"Grand Ole Opry": First network radio broadcast (October 14, 1939)
Added to the National Registry: 2002
Essay by Paul Kingsbury (guest post)*

Background

“The Grand Ole Opry” is the oldest radio program still in existence in the United States. The musical variety show has been broadcast on Saturday nights from station WSM in Nashville, Tennessee, since 1925. The members of its cast over the decades have been some of the most influential and significant performers in the history of country music. They include Hank Williams, Patsy Cline, Johnny Cash, Dolly Parton, Loretta Lynn, Reba McEntire, Garth Brooks, and many more.

The “Grand Ole Opry” broadcast that was selected for the National Registry in 2002 is the first network radio broadcast of the “Opry,” which took place on October 14, 1939. Up until this date, the “Grand Ole Opry” had been only broadcasting from its radio towers and had not been affiliated with a radio network, which at that time used telephone lines to transmit radio signals more widely across the nation.

In 1939, the New York advertising firm of William Esty & Company convinced the R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company to promote its Prince Albert Smoking Tobacco (“The National Joy Smoke”). The clout of a major sponsor like R.J. Reynolds helped convince the NBC Red Network to pick up a half-hour segment of the “Grand Ole Opry” and air it from 8:30 to 9:00 p.m. Central Time. That initial broadcast of the “Prince Albert Show” portion of the “Grand Ole Opry” in October 1939 was transmitted to a regional network of 26 stations in the Southeast and Southwest--or as announcer David Stone puts it in this first network broadcast, “from the Mexican border to the mountains of Virginia.” (In October 1943, NBC expanded the transmittal to its full coast-to-coast national network beginning with 125 stations and gradually increasing.)

The “Grand Ole Opry” had moved into Nashville’s stately War Memorial Auditorium (built in 1925) for its broadcasts just a few months earlier, in July 1939. For the first
time, the “Opry” charged admission to its audiences in the new venue, which could hold 2,200 people. The admission fee was 25 cents.

The Performers

On hand for that premiere network broadcast was a cast that represented the cream of the “Opry” crop in the late 1930s. Of the performers who appeared on the half-hour broadcast that night, four of them have since been elected to the Country Music Hall of Fame: Roy Acuff, DeFord Bailey, George D. Hay, and Uncle Dave Macon.

Roy Acuff, then the “Grand Ole Opry’s” rising star, had joined the program a year and a half earlier at the age of 34 with his Smoky Mountain Boys string band. He was a fiddler with showmanship and a powerful, emotionally charged singer. He poured himself into his songs like a method actor, living inside the lyrics of his songs. “I like to get into the mood of a song,” he explained. “If you don’t feel it, you can’t sing it. You can’t fool a person out there. I’ve cried onstage, not just for that audience, but I’ve cried because I wanted to cry, because it was hurting.” Two performers from his band are spotlighted performing “John Henry” in this broadcast--18 year-old banjoist Rachel Veach and 27 year-old dobro player Pete Kirby, known in the cast as Rachel’s “Bashful Brother Oswald,” though he was no such thing.

The master of ceremonies was George D. Hay, then aged 44 and often called “Judge Hay,” though he was not an attorney or a real judge; he took the nickname years earlier when he was a court reporter for the “Memphis Commercial Appeal.” Hay was the WSM program director who originated the “Grand Ole Opry” in 1925, but he was no longer the program director at this time, having been superseded by others. Nevertheless, he was a folksy and colorful announcer who was still a key public face for the “Opry.”

DeFord Bailey, dubbed the “Harmonica Wizard” by Hay, was indeed a virtuoso on the harmonica. He joined the “Opry” as a cast member in 1926, and he quickly became one of its most popular and most frequently scheduled performers. Bailey could also play the guitar and banjo and sang sometimes as well, but harmonica pieces were his showcases. Aged 39 when he appeared on this broadcast, he was at the peak of his musical prowess.

Uncle Dave Macon took up professional music making late in life, at the age of 53. Two years later, he was starring at the “Opry.” An all-around entertainer and showman, Macon could tell funny stories and jokes, twirl the banjo around as he played, and share popular old tunes from the 19th century or his versions of the latest country favorites. “It ain’t what you got; it’s what you put out,” he liked to say. “And boys, I deliver!” Macon performed frequently with his son Dorris on guitar, who joined the old-timer for two songs on this broadcast.

