

STARS BEHIND BARS:  
HARD TIME AND GOOD TIMES ON TEXAS PRISON RADIO

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## ABSTRACT

This project follows the beginning years of the prison radio show, *Thirty Minutes Behind the Walls*. The show originated in Texas and aired mainly out of the Huntsville Unit from 1938 to the late 1950s. Through an analysis of the available transcripts and the recordings taken by the father-and-son duo, Alan and John Lomax, I address the show's current historiography. I argue that the existing scholarship takes an unfairly presentist interpretation and cheats the show out of what I further argue is a pioneering in authentically diversified casting and performance. Given its existence in the midst of Jim Crow Texas, there are expected and realized shortcomings. I carefully avoid the anachronistic judgments made on the show by its two major accounts, and instead approach it on its own terms.

In the small town of Yoakum, Texas, the Annual Tomato Tom-Tom festival was a beloved local tradition, with events such as cookoffs, arts and crafts, and royalty pageants. After nearly two decades of the yearly festivities, the Tom-Tom took on a new dimension when an eccentric group of entertainers were announced: state prisoners. Behind the walls of a Texas penitentiary in the 1940s, a group made up of musicians, comedians, and dancers practiced their craft, dreaming of one day performing for an audience beyond the confines of their cells. In 1948, a once-in-a-life-sentence opportunity appeared when they were invited to participate in the festival.



Figure 1. The Rhythmic Stringsters who appeared at several out-of-prison entertainment demonstrations. Source: *The Mexia Herald*, Mexia, TX, April 3, 1942.

The *Yoakum Herald-Times* listed the convict performers who would appear at the festival as “eight musicians who call themselves the ‘Rhythmic Stringsters,’ two vocalists, one colored comedian, vocalist, and tap dancer, and a colored quartette that sings old-time spirituals.”<sup>1</sup>

However, this was not the only chance inmates had to briefly escape the confines of prison. In another visit, a little before the Tom-Tom festival, to the American Legion Post No. 102 in La Grange, inmate performers were said to have “held the attention of a packed house... And they conducted themselves in a manner that would be a credit to any institution.”<sup>2</sup> Yet another example was at the 1941 Taylor Farm Festival, where inmate entertainers reportedly laughed, “‘We’re not the Doughboys, you know, ... but whatta ya want us to play?’”<sup>3</sup> This was a reference to the famous Texas swing band, the Light Crust Doughboys – making for a joke that would have likely landed well with the Texan crowd.

The thought of a prison band, especially one which had the opportunity to essentially go on tour, seems almost comical by twenty-first-century mass incarceration standards. Not only were they able to experience the outside world as entertainers, but they were also being advertised as newspaper headlines to the free public which adored them. This was all largely possible thanks to the inmates’ exposure on the air, over the *Thirty Minutes Behind the Walls* radio show, which aired from 1938 to the late 1950s. The show featured a diverse cast of convicts from various prison facilities in Texas, entertaining as musical features, miscellaneous performers, and interviewees. Amidst Jim Crow Texas, the broadcast transcended the period’s segregating barriers, provided a

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<sup>1</sup> “Prison Group to Play at Tom-Tom,” *Yoakum Herald-Times* (Yoakum, TX), May 11, 1948

<sup>2</sup> “Prison Group to Play.”

<sup>3</sup> “Not the Doughboys – But They Make Music,” *The Rockdale Reporter and Messenger* (Rockdale, TX), Oct. 30, 1941.

creative outlet and voice for the incarcerated, and served as a connection between worlds inside and outside the prison walls.

Historians have paid little attention to this curious and telling phenomenon. Beyond the first three years of existing transcripts, only two other substantial accounts exist: Ethan Blue's *Doing Time in the Depression* and Caroline Gnagy's *Texas Jailhouse Music: A Prison Band History*. However, *Thirty Minutes* is briefly discussed in a few online articles as well. The Marshall Project, a nonpartisan and nonprofit journalism organization aiming to draw attention to the U.S. criminal justice system, shares an article, "A Peek at the Golden Age of Prison Radio," describing the findings of Gnagy's work. Texas Monthly has a couple of articles mentioning the broadcast. One is titled "Texas History 101," and briefly describes the show. The other is "O Sister, Where Art Thou," and discusses the Goree Girls, the all-female inmate band that frequented *Thirty Minutes*.

The East Texas History website shares some relevant images and more notably, some of the audio recordings taken by John A. and Alan Lomax of the Huntsville inmates from 1934 to 1939. Several inmates who are recorded performed on *Thirty Minutes*. This father and son duo, a pair of American folklorists and musicologists, made a significant impact on the documentation and conservation of folk traditions across America.

Blue's *Doing Time in the Depression* represents one of the more in-depth accounts of the radio show. Blue establishes three arguments about *Thirty Minutes*. The first is that the show was a "cutting-edge form of public punishment, much as legal hangings, public labor, and even

lynchings had been a generation before.” Second, it “helped enforce Texas’s modern racial and class hierarchies.” Third, the “show’s actual effects could be unpredictable.”<sup>4</sup>

The other significant account of *Thirty Minutes* is Gnagy’s *Texas Jailhouse Music: A Prison Band History*. This is perhaps the most substantial account of the show. However, for the most part, as the name suggests, the discussion highlights the prison bands and the musicians that made them up, rather than analyzing the show itself. In moments where the broadcast is explored beyond the musical entertainment, Gnagy agrees with Blue that while the show evoked a sense of tolerance, it nevertheless subjugated the Black inmates, forcing them to “submissive” or “minor” roles.<sup>5</sup> Gnagy argues that the broadcast communicated that Black appearances were strictly “entertainment,” while white ones may be “taken seriously.”<sup>6</sup> She cites the appearance of two Black inmate clowns as an example of how when they were received on air, it was meant to be humorous rather than drawing a more sincere and thoughtful reaction.

Gnagy writes that given the time period, of course a broadcast like *Thirty Minutes* “adhered to certain social and legal expectations concerning the race of its performers.”<sup>7</sup> Despite her discussion of the show as conforming to the oppressive standards of the time, she does acknowledge some good behind it. She continues that the show was a “shining moment in the history of the Texas prison system, broadcasting unheard-of and unforeseen talent over the airwaves.”<sup>8</sup> She truly believes in the “power and possibilities of music,” citing the *Amarillo Daily*

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<sup>4</sup> Ethan Blue, *Doing Time in the Depression: Everyday Life in Texas and California Prisons* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 137.

