

MEDIATED COMMUNITY AND PARTICIPATORY BLACKFACE IN *GILLETTE ORIGINAL COMMUNITY SING* (CBS, 1936–1937)

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RADIO BROADCASTING SCHEDULES of the 1930s were peppered with sing-along programmes. These idiosyncratic offerings fit none of the prevailing programme-type moulds, yet drew on many of radio's conventions, including audience participation and blackface songs and humour. Their frequency can be explained by the popularity of movie-theatre sing-along in the same era, for it was typical for radio broadcasters to adapt theatrical formats to the airwaves. The notion of a broadcast sing-along, however, is intriguing. In all of its previous incarnations, the community sing had been predicated on the physical presence of participants, who saw and heard one another and responded in the moment to audiovisual stimulus. In its broadcast format, the singing community had to be imagined by both broadcasters and participants. 1930s-era radio consumers were certainly in the habit of imagining themselves as part of a regional or national community of listeners—a fact that was exploited by sing-along hosts and might have contributed to the proliferation of these programmes. No single instance of a radio sing-along, however, seems ever to have generated mass appeal, and for the most part they survive only in listings and brief reviews. The most successful offering of this type was *Gillette Original Community Sing*, which broadcast nationally on CBS from September 1936 until June 1937. Although no recordings exist, a near-complete set of scripts and supplementary documentation have been preserved among the papers of the producer George Bennett Larson and the host Milton Berle, with the result that the programme can be largely reconstructed.¹ These materials provide insight into the development of community singing practices as they intersected with the changing medium of the radio broadcast. They also exhibit the central role of blackface performance and the stereotyping of ethnic minorities in both radio entertainment and community singing practices of the era. In particular, they indicate regular large-scale engagement in participatory blackface—a practice in which white audience members and home listeners adopted blackface personae in the context of collective singing.

This study contextualizes *Gillette Original Community Sing* in the rich network of contemporary community singing practices—both in-person and broadcast—to which it belonged. It identifies the uncomfortable nexus at which the programme was situated: as a radio offering, it traded in the tropes of various genres before finally abandoning

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¹ All scripts for the national broadcast survive. For the ten-week regional tryout run that preceded the national broadcast, scripts survive for all but the first (5 July 1936), fifth (2 Aug.), and ninth (30 Aug.) broadcasts. Scripts are located in the G. Bennett Larson papers, 1929–1987, MS 0444 (Special Collections and Archives, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, UT) and the Milton Berle papers, 1906–2002 (Library of Congress Music Division, Washington, DC).

audience participation to become a straight-up music-and-comedy programme, while as a vehicle for the delivery of community singing it struggled to overcome the limitations of its medium. Although *Gillette Original Community Sing* in particular, and sing-along radio in general, never successfully negotiated these challenges, an analysis of the programme elicits important questions about what it means to participate in a mediated singing community. It also further muddies the neat categories into which 1930s-era radio programmes have never easily fit. Finally, it illustrates the pervasive legacy of the minstrel stage, which saturated both radio and the community singing movement.²

COMMUNITY SINGING IN THE 1930S

The heterogeneity of radio sing-along programmes reflected the in-person community singing practices with which Americans came into contact as part of daily life. Although informal participatory singing had long found a home in popular entertainment venues such as dance halls, vaudeville houses, and amusements parks, the emergence of an organized community singing movement can be traced to the early 1890s.³ While there was interest in community singing among African Americans and some evidence of their activities has survived,⁴ the movement was steered by white music reformers and most events were segregated (formally in the South and informally in the North). Efforts to promote community singing in the early 1910s laid the groundwork for its prominent role in the Great War, and were sustained into the 1920s by organizers of municipal and national Music Week events.⁵ During the 1930s, community singing was deployed in public and private spaces by various agents for purposes of entertainment, advertising, uplift, and fraternal bonding, the lines between which were often blurred. The sponsors of radio sing-alongs believed that they could capitalize on a popular activity, and producers drew freely from the repertoires, practices, and discourses of in-person modalities. Likewise, consumers' understanding of and engagement with sing-along radio would have been shaped by their in-person experiences.

Radio sing-alongs were primarily modelled on their picture-theatre forebearers, and sometimes were broadcast directly from the theatres themselves, so it is natural that they should draw from theatrical practices. Motion-picture theatres, like most entertainment spaces, were often segregated by race or national origin, and while some African American theatres are known to have incorporated community singing into the programme, most documentary evidence pertains to white theatres.⁶ In the late 1930s, patrons of the motion-picture theatre might still sing with one of the few remaining theatre organists, in which case their activity would be guided by lantern slides used to project the lyrics to recent hits or old favourites. A decade earlier, it had been common for music publishers

² For a broad discussion of blackface minstrelsy as the foundation of American popular culture, see: Matthew D. Morrison, 'Race, Blacksound, and the (Re)Making of Musicological Discourse', *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 72 (2019), 781–823.

³ David Suisman, *Selling Sounds: The Commercial Revolution in American Music* (Cambridge, MA, 2009), 79; Andy Krikun, "'Perilous Blessing of Leisure": Music and Leisure in the United States, 1890–1945', in Roger Mantie and Gareth Dylan Smith (eds.), *Oxford Handbook of Music Making and Leisure* (New York, 2017), 231–60 at 246.

⁴ See, for example, 'Community Sing by Colored People', *Savannah Tribune*, 16 Mar. 1918.

⁵ For a case study of these pre-war activities, see Esther M. Morgan-Ellis, "'Making the many-minded one": Community Singing at the Peabody Prep in 1915', *Musical Quarterly*, 102 (2019), 361–401. Regarding wartime singing, see E. Christina Chang, 'The Singing Program of World War I: The Crusade for a Singing Army', *Journal of Historical Research in Music Education*, 23 (2001), 19–45; Esther M. Morgan-Ellis, 'Warren Kimsey and Community Singing at Camp Gordon, 1917–1918', *Journal of Historical Research in Music Education*, 39 (2018), 171–94. For details on Music Week events, see Charles M. Tremaine, *The History of National Music Week* (New York, 1925); Esther M. Morgan-Ellis, *Everybody Sing! Community Singing in the American Picture Palace* (Athens, GA, 2018), 72–4.

⁶ Morgan-Ellis, *Everybody Sing!*, 21.

to issue slides for the purpose of promoting new songs, while lantern slide companies produced sets that were more likely to feature classic community singing numbers.⁷ In the 1930s the production of commercial slides essentially ground to a halt, but organists were able to satisfy demand by adapting old slides and creating new ones by hand.⁸ 1930s-era theatregoers would have been even more likely to sing to the accompaniment of a sound short. Two series of sing-along film shorts represented typical iterations of the activity: the Master Art *Organlogues* (1932–5), which featured famous theatre organists, were sentimental and nostalgic, while the Paramount *Screen Songs* (1929–38), which typically framed live song-leaders with Max Fleischer’s animated antics, were lighthearted and irreverent.⁹ These films extended conventions established by two series of silent films in the previous decade:¹⁰ Educational Pictures’ heartfelt *Sing Them Again* (1923–4) and Out of the Inkwell Films’ comedic *Song Car-Tunes* (1924–7), also animated by Fleischer.¹¹ All except the Master Art films traded heavily in minstrel repertory and imagery, and the two Fleischer series were additionally populated with stereotyped representations of other non-white characters, including Chinese, Mexicans, and Jews.¹² In his analysis, Nicholas Sammond describes the Fleischer films as ‘offering ostensibly white audiences an affectively positive experience of collective and distributed racism’.¹³ These films reflected the minstrel legacy that would also surface in sing-along radio programmes, but the experience of singing along with a film, in which the song-leader (usually unseen) is separated in time and space from the participating singers, also provided an important conceptual framework for engaging with the radio sing-along.

Outside the theatre, community singing was supported (and capitalized upon) by an ever-growing library of songbooks and pamphlets issued by white editors and publishers. Until 1930, two book series seem to have dominated the market. The first, edited by a Music Supervisors National Conference (MSNC) committee headed by Peter Dykema, was published by C. C. Birchard & Co. of Boston; its most popular title was *Twice 55 Community Songs*, first printed in 1919 but later published in editions for varied uses.¹⁴ The second was launched with the 1915 publication of *The Golden Book of Favorite Songs* by Hall & McCreary of Chicago, a volume that underwent a major revision in 1923 and spawned several other collections.¹⁵ Both of these series were popular in the music education community, members of which sought to employ community singing as a means of cultural uplift. Outside of educational institutions, community singing activists—including music educators, professional song-leaders, and music industry promoters—used these volumes to facilitate massive public events.

⁷ Ibid. 92–3.

⁸ Ibid. 88.

⁹ Ibid. 209–24.

¹⁰ Many of the *Song Car-Tunes* were released with recorded soundtracks, making them some of the earliest sound films. However, the soundtracks were only employed in a few theatres, since most lacked the necessary playback equipment. Instead, they were accompanied by orchestra or organ. Richard Fleischer, *Out of the Inkwell: Max Fleischer and the Animation Revolution* (Lexington, KY, 2005), 43–4; Morgan-Ellis, *Everybody Sing!*, 119–20.

¹¹ Malcolm Cook, ‘Sing Them Again: Audience Singing in Silent Film’, in Ruth Barton and Simon Trezise (eds.), *Music and Sound in Silent Film: From the Nickelodeon to The Artist* (New York, 2018), 61–75 at 67–71; Morgan-Ellis, *Everybody Sing!*, 111–22.

¹² Nicholas Sammond, *Birth of an Industry: Blackface Minstrelsy and the Rise of American Animation* (Durham, NC, 2015), 160.

¹³ Ibid. 152.

¹⁴ Patricia S. Foy, ‘A Brief Look at the Community Song Movement’, *Music Educators Journal*, 76 (1990), 26–7; Morgan-Ellis, *Everybody Sing!*, 64–5.

¹⁵ Lucile M. Slade, ‘The Biggest Sleeper of Them All’, *Music Educators Journal*, 53 (1967), 48–50 at 50.

During these decades, community singing also took place in domestic spaces. The 1930s, however, witnessed an overt turn away from the large-scale public events presided over by community singing organizers—a new orientation that is reflected in the songbooks of the decade. *The ‘Everybody Sing’ Book* (1930, revised 1932), for example, was edited by Kenneth S. Clark, who had served as a training-camp song-leader during the war and later helped organize National Music Week. This volume, however, was intended for ‘singing by family and neighbors around the household piano, organ, ukulele or “what have you”’, and included a selection of barbershop-style arrangements.¹⁶ Another well-received volume, the *Let’s Sing Community Song Book* (1933), provided for accompaniment by the full arsenal of domestic instruments, including piano, organ, guitar, ukulele, and tenor banjo.¹⁷ Other volumes, such as *The One Hundred and One Best Songs* (1916, revised 1931), were published on behalf of instrument manufacturers with the obvious intent that families gather around the piano to enjoy their contents, as depicted on the cover.¹⁸ The radio, therefore, was positioned to serve as yet another instrument for the facilitation of domestic singing.

Despite this domestic turn, public community singing continued to flourish. It was heavily promoted by the National Recreation Association (NRA) and allied organizations, which regarded singing both as integral to physical health and ‘as a medium of personality expression and development’, while members of the MSNC continued their crusade to get (and keep) Americans singing.¹⁹ By the 1930s, however, the community singing movement was no longer guided by any single organization. In 1937 alone, for example, the New York City Police Department Juvenile Aid Bureau sponsored community singing outdoors and in hospitals;²⁰ the Chicago Park District supported community singing groups by providing facilities, music directors, a music library, and songbooks printed in the District’s own production shops;²¹ the Young Men’s and Young Women’s Hebrew Association facilitated community singing in Baltimore;²² the Rhode Island Physical Education Association conducted community singing at their quarterly meetings;²³ the city of Louisville held a Community Sing Program to celebrate Christmas;²⁴ and students at the Connecticut College for Women were trained to conduct community singing as part of a course on recreation leadership.²⁵ The Great Depression spurred further activity, as high levels of unemployment resulted both in unwanted leisure time and government support for cultural projects.²⁶ Consortiums of social welfare organizations turned to community singing in an effort ‘to meet the particular needs of those who find themselves unwilling victims of the present-day condition’,²⁷ while music staff in the Resettlement Administration and Recreation Program divisions of

¹⁶ Kenneth S. Clark (ed.), *The “Everybody Sing” Book* (New York, 1932), foreword.

¹⁷ *Let’s Sing Community Song Book* (New York, 1933).

¹⁸ *The One Hundred and One Best Songs*, rev. edn. (Chicago, 1931).