Rounding out the cast of performers that evening was one of the “Opry’s” many string bands that appeared on the show in that era, the Fruit Jar Drinkers, led by fiddler George Wilkerson, who earned his living working in a Nashville lumberyard. The “Opry” featured several string bands since its beginnings, and the Fruit Jar Drinkers were one of
the program’s most popular because of their hard-driving style on up-tempo numbers. Surprisingly, the band never made any commercial recordings, which makes this recording a rare opportunity to hear the Fruit Jar Drinkers in action.

The Musical Selections

The program opens with WSM announcer David Stone (who also delivers the commercials) introducing Prince Albert Tobacco as the sponsor of this broadcast of the “Grand Ole Opry” and handing the program off to the folksy emcee of the show, George D. Hay.

Next Roy Acuff & His Smoky Mountain Boys play the show’s theme song, “Have a Big Time Tonight,” followed soon after by a high-speed fiddle breakdown on “Ida Red,” an old folk tune recorded by many early country music acts. Not surprisingly, Acuff and the band had recorded the song that July in sessions in Memphis, Tennessee.

Hay introduces one of the “Opry’s” favorite stars next as “our Senator from the Cannon County hills.” Uncle Dave Macon, accompanied on guitar by his son Dorris, then proceeds to sing his humorous autobiographical song “Cannon County Hills” about the Tennessee moonshiners he would come across as he made his rural rounds. Following Macon, we get the rare treat of hearing the Fruit Jar Drinkers, who never recorded commercially. Here they perform a lively version of “Up Jumped the Devil,” a venerable fiddle breakdown handed down through folk tradition.

As was his custom, Hay delivers a patronizing introduction for DeFord Bailey, referring to him as “our little mascot.” Though diminutive in stature (standing less than five feet tall) and the only Black musician in the “Grand Ole Opry” cast, Bailey was hardly a mascot. On the contrary, he was by all accounts one of the most popular performers on the program at the time. Here he plays one of his signature numbers, “Pan-American Blues,” in which he musically imitates the sound of an accelerating freight train. His commercial recording of it was released by the Brunswick company in 1927.

Roy Acuff sings the next number, the allegorical hymn “The Great Speckled Bird,” with lyrics written by the Reverend Guy Smith. It was already one of Acuff’s signature songs, along with the “Wabash Cannonball,” both of which he would sing proudly at the “Opry” for the rest of his life. He recorded “The Great Speckled Bird” several times in his career.

Uncle Dave Macon returns to perform a song he did often, Jimmie Davis’s “Nobody’s Darling But Mine.” In contrast to Davis’s serious and sentimental hit version of the song from 1934, Macon hams the song up with stuttering tongue trills and humorous pauses. He’s quickly followed by another breakneck fiddle-driven instrumental from George Wilkerson & the Fruit Jar Drinkers.

For his second number, DeFord Bailey offers another one of his impressive musical imitations, “Fox Chase,” which he recorded for Brunswick in 1927. In this tune, Bailey
conveys both the yips of the hounds and the calls of the fox hunters urging their dogs on in the hunt. Acuff’s band members Rachel Veach and Bashful Brother Oswald tackle the next number, the venerable folk tune “John Henry.” Rachel plays the rollicking banjo and delivers the lead vocals.

Acuff and band follow with another up-tempo hoedown tune, the folk song “Old Rattler,” driven by Acuff’s frenetic fiddling and Brother Oswald’s rapid-fire dobro. Uncle Dave and Dorris Macon provide another humorous interlude with a jocular version of Kelly Harrell’s “Away Out on the Mountain,” which was popularized by the Blue Yodeler, Jimmie Rodgers. The Macons deliver an almost slapstick duet version of the song, punctuated by ragged yodels and interjections.

It’s worth noting that DeFord Bailey was significant enough a performer to merit two more harmonica numbers, “Evening Prayer Blues” and “Memphis Blues,” bringing his performance total to four--more complete performances than any other musician that night. The first of these is a tune Bailey developed from an old folk song and which he recorded for Brunswick in 1927. The second is Bailey’s wonderfully jaunty and acrobatic rendition of W.C. Handy’s famous 1912 composition. Bailey never made a commercial recording of this lively tune. Roy Acuff and his band close the program with a brief up-tempo version of the venerable folk song “She’ll Be Coming Round the Mountain.”

This remarkable historical recording was preserved for many years on a 16-inch radio transcription disc that had been in safekeeping at the National Tobacco Museum. In 1985, having acquired the collection, the R J. Reynolds Tobacco Company donated its entire collection of “Grand Ole Opry” network broadcasts to the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum. More than 300 shows, recorded between October 14, 1939 and December 24, 1960 (when the “Prince Albert Show” ended) are preserved on those discs in the Frist Library and Archive of the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum.


*The views expressed in the essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.