<sup>5</sup> Caroline Gnagy, *Texas Jailhouse Music: A Prison Band History* (Charleston: The History Press, 2016), 142.

<sup>6</sup> Gnagy, *Texas Jailhouse Music*, 142.

<sup>7</sup> Gnagy, *Texas Jailhouse Music*, 149.

<sup>8</sup> Gnagy, *Texas Jailhouse Music*, 150.

*News*, which wrote that “Radio has gone behind prison walls and messaged to the outside world the almost forgotten fact that men and women behind the bars are human, that they have feeling... This changing public attitude well could make for reform instead of punishment. The prison problem is a public problem.”<sup>9</sup>

She praises the prison’s musical program in how “many of the inmates felt not only the rhythm of the songs but also a sense of accomplishment, of belonging to a group – and strongest of all – a fervent hope for release.”<sup>10</sup> Gnagy wonders at the “compassion, insight and inspiration” provoked by their music, exploring how these various prisoners “managed to provide such widely lauded creative expression in such literally confining circumstances.”<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, she argues that “it did not challenge the social and political limitations of its time.”<sup>12</sup>

Blue and Gnagy both take significant issue with the seemingly unequal treatment and lack of diversity of those who appeared on the show. While I do not intend to make excuses for any unequal opportunity, I will argue that both Blue and Gnagy are overly critical in their analysis of the broadcast and fail to take into reasonable account the context of the period, thereby dismissing what was arguably a revolutionary series. While both Blue and Gnagy have clearly studied and made use of the existing *Thirty Minutes* transcripts, their analysis is unfairly presentist. It is true that the majority of appearances on the show by Black and Latino men and all women were mostly as entertainers. However, it would be an injustice to minimize the significance of not only their existence as performers but also when they were, in fact, portrayed as interviewees.

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<sup>9</sup> Gnagy, *Texas Jailhouse Music*, 169-170.

<sup>10</sup> Gnagy, *Texas Jailhouse Music*, 11.

<sup>11</sup> Gnagy, *Texas Jailhouse Music*, 11.

<sup>12</sup> Gnagy, *Texas Jailhouse Music*, 150.



Blue and Gnagy fail to appreciate the show which, more often than not, radiated laughter, authenticity, and a refreshing sense of humility. Due to its failure in promoting a flawlessly diverse platform, these two historians make perfect the enemy of good. The point of this paper is not to claim that *Thirty Minutes* was the most idealistic portrayal of equity and inclusion. Rather, it is to argue that given the pre-Civil Rights Era the show existed in, they did a *good* job at maintaining a diversified cast and humanizing inmates *as a whole*. This show provided the inmates a platform for their voices to be heard. They used this to take ownership of past mistakes and responsibility for their future, whether freedom was in sight or not.

Blue's rhetoric cheats the show out of its socially advanced promotion of diversity. Furthermore, it downplays the way music and entertainment could, in fact, similarly portray inmates as humans who deserved redemption and trust, as seen by the audience's reactions. Finally, it underestimates the impact of the white male prisoners' appearances on the show, which opened the public's hearts to inmates in general.

The existing interpretation of the show begs the question of what standard *should* it be held to? Even in 2023, popular forms of entertainment like movies, television shows, and even podcasts, struggle to satisfy the public's growing desire and expectation for a diversified cast. When media seek out diversity for diversity's sake, they will typically fail to resonate with their audience. It is painfully transparent to consumers when producers write in inauthentic diversity to distract from a lack of substance or real representation.

In 1938 Texas, there was *no* societal pressure to accommodate *anyone* beyond white men. In this sense, *Thirty Minutes* was a pioneer in genuinely depicting a diverse cast of performers and interviewees. The diversity seen on *Thirty Minutes* was not diversity for diversity's sake, rather, it was diversity for authenticity's sake.

The show did not seek out social identity markers that would make them look ahead of the times, rather, they sought startling talent and captivating stories. Diversity was not the goal of the production, yet nevertheless, it was an impressive and welcomed outcome. The reactions of the audience, as discussed later through the lens of fan mail, reveal how being on the receiving end of the show increased their friendly sentiments towards inmates, regardless of background.

*Thirty Minutes* reveals a side of Texas history seldom discussed. It is common to see historical analysis of the oppressive times of Texas's pre-Civil Rights era. Being such a deeply segregated society practically eliminated Texas from the possibility of racial mingling. *Thirty Minutes* was not only unique in the diversity amongst its performers but also in its audience.

A lingering question in the discussion of this broadcast was who exactly was it made for? The 1930 Census reported twelve million households, or 40 percent of the U.S. population, owned a radio. This starkly increased by 1940 when twenty-eight million households, or 82.8 percent of the population, reported owning a radio.<sup>13</sup>

*Thirty Minutes* was broadcast on WBAP, or according to President Herbert Hoover, "We Bring a Program," a station based out of Fort Worth, Texas.<sup>14</sup> From their early years, they featured live music with artists such as the earlier mentioned Light Crust Doughboys. This was a station that achieved many broadcasting firsts, including airing "regularly scheduled newscasts, livestock market reports, weekly church services, a rodeo, and it was the first to have an audible logo signal,

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<sup>13</sup> "The 1930 Census," U.S. Census Bureau, last modified March 23, 2015, [https://www.census.gov/history/www/homepage\\_archive/2015/march\\_2015.html#:~:text=The%201930%20Census%20was%20the.increasingly%20popular%20during%20the%201930s.](https://www.census.gov/history/www/homepage_archive/2015/march_2015.html#:~:text=The%201930%20Census%20was%20the.increasingly%20popular%20during%20the%201930s.)

<sup>14</sup> "Station History," WBAP, accessed May 8, 2023, <https://www.wbap.com/station-history/>.

the cowbell.”<sup>15</sup> Broadcasting at up to fifty-thousand watts, WBAP was considered a radio superstation, with their signal beaming virtually nationwide.

The station grew quickly with a wide appeal, making *Thirty Minutes* accessible and attractive to many listeners. Moreover, the way the producers felt comfortable promoting an incredibly wide range of music, from spirituals to rhumbas, from Western to Hawaiian, shows that they were not limiting their target audience to a strictly white crowd, or at least that the audience, whites included, had an eclectic taste.

The show made a personal appeal to *all* those in the public who had a fascination with what could be considered the “dark side” of human nature, or who experience a sense of “morbid curiosity,” which is not necessarily limited by race, gender, or age demographics. While possibly not the original goal of the production, the show accomplished alleviation of this sense of morbidity, while maintaining the viewers’ curiosity. The broadcast put voices to crimes and humanized the legal system. It gave people a vested interest in the well-being of Texas inmates, who have been historically overlooked and underrepresented.