¹⁹ Paul V. McNutt, ‘Recreation and the National Morale’, *Twenty-Fourth National Recreational Congress Proceedings* (New York, 1939), 44.

²⁰ Lewis J. Valentine, *Police Department City of New York Annual Report for the Year 1937* (New York, 1938), 11, 62.

²¹ Arthur J. Todd, *Chicago Recreation Survey 1937*, iii: *Private Recreation* (Chicago, 1938), 143.

²² ‘Community Singing Arranged’, *Baltimore Sun*, 8 May 1937.

²³ ‘Eastern District Association News: Rhode Island’, *Journal of Health and Physical Education*, 8 (1937), 327.

²⁴ Kirtley Scott, ‘Miss Helen McBride Directs Voices on National Christmas Program’, *Louisville Courier-Journal*, 16 Dec. 1937.

²⁵ Ruth Hill Wood, ‘Recreation Leadership as a College Course’, *Journal of Health, Physical Education, Recreation*, 9 (1938), 99.

²⁶ Krikun, ‘Perilous Blessing of Leisure’, 252.

²⁷ Naomi M. Lantz, ‘Eastern District Association News: Maryland’, *Journal of Health and Physical Education*, 4 (1933), 44.

the Works Progress Administration conducted community singing in rural homesteads, frontier outposts, and public urban spaces.²⁸ During this time, the community singing movement increasingly penetrated rural areas, primarily by means of NRA recreation institutes and extension courses designed to train rural recreation leaders.²⁹ Finally, community singing was integral to the private activities of social organizations, including the Rotary Club, the Masons, and the California State Society.³⁰

The history of community singing during the Depression years has yet to be written, and the above summary is both cursory and incomplete. However, it demonstrates the ubiquity of community singing in the lives of Americans—young and old, poor and rich, rural and urban—and the great variety of its practices and aims. When radio listeners tuned in to *Gillette Original Community Sing*, therefore, they were already in the habit of singing along in movie theatres, at club dinners, in city parks, and in educational settings. On the one hand, singing along with the radio was a simple and natural extension of popular practice. On the other, the nature of the medium—with its disembodied voice(s) and anonymous, dispersed community of listeners—required that singers work to imagine their participation in communal music-making as they never had before. Radio sing-alongs also collapsed the domestic–public divide that had previously characterized community singing activities. Now, the family singing together at home could join an imagined choir of national scope.

SING-ALONG RADIO IN THE 1930S

The technology to broadcast and receive radio programmes matured just in time to meet the fiscal and cultural demands of Depression-era citizens, who sought both affordable entertainment and a sense of community in time of crisis. The two major networks, NBC and CBS, both formed in 1926, and within a few years the network model had come to dominate the industry.³¹ While some contemporary commentators predicted that radio would unite a fractured nation, others worried that the rise of national broadcast networks would erase regional culture and shift interest away from local communities.³² More recently, however, scholars such as Michele Hilmes and Elena Razlogova have criticized both positions and instead emphasized consumer autonomy, suggesting that individual listeners engaged with radio according to their own interests and agendas, and discouraging generalizations about the meaning or impact of the radio programmes

²⁸ Sheryl Kaskowitz, 'Government Song Women: The Forgotten Folk Collectors of the New Deal', *HUMANITIES*, 41 (2020), <https://www.neh.gov/article/government-song-women> (acc. 28 Sept. 2021); Peter L. Gough, "'The Varied Carols I Hear': The Music of the New Deal in the West" (PhD diss., University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 2009), 139–40; *WPA In New York City: The Record for 1938* (New York, 1938), 50–1.

²⁹ Katherine Glover (ed.), *Leisure for Living*, second in a series of Bulletins on Youth (Washington, DC, 1936), 18–19; John Bradford, *Rural Leadership Training Course in Recreation* (Corvallis, OR, 1937), 5–14.

³⁰ Sigmund Spaeth, 'Sing, You Rotarians!', *The Rotarian*, June 1938, 41–3; Todd, *Chicago Recreation Survey 1937*, 96; Jessie Ash Arndt, 'California Society Launches Its Sunday Breakfast Series', *Washington Post*, 6 Dec. 1937.

³¹ Christopher H. Sterling and John M. Kittross, *Stay Tuned: A Concise History of American Broadcasting* (Belmont, CA, 1978), 105–10.

³² Daniel Czitrom has described turn-of-the-century thought concerning the power of these new technologies of communication to address the three 'wrenching disruptions of the nineteenth century: industrialization, urbanization, and immigration' (Daniel J. Czitrom, *Media and the American Mind: From Morse to McLuhan* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1982), 91). For these commentators, radio had the power to heal divides and drive consensus. The lasting power of this way of thinking is reflected in an oft-cited 1922 article from *Collier's*, the author of which—Stanley Frost—predicted that national radio would bring 'mutual understanding to all sections of the country, unifying our thoughts, ideals, and purposes, making us a strong and well-knit people' (Stanley Frost, 'Radio Dreams that Can Come True: Here Is What the Radio People Can Give You if You Want It', *Collier's*, *The National Weekly*, 69, 10 June 1922, 18). In their 1937 study *Middletown in Transition*, however, Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd expressed concern that the homogenizing effect of network radio threatened to eradicate local culture and distract consumers from local political affairs (Richard H. Pells, *Radical Visions and American Dreams: Culture and Social Thought in the Depression Years* (Urbana, IL, 1998), 26).

themselves.³³ Likewise, Alexander Russo has probed the tangled relationships between national networks and individual stations to reveal that ‘network radio’ was in fact not a national monolith but a heterogeneous amalgamation of local practices.³⁴ This study—which draws from scripts, scrapbooks, programme listings, promotional columns, and reviews—will focus on the contents of sing-along radio broadcasts, not their reception. All the same, it is a study of mediated participation, and the shadowy-yet-indispensable figure of the home participant lurks perpetually in the background.

In many respects, *Gillette Original Community Sing* fitted comfortably into the landscape of 1930s radio. In *Community Sing*, established personalities coalesced around proven, highly formulaic material driven by a central gimmick—community singing—that had already become ubiquitous on the air. Many of its characteristics were representative of network entertainment, including modes of address that urged listeners to imagine invisible audiences, both remote and studio-based; tactics for circumscribing that audience; and a reliance on ethnic and gender stereotyping as a basis for humour. Unlike most radio programmes of the era, *Community Sing* is still available for study: its status as a network show meant that it was well-covered in the national trade press, while the prominence of its cast and production team has resulted in the preservation of scripts and ephemera in archival collections such as the G. Bennett Larson papers at the University of Utah and the Milton Berle papers at the Library of Congress. However, *Community Sing* was but the most prominent in a crowded field of sing-along radio programmes. These occupied the spectrum from local to national and expressed a full range of techniques and purposes.

Sing-along radio programmes are most easily categorized as being of the ‘audience participation’ type, which also included amateur hours, quiz shows, advice shows, and the ‘man-in-the-street’ interviews pioneered by Parks Johnson.³⁵ However, there are significant distinctions to be made between these offerings and sing-along shows. To begin with, the participatory element of most of these programmes did not intersect with the act of listening; although consumers might write letters submitting quiz questions or asking for advice, participation took place outside of the broadcast, the consumption of which was essentially passive. Similarly, contestants on a programme like *Major Bowes Amateur Hour* might sing and dance, but the home listener participated only by calling in to vote.³⁶ *Community Sing* listeners, in contrast, were expected to add their voices to the sound coming out of the receiver—to respond with physical activity to precise instructions. However, although sing-along programmes called on listeners to use their voices, they did not *give* them a voice. While *Vox Pop* interview subjects were invited to express their views and advice show listeners were given the opportunity to share their domestic and professional concerns, the participation of sing-along radio consumers was fully scripted. The meaning of ‘participation’, therefore, is not consistent across these examples. Sing-along radio programmes were unique in encouraging *musical* participation, with all that is implied by that phrase: a sense of community membership, a heightened sense of wellbeing, an opportunity for creative expression, and entrainment with the voices on the airwaves.³⁷

³³ Michele Hilmes, *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922–1952* (Minneapolis, 1997), p. xvii; Elena Razlogova, *The Listener’s Voice: Early Radio and the American Public* (Philadelphia, 2011), 3.

³⁴ Alexander Russo, *Points on the Dial: Golden Age Radio beyond the Networks* (Durham, NC, 2010), 6.

³⁵ Jason Loviglio, *Radio’s Intimate Public: Network Broadcasting and Mass-Mediated Democracy* (Minneapolis, 2005), 42–3.

³⁶ Ross Melnick, ‘Reality Radio: Remediating the Radio Contest Genre in Major Bowes’ Amateur Hour Films’, *Film History*, 23 (2011), 331–47 at 333.

³⁷ Thomas Turino, *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation* (Chicago, 2008), 29.

Community singing hit the airwaves at least as early as 1925. Naturally enough, the first such programmes were broadcasts of site-specific events that were not conceived with radio audiences in mind. For example, a sing hosted by the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music on the first and third Saturdays of each month was carried on the local station WLW,³⁸ while KMTR broadcast the community sing that took place in Hollywood every Tuesday evening.³⁹ These programmes encouraged passive consumption. While remote listeners were certainly able to join in, no special accommodations were made for them. The primary function of such broadcasts was to remediate an event experienced fully only by those physically present.

Medium-specific programming emerged with the proliferation of commercial sponsorships in the early 1930s. This was not a coincidence. As the new profit-driven model took over the airwaves, sponsors looked for ways to build ‘good will’ among listeners so as to improve their brand images and boost sales. Community singing fit the bill: it was fun, family-oriented, wholesome, neighbourly, and shot through with nostalgia. Community singing programmes also provided an opportunity for commercial tie-ins in the form of song sheets, which could be used to attract customers to stores and which provided an additional conduit for print advertising.

An excellent early example of a radio-specific community singing programme is *Safeway Square*, which broadcast from KFI in Los Angeles in 1933. The programme was sponsored by the combined Safeway and Piggly Wiggly grocery chains (the former had recently acquired the West Coast branch of the latter), and listeners were encouraged to pick up a free song sheet each week along with their groceries. Typical of Depression-era marketing, the song sheet also included a picture-caption contest that promised \$100 in free groceries to the author of the winning submission. Listeners who tuned in to the twice-weekly broadcasts were invited by the film actor John T. Murray to sing ‘old-timers’ with a male studio chorus. The *Variety* reviewer described ‘getting listeners to join in the singing with ether artists at the other end of the set’ as ‘a new gag for this part of the country’.⁴⁰ While it was not novel to hear community singing on the radio, this may indeed have been one of the first programmes actively to encourage home participation.

The concentration of sing-along programmes increased steeply in the middle of the decade, and by 1936 *Variety* was able to describe radio-based community singing as a ‘national craze’.⁴¹ In total, I have documented forty-one community singing programmes that were on the air at the same time as *Community Sing*. This list is restricted to programmes mentioned in the national trade press and does not include one-time broadcasts of community sings associated with holidays or local celebrations. Of the shows I have documented, four were network while the remaining thirty-seven were local. Six (two network, four local) were variety shows that included a community singing component, while the remainder appear to have been dedicated primarily to community singing.

Most of these programmes navigated a middle ground between the site-specific broadcasts of the 1920s and radio-specific programmes like *Safeway Square*. Producers seem to have discovered that the most successful approach was to employ a live participatory audience within the framework of a programme designed for remote consumption. This live audience could be provided in two different ways: either participants could be

³⁸ ‘New Briefs from the Broadcasters’, *Radio Digest*, 21 Nov. 1925, 10.

³⁹ ‘KMTR is “high-brow”’, *Radio Digest*, 8 May 1926, 28.

⁴⁰ Stan., ‘Safeway Square’, *Variety*, 10 Jan. 1933, 36.

