; with a sad, corny record playing behind him, he paints a lachrymose picture of the mean way people carry on after a tiring day at the office, and then this same weary Cookie describes the virtues of a cheerful countenance, a helping hand. Cookie’s rich basso is saturated with self-confidence, but he sells his pious exhibitionism by affecting the IQ of a simple, uncalculating fellow. He foregoes telephone calls and games; his program of “ballady” records and talk is rigged like a make-believe train ride that transports listeners away from slums, smog, and subway jams. Conductor Cookie offers friendship and reassurance in uplifting “you” sentences of four or five words — “Don’t you get discouraged . . . and don’t you forget . . . and don’t you be blue.”

In the wee, phantasy-producing hours of the night there is a radio companion for just about every variety of bored, frightened, or dissatisfied listener. “Serious-minded” people can tune in Controversialist Barry Gray and have invigorating hair-pulling and hair-splitting on subjects like Frank Costello, antivivisection, or legalized prostitution. The snob-set and its aspirers

snuggle close to Igor “Cholly Knickerbocker” Cassini and his low-garbling of syntax with highly situated people from sparsely inhabited places like Newport and Bermuda. Knickerbocker is a self-satisfied newcomer to radio, who operates as a social ice-breaker, and who can be heard at 11:00 P.M., washing and flopping in the verbal waves like a nervous aardvark: “De odder night, if I may use de woid ‘cute,’ I tawk wid dat cute inhabitant, dat puhson who is called Maggi MaNellis by duh best people.”

WHAT IS THE secret of their success? The disc jockey would like to think it is “sincerity,” but much more probably it is shrewd showmanship. Like an old trouper, he talks directly at an individual rather than a large audience, as though the listener were being singled out as a beloved friend of the announcer’s family. “How’s yoah mother feeling . . . not so good . . . well it’s mighty sweet of you to send money foah our newspaper . . . our Happiness Exchange newspaper . . . our little newspaper.” He manages to exude so much sympathy and pleasure that it encourages others to phone in for a similar reception.

Listeners follow his pampering speech like an army of rats in the wake of a Pied Piper. But while the mythical Piper played a tune that was completely of his own making,

his modern counterpart offers talk that is a mimicry of the words and intonations his listeners use every day. By carefully gearing their dialogue down to the level of the most commonplace listener, these opportunistic shrewdies give the average guy a big lift by putting an okay on his conversation, taste, and intelligence. These programs keep telling him that the way he is, is the right way to be. He figures, "This jockey guy makes a million dollars a year." By self-identification, he figures he, too, can be a Big Shot Success and make a million dollars.

A good jockey plays to each member of the family; he jokes about his own wife and kids like a fond parent, trills like a serious housewife about a handsome pocketbook, and soars effortlessly into bobby-sox ecstasy over an undernourished crooner. He makes emotionally charged displays of vulnerability as a comrade-in-arms. "My dear Mrs. Marty, I've never got provoked at a telephone call. I've wanted to be a little bit bigger than the telephone call." If this outburst doesn't prove his freedom from pretense, the next step is to sound still more natural and untrained. So he breaks into a thought with an embarrassed aside — "You're staring, oh how you are staring"; he loses the thread of conversation so that he can giggle like a drunken uncle at his niece's marriage; he gives it the Fred Robbins' touch of

intimacy, breathing heavily and talking as though he were running up a steep hill.

THE NIGHT RIDER of the air-waves shuttles between two worlds of sound. From everyday life, he takes the cozy words familiar to the ear. The other world, the peculiar creation of disc jockeys, is made up of oral pyrotechnics, tricks for multiplying conversation, drawing attention, building suspense. The disc men are the nerviest noise creators in captivity; in order to keep their insipid discourse from dying on the air-waves, they will bellow, purr, explode, or talk like angels. "Anything to break the monotony" is their first working rule, and they succeed by providing the most remarkable sounds in radio. Fred Robbins has a five-year-old reciting commercials; Barry Gray spikes a discussion of Miami hotel rates with a dig at his restaurant audience: "This place sounds like the Chicago stockyards;" and any chunk of Big Joe's ranting has a variety of words and images that would satisfy a good surrealist poet.

"And we keep right on going" is a pet announcement of Symphony Sid. These disc men will do anything in order to keep the conversation rolling endlessly. Their constant questioning "hooks" the caller into an obligation to respond. These "hooks" create a weird conversation made up of grunts, pauses, sociable

phrases, and the “Yes, I know” answer that tells the radio audience nothing. This paucity of information is frustrating, so you listen indefinitely, just waiting for a crumb of enlightenment to grab hold of. All of which goes to prove that these midnight programs are well-timed, because if you were to listen to them in the daytime, they would probably put you to sleep.

Still another factor that makes for the popularity of these programs has to do with the usually painful relationship of the American to Words. It is hard to imagine the average Frenchman or Italian — people to whom buzz-saw talking is probably the easiest thing they do — accepting, much less asking, for a radio entertainer whose foremost talent is ceaseless chatter. For talk that never tightens up, stumbles or embarrasses itself in company is like circus magic in a country that is impressed by the man who can simultaneously sound off and keep his foot out of his mouth; i.e., Al Smith, Joe Louis, Roosevelt.

