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Norman Corwin's *The Lonesome Train* (Live Broadcast) CBS 1944: a critical reflection

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Abstract

The Lonesome Train was a commercial half-hour 'ballad opera' or folk cantata, transmitted in 1944, about the funeral train bearing President Abraham Lincoln's body home after his assassination in the Ford Theatre of Washington D.C. in 1865. This became culturally resonant in 1945 on the death of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, when the Decca recording of the show became a sort of 'media requiem', played over and over again on US radio stations. The live production, directed by Norman Corwin, is a hybrid between drama and documentary, but goes further with its use of music and poetry... perhaps a musical modernist montage of traditions as varied as George Gershwin, Woody Guthrie and Robert Johnson. Corwin has been characterised as the American Shakespeare of radio, his *We Hold These Truths* (1941) possibly attracting the highest audience for any radio play in human history.

The central narrative character in *The Lonesome Train* is a reporter, a 20th century chronicler, a journalistic oracle representing the role of the freedom and significance of the US media under the First Amendment. And he narrates with style, dignity, sensitivity, subtlety and deploys the art of a storytelling aesthetic with a knowing understated language when describing Abraham Lincoln's assassination: 'and along about the middle of the evening something happened that wasn't in the program. I guess you all know what that was. The news spread pretty fast...' When the radio medium engages in any form of grieving and memorialising, with the full commitment of musical expression, poetic exposition and the rallying of an ethical belief system against threat and danger in the context of war, emotiveness, empathy and sympathy will be engendered with full force. Here, its cultural power and significance travels vertically and horizontally through the sociological vectors of state and federal power and people power. It can be argued that *The Lonesome Train* is the American equivalent of Handel's *Messiah*.

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Keywords

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

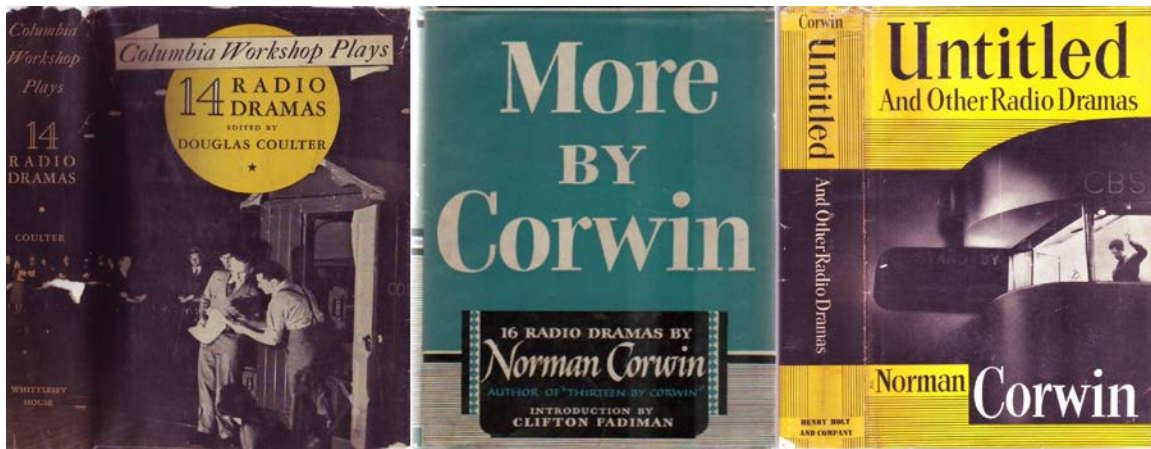
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The Lonesome Train (Live Broadcast)

Produced and directed by Norman Corwin. Text by Millard Lampell and music by Earl Robinson. First broadcast by CBS 1944. 27.40 mins.

Reviewer: Tim Crook



Norman Corwin's auteuring in the radio medium during the 1940s would be canonised, with collections of his scripts being published in book form.

Introduction

The Lonesome Train was a commercial half-hour 'ballad opera' transmitted in the spring of 1944 about the funeral train bearing President Abraham Lincoln's body home after his assassination in the Ford Theatre of Washington D.C. in 1865. This became culturally resonant in 1945 on the death of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. The live production was transmitted on a sustaining CBS series entitled *Columbia Presents Corwin* which 'showcased a miscellany of subjects and forms and exemplified Corwin's constant search for unexplored themes.' (Bannerman 1986, p.126) Norman Corwin did not auteur the piece. He edited and directed it for a broadcast which lasted less than thirty minutes. The text and music had been created previously by Millard Lampell and Earl Robinson respectively.