⁴¹ ‘Sunday Sings’, *Variety*, 30 Sept. 1936, 23.

recruited for the purpose of broadcasting, or the broadcast could emanate from a venue already stocked with patrons—namely, a movie theatre. While a variety of programme types were broadcast from picture houses, this approach was especially suitable for community singing programmes, given the fact that audiences were already engaging in the practice. In Baltimore, for example, WBAL offered a Monday-night broadcast of the regular 15-minute community sing conducted by the organist Harvey Hammond at the Century theatre. The purpose of this programme, which *Variety* declared to be ‘as good as the chain ones, save that pickup from the theatre is not so smooth as from a N. Y. studio’, was both to entertain listeners and to attract patrons to the theatre who might be desiring a ‘chance to stretch their tonsils anonymously over the ether’. Introductions and conclusions by the radio announcer Rex Reynolds, who used his airtime to plug the Century, served to modify the entertainment for consumption over the air.⁴²

Simply broadcasting the community-sing portion of a motion picture programme seems to have been unusual. There would have been a number of shortcomings to this approach: picture theatre sings were shorter than the 15-minute block designated for a radio programme, the timing might have been difficult, and the fact that the sing was integral to a site-specific performance would have challenged the producer who wanted to create an effective radio programme. In most cases, therefore, broadcasts from movie theatres constituted special programmes that were scheduled between regular shows or at the end of the day. This was the case at the Alabama theatre in Montgomery, which broadcast a sing over WBRC before the first show on Sunday,⁴³ and at the Enright theatre in Pittsburgh (WWSW) and the Tampa theatre in Tampa (WDAE),⁴⁴ both of which broadcast 30-minute sings every Friday night at 8:30. At the Enright, the distribution of prizes paid for by the sponsor, a jewellery firm, reportedly swelled audiences for the regular show. Radio staff often stepped in to lead the singing, such as in the cases of KIRO’s Gene Baker at the Seattle Paramount (Sundays at 3:15)⁴⁵ and KCKN’s Karl Willis at the Kansas City Granada (Wednesdays at 8:30).⁴⁶

While the above-mentioned broadcasts all focused exclusively on community singing, it was more common for programmes to incorporate participatory music-making into a variety show. The *Easy Iowa Song Fest*, for example, combined thirty minutes of community singing with audience interviews (a gimmick in widespread use), solo organ numbers, and amateur acts. The *Song Fest* also boasted a unique feature. While Doug Grant led the singing, the radio personality Benne Alter would wander through the crowd and hold a microphone in front of various singers, at the same time handing each a numbered ticket. A judge would listen to each voice and select the best singer. At the conclusion of the show, the winner was called to the stage and presented with a five-dollar bill. This one-hour programme was sponsored by the Easy Washing Machine Co. and broadcast from the Paramount theatre in Grand Rapids, at first following the conclusion of regular programming on Saturday night but later from a spot after the first show on Sunday. As in other cases, this arrangement was mutually beneficial: the theatre could guarantee an audience for the broadcast, while the broadcast was reported to boost ticket sales to the preceding show, thereby benefitting the theatre.⁴⁷

⁴² Bert, ‘Harvey Hammond’, *Variety*, 92, Sept. 1936, 32.

⁴³ ‘Sunday Sings’, *Variety*, 30 Sept. 1936, 23.

⁴⁴ ‘Tampa Ties up with WDAE’, *Motion Picture Daily*, 20 Oct. 1936, 10.

⁴⁵ ‘Theatre Broadcasts Singing’, *Motion Picture Daily*, 4 Feb. 1937, 8.

⁴⁶ ‘KCKN, Theatre in Tieup’, *Motion Picture Daily*, 2 Feb. 1937, 8.

⁴⁷ ‘WMT Midnite Theater Show’, *Radio Daily*, 22 Apr. 1937, 3; ‘New Community Sing Slant’, *Radio Daily*, 10 June 1937, 3.

Another variety show, the California-based *Sing Time*, represented a different approach to the alignment of motion picture and radio interests. The show took to the air on 5 January 1937, as a collaboration between the Don Lee Broadcasting System and Fox West Coast Theatres.⁴⁸ It was staged on Tuesday evenings in Hollywood's 900-seat Filmarte theatre, a speciality house used primarily to screen French films.⁴⁹ The musical theatre actor Ed Lowry served as song-leader and master of ceremonies, while variety entertainment was provided by the tenor Milton Watson, the comedian Peggy Bernier, the contralto Maxine Lewis, the three Bryant Sisters (a vocal trio), and a male quartet. Per the original agreement, Don Lee would plug Fox West Coast on its four stations—KHJ in Los Angeles, KFRC in San Francisco, KDB in Santa Barbara, and KGB in San Diego—while all 150 Fox theatres would carry screen advertisements for the Don Lee network and its affiliate, Mutual Broadcasting System.⁵⁰ The show was evidently a success, as it was picked up by Mutual for national broadcast in April.⁵¹

An equal number of sing-along radio programmes had no affiliation with motion picture theatres or chains. *Philadelphia Sings* was broadcast from the WIP studios,⁵² while WJAY leased the Hanna theatre in Cleveland for its programme with no promise to benefit the exhibitor.⁵³ The KCMO *Community Sing* was staged in the Kansas City Municipal Auditorium,⁵⁴ the Wilkens jewellery firm elected to broadcast its WJAS programme from the Moose Temple in Pittsburgh,⁵⁵ and the Salt Lake City *Community Sing* was broadcast over KDYL from a pavilion in Liberty Park.⁵⁶ Several of these broadcast locations represented the types of settings—parks, municipal auditoriums, and fellowship halls—in which community singing was traditionally practised. When it came to the task of optimizing a broadcast for the home listener, however, the studio offered the most desirable environment.

THE FORMAT AND DEVELOPMENT OF *GILLETTE ORIGINAL COMMUNITY SING*

Gillette Original Community Sing got off to an inauspicious start. On 1 July 1936 *Variety* and *Broadcasting* both carried stories about an unusual mix-up that had taken place at CBS.⁵⁷ Contrary to policy, the idea of a community singing programme had been pitched to two clients simultaneously: the advertising firm of Benton & Bowles had sold the programme to the Colgate–Palmolive–Peet Company—New Jersey-based manufacturers of soap, toothpaste, shaving cream, and other personal care products—while the firm of Ruthrauff & Ryan had sold it to Gillette Safety Razors. Both were enamoured of the idea and signed for it within hours of hearing auditions, and neither was willing to cede ownership. In the end, the two companies reached an agreement whereby each would sponsor a community singing programme on a different night of the week. It appears that the sponsors expected community singing to have such a powerful appeal that it would further their marketing aims even when saturating the airwaves.

⁴⁸ 'Ed Lowry on Don Lee', *Variety*, 23 Dec. 1936, 33.

⁴⁹ 'Filmarte Theatre', *Los Angeles Theatres*, <https://losangelestheatres.blogspot.com/2017/02/filmarte-theatre.html> (acc. 25 June 2018).

⁵⁰ 'Merchandising & Promotion', *Broadcasting*, 1 Dec. 1936, 76.

⁵¹ 'Sing Time', *Radio Daily*, 15 Apr. 1937, 7.

⁵² 'When Philadelphia Sings', *Broadcasting*, 1 Sept. 1936, 42.

⁵³ 'WJAY Leases Legiter', *Variety*, 9 Sept. 1936, 43; '2,000 at Cleveland Sing in Theatre Every Sunday', *Variety*, 9 Dec. 1936, 37.

⁵⁴ 'Community Sing Starts', *Motion Picture Daily*, 26 Oct. 1936, 16.

⁵⁵ 'Successful Sings', *Variety*, 23 Dec. 1936, 23.

⁵⁶ 'Coast-to-Coast', *Radio Daily*, 14 June 1937, 8.

⁵⁷ 'Smoothing out a tough one', *Variety*, 1 July 1936, 27; 'Colgate–Palmolive–Peet and Gillette Razor Sign for CBS Song Program', *Broadcasting*, 1 July 1936, 149.

Although reports indicate that Gillette signed for the idea two days before their rivals, Colgate–Palmolive–Peet were the first to the airwaves. Titled *Come On, Let's Sing*, the Colgate–Palmolive–Peet programme premiered on Wednesday, 1 July, in the 9:30 to 10 pm time slot and was broadcast over a sixty-seven-station network.⁵⁸ The format anticipated that of the forthcoming Gillette show. Jack Arthur served as master of ceremonies and led the singing of the theme song, 'How do you do' (1924), to open the broadcast. Next, Edmond 'Tiny' Ruffner conducted scripted audience interviews. This was followed by comedy and songs from Ed East and Ralph Dumke, who invited the audience to join in on their refrains. The inaugural broadcast earned plaudits from *Variety*, although the reviewer expressed reserve concerning the long-term prospects of community singing programmes: 'If the thing does get started on any scale, it's safe to say that it can burn itself with the same suicidal pace the amateur nights did.'⁵⁹ The reviewer's pessimism seems to have been merited in this case. Published programme schedules indicate that famed song-leader Homer Rodeheaver took the helm later in 1936, but even his celebrity could not rescue the programme.⁶⁰ *Come On, Let's Sing* was replaced by Jessica Dragonette's *Palmolive Beauty Box Theater* on 13 January 1937.⁶¹

The *Variety* review of *Come On, Let's Sing* contains two additional observations that are worthy of comment. First, the reviewer was quick to connect the programme with motion picture entertainment. He described the community-singing premiss as 'one more case of radio lifting a page out of the film file', although he noted with admiration that the format was low-cost in comparison with other sponsored programmes, given that the studio audience provided a significant portion of the entertainment.⁶² (This appears also to have been a selling point for Gillette, which in May of 1936 rejected several auditions for a variety programme hosted by Jack Oakie. The proposed show featured an all-star cast and would have required an enormous weekly outlay from the sponsors.⁶³) Second, the *Variety* reviewer stated that the home listener was not expected to join in with the singing on *Come On, Let's Sing*. He provided no evidence to back the claim, and I am sceptical that such was the case. As we shall see, the Gillette show strongly encouraged home participation. However, at the very least this claim indicates a lack of consensus regarding the role of community singing programmes. Either Colgate–Palmolive–Peet did not encourage home participation or the reviewer (and therefore, it is likely, many other listeners as well) did not understand that participation was expected. We can conclude that community singing programmes were still unfamiliar enough to invite fluid interpretations from both creators and listeners.

The greater success of *Gillette Original Community Sing* might be explained by the production team's novel approach to development, which was smugly described by the producer George Bennett Larson in an article for *Broadcasting*.⁶⁴ Before the programme was released for national consumption, it underwent a nine-week tryout period on the

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Edga., 'Come on, Let's Sing', *Variety*, 8 July 1936, 30.

⁶⁰ For more on Rodeheaver and broadcast community singing, see Kevin Mungons and Douglas Yeo, *Homer Rodeheaver and the Rise of the Gospel Music Industry* (Urbana, IL, 2021), 122–33.

⁶¹ 'Cities Service, C-P-P Shift', *Broadcasting*, 15 Dec. 1936, 32.

⁶² Edga., 'Come on, Let's Sing', 30.

⁶³ Milton Berle Papers, 1906–2002, Library of Congress Music Division, Washington, DC, Box 31, Folder 1. This folder contains two audition scripts. In the first, dated 6 May 1936, the programme is referred to as the Gillette Gayeties, while in the second, dated 13 May 1936, the programme is referred to as the Gillette Hollywood Parade. The proposed programme was to feature a regular cast of Jack Oakie, Gertrude Niesen, Cliff Edwards, Milton Berle, and Walter Huston, with music by Victor Young and his orchestra.

⁶⁴ G. Bennett Larson, 'A Unique Tryout Proves Successful for Gillette Show', *Broadcasting*, 15 Oct. 1936, 41. Contains inaccurate information.



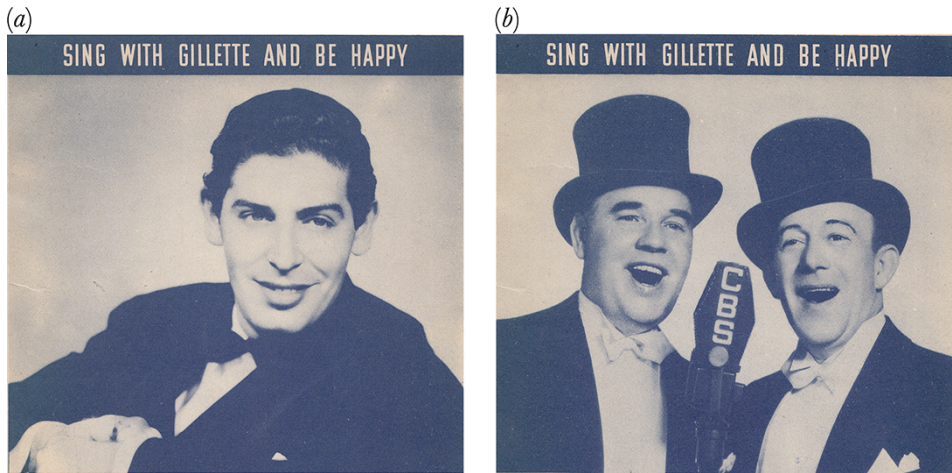
Pl. 1. This image of song leader Wendell Hall was used to promote the series of *Community Sing* short subjects that was released by CBS in January of 1937. Wendell Hall Papers

ten-station Yankee network. During the tryout, the programme aired Sundays, 10 to 10:45 pm, from the 900-seat Repertory theatre in Boston. The first Boston broadcast was made on 5 July 1936, while the last took place on 30 August. The purpose of the tryout, in the words of Larson, was ‘to discover the best possible entertainment combination that could result from the juggling of entertainers and formulae’. Although the cast moved into place over the course of the tryout period, the character of *Community Sing* and the strategy that informed that character were clearly established with the inaugural broadcast.

