

The story of the Hillbilly Boys is linked inextricably with the story of W. Lee O'Daniel, flour salesman, entrepreneur, music promoter, governor of Texas, and United States Senator. It is also strongly linked to the story of Border Radio – powerful radio stations located on the Mexican side of the U.S. - Mexico border which broadcast programming primarily directed at the United States audience in order to circumvent FCC regulations. Because of these strong links, we will have separate discussions of W. Lee O'Daniel's career and of Border Radio. The discussion here is specifically directed to Border Radio.

In 1931, a disgraced and controversial doctor from Kansas trying to circumvent U.S. radio regulators started a phenomenon that eventually helped reshape contemporary music, modern advertising, the media and American culture. The doctor was Dr. John R. Brinkley; the phenomenon was Border Radio.

There were three main elements necessary for the start of Border Radio: Mexico's dissatisfaction over the international allocation of radio frequencies, the high-brow image of early radio, and Dr. Brinkley.

When radio broadcasting first started up, it became very popular, so much so that by the early 1920's there was a glut of on-air radio stations in the United States, and radio station signals were constantly interfering with others. In 1923, the United States government assumed the power of allocating radio frequencies and licensing broadcasters. By 1924, Canada was very upset that the United States had assumed all of the 106 possible frequencies on the AM band for themselves, leaving no “clear channels” (i.e. - no frequency guaranteed to have another station broadcasting on) for Canadian broadcasters. After negotiations between the two countries, 6 frequencies were allocated to Canada, and the United States maintained the other 100 frequencies. Unfortunately, no thought was given to Mexico and they were left out in the cold.

In the initial burst of unlicensed broadcasting freedom, not only were the frequencies unregulated, but the content of broadcasts was unregulated as well. Broadcasters put out all manner of content, including advertisements for products and services both good and bad. Once the federal government stepped in to license broadcasters, the content settled down as well. In 1926, when RCA, Westinghouse, and General Electric formed the NBC network, the thought was that the primary revenues would come from the sales of radio sets, and that the broadcasts would merely be implicit advertisements for the radios with no thought of other revenue coming in. The programming was high-brow, with lots of classical or light-music concerts. For a while at least, advertising was generally frowned upon, or, when allowed, it was very selective and limited. By the 1930's, broadcasters had discovered that they could make money by selling advertising, and it became a free-for-all, eventually only being reined in by a combination of government and self-regulation.

Dr. John R. Brinkley was a smooth talker with two medical degrees from questionable schools. In spite of his dubious credentials, he was licensed to practise medicine in Arkansas, and set up a practice in Kansas. His most infamous practice was his controversial “goat gland” operation, where he claimed to cure male infertility and virility by the implantation of goat glands. This, and a thriving patent medicine business, made Dr. Brinkley rich. He recognized that radio could allow him to reach a wider audience, and, in 1923, he started up the first radio station in Kansas – KFKB (Kansas First, Kansas Best). He knew the value of a good show, and, so, played lots of country music, often live from Kansas bands, and sold time to fundamentalist preachers. For the most part, however, KFKB carried Dr. Brinkley's message of marvelous cures for all manner of ills, including, of course, his “goat gland” cure. Dr. Brinkley was a very persuasive speaker, and even the most healthy of people would find it difficult to not feel like they needed urgent medical attention after listening to him. His activities of

diagnosing illness and prescribing medicines over the radio caused him to run afoul of the American Medical Association, and in 1930 he lost his medical license in Kansas. He also lost his license to broadcast in 1930 when he tried to upgrade to a more powerful transmitter and was opposed by competing interests. After a failed attempt at running for governor of Kansas, things looked bad for Brinkley with the loss of his medical license in Kansas, and the loss of his radio station. His next move, however, was designed to take him beyond the reach of the Federal Radio Commission (later the FCC), and circumvent any problems with the AMA.

