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Most of us know that feeling, driving alone at night on a road or highway, surrounded by darkness and listening to the radio. Or we share that delicious, almost primal memory of lying in bed, sometimes with the covers just barely over our heads, listening intently to a world beyond our windows. Before so many of us installed tape decks and CD players in our cars or trucks, it was the voices and music on the radio that provided that lifeline we needed, pulling us out of the solitary darkness.

In bed, the sound of a bat cracking against a ball, or the music of, say, Sam Cooke, transported us to places we imagined to be more vibrant, less fettered, than our own boring, constricted little universes. There we were, alone, yet through this device, we were tied by the most gossamer connections to an imagined community of people we sensed loved the same music, or ball club, that we did, and to an announcer or disc jockey who often spoke to us in the most intimate, confidential and inclusive tones.

Back before the rise of FM and the constant expectation of clear stereophonic sound, we tuned in at night and heard 50,000-watt AM stations several states away. We vaulted over regional boundaries, yet felt that we were part of a community -- even if only of radio listeners -- bigger than ourselves.

White disc jockeys such as Alan Freed, Hunter Hancock and Wolfman Jack, by imitating Black speech and playing Black music, created an

imagined community that was less segregated and more racially tolerant than much of everyday life in the late 1950s and the 1960s.

Although hardly true for everyone, many of us White folks who lay in bed at night listening to Otis Redding or the Shirelles developed a deeply sympathetic stance towards the civil-rights movement because that music reminded us, simply yet powerfully, that these were people who felt what we felt, and expressed from their hearts what was in our own.

Of course, it is all too easy to romanticize radio of yore. Radio was, from the 1920s onward, filled with commercials that were sappy and moronic, shows that were dreadfully written and exceedingly bad, formulaic music.

Radio provided national platforms for demagogues such as Father Coughlin and Huey P. Long, and it helped perpetuate racial, ethnic and gender diversions through shows such as *Amos 'n Andy, Beaulah,* and *The Eddie Cantor Show.*

By the 1930s, radio was controlled by an oligopoly, its main mission to produce profits for corporations and make consumerism our national religion. Yet many of us look back, especially to the radio of our youth, with a powerful sense of fondness for how it made us feel a part of this culture we call "America."

This silky nostalgia swirls around radio, I think, because of the power of listening -- as opposed to reading or viewing -- and of the crucial ways that listening to the same thing at exactly the same time forges people into a common audience. No, people do not have the same reactions to the same songs or political speeches or comedy sketches. But listening simultaneously to spoken words forms hearers into a group and generates a powerful participatory mystique as people understand that

they are, together, experiencing something fleeting: sound.

Also unifying was the fact that millions were engaged, simultaneously, in the same cognitive and emotional work: to create a mental representation of a speaker, a news event, a story.

The cultivation of the imagination did not die in the 1980s -- it was taken up by National Public Radio and talk shows hosted by Don Imus, Howard Stern, Rush Limbaugh, and others.

NPR listeners often have "driveway moments:" they are so engrossed in a story or discussion that they can't get out of the car until there's a break. When someone else mentions that moment, you feel you've met a kindred spirit.

"Dittohead" instantly signifies membership in Limbaugh's club. Imus and Stern have created compelling on-air fraternities to which millions of men -- and some women -- have pledged. Some of these on-air communities have been controversial, and for good reason, but they testify to how excluded many Americans feel, whatever their politics, from the glitzy, remote, topdown news and talk shows on TV.

Yes, TV viewing, especially during national crises, bonds people together, too. However, TV doesn't make you work, doesn't require that you bring something to the event, that you play a central role in giving news to its public and private meanings.

Today the importance of listening to the radio is all but forgotten, even while the radio industry generates millions of dollars in profits. This year is the 100th anniversary of radio's introduction to the United States, but nearly all of the endless retrospectives of the 20th century have neglected it, even though radio was the dominant mass medium in the

country for 25 years and continued to have enormous influence even after television stole much of its evening audience.

Today, people point to the Internet as the latest community-building technology, the one that flattens corporate and political hierarchies and really lets us connect to each other. Certainly, this is true -- through chat rooms, e-mail and independant Web sites, those of us shut out of or repelled by what we see in the mainstream media can and do connect with each other to create new, recombinant communities online.

But I don't think that reading text on the computer screen, or typing messages back, has the same imaginative power as listening. We still feel more alone, more invisible and isolated than when we hear a sympathetic voice or song on the radio and imagine others reacting at the very same time.

Maybe this is generational. But I want our airwaves back. I want a music radio station I can listen to that assumes I want newness as well as predictability, that will tell me about interesting new music by young people, by women who don't have to look like a Barbie doll to get air time, by people of color who aren't getting processed through the industry's increasingly routinized rap and soul machines. At its 100-year mark, radio has become powerfully re-segregated by age, race and gender.

All of the market segmentation, the dividing up of programming into ever more narrow formats, encourages push-button listening, in which we punch the select button after two bars of a song if we don't like it, and see ourselves as members of mutually exclusive auditory niches.

With the shriveling of communal imaginings comes an increased alienation from the concept of community itself. At the end of the century, our modes of listening, once encouraged by radio to be so varied and

rich, are truncated. But many of us miss our supple, bygone imaginations, and we miss the sense of community, however intangible, that these imaginings produced. We yearn for a radio renaissance. I think we still want -- and need -- to listen.