

Activity Idea

Old-Time Radio and the Emergence of Foley Sound Design

Recommended for Adults

Introduction

The “Golden Age of Radio”, often times known colloquially as “old-time radio,” was an era in the U.S. when radio was the dominant home entertainment medium. Radio’s peak popularity came in the 1930s and 1940s until it was superseded in popularity by television in the 1950s. Listeners enjoyed a wide range of content, from plays and detective serials to comedies and variety hours. Of course, without a moving picture to accompany the audio, stories had to be told and moods had to be conveyed solely through voice and sound. Out of this need, sound effects such as doors opening and closing, footsteps, and other ambient noises would be used to aid in the storytelling process. In the early days of radio when live broadcasting was the norm, it was especially important for sound effects to be delivered quickly and seamlessly in sync with the dialogue.

The art of creating sound effects for radio (as well as film and television) would come to be known as “foley,” with individuals in the trade known as “foley artists.” The term comes from an early pioneer in the field, Jack Donovan Foley (1891-1967), who is credited with developing techniques using a variety of tools that created more realistic sounds for radio and film. Foley artists and sound technicians continue to bring their diverse skills and creative ideas to engage audiences through sound in modern-day filmmaking and other media.

Whether you are interested in the Golden Age of Radio in general or the art of foley in particular, check out the resources below to discover more about these fascinating topics. All are free with our LA County Library card!

Audio

Classic Radio Collection from Hollywood 360 on Overdrive tinyurl.com/y7ym5lmz

This collection of 19 separate audiobooks compile the “greatest” original radio broadcasts from Radio’s Golden Age. Titles span a variety of genres, including detective shows, comedy shows, and westerns, as well as spotlights on specific personas such as Lucille Ball and Orson Welles.

Golden Age Radio: Vintage from UPPM Records on Hoopla tinyurl.com/y85f9kep

Turn up the volume and give a listen to these “...gorgeous live recordings with a 1920s-40s vintage aesthetic...” to get a sense of what old time radio listeners must have experienced when listening to music.



Video

Ken Burns: Empire of the Air – The Men Who Made Radio on Kanopy tinyurl.com/yac6x3yw

This PBS documentary uses archival photographs, newsreels, and interviews to showcase the lives of three men who shared the primary responsibility for the invention of the radio and its early success.

“Radio and Television” from the series *Understanding the Inventions That Changed the World* on Kanopy tinyurl.com/y9inj7tm

A 30-minute documentary that focuses on the emergence of broadcasting in the 1920s as well as the cultural effects of the new technology and the fierce competition between broadcast networks that continues today.

“How Hollywood Does It – Creating the Magic of Film – Sound” from the series *How Hollywood Does it Collection* on Kanopy tinyurl.com/ybwn5g9x

This short documentary explores how the three categories of sound design (dialogue or voice, music, and sound effects) contribute to a film’s overall mood and uses several films from the 1950s as examples.

Sound for Film and Television by Wrightsville Beach Studios on Kanopy tinyurl.com/ya3g2pil

A 154-minute instructional video that explores a wide range of topics related to sound engineering, from the fundamentals of sound theory and sound gear all the way through the basics of audio post-production.

Books

The Darkness Knows: Viv and Charlie Mystery Series, Book 1 by Cheryl Honigford on Overdrive tinyurl.com/y783rmr2

Although a fictional account, this mystery novel “...bring to life the world of radio in 1938 Chicago” and centers on Vivian Witchell, a voice actress in a popular radio serial who is thrust into a murder mystery.

The Golden Age of Boxing on Radio And Television: A Blow-by-Blow History from 1921 to 1964 by Frederick V. Romano on Hoopla tinyurl.com/y8vxcub4

Whether you’re interested in how old time radio sports broadcasting translated the action to audiences, or a fan of boxing in general, this book covers both topics as it explores how radio (and television) “...impacted the manner in which the sport was presented to its public audience, the exponential growth of those audiences, and the influence radio and television had on the financial aspects of the sport.”



Courses

Lynda/LinkedIn Learning: *Introduction to Video Sound Design* [tinyurl.com/y9uzhcmk](https://www.lynda.com/VideoSoundDesign/Introduction-to-Video-Sound-Design/learn/author/y9uzhcmk)

If you're interested in pursuing sound design, this course aims to give you a basic understanding of key concepts. It explores the history of video sound design and will help you understand the "...workflow, development, and elements of a successful soundtrack."

Lynda/LinkedIn Learning: *Audition: Mixing a Short Film* [tinyurl.com/yba9cutr](https://www.lynda.com/Audition/Audition-Mixing-a-Short-Film/learn/author/yba9cutr)

This hour-long course promises to demonstrate how to import, edit, mix, and export audio tracks for a short film. It includes a dedicated section to working and synchronizing SFX.

Get Started!

Do you have any fun or unique ideas about how to create sounds out of everyday objects? Use your imagination and see what you can come up with. And if you are interested in pursuing foley or sound design as a trade, take a closer look at some of the resources offered to see what it might entail in the real world!