



Episode 1, Amos 'n' Andy Record, New York City

Tukufu: It's 1931. Every night at 7pm, a third of the American population indulges in a national obsession. It's called the Amos 'n' Andy Show. A pair of white actors portray the adventures of two black men from the south, struggling to make a new life in a northern city. Despite mass protests by the African American community, Amos 'n' Andy quickly becomes the most successful radio show of all time. At its peak of popularity, the program was always broadcast live. No professional recordings were made, which means that almost all of those performances have been lost forever. Or are they? A man from Lakeland, Florida wonders if he's stumbled upon a treasure from the early days of radio. I'm Tukufu Zuberi. I'm on my way to meet Terry and take a look at his record. Hello, Terry. So, where did you get this from?

Terry: We found it at a flea market.

Tukufu: Oh, really?

Terry: I'd just never seen anything like that before.

Tukufu: Sentinel Chromatron. For master recording. Use fiber needle.

Terry: So, I saw the Amos 'n' Andy on it and that sparked my interest.

Tukufu: Amos 'n' Andy, W-O-W.

Terry: Yeah. I don't know what the W-O-W part is either.

Tukufu: Have you ever listened to it?

Terry: No, I haven't, because it says to use a fiber needle and I don't have a fiber needle.

Tukufu: So you don't know if there's anything on this at all?

Terry: No. I have no idea.

Tukufu: You know much about Amos 'n' Andy?

Terry: Very little. I saw a couple of shows when I was a kid on TV.



Tukufu: Both Terry and I watched reruns of the old Amos 'n' Andy TV show, which came after the radio show. The jokes and storylines were similar, only now African Americans were doing the acting. I think that Terry and I watched the program through slightly different colored lenses.

Tukufu: When I was a kid, if you were acting oddly or misbehaving, they might say "you're acting like Amos 'n' Andy" as a negative characterization of what you were doing.

Terry: Well, I was little, so it was just kind of a funny show to me at the time.

Tukufu: Yeah, I think that's the way it was for most people. Just lay it out, what do you want me to find out for you?

Terry: Well, I'd like to find out exactly what I have there. If maybe there is a recording of the Amos 'n' Andy Show from the radio days on there. And, I'd like to know why the show was so popular.

Tukufu: Alright. Now that sounds like an investigation to me.

Terry: Alright.

Tukufu: As a sociologist who is African American, researching Amos 'n' Andy is a tricky assignment. The TV show that Terry and I watched as kids is still available on DVD.

Amos: Ladies and Gentlemen, this is Amos.

Judge: I believe that there was more stupidity involved here than criminal intent.

Amos: Yah Sir, Your Honor.

Tukufu: The racial stereotypes are degrading today. And they certainly enraged lots of people in the 1950s. It only lasted two years because the African American community rose up and protested and demanded that it be taken off the air. But the story of Amos 'n' Andy began more than twenty years earlier, in 1928 with a nightly 15-minute radio show. It was the brainchild of Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll. They begin their show business careers in black-face playing minstrel acts. This form of entertainment was not only degrading to African Americans, it excluded them from participating on the stage. This is the mindset of Amos 'n' Andy. Nevertheless, and somewhat incredibly to me, by 1931 Amos 'n' Andy had become the most popular radio show of all time. Forty million people were listening six nights a week. That's roughly one third of the U.S. population. It was a pop culture phenomenon. Movie theaters even stopped their shows so people wouldn't miss the 7pm broadcast. So how does Terry's record fit into this history? It says that Amos 'n' Andy was



broadcast live and that Gosden and Correll didn't see the need to make recordings of the show. So what could this record be? Melvin Ely teaches History and Black Studies at the College of William and Mary. And he's the author of a book that explores the social history of Amos 'n' Andy. This is the object that we have. You ever seen that before?

Melvin: You know, I don't believe I have. I've seen a lot of Amos 'n' Andy artifacts. I'm not sure I've ever seen one of those before.

Tukufu: Yes. Okay. Mel tells me that a number of Amos 'n' Andy recordings do exist, from 1928 and '29. That's when Gosden and Correll pioneered an early form of syndication. To reach a national radio audience, programs were recorded to disk and sent out to stations around the country. He can't tell me if this is one of those records, but Mel has a lot to say about how Amos 'n' Andy appealed to such a huge audience. He says the key to understanding the show's popularity is recognizing it as a product of its time.

