

“Mary Margaret McBride” with guest Zora Neale Hurston (January 25, 1943)

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Essay by Cary O'Dell



Mary Margaret McBride



*McBride on “Radio-Television Mirror”
August 1951*



Zora Neale Hurston

Often referred to as the “First Lady of Radio,” interviewer Mary Margaret McBride was heard over the national airwaves from 1941 to 1954 and, at her peak, counted over eight million listeners to her daily broadcast. So vast was her fame that, in 1949, an event held to celebrate her 15th year on the air sold out Yankee Stadium.

Born in Paris, Missouri in 1899, McBride trained as a journalist at the University of Missouri and spent the early years of her career writing for the “Cleveland Press” and the “New York Evening Mail.” Later, she branched into freelance magazine writing by contributing articles to “Good Housekeeping,” “Cosmopolitan” and other publications. Her entrée into radio arrived in 1934 over WOR in New York when she was chosen to take on the persona of that station’s pseudo-mascot “Martha Deane,” a sort of over-the-air “Dear Abby.” After three weeks of “playing” “Deane” however, McBride finally one day broke character on the air and emerged as herself, immediately gaining a rapport with her audience and obtaining a surprising amount of respect from her station managers.

Her WOR work soon brought her to the attention of the CBS radio network who packaged her into her own daily, 15-minute show beginning in 1937. She switched to NBC and a 45-minute show in 1941. Through it all, McBride applied and honed her trademark interview style, one that would eventually make her one of radio’s most famous voices and one of the nation’s most influential women.

Usually described as “folksy,” McBride’s on-air discourse and interviews were completely ablibbed and off-the-cuff (rare for that time on radio). Her Midwestern values and accent, her basic common sense, informality and unique way of drawing out her guests, attracted a loyal (largely female) audience and managed to put her guests at ease. Over the course of her career, McBride interviewed hundreds of individuals from the notably famous to the simply noteworthy. Lillian and Dorothy Gish, H.V. Kaltenborn, Tallulah Bankhead, Pearl Buck, Orson Welles, Margaret Mead, Tennessee Williams, Danny Kaye, George Jessel, Al Capp, the Quiz Kids, Margaret Bourke-White, Omar Bradley, Moss Hart, Bennett Cerf, Mary Pickford, Eleanor Roosevelt (her all-time favorite guest) and Norman Vincent Peale (her final guest) were just some of the people

who, at one time or another, sat opposite McBride and her microphone. During World War II, Mary Margaret (as she was always addressed) took a bold step with her show when she began regularly booking African-American guests, another radio rarity at the time. Along with on-air chats with Langston Hughes and Lena Horne, McBride would have one of her most famous conversations with author Zora Neale Hurston in 1943.

Like McBride, Hurston was from a small town. She was born in Notasulga, Alabama, in 1891. (Though she often claimed to be born in Eatonville, Florida in 1901.) After attending both Howard University and Barnard College, Hurston graduated with a B.A. in anthropology in 1927. After college, in the mid-1920s and 1930s, she embarked on anthropological research in both the US and Haiti and began writing and publishing a variety of works. She was also a key member of the Harlem Renaissance. Hurston published three novels during the 1930s, including her most famous work, "Their Eyes Were Watching God," which appeared in 1937.

By the time she came to talk to McBride, in 1943, Hurston was in the process of promoting her just-published autobiography, "Dust Tracks on the Road." Despite the formality in which both women approach the interview—they address each other only as Miss McBride and Miss Hurston—it is easy to see from the beginning that these two women have an immediate rapport and trust. Indeed, the duo would become friends and Hurston would return at least once more to McBride's show in later years.

Despite the relaxed informality of the on-air discussion, however, McBride and Hurston cover a great deal of ground and delve into a significant number of topics, with Hurston's memoir providing the catalyst for each. Hurston is candid and forthright with her thoughts and memories whether she's recounting tales from her Southern childhood or even explaining the early prophetic "visions" she experienced and which have since guided her life. She's even open about the examples of voodoo and real-life "zombies" she encountered during her 1937 anthropological trip to Haiti (recounted in her book "Tell My Horse"), photos of which were later published in "Life" magazine. Hurston's un-ridiculed though not unquestioned discussion of the alleged undead may be one of the reasons that this particular interview, amidst the hundreds Hurston consented to during her life, has so endured.

Of course its endurance may also be due to the myriad of other topics Hurston touches upon and which grant a window into the personality of this still enigmatic American figure. As mentioned, McBride's discussion with the author is far-reaching and inflected with both humor and insight. The ladies discuss their mutual Southern roots, colloquial expressions, and their cooking techniques. Hurston also recounts her early years working as a secretary for the eccentric novelist Fannie Hurst and the details surrounding the writing of her own first book. In regard to the latter, Hurston relates that she pounded it out in seven to eight weeks while holed up in a \$1.50-a-week apartment. Perhaps as interesting as anything discussed is what is also not discussed--namely, anything having to do with race, racism or race relations.

Between the asides and anecdotes, McBride also, somewhat distractingly, attends to the other necessary business of the broadcast—namely, its commercials. She, at length, expounds on the value of Fanny Farmer candies and Ward's white bread and even tells short stories each with these products firmly at its center. So integrated is the sponsorship with the program, that, soon, even guest Hurston is singing the praises of Farmer's sweet treats.

Also of interest in this installment is the unusual presence of a studio audience; a group of ladies from the local chapter of the Red Cross are sitting in the studio throughout the broadcast. They can occasionally be heard giggling in the background. Fred Waring, McBride's "orchestra leader," is also heard, playing intro and outro music and, from time to time, conversing with McBride.

For many years, even before it was named to the National Recording Registry in 2008, this McBride-Hurston interview was one of the most requested items in the sound and radio “reading” room of the Library of Congress. It has become so famous that a portion of it was later reenacted for PBS’ 2008 docudrama on Hurston’s life, “Zora Neale Hurston: Jump at the Sun.” In it, actress Kim Brockington played Hurston and Mary Margaret doppelganger Marceline Hugot portrayed McBride. The filmed excerpt, drawn verbatim from the original recordings, has the duo discussing various African-American, specifically Southern African-American, customs and language.

Why the interview has become legend, however, is a different matter entirely. Its mix of the formal and the informal, its exploration of topics both lofty (literature) and, arguably, low-rent (zombies), grants to listeners a unique perspective on the lives and achievements of these two fascinating and notable American women. Along with being of invaluable use to both Hurston and McBride scholars, it has also proved of interest to radio historians and women’s history enthusiasts. For while it was not, by any means, unusual for women of this ilk and caliber to be heard over the radio waves at the time (what with the then on-air presence of Dorothy Thompson, Eleanor Roosevelt and Martha Rountree, among others), there is, nevertheless, something interesting and undeniably eye-opening about the presence of two such intelligent and erudite women conversing and addressing issues above and beyond the stereotypical “women’s issues” of the day.

And this is the recorded evidence that it happened.

Cary O’Dell is with the Motion Picture, Broadcast and Recorded Sound division of the Library of Congress. He is the author of the books “June Cleaver Was a Feminist!” (2014) and “Women Pioneers in Television” (1997). He also served as assistant editor of “The Concise Encyclopedia of American Radio” (2009) and “The Biographical Encyclopedia of American Radio” (2010).