It seems that the only member of the national cast to appear in the first broadcast was the announcer Joe Seymour, although this is difficult to confirm; the script does not appear to have survived, and one must rely on the *Variety* review for details.⁶⁵ Wendell Hall (see Pl. 1) replaced Roy Harlow as the song-leader in the third broadcast (19 July), which also marked the first appearance of Billy Jones and Ernie Hare, who took over the task of performing audience interviews from Linus Travers (see Pl. 2).⁶⁶ Milton Berle’s

⁶⁵ Fox., ‘Community Sing’, *Variety*, 8 July 1936, 32. Seymour is not mentioned in the review, but it is indicated in the 12 July script that he participated in the premiere (Milton Berle Papers, Box 31, Folder 2).

⁶⁶ Milton Berle Papers, Box 31, Folder 2. Although Hall later claimed that the *Community Sing* programme was his idea, the fact that he was not a member of the original cast sheds doubt on his account (Francis Gerald Fritz, ‘Wendell Woods Hall: An Early Radio Performer’ (MA thesis, University of Wisconsin), 163). Hall also claims that *Community Sing*



PL. 2. These portraits of (a) Milton Berle and (b) the ‘Gillette Gentlemen’ (Billy Jones and Ernie Hare) were published in the *Official Songbook of Gillette Original Community Sing* (1936). Author’s collection

first appearance came a week later (26 July), when he replaced Jones and Hare in the role of interviewer (Pl. 2).⁶⁷ The celebrated duo were absent from that broadcast, but soon returned as regulars. By August, the final cast had come together, with one exception.⁶⁸ Throughout the tryouts, a boy singer named Jackie Duggan—‘discovered’ in the audience at the inaugural broadcast—was featured in a weekly solo. He was replaced with Eileen Barton in the role of Jolly Gillette, ‘the sponsor’s daughter’, at the first national broadcast. Finally, although her name was never mentioned in scripts, advertising, or reviews, there is evidence that Betty Garde had a recurring role playing the female characters in all mock interviews and sketches; Berle recalls that she was a member of the cast, and she filled a similar role on CBS’s *The Eddie Cantor Show* in 1936.⁶⁹ Neither of the female cast members were ever credited by name on the air or in the scripts.

The *Community Sing* cast combined a who’s-who of radio trailblazers—Wendell Hall, Billy Jones, and Ernest Hare—with an emerging star, Milton Berle, who was later to make a name for himself in the medium of television. Hall, who got his start playing xylophone and singing on the vaudeville stage, was broadcasting over KYW in Chicago by early 1922, and has been credited with being the first paid radio programmer, the first on-air song plugger, the first to undertake a radio tour, and the first radio performer to have a commercial sponsor.⁷⁰ Whether or not he is in fact entitled to all these honours, there is no question that he was enormously influential during the era in which entertainment radio was taking shape. Hall specialized in blackface routines and songs, including what he termed a ‘two-voice Negro dialogue’ in which he would play both parts.⁷¹ His

tryouts started in the spring of 1936, with one-off local broadcasts from ‘several different cities’, although his apparent unreliability throws this claim into question (Fritz, 164).

⁶⁷ Milton Berle Papers, Box 31, Folder 2.

⁶⁸ Milton Berle Papers, Box 31, Folder 3.

⁶⁹ Milton Berle and Haskel Frankel, *Milton Berle: An Autobiography* (New York, 1974), 188; ‘Betty Garde is Happy These Days; Cantor Calls Her a Great Actress’, *Oakland Tribune*, 12 Apr. 1936.

⁷⁰ Fritz, ‘Wendell Woods Hall: An Early Radio Performer’, 51, 80, 89.

⁷¹ *Ibid.* 106; Hall claimed to have developed the ‘Sam ’n’ Henry’ characters—later to become the ‘Amos ’n’ Andy’ of radio and television fame—several years before they were adopted by Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll.

greatest hit, however, was the dialect song ‘It Ain’t Gonna Rain No Mo’’, which he recorded and copyrighted in 1923 (the song had previously circulated in the oral tradition). On air, Hall—who grew up in Chicago—adopted a racially ambiguous Southern accent, and it was only his nickname, ‘The Red-Headed Music Maker’, that prevented many listeners from assuming he was African American.⁷² Jones and Hare, likewise, often worked in a blackface idiom, engaging in comic banter and singing ebullient songs. They took to the air in 1923 as ‘The Happiness Boys’, broadcasting over WEA in New York City under the auspices of the Happiness Candy Company.⁷³ They adjusted their name with each subsequent sponsor, in 1936 becoming ‘The Gillette Gentlemen’. For all three, *Community Sing* marked the end of the line: Hall was dissatisfied with his small part on the programme and never worked in radio again, while the Jones/Hare partnership was to end a few years later with Hare’s 1939 death.⁷⁴ On the other hand, *Community Sing* was Berle’s first radio engagement as a headliner. This intergenerational combination of talents is striking, and it seems likely that Berle’s fast-faced, edgy humour came into conflict with the out-of-date, perhaps nostalgic, broadcasting styles of his co-stars.

The national premiere of *Community Sing* took place on 6 September from 9 to 9:45 pm (6 to 6:45 pm on the West Coast), although the programme was moved to the 10 pm slot on 27 September (7 pm on the West Coast). Its main competitor in both slots (they moved together) was NBC’s *General Motors Concert*, a broadcast of classical music conducted by Ernö Rapée. *Radio Guide* designated *General Motors Concert* a ‘high spot selection’ and often listed the works to be performed, while occasionally also listing the songs to be sung on the Gillette programme.⁷⁵ Indeed, *General Motors Concert* proved to be a moderate hit, ranking thirty-eighth in popularity for the 1936–37 season with a Hooper rating of 8.4.⁷⁶

For its national run, *Community Sing* was moved to the 1180-seat Manhattan theatre in New York City, which had been leased by CBS for use as a radio studio and was referred to on-air as the Gillette Community Hall.⁷⁷ Although segregation was not legislated in Boston or New York, it is likely that African Americans and other non-whites were not welcome in the theatres CBS used for broadcasting, and only white attendees can be seen in any of the surviving photographs.⁷⁸ *Community Sing* was heard on between 94 and 104 stations (reports varied) across the United States, in Canada, and in Hawaii, where the programme was received via shortwave radio and then rebroadcast via long-wave.⁷⁹ The premiere established the roles of each cast member and introduced a format that would be adhered to for several months. Seymour introduced the programme and voiced two advertising spots, one of which was always in the form of a testimonial letter. He also interjected with references to the sponsor, sparred with Berle (their on-air relationship became increasingly adversarial over the course of the season), and closed each programme with an invitation to tune in to or attend the broadcast the following week. Seymour opened each programme by introducing Berle, who provided a monologue

⁷² Razlogova, *The Listener’s Voice: Early Radio and the American Public*, 77.

⁷³ Susan Smulyan, *Selling Radio: The Commercialization of American Broadcasting, 1920–1934* (Washington, DC, 1994), 98.

⁷⁴ Fritz, ‘Wendell Woods Hall: An Early Radio Performer’, 165.

⁷⁵ See, for example: ‘This Week’s Programs’, *Radio Guide*, 3 Apr. 1937, 31.

⁷⁶ Jim Ramsburg, *Network Radio Ratings, 1932–1953: A History of Prime Time Programs through the Ratings of Nielsen, Crossley and Hooper* (Jefferson, NC, 2012), 62.

⁷⁷ ‘Fifth CBS Theatre’, *Broadcasting*, 1 Aug. 1936, 14.

⁷⁸ Albert M. Camarillo, ‘Navigating Segregated Life in America’s Racial Borderhoods, 1910s–1950s’, *Journal of American History*, 100 (2013), 645–62 at 650.

⁷⁹ ‘70 Network Premieres’, *Variety*, 26 Aug. 1936, 66; ‘10 Radio Programs in Tieup on Mickey Mouse’s Birthday’, *Film Daily*, 18 Sept. 1936, 4; ‘Agencies—Sponsors’, *Variety*, 12 Aug. 1936, 45.

before Hall led the first round of community singing. (According to Hall, the audience included thirty to thirty-five paid singers to guarantee healthy participation.⁸⁰) After the testimonial, Jones and Hare would banter and perform a song, often with audience participation. This was followed by another round of singing led by Hall. Next, Berle would engage in repartee with Barton, who would usually invoke her right as ‘the sponsor’s daughter’ to sing a solo number. After a few more community songs with Hall, Jones and Hare would perform scripted audience interviews. Another set of community songs preceded Berle’s sketch, which was usually a burlesque on a well-known drama, novel, or radio programme. The show concluded with a final set of participatory songs, a Gillette spot, and the singing of ‘Goodnight, Neighbors’ (composed by Edwin Pearce Christy for use in minstrel shows and published as ‘Goodnight, Ladies’ in 1867).

Gillette Original Community Sing aired every Sunday night for forty-three weeks, although the programme underwent several transformations. Beginning on 21 February 1937, *Community Sing* broadcast for fourteen weeks from Hollywood, where CBS purchased the Studio theatre for conversion into a radio studio.⁸¹ The entire cast relocated for the duration, and Berle reportedly paid all of the expenses himself (amounting to \$1000 a week) in order to be in Hollywood to film his first feature picture, RKO’s *New Faces of 1937*. Although the filming was originally expected to be completed in six weeks, the trip was repeatedly extended.⁸² Berle, however, had recently signed a two-year contract with Gillette for \$2,500 a week, rising to \$5,000, so presumably he could tolerate the expense.⁸³

The sojourn in Hollywood also saw some programming changes. Without abandoning its obligation to Gillette or its identity as a participatory programme, *Community Sing* subtly transformed into an advertising vehicle for *New Faces of 1937*. The film’s headliner, Joe Penner, made a guest appearance on the first broadcast, while cast members Tommy Mack and Bert Gordon returned weekly in character as Judge Hugo Straight and Count Mischa Moody. On 14 March, Berle announced that the three of them would be making their own movie, a gimmick that provided sketch material for almost the entire remainder of the show’s run. This continuity, in combination with frequent (if oblique) references to the film and its stars, kept *New Faces* in the minds of listeners into the summer months. (All of this effort did not pay off: *New Faces* lost \$258,000 for RKO.⁸⁴)

On 25 April, *Community Sing*—along with its NBC competitors, both of which were broadcasts of classical music⁸⁵—was moved back to the 9 pm slot (6 pm on the West Coast) and the programme was shortened to thirty minutes. The abbreviated *Community Sing* returned to New York City, with Mack and Gordon as permanent cast members, on 23 May. One week later, the premiss for the broadcast was transformed when the entire cast ‘moved’ to the Gillette Summer Hotel, which provided a new conceptual framework for the gags and sketches. Beginning on 6 June, the programme was listed in *Radio Guide* as *Gillette Summer Hotel*—‘The Gillette “Community Sing”, converted for the warm months’, with participation still part of the show.⁸⁶ What might have been a temporary experiment turned permanent, however, and by 27 June the programme

⁸⁰ Fritz, ‘Wendell Woods Hall: An Early Radio Performer’, 164.

⁸¹ ‘CBC Buys Film Theatre Outright in Hollywood’, *Variety*, 24 Feb. 1937, 39.

⁸² ‘Berle Staying Longer’, *Radio Daily*, 1 Apr. 1937, 2.

⁸³ ‘Milton Berle’s Hollywood Guests’, *Variety*, 13 Jan. 1937, 34.

⁸⁴ Edwin M. Bradley, *Unsung Hollywood Musicals of the Golden Era* (Jefferson, NC, 2016), 165.

⁸⁵ On 11 Apr., *General Motors* moved to the 7 pm slot and *Community Sing* was joined at 9 pm by an unnamed programme headlined by the soprano Gladys Swarthout and *California Concert*, both on the NBC network (‘This Week’s Programs’, *Radio Guide*, 17 Apr. 1937, 30).

