

RadioDoc Review

Volume 1 • Issue 1 • 2014

2014-03-05

Norman Corwin's *The Lonesome Train* (Decca Recording) 1944

David K Dunaway, San Francisco State University, University of New Mexico

Abstract

The Lonesome Train, the cantata for radio with words by Millard Lampell, music by Earl Robinson, and directed by Norman Corwin, probably originated in a dilapidated brownstone on lower Sixth Avenue in Manhattan: The Almanac House, a radical commune for music organisers in Greenwich Village, including Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie. Corwin is widely regarded as a guru of thoughtful radio producers, a poet-laureate of radio. From 1936, when he helped create WQXR-FM in New York City (later, voice of the *New York Times*) to his death 75 years later, Norman Corwin managed to be simultaneously commercial, popular, and experimental. The series in which *The Lonesome Train* appears, 'Columbia Presents Corwin,' was made up of dramatised readings, interview excerpts, dramatisations of historical moments - oral and terrifying creativity in the art, as opposed to the craft, of radio. For historians, story can be an impediment to actual recollection of an event; the more times the story of an event is told, the less value is its factual recollection. But for the documentarian, the challenge is to discover a dramatic plot in a series of facts. Faced with a fact that may or may not be accurate, but which adds spice to the narrative, a documentarian will often make the imaginative leap to include what reaches the audience most directly. Craft and artistry, as well as intended audience, inflect such hard choices. The cantata is an uncommon form of documentary but an evocative one. The musical mix of orchestra and chorus (and banjo picker) must not overwhelm readings, interview actuality, and dramatisations; in this, Robinson and Corwin were original and innovative. The story is strong, dramatically simple; A man, a train, and his spirit moving across the land. The work engages the audience by its multiple voices, dialoguing with the narrator and one another, and its elegiac, Whitmanesque themes and music. Instead of being a linear, complex account of Lincoln's funeral train, this program uses the historical record as a springboard for a fantastic voyage.

Reviewer **DAVID K. DUNAWAY** is a biographer of Pete Seeger, a DJ at KUNM-FM, Professor of Radio at San Francisco State University, and Professor of English at the University of New Mexico.

Keywords

Norman Corwin, Earl Robinson, Millard Lampell, Pete Seeger, cantata,

Recommended Citation

Dunaway, D. K., (2014) "Norman Corwin's The Lonesome Train (Decca Recording) 1944", *RadioDoc Review* 1(1). doi: <https://doi.org/10.14453/rdr.v1i1.6>

The Lonesome Train **(Decca recording)**

Produced and directed by Norman Corwin. Text by Millard Lampell and music by Earl Robinson. First broadcast by CBS 21 March 1944 and later recorded by Decca as LP. C.30 mins.

Reviewer: David King Dunaway



Where does a work of art begin? In the minds and spirits of its composer or creator, of course; and sometimes in their neighbourhood bar, cantina, or local hangout. Thus it's fairly certain that *The Lonesome Train*, the cantata for radio with words by Millard Lampell, music by Earl Robinson, and directed by Norman Corwin, originated in a dilapidated brownstone on lower Sixth Avenue in Manhattan.

The Almanac House was a radical commune for music organisers in Greenwich Village. An apartment on the upper floors of the walk-up, in the Bohemian epicentre of the United States, was rented to a talented and motley group of musicians who performed anonymously as the Almanac Singers. This group became a petri-dish of

the American folk music revival of the 1960s, featuring musicians who went on to perform as The Weavers, and as solo artists, including Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie.