Melvin: One of the things that was happening in the 1920s and '30s was the great migration of African Americans from the country to the city, from the south to the north.

Tukufu: Mel says that Gosden and Correll based the storyline of Amos 'n' Andy on this profound change in the American racial scene.

Melvin: They chose to depict two southern black men moving to the northern city. But, of course, when they get to the city they are in part having sort of urban new sorts of adventures and in part they're depicting the caricatures of blacks that had existed from time immemorial.

Tukufu: And it was two white men who were kind of not putting the black cork on their face, they were putting it on their voice. Gosden and Correll claimed that Amos 'n' Andy was an authentic depiction of black life in the big city. But huge numbers of African Americans didn't agree.

Melvin: This is the Pittsburgh Courier, which was a very popular weekly black newspaper. Which was passing around a petition.

Tukufu: This is really powerful. "Wanted! One million Signers. A nation-wide protest against Amos 'n' Andy".

Melvin: They claimed at one point to have gathered some three-quarters of a million signatures.

Tukufu: But some black newspapers actually came out in favor of Amos 'n' Andy, including the Chicago Defender in 1931.



Melvin: Well, the Chicago Defender invited Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll to be guests of honor at this picnic.

Tukufu: "35,000 cheer Amos 'n' Andy". You definitely did not have a unanimous opposition to Amos 'n' Andy.

Melvin: Right.

Tukufu: ...among African Americans. Heading back downtown, Mel tells me that Gosden and Correll's ability to win fans, even among some African Americans, was based on the show's unique recipe.

Melvin: Amos 'n' Andy really offered a little something for everybody. If you wanted this sort of old time minstrel style caricatures of blacks, you could certainly find them. On the other hand, there were also occasional dignified, well spoken black characters, so liberal and black folk could relate to that.

Tukufu: Of course, the caricatures of race and class were deeply offensive, and remain so. But Mel says the recipe for preparing those ingredients has become a staple of today's television.

Melvin: There was a continuing storyline with characters people could identify with. It's really not only radio's first comedy, but if you want it's radio's first soap opera and it brought radio into its own as a media.

Tukufu: With the backdrop of the great migration, Amos 'n' Andy was a soap opera of a uniquely American context. But maybe I'm getting ahead of myself. I still don't know what this disk is or if anything is recorded on it. John Samuels is a recording engineer who's helped me out in the past. He specializes in audio preservation and restoration.

John: Oh, I haven't seen one of these in a long time. This is an aluminum record. It's literally made out of aluminum. And there are very few of these in existence, because the technology was only used for a short time. Roughly five years, in the early '30s. Let's say 1929 to '35.

Tukufu: Mel had told me that recordings of Amos 'n' Andy were being sent out to radio stations during that period. But John doesn't think we have one of those disks.

John: Radio stations didn't usually put their masters on aluminum records. If they ever wanted to rebroadcast or to preserve something, it would probably be on what we call 78s or shellac records.

Tukufu: John showed me what master recordings of radio programs usually looked like.



John: The reason this wasn't used as a master, to be honest, was that it was a rather unstable technology. And, it didn't sound that good.

Tukufu: So what, if anything, is actually recorded on here? Do you think we can play it?

John: Let me look at it. I mean, you can see it's pretty beat up. It's got quite a few scuffs over here.

Tukufu: John's studio is state of the art and can retrieve sounds from some of the very earliest recording formats.

John: I'm going to try a different stylus.

Tukufu: John's modern stylus is too broad for the grooves. He finds one to match the fiber needles used in the 1930s. Terry's record finally comes to life.

Mr. Collins: ...don't contradict yourself.

Andy: Don't what?

Mr. Collins: Contradict yourself.

Tukufu: It definitely sounds like the buffoonery that was Amos 'n' Andy, but I'm not sure. John cleaned up the recording and transferred it to a digital format.

Andy: Well, what can I do that'll make 'em cremate me.

Mr. Collins: Oh, no. I said incriminate.

Amos: Well, don't worry about that, just think how you're gonna act when they get on the witness stand.

Ain't that right Mr. Collins?

Tukufu: Listening to it, I can't help but wonder if I'm the first to hear these voices in over 70 years. I've only heard the TV show, so I don't really know what I'm listening to. I don't know if this is Amos 'n' Andy, but Andy and Amos are mentioned by name. They can barely pronounce the words that they're trying to use.