⁸⁶ ‘This Week’s Programs’, *Radio Guide*, 19 June 1937, 31.

had been completely rebranded as *Gillette Summer Hotel*. The new show featured the same performers in the same routines, but excised the community singing. The disappearance of the participatory element, however, probably did not come as a surprise to listeners. The number of community songs per broadcast had been dwindling steadily for most of the programme's run. After an average of fourteen community songs per broadcast in September and seventeen in October, the 29 November broadcast contained only eleven songs. The average for the Hollywood run before the show's length was cut was just under ten songs per broadcast. After the cut, it dropped to six and a half. The final four broadcasts from New York City contained only four community songs each.

While *Community Sing* was successful for its genre, it never garnered wide appeal. It tied with *Shep Fields Orchestra* as the ninth most popular Sunday night programme of the 1936–7 season, with a Hooper rating of 6.8.⁸⁷ This means that an average of 1,555,092 homes tuned in each week during the rating period. The top fifty programmes that season, meanwhile, each had an average rating of 12.0.⁸⁸ The fact that it was not quickly cancelled suggests that the sponsor was satisfied with the return on their investment, but it is clear that most Americans preferred alternative Sunday night diversions.

HOME CONSUMPTION OF *COMMUNITY SING*

All the same, several million listeners *did* tune in to *Community Sing*, and I want to reconstruct their experience as far as possible, although details regarding participation are difficult to pin down. It is likely that fans of the show sent in large quantities of mail describing their habits, but none of these letters have survived in archives, while newspaper and magazine columnists of the time did not seem to think that the participatory experience of sing-along fans was an interesting topic. It is also certain that participation was not even across categories of age, race, education, geography, and socioeconomic status. As has been previously observed, participatory singing was on the decline in urban theatres, although it still exercised a strong nostalgic appeal (reinforced, perhaps, by the presence of 1920s-era stars in the *Community Sing* cast).⁸⁹ All the same, there is significant evidence that those who tuned in did in fact sing along, and we can reconstruct their participation in general terms based on what we know about radio listening habits in the 1930s.

To begin with, *Gillette Original Community Sing* maintained the community singing format for an entire season—a strong indication that the participatory element had verified, if limited, appeal. Broadcasters were growing fanatic about market research, and a sing-along show that failed to elicit singing would have been quickly retooled.⁹⁰ The next item of evidence is the pair of songbooks published by Gillette to accompany the show. At the midpoint of the 6 December broadcast, Seymour shared some exciting news: an official songbook had been compiled and was free to any listener who sent in an empty Gillette blade package.⁹¹ The book contains not only lyrics to 113 favourite songs but also photographs and biographies of each cast member and snapshots taken during a broadcast. In this way, the songbook not only facilitated participation but also provided a visual supplement to an auditory medium, thereby assisting listeners to imagine the physical

⁸⁷ Ramsburg, *Network Radio Ratings, 1932–1953*, 56.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.* 61–2.

⁸⁹ Morgan-Ellis, *Everybody Sing!*, 224.

⁹⁰ Susan J. Douglas, *Listening In: Radio and the American Imagination* (Minneapolis, 2004), 136.

⁹¹ George Bennett Larson Papers, 1929–1987, MS 0444. Special Collections and Archives, University of Utah, J. Willard Marriott, Salt Lake City, Utah, Box 16, Folder 1.



PL. 3. The cover of the first *Community Sing* songbook (1936). Author's collection

space in which the singing community was rooted. The cover of the songbook, on the other hand, turned its gaze upon the home participant (see PL. 3). Here we see a white, middle-class family—father, mother, and two children—gathered around the radio, gleefully singing along. This image both ‘verifies’ the fact that listeners across the continent were joining in and further urges the listener to imagine the dispersed community.

When Seymour came over the air a week later, it was with reports of the songbook’s wild success. ‘To say we have been swamped with requests’, he announced, ‘is putting it mildly.’⁹² He described inquiries from every state in the union and all parts

⁹² Ibid.

of Canada, and urged listeners to write as soon as possible before the songbook was out of stock. Although we should take Seymour's on-air accounting with a grain of salt, the book was clearly successful. This is evidenced both by the fact that it is fairly easy to obtain a copy today and by Gillette's decision to issue a companion volume in 1937. On 21 March Seymour announced that the last copies of the *Official Song Book of Gillette Original Community Sing* were in the mail and that a new Gillette songbook was in the works.⁹³ This second volume appears to have begun shipping in early April.⁹⁴ It contains 128 songs, only twenty of which had appeared in the first book, and a one-page biographical and photographic overview of the cast. The cover portrays white members of the studio audience crowding into Gillette Community Hall before a broadcast (see Pl. 4). Even if Seymour is misinforming us when he describes 'three huge printings' and a 'flood of requests' so great that it had been impossible to keep up with demand, the fact that Gillette undertook the expense of a second volume indicates that the distribution of the first must have met their expectations.⁹⁵ The show was designed and scripted with the understanding that home participants were making use of the songbook. Beginning with the 10 January broadcast, Hall always gave the page number for any musical selection that was to be found in the book.⁹⁶ This practice continued until 9 May, when the penultimate Hollywood broadcast was made.⁹⁷

But under what circumstances did this home participation take place? Although radio consumption became an increasingly domestic and solitary activity in the 1930s, it is likely that the average *Community Sing* listener would not be alone. In 1934, families listened to the radio together in 85 per cent of households. There were usually two to three people listening in the evenings, when most community singing programmes were broadcast, and men and women were equally likely to tune in.⁹⁸ It is also probable that listeners to participatory programmes often shared the experience with neighbours. They were certainly encouraged to do so. At the conclusion of one *Community Sing* broadcast, for example, song-leader Wendell Hall signed off with the following invitation: 'Next week, you folks out there on the air, why don't you have your neighbors over for a glass of cider and some home-made cookies and join with us in singing out these old-time songs?'⁹⁹ Hall's advice did more than encourage communal participation. It also inspired listeners to imagine neighbourly groups gathered around the radio, singing together in all parts of the country.

COMMUNITY SING AND THE IMAGINATION OF COMMUNITY

Before radio, community singing required the physical presence of all participants. Even if these participants did not know one another, they could see and hear one another. The community created by the singing experience, although temporary, was clearly defined and bounded. With the advent of radio, these boundaries were less visible. A sing-along broadcast from a studio encompassed a minimum number of participants (those physically present), but not a maximum, and all of these participants were asked to imagine a community that extended far beyond that which they could perceive. Members of the studio audience participated in a perceived community, but they also understood that

⁹³ Ibid., Box 17, Folder 2.

⁹⁴ Ibid., Box 17, Folder 4.

⁹⁵ Ibid., Box 17, Folder 2.

⁹⁶ Ibid., Box 16, Folder 3.

⁹⁷ Ibid., Box 17, Folder 6.

⁹⁸ Richard Butsch, *The Making of American Audiences: From Stage to Television, 1750–1990* (Cambridge, 2000), 197.

⁹⁹ G. Bennett Larsen Papers, Box 15, Folder 1.



PL. 4. The cover of the second *Community Sing* songbook (1937). Author's collection

they were participating in an imagined community that extended across the continent.¹⁰⁰ Home participants likewise were in a position to perceive community—whether in the

¹⁰⁰ Benedict Anderson famously described the nation as an 'imagined community'—imagined because any given inhabitant has never encountered, or even heard of, the vast majority of the community's members, yet is able to carry a mental image of these anonymous strangers as constituting a defined and identifiable community. He contrasted the premodern experience of community, in which each member of a village had a personal relationship with every other member, with the modern nation, in which community is understood to extend far beyond the bounds of immediate perception (Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Community*, rev. edn. (London, 2006), 6). The relationship between network radio and the imagination of national community has been rigorously investigated. As David Goodman sums it up: 'That network radio made the nation more real to ordinary Americans is now a well-known historical fact' (David Goodman, *Radio's Civic Ambition: American Broadcasting and Democracy in the 1930s* (Oxford, 2011), 61).

form of co-participants who were physically present or through the sounds of the studio audience that emanated from the radio—while simultaneously imagining a much larger community of individuals, much like themselves, who were participating from countless remote locations.¹⁰¹

Hosts of sing-along radio programmes did not take the ability of their listeners to imagine this community for granted. *Gillette Original Community Sing* participants were constantly reminded that they were members of a vast community, and they were regularly and explicitly urged to imagine that community. This tactic was common and, in the view of the 1930s-era radio researchers Hadley Cantril and Gordon Allport, powerful, for it ‘inevitably increases our sense of membership in the national family’.¹⁰² The task of reminding listeners that they were not alone largely fell to the announcer, Dan Seymour. Although he opened every broadcast with a unique introduction, each of his introductions hit upon the same points. Here is an example from 16 August, near the end of the tryout run in Boston:

Good evening, neighbors! May we drop in again? We – nearly a thousand of us here in the Repertory Theatre, Boston – are bringing you The Gillette Community Sing; and it’s our sincere wish that wherever *you* are, whether you’re at home, out driving in your radio-equipped car, or perhaps beside a campfire at the beach – you’ll join in and sing with us!¹⁰³

Seymour addresses the listeners as ‘neighbors’ and asks permission to visit them in their homes. This was a common conceit in the early years of radio. Richard Butsch has argued that 1930s listeners conceived of radio personalities as intimate friends, not abstract voices, and that they understood broadcasts as akin to social calls. He suggests that radio provided listeners with a platform for parasocial interaction that, while largely imaginative, was no less real to participants than face-to-face interaction. Butsch supports his conclusions by examining 167 pieces of correspondence collected by Wendell Hall over the course of his broadcasting career (none, unfortunately, dating from his time with *Community Sing*). He found that listeners wrote to Hall as if they shared a personal relationship, addressing him as a friend and sharing details about family members and daily life. The letters also make it clear that listeners imagined Hall to be physically present during broadcasts. One writer described him as ‘a friend of the family who has been kind enough to drop in and entertain us’, while another lamented that ‘we missed you ... while you were away’. A third begged, ‘Please come back’.¹⁰⁴ Seymour explicitly encouraged the listener to imagine that the *Community Sing* cast and studio audience were physically present.

Every single one of Seymour’s introductions also made explicit reference to the programme’s two audiences: the physical audience present in the hall, and the dispersed audience listening in over the airwaves. Both of these audiences had to be imagined. Those present in the hall could not see or hear those listening in, while those listening in could neither see nor hear each other and could only hear those in the hall. No matter what the location of the participant, therefore, they had to engage their imagination to construct the community in its entirety. Seymour always mentioned the location of the

¹⁰¹ Elsewhere, I define ‘broadcast community singing’ as one of four types of mediated community singing. For a complete taxonomy and further discussion, see: Esther M. Morgan-Ellis, ‘Mediated Community Singing’, in Esther M. Morgan-Ellis and Kay Norton (eds.), *Oxford Handbook of Community Singing* (New York, forthcoming).

¹⁰² Hadley Cantril and Gordon W. Allport, *The Psychology of Radio* (New York, 1935), 21.

¹⁰³ Milton Berle Papers, Box 31, Folder 3.

¹⁰⁴ Butsch, *The Making of American Audiences*, 214.

studio and gave the number of participants present. Although the community created by *Community Sing* was dispersed, it was always clearly anchored in a single geographical location, whether that was Boston, New York City, or Hollywood, and in a physically present group of participants. Seymour also conjured up visions of remote listeners in a variety of dispersed locations: at home, in the car, and on the beach. His introductions provided all of the grist necessary to fuel vivid imaginings of the singing community.

Once *Community Sing* went national, Seymour and other cast members took pains to mention the specific far-flung locations in which participants were to be found. During the 13 September broadcast, for example, Seymour located the ‘neighbors coast to coast’ who constituted the singing community in ‘New York’, ‘the islands of the mid-Pacific’, ‘a penthouse in Manhattan, a bungalow in California, a cabin in the North Woods’, ‘a little grass shack in Kalikahua, Hawaii’, ‘all of North America’, and ‘half the Western hemisphere’. As if this jambalaya of the general and specific were not enough, Berle launched into his first spot by locating listeners ‘from Alaska to Albuquerque—from Hoboken to Honolulu’.¹⁰⁵ This habit of naming locations and sketching the anonymous listeners tuning in from each would continue throughout the run.

