
Chapter 31

Midwestern Ethnic Radio

Program 31 Performances

1. Detroit Croatian Radio Program, "Lijepa naša domovina." 2. Balkan Serenaders, "Domovina zovi nas." 3. Anton "Speedy" Beringer (1985 I), A Musical Remembrance of Heinie and His Grenadiers. 4. Heinie and His Grenadiers, "Tiroler Holzhacker Buab'n." 5. Mad Man Michaels, "Czarnina Kid"/"Lincoln Avenue." 6. Indianhead Rendering Company ad on the Eric Berg radio show followed by Eric Berg, "Chillicothe Schottische." 7. Famous Lashua, "Won't You Share Your Love with Me?" 8. Sunny Brown, "Spanish Two-Step."

The Station That Speaks Your Language

Radio has always had a place for idiosyncratic freebooters who start up local stations, or special interest groups who buy or borrow odd hours of air time from established stations. All it takes to put a radio broadcast on the air is a transmitter and a little basement studio, a business or a church to purchase some Sunday morning air time for a meagre sum, or a part-time producer with a program idea and a couple of sponsors. Broadcasters outside the medium's mainstream have often relied on traditional music to serve their particular subcultures. Although largely overlooked, their diverse efforts contribute significantly to the history of American radio.

Radio was in its infancy in the 1920s when programs offering ethnic and regional folk music were first broadcast. Because radio could be heard in the countryside, the regional folk music appreciated by ruralites was put on the air. In 1922, WSB in Atlanta, a station owned by the *Atlanta Journal*, featured Fiddlin' John Carson and Rev. Andrew Jenkins, probably the first southern country musicians on the air. Shortly thereafter, WBAP in Fort Worth, Texas, produced the first radio barn dance show, a format that was quickly imitated by Chicago's "National Barn Dance" on WLS and Nashville's "Grand Ole Opry" on WSM (Malone 1974).

In northern urban areas as early as the 1920s, some stations broadcast programs in the plethora of (mostly European) mother tongues of the new immigrants. In 1927, WEVD began in New York with the later-imitated slogan "the station that speaks your language." It had competition from WBNX in the Bronx and from WHOM, a Jersey City station begun in 1920. In other listening areas, multilingual broadcasting could be heard over WRAX in Philadelphia; WBRE in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania; WJAY in Cleveland; WBVM in Utica, New York; and WJBK in Detroit, to name a few (Greene 1992).

The Voice of Croatian Americans

The Croatian Radio Program sponsored by the Croatian Radio Club from 1939 to 1952 is a good example of the radio efforts of urban ethnic groups in the middle of the twentieth century. In 1939 Croatians formed a radio club with the explicit purpose of creating a Croatian radio program in the Detroit area. My aunt, Agnes Grbac Daniels, who had immigrated as a teenager from her native village on the northern Adriatic island of Losinj to the south side of Chicago and in 1941 had relocated with her husband to Detroit, became the program's second regular announcer. Mrs. Daniels recalled, "The committee people came to me at a picnic and asked me to be the radio announcer. At first I didn't think I should say yes but they said, 'Sure you can do it, you'd be good'" (Daniels 1991 I). She was known to have a good voice and stage presence from her background as an active member and soloist in Slavuj, Detroit's Croatian singing society. Moreover, having immigrated at a young age, she had attended school in the United States and spoke English fluently and more confidently than many of her European-raised compatriots.

The Croatian Radio Club raised funds to launch the program. Station WJBK already broadcast other ethnic programs, so the club simply had to obtain a suitable time slot, organize the program content, put the program on the air, and continue to raise funds to keep it going. The broadcasts began in May 1939 with the theme song "Lijepa naša domovina," the Croatian national anthem, played from a recording of a tamburitza orchestra and choir. On a typical program, the station's announcer introduced Mrs. Daniels as the program's hostess. She would then greet the listeners in English and Croatian. Most of the hour was devoted to Croatian folk music. For ordinary programs, a technician cued up 78 rpm recordings of tamburitza combos from Croatian communities around the United States. (See the chapter on tamburitza.) For special programs, such as Croatian Radio's anniversary, "live" music was broadcast from a larger studio. A Detroit tamburitza combo, the Balkan Serenaders, led by Marko Kramarich, was the house band. They played and sang and also accompanied guest vocal soloists—such as Marko's daughters Helen and Violet—in folk songs as well as some classically inspired material. Helen Kramarich sang Schubert's "Ave Maria" for a special request, and Mrs. Daniels herself performed "Dalmatinski šajkaš" (Dalmatian boatman), a showpiece of vocal virtuosity from a well-known Croatian operetta.

Besides announcing the music, Mrs. Daniels read summaries of the news in Croatian and announcements of social events and club meetings. Events were many because in Detroit Croatians from particular regions (Dalmatia or Lika or Zumberak) had clubs that put on their own dances, picnics, and banquets, and broadly based groups like the Croatian Fraternal Union also had activities. During World War II, Mrs. Daniels read dispatches on the situation in Croatia, and she frequently mentioned the war relief efforts of Detroit Croatians. Meanwhile the Croatian Radio Club played a significant role in two multiethnic Slavic-American congresses held in Detroit and Chicago to support the war effort.

Most Croatian Radio Club members and program listeners first encountered radio in America, since most of them had arrived in the United States before radio had spread widely. Thus they modeled their program on the American musical variety show, using the Croatian language and material of interest to Croatians. On the show Mrs. Daniels and other occasional speakers pronounced *radio* "REY-dee-oh" as it is in English, even when speaking Croatian, instead of "RAH-dee-oh" as it is in Croatian. For thirteen years the program helped tie the community together.