*Thirty Minutes* was sure to address fears that the public may have over people who end up in prison. Many interviews reflected a sense of moral teaching, particularly those with the prison staff. Reverend Garrett, one of the Texas Prison System’s two Protestant Chaplains at the time of production, preached acceptance and love over the radio show. He claimed that “These are not all bad folks at heart, many of them are only awaiting the time when they can prove to the world that they have profited by their mistakes.” He even went so far as to say that there are “two sides” to incarceration, and addressed the viewers by asking, “What did you do for them while you had

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<sup>15</sup> Shaun Stalzer, “WBAP,” Texas State Historical Association, accessed May 8, 2023, <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/wbap>.

them?”<sup>16</sup> By implying a sense of accountability on the part of society, he reminded the viewers that not only ought they extend a degree of compassion and friendship to those currently incarcerated, but also to those in society who are particularly vulnerable to becoming incarcerated. Through performances and interviews, *Thirty Minutes* proved to its viewers that even people who have done what may be some of the worst crimes imaginable, are nevertheless still deserving people.

What is particularly interesting about the show’s incredibly positive reception was the way that *Thirty Minutes* came to its existence in the midst of Texas’s tripartite racial segregating system. The division between Black and white people was a standard during this period of American history. However, Texas complicated this by further segregating those of Latinx descent. It does the show an injustice to disregard the context under which it was broadcast. It is true that on *Thirty Minutes*, white, Black, and Latinx inmates were not represented in perfect equality. However, in interpretation of the show, one ought to remember that inequality, at the time, was law. Segregation was not formally put to an end until the Civil Rights Act of 1964, several years *after* the show had gone off the air.<sup>17</sup>

This period of radio was not exactly renowned for its inclusivity. William Randle Jr., a disc jockey turned professor, wrote an article titled “Black Entertainers on Radio, 1920-1930.” While this is pre-*Thirty Minutes*, the tone set in these years set the stage for the prison broadcast. Randle cites the 1930 census, stating that there were fifteen thousand Black entertainers, making up less than 7 percent of total employed performers, which was disproportionate to their population

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<sup>16</sup> *Thirty Minutes Behind the Walls*, 16, aired January 6, 1938, on WBAP.

<sup>17</sup> Senate Historical Office, “The Senate and Civil Rights: 1862-1963,” Civil Rights Act of 1964, United States Senate, accessed March 21, 2023, [https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/civil\\_rights/background.htm](https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/civil_rights/background.htm).

percentage.<sup>18</sup> Black entertainers were heavily underrepresented in the performance arena. It took until 1947 with WDIA Memphis for a Black radio station to be finally broadcast in America.<sup>19</sup>

Segregated America made for few opportunities for Black stardom. Furthermore, those people of color who did manage to get on the air were subject to oppressive treatment which, for decades, was legitimized by the times' legal practices. It was not until the Federal Communications Commission, in 1969, prohibited radio stations from "discriminating against any person in employment on the basis of race, color, religion, or national origins," and further required them to "maintain a program designed to assure equal opportunity in every aspect of station employment."<sup>20</sup> This ruling came almost twenty years after *Thirty Minutes* had gone off the air, almost thirty years after they had first gone on.

This is significant for two reasons. First, society in general was not holding the show to any expectations to be diverse. The creators of *Thirty Minutes* welcomed a diverse crowd on their own accord, despite potential backlash. Second, beyond social norms, legal standards *demand*ed discrimination and segregation. By allowing inmates to not only perform on the same broadcast but to even often encourage cross-cultural connections through racially mingled performances, *Thirty Minutes* actively challenged legal norms.

The argument here is not that *Thirty Minutes* should be the standard of diversity, rather, it is that it was more beneficial and less intentionally discriminatory than modern interpretations claim. While we may never know what occurred behind the scenes of the show, there is evidence

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<sup>18</sup> William Randle, Jr. "Black Entertainers on Radio, 1920-1930," *The Black Perspective in Music* 5, no. 1 (1977): 67.

<sup>19</sup> "1070 WDIA: The Heart & Soul of Memphis," WDIA AM1070, accessed March 21, 2023, <https://mywdia.iheart.com/>.

<sup>20</sup> Federal Communications Commission, Review of the Commission's Broadcast and Cable Equal Employment Opportunity Rules and Policies and Termination of the EEO Streamlining Proceeding, 2000, accessed April 23, 2023.

that suggests at least some degree of respect and recognition to the Black and Latinx and female entertainers provided by the audience, announcers, and other performers. By interpreting primary source evidence on the advertising and reception of the inmates, there is an apparent delight and devotedness to the performers of color.

Historic newspaper articles give a glimpse into the public reception of the musical artists and interviewees. Analyzing the welcoming acceptance toward performing inmates of color reveals a degree of ignorance toward Texas' Jim Crow status quo. For example, when one 1939 newspaper advertised the "favorite performers" who would be broadcast on the upcoming program, only two performers are mentioned by name. The article lists, "Humberto Boone, tenor, will sing 'Contraste,' a Spanish rhumba, and Hattie Ellis has listed 'I Cried For You.'" Humberto Boone, convict #85349, was a Texas-born Latino inmate who was, at the time, living in the Huntsville Unit. Hattie Ellis, convict #73126, was a Black female inmate housed at the Goree State Farm for Women.

The author lists other featured acts as being "'Moonlight and Shadows,' 'When Irish Eyes are Smiling,' 'There's Silver on the Sage Tonight,' and 'Red Sails in the Sunset.'"<sup>21</sup> These were sung by Ruby Morace, convict #89363, Richard Stammitz, convict #90959, and Jerry Lee Norris, convict #89894. These unnamed artists all happened to be white, suggesting that rather than highlight just the white performers who may have been more outwardly palatable or generally appealing to a strictly white audience, the article prioritized talent and popularity, which, at this moment, was held by these two Mexican and Black entertainers.

Analysis of the newspapers demonstrate two things. First, *Thirty Minutes* was providing an avenue to fame for marginalized folk who otherwise may have experienced far greater obstacles

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<sup>21</sup> *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* (Fort Worth, TX), Aug, 2, 1939.

on the path to stardom. Second, the audience had to have some degree of admiration and respect for these individuals on the basis of their talent for the author to include their names. Even though there were talented white performers, the newspaper knew these two individuals made for better name drops. This meant the massive audience, in this context to at least some extent, disregarded the societal norms of heavy discrimination and white supremacy in the name of listening to quality music.