Community Sing also encouraged the imagination of community directly through song. The inaugural broadcast was conceived of as a musical homage to the dispersed geographical communities that constituted the unified singing community of the air. Songs included ‘California, Here I Come’ (1921), ‘Back Home Again in Indiana’ (1917), ‘Missouri Waltz’ (1914), ‘When It’s Springtime in the Rockies’ (1929; dedicated to ‘our neighbors’ in Montana, Wyoming, Idaho, Utah, Nevada, Colorado), ‘The Sidewalks of New York’ (1894; presented as ‘the greetin’s of little old New York to the entire western hemisphere!’), ‘Maple Leaf Forever’ (1867; dedicated to our ‘new singin’ neighbors up in Canada’), ‘Song of the Islands’ (1915; ‘for our neighbors out in the balmy isles of Hawaii’), and ‘Dixie’ (1859; sung in dialect).¹⁰⁶ The idea of a travelogue conducted through song was not new. Indeed, this type of programme was typical of picture palace sings, in which the organist would lead the patrons on an imagined trip around the country or world.¹⁰⁷ The difference in this case was that participants were encouraged to imagine not only the varied destinations but also the members of the singing community whom they were assured could be found there.

Print media also helped fans of the show to imagine the singing community. Although most listeners were never able to attend a live broadcast, they could still read about and thereby become inaugurated into the unique rituals of the studio audience. In late 1936, at least three detailed reviews of the in-house experience were published in newspapers across the country.¹⁰⁸ Each provided readers with a vivid description of the ‘men and women, old and young, from every walk of life’ who came together in Columbia Radio Playhouse No. 3 to sing.¹⁰⁹ Every author emphasized the socioeconomic diversity of the audience. In an oft-reprinted article, Ruth Arell explained how ‘social registerites sing loud and lustily along side of the ordinary rank-and-file that makes up the population of

¹⁰⁵ Milton Berle Papers, Box 31, Folder 6.

¹⁰⁶ G. Bennett Larsen Papers, Box 18, Folder 5.

¹⁰⁷ Morgan-Ellis, *Everybody Sing!*, 90.

¹⁰⁸ Three such articles appear in the Wendell Hall Scrapbooks. Hall clipped two prints of an article by Ruth Arell, one dated 15 Nov. from the *Jamaica Press* and one dated 22 Nov. from the *Atlanta Constitution*. An article from the *Toledo Ohio Morning Times* is dated 15 Nov. A third article entitled ‘Try and Make Me Sing!’ is not labelled, but the author, Herschell Hart, is identified as writing for the *Detroit News*. It appears on a page with clippings from mid-December, and can therefore be dated to within a month of the other articles.

¹⁰⁹ Herschell Hart, ‘Try and Make Me Sing!’, in Wendell Hall Scrapbook, Wendell Hall Papers, 1915–1962 (microfilm edition, 1978).



PL. 5. This collage of images accompanied Ruth Arell's 1936 article about *Community Sing*. In the centre, we see a crowd of white faces. A similar image appeared in the first songbook. Wendell Hall Papers

a city',¹¹⁰ while a critic for the *Toledo Ohio Morning Times* portrayed a patronage 'of divers backgrounds—society matrons, steel workers, school teachers, taxicab drivers, et al.'¹¹¹ Herschell Hart enriched his review by tracing the reactions of 'that young fellow with the underslung jaw and grimy nails and the chap sitting next to him who looks as if he had just come from dinner at the Ritz' throughout the evening. In Hart's narrative, these two disparate characters both transform from sceptical onlookers into enthusiastic participants, 'singing as they have never sung before'. Clearly, participation in *Community Sing* was understood to erode class barriers and invite a relaxation of social norms—at least for the evening. Photographs included with Arell's review, however, made it clear that racial barriers remained intact (see [Pl. 5](#)).

¹¹⁰ Ruth Arell, 'Sing, Stranger!: An Inquiry into that Latest Radio Craze, the Popular Community Sing', *Atlanta Constitution*, 22 Nov. 1936, 12, in Wendell Hall Scrapbook, Wendell Hall Papers (microfilm edition, 1978).

¹¹¹ 'Hall, Berle, Others Warm Up Auditors before Broadcast', *Toledo Ohio Morning Times*, 15 Nov. 1936, in Wendell Hall Scrapbook, Wendell Hall Papers (microfilm edition, 1978).

All three reviewers described the pre-broadcast activities of the studio audience. While it was typical for such audiences to be in place ten minutes before a programme went on the air, ‘Community Sing’ required ticket holders to take their seats thirty minutes before the broadcast. This extra time was needed to complete vocal warm-ups, rehearse the mechanics of the sing-along, and—most importantly—build community rapport. Reviewers emphasized the reticence of audience members to participate; as Hart put it, ‘you can tell they are there to see, but not to take part ... nobody can make them sing’.¹¹² As reported, however, the pre-show icebreakers invariably served to win over the crowd. First, Wendell Hall would lead the audience in singing octaves and scales on solfege. Next, he would rehearse them in the hand signals used to direct the singing: ‘A fluttering motion of both hands at shoulder height means to sustain. Hands thrown violently in the air means louder and pushed down towards the floor means to sing softer.’¹¹³ Finally, he would call for a familiar comic song (‘K-K-K-Katy’ in Hart’s review), the lyrics of which were projected in the theatre using a slide. After Hall, Jones and Hare would take the stage; two reviews mention their use of an upside-down slide to provoke laughter. Milton Berle followed with a brief, comic introduction of his own before producer George Bennett Larsen inaugurated the broadcast. By this point, the 1,500 members of the audience had transformed into a community of singers, thereby ensuring the success of the programme.

Finally, the producers of *Community Sing* took at least one opportunity to engage with the geographical communities in which their listeners resided. During the broadcast on 13 December 1936, 2 minutes and 55 seconds were allotted for the mayors of 101 cities to take to the airwaves from their local stations in a fundraising plea, donations to benefit local Community Chest or Christmas Fund drives.¹¹⁴ The broadcast was heavily promoted in advance. Newspaper columns announced that the *Community Sing* producers had consulted with the executives of the national Mobilization for Human Needs campaign, which was operated by the National Citizens Committee. The list of participating cities, which stretched from coast to coast, also appeared in print.¹¹⁵

Both the press coverage and the broadcast itself emphasized the easy relationship between community singing and local charity: ‘The idea itself’, newspaper readers learned, ‘was generated from the close association of the communal spirit involved in both community singing and Community Chests’.¹¹⁶ On air, the special guest Kate Smith hosted the national end of the fund drive. Before handing over to local officials, she reminded listeners that ‘the spirit of community singing is the spirit of neighborliness, and friendship for each other’.¹¹⁷ Naturally, Smith sang as well. The transition back to the national broadcast was facilitated by her rendition of ‘O Come, All Ye Faithful’, after which she led the crowd in her 1931 hit ‘When the Moon Comes Over the Mountain’.

This stunt surely built goodwill on behalf of the programme, but it also served to cement listeners’ awareness of their participation in a nationwide community. Smith

¹¹² Hart, ‘Try and Make Me Sing!’

¹¹³ Arell, ‘Sing, Stranger!’

¹¹⁴ G. Bennett Larsen Papers, Box 16, Folder 1; W. B. M’Claran, ‘Reading the Meters’, *Grand Rapids Herald*, 29 Nov. 1936, in Wendell Hall Scrapbook, Wendell Hall Papers (microfilm edition, 1978); ‘101 Mayors to Participate in Broadcast’, *Erie Dispatch Herald*, 6 Dec. 1936, in Wendell Hall Scrapbook, Wendell Hall Papers (microfilm edition, 1978).

¹¹⁵ M’Claran, ‘Reading the Meters’.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ G. Bennett Larsen Papers, Box 16, Folder 1.

prepared each listener to experience their local fund drive as one instance of a coordinated national event experienced simultaneously by countless Americans: ‘It is a thrilling thought’, she remarked, ‘to picture these officials, all speaking at the identical moment, while hundreds of thousands of people in this great country of ours will give heed to the needs of those less fortunate than themselves’.¹¹⁸ While each local plea was to be unique, therefore, the participants were encouraged to imagine themselves as national citizens. The event, which positioned the voices of local personalities at the heart of the programme, also allowed listeners to connect *Community Sing* with their physical, everyday experience of community. Although the stunt was never repeated, it probably contributed to the programme’s longevity and impact.

MINSTREL LEGACIES AND PARTICIPATORY BLACKFACE ON *COMMUNITY SING*

Despite the origins of network radio in the desires and needs of the American populace, it developed to serve the industry, not listeners, and the industry favoured homogeneous programming directed towards what Susan Smulyan describes as ‘a white, urban, middle-class, East Coast sensibility’.¹¹⁹ This was certainly true of *Gillette Original Community Sing*, as our introduction to the programme has already suggested. In this final section, I will consider how the programme’s contents—in particular, the comedic sketches and sing-along repertory—further centred and normalized a white, male, middle-class identity and defined that identity in relation to minstrel stereotypes.

To complete my analysis of the *Community Sing* repertory, I constructed a database into which I entered every instance in which the scripts indicated a community singing number.¹²⁰ Many of these instances included text, although some did not. The absence of text occasionally made it impossible to know what portions of the song were performed (e.g. chorus only) and whether or not the song was sung in dialect—an issue to which I will return later. For each song entry, I included (as applicable) year of composition, lyricist, composer, original publisher, and tags for topic and style. By querying the database, I was able to answer many questions about what participants were singing. This repertory did not arise in a vacuum. It reflects both the contents of songbooks associated with the community singing movement, which emphasized the minstrel songs of Stephen Foster and parlour songs from the British Isles, and the practices of picture-theatre organists, who combined ‘chestnuts’ with recent Tin Pan Alley hits.¹²¹ I will begin by describing the repertory in general. Then I will explore the identity constructed by these songs.

It is illuminating to examine the *Community Sing* repertory in terms of the years in which the songs were published. Figure 1 indicates how many of the songs were written in each year between 1848 (the start of Foster’s career) and 1937. Peaks in the histogram all mark important periods in the development of the community singing repertory. The first can be explained by the popularity of Foster’s music, while the second marks songs of the Civil War era. Gilded Age songs of the 1890s had a significant presence. However, Tin Pan Alley songs made up the majority of the repertory. These included both classics from the 1910s and 1920s and recent hits. The most popular songwriter was Irving Berlin,

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Smulyan, *Selling Radio*, 31. As she has demonstrated, network radio was initially driven by the demands of citizens—principally farmers, whose practical needs included regular weather forecasts and market reports, and sports fans, whose less-practical desire to hear games broadcast live was no less consequential in motivating technological progress. Increased migration within the United States further stimulated listeners’ interest in radio programmes originating from the cities and regions they had left behind (pp. 20–9).

¹²⁰ This database is freely available online and can be queried by interested users: <https://dasar.us/>.

¹²¹ Most of the songs that would become central to the songbook repertory were included in *18 Songs for Community Singing*, the first songbook published by the MSNC. Morgan-Ellis, *Everybody Sing!*, 64–5.

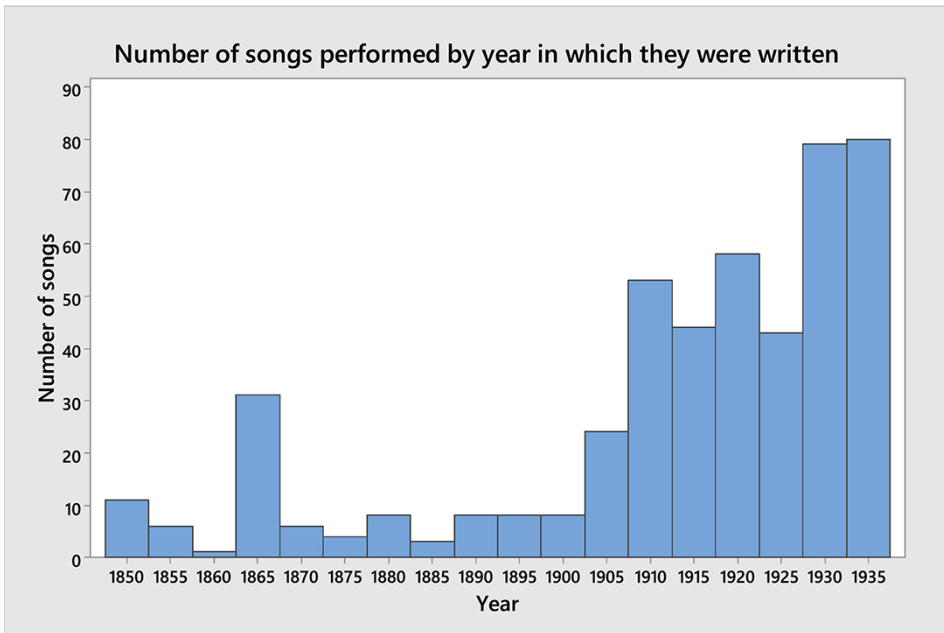


FIG. 1. This histogram details the frequency with which songs in the *Community Sing* repertory were published in each five-year block since 1850. Older songs and folk songs are not represented

eight of whose songs were sung on the programme. Close behind were Harry von Tilzer (six songs, half with Andrew B. Sterling as lyricist), Albert von Tilzer (six songs, four with Lew Brown as lyricist), Harry Warren (five songs, four with Al Dubin as lyricist), and Stephen Foster (five songs). George M. Cohan had four songs in the repertory, as did Victor Herbert and Walter Donaldson (each working with a variety of lyricists) and Harry Tierney (working primarily with the lyricist Joseph McCarthy).

