

Broadcasting Spanning Six Decades

Posted on

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One mile of English origin, one gramophone, a Scotsman and parts of a German radio set a somewhat cosmopolitan beginning to the whole affair. Let's call it the genesis of broadcasting in Ceylon.

It is 1923. The location is the Central Telegraph office in Colombo. The scene-a mike placed in front of a gramophone churning out music from a tiny room in the office. These sounds are broadcast through a transmitter pieced together from parts recovered from a radio set of a German submarine which was sunk off the coast of Ceylon. The voice on radio belonged to Scotsman Robert Ray Anderson. If you happen to remember his voice and the much aired number 'I Love a Lassie', by Sir Harry Lauder, chances are that you are approximately four score years, and thinking fondly of the reputation this little station had in those early years. It is believed that Ceylon was the first British colony and country in the East to start a broadcasting service and followed on the heels of the B.B.C. which started operations three years ahead of us. Its aims were to serve every class of people, and make available to everyone knowledge of international happenings and the riches of the island's cultural heritage.

Actually, cultural heritage and broadcasting were getting on quite nicely until World War II hit Ceylon. Before the war the station was expanding by way of staff and programme output and it had moved from a stuffy little room of the Telegraph Office to more spacious surroundings at Torrington Square, Colombo 7. The war came in all its fury and the British forces came as well and built an aerodrome in close proximity to the studio. The R.A.F. needed the premises for occupation, so the broadcasting organization moved to a rambling old bungalow on Cotta Road (now Dr. N. M. Perera Mawatha). It was during this period that Ceylon came to play an important role in the war, since the South East Asian Command, headed by Lord Mountbatten, broadcast to Asia and the Far East from Colombo. British singer

George Formby was heard on radio during this period because he was brought to Ceylon to entertain the British forces. The station had a programme called 'Ceylon Lads Overseas' which was beamed to our men serving abroad. and still remembered fondly by war veterans.

Apart from its involvement with war-time activities, the station catered to the interests of music lovers in the country. Bing Crosby held sway through the whole decade, about four or five of his numbers were played during one hour of request programming. Then there was Victor Sylvester and his Ballroom Orchestra, which had a long-running radio programme on the BBC's World Service for about 38 years until 1977. A lot of him was heard locally in the forties, and even now select programmes contain much abused tracks off his albums. The teeny-boppers raved over the music of Frank Sinatra, and Perry Como, as well as over the Ink spots, Mills Brothers and the Andrews Sisters. Seventy-eight r.p.m. recordings of these hits sold for what was 4.50 rupees then and were considered pricey items. The station was the beneficiary of records through large department stores such as Miller's and Cargills and record shops. Even private collections were delved into for suitable material.

Even if tape recorders had not been discovered, and sound effects had to be made from scrap material, drama had to go on if a station was worthy of its name, so an enterprising band of players produced drama 'live' with rather unusual accoutrements beside them. Coconut shells, for instance, provided the sound of the drumming of horses' hooves; and bits of metal or wood were scraped, bashed or tickled into providing an umpteen number of sounds. The drama studios were huge and could contain cast, sweating sound-effects man and all his paraphernalia quite comfortably. Prior to 1950, nearly every programme was 'live' since there were no recording facilities available. The exceptions were V.I.P. messages which were cut on acetate discs, the playback of which sounded like voices processed through a spin dryer.

Then came the 1950s, the beginning of the commercial service and the entry of tape recorders to the scene. The commercial service was bent on providing entertainment with the aim of attracting clients to use the broadcast medium for advertising their products. Its programmes ranged from pop music to classics, and the decade saw a number of international artistes visit with us. Contralto Marian Anderson, the Golden Gate Quartet, Dave Brubeck, Eric Jupp and Jack Teagarden- the American trombone virtuoso- have appeared on this service. The National Service, amongst more serious subjects, broadcast messages by visiting dignitaries.

In 1953, the “Outside Broadcast Unit” recorded Queen Elizabeth II message, on board the H.M.S. Gothic when it docked here. Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, Chou En Lai, Harold Macmillan, Richard Diefenbaker and Indira Gandhi have been either interviewed or had special messages broadcast to the people while staying in the country.

A number of V.I.Ps were also brought quite regularly to the station when passenger liners paused in port and some of them have walked away with the autographs of our announcers. The Golden Book maintained contains the signatures of Sir Laurene Olivier, Vivien Leigh, Hugh Gaitskell, Prince Peter of Greece and scores of others, some of whom knew the names of our announcers even before they came here.

A trip to the English Records library will reveal row upon row of records, ranging from 78 r.p.m.s of the '50s, to the number one hit on the British charts this week. The latest music is sent to us by the Transcription Service of the B.B.C., or is taken off V.O.A. programmes, but in the '50s, the music of the day in Britain and America was flown in for us by major airlines such as B.O.A.C., KLM., Pan American Airways and T.W.A. Some of these records are still sitting in their brown cardboard jackets on long-forsaken dusty shelves, and they must be worth a pretty penny as collector's items. As a colony, the station concentrated on English programming, although Sinhala and Tamil programmes had been aired since 1927. With independence, the Sinhala and Tamil services came to play an increasingly important role in broadcasting. The Sinhala service now holds the largest audience in Sri Lanka and its programmes are also broadcast to Sri Lankans living abroad, over the external services to Asia, South East Asia, and the Middle East.

Our external service transmissions have been heard in many parts of the world, reaching places faraway as Africa and the Netherlands. Sir Edmund Hillary in his autobiography wrote that when he was at the top of Mount Everest his only contact with the world was through Radio Ceylon, which was the only transmission that his radio could pick up at that elevation.

From the 1950s the station concentrated on bettering its services and expanding its divisions some of them being the External, News Education, Engineering, Finance, Training, Foreign and Public Relations, Administration and Audience Research departments.

Six decades and three thousand employees after the mike, gramophone and Scotsman, the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation is keeping up with the standards

of international broadcasting. It is gradually converting all of its SW and MW transmissions to FM stereo, and is planning to construct a totally new studio complex with modern equipment. That would see the end of grand old tapestried walls and huge turntables that are about 30 years old and are still very much part of some older studios in the Corporation, but its going to ensure that the 3.2 million owners of radio sets in the country get the best of a service that's still the number one source of information and entertainment to people in every part of Sri Lanka.



A continuity announcer at work. (©Information Dept)



A recording room in the 1970s (©Information Dept)