The one disc jockey who almost satisfies this thirst for intelligent articulation and exploits all the weird possibilities of the non-musical record program bears the fake-sounding moniker, Barry Gray. He is, without doubt, the glib but most spontaneous radioriginal since the early Henry Morgan tried nightly to ruin his sponsor’s “elevated shoe” sales.

Gray runs a combination show — current events and celebrities — at a pink-walled, rather genteel bistro named Chandler’s, and he has nudged the idea of impersonal radio chatter in all of the more reasonable directions. An Oral Oligarch who is sincere to a painfully humorless point, he created the din of a raging machine-gun battle, with opinions on everything from William O’Dwyer to mile-by-mile descriptions of trans-continental auto trips. Anything that Gray has heard, seen, or done since puberty strikes him as a wonderfully juicy topic that makes him ooze pleasurable belief in his precocity.

Covering an infinite range of topics, Gray nevertheless manages to keep all of his conversation going on a reasonably intelligent level. He never gets very brilliant, but I have rarely heard him make a stupid remark, except when he is engaged in the tiresome business of flattering someone. Fundamentally Gray seems to think there are two wonderful classes of people in America: successful theatre people and people who have the “right ideas” on politics. He doesn’t think anything is interesting unless he or the person he is interviewing has a personal relationship to it. If someone mentions a book and he doesn’t know the author he doesn’t think it worth discussing. The mention of a character in a recent best-seller drew the bewildering response, “Who’s that,

someone you know?" His feeling for personal relations is a monomania and in a way a weakness, but it seems to be what people crave and need on radio. It also helps to make him, for all-round intimate chatter and varied ad-libbing, the most gifted improviser on radio.

GRAY is a touchy, young Californian with a nervous manner, mellifluous voice, and certain rabid traits possessed by all disc jockeys. His tongue runs wild on Americanisms: "This system is a great one . . . we are the only people on earth existing at this moment. . . ." The type of self-confidence that smiles at itself rather than the audience, makes him drool over his own taste and strength of character: "What a wonderful world it would be if everyone told the truth, Gosh! . . . most of the people who come here tell the truth." Sometimes he lords it over his phonecallers, pouncing on faux pas, like "propagation" used by someone who meant "propaganda," until you wonder why anyone ever calls him. Probably, some of his callers are just masochists, dying to get their ears pinned back—but the rest want to test their verbal powers against a guy who's become known as the Champ. The competitive urge draws an impressive lineup of opponents—standouts in their own fields—who work for nothing and take the chance of getting their reputations

jarred by taking an oratorical "beating" on the air.

Gray brings to disc-jockeying a frankness that steps on toes, and hides little. He trades opinions with Big Shot guests, choosing subjects from the front-page of the newspaper, which he seems to have studied before going on the air. His political position veers first to the right, then to the left of center; he is anti-MacArthur, for outlawing the Communist party, pro-U.M.T., pro-Acheson, anti-socialized medicine. Gray is Jewish and he is driven by anti-Semitic letter-writers and phoners to brandishing that fact on nearly every program. He obligingly reads their notes over the air: "Why don't you go back to Israel?" or even more fascinating "Why don't you go back to Africa?"

Despite his name, which suggests an empty smoothie, he is a pugnacious debater and a solemn wit who describes the lady who lives over Chandler's as a "very nice lady . . . every once in a while she bangs on the ceiling with a broom . . . in the daytime she flies around on it." A reference by the boss to the decor of Chandler's drew the accurate response: "What decor?" A famous guest, trying too hard to prove his Hooper rating as a comic ran into the vicious haymaker: "We're not going to do the old insults again?"

As you can see, it's just a question of who can outlast whom. My bet is on the disembodied voice.

*Why a Young Russian Soldier Gave a
Hungarian Woman a Pair of Silk Stockings*

“WE’RE HUMAN BEINGS, TOO”

ALEXANDRA ORME

IN 1944, IN A Hungarian village, seventeen people were sitting in a cellar, expecting the Russian armies. For two days Germans and Russians had been fighting over their heads but today it seemed quieter; nobody was shooting. The children grew restless and wanted to go up to see the first Soviet soldiers, but they were told to keep quiet, and only some of the men went up to see what was going on. They came back very soon with the news. The village was occupied by the Red Army.

“How do they look, the liberators? What are they doing? Are they sacking the population? How do they behave?”

These were the questions the men heard on their return to the cellar.

But they answered unwillingly, pretending indifference, the better to hide their fears.

“They look like hooligans, par-

tisans, or marauders, not like any regular army I ever saw,” said one of the men.

“Ildiko!” called the priest of the village from his dark corner in the cellar. “You know your new responsibility; you’re the only one who can talk to them.”

A woman turned her head. “I hardly speak Ruthenian, it’s so many years since I last spoke it,” she said. She was middle-aged and plump, with a large, kind face.

“Good gracious! what will we do if they don’t understand what Ildiko tells them?” shouted another woman. “If she speaks only Ruthenian it might prove as hard for a Russian to understand as Dutch for a German.”

“Not in the least,” and the priest waved his hand to quiet them. “The Slav languages are all very much alike. I’m sure every Russian will understand Ildiko’s Ruthenian.”

One of the men asked: “Mrs.