The first live transmission, which ended 10.30pm 21 March 1944, was performed in a studio theatre on Broadway, New York City, and this is the production being evaluated. After the live transmission, the cast was transported across town to

Decca Studios where until 3.30am they repeated their performance for the recording of a 78 rpm album. Prior commitments meant that Raymond Massey played the part of Lincoln in the live CBS broadcast, but Raymond Edward Johnson performed the role in the Decca recording.

The Decca recording became what I would describe as 'a media requiem' played over and over again on US radio stations after President Roosevelt's death over a year later. (Bannerman 1986, p.129) What is the form of *The Lonesome Train*? Writing an introduction to the script's first publication in 1945, Erik Barnouw said it was a "Folk Cantata", "ballad opera", or what you will – radio is developing a dramatico-musical form and tradition of its own.' (Barnouw 1945, p.240)



The Lonesome Train became a bestselling production distributed by Decca Records and providing an alternative way of listening to the work outside radio transmission.

The Lonesome Train was signposted and scheduled as a radio drama on US network radio in the sense that it had a fictional core and style. The production contained performance in music, acting, singing, and sound design. It was not an assemblage or creative construction of actuality. Original documentary materials such as interviews with living witnesses or storytellers and analysts such as historians and academics were not present. Can it be described as 'drama-documentary'? I would argue that on the basis of what I have previously termed the 'phantom distinction' (Crook 1999, pp.201-212) we can embrace this live production as belonging in the documentary as much as the dramatic genre. This is because the script fashioned for broadcast was derived from historical research and sought to represent an historical event through creative techniques of radio production that blended factual and fictional representations.

It is a hybrid between drama and documentary, but goes further with its use of music and poetry. In 1945 Erik Barnouw argued that

The “Ballad”, while it was music almost throughout, was at the same time poetry and at the same time drama. It was not primarily any one of these. Its narrator could sing, or speak; so could its chorus. There was occasional spoken dialogue. (Barnouw 1945, p.240)

Barnouw excluded from his definition any reference to the journalistic or the documentary, when the script, in my opinion, embraces these techniques of exposition, particularly in the binding narrative of the journalistic chronicler.

Corwin had previously produced *Ballad for Uncle Sam* starring Paul Robeson. Corwin also directed a ballad opera called *Magna Carta* by Maxwell Anderson and Kurt Weill. *The Lonesome Train* was a representation of a creative documentation of history. Since the actual event explored, analysed, narrated, imagined and performed took place in 1865, it might be argued that it lent itself to dramatisation. Actual eye-witnesses would have been rather thin on the ground in 1944. However, it should also be appreciated that a combination of regulation, technology and contemporary cultural broadcasting ritual meant that the dramatisation of news and current events was normative. *The March of Time* (radio version broadcast 1931-45) was the icon of dramaturgical performance of the news: a form of performative ventriloquising of reality. (Barnouw 1968, pp.51-2; Crook 1997, pp.87-90)

The concept of the ‘radio ballad’ was being talked about in the context of US Radio at least a decade before the BBC’s Charles Parker, in the Midland Region based in the City of Birmingham, was developing the genre of ‘The Radio Ballad’ with Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger between 1958-1964 that would gain recognition at the prestigious Prix Italia convention in 1960. (Long 2004, pp.131-52) The BBC Radio 4 documentary series *Radio Lives*, produced by Parker’s daughter Sarah in 1993, confirmed that Parker had been influenced and inspired to develop the British dimension of radio ballad by listening to a disc of the Norman Corwin-directed *The Lonesome Train* brought over from America.

The First Lady’s lament

Eleanor Roosevelt rode the train transporting her husband’s body back to Washington in 1945, and she remembered the haunting refrain: ‘A lonesome train on a lonesome track, Seven coaches painted black. A slow train, a quiet train, Carrying Lincoln home again...’ She wrote:

I lay in my berth all night with the window shade up, watching the faces of the people at stations, and even at the crossroads, who came to pay their last tribute all through the night. The only recollection I clearly have is thinking

about “The Lonesome Train,” the musical poem about Lincoln’s death. I had always liked it so well – and now this was so much like it. (Bannerman 1986, p.127)

The impact of this production in this way was something Corwin would remember acutely many years later:

When Franklin Delano Roosevelt died and was carried by train from Georgia to Hyde Park, Eleanor Roosevelt wrote later that the melody and words of *The Lonesome Train* kept going through her mind as she rode on that train. (Bell and Corwin 1994, p.49)

This is the sequence that Eleanor Roosevelt recalled so vividly, starting with four crashing and dramatic orchestral chords mixing with the chorus so vividly imagining the lonesome train on a lonesome track and then the low beat of the steam locomotive’s chug chug building the momentum and tension, as the chorus paints the picture of ‘Seven coaches painted black.’

