

She Made It: Recovering the Woman's Voice in Radio and Television

By Ron Simon

From the earliest days of broadcasting, women have had a major impact on the artistic growth and financial success of radio and television. They have been responsible for the development and evolution of many genres crucial to the broadcasting industry, including situation comedy, the soap opera, and, most recently, reality. These contributions have been largely ignored in standard textbooks. For example, Irna Phillips created one of the most resilient genres in the history of broadcasting, the soap opera, crafting the techniques to sustain the serial narrative that is now a fixture on prime time. She is not mentioned in Eric Barnouw's sweeping, three volume history of the media; the two titans for whom she generated unprecedented profits, David Sarnoff of NBC RCA and William Paley of CBS Television, gave her no credit in their respective autobiographies. In her 1973 obituary the *New York Times* revealed the prejudices of the day by describing her as an "elderly,

wispy spinster."

Since 2005 The Museum of Television & Radio has attempted to rectify the situation by offering a storyline of broadcasting history that integrates the achievements of women with its most extensive exhibit, *She Made It: Women Creating Television and Radio*. The exhibition pays tribute to the visionary pioneers and contemporary innovators and is a multi-year project that annually spotlights the accomplishments of exemplary women in four distinct realms: entertainment, news, sports, and the executive suite. The project focuses on women's contributions as producers, writers, and directors as well as heads of networks. The Museum will use all of its resources—screenings, seminars, permanent collection, and the Internet—to document the struggles and triumphs of the women who have made a difference in the electronic arts. The biographies and selected programming of the first hundred women are published on its website www.mtr.org.

The Pioneers

The Museum has been working with a steering committee of industry leaders and academic specialists to select the women who have made a difference. Its honorees represent three distinct eras of women's engagement in broadcasting. The first generation encompassed the true pioneers, often the lone female in the company of men. Even without moral support, these women envisioned possibilities for media that had startling consequences. Two dimly remembered women notably innovated new forms of radio programming. Radio executive Anne Hummert, who was one of the mostly highly paid women in the country, revolutionized daytime programming by not only reshaping the soap opera narrative but also crating a production process marked by efficiency and specialization. Hummert became so dominant in radio broadcasting because she coupled an acute business sense with what writer James Thurber called, "a sound understanding of how to catch the ear of the woman radio listener." Nila Mack was the first producer to cast a children's series with child actors and her landmark series *Let's Pretend* ran for twenty years with Mack doing it all as creator, writer, producer, and "directress," the term the industry coined for a woman who aspired to the man's job of directing. Child actor and now historian Arthur Anderson assesses all her talents: "Besides Nila Mack's scripts, her genius for choosing and working with her juvenile cast was the main reason the show survived longer than any other dramatic program on American radio."

Another trailblazer almost totally forgotten is Bertha Brainard, who was there at the creation of network radio. Brainard, the first head of programming

for NBC radio in the late 1920s, established radio as a cultural medium by developing the Saturday afternoon Metropolitan Opera broadcasts and Walter Damrosch's *Music Appreciation* programs. Brainard was a habitu  of the theater and concert halls, trusting her well-tuned ear for the best of all sorts of music. She changed the direction of the radio programming by hiring the medium's first superstar, Rudy Vallee. Singer and bandleader Vallee demonstrated that radio was also made for contemporary music and that the public hungered for those new sounds enhanced by the microphone. Brainard later reasoned that only a woman could understand the seduction of Vallee's voice and foresee its power on the airwaves.

Some pioneering women were initially uncomfortable running the show, but, after an early reluctance, transformed themselves and the industry. Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz built their small production company, Desilu, into a major Hollywood empire. When they divorced, Ball was forced to become a manager: "I never wanted to be an executive, but when my marriage to Desi broke up after nineteen years, I couldn't just walk away from my obligations and say forget it. We were an institution. So I took on all the responsibilities." She became the first women president of a major television production company and later sold Desilu Studios to Gulf + Western Industries for a handsome profit. Another executive pioneer, Ethel Winant used her legendary casting expertise to become the first female vice president in network television. She relished working on such series as *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and *The Bob Newhart Show*, but realized that changes were necessary on the top floor. Becoming a VP at CBS, she was upset that the single restroom in

the executive dining room did not have a lock. Winant recalled: “For a year and a half I would take the elevator down to the ladies’ room. One day, I decided to just leave my shoes outside the executive bathroom door. They got the message fairly quickly.”

With the Law on Her Side

The second era was impacted by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission’s enforcement of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Now it was not a matter of choice for corporations to hire women and minorities, and females entered workplace en masse, not as lone individuals. Cokie Roberts has written that the feminist revolution was successful in breaking down many barriers: “Now there is an entire generation of women, and we came in all together. We came in with the law on our side, and we’ve been working our way through the workplace for the last thirty-plus years.” National Public Radio made its debut in May 1971 and its beginnings paralleled the emerging women’s movement. NPR became a model organization in which women were promoted to challenging and creative positions as producers, directors, and journalists, including Roberts, Susan Stamberg, Nina Totenberg and Linda Werthheimer. Totenberg understood how hard it was for a woman reporter before the Title VII: “In those days, it was very difficult to get a job as a journalist if you were a woman. It was prior to the Civil Rights Act even passing and women



U.N. Correspondent Pauline Frederick, 1946

didn’t hire women. They just didn’t. And people said that to me.”

Before this community of women came the pioneering journalists, often powerless in a male-dominated industry. Roberts and other reporters were certainly mindful of the work of such early newswomen as Dorothy Thompson and Pauline Frederick. Thompson was one of the first commentators to question Hitler’s rise to power (calling him the “very prototype of the Little Man”) and her radio broadcasts were considered “an intriguing blend of Oxford and Main Street.” In 1934 Thompson achieved the distinction of being the first journalist, male or female, to be thrown out of Germany. Frederick established a series of firsts for women: she was the first woman to cover politics for ABC (1946),



Connie Chung on the set of "Saturday Night with Connie Chung" in 1989.