'Every Sunday afternoon they'd have this performance open to the public; you could just drop in,' said Earl Robinson:

Kids on the floor and a marvellously relaxed country feeling right in the middle of New York... I felt kind of like a father confessor in a sense to the Almanac singers. I was just the elder statesman. I'd sing with them occasionally and just glory in my children. This Almanac group was far more important to me than anything happening on Broadway. (Robinson 1976)

Almanac House ran on turmoil and music, the only items they had in excess. To pay the rent, the group held 'hootenannies', named after ones Seeger and Guthrie had attended in Seattle. On Sunday afternoons, audiences assembled in their basements; those in the know brought old coats or cardboard to sit on. 'Along about noon on Sunday all the mattresses were gathered up forced down a narrow stairway leading from the kitchen into the basement, and spread around the concrete floor,' Gordon Friesen later recalled.(Friesen 1976)

Membership in the group varied considerably, but the core group was Pete Seeger, Lee Hays, Millard Lampell, Gordon Friesen, Sis Cunningham, Bess Lomax Hawes, and Pete Hawes. Regularly performing with the group were Woody Guthrie, Josh White, Sonny Terry, Brownie McGhee, Arthur Stern. Guthrie, considerably older than the rest of the gang, Heddie Ledbetter (Lead Belly), Earl Robinson, and Alan Lomax, budding radio star and folklorist, completed the scene. Though famous for singing anti-war tunes on *Songs for John Doe*, their first record, World War II was well underway and their peace songs were scandalous in the context of the time. Nevertheless, the Almanacs were featured on the inaugural broadcast of *This is War* by Norman Corwin on CBS radio on February 14, 1942. The show was broadcast in prime-time, Saturday night, on all four radio networks from Maine to California, with 30 million listeners. The Almanacs sang their parody of *Old Joe Clark - Round and Round Hitler's Grave*. Soon afterwards, the group sang for another populist program on CBS, *We the People* (Dunaway 2008, p.110) and were promised another slot.

So it was natural for Norman Corwin and Earl Robinson, looking around that basement stuffed with mattresses and old coats, to pick out the cast of *The Lonesome Train*. Burl Ives, a budding actor and singer of folksongs would sing and narrate and Millard Lampell would do the text. Earl thought Pete Seeger, not yet 25, would play well with the orchestra:

Pete was superb with that banjo. I saw then what came out later: Pete would stand up in front of an audience and really get them going, and in the enthusiasm of the moment he'd tear off about twelve seconds of totally

brilliant candeza-type banjo; music that would stand up in any concert stage. Then he'd pull back and say, 'Let's all sing a song shall we?' He didn't want to act 'longhair'. (Robinson 1976)

So between Norman Corwin's interest, and fellow CBS producer Alan Lomax's sponsorship of the group, the pieces of *The Lonesome Train* were drawn together.

Norman Corwin, Director

Corwin is widely regarded as a guru of thoughtful radio producers, a poet-laureate of radio. From 1936, when he helped create WQXR-FM in New York City (later, voice of the *New York Times*) to his death 75 years later, Norman Corwin managed to be simultaneously commercial, popular, and experimental. In 1938, he joined CBS Radio and soon garnered a reputation among liberals and radicals for his ability to air cultural programs on fairly taboo topics, such as the Spanish Civil War and The Bill of Rights.

The series in which *The Lonesome Train* appears, *Columbia Presents Corwin*, was made up of dramatised readings, interview excerpts, dramatisations of historical moments – oral and terrifying creativity in the art, as opposed to the craft, of radio. The series ended with his most famous work at the close of WWII: *On a Note of Triumph* which would also include the Almanacs, on May 8, 1945. (Corwin 1945)

The Story

Lincoln's time had come. A train carried Lincoln's body from Washington D.C. to Springfield, Illinois, his youthful home, 'a lonesome train on a lonesome track/ seven coaches painted black.' The piece details Lincoln's journey to the burying ground. 'But they say Lincoln wasn't on that train.' He was in Alabama, in an old wooden church. He swung a partner at a square dance in Kansas. He walked a hospital corridor in Ohio with a veteran. The train pulls into the last stop, and they unload the president; but he's in the crowd, in Illinois:

Mr Lincoln, isn't it right that some men should be masters and some slaves?

Brother, if God, intended some men to do all the work and no eating he would have made some men with all hands and no mouths.

In other words, 'You couldn't quite tell where the people left off and old Abe Lincoln began.'

