Edison and Radio

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. . . in which the Editor takes issue with Mr. Edison's claim that radio is a failure; yet it is pointed out that the Radio Industry owes Edison a great debt; wherein facts and figures are given to show that Radio is on a steady increase; granting that neither Radio nor the phonograph is yet perfect; how the interest in Radio is steadily increasing, and radio dealers are now making good money.

THOMAS A. EDISON has recently been quoted in the press as saying that Radio is a dismal failure.[1] The following remarks on the subject are attributed to Mr. Edison: "The radio is a commercial failure, and its popularity with the public is waning. Radio is impractical commercially and esthetically distorted, and is losing its grip rapidly in the market and in the home. There is not ten per cent. of the interest in radio that there was last year. Radio is a highly complicated machine in the hands of people who know nothing about it. No dealers have made any money out of it. It is not a commercial machine because it is too complicated. Reports from 4,000 Edison dealers who have handled radio sets show that they are rapidly abandoning it, and as for its music—it is awful," comments the wizard of Menlo Park. "I don't see how they can listen to it.

"Thousands of people have signed a petition asking that sopranos be kept off the air. Of course most of them don't know that the soprano voice distorts the radio. The phonograph is coming into its own because the people want good music. The fact is that radio has never had a high peak of popularity. In towns where 25 or 30 dealers were handling radio sets, only one or two are now handling them. A farmer five miles from town buys a radio, perhaps on

[1] "Edison Calls Radio a Failure for Music; Thinks Phonograph Will Regain Its Own," *The New York Times*, (September 1926): 27.

the installment plan. A wire becomes loose. The dealer has to arrange to fix it. This happens time and time again. The business becomes unprofitable for the dealer to engage in. He does not make any money out of it. None of them has. They are giving it up as fast as they can. It is not a commercially successful machine, because it is too complicated."

Turning to the musical side of the question, Mr. Edison chuckled in his characteristic manner, "Static is awful, and the difficulties of tuning out—and now they are stealing each other's wavelengths! It is too bad that the radio has to be so complicated. It was a big and interesting thing and the people responded to it, but they want good music and they have found it is not to be had on the radio. That is why tbe phonograph is reclaiming its own."

Incidentally, this outburst from the dean of modern electricity was in connection with the announcement of Mr. Edison's latest invention, his 40-minute phonograph record—a great achievement, and one that without doubt will be of much benefit to the phonograph industry.

Since the publication of this famous interview with Mr. Edison, the press, and particularly the radio press over the entire country, has been more or less agitated. The following comments of mine, most of which were printed in the *New York Times* of September 26, and the *New York Evening Post* of the same date, were made by me at the time, and are here somewhat amplified:

I have too high a personal opinion of Thomas A. Edison to wish to say anything of a controversial nature, or anything that would even border on discourtesy to the great inventor, but I do believe that Mr. Edison has not been recently in touch with radio sufficiently to appreciate fully the tremendous advances that have been made. Mr. Edison is a busy man, and a tremendously busy inventor. It would be well-nigh impossible for him to be in touch with all of the various commercial phases of radio all over the country; and like other executives he obtains his reports from subordinates, and such reports often as not may be highly colorful and even wrong.[2]

Right here I wish to pay a tribute to Mr. Edison that the radio industry so far has been unwilling to accord him. If it were not for Mr. Edison and the "Edison Effect," radio would not he what it is today. It is the Edison Effect that has

[2]Leroy F. Dyer, Managing Engineer of the Dyer Radio Manufactory, writes in a letter published in the February 1927 issue of *Radio News*:

> I want to commend your lenient attitude in commenting upon the remarks, attributed to Mr. Edison, regarding the comparative merits of radio and the phonograph. In spite of the reverence due our great inventor, most of us could not have resisted a temptation to characterize such statements as propaganda. … It is not fair to compare the results of the average phonograph with the average radio receiver in reproducing music. The average phonograph of today is a highly-developed, scientifically-designed, factory-built piece of apparatus, the culmination of many years of experience. The average radio receiver—well, I don't want to hurt anyone's feelings, but to put it mildly, the *average* radio receiver is far from representing the present state of perfection in the radio art.

made possible our present vacuum tubes, now used universally in radio. Radio, therefore, owes a tremendous debt to Thomas Alva Edison; and I recommend to the radio industry that it acknowledge this debt more frequently in the future.[3]

As to Mr. Edison's remarks, the statements that follow are facts which can be checked up by any one who is unbiased. They are not given with any idea of starting a controversy.