The aforementioned Hattie Ellis was one of the inmates immortalized by the Lomax duo through recording. The duo only recorded a select few grouped or single women, so it is certainly notable that Hattie was recorded on multiple occasions. The female artists in these recordings were predominantly Black. In fact, John A. Lomax, in a 1933 interview, stated he sought to get “*real* Negro singing and Negro idiom,” and to do this, looked for “the Negro who had the least contact with the whites.” He explained that they recorded “in most cases under very unfavorable conditions and our records are not all perfect.” However, in a peculiar adventure for authentic, American folk songs, he succeeded in getting these tunes by permeating prison walls, finding a “fairly accurate representation” of what he called “the real Negro, in the South – removed from white influence.”<sup>22</sup>

One of Hattie’s recorded songs, “These Desert Blues,” was performed alongside Jesse Ramsay, a white male inmate.<sup>23</sup> This represents just one instance of cross-cultural, interracial musical collaboration, which was celebrated both in the Lomax recordings as well as on *Thirty*

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<sup>22</sup> John Lomax interview with Dr. Miles Hanley, October 1933, transcribed by author from *Jail House Bound: John Lomax's First Southern Prison Recordings*, 1933, Global Jukebox, 2012, CD.

<sup>23</sup> Three convicts named J Ramsey were recorded in the 1940s: J W Ramsey, convict #102798, J R Ramsey, convict #94766, and J S Ramsey, convict #94767. All three were white.

*Minutes*. The song describes being lost in a desert on her way home and can be heard on popular streaming services in 2023 including YouTube and Amazon Music.<sup>24</sup>



Figure 2. depicts “Lighnin” Washington, an inmate at the Darrington State Farm, Texas, singing with his group in the woodyard. Source: Alan Lomax, 1934. Part of the Lomax photographs depicting folk musicians in the Lomax Collection of the Library of Congress.

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<sup>24</sup> Hattie Ellis and “Cowboy” Jack Ramsey, “These Desert Blues,” YouTube video, 2:22, posted by MNRK Music Group, March 1, 2019, accessed April 23, 2023, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tY3efMb6Vok&ab\\_channel=VariousArtists-Topic](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tY3efMb6Vok&ab_channel=VariousArtists-Topic).



Male prisoners, in general, were recorded by the Lomax duo at a much higher rate in absolute terms. Figure 2. depicts “Lightnin’” Washington, an inmate at the Darrington State Farm who was similarly immortalized by the Lomax family in the mid-1930s. According to East Texas History, Lightnin’ got his name by fellow inmates who claimed he could “think faster than the Warden.”<sup>25</sup> He appears in the image performing with a group of fellow inmates in the woodyard. The Lomax duo traveled to Texas prisons beyond Huntsville in hopes of eternalizing musical tradition, even in its rawest, most outcasted, dangerous forms. The Alan Lomax Archive on YouTube retrieved Lightnin’ Washington’s recorded song, “Good God Almighty.”<sup>26</sup> This song, recorded at the since-renamed plantation-turned-prison, combines elements of many traditional spirituals, conveying hardships along with the desire for holy redemption or salvation.<sup>27</sup>

Analysis of the lyrics provides an interesting glimpse into life on a Texas prison farm, and furthermore, a preview of what kind of music may have been featured on *Thirty Minutes*. The phrases, “Good God Almighty” and “Oh my lord, lord,” are repeated throughout the song, suggesting calls for divine intervention or guidance. The lyrics, “Saw the captain riding... O’ captain won’t you help me,” convey a plead to an authoritative figure, possibly calling out the power of the white prison officials in juxtaposition to the subjugation of the largely Black inmate body. The next call is “I’m down in trouble, good God Almighty,” responded to with, “I’m down

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<sup>25</sup> Amy Bertsch “Darrington Prison Recordings,” East Texas History, accessed April 24, 2023, <https://easttexashistory.org/items/show/35>.

<sup>26</sup> Lightning Washington and Prisoners, "Good God Almighty," YouTube video, 3:02, posted by Alan Lomax Archive, May 2, 2012, accessed April 24, 2023, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3O3vEOwFuOo&ab\\_channel=AlanLomaxArchive](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3O3vEOwFuOo&ab_channel=AlanLomaxArchive).

<sup>27</sup> “TDCJ to Rename Three Facilities,” Texas Department of Criminal Justice, accessed April 24, 2023, [https://www.tdcj.texas.gov/news/tdcj\\_renames\\_facilities.html](https://www.tdcj.texas.gov/news/tdcj_renames_facilities.html).

in trouble, oh my lord, lord.”<sup>28</sup> This stanza further reinforces the hardship and struggle experienced by these inmates, again emphasizing their need for help or salvation.

This song, on the YouTube platform alone, is climbing over 150,000 views. The inmates recorded this song in 1934, four years before the advent of *Thirty Minutes*, meaning they likely had no idea how far their voices would one day reach. This was the story of many inmates who were recorded by the Lomax family. With the rise of *Thirty Minutes*, which by 1944 was receiving over 294,000 pieces of mail from devoted fans, inmates began to personally benefit, albeit mostly emotionally, from their musical performance.<sup>29</sup>

One example of a surprisingly warm reception to the inmates was the reaction to the Latinx bands, who were immensely popular. This becomes possibly less surprising when it is noted that *Thirty Minutes* reached an international audience that included Mexico as early as 1939.<sup>30</sup> By 1940, they were even receiving fan mail from so far south as Colombia.<sup>31</sup>

Gnagy describes the Latino performers as being “featured heavily in the rotation of songs,” particularly during and after the war.<sup>32</sup> One would imagine that in a time where the Texas Latinx population was facing great injustice at the hands of the segregating government, having been “heavily” broadcast on an integrated radio show would be a reason to consider *Thirty Minutes* to be challenging the social and legal status quo.

The 1930s were not particularly kind to Mexican Americans, especially those living in Texas. This was a time of “massive deportation and repatriation,” producing the “relocation of an

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<sup>28</sup> Washington and Prisoners, "Good God Almighty."

<sup>29</sup> *The Aspermont Star* (Aspermont, TX), Feb 10, 1944.

<sup>30</sup> *The Fort Worth Star-Telegram* (Fort Worth, TX), Mar 15, 1939.

<sup>31</sup> *Thirty Minutes Behind the Walls*, 107, aired April 3, 1940, on WBAP.