History vs. Documentary

Not being an expert in Lincolniana, I'm not in a position to evaluate the factual accuracy of the documentary, such as whether a woman actually stood by the coffin and said, 'Mr. Lincoln, are you really dead?' The historian's business is to track

sources to an illuminated understanding. The documentarian is in the business of narrating and re-contextualising that discovery. Their audience is a necessarily public one, who expect a finished product, instead of reading interviews.

The point is that, besides audiences and methodology, the role of story plays out differently in their work. For historians, story can be an impediment to actual recollection of an event; the more times the story of an event is told, the less value can be placed on its factual recollection. But for the documentarian, the challenge is to discover a dramatic plot in a series of facts. The facts collected by the historian may lack context; they may be so poorly recorded that the documentarian cannot use the audio or video; they may be rich with detail but, fundamentally, they do not constitute a story for broadcast until a documentarian enters the process, by sifting and winnowing the truckloads of facts into a dramatically constructed narrative. At times, the pressure to storify for documentarians exceeds the pressure for historical accuracy. Faced with a fact that may or may not be accurate, but which adds spice to the narrative, a documentarian will often make the imaginative leap to include what reaches the audience most directly. Craft and artistry, as well as intended audience, inflect such hard choices.

The cantata is an uncommon form of documentary but an evocative one. The musical mix of orchestra and chorus (and banjo picker) must not overwhelm readings, interview actuality, and dramatisations; in this, Robinson and Corwin were original and innovative, in a format Corwin would refine.¹ The story is strong, dramatically simple; A man, a train, and his spirit moving across the land. The work engages the audience by its multiple voices, dialoguing with the narrator and one another, and its elegiac, Whitmanesque themes and music. Instead of being a linear, complex account of Lincoln's funeral train, this program uses the historical record as a springboard for a fantastic voyage. The cadences of *Leaves of Grass* and Carl Sandburg's *The People, Yes* fill the ear, with Robinson's score underlining and swelling the emotions of a country losing its beloved leader.

The score

For Earl Robinson, composing and singing the score to *Lonesome Train* was a natural development. In 1932, he had arrived in New York as a budding young composer and quickly joined the Composer's Collective, an offshoot of the Communist Party's Pierre De Geyter Club. The musicians met in a loft in Greenwich Village to define and write music they termed progressive. (Dunaway 1979) Earl and the other modernist composers (many affiliated with Julliard), wrote and performed compositions on a piano, mixing Hans Eisler's staccato-style marching music for the Left with the atonal and chromatic styles of Webern and Schoenberg.

¹ In *Sound Sentiment: An Essay on Musical Emotions*, Peter King reflects on how composers inflect 'natural' sounds: 'There's a passage in *Lonesome Train* in which the composer imitates the train whistles mournful sound. But not only does a train whistle not sound a perfect or well-tempered third, it fills up whatever interval it does sound with a glissando.' Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989, p.92.

At one point Aaron Copland complained that workers would need a piano on the march to be able to play a May Day composition by Charles Seeger, Pete Seeger's father and (under the pseudonym 'Carl Sands') a music critic for the *Daily Worker* the Communist Party's daily. In those days the Party was culturally engaged by a slogan of its leader, Earl Browder: 'Communism is 20th century Americanism.'

'Americanising the movement became very soon my job as I saw it,' Robinson told the author. 'I discovered Carl Sandburg's *American Songbag*.' (Robinson 1976) While working as choral director at a Party redoubt, Camp Unity, Robinson had tried out his radical Americanism in songs about Joe Hill and Abraham Lincoln. He'd set Lincoln's words to a stirring melody, re-conceiving him as a folk hero born in an old log cabin splitting rails:

Now Abe, he knew right from wrong
For he was as honest as the day was long
And these are the words he said:
'This country with this Constitution –
Belongs to the people who inhabit it.
This country – with its Constitution –
Belongs to us who live in it.
Whenever we shall grow weary of
The existing government [this
phrase proved challenging to set]
We can exercise our Constitutional right –
Of amending it – or a revolutionary right
To dismember or overthrow it.