Dr. Brinkley went to the Mexican government with a proposal to set up a high-powered radio station on the Mexican border at Villa Acuña, Mexico just across the border from Del Rio, Texas. This station would be located in Mexico, but would have its signal directed towards the United States. For Dr. Brinkley, this was a way to avoid the FRC regulators and to get his signal back into Kansas, as well as across a larger area; for the Mexican government, this was a way to try to force the United States into negotiating an international radio agreement with Mexico.

Dr. Brinkley was given his approval, and station XER (all radio stations in Mexico had call-signs which started with the letter "X") was born, with a signal at least strong enough to reach Kansas with little trouble. Dr. Brinkley stayed in Kansas, trying unsuccessfully twice more to run for governor. In order to get his message out over the Border Radio station, he set up dedicated long-distance telephone lines from Kansas to Mexico at a cost of \$10,000 a month in order to make regular remote broadcasts. As well as doing remote broadcasts over phone lines, Brinkley was, if not an innovator, at least an early adopter of electrical transcription technology, where he would record his shows onto large metal "transcription disks" for later broadcast on XER. In fact, he made so many transcription disks that many Villa Acuña residents would shingle their houses with disks that were discarded once they were used.

In addition to carrying Brinkley's pseudo-scientific lectures and infomercials, XER also sold time to country music groups, radio preachers, and a variety of proven programs and stars from KFKB, thus creating "the prototypical, pay-before-you-pray, dollar-a-holler, Southern AM radio station." Eventually, Brinkley was given the authority to boost the radio station's power to an overwhelming 1,000,000 watts of power, making it by far the most powerful radio station and extending its broadcasting limits around the world. Because of the strength of the signal, and because it was directed primarily towards the United States, the Border Radio station became known as a Border Blaster. There were reports of the radio signals being picked up on dental work, and, in many of the Border States, people could listen to the signal being picked up on wire fences. The signal was strong enough to overwhelm signals throughout the United States, and there are world-wide reports of people being able to tune in to XERA (as it was now called) when conditions were right. Legend has it that, during the Cold War, Russian spies tuned in to the various Border Blaster stations that were running then in order to learn to speak English.

Atmospheric conditions were such that radio waves travelled furthest in the evenings and overnight, and, because of sunspot activity during the summer months, they travelled best in the winter, so the natural broadcast time and season for the Border Blaster stations tended to be overnight and in autumn, winter, and spring.

Brinkley's new radio station and new format were so profitable that others soon came down to Mexico in order to set up their own stations, or to buy time on existing Border Blasters.

One company which came was Crazy Water Crystals, an established company which marketed their

Texas mineral spring as a rejuvenating spa. When the Depression came, they realized that people couldn't afford to travel to their spring, so they started selling the mineral residue left over after their mineral water was evaporated as Crazy Water Crystals. They sponsored a variety of country music bands, such as the Crazy Gang, the Crazy Mountaineers, the Crazy Hickory Nuts, or the Crazy Hillbillies, over small area radio networks, and saw the Border Blasters as a way to extend their message over the entire United States. It also didn't hurt that the FDA and AMA were looking into the overblown claims of the miraculous healing powers of what was basically a laxative, and that they could exert no control over what a radio station in Mexico aired.

Another arrival on the scene was W. Lee O'Daniel and his Hillbilly Boys. When O'Daniel started his own flour company in 1935, he wanted to air his Hillbilly Boys shows on local Texas radio networks, but he also wanted the extended reach of the Border Blasters. When he decided to run for governor in 1938, Border Radio helped him reach every part of Texas, and, when he ran into trouble from the Federal Radio Commission over airing what they deemed to be regular political broadcasts from the Governor's Mansion when the Hillbilly Boys broadcast from there every Sunday, O'Daniel simply moved those broadcasts from Texas radio stations down to the Border Radio station XEAW, of which he was part owner.

