

Destination Freedom (1948)

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Destination Freedom is perhaps the best-known Black old-time radio series, despite only airing on Chicago's WMAQ and never being fully sponsored throughout its duration. This is in part due to transcription disks for three-quarters of the episodes being discovered in the early 1980s and circulated among old-time radio fans, which helped inspire additional interest and research into the show. However, the powerful – and radical, particularly for the times – storytelling of Richard Durham, combined with the quality ensemble performing these episodes make them well worth revisiting.

The series debuted June 27, 1948 on WMAQ, in the public-service time slot of Sunday at 10 am. The first several episodes were partially sponsored by the *Chicago Defender* newspaper until cast member Oscar Brown Jr. ran for office in opposition to one of the paper's endorsed candidates. Additionally, a handful of episodes in early 1950 were partially sponsored by the Chicago Urban League, but for the most part WMAQ footed the bill for the series.

In many ways, the show built upon Durham's earlier work on *Democracy – USA*, including revisiting several of the individuals and subjects covered in that earlier series. Whereas that show was only 15 minutes and WJJB and CBS exerted a fair amount of control over the scripts and subjects, Durham had a full 30 minutes to tell his stories, and more editorial control over the new series.

That is not to say there were not conflicts between Durham and WMAQ and NBC, and WMAQ retained final editorial control and approval of all scripts. While Durham managed to produce episodes about the attempted slave revolt of Denmark Vesey and the assassination of Mississippi State Senator Charles Caldwell, episodes about Nat Turner and Paul Robeson were deemed too controversial and were rejected.

Richard Durham was responsible for all 97 original episodes, with the help of Vivian Harsh and her staff at Hall Branch Library. Durham covered a wide range of historical and contemporary subjects and people, from Crispus Attucks and Harriet Tubman to Jackie Robinson and Gwendolyn Brooks. Additional episodes were produced that covered Black folklore figures like John Henry and Stackalee, and common men and women like the all-Black 332nd Fighter Group in World War II.

The episodes portrayed Black characters in a positive and realistic light – in stark contrast to how Black people were generally presented in American media at the time. Durham also highlighted the accomplishments of several Black women, presenting them as every much the equal to the men around them. This too, was a rare portrayal of women – of any race – in radio at the time.

Despite the popularity of the series, particularly with Black Americans, the series broadcast its final episode August 13, 1950. WMAQ had been spending between \$15,000 and \$18,000 a year on the series, and there were increasingly vocal critics of it, including the American Legion and the Knights of Columbus. In 1950, a new director, John Keown, was brought in to manage the show. That was the final straw for Durham, who declared Keown's "massacre of [my] scripts was butchery I could no longer endure," and pulled the plug on his show.

A couple of months later, WMAQ announced they were bringing back the show with a different format that would highlight the accomplishments of primarily white patriots. Durham, who held the copyright to the series name, immediately sued. Ultimately, this version lasted less than a year and produced fewer than half the episodes the prolific Durham had penned.

Destination Freedom was notable for its hard-hitting examination of racism and injustice in the United States, particularly at a time when McCarthyism was on the rise. As historian J. Fred MacDonald noted, "Nowhere else in radio history did a single series, written by a single talent over as long a period, project such a strident reminder of liberties denied and rights abused."

References:

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