'Those were Lincoln's words,' Robinson later reflected. 'Now this is a perfect amalgam: it's in a minor key, so I bowed to the Russian thing. It's Hans Eisler's chords mixed in, but it's very American.' (Robinson 1976)

It just happened to suit where I was and my talent and the deep American roots really did this... the people element is something that came from reading Carl Sandburg's *The People Yes* – I wanted to do an opera – and Sandburg's way of looking at the people is what's in *Ballad for Americans*. (Robinson 1976)

This was Robinson's first radio cantata, featuring the voice of Paul Robeson. It has the peculiar historic claim of being performed at the Presidential Conventions of both the Republican and Communist Party in 1940. Broadcast in 1942, it was the first of two adaptations of *The People Yes* Robinson attempted, with words by John La Touche. The second, developing his interest in radicalising popular icons like

Lincoln, was *The Lonesome Train*, on which Robinson composed, narrated, and sang.²

The Legacy

Working in Hollywood, William Faulkner was so moved by the simple but passionate patriotism of *The Lonesome Train* that he decided to make it the central motif of the film he was writing for Howard Hawks, *Battle Cry*, an idea James Agee also used in his later script. Faulkner simply called it *The Lincoln Cantata*.³ However its influence also extended across the Atlantic. *The Lonesome Train* served as a model for one of Britain's classic documentary radio series, *The Radio Ballads* on the BBC. As Peggy Seeger (Pete's half-sister) tells in a forthcoming biography, English radio producer Charles Parker heard and was moved by a copy of the Decca LP.⁴ Learning of a railway engineer John Axon, who died trying to stop a runaway freight in Derbyshire, he hired balladeer Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger for the first radio ballad, *The Ballad of John Axon* (1957), modelled after *The Lonesome Train*. This linkage of American and English social documentaries, both enmeshed in folklore and folk music, is crucial to understanding the long-term impact of *The Lonesome Train*.

Today, a copy of the original Decca recording of *The Lonesome Train* will set the buyer back US\$200. For a seventy-year-old cantata, an experiment in musical documentary, that's not cheap. But then, there's nothing cheap about the fusion of drama, historical record, and musical inspiration that created *The Lonesome Train: A Musical Legend*.

² 'The Lonesome Train' *Columbia Presents Corwin*. 21 March, 1944. Program #3. (CBS net.) A 'folk cantata' about the aftermath of Lincoln's assassination, dedicated to Carl Sandburg. Credits: Norman Corwin (Producer, Director), Raymond Massey, Earl Wrightson (narrator), Burl Ives, Earl Robinson (Composer, Orchestration), Millard Lampell (Lyricist), Lyn Murray (Conductor), Richard Huey, Laura Duncan, Lavinia White, William Beebe, Amadeo Di Felipe (Orchestration), Hester Sondergaard, Lon Clark, Larry Robinson, The Jeff Alexander Chorus, Harry Marble (Announcer). 29:47.

³ Tom Dardis, *Some Time in the Sun*. New York, Scribners, 1976, p.113. See also Ian Hamilton, *Writers in Hollywood* New York, Harper, 1990, p.205

⁴ Peggy Seeger Biographies, MS. In possession of author. Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 2014.

References:

Corwin, N 1945, *On a Note of Triumph*, New York, Simon & Schuster.

Dunaway, D K 1979, 'Unsung Songs of Protest: The Composers Collective', *New York Folklore*, Fall 1979.

Dunaway, D K 2008, *How Can I Keep from Singing: The Ballad of Pete Seeger*, New York, Villard.

Dunaway, D K, 2008, *Pete Seeger: How Can I Keep from Singing*, radio documentary, 3 x 60mins, Public Radio International.

Friesen, G 1976, interview with the author, 18 March, 1976.

Robinson, E, 1976, interview with the author, 18 March, 1976.

DAVID K. DUNAWAY is a biographer of Pete Seeger in *How Can I Keep From Singing*, (Villard, 2008) and co-author of *Singing Out: An Oral History of America's Folk Music Revivals* (Oxford, 2010), among other books. He's a DJ at KUNM-FM, a Professor of Radio at San Francisco State University, and Professor of English at the University of New Mexico. <http://www.davidkdunaway.com>