<sup>32</sup> Gnagy, *Texas Jailhouse Music*, 149.

estimated 250,000 Texas Mexicans to Mexico.”<sup>33</sup> Besides schools being segregated as a “tri-ethnic” system, separating children by Anglo, Black, and Chicano, several other social institutions discriminated severely against the group.<sup>34</sup> Basic entertainments such as eating at a restaurant or watching a movie in a theater was not allowed for Chicanos until the 1950s.<sup>35</sup> In Ozona, a city in West Texas, even drugstores refused to serve Mexican Americans, all the way through the late 1940s.<sup>36</sup> The fact that the radio show featured Latinx music performed by Latinx artists, whether it be Humberto Boone, the Blue Ridge Troubadours, or the Mexican Quartette, showed not only that at least some representation existed, but furthermore, that in this setting, Latinx people were welcomed with open arms.<sup>37</sup>

On the sixth program in 1938, a heavily Latinx broadcast was aired with their featuring of the Blue Ridge State farm, otherwise known as “Mañana Land” or “Land of Tomorrow.” This facility was known for housing an “all-Mexican inmate body.”<sup>38</sup> On this broadcast, it stands out that rather than balance out the Latinx music with music associated as more typically White, they instead had “a group of five Negro girls” from Goree perform a spiritual. This was followed by the Spanish song “La Paloma,” followed by E. S. Shumake, convict #78684, a “Negro pianist” who added some “swing” to the show.<sup>39</sup> While Gnagy argues that Eva Vigil, the “Little Spanish

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<sup>33</sup> Robert A. Calvert, Arnaldo De León, and Gregg Cantrell, *The History of Texas* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2020), 309.

<sup>34</sup> Jorge C. Rangel and Carlos M. Alcalá, “Project Report: De Jure Segregation of Chicanos in Texas Schools,” *Harvard Civil Rights-Civil Liberties Law Review* 7, no. 2 (1972): 313.

<sup>35</sup> Rangel and Alcalá, “Project Report,” 308.

<sup>36</sup> Rangel and Alcalá, “Project Report,” 308.

<sup>37</sup> Possibly spelled “Troubadors”

<sup>38</sup> *Thirty Minutes Behind the Walls*, 6, aired April 27, 1938, on WBAP.

<sup>39</sup> *Thirty Minutes*, 6.

Nightingale” of the Goree Girls, was the only “notable Latina” who made an appearance on the show, the fact of the appearance is still significant.<sup>40</sup>



Figure 3. shows on the top from left to right, Ruby M., “The Little Blue and Gold Songbird;” Eva V., “The Little Spanish Nightingale;” and Bonnie S., who doubles on the harmonica. On the bottom from left to right is Ruy G. nimble fingered guitarist; Winona S., and Reable C., fast strumming banjoist. Source: *The Texas Mesquiter* from Mesquite, Texas, on October 10, 1941.

Eva appears in Figure 3. in the middle of the top row. Being Latina, and furthermore, being female, meant Eva was more marginalized than many fellow performers. However, she held her

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<sup>40</sup> Gnagy, *Texas Jailhouse Music*, 148.

own as she appeared on the show that reached hundreds of thousands of listeners, even earning her photo in a Texas newspaper.

Another notable feature of the sixth program was an interview with Candelario Salazar, convict #45801, a Mexican inmate known for his involvement with the “sensational break of 1921.”<sup>41</sup> This interview requires particularly careful consideration. Past scholarship on *Thirty Minutes* has drawn attention to the disclaimers made by Nelson Olmsted, the WBAP announcer before he began the interview. Olmsted clarified that Candelario “neither reads nor writes English, and speaks it only with the greatest of difficulty.” He goes on to ask listeners to “be patient whenever he seems to stumble or falter in answering the questions we shall ask him.” Olmsted then states that he “promised to spend all of last week learning to pronounce that name.”<sup>42</sup>

Previous interpretation claims, “Olmstead begged the listeners’ forgiveness on Salazar’s behalf, as Olmstead condescended to struggle with the foreignness of Spanish.”<sup>43</sup> They have taken this to mean that Olmsted did his “best to contain and alienate” Black and Mexican inmates who spoke on the show.<sup>44</sup> It is crucial here to deeply and carefully consider Olmsted’s words, as we cannot help but lose a layer of understanding when the tone of his voice is left in 1938.

It seems clear that Olmsted is far from “begging” anyone for “forgiveness.” Given that this is a radio show, not a television show, audience members lose the ability to read lips and body language along with verbalized communication. Olmsted simply requests patience as he is preparing to interview someone whom one can assume would not only have a thick accent but is also heard speaking in imperfect English. While anyone familiar with a similar accent would likely

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<sup>41</sup> *Thirty Minutes*, 6.

<sup>42</sup> *Thirty Minutes*, 6.

<sup>43</sup> Gnagy, *Texas Jailhouse Music*, 149.

<sup>44</sup> Gnagy, *Texas Jailhouse Music*, 149.

have no issue perfectly understanding Candelario, it is a fair possibility that in Texas' segregated society, many audience members would have limited experience interacting with someone with such a dialect. This is even more likely when one considers that Mexican immigration to Texas spiked *after* the show went off the air.<sup>45</sup>

While in the twenty-first century, we can comfortably rely on subtitles to instill confidence that we will understand one's speech no matter the accent, this was not a luxury afforded to the radio listeners of 1938. Arguably, it was fair for Olmsted to give a light nudge to listeners to tune in extra carefully so they could best appreciate what Candelario had to say. We ought to interpret this to have been priming viewers to be sympathetic and listen, to fight through any roughness that they might soon encounter.

Of course, modern sensibilities dictate that it would be ideal for programs to not distinguish a person by their ethnic background, as this certainly opens the door to discrimination and surface-level judgments. However, as Gnagy notes, "Perhaps distinguishing the race of its performers on the air is unnecessary for the radio shows of today's society, but it was closer to a social necessity for a southern state in the Jim Crow era."<sup>46</sup> Gnagy points out that "however discriminatory the identifier, the radio audience may have been confused without them."<sup>47</sup>

To accuse Olmsted of actively trying to "contain and alienate" Candelario misses a deep and open-minded reading of the source.<sup>48</sup> Besides the very beginning where Olmsted foreshadows some potential difficulty in understanding Candelario, he never again drew attention to

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<sup>45</sup> "Mexican-Born Population Over Time," Migration Policy Institute, accessed April 24, 2023, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/programs/data-hub/charts/mexican-born-population-over-time?width=1000&height=850&iframe=true>

<sup>46</sup> Gnagy, *Texas Jailhouse Music*, 149.

