

## **Mechanical Reproduction Announcement (McLeod)**

Date: Thu, 14 Jan 99 07:54:11 -0500  
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To: old.time.radio@broadcast.airwaves.com  
Subject: Re: the Mechanical Reproduction Announcement

*What does "transcribed" means when the announcer on an OTR program says it?*

This is a later version of the Mechanical Reproduction Announcement — a bit of phrasing once required by federal law whenever recorded material was broadcast. It's a sort of Truth In Labelling requirement, with an interesting political history behind it.

The MRA goes back to the late twenties, when controversy was raging over the proper use of phonograph records on the air. Ordinary records had been used as filler programming since the earliest days of radio, but beginning with "Amos 'n' Andy" and the various offerings of the National Radio Advertising Company pre-recorded material made especially for broadcasting began to appear. These recordings were designated "electrical transcriptions" to distinguish them from ordinary records — even though technologically, these early 12" 78 rpm "transcriptions" were no different from any record you could buy in a store.

One of the early regulations imposed by the Federal Radio Commission was that an announcement had to be given whenever a recording of any kind was played. Originally, it was necessary for the announcer to say explicitly "this is a phonograph record," in announcing each recorded selection (or, "this is a player piano roll" if that was what it was.) This was seen as a sort of consumer-protection law — to ensure listeners weren't tricked into believing that recordings were actually live broadcasts. There was a lot of sentiment in official circles that recorded broadcasts should be discouraged — that they were a waste of broadcast bandwidth. What it all comes down to is that the Mechanical Reproduction Announcement was a way of stigmatizing recorded programming.

With the advent of "electrical transcriptions" in 1928-29, the MRA was modified to allow for recordings that had not been made for the consumer market. Stations were required to introduce syndicated programming with "This is an electrical transcription made exclusively for broadcasting purposes." This announcement had to be given at the start *of every* transcription — meaning programs recorded on more than one side had to have the announcement read at the start of every side. This meant a half-hour show recorded on 78rpm discs would have to have this announcement inserted eight times — and broadcasters (and syndication companies) were *very* unhappy. The adoption of 16" discs helped this situation — only one or two interruptions would be required in a half hour show using these larger discs —but the MRA remained a sticky point thruout the early thirties. Eventually, a hearing was held before the newly-formed Federal Communications Commission, with the National Association of Broadcasters and the World Broadcasting System (a major ET producer) arguing for the relaxation of the rule — and the networks and the American Federation of Musicians arguing that it should be kept. The conflict here is obvious ~ on the one hand, local broadcasters saw recordings as a source of cheap but high-grade programming, while the networks and the musicians union saw them as a continuing threat to the value of live broadcasts. The situation for NBC was especially complicated — the network had begun to produce programming for the syndication market, even as it was trying to protect the prestige of live broadcasts.

The result, in early 1936, was a revised MRA regulation, requiring the announcement at fifteen-minute intervals, unless the announcement would interrupt a continuous "play, speech, or concert." Stations were also allowed flexibility in how they made the announcement, as long as it was in clearly-understandable language and as long as differentiation was made between transcriptions and ordinary phonograph records. Thus, it took such forms as "The music is recorded," "This program is transcribed," "Here is a transcription," and so forth. The differentiation between ETs and ordinary records led to an occasional forced redundancy: a DJ program which announced that "portions are recorded and transcribed" meant that it used both commercial records and material from a transcription service.

The MRA requirement was increasingly liberalized as recordings became more and more accepted, and eventually it all but disappeared. Currently, the only vestige of it which remains is the rule that a recorded program in which the time element is critical, and which could "create the impression" of a live event" must be announced as pre-recorded. This usually means a tape-delay broadcast of a sports event or a news pickup. And no one says "transcribed" any more.

Elizabeth