By examining the topics of songs that were sung more than once—that is to say, songs that the audience presumably enjoyed enough to merit repetition—we can gain insight into the *Community Sing* experience. Not counting the two songs that were regularly used to open and close broadcasts (‘Let’s All Sing like the Birdies Sing’ and ‘Goodnight, Neighbors’), ninety-three songs were repeated on *Community Sing*. Of these, five were sung four times, eleven were sung three times, and seventy-seven were sung twice. Unsurprisingly, more than half of these songs were about love, which was almost always described from a neutral or male perspective. Only three songs described love or attraction from the female perspective: ‘There is a Tavern in the Town’ (1891), ‘My Pony Boy’ (1909), and ‘Strike Up the Band’ (1927).

By far the next most common topic was nostalgia. Specifically, songs in this category expressed nostalgia for lost love (seven songs), for home (six songs), for childhood (four songs), for the South (three songs), and from the perspective of the elderly (three songs). The most frequently sung nostalgic song was ‘Put On Your Old Grey Bonnet’ (1909), which was programmed in August, September, and November of 1936, and again in January of 1937. ‘Silver Threads among the Gold’ (1873), ‘School Days’ (1907), and ‘Moonlight and Roses’ (1925) were each sung three times, as was ‘My Old Kentucky Home’ (1852)—a song with complex layers of meaning to be addressed below. Community singing had been marketed as a nostalgic form of recreation since at least the early

1920s.¹²² The persistence of ‘chestnuts’ in the repertory was essential to the success of community singing (participants can most easily sing songs they know), but also facilitated nostalgic experiences. Participants sang about times gone by even when the topic of the song was not nostalgia itself, and in many cases they probably recalled those times as well. In this regard, therefore, the *Community Sing* repertory was typical.

The third most common topic for songs was the African American experience as imagined by white songwriters and performers. (Two of the songs in this category were in fact penned by African American songwriters, but they still fulfilled the stereotypes of the minstrel stage and still, therefore, represented a predominantly white point of view.) Many of these songs also addressed topics of love, nostalgia, and the South, but they did so through the lens of an imagined racialized identity. I will return to this topic below.

Songs expressing optimism were the fourth most frequently programmed. Of these, ‘Smile, Darn You, Smile’ (1931) was by far the most popular, making four appearances (July, November, and December of 1936, and February of 1937). Other favoured selections were ‘Pack Up Your Troubles in Your Old Kit Bag and Smile, Smile, Smile’ (1915), ‘When You’re Smiling’ (1928), and ‘Happy Days are Here Again’ (1929), the last of which might also have had political connotations for listeners after it was featured by Franklin Delano Roosevelt in his 1932 presidential campaign.¹²³ The reason for programming cheerful songs is clear enough: the stated purpose of *Community Sing* was to have fun.

Other popular song categories had to do with context instead of content. These included children’s songs (‘Pop Goes the Weasel’ and ‘Farmer in the Dell’), college songs (‘The Sweetheart of Sigma Chi’ and ‘Stein Song’), and patriotic songs (‘Columbia, the Gem of the Ocean’ and ‘Yankee Doodle’). Of course, songs in these categories could also provide a nostalgic experience to participants, and probably did so.

My interest here, however, is in the specific brand of nostalgia that conjures up an imagined past in which non-white Americans were content to occupy the lowest rungs of society—or were simply absent. *Community Sing* participants frequently enacted fantasies of a past (and present) that upheld white supremacy, and some of the songs and sketches perpetrated explicit harm.

As indicated above, songs depicting African Americans were among the programme’s most popular. In total, I identified eighteen such songs. These songs can be categorized in different ways. We might begin by examining the five Stephen Foster songs, all of which had been associated with the minstrel stage: ‘Oh! Susanna’ (1848), ‘De Camptown Races’ (1850), ‘Old Folks at Home’ (1851), ‘My Old Kentucky Home’ (1852), and ‘Old Black Joe’ (1853). As I have demonstrated elsewhere, ‘Old Folks at Home’ and ‘My Old Kentucky Home’ were at the core of the early twentieth-century community singing repertory.¹²⁴ All of the Foster songs listed here were not only popular sing-along numbers but, in the view of many, authentic American folksongs. Of course, these songs are of very different types, and both their texts and reception history must be taken into account.

To begin with, three of these songs—‘Oh! Susanna’, ‘Camptown Races’, and ‘Old Folks at Home’—were initially published using a form of blackface dialect developed

¹²² Ibid. 112.

¹²³ Eric T. Kasper and Benjamin S. Schoening, ‘Tippecanoe and Trump Too: A Brief History of Why Music Matters in Presidential Campaigns’, in Kasper and Schoening (eds.), *You Shook Me All Campaign Long: Music in the 2016 Presidential Election and Beyond* (Denton, TX, 2018), 1–17 at 5.

¹²⁴ Esther M. Morgan-Ellis, ‘A Century of Singing along to Stephen Foster’, in Jason Geary, Seth Monahan, and Michael Puri (eds.), *Critical Approaches to Musical Meaning* (New York, forthcoming).

and popularized on the minstrel stage. Although these songs were sometimes printed and performed without dialect in the early decades of the twentieth century,¹²⁵ *Community Sing* retained both the dialect and racist language (e.g. ‘darkies’), thereby firmly rooting these songs in the blackface tradition. All three songs were printed in dialect in the 1937 edition of the *Official Song Book of Gillette Community Sing*, while ‘Oh! Susanna’ and ‘De Camptown Races’ were also included in the 1936 edition. Furthermore, the scripts indicate that ‘Oh! Susanna’ was sung in dialect on 16 August 1936, while Hall announced ‘Camptown Races’ as ‘Gwine Run All Night’ on 13 December.¹²⁶ Interestingly, ‘Old Folks at Home’ (under the title ‘Swanee River’) appears in the scripts out of dialect.¹²⁷ This, however, does not prove that the song was not in fact sung in dialect on the air. As a 1931 handbook entitled *How To Write for Radio* advises, ‘In preparing most blackface dialogue for radio, it is best not to indicate all the dialect’.¹²⁸ Wendell Hall, who led the singing, specialized in dialect songs, and would therefore not have needed dialect to be indicated in his scripts. Hall’s version of blackface dialect can be heard on a recording of ‘Oh! Susannah’ that he made for Victor in 1924.¹²⁹ The recording hints at what radio listeners might have heard in the 1930s—and also help us to imagine their singing voices, which would have echoed Hall’s own inflections.

A total of fourteen blackface dialect songs were included in the two songbooks, although not all were featured on the air. Those that did make an appearance included ‘Turkey in the Straw’,¹³⁰ ‘Dixie’ (1859), and ‘Li’l Liza Jane’ (pub. 1916). ‘Turkey in the Straw’ also appears in dialect in the script for the 22 November broadcast.¹³¹ Later in the same broadcast, Hall led the singing of ‘Watermelon Smiling on the Vine’ (1882; ‘Hambone Am Sweet’ in the script), another dialect number from the minstrel stage.¹³² ‘Missouri Waltz’ (1914)—with a dialect text recalling the days ‘when I was a Pickaninny on ma Mammy’s knee’—was included in the inaugural national broadcast, which took place on 6 September, while the dialect song ‘Can’t yo’ heah me callin’ Caroline’ (1916) was broadcast on 20 September and the dialect-tinged chorus of ‘Put Your Arms Around Me, Honey’ (1910) appeared in the script for the 25 October broadcast.¹³³ This last example is particularly telling, for the song does not rely on dialect throughout. Instead, the speaker lapses into dialect only to deliver the racially marked command, ‘Oh, babe, won’t you roll dem eyes’.

When participants sang these songs, they assumed imagined black identities. Dialect—applied to texts that were written in the first person and replete with stereotyped references to ‘darkies’, banjos, watermelons, and Dixieland—allowed white singers momentarily to embody and give voice to the black ‘other’. The character types portrayed in these songs had a long history on the minstrel stage, although only non-threatening minstrel types found their way onto *Community Sing*. The African Americans

¹²⁵ See, for example, Clark (ed.), *The “Everybody Sing” Book*.

¹²⁶ Milton Berle Papers, Box 31, Folder 3; G. Bennett Larsen Papers, Box 16, Folder 1.

¹²⁷ G. Bennett Larsen Papers, Box 17, Folder 6.

¹²⁸ Seymour and Martin, *How to Write for Radio* (New York, 1931), 88.

¹²⁹ *Discography of American Historical Recordings*, s.v. ‘Victor matrix B-29417. Oh! Susanna / Wendell W. Hall; Shannon Quartet’, https://adp.library.ucsb.edu/index.php/matrix/detail/800003490/B-29417-Oh_Susanna (accessed 29 May 2021).

¹³⁰ ‘Turkey in the Straw’, which shares a melody with the minstrel song ‘Zip Coon’ (pub. c.1834), has a complicated history, having moved frequently between print and oral traditions. The version used in *Community Sing* includes the verse: ‘As I was a gwine on down de road / With a tired team and a heavy load, / I cracked my whip, and the leader sprung, / Says I goodbye to the wagon tongue.’

¹³¹ G. Bennett Larsen Papers, Box 15, Folder 7.

¹³² *Ibid.*

¹³³ *Ibid.*, Box 18, Folder 5; Box 15, Folder 1; Box 15, Folder 4.

portrayed in these songs longed to return to the South and to plantation life, exhibited their childlike intellects, or expressed conventional feelings of love.

Similar blackface characters were portrayed in the non-participatory segments of *Gillette Original Community Sing*. Milton Berle's comedic sketches frequently featured characters who occupied stereotypical roles and spoke in dialect. In relating stories about his travels, the comedian himself used dialect to assume the characters of a black porter ('Sorry the bed ain't ready ... Mistuh Berle ... But ah thought you comedians made up your own bunk!') and a black train waiter (who said 'heah' in place of 'here').¹³⁴ Other cast members frequently assumed what Robin Means Coleman terms 'black-voice' as well.¹³⁵ Eddie Cantor used dialect to portray a shoeshiner named Euphonius Ephemereal Razmataz Jefferson Jackson in the 13 June broadcast, while unnamed cast members took on the dialect roles of a chicken thief (25 October), a porter (16 May), and a child who is incapable of spelling (28 February).¹³⁶ Some instances of dialect on *Community Sing* suggested an inability on the part of the writers to differentiate between various non-white ethnicities. Dan Seymour used 'darky dialect' (a term found throughout the scripts) to play the role of Friday in a Robinson Crusoe-themed sketch with Berle during the 14 March broadcast, despite the fact that the character was originally understood to be Native American.¹³⁷ In a 4 October scene that conflates race with occupation, an unnamed cast member used 'French darky dialect' to depict a train porter in France. His response to Berle's command to speak in dialect—'OUI OUI Monsieur—yowsah—yowzah—mais oui—sho'nuff!'—exhibits a core type in radio comedy of the time: the subservient and buffoonish blackface character.¹³⁸

Berle's writers also turned to the blackface tradition for one of his earliest parody sketches, a production entitled 'Uncle Tom's Gabbin' in which Berle played Uncle Tom.¹³⁹ The sketch, which consisted of one-liners exchanged between Stowe's characters, featured in the second half of the fourth national broadcast. Like all of Berle's sketches, it began and ended with community singing numbers. In this case, the opening song, 'Is It True What They Say about Dixie?' (1936), provided a tongue-in-cheek catalogue of stereotypes about the South. It is worth noting that the original sheet music, published by Irving Ceasar, Inc., featured a blackface character on the cover (see Pl. 6). The closing song was 'My Old Kentucky Home', which had already long been associated with legitimate stagings of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.¹⁴⁰ Also typical was Seymour's interruption at the midpoint to plug Gillette razors. His line—'GILLETTE HAS FREED THE SLAVES! THE SHAVING SLAVES ...'—is perhaps the most disturbing of the entire *Community Sing* run.