[AUDIO CLIP: Lonesome Train \(3\) First Chorus chug chug](#)

The political and cultural ritual of the powerful steam locomotive crossing state lines in the final journey home for the President of the United States is recaptured when viewing cinema newsreel archive of the event by Movietone (FDR funeral 1945) and United News (Funeral of President 1945).



*Stills from newsreel reports by Movietone and United News of President Roosevelt’s funeral train escorted by his widow Eleanor Roosevelt who would recall *The Lonesome Train* when viewing the track-side vigil of American citizens in 1945.*

The visual rhythm of what was a retrieved symbol of 19th century steam power is seen as almost metaphorically representing the spirit of Roosevelt and his predecessor Lincoln being pulled across the state and timelines of history, with the American people lining the tracks in respectful vigil. The trilbies and fedoras of 1945 America could be the top hats and bowlers of 1865.



President Lincoln flanked by his generals at the height of the American Civil War in 1862. Digital image courtesy of the Getty's Open Content Program. Image Alexander Gardner 1862.

The respected US radio historian Erik Barnouw, with a distinguished track record and reputation as a radio drama director himself, said of *The Lonesome Train*: 'it was in the most important sense a political document, a cantata against Copperheads'.¹ Barnouw believed that

In depicting extremes of feeling toward Lincoln, "The Lonesome Train" had suggested a parallel with Roosevelt. War was another parallel. Ballad Singer: 'The slaves were free, the war was won, But the fight for freedom has just begun... Freedom's a thing that has no ending, It needs to be cared for, it needs defending.' (Barnouw 1968, p.210)

According to Barnouw

In the days following the President's [Roosevelt] death particularly as the funeral train moved north, the transcriptions were broadcast by local stations across the length and breadth of the country. And in many communities, school assemblies, and other groups listened to phonograph recordings of "The Lonesome Train." (Barnouw 1945, pp.240-41)

Why did the theme of *The Lonesome Train*, in mythologising the solemn route of Lincoln's funeral train from Washington to Springfield, Illinois, resonate so powerfully with the American imagination in 1945? Corwin's biographer R. Leroy Bannerman advanced a persuasive theory that it addressed the social anxieties of the present:

...stirring themes matched the mood of America and its thoughts paralleled Roosevelt's hard task of piloting a country at war. With determination and intensity, its chorus - like the voices of the people - soared in triumphant challenge: "Freedom's a thing that has no ending, It needs to be cared for, it needs defending." (Bannerman 1986, p.128)

The Lonesome Train's origins

This production was not one of Norman Corwin's autotyping masterpieces where he had authored, moulded, directed and live-produced directly all dimensions of the storytelling and creativity to the audience's aural perception. Symbolising through sound drama key moments in past and present US history through set-piece audio drama events such as *We Hold These Truths* (1941) and *On A Note of Triumph* (1945), with the former possibly attracting the highest audience for any radio play

¹ Copperhead is an old American-English term that was used to describe pejoratively northerners who supported the Confederate cause during the Civil War. The word derives from that of a poisonous snake that strikes and injects its venom without warning. The Copperheads opposed the abolition of slavery, agitated against President Lincoln's administration, and argued for an early reconciliation with the breakaway southern states.

in human history, Corwin has been characterised as the American Shakespeare of radio, or the cultural and political heartbeat and oracle of radio's so-called Golden Age.

Corwin's role in *The Lonesome Train* was still the work of a master of radio, but in this context he was a collaborator, dramaturgist and achieving the heights of his ability as a director/producer. According to Barnouw:

Lampell and Earl Robinson wrote *The Lonesome Train* in 1942. Warner brothers bought it and then did nothing with it. The movie contract prevented radio performance until 1944, when Norman Corwin introduced it over the Columbia Broadcasting System. (Barnouw 1945, p.241)

Corwin saw it as a fortuitous gift in being the right script and score at the right time:

The Lonesome Train was brought to me by Earl Robinson, its composer, not long after I had inaugurated the first of the *Columbia Presents Corwin* series. Robinson had previously scored a big hit in a program that I directed on the *Pursuit of Happiness* series called *Ballad for Americans*. As with *Ballad for Americans*, which I helped by making suggestions as to its shape and its title, I proposed changes in the score and the treatment of *The Lonesome Train*. (Bell and Corwin 1994, p.47)

How did Corwin adapt it for radio?

