

Richard Durham
Ryan Ellett

Isadore Richard Durham was born September 6, 1917 in Jackson, Mississippi but called Chicago home through most of his childhood. He was introduced to the art of radio production while participating in the first NBC-Northwestern University summer radio institute held in 1942. This, combined with his writing experience gained with the WPA's Writers Project and as an editor for *The Chicago Defender*, led to *Democracy – USA*, Durham's first known radio series in 1946.

Democracy – USA ran for two years, dramatizing the lives of prominent Black Americans in weekly quarter-hour episodes. Partway through the run of *Democracy – USA* Durham brought *Here Comes Tomorrow* to the airwaves in 1947. Recognized as the first African American soap opera, the program followed the Redmond family in a post-War America. Both *Democracy – USA* and *Here Comes Tomorrow* went off the air in 1948.

With two series under his belt, Richard Durham premiered his most famous work, *Destination Freedom* on June 27, 1948 over Chicago's WMAQ. Like the earlier series *Democracy – USA*, *Destination Freedom* dramatized the lives of famous Black people, both living and dead. Though Durham could not land a sponsor or a network slot for his series, it ran for two years until 1950. Interestingly, this show may have been little more than a footnote if a large number of episodes hadn't been discovered in the early 1980s and put into circulation among old-time radio fans. It is now one of the most recognizable Black radio series of the Golden Age.

Durham later claimed that he went to work writing for soap opera maven Irna Phillips after finishing *Destination Freedom* because it paid substantially more than his own unsponsored creations. To avoid raising eyebrows among Southern sponsors, Durham said his name was never associated with her series.

Richard Durham had a long career writing after he left radio. His jobs included publicity for the Packinghouse Workers' Union, press work for a GOP Congressional candidate, editing *Muhammad Speaks*, the newspaper of the Nation of Islam, and co-author of Muhammad Ali's autobiography, *The Greatest: My Own Story*. He died April 27, 1984 in New York City and was inducted into the National Radio Hall of Fame in 2007.

Condensed from Richard Durham's entry in Encyclopedia of Black Radio in the United States.