Country music was important to Border Radio. It was cheaper and easier to bring in local bands than to try to bring in the more sophisticated bands that were airing on radio stations out of New York or Los Angeles, and these local bands played the music that they knew, creating a different sound for the Border Blasters. The music that they knew was the music of the rural areas of the country, which had very little hope of getting onto the major radio networks. This music would probably have remained an isolated local phenomenon if Border Radio hadn't made it readily accessible across the entire country as an alternative to the more sophisticated favoured by the urban-based major networks. Even when the local bands tried to imitate sounds such as the Big Bands, they brought their own sound and instrumentation to it, creating new musical styles such as Texas Swing or Western Swing. Because of Border Radio, the Carter Family became the First Family Of Country Music and a household name across the United States, and Johnny Cash was able to grow up hearing his future wife, June Carter, singing on the radio with her family. Border Radio is credited with keeping Country Music alive at a time when it might have disappeared. A generation later, Border Radio helped in a similar way to promote a new style of music across North America when Wolfman Jack and other Border Radio disc jockeys played Rock-and-Roll.

Of course, not all of those who flocked to Border Radio were legitimate – many were charlatans, hucksters, and con-men – and almost everyone had something to sell, whether it was a product, an idea, or themselves. The measure of success was how much mail a performer drew, and, most importantly, how much money came in to purchase the products or services that they were selling. Singers would sell songbooks, with the words and music to their songs; fortune tellers would sell their predictions; Dr. Brinkley would sell diagnoses and a wide variety of mail-order nostrums. Others sold “Crazy Water Crystals, warped guitars, bad paintings of Jesus, cheaply bound Bibles, fearsome-looking medical gadgets that buzzed and made ozone, and everything else from the fertile imaginations of outlaw broadcasters on high-wattage X-stations. Preachers fought off Satan right on-mike, screamed about killing the rich and eating them, and asked old ladies to send those life savings right on down south for Jesus. Whacko politicians advocated everything from free love to chastity belts.”

Mexico's strategy of approving the Border Blaster radio stations in order to get the attention of the United States worked to a certain extent. In the mid-1930's, the U.S. passed a bill known as the Brinkley Act (named after Dr. Brinkley) that made it illegal for a broadcasting studio located within the

United States to be connected via a live phone-line to a transmitter in Mexico. This forced Brinkley (and other Border Radio broadcasters) to move their broadcast studios into Mexico. In 1939, there was some limited movement on an international agreement on radio frequencies which included Mexico, and the Mexican government cracked down on many of the Border Radio stations. However, it wasn't until the 1970's produced stronger agreements, and the advent of the FM radio band, that Border Radio was effectively silenced. There are still some small Border Radio stations, but the heyday of Dr. Brinkley, W. Lee O'Daniel, Crazy Water Crystals, and Wolfman Jack is over. Nostalgia still exists, however. George Lucas' film, "American Graffiti" celebrated Wolfman Jack's influence via Border Radio over youth culture in the early 1960's. ZZ Top wrote and performed "Heard It On The X", a song linking the roots of their music back to Border Radio in the 1960's and earlier. Canadian rockers The Guess Who had a hit with "Clap For The Wolfman", a song celebrating infamous Border Radio disc jockey Wolfman Jack. Los Super 7 put together a full album, "Heard It On The X", which is a tribute to the sound of Border Radio. Joel Mabius did a banjo-accompanied monologue about "Crazy Water Crystals" on his "The Banjo Monologues" album. And the list goes on.

Border Radio, while not even located in the United States, had a major influence on radio. It broke the boundaries of radio content beyond the initial "high brow" style favoured by the early networks. It provided a national (not to mention international) radio station that everyone could tune in to. It pioneered different broadcasting technologies, including the first use of a portable transmitter for remote broadcasting in 1932, and was at least an early adopter for other technologies, such as electrical transcriptions. It changed the sound of radio, exposing country music to a national audience. It showed the good and bad sides of advertising. It created the format for the infomercial, and it set the pattern of music and talk interspersed with ads (or ads interspersed with music and talk) that became the standard for many radio stations to this day. Whether good or bad, the effects of Border Radio can still be felt to this day.