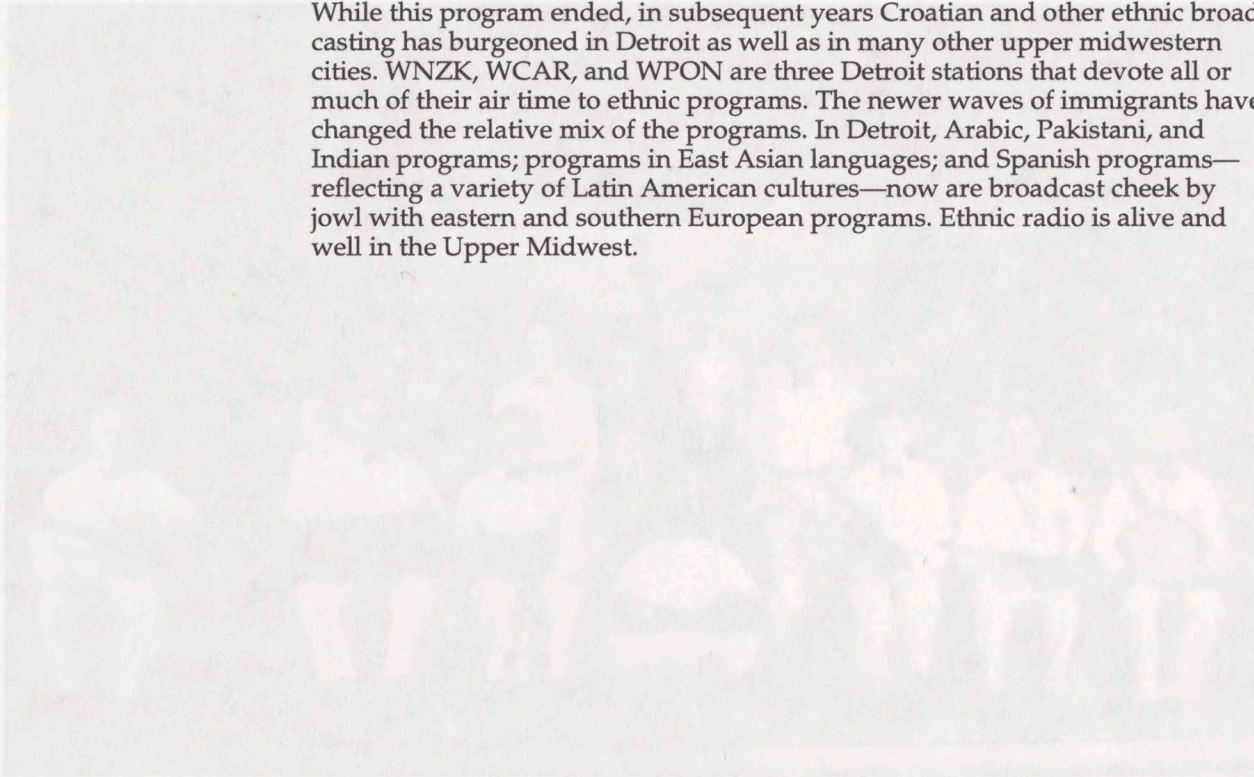


A Swiss band on radio in Racine, postcard, late 1920s Wisconsin Folk Museum Collection

Most Croatian immigrants were poorly educated villagers who came to America with few assets to work in the burgeoning heavy industries of North America. In the first decades of the twentieth century, in mines, factories, and steel mills, they experienced labor strife. Many were organized into militant unions such as the United Mine Workers, the United Steel Workers of America, and the United Automobile Workers, affiliated with the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). Labor militancy, opposition to the Serbian monarchy dominating their homeland, and generally left-leaning politics characterized the views of many Croatian Americans before World War II. Of course, their leftist tendencies also were tempered by widespread devotion to the Catholic Church.

During World War II, the Soviet Union was a U.S. ally and the Communist-led Partisans were the most effective anti-Axis force in the Balkans, so there was considerable sympathy for Tito and his followers. Echoing this sympathy, U.S. news broadcasts announced labor and socialist-oriented activities. At the end of World War II, with the Cold War, the U.S. political climate changed and left-leaning "foreigners" suddenly were suspected of being potentially treasonous radicals, just as had happened after World War I during the notorious Palmer Raids. Rumors circulated that the foreign language broadcasts might be carrying coded messages to Communist spies. The "Croatian Radio Program" was canceled by WJBK in 1951—at the behest of the FBI, Mrs. Daniels reckons. The club found a station in the nearby college town of Ann Arbor and continued the show for several months. But Mrs. Daniels began to feel intimidated. She was tailed by presumed FBI agents en route to and from Ann Arbor. In a climate of fear the members of the Croatian Radio Club gave up their efforts and shut down the program.

While this program ended, in subsequent years Croatian and other ethnic broadcasting has burgeoned in Detroit as well as in many other upper midwestern cities. WNZK, WCAR, and WPON are three Detroit stations that devote all or much of their air time to ethnic programs. The newer waves of immigrants have changed the relative mix of the programs. In Detroit, Arabic, Pakistani, and Indian programs; programs in East Asian languages; and Spanish programs—reflecting a variety of Latin American cultures—now are broadcast cheek by jowl with eastern and southern European programs. Ethnic radio is alive and well in the Upper Midwest.



A Swift band on radio in Berlin, postcard, July 1950. National Postcard Collection

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