<sup>47</sup> Gnagy, *Texas Jailhouse Music*, 145.

<sup>48</sup> Gnagy, *Texas Jailhouse Music*, 149.

Candelario's accent or language barrier. They had a conversation uninterrupted by confusion or miscommunications. Furthermore, what could have been more alienating, dismissive, and arguably rude, than if Olmsted had, on air, butchered the pronunciation of Candelario's name? Sure, one may wonder how hard is it really to pronounce? But to argue that Olmsted stating that he practiced all week to learn its proper articulation is "containing" and "alienating" Candelario seems unfair. If meaning anything at all, using someone's proper name, and saying it correctly, is a sign of acknowledgment and respect.

In Candelario's interview, a somewhat emotionally evocative moment is shared when Olmsted asked, "where is your home?"<sup>49</sup> Candelario responded, "When I come to this place, I live in Victoria, Texas... But I don't know if I got a home any place now. Just the Blue Ridge, I guess."<sup>50</sup> Candelario, like many fellow inmates, felt estranged from society. The only place they could fit in or feel a sense of belonging anymore was behind bars. As Olmsted closed out the program, he thanked the viewers for writing to the show. He stated, "Tomorrow, and the next day, and the next – they will continue to pass your letters around, until each man has read every one of them... It means encouragement and inspiration to these men behind the walls – it conveys to them a touch of personal interest that nothing else can duplicate."<sup>51</sup> Individuals like Candelario put a face, or at least a voice, to the prison system. These were real people, not just numbers, being impacted.

This show and the viewers' interactions played a significant role in many inmates' lives. The concept of belonging, being unconditionally accepted for who you are, is not exactly widespread in a prison environment. Candelario being given a platform to connect with and be

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<sup>49</sup> *Thirty Minutes*, 6.

<sup>50</sup> *Thirty Minutes*, 6.

<sup>51</sup> *Thirty Minutes*, 6.

welcomed by the public, despite any perceived linguistic barriers, demonstrates the historically neglected beauty of *Thirty Minutes*.

Another moment in the series where a diverse group was given a platform was the twenty-first program in 1938. This program covered the Goree dance, and while the dance itself was segregated, the selection of women interviewed was a blended crowd.

Reba Nawlin, convict #87451, appeared briefly on the broadcast. Her records indicate she was a white drug addict who had been arrested for possession of marijuana. But beyond that, Reba reported being a rodeo performer on the outside, specializing in Bronc riding. In the Goree farm, Reba found herself working in the sewing room. She mentioned her hope for entering the Texas Prison Rodeo and her fondness for the dances.<sup>52</sup>

Mary Ann Jackson, convict #74863, was also interviewed by Olmsted. She was a Black woman in her twenties convicted for being an accessory to murder. When asked to comment on the dance, she said she would “like to know how long it’s gonna last.” Olmsted responded, “Til eleven o’clock – why, doesn’t that suit you?” Enthusiastically, Mary Ann said, “Yassah, but Ah’d like it to go on until mornin’.”<sup>53</sup>

Despite the drastic range of conviction severity, both Reba and Mary Ann had a certain captivating charm to them. Hearing their sweet voices on the air reminded their audience that these performers, beyond a few mistakes, were really just regular people at the end of the day. At that point, what did the crimes even matter anymore, besides that they gave these delightful ladies a chance to dance?

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<sup>52</sup> Texas State Library and Archives Commission, Convict Record Ledgers, Convict Number Range: B 084741-090340, Volume Number: 1998/038-168, accessed April 24, 2023, Ancestry Library ([https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/discoveryui-content/view/143634:2143?\\_phsrc=WtQ123&\\_phstart=successSource&ml\\_rpos=1&queryId=173e556ff6492a004edf790c75291ea5](https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/discoveryui-content/view/143634:2143?_phsrc=WtQ123&_phstart=successSource&ml_rpos=1&queryId=173e556ff6492a004edf790c75291ea5)).

<sup>53</sup> *Thirty Minutes Behind the Walls*, 21, aired August 10, 1938, on WBAP.



The interview series continued with Fannie Burnett, convict #84663, a Black woman convicted of murder without malice. She was inquired about her choice to wear trousers. Olmsted wanted to know of any “special reason.” Fannie replied, “No suh – no special reason. Ah jus’ likes to be different, I guess. Jus’ makes the dance seem mo’ real.” Olmsted continued by asking if she was enjoying the dance, to which she responded, “Yes, suh! Ah sho’ am! Ah always enjoys these dances!”<sup>54</sup>

Julia Brown, convict #66399, was a Black woman also convicted of murder. She was apparently a “mighty long time” through her twenty-year sentence by the time of this interview. Her job at the farm was “herding watermelons;” she clarified that “Ah jes’ keeps th’ crows and things from eatin’ up the watermelons.”<sup>55</sup>

While it is true that these interviews were much shorter and held a less serious tone than some other interviews with male inmates, their appearance remains significant. There is an undeniably endearing quality to these interviews. Hearing these women talk about their lives in prison and listening to them express genuine joy in being at the dance is incredibly humanizing.

Interviews and music were not the only avenues for inmates to get on the air, however. The proclaimed “Mirth-makers of the Airways,” Fathead and Soupbone, were two convict clowns who performed for *Thirty Minutes* on multiple occasions.<sup>56</sup> They had performed prior at the Texas Prison Rodeo, and in November of 1939, they made their radio debut. As they were both Black, it is especially important here to consider the history of clowning.

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<sup>54</sup> *Thirty Minutes*, 21.

<sup>55</sup> *Thirty Minutes*, 21.

<sup>56</sup> *Thirty Minutes Behind the Walls*, 87, aired November 15, 1939, on WBAP. These performers are cited in other works as the Black inmates Louie Nettles and Charlie Jones.

There is a vital distinction between minstrelsy, vaudeville, and clowning performance. Minstrelsy developed early in the nineteenth century and thrived through the twentieth century. David Pilgrim, Professor of Sociology at Ferris State University, writes that the audiences of minstrel shows would laugh at the “slow-talking fool who avoided work and all adult responsibilities.”<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, they played into racial stereotypes such as buffoonery and eating watermelons. These entertainers were known to speak with “bastardized English,” an exaggerated dialect which, to a white audience, suggested and poked fun at the sense of Black inferiority.<sup>58</sup>

Frank Cullen, the Founder and Director of the American Vaudeville Museum, wrote that Vaudeville, popularized after the Civil War, began a departure from the “knockabout comedy” of the antebellum American shows, which were “often racist and always violent.”<sup>59</sup> Several theaters began to see the potential value in appealing to a family audience, the idea being that performances like puppetry and ventriloquism may be more interesting to women and children than productions purely centered around racist buffoonery and drama.<sup>60</sup> Vaudeville did often incorporate discriminatory entertainment, but unlike minstrelsy, this was not, as a rule, the foundational principle of the show.