Mr. Collins: If you can give a testimony that will help you as much as Amos did when he was on the stand, I think you'll come out alright.



Tukufu: It sounds like the two main characters are talking about preparing for a trial of some sort. And then there's another character in there, a lawyer. He understands the words and he speaks in a way that is appropriate for court.

Mr. Collins: Remember what you have said and don't contradict yourself.

Andy: Don't what?

Mr. Collins: Contradict yourself.

Tukufu: The lawyer is preparing Andy to testify. It certainly sounds a lot like the soap opera narrative that Mel described. Then I hear something I didn't expect.

Announcer: You are now listening to Radio Station W-O-W way up in top of the Whitman of The World Building in Omaha, Nebraska. I take this opportunity of inviting you up to our wonderful studio to watch.

Tukufu: W-O-W seemed to be call letters. But John told me this recording wasn't made by a radio station. And there are other programs on here I can't identify. Now I'm really lost. If this is Amos 'n' Andy, we only have about half of the full 15-minute show. And there's nothing that indicates where our chunks of dialogue are from. There's another problem too. John told me radio stations used shellac, not aluminum for their recordings. So, why are all these other show fragments mixed in? Broadcast historian Liz McLeod has spent 28 years studying Amos 'n' Andy. That includes original scripts and the handful of existing recordings. When I told her I might have a recording that she wasn't aware of, Liz wanted to hear it right away.

Liz: Okay. Yeah, I can tell right now what you have here.

Tukufu: I really don't know if this Amos 'n' Andy is Amos 'n' Andy.

Liz: Yes it definitely is. It probably dates from, I would guess early March of 1931.

Tukufu: Early March of 1931.

Liz: Of 1931. That's right.

Tukufu: That's when Amos 'n' Andy was at its height of popularity. Incredibly, it's also from the period when no master recordings were being made. Or, are known to exist.

Tukufu: Had you ever heard this story before?



Liz: I had not. I have read the script.

Tukufu: Liz tells me that she can be precise about the date because the recording is from a very famous storyline called "Breach of Promise". So it's from the script?

Liz: As part of my own research into broadcasting history, I have read all of Amos 'n' Andy's scripts.

Tukufu: She can even pinpoint the date of the broadcast.

Liz: Thursday, March 5th, 1931.

Tukufu: And here are the characters I heard – Amos, Andy and the lawyer, whose name is Collins. But who made the recording? According to Liz, the answer is...that voice I couldn't identify.

Liz: As you're listening to Amos 'n' Andy you hear the voice singing, "I've been working on The Railroad".

Tukufu: Right.

Liz: And then doing the W-O-W. Well, my speculation would be that that is the voice of the person making the recording.

Tukufu: Interesting.

Liz: This record was probably made by an advanced amateur. Probably recording a part of the broadcast is a test of his equipment or as an experiment of some sort. And then he decided that he would lay his own voice down for posterity.

Tukufu: And how did he do it?

Liz: Well, they would have used a device very much like you'll see in this pamphlet.

Tukufu: Small machines for what was called instantaneous recording were available to audio files as early as 1930.

Liz: This photograph here shows a machine designed for recording on uncoated aluminum.



Tukufu: So Terry's recording probably exists purely by accident. Somebody, somewhere just happened to capture it off the air, with no clue that we'd be studying his work some 70 years later.

Tukufu: How many recordings like this one exist?

Liz: There's very little recorded material....

Tukufu: What Liz tells me next is going to be big news for Terry.

Terry: Hey, how you doing?

Tukufu: Alright.

Terry: Come in.

Tukufu: You were correct. What you do have here is an aluminum record. Okay? I let Terry hear his recording for the first time. While you do have a recording of Amos 'n' Andy, it's a little more significant than that.

Tukufu: Liz McLeod had been startled at the content of Terry's record.

Liz: As far as Amos 'n' Andy are concerned, this is only the second bit of audio from the "Breach of Promise" storyline to ever be found.

Tukufu: That's makes Terry's disk both a rarity of early radio broadcasting history and a window on some of the racial attitudes of Americans during the Depression.

Liz: And what you have here is historically a major find.

Terry: Well, that...It's even more amazing than I thought. That's pretty good. My wife will be happy. Yeah. It's like hitting the lottery. You find some stuff that's good and...and some that's bad.