The racialized character of the repertory was not always made quite so explicit. This was especially true where community singing numbers were concerned, for the verses of songs—which were more likely to include dialect and contextual references—were often omitted on the air. For example, when the chorus of 'Please Go 'Way and Let Me Sleep' (1902) was sung near the end of the programme on 15 November 1936,

¹³⁴ Milton Berle Papers, Box 35, Folder 2; Box 36, Folder 3.

¹³⁵ Robin R. Means Coleman, *African American Viewers and the Black Situation Comedy: Situating Racial Humor* (New York, 1998), 55.

¹³⁶ G. Bennett Larsen Papers, Box 18, Folder 2; Box 15, Folder 4; Milton Berle Papers, Box 36, Folder 3; G. Bennett Larsen Papers, Box 16, Folder 7.

¹³⁷ G. Bennett Larsen Papers, Box 17, Folder 2.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, Box 15, Folder 2.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, Box 15, Folder 1.

¹⁴⁰ William W. Austin, "Susanna," "Jeanie," and "The Old Folks at Home": *The Songs of Stephen Foster from His Time to Ours* (Urbana, IL, 1989), 235.



PL. 6. Although the choruses of these three songs do not contain racial markers, the sheet music covers make it clear that the subjects are African American caricatures

it was clearly intended to voice the participants' own collective sentiment.¹⁴¹ The text of the chorus does not in any way suggest the identity of the speaker—and indeed, with twenty-four years having elapsed since the composition of the song, it seems likely that most participants would have forgotten the 'coon' reference in the verse and the blackface character on the cover of the Harry Von Tilzer Music Publishing Co. sheet music (see Pl. 6). (It is also worth noting that this is one of very few songs included on the programme that was created by an African American songwriting team, the lyricist Richard Cecil McPherson and the composer James Timothy Brymn.)

Similarly, the chorus of 'What You Goin' to Do When the Rent Comes 'Round?' (Rufus Rastus Johnson Brown)' (1905), sung on 17 January, does not reference the racial identity of the singer, although the fact that it was paired with 'Old Black Joe' and introduced as representing a related character suggests that participants were in the know.¹⁴² Again, a 'coon' reference in the verse and blackface characters on the cover identify the subject of Andrew B. Sterling and Harry Von Tilzer's song (see Pl. 6 above). Both of these examples elicited humour from the same negative black stereotype: laziness.

A third example, 'River Stay 'Way from My Door' (1931), was sung in response to the concluding punchline—'Will you stay away from my door?'—in the 4 October Berle skit.¹⁴³ Once again, the chorus does not reference the speaker's identity, but the Shapiro, Bernstein & Co. sheet music cover makes it clear. This time, the African American protagonist is characterized by his poverty and helplessness. While it might be argued that *Community Sing* participants were not consciously imagining and voicing black characters in the case of these three songs, they were certainly embodying black musical styles: ragtime in the first two cases, and blues in the third.

Finally, three songs ostensibly offered participants glimpses of African American entertainment culture: 'Alexander's Ragtime Band' (1911), 'Waiting for the Robert E. Lee' (1912), and 'Darktown Strutters' Ball' (1917). The identity of the speaker varies across these songs. The last is certainly voiced from an African American perspective (and indeed was penned by a black songwriter, Shelton Brooks), while the identity of the

¹⁴¹ G. Bennett Larsen Papers, Box 15, Folder 6.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, Box 16, Folder 4.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, Box 15, Folder 2.

speaker in the other two songs is ambiguous. The creators of the songs—Irving Berlin and the songwriting team of Louis Wolfe Gilbert and Lewis F. Muir—were certainly not black. By singing these numbers, participants were encouraged to imagine black bodies dancing, playing instruments, and courting. Singing these songs constituted a kind of imagined ‘slumming’, accomplished without leaving the comfort of the theatre.

Other non-white identities were represented with one Tin Pan Alley song each. Participants sang about the love of a Native American maiden in ‘Red Wing’ (1907), a desirable Mexican beauty in ‘Rio Rita’ (1926), the exotic landscape of Hawaii in ‘Song of the Islands’ (1915), opium addicts in ‘Chinatown, My Chinatown’ (1910), a Puccini-inspired tragic heroine in ‘Poor Butterfly’ (1916), and a seductive Middle Eastern lover in ‘The Sheik of Araby’ (1921). Native Americans were also evoked by ‘Ten Little Indians’, a song published in 1868 and used on the minstrel stage. None of these offered realistic portrayals of the subjects.

Some of these ethnicities were also the butts of on-air jokes. Indeed, a range of non-white ethnicities was subjected to ridicule in the context of minstrelsy, the practices of which extended to ‘redface’ and ‘yellowface’ representations. It is therefore predictable that *Community Sing* should have followed in this pattern. The singing of ‘Red Wing’ paved the way for a Berle sketch entitled ‘Last of the Hicans’. In it, Berle adopted a redface dialect and delivered a catalogue of stereotyped references to wigwams, ‘many moons’, and scalping, while members of the orchestra provided ‘war whoops’.¹⁴⁴ Interestingly, the sketch also included blackface dialect, when an actor playing the role of the butler supposedly gets confused about which ethnicity he is meant to portray. (Seymour interjects a plug for Gillette blades, which will provide listeners with a ‘heap terrific shave’.) Before leading ‘Ten Little Indians’ on 7 March, Berle and Hall exchanged jokes about scalping, reservations, and braves.¹⁴⁵ Berle took listeners on a trip to the exotic East with his 17 January sketch, which featured ‘a native possessing strange powers’ (played by Mack).¹⁴⁶ Yellowface actors spoke in broken English during sketch appearances as ‘Chinamen’ in the laundry or food delivery business.¹⁴⁷ Other non-white identities were not acknowledged on the programme.

On the musical front, ethnic identities were primarily established by means of Tin Pan Alley songs. In other words, identities were constructed by professional songwriters who in almost all cases did not belong to the ethnicity in question, and they were constructed for the purpose of selling a commercial product. *Community Sing* participants occasionally sang folksongs of African American descent, such as ‘She’ll Be Coming ’Round the Mountain’. However, these were not presented as representative of African American culture, and it is unlikely that participants thought of these selections as anything other than artefacts of white heritage. (In the mid-1930s, ‘She’ll Be Coming ’Round the Mountain’ was thought of as a hillbilly tune, not a Negro Spiritual.¹⁴⁸)

The same would not have been true of the many traditional songs from the British Isles that were featured on *Community Sing*. These included two Scottish songs (‘My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean’ and ‘Annie Laurie’) and an Irish song (‘Believe Me if All Those Endearing Young Charms’). All three of these were included in the songbooks, as were four additional Scottish folksongs and seven additional Irish folksongs.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., Box 15, Folder 1.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., Box 17, Folder 1.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., Box 16, Folder 4.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., Box 15, Folder 4; Box 16, Folder 2; Box 17, Folder 1.

¹⁴⁸ ‘The Post Impressionist: Ten Below at a Skyland Camp’, *Washington Post*, 7 Feb. 1936, 8; ‘Salem Scene of Gathering’, *Oregonian*, 23 Apr. 1937, 11.

These songs would have been immediately identified with their national origin by *Community Sing* participants. Indeed, it is not difficult to find historical accounts of ‘My Bonnie’ and ‘Annie Laurie’ in contemporary newspapers.¹⁴⁹ These songs were firmly and proudly connected with their origins. In this way, *Community Sing* ensured that only Scottish and Irish ethnic identities were permitted to voice themselves. Of course, the Irish were also portrayed with varying degrees of sympathy in numerous Tin Pan Alley songs, including ‘Has Anybody Here Seen Kelly’ (1909), ‘When Irish Eyes are Smiling’ (1912), and ‘I’ve Got Rings on My Fingers’ (1909)—the last of which transposes Irish stereotypes to a primitive Indian island for an orgy of ethnic comedy.

CONCLUSION

Situated at the nexus between community singing and radio broadcast practices, *Gillette Original Community Sing* offers a window into both worlds. As a radio programme, *Community Sing* is the best-documented representative of the sing-along genre—a distinctive approach to participatory broadcasting that swept the airwaves in the 1930s yet never secured a large audience. Perhaps the limited reciprocity of the activity, or the burden of imagining an unseen and unheard singing community, left home listeners disappointed by the participatory experience. Perhaps the failure of sing-along radio should be associated with a broader decline in home music-making and the rise of alternative consumption habits centred on broadcast and recorded performances by professional musicians. The perseverance of participatory engagement with media, spanning the chart-topping LP *Sing Along with Mitch* (1958) to the 2020 #seashanty craze on TikTok, suggests that the American appetite for musical participation has not dwindled, and that participation can be effectively mediated.¹⁵⁰ Perhaps the fact that most 1930s radio listeners had access to in-person participatory singing experiences overshadowed the sing-along broadcasts, which failed to live up to expectations. This is a rich area of inquiry that requires further study.

At the same time, this analysis of *Community Sing* provides insight into community singing practices that spanned social contexts and media types. The broadcast scripts capture a unique snapshot of the sing-along repertory—a fine-grained topology that cannot be derived from other sources. Songbooks, for example, can be prescriptive, encompassing the repertory that an editor thinks people *should* sing instead of the songs they really *do* sing. Songbook compilers also tended to favour repertory that was not under copyright, and the artefacts they left behind provide limited insight into the relative popularity of songs. Descriptions of community singing events printed in newspapers and trade journals often mention songs, but seldom provide an exhaustive list. In this respect, therefore, the scripts are unique and precious documents. Although the *Community Sing* repertory was doubtless shaped by its context, as exhibited by links between songs and comedic sketches, it just as surely reflected mainstream practice. These are the songs Americans were singing together in the mid-1930s.

The centrality of race—especially blackface performance—to mainstream entertainment in the 1930s has been well documented. However, blackface participatory practice as a central feature of the community singing movement has been underexamined.

¹⁴⁹ ‘Westward-Whoa!’, *Christian Science Monitor*, 20 Jan. 1937, 20; ‘Annie Laurie’, *Tampa Bay Times*, 7 Dec. 1936, 4.

¹⁵⁰ Emily Margot Gale, ‘Sounding Sentimental: American Popular Song from Nineteenth-Century Ballads to 1970s Soft Rock’ (PhD diss., University of Virginia, 2014), 169; Esther M. Morgan-Ellis, ‘Leslie Uggams, *Sing Along with Mitch* (1961–1964), and the Reverberations of Minstrelsy’, *Journal of the Society for American Music*, 16 (2022), 47–68; Esther M. Morgan-Ellis, ‘Virtual Community Singing during the COVID-19 Pandemic’, *American Scientist*, 110 (Jan.–Feb. 2022), 28–35 at 31.

A study of songbooks printed in the first three decades of the twentieth century reveals that, after patriotic songs, minstrel songs—Steven Foster’s ‘Old Folks at Home’, ‘My Old Kentucky Home’, and ‘Old Black Joe’, and Daniel Decatur Emmett’s ‘Dixie’—were the most commonly included, while the sights and sounds of minstrel stereotypes were ubiquitous in sing-along films before and after the advent of sound.¹⁵¹ In other words, many Americans of the era were in the habit not only of consuming blackface entertainment but of embodying blackface personae as singing participants. The dual mechanisms of the community singing movement, which purported to endorse and popularize songs that ‘every American should know’, and network radio, which encouraged listeners to imagine themselves as part of a homogenous national community, positioned these songs—and their collective singing—as central to American identity.¹⁵²

ABSTRACT

In the United States, sing-along radio programmes became common in the 1930s. These programmes aired locally, regionally, and nationally, and they took various approaches to audience participation. Although categorized as radio participation shows, sing-along programmes were unique in that they prompted scripted musical participation by home listeners during the course of the broadcast. This article examines the most successful sing-along programme, *Gillette Original Community Sing*, which broadcast on the CBS network in 1936 and 1937. Participants were encouraged to imagine themselves as part of a numberless mediated community that included both audible singers in the studio audience and unheard singers spread across the continent. This community, however, was clearly bounded in terms of race. A detailed analysis of the *Community Sing* repertoire reveals that the African American experience—as imagined primarily by white songwriters and often using blackface dialect—was the third most common song topic. By singing these songs, especially in the proximity of minstrel sketches, home listeners participated in mediated blackface performances that addressed racial anxieties and constructed white identity.

¹⁵¹ I presented preliminary findings on this topic at the Annual Meeting of the Society for Ethnomusicology in 2020 and the Annual Meeting of the Society for American Music in 2022. A comprehensive study of songbook contents is under way; Morgan-Ellis, ‘A Century of Singing along to Stephen Foster’.

¹⁵² Morgan-Ellis, *Everybody Sing!*, 64.