Clowning, while its elements may have been used in minstrel and vaudeville shows, has its own deep history, dating as far back as Egypt’s Old Kingdom.<sup>61</sup> As for its upbringing in American society, clowning became a popular form of amusement early in the country’s history,

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<sup>57</sup> David Pilgrim, “The Coon Caricature,” Ferris State University: Jim Crow Museum, Ferris State University, published October, 2000, <https://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/coon/>.

<sup>58</sup> Pilgrim, “The Coon Caricature.”

<sup>59</sup> Frank Cullen, “What is Vaudeville?,” The American Vaudeville Museum & UA Collection: American Vaudeville, University of Arizona, accessed March 21, 2023, <https://vaudeville.sites.arizona.edu/content/94>.

<sup>60</sup> Cullen, “What is Vaudeville?”

<sup>61</sup> Michael Bala, “The Clown: An Archetypal Self-Journey,” *Jung Journal: Culture & Psyche* 4, no. 1 (2010): 50.

sometime between the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth century.<sup>62</sup> David Carlyon, a former clown and, more recently, a professor of Theater History, wrote an article titled “American Clowns: Performance, History, and Cliché.” Carlyon writes about early clown celebrities, who rose to fame by “joking about sex and mocking authority.”<sup>63</sup> Clowning has historically held a certain “anarchic spirit” and sense of lawless humor.<sup>64</sup>

There certainly exists an overlap between minstrelsy, vaudeville, and clowning performances. One ought to consider and contrast the intentions behind the three. Minstrelsy was purely and inexcusably racist. Vaudeville had clear discriminatory origins but was a step in a direction that valued talent and genuine performative value over exclusively offensive foolishness. Clowning is a form of performative art that, while similar to minstrelsy in being partially appreciated for its shock value, was different in that minstrel shows entertain by belittling and humiliating Black folk, whereas clowns entertain by poking fun at themselves and playing into universally experienced human imperfections.

Another important note is that in the Texas prison system, clowning was not limited to Black inmates. A few images exist of clowns at the Texas Prison Rodeo, often depicting unnamed, white-appearing clowns.

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<sup>62</sup> David Carlyon, “American Clowns: Performance, History, and Cliché,” Smithsonian Folklife Festival Blog, Smithsonian Institution, published May 8, 2017, <https://festival.si.edu/blog/american-clowns-performance-history-and-cliche>.

<sup>63</sup> Carlyon, “American Clowns.”

<sup>64</sup> Carlyon, “American Clowns.”



Figure 4. shows two convict clowns appearing at the 1935 Texas Prison Rodeo. Source: TDCJ Texas Prison Rodeo Records. Box: 1998/038-390. Folder: Prison Rodeo Photos c. 1935 – 6 of 11.

Figure 4. is just one example of two white-appearing clowns who performed in front of an audience. The book *Convict Cowboys: The Untold History of the Texas Prison Rodeo*, delves into the possibility of exploitation within convict clowning, particularly as seen on the rodeo. While there are undoubtedly instances of racism protruding the acts, this would have been expected and accepted in 1930s Texas. Attention ought to be drawn to the questioned legitimacy of the clown's choice of art form. While it is important to investigate possibilities of these inmates being taken advantage of, it is notable that the white clown's art form is seldom questioned on a basis of artistic validity.

Fathead and Soupbone come under great scrutiny in modern interpretations of *Thirty Minutes*. For context, here is a sample of a few of their bits.

Soupbone: Say Fathead, I'm sorry 'bout that dirty trick I pulled on you the other day.

Fathead: How Zat, Soupbone?

Soupbone: That ring I sold you was phoney.

Fathead: It's O.K., Soupbone, I paid you with money I snatched our of your vest pocket.

Soupbone: Why, you lousy rat, that was counterfeit.<sup>65</sup>

Fathead: Say Soupbone, what kind of dress is yo' gal gonna wear to the dance tomorrow night?"

Soupbone: You know all the gals is 'sposed to wear something to match their boy friends hair, so mine's gonna wear black. What's youre' gal gonna wear?

Fathead: "Oh, I don't think my gal's going. You see I'm bald headed."<sup>66</sup>

Humor may be subjective, but the clowns' comical chemistry and how they fed off each other's energy was evident. With themes of being broke and bald, it appears that Fathead and Soupbone were aiming to poke fun at themselves in a way that the audience could possibly relate to. Other bits touched on their prison lives:

Fathead: Soupbone I'm going to make a complaint to de warden about dis penitentiary, dats wat I'm going to do, I don't like it here.

Soupbone: Whattsa matter wid you Fathead? What's wrong with dis penitentiary, nohow?

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<sup>65</sup> *Thirty Minutes*, 87.

<sup>66</sup> *Thirty Minutes*, 87.

Fathead: There jest aint enough exits around here to suit me dats what.<sup>67</sup>

This bit plays with the authority of the prison administration through escape jokes. In an earlier program, they even make a bold reference to the governor.

Fathead: You see I was clowning out dere befo' all dem milluns o' white folks, an' wuz actin' kinda smart an' graceful you know. When all a sudden one of dem big Brahma bulls broke loose an' started toward me.

Soupbone: He did, an' wot did you do Fathead?

Fathead: I started to gittin' away from there in a hurry. I made a big razzo fo de fence, and I busted right into one o' dem big men whot was wearing one o' dem big hats. Well, I hit him so hard I bet he thot it was dat Brahma Bull instead o' me.

Soupbone: I'll bet yo' got into a jam, did'nt yo'?

Fathead: I sho' did but I come out of it alright.

Soupbone: How's dat, Fathead?

Fathead: Well yo' see, I gets up off de top o' hem and he gets up an' we both brush de dirt from our clothes, an' he sez... 'Look here boy, don't you know who I am?'

Soupbone: Whot did yo' say then, Fathead?

Fathead: I sez no I don't know who yo' is... an' he sez, 'I'm the governor, that' who I am.'

Soupbone: Lawd have mercy on you! I bet yo' started runnin'.

Fathead: Oh no. I didn't. No! No!

Soupbone: Well wot' in de world did yo' do then, Fathead?