It might be argued that Corwin did more than enable the original script and score for radio transmission. But it might also be countered that he did not fully transform it into something that was seething with the majority of his own writing and creativity. Corwin was not a composer. To that extent he was a skilled and effective adapter. In the modern parlance he successfully re-branded the work:

Corwin thought the title 'The Lincoln Cantata', which Lampell and Robinson had called it, rather pompous and recommended they re-title it after the recurring theme 'the lonesome train.' He also felt that the work should not start 'tutti' or full orchestra, but rather simply, with a brief prologue, which he wrote, and he enlisted Earl Robinson as the narrator. (Bannerman 1986, p.128)

Corwin, himself, explained the detail of his creative intervention in the interviews he recorded with Douglas Bell for the Directors' Guild of America Oral History:

I said to Robinson, "You're not Johann Sebastian Bach. We live in an era when the cantata is not a viable form, and this is a folk piece. It's warm and about a folk hero and a genuine national treasure. You have already built into the lyrics the most important line, 'The lonesome train.' Why don't you use that

for a title?" He did. I also suggested a change in the way it opened, which he implemented, having to do with the use of a banjo in the expert hands of Pete Seeger. (Bell and Corwin 1994, p.47)

Corwin was wholly responsible for structuring and indeed writing the new beginning. In later years he wrote about his drive to set an identity for plays and radio works that engaged with the human imagination in a real and emotional way. In a letter to George Movshon, producer, UN Radio, on 9 September 1968, he wrote:

Dear George, I now unmask myself as a Difficult Author. Up to the receipt of your letter of 17 September, I have been hoping that the Committee would, in its majesty and on its own, agree that we should have a human title for the human rights cantata. This hope has now been dashed by your selection of "Human Rights Cantata." I agree with you that it has little pizzazz; but on top of these qualifications it is pompous. And cold. [...]

Two cantatas were brought to me when I was producing for CBS. One was entitled "Ballad of Uncle Sam". I thought that was too square, and changed it to "Ballad for Americans." The change of preposition gave it a certain special interest, and saved it from pompousness. Next a work entitled "Lincoln Cantata" was submitted to me. I changed that to "The Lonesome Train"... (Langguth 1994, pp.281-82)

Analysing the text

This was a live event – a public radio folk opera, radio cantata, radio musical, ballad opera. As already indicated it has been called many things. It is not the close intimate personal world of contemporary documentary which is socio-psychological. It had spatiality. The opening music was orchestral, film symphonic, broad ranged, wide horizon and charged with the concept of important, significant agora, public sphere performance. To this extent *The Lonesome Train* slips comfortably into the context of Neil Verma's critical terms for analysing 'important works of narrative radio from around 1937 through to the end of the war years.' (Verma 2013, p.73) Verma's vocabulary of 'intimate and kaleidosonic audioposition schemes' (ibid) tabulated by citing contrasts in sound, space, time, dramatic emphasis, narrator, tense, characters, listener, rhetoric and political affect, give the student of radio texts some mental and critical geography for criticism. (ibid, p.70)

While *The Lonesome Train* may not fit easily into the concept of a 'New Deal imaginary' (ibid, p.73), there is something to be said about the view that the play's production could have contributed to an inclusive 'culture of unity.' Michael Denning's concept of 'aesthetic ideology' summarised by Verma as 'part of a repertoire of formal qualities that interlocked with populist and radical politics by creating an aesthetic to affirm and beautify solidarity in the public realm' (Verma

2013, p.73; Denning 1998, pp.xix-xx and pp.117-18) can be surely applied to any analysis of *The Lonesome Train*.

The central narrative character is a reporter, a 20th century chronicler, a journalistic oracle representing the role of the freedom and significance of the US media under the First Amendment. And he narrates with style, dignity, sensitivity, subtlety and deploys the art of a storytelling aesthetic with a knowing understated language when describing Abraham Lincoln's assassination: 'and along about the middle of the evening something happened that wasn't in the program. I guess you all know what that was. The news spread pretty fast...'

In this sequence you can hear Earl Robinson as the Reporter understating the fate of Lincoln at the Ford theatre, which is then dramatically segued by Pete Seeger's upbeat banjo to the opening of the ballad theme.

[AUDIO CLIP: Lonesome Train \(4\) Opening narration banjo to ballad](#)

Method of textual and contextual analysis

I believe that the differences between the cultures and perspectives of professional media program makers and theoreticians are something of an illusion. They have much more in common than they have in difference. It is not a binary divide. Both traditions of analysis are informed by rational reflection and empirical analysis. Both are capable of critical insight. I think more is to be gained from a *convivencia*; a fusion and respect for both sides. This is an inter-disciplinary path and much is to be gained by cherishing the privilege of mixing an aspiration to academic critical thinking and professional and creative instinct or intuition.

