

An Afternoon with Harry L. Bryant

Editor's Note: This is the fourth in a series of interviews with major figures in audio conducted by the Los Angeles Section. This feature is an edited transcript of the interview with AES Award recipient, Harry Bryant, on November 21, 1982. Richard Heyser, who was moderator, died in March 1987.

Heyser: I'd like to welcome you this afternoon. Harry has been a pioneer in the industry on the West Coast for quite a long time and a person I am pleased to call my friend. Harry, can you tell us how you got started as a young man in technology and radio amateur work?

Bryant: An uncle of mine left a set of books called *Audels Electric Books*, which I browsed through about the time I learned to read. I was fascinated by electricity — we didn't use the term electronics in those days. All through high school I was studying radio and electricity.

Heyser: About when was that?

Bryant: I'll reveal my age now: I was born December 30, 1909—

that was quite a while ago. I remember around 1920 — I don't remember much in the electric field before that — I built a crystal radio set. A couple of years later I read an article about building a set using a WD12 vacuum tube. I saved a little money, got the parts, and built it. It worked. The first station I heard was WOW, Davenport, Iowa, which is about 1500 miles away. From that day on, I was a dyed-in-the-wool radio fan.

Heyser: Did you aspire to be a technical person?

Bryant: Yes. When I was in high school I was planning to go to college to study electrical engineering. I also thought of becoming an aviator, but somewhere along the line the depression began, and I discovered girls. When I finished high school, my dad couldn't send me to college. I took a job with the Columbia, South Carolina, telephone company



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and a correspondence course at RCA Institute. I didn't quite complete it because I decided to go to California— incidentally, I rode on a freight train.

Heyser: The aspiring young audio engineer should take heart from that. The road to glory is sometimes through a freight train. What was your first activity in the technical end out here?

Bryant: I got a job with Otto K. Olesen. Olesen used to be the big PA man in Hollywood. He was responsible for putting in the equipment for the Christmas parade. I ended up climbing poles, putting up equipment, building PA equipment, and going out on PA dates and openings at theaters where they had the big searchlights. I was the final person to check out

the PA system a few hours before the Christmas parade started one year. At the opening ceremony there were notables such as Mary Pickford, Governor Miriam, and the mayor. I went prancing over to get somebody to talk, but no one would say a word. I was being brash and having fun, "Now do you hear me loud enough?" A fellow named Stevens that I worked for and Bette Davis were sitting in a car. I told Stevens that no one would say anything, and he couldn't believe it. Bette Davis blurted right out: "That's the damndest thing I ever heard."

Heyser: You once mentioned an amusing story about your experience at a football game. Could you tell us about that?

Bryant: I left Otto somewhere along the line and got a job with Flickinger. He had a sound truck, and we would handle football

games. I went out to do the sound at Victor McLaughlin Stadium once, and when the announcer didn't appear, I announced the football game over the public address system. Flickinger didn't know that I had done it. He said they had received some phone calls wanting to know who the Southern boy was. He denied knowing anything about it.

Heyser: When did you get involved with Don Lee Broadcasting?

Bryant: I was with Don Lee before and after Flickinger. One of my jobs between the other jobs was being in charge of a hot dog stand in front of a restaurant at the San Pedro Pier. I was having fun. But, they also decided to buy out a nightclub that was just starting next door. It was Omar's Dome at 453 Hill Street. While they were organizing it, I went tearing in, found the proper people, and got a job as a technician to handle the lights and sound. After I started working there, I began to learn a little bit about what it was all about — mixing and what have you. Then we started a broadcast on Royal Hawaiians.

I would handle broadcast for KHJ. A fellow named Bob Murray came down and hooked up the telephone lines and gave me some idea of what to do. I had been a music student in high school, too. I sang in the chorus and played saxophone. Although I didn't play very well, I was familiar with what happens in the music field. They started to have a nightly broadcast of bands, and quite a few orchestras originated there. I handled the broadcast up until 1937.

Apparently, I had been very negligent about replacing the gelatin screens over the lights around the place. I simply forgot. Who would grab a 75-foot ladder, go up there, and replace the gels? Then, people from the Biltmore Hotel bought the place out. They had their own crew, so it didn't take long for them to see I didn't know what I was doing as far as the lights were concerned. I was fired.

Heyser: How long did you continue in the broadcast end?

Bryant: We weren't in the war yet. I left Don Lee to go with Miller Broadcasting in 1941. James A. Miller developed an optical system of recording on tape. A B-shaped groove cut a hill-and-dale type recording that was push-pull, which removed the coating to allow a light pixel to shine through it.