CBS News correspondent Marlene Sanders in 1981 for "Where Are You" CBS Reports.

the first woman to cover a national political convention (1948), the first newswoman on staff full-time for a TV network (1948), the first newswoman to win a Peabody Award (1954), and the first woman to moderate a presidential debate (1976). But she was turned down by the legendary Edward R. Murrow, who commented in a memo that her voice is pleasing but I would not call her manner or material distinguished." Perhaps Murrow was influenced by a 1947 profile in Newsweek, entitled "Spinster at the News Mike."

Lesley Stahl was working for a Boston affiliate when she heard about the new hiring policy of CBS, receiving her big break when the news division hired her as a general-assignment reporter. She was part of CBS News' "affirmative action babies," whose team included Connie

Chung and Bernard Shaw. As a team they struggled against newsroom veterans, who objected to the new employment practices. In 1975 sixteen women brought a sex discrimination suit against NBC on behalf of all women employed by the company from 1972 on. Two years later NBC settled the bias suit, agreeing to a two million dollar out-of-court settlement and promising to set specific affirmative goals for woman, including fifteen percent of the top position below the rank of vice president. A long-time documentary producer at NBC, Lucy Jarvis, clearly understood the corporate and personal ramifications of such a suit: "I fought hard to help women move up the ladder because I always felt that the more successful women there were around me, the better it reflected on me."

Even the most celebrated women have

had to overcome obstacles that now seem unbelievable. When Barbara Walters began interviewing guests on *Today* during the 1960s, she was forbidden to ask questions about such “male” topics as politics or economics. Walters pointed out to the *New York Times* in 2004 that *Today*’s host, Frank McGee, required that in the studio “if there was a hard news interview I could only come in after he’d asked three questions.” In 1976 Walters made history. She became not only the first woman to helm a nightly newscast, but also the highest-paid journalist in the industry. Walters’ salary created a firestorm of debate while she also failed to achieve a chemistry with coanchor Harry Reasoner. In fact, the chauvinistic Reasoner would not speak to the newcomer off the air. Walters later admitted: “I was drowning without a life preserver.” A year later, she recovered, smashing any vestige of the old rules by arranging the first joint exchange between Egypt’s President Anwar Sadat and Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin.

Advancement as Evolution

Despite changes in the law, women advanced slowly. In the pre-feminist era producer Marian Rees stated that she was “overlooked, bypassed for promotions, always underpaid, and dismissed when I asked to produce.” Before she founded her own production company in 1981, she had to overcome years of self-doubt and anxiety. For years actor Betty Thomas yearned to direct. While she was performing on *Hill Street Blues*, she spent countless hours absorbing the directorial process: going to castings calls, story meetings, and editing sessions. She finally got her chance to direct in the late eighties, helming such series as *Hooperman* and *Dream On*, and now

realizes that advancement of women is “an evolution; it is not a revolution.” Even in the new century with the law on her side, advancement in the crafts is still difficult for women. After a successful career in film and television, Martha Coolidge was elected president of the Directors Guild of America—the first woman to hold the post. She campaigned for greater women and minority employment, but became frustrated with the results: “The DGA and its African American, Asian, Latino, and women’s committees have held countless meetings with producers, networks, and studio representatives, conducted nine networking mixers in 2002 to introduce women and minority directors to key showrunners in order to develop new relationships, and have created extensive women and minority director contact lists to counter the argument that quality women and minority directors are difficult to find. With few exceptions, these efforts have not translated into action by the producers and the networks.”

Journalist Marlene Sanders remarked that being the only woman in a television newsroom was a distinction, “but a lonely one.” Sanders would later become the first woman to go to Vietnam and the first woman to anchor a nightly newscast for a major network, but will always remember the beginning in the fifties: “I was the only woman in my category of work. In those days, the newsrooms and the studios did not employ women in any capacity, except for secretaries or an occasional production assistant. There were no women writers, producers or broadcasters.” The Museum’s *She Made It* initiative was created to acknowledge the ample history of women’s achievements in radio and television, from the pioneering individuals to the empowered generation. The third generation of

women in the industry can now see their roles as a continuum, making the future less lonely: The accomplishments of Gertrude Berg, who starred on the radio and television series *The Goldbergs* while writing thousands of scripts, let Roseanne and Ellen DeGeneres know that a women can produce, write and star in her own comedy. Founder of King Broadcasting Company Dorothy Stimson Bullitt helped to open the executive suite for Kay Koplovitz (President and CEO of USA Networks) and Pat Fili-Krushel (President of ABC-TV). Writer Madelyn

Pugh Davis's comic touch on *I Love Lucy* paved the way for the sketch comedy of Gail Parent on *The Carol Burnett Show* and later Anne Beatts and Rose Shuster on *Saturday Night Live*. During the First Annual Comedy Hall of Fame festivities, Carol Burnett was explicit about the contributions of Lucille Ball: she "opened the door for us." The Museum hopes that learning the invaluable contributions of all the *She Made It* women will open doors in all media for many generations to come.

Ron Simon is the radio and television curator at The Museum of Television & Radio. He can be seen moderating two *She Made It* seminars at www.mtr.org: *From The Goldbergs to 2005: The Evolution of the Family Sitcom* with Gertrude Berg biographers Aviva Kempner and David Zurawik as well as comedy writers John Markus and Bell Persky and *The Women of NPR* with Melissa Block, Maria Hinojosa, Cokie Roberts, Susan Stamberg, and Linda Wertheimer.