1. STORYTELLING STRENGTH

The Lonesome Train is constructed by way of content creation, production and editing to succeed in a highly disciplined and creatively intense commercial half-hour of radio programming in 1944. The program product in a liberal capitalist society was not sponsored but was still funded by the profits of what were powerful and successful national federal radio networks: CBS competing with NBC and MBS. The term used for non-sponsored slots was 'sustaining.' The programming was still being transmitted in a traditional capitalist socio-economic structure. The CBS network, through its affiliated stations, operated by selling local, regional and national advertising spots. But these are not evident within the half-hour texture. They do not interrupt the pace and narrative drive of the docudrama, which is cued as the expression of storytelling in the context of war, duty and service. The text, or rather the libretto, is credited to 'Corporal Millard Lampell.' The program is also sourced in the opening dedication to Carl Sandburg, 'poet and biographer' of Abraham Lincoln whom H. L. Mencken described as 'indubitably an American in every pulse-beat.' Indeed the transmission is taking place four years after Sandburg

won the 1940 Pulitzer Prize for history in recognition of *The War Years*, the second volume of his Abraham Lincoln biography.

In this sequence you can hear the dedication to Carl Sandburg and opening credits revealing Millard Lampell's modest military rank.

[AUDIO CLIP: Lonesome Train Credits opening](#)

This is an indication that the style and approach of the program is likely to mix the poetic with the documentary of biography. Lincoln was the US political leader who was militarily victorious in the traumatic civil war of 1861 to 1865. Thus the presidential dimension of celebration is an exploration of the democratic doctrine of state arms. This is going to be a characterisation of a man of war. Corwin reflected 50 years later:

It's a famous piece and deservedly so, though it has shortcomings as did *Ballad for Americans*. In the light of the intervening years, the endings of both pieces are perhaps over-sentimentalized. But I think that even the most cynical American would have to be extremely uncharitable not to feel a certain patriotic rapport with the elements of both plays. (Bell and Corwin 1994, pp.48-49)

2. ORIGINALITY AND INNOVATION

The program is specifically styled at the beginning as a 'new folk cantata', thus alluding to a self-consciousness and assertion of something original and innovative in the medium, though it has already been explained that the notion of the radio ballad, to be later appropriated and self-proclaimed by the BBC's Charles Parker, had been recognised as a specific genre in the musical drama of the radio medium. It could be argued that there is something original in the intense switching of musical forms throughout the piece. Pace and volume is varied with the single instrumentation of banjo, orchestra, what was described then as 'negro-spiritual' but is perhaps now more readily defined as church gospel, Kajan folk, the characteristics of what would be described later in the 20th century as 'bluegrass', and a continual element of what I could certainly perceive as quasi-jazz rhythm reminiscent of the New Orleans jazz funeral.

Is it possible to say that the near-thirty-minute sequence is a musical modernist montage of traditions as varied as George Gershwin, Woody Guthrie and Robert Johnson? Perhaps the joint composer, Earl Robinson, can be credited with this fascinating transition between genres, forms and traditions. He worked in classical concert hall, live and motion picture theatres, television production and for the folk-rock musical market. His 'Concerto for Five-String Banjo' has been performed in Boston and Berlin. The other joint composer and author, Millard Lampell, originated from the folk singing group the Almanacs, which also included Woody Guthrie and

Pete Seeger; yet again substantial evidence of significant collaboration and influence from the 20th century American folk musical tradition.

The melody is underscored by deep bass resonant chords that are onomatopoeic with the emotion and sound of a trans-state steam-powered locomotive drawing Abraham Lincoln's funeral train from Washington back to Springfield, Illinois. Corwin was always conscious of the power and metaphorical symbolism of steam-powered locomotives in the new electronic media of storytelling:

Trains intrigued not only Thomas Wolfe, but millions of Americans. It's a pity that later generations grew up not knowing the sound of the steam engine. What they hear now, if they hear anything, is a diesel horn. The old whistle of the panting locomotive, the chug-chug and the marvelous thunder of those old engines, the sound of those trains flying across the rails is something that aroused all kinds of romantic associations. (Bell and Corwin 1994, p.49)

Corwin was also conscious of how contemporary storytelling had abandoned all the rituals and romanticism of interstate train travel when he once shared a taxicab with Aaron Copland and talked about music and trains. He recalled that Copland looked at him as though he were 'absolutely raving mad' as he extolled the nostalgia for

the '40s and '50s – when you went across the country, there was a timetable. They had all the stations and wonderful symbols: the suits of the diamond and the heart and the club and the spade, crosses and double crosses, stars and asterisks and daggers, those marvelous typographical squiggles. It told you how long a train stopped at a station and from where and whether this was on Wednesdays or Fridays or all week long. In them they used to speak of the time of departure of a train as a sailing – sailing time, sailing date. I just loved that. (ibid, pp.49-50)

The power of the heavy low chords of the steam locomotive pulling the funeral train into the last stop is subtly and deftly turned into a depowering and decelerating rhythm of orchestra and banjo.