I established a facility for him at 7000 Santa Monica Blvd., where Radio Recorders would end up. We had it operating and were just beginning to do commercial work when war was declared. Miller had a contract with WOR, and for a couple of years handled rebroadcast work for them in New York that was far superior to disk in those days—as long as you didn't get it dirty.

The quality was excellent. He would record a full 30 minutes on a reel of tape just as we do today with magnetic. We were trying to get it organized and use it here in Hollywood, but Miller went back in the Signal Corps. He later became a

colonel in the Signal Corps and he asked me to see what I could do to get rid of the studio, and sublease the place.

I made a deal with Radio Recorders to take the place over. About that time, I was offered a job at NBC, which I accepted in 1942. I was in seventh heaven. It is difficult to remember all the shows I worked on: Jack Benny Show, Amos and Andy, Fibber McGee and Molly, Bob Hope Show, Kay Kyser, College of Musical Knowledge, Horace Heidt, Bob Crosby Show, Westinghouse Show, and John Charles Thomas. There were more because I was out constantly on the Army/Navy shows on the road.

Heyser: You must have some good NBC anecdotes.

Bryant: Unbeknownst to NBC, I developed a foot switch. I rigged up a bridge box to complement the PA system, which I controlled. When I wanted to crank up a microphone to get laughs out in the auditorium, or what have you, I would step on the foot switch and could crank up 15, 20 dB without feedback.

Obviously, I had it made after that. From that day on, I would even do it in the studio, and word got out — especially on comedy shows. Shows like Hope and Kyser were the same — you didn't have to worry about them. The laughs and everything were there. But, other shows weren't quite that funny.

Heyser: The first laugh-track on air?

Bryant: You bet. I always used it. I suggested it to a chief engineer at NBC because I had used it when I was at KHJ. I figured out a deal to use it. He came back and said "look, you were hired to do what you're paid to do. You're not engineering; they're still in New York. Don't bother me with your half-baked ideas." I walked out and decided to do it myself — and I did.

Heyser: You were and still are very active in the Audio Engineering Society and a staunch member of Sapphire. When were you president of the AES?

Bryant: In 1959–60. At that time the AES president-elect was called executive vice-president. For one year he had the responsibility of putting on conventions. I put on the first convention here in Los Angeles, and I was also sessions chairman. I also had to collect all the papers, which was a big job. I had the same responsibility in New York.

Somewhere in the early 60s, they assigned one person to take over the duties as sessions chairman. It was really too big a job for one person to do more than once. As the AES grew, more money was available. When I was president, I was trying to cooperate with the Institute of High-Fidelity (IHF). We were affiliated with them for a year or two, then separated completely.

Heyser: When you first became aware of tape as a medi-

um for recording, did you ever meet Jack Mullin?

Bryant: Oh, sure. Jack and I used to put on the "bass" — we'd deliberately argue back and forth. Jack and I bid — maybe it wasn't Jack personally — but he and I bid on a part of the contract for recording-on-tape the Bing Crosby Show for CBS. I cut a vacation short and rushed back from North Dakota, driving night and day to get back here in time to make a presentation to CBS. I had Ranger machines and Jack had the Magnetophon but was to get Ampex machines almost immediately. But, he won the contract. That was the first time I met Jack personally: he is a man who knows his business, and I have a lot of respect for him.

Heyser: Well, from your standpoint, do you have any feeling for the way the recording industry is going today. What might happen in the next 10 or 20 years?

Bryant: The recording industry expanded because of magnetic tape recording more than it could have otherwise. Today, the manufacturers are pushing digital recording. What I have heard is excellent and impressive. I am impressed primarily by the lack of noise and the fact that the level and dynamic range seemed superior to anything I've heard on a record.

Heyser: Do you have any words of wisdom for young engineers today in the field?

Bryant: The only thing I would really say is to get all the experience you can and study, become up-to-date with what's happening in the world electronically. You don't need it to be a mixer, but it sure helps. Several times I hired musicians at Radio Recorders to mix. While they were very good at straight mixing, when it came to making any change or anything, they were in trouble. They had to have somebody that knew the equipment.

Heyser: So the young person should learn his trade technically and musically?

Bryant: Yes. I would have been better off had I had music training — more than the little I did have. There were times when I could have talked to a producer or a conductor and been able to satisfy them or explain things better than I did.

Heyser: Well, Harry, on behalf of the Los Angeles Section, I'd like to thank you for a most entertaining afternoon.