Rather than waning in popularity, it is well known that radio is on the constant increase. Witness, for instance, the recent Third Annual Radio World's Fair, in New York, where the attendance for the week was 228,000, the greatest on record of any radio show, and a tremendous increase over last year's figures.[4] There certainly was no such interest in the phonograph when the latter was but five years old, which is the age of radio, since radio broadcasting started.

The sales of radio apparatus, for the United States alone, will reach $520,000,000 for 1926. The figures for the former years, compiled by the Radio Manufacturers' Association, are given here: 1922, $46,500,000; 1923, $120,000,000; 1924, $350,000,000; 1925, $449,000,000. These are not mere estimates, but actual figures. From orders that have been placed, the various radio trade associations know now that the 1926 figure will be exceeded in 1927. The fact is that the popularity of radio is becoming steadily greater rather than less, and no home today is considered complete without its radio set.

Radio's popularity started with the introduction of broadcasting in 1921. In five short years it has accomplished more than the phonograph did in fifteen years. The modern radio set is no more complicated than the automobile when it was five years old; and for best results the radio set should be serviced by radio dealers, just as the modern automobile is serviced by its garage. In the last analysis, radio will probably be handled by radio or electrical stores, whose staff understand the mechanism. The phonograph dealer is not always equipped to do servicing, although quite a good many phonograph stores do so.

As for quality, it is the belief of unprejudiced experts that in many cases the radio, providing it is of a good make, with a good loud-speaker, will deliver quality exceeding that of a phonograph. Neither phonograph nor radio are perfect. The best phonograph is of no avail after a record has been played several

[3]See **Thomas A. Edison Speaks to You** on the Edison effect.

[4]With exhibitions from amateurs and corporations alike, the Radio World's Fair was held at the newly opened third iteration of Madison Square Garden, beginning September 13, 1926.

> For the first time, under a single roof, the public will see all the marvelous new radio equipment that, only a few months ago, was in the experimental stage in a hundred research laboratories. It will not only be a demonstration of the tremendous advance in the radio engineering art, but the sets themselves will be encased in de luxe cabinets that make radio not just a luxury or a necessity in the home, but an actual adornment as well.

"New York Radio Show Ushers In Era of New Development And Beginning of New Year," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, (September 1926): 10C, http://www.newspapers.com/image/58266309/.

dozen times; after which, by no stretch of the imagination, can one call the result music. Furthermore, the scratchy sound produced by every phonograph is highly objectionable and is certainly worse than the few extraneous noises produced in most radio sets today.

The radio and phonograph are two different entities, and should never compete. As a matter of fact, they never do. At the same time, the phonograph has come back *only because the popularity of radio* caused the phonograph makers to turn out a product such as had never existed before.

The radio dealers are making far more money in radio now than ever before. A great number interviewed, in New York and vicinity, claim that their business was never better and is on the increase. There are pretty close to 30,000 radio dealers throughout the country today. It is true that for some time the dealers did not make money, due to the price-cutting evil, but this is rapidly being eradicated.

Some of the best sets of today combine the phonograph and the radio. Each has its particular field. You can not listen to Caruso on the radio, nor can you get the latest presidential address on the phonograph.[5]

The radio industry today is only five years old, and it may safely be predicted that when it becomes as old as the phonograph is today we shall hardly be able to recognize it as the same development. It is admitted that radio is not yet perfect. Neither is the phonograph, nor the automobile, nor motion pictures, nor electric lights; nor, for that matter, a pair of shoes.

Mr. Hugo Gernsback speaks every Monday night at 9 P. M. from Station WRNY on various radio and scientific subjects.

[5]Enrico Caruso was an Italian opera tenor with a famously "phonogenic" voice, one that drove the sales of phonographs in the early twentieth century according to John Potter, *Tenor: History of a Voice*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).