[AUDIO CLIP: Lonesome Train\(8\) Train chords orchestra last stop and banjo](#)

What could also be described as innovative is the contrapuntal word journey of newspaper reporter/journalistic narration tracing the train's route across America with the dramatised action and dialogue of rumours that Lincoln is not dead at all, but alive and extant among his people. This is, of course, the blending and fusion with the New Testament gospel of Jesus Christ's resurrection and Lincoln's transubstantiation into a spiritual leader who had died for the sins of his nation; namely the horror and grief of a bloody civil war. Words in narration and action weave and parallel between an African-American church in Alabama, a square dance

in a Kansas prairie, the convalescence of an army hospital ward, and the waiting crowd at the Springfield railway depot convening to pay homage and respects to the President's body coming home.

The dramatisation of lament through gospel singing in the black church switches all the imaginative focus of who Lincoln's people actually were – singing in an old wooden church with no paint, floor, glass in the windows, just a pulpit and some wooden benches.

AUDIO CLIP: Lonesome Train (5) Gospel scene in the black church

I would also like to add that the libretto of words and the musical score feel as though they have been informed by the new cultural force of Hollywood cinematic musical theatre. The ideology appears to be an intense combination of emotional celebration and optimism through musical melody and the expression of hope and dreams through lyrics. I am reminded of the melody of democracy present in the popular operatic songs of the 1939 film *The Wizard of Oz*. 'Over the Rainbow' by Harold Arlen (music) and E.Y. Harburg (lyrics) was a defining and influential ballad of the Second World War, indeed became Academy Award-winning. Its central place in the musical imagination of the United States of America, created by artists fully conscious of the sanctuary that the USA had given them from the persecution and oppression of their family and community in the genocidal dictatorships of European military states, evoked hopes and dreams as symbols of liberty, freedom and democracy. *The Lonesome Train* also serves this purpose by retrieving the hopes and dreams of American liberty, the pursuit of happiness, and the ideal of all men and women being born equal from the ashes of scorched earth civil war between Union and Confederacy.

3. AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT

This is achieved by the deployment of classic storytelling techniques; the folksy chronicler in the form of the travelling reporter, vicariously the ears, eyes and voice of the people. It is a style that in its cultural context resonated with the narration of *film noir*, where the consciousness of the private detective or journalist investigates the high and low of society to fashion legend and myth. The intensity of musical entertainment discussed earlier obviously emotionally chimes with the hearts of the listening audience. There is the sense of live performance and the sharing of an artistic and storytelling experience in the moment, which does not exclude the thrilling risk and jeopardy of going over the top as the performers strive to do their best. In that I believe live audiences in radio, as live audiences in theatre now, invest their emotional, imaginative and intellectual engagement to a much greater degree of intensity. They are aware, as each performer is, that every line, every note, every cue, every sound effect has to be expressed in tune, in time, in mind, in attitude, and in the togetherness and solidarity of the live performance. In the result where the collective experience has been successful and thrilling, the appreciation is ecstatic, memorable and culturally resonant. Anyone listening to the power of audience

applause present in the live broadcast studio at the end of the program can be sure that live performance of this kind of dramatised musical documentary is a unique phenomenon with a charge of engagement absent from the version later recorded for phonograph, and the contemporary production doctrine of pre-recorded program making.

In this extract you can hear the final exclamatory choral cry of *The Lonesome Train*: 'Freedom!' followed by over a minute of clapping, cheering and the cries of 'Bravo!'

[AUDIO CLIP: Lonesome Train \(7\) Freedom! Live Applause and closing credits](#)

4. RESEARCH AND REPORTING

It can hardly be assumed, either now at the time of writing the review, or even then in imagining the cultural context of its production and live transmission in 1944, that the program was aspiring to some realistic investigative discovery of historical truth and accuracy. The script and treatment are mythical, metaphorical and symbolic. Lincoln did not in reality undergo a Christ-like resurrection. The characters and language are imagined emotions and concepts characterised through a fantastic dramaturgy representing an historical event. Notwithstanding these points, it is a fact that the docudrama's text is rooted in the publication of what was seen as legitimate and authoritative history, namely Carl Sandburg's 1940 *The War Years*. The history writing source has been acknowledged as having a poetic perspective and the folk cantata could certainly be recognised as expressing a poetic aesthetic. *The Lonesome Train* should, therefore, be evaluated and respected as a creative and poetic documentary.

