

Jack Jackson: the DJ who made radio fun

Blending music and humour from the austere Forties to the swinging Sixties. By Derek Lamb.

With radio and TV relatively limited in the 1950s and early 1960s, it required some determination to tune into a favourite programme or presenter. An unmissable part of my weekend listening was Jack Jackson's Record Roundabout. Linking popular music with clips from well-known comedy shows, his programme was original, witty and very funny.



Like many DJs from the 40s and 50s, Jack Jackson came from a popular music background; he was a successful dance band leader. The band had a residency at the Dorchester Hotel in London for much of the 1930s. Through records and radio broadcasts, Jack was a household name. The band also appeared on pre-war television from Alexandra Palace and, in 1939, had its own series on Radio Luxembourg. Released from the formality of the BBC, Jack began to use his humorous personality to enliven the introductions to the music, which proved popular with listeners.



Jack Jackson at Radio Luxembourg collection: Dick Offringa

When dance bands failed to regain their popularity post-war, Jack changed direction. With his engaging microphone style and his credibility as a trumpet player, he was a natural choice as compere for the BBC's Light Programme's Band Parade and Jazz Club. Listening figures were soon rivalling those of the most popular shows like ITMA. This led to a more mainstream residency on Housewives' Choice; from here Jack was given a Saturday afternoon record show

This was something of a blank canvas. He was no longer required to read record requests or link music of a similar style. Always innovative, Jack was keen to develop a new way of 'keeping the records apart'. At that time, the Light Programme often carried sports news and so Jack's programme would be interrupted by a football result or a horse race. This inspired him to humorously incorporate sound effects of sport and other activities. Listeners enjoyed this original and slightly surreal presentation. They also approved of his choice of records, frequently American.



Jack Jackson collection Radio Rewind

Both features were further honed in his Record Roundup broadcast on Saturdays in the 11 to 12 midnight slot, which he occupied from 1948 to 1954. Sound effects were supplemented with 'telephone calls' from BBC executives and others. He was regularly interrupted by Tiddles, the studio cat. Naturally some BBC management did not entirely approve of his mild irreverence. Jack took this in his stride and referred to 'Auntie BBC', likening the Corporation's sensitivities to those of a maiden aunt. This struck a chord and 'Auntie' became widely used as a nickname for the BBC. Despite the late hour, audiences grew to 6 million, making exposure on the show critical to a record's success. Gillian Reynolds, the veteran radio critic, was one of those late night listeners

'Anything was possible on Jack Jackson; he was talking to me. It was pure magic radio'

As Kenny Everett put it

'Jack Jackson was the first person to have fun on the radio'.

Most sound effects then were on brittle 78 rpm discs which made the smooth transition from one to another very difficult. Jack enjoyed those technical challenges. In his 100th show he wanted to feature parts of 100 records, all of which were on 78s. This required a special studio with six gramophone decks, six operators

and a dispensation from the BBC that neither he nor the operators would be charged for breakages.

Record Roundup ended when Jack signed an exclusive deal with commercial television. His was the first voice heard on ITV's opening night in 1955. His television show was basically Record Roundup with pictures. Jack, Glen Mason and Libby Morris would mime to the clips and sound effects. With sharp camera work, the humour transferred well to the new medium. By now, Jack also had regular shows on Radio Luxembourg. This exposure led to him being regularly voted top DJ by readers of the *New Musical Express*.

He returned to the BBC in 1959 and by 1962 had settled into a prime Saturday lunchtime slot for his Record Roundabout programme. By now all the humorous material was available on magnetic tape and Jack could produce broadcast quality links in his home studio. In what would now be called sampling, he spliced together clips from Tony Hancock, *The Goon Show* and *Beyond our Ken* as well as comedy records. Listeners were familiar with these comedy voices and delighted that he could edit them into tight and convincing exchanges. And they were funny too. A typical opening to a programme would be:

Jackson: *Hello record lovers everywhere and welcome to the show*
Wilfred Bramble (as Albert Steptoe): *Aw Gawd, gramophone records!*

Harry H Corbett (as Harold Steptoe): *Look, there's still time for you to leave if you want to...*

Albert: *I'm stopping here*

Jackson: *Alright then; sit down and shut up!*

Jack's preference for easy listening records ensured an audience well beyond teenagers; my parents were as much fans of the show as I was. Between records, Jack would produce conversations from two or more completely different sources. For example, in the famous

Blood Donor episode, a wary Tony Hancock is reassured by a doctor. With Jack's editing, the reassurance was supplied by American comedian Bob Newhart, from his equally well known hesitant driving instructor routine. The editing is so skilful that the conversation sounds real and is all the funnier for that.

By now Jack was living in the Canaries and recording these programmes from his own studio. The climate and low taxes benefitted his health and his finances respectively. Just when it seemed as though he was impregnable, offshore pirate radio began in Britain in 1964. Public taste in record programmes quickly began to favour the style of American Fab 40 radio.

Record Roundabout transferred from the Light Programme to Radios 1 and 2 when BBC radio was reorganised in September 1967. Jack was now 60 and described as the 'daddy of the DJs'. On the new network, the programme sounded dated, especially as it was preceded in the schedule by the ultra-hip, jive-talking Emperor Roscoe. Not surprisingly, Record Roundabout ended in the summer of 1968. By then, newer DJs like Kenny Everett were using tape, sound effects and funny voices as part of a Fab 40 presentation. Later, Noel Edmonds and Adrian Juste followed the humorous style of Jack Jackson in their shows.

A heavy smoker, Jack's health began to decline. He returned to Britain in 1971 and broadcasted occasionally on Radio 2, including a programme on August Bank Holiday Monday 1976. He died two years later, aged 71.

Jack Jackson was an original, entertaining and much loved broadcaster; he rightly deserves his place in the Radio Hall of Fame. Enthusiasts justify their preference for radio over television by claiming 'that the pictures are better on radio'. They certainly were when Jack Jackson was on the air.