Fathead: I jes' sez in de mokest sweetest voice I knew how. 'Pardon me Governor....'<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> *Thirty Minutes Behind the Walls*, 89, aired November 29, 1939, on WBAP.

<sup>68</sup> *Thirty Minutes Behind the Walls*, 85, aired November 8, 1939, on WBAP.

The clowns' skits were creative; they authentically and uniquely depicted their humor and experiences. Abiding by classic clown tradition, they were raunchy, questioned authority, and poked fun at the imperfect conditions of their lives. Scholarship on these clowns refuses to appreciate their surprising humor. Rather, their routine is scolded and compared to "radio blackface" due to their "exaggerated 'Negro' dialect, buffoonery, malapropisms, clever wordplay, and so forth."<sup>69</sup> Their performance is dismissed as a "blackface racial ventriloquism."<sup>70</sup>

Canadian philosopher Marshall McLuhan coined the phrase "the medium is the message," meaning the way that information is communicated is equally important to the information itself.<sup>71</sup> The medium is incredibly influential on the reception of a message by any audience. The role of communication is key to understanding the information conveyed. Given that there is only access to the radio transcripts, rather than the nonexistent radio recordings, there is a fundamental difference in the medium, resulting in the modern perception of *Thirty Minutes* to be understood fundamentally differently now than at the time it aired.

Claiming the language used by the clowns proved it a case of "radio blackface" is a highly assumptive interpretation of the transcripts.<sup>72</sup> This disregards the possibility of the clowns simply having certain speech patterns. Because the transcripts are written phonetically, some readers may recognize the clowns' language as African American Vernacular English or AAVE. This derivation of English, in certain situations, may be the more "socially accepted language" when a majority of peers in a setting are speaking it. It is a "linguistic and cultural identity marker" for

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<sup>69</sup> Blue, *Doing Time in the Depression*, 148.

<sup>70</sup> Blue, *Doing Time in the Depression*, 149.

<sup>71</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964).

<sup>72</sup> Blue, *Doing Time in the Depression*, 148.

African Americans who “use language as a way to define their common histories and establish a social, cultural, and linguistic allegiance to their group.”<sup>73</sup>

If we assume Soupbone asking, “What’s dat?,” or Fathead saying, “I sho’ did,” are examples of an intentionally “exaggerated ‘Negro’ dialect” provided to appease a white audience, how ought we interpret the earlier interviews with the ladies at the Goree dance?<sup>74</sup>

For example, Fannie Burnett, one of the Black women of Goree, said, “Yes, suh! Ah sho’ am! Ah always enjoys these dances!”<sup>75</sup> In the phonetic transcript, it appears that Fannie has a similar dialect to the clowns. However, she is not in the midst of a clowning performance, she is simply reflecting on the Goree dance in what can be assumed to be her natural voice.

Beyond accusations of altering their voices, the clowns are referred to as “minstrel characters.”<sup>76</sup> This interpretation takes away the possibility of clownery as their cherished craft. Consider the question of what incentive did these performers have to appease a white audience by playing into offensive stereotypes? As for a regular minstrel show, there were at least financial motivators for the actors. Performers on *Thirty Minutes* were paid in fan love and public admiration, being monetarily unpaid. Why did these clowns choose to showcase their talents? One might infer that it was simply because they loved their craft, and possibly the fame and appreciation that came with it as well.

Calling their act a performance of “blackface racial ventriloquism,” makes it seem like the clowns had no agency in this decision to entertain.<sup>77</sup> These are inmates who already had a severely

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<sup>73</sup> Khadar Bashir-Ali, “Language Learning and the Definition of One’s Social, Cultural, and Racial Identity,” *TESOL Quarterly* 40, no. 3 (2006): 628.

<sup>74</sup> *Thirty Minutes*, 87; *Thirty Minutes*, 89; Blue, *Doing Time in the Depression*, 148.

<sup>75</sup> *Thirty Minutes*, 21.

<sup>76</sup> Blue, *Doing Time in the Depression*, 149.

<sup>77</sup> Blue, *Doing Time in the Depression*, 19.



degraded sense of autonomy. Having the ability to write their own script and perform it was their choice of art and public expression. Furthermore, laughter is often spoken of as the “best medicine.”<sup>78</sup> *Thirty Minutes* provided them the platform to access joy, allowing them to just have fun, which resulted in positive feedback from the free world that they had once been completely alienated from.

The week after one of the clowns’ broadcasts, a letter was read from Mary Heinz Jackson of Kansas City, Missouri. She wrote, “Dear friends: Many thanks for your delightful program. Each Wednesday evening seems better than the week before. You are doing a splendid and constructive work through these weekly broadcasts – all those who take part develop their self-expression, which otherwise may be dormant...”<sup>79</sup>

Inmates like the convict clowns put a lovable face to incarceration, forcing people to question their previous associations with prison. Words like “gangs,” “riots,” and “fighting,” all seem to be reasonable mental connections to prison. Now how about the convicts themselves? Merriam-Webster’s thesaurus lists several synonyms and similar words for “criminal,” including “offender,” “thug,” “crook,” “sinner,” and so on. None get the point across so well as the listed word, “villain,” though. There is an undeniable affiliation between prisons and prisoners with an extreme degree of social offensiveness. All the words and associations that appear demonstrate the deemed repulsiveness from the average person towards incarceration and the incarcerated.

While modern historiography complains of the show serving as a mask to prison violence, it is reasonable to question if that is even a bad thing when instead, the show served as a way to humanize the people who were arguably the most diminished and demonized population in

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<sup>78</sup> Bible, Proverbs 17:22, King James Version. Derivation of this verse.

<sup>79</sup> *Thirty Minutes Behind the Walls*, 88, aired November 22, 1939, on WBAP.

America.<sup>80</sup> Those in prison are routinely stripped of any significance, agency, admiration, or love. To find true joy in the confines of a penitentiary is rare and should be celebrated. Allowing *Thirty Minutes* to be entertaining and uplifting gave back to the inmates. It provided not just a break from said violence, but even a moment of *fun*. A moment to share stories, perform skits, sing, and play instruments; a moment to *be heard*. Why should their only chance to communicate to the public be recounts of the brutal agony they face? Why not, for example, allow inmates like Lawrence Evans, convict #85374, to go on air just to imitate what a cat and dog fight might sound like?<sup>81</sup> Or Danny Leach, convict #95925, to perform his imitation of hogs eating breakfast or being caught under a gate?<sup>82</sup> *Thirty Minutes* filled a need in society for the public to find compassion towards the incarcerated, which was possible because of the program allowing inmates to genuinely engage and be