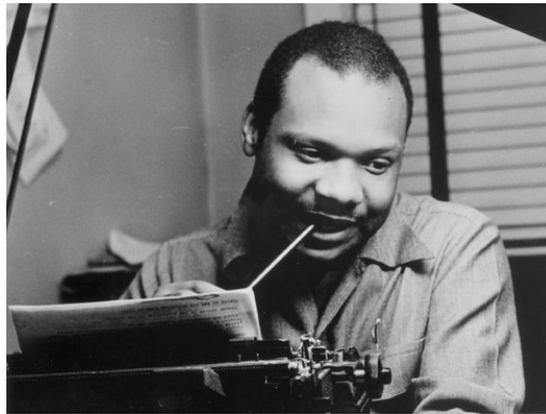


# “Destination Freedom”: “A Garage in Gainesville” and “Execution Awaited” (September 25; October 2, 1949)

Added to the National Registry: 2015

Essay by Ryan Ellett (guest post)\*



*Richard Durham*

“Destination Freedom” is widely considered the pinnacle of African-American-created audio drama from the Golden Age of broadcasting. This recognition is an acknowledgement of both creator Richard Durham’s writing prowess and the paucity of opportunities for black writers and performers in radio at the time. Airing between June 1948 and August 1950, Durham’s series highlighted triumphs and tragedies of famous and not-so-famous African-Americans, from biographies of black stars including Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong and historical giants such as Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass, to common men and women such as the all-black 332<sup>nd</sup> Fighter Group of WWII.

As moving as his biographies could be, Durham’s writing was at its most powerful when he scripted fictional stories that directly called out racism and the associated acts of brutality that were all too common at the time. During the fall of 1949, Durham wrote a two-episode series dealing explicitly with prejudice and racism using language and perspectives that would have been eye-opening for most mid-century white listeners. In the first broadcast, “A Garage in Gainesville,” aired September 25, 1949, a white man was expected to aid a local mob in lynching his African-American business partner who was wrongly accused of assaulting a white woman. The finale was dramatic and, tragically, too real. The second episode, “Execution Awaited,” aired October 2, 1949, directly called out prejudice in the United States Senate, in American industry, and in social circles through a unique interview with Mr. Prejudice himself. Its addressing of the evils of the transatlantic slave trade was a jaw-dropping contrast to the idyllic, carefree plantation settings that had held over from the vaudeville era and were still common in radio even as the mid-century neared.

Originally sponsored by the “Chicago Defender” for its first 13 weeks, “Destination Freedom” was carried by Chicago’s WMAQ on a sustaining basis (meaning without sponsorship) for most

of the rest of its run except for some funding provided by the Urban League of Chicago in 1950. The show's two-part series on prejudice that is now a part of the Library of Congress' National Recording Registry epitomized the scathing scripts that prevented "Destination Freedom" from ever gaining a deep-pocketed commercial sponsor.

Author Richard Durham stated that one of his goals with the program was to "cut through the false images of black life propagated through the popular arts." His efforts were recognized and during its short run the series received praise from one of radio's premier writers, Norman Corwin, the Ohio State University, and even Illinois governor (and future presidential candidate) Adlai Stevenson. As might be expected in a time when issues of racial oppression and segregation went unacknowledged on the airwaves and sponsors avoided any whiff of the topics as to avoid offending Southern audiences, the program received its share of criticism. Despite airing on Sunday mornings, a virtual graveyard for any dramatic programming, the host station, WMAQ, retained the right of final approval for all of Durham's scripts and not infrequently used this power to insist on changes. Organizations including the Knights of Columbus and the Chamber of Commerce also leveled criticisms at particular episodes during its run.

"Destination Freedom" grew out of Richard Durham's previous radio work that started as early as 1942 when he participated in the first NBC-Northwestern University radio institute. His first series, "Democracy-USA," premiered on Chicago's WBBM in 1946 and profiled the lives of African-American figures. The next year he debuted the earliest known black soap opera, the purely dramatic show "Here Comes Tomorrow," that followed the post-War problems of the Redmond family. Both of these programs left the air in the spring of 1948 as Durham prepared "Destination Freedom."

The large body of surviving recordings for "Destination Freedom" serves as an audio treasury of the broadcasting work of a number of African-American performers who, as a whole, struggled to find roles outside of comedy programming. Richard Durham fashioned a small cadre of Chicago-area actors of color who regularly worked all of his series. Many of the male roles in "Destination Freedom" were played by Fred Pinkard who was just getting a foothold in the radio business in the late 1940s and Oscar Browne, Jr. who starred in Durham's other series as well as a news show called "Negro Newsfront." Female parts were frequently filled by Wezlyn Tilden and Janice Kingslow, the former going on to a long stage career but the latter seeming to disappear from the Chicago performing arts scene. This series represents the only known broadcast recordings of these performers.

Like Carlton Moss, radio's first black dramatist who left radio in the mid-1930s to pursue greater opportunities in film, Richard Durham ended "Destination Freedom" not due to station pressures or negative audience reaction but because he simply could not earn a satisfactory living authoring a sustained series. Durham was subsequently hired to write for sponsored network series and he worked steadily through the waning years of radio drama. However, his name was rarely associated with any of this work, so he claimed, to avoid upsetting Southern sponsors.

"Destination Freedom," ironically, may have reached a wider audience in the last 35 years than it did while on the air thanks to the discovery of a large stash of the program's transcription discs found in the early 1980s. Listeners today can now hear most of the series in high quality audio

and appreciate the show both for its historical importance and for its entertainment value that still fully holds up seven decades later.

*Ryan Ellett earned his Ph.D. at the University of Kansas and has published three books and dozens of articles on the history of radio broadcasting. He is the recipient of the 2008 Stone/Waterman Award winner recognizing Outstanding Contributions to the Preservation of Old Time Radio.*

\*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.