This is represented by the first three verses of the recurrent ballad that crescendos with the refrain that freedom has no ending and 'needs defending.'

[AUDIO CLIP: Lonesome Train \(2\) First Ballad verse: freedom needs defending](#)

5. COMPLEXITY OF INFORMATION AND PORTRAYALS

The Lonesome Train is a model exposition of the principle of nobility in simplicity. There is a constant interplay between the emotive elements of musical expression by instrument and singing voice, and the rational storytelling characterisation of speech that joins and departs from the emotional direction of communication for dramatic purpose. As a result the multiple streams of message, story, and feeling divide like the Red Sea to reveal the blossoming of focalised intensity, be it the jaunty advance of the banjo or the cry of the gospel chorister 'O Great God Almighty, Lord...' (Corwin 1946, p.244) Even the dramatic setting of a scene could be powerfully delineated by the trailing sung line of the ballad singer: 'A quiet crowd;

nobody wanting to talk out loud.’ (ibid, p.246) Here imagistic language characterises, humanises, and gives emotional tone in tune and word. Corwin succeeds as the director-producer by achieving near perfect exposition of the verse play, radio drama medium, musical opera, and historical documentary.

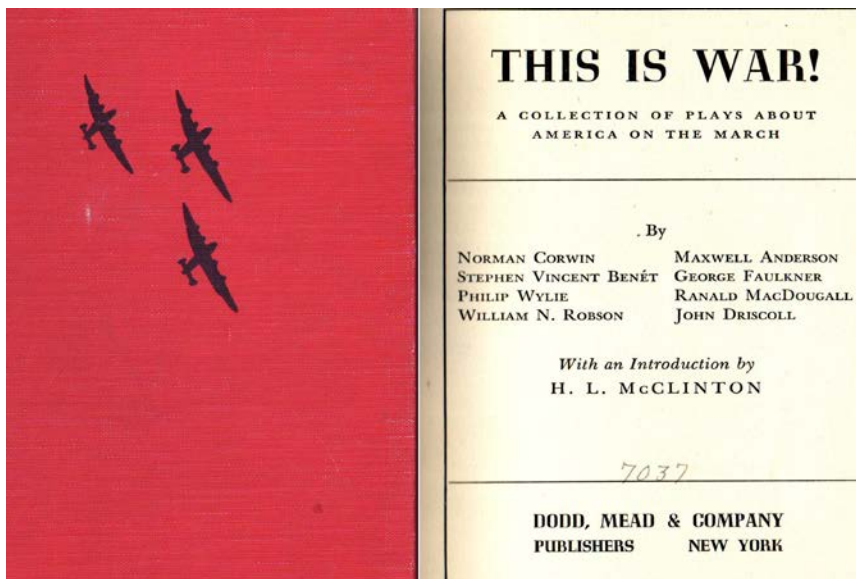
The program can be criticised for its one-dimensional representation of character. The portrayals of personality and human character verge on the dramatically utilitarian. They are functional and akin to caricature. There is little room for complexity or nuances of thought, feeling and attitude. For example the Copperheads as representatives of prejudice and bigotry do not change in any way. They remain as a constant symbol of cultural groundhog; always there to curse Lincoln for every day he lived and cheer on the day he died: ‘A New York politician who didn’t like Lincoln... An Ohio businessman who didn’t like Negroes... A Chicago newspaper editor who didn’t like people...’ (Corwin 1945, pp.247-48) Even the characterisation of Lincoln himself is simplistic. There is no doubt or wavering of faith as was the case indeed in the New Testament scriptures. This is a sound poetic eulogy with little scope for dramatising or indeed reporting any significant transformation in belief and feelings. Only the soldier in the Cleveland hospital appears to undergo some kind of persuasion from Lincoln’s phantom to come to terms with the fact that the killing will not be over until ‘free men have a free men’s peace!’ (ibid, p.248) In conclusion, the script and ideology of *The Lonesome Train* can be criticised for over-simplifying a narrative that was complex and ambiguous and where the heroes and heroines bore the scars of hypocrisy, guilt and moral culpability.

6. EMOTIVENESS AND EMPATHY

When the radio medium engages in any form of grieving and memorialising, with the full commitment of musical expression, poetic exposition, and the rallying of an ethical belief system against threat and danger in the context of war, emotiveness, empathy and sympathy will be engendered with full force. It is a sequence of radio that never ceases to move me and I am more than happy to admit that its beauty and impact bring tears to my eyes. I can account for these feelings as a professional radio drama and theatre director who has direct personal experience of those moments when live dramatic expression is poetic and resonant to the point of thought-changing and emotional identification. The beauty and achievement in craft and artistry is not the whole story. The effect would be pointless were it not also the case that I personally can relate to the ideological aspiration contained in text and context. The American public spirit encoded in the production involves me as a British subject, because my father, a Second World War infantry officer and veteran of the Battle of Normandy, educated his children on why young American men and women of all races and backgrounds died in Europe to avowedly protect shared values of democracy, equality and freedom. I can readily concede that I have been culturally and politically programmed to receive the program’s emotive encoding.

8. ETHICAL PRACTICE

As the production is a frame of professional performance by artists with a text that is not drawn from any process of theatre workshop, or documentary interview, any issues of 'ethical practice' are likely to be limited to the voices and symbolic representation unfairly absent from the ideological rallying of top, middle and bottom of 1865 American society. First Nation Americans are not present in either their oral, cultural or musical traditions. Whilst liberal Americans sought to involve African Americans as an interest to be fought for in the Second World War against the enslaving ideologies of Nazism, Fascism and Japanese militarism, the fact remained that large parts of the USA were subject to apartheid. Black Americans were segregated in their armed forces. Japanese Americans had been rounded up and concentrated in camps through a demeaning process of confinement and detention. The program uses the function and mythology of the reporter to symbolically narrate a representation of Lincoln's funeral train, but the creator's investigative and interrogative antennae are switched off from questioning any of the hypocritical ambiguities of the society that hosts the program.



The Lonesome Train can be criticised for its marshalling of sentimentalised patriotism and its mythologising of an American political dream of freedom and equality that was hardly matched by its contemporary reality in 1944. It is also true that its director Norman Corwin was committed to the propaganda cause of winning the Second World War by words and music.

9. PUBLIC BENEFIT

The Lonesome Train made the American public feel good about themselves and their history. The program broadcast combined a summit of artistic expression in singing, composition, scripting, dramatic performance and direction, and musical arrangement that symbolised the success of an American ideal of asserting and protecting their notions of freedom, democracy and equality that was worth fighting

for on the global stage. This is a docudrama for a nation at war where the collective spirit is being defined by positive political values: the fight against slavery; against hunger and poverty; the fight to protect freedom; and to find justification for killing to protect that freedom. The program celebrates and elevates high and low status Americans as it does with classical and popular music. The polity so conceptualised is also enchanted with the spiritual glow of religiosity; albeit monotheistically Christian.

The docudrama dramatises Lincoln's exchange with a wounded soldier from the battles of Bull Run and Chancellorsville and it becomes a poetic and theological discussion on reconciling faith, scripture and the horrors of war.

[AUDIO CLIP: Lonesome Train \(6\) Lincoln and soldier killing debate](#)

10. IMPACT

The issue of impact has already been extensively explored. US newspaper radio reviewing immediately after the broadcast premiere discussed here was extensive with panegyrics present in the *New York Times*, *Kansas City Star*, *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, *Variety* and *Newsweek*. It was presented to Britain's Second World War leader Prime Minister Winston Churchill at the White House when he visited the USA to inaugurate the Atlantic Charter. It was subsequently performed in the Hollywood Bowl with a cast including Gregory Peck and Frank Sinatra backed by a hundred-voice choir and symphonic orchestra. As a contrast, in McCracken, Kansas it was once performed by the entire student body and musical ensemble of a one-room schoolhouse: fifteen children with a guitar and harmonica. (Lampell and Robinson 1969, p.1) It can be argued that it is the American equivalent of Handel's *Messiah*. Its cultural power and significance travels vertically and horizontally through the sociological vectors of state and federal power and people power. A close study of the development of the British radio 'feature' as creative documentary, as previously explained, links its genre with Charles Parker's *Radio Ballads*. The influence is probably wider. Charles Chilton's *The Long Long Trail*, (BBC 1961) engages musical arrangements of First World War soldiers' renditions of the popular ballads and songs of their period and interpolates them with a narrated history of the Great War. This would inform and inspire the Theatre Royal Stratford East musical *Oh What A Lovely War*, later produced in film version and directed by Richard Attenborough in 1969. Chilton studied all aspects of American music and became the BBC expert in this area. It is not at all inconceivable he had been influenced by *The Lonesome Train*, consciously or subconsciously.

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Charles Parker, *Radio Lives*, produced by Sarah Parker, BBC R4, 1993.

Whilst this review for the purposes of criticism has analysed and referenced eight selected extracts, I would strongly advise listening to the piece in its entirety.

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Image Tim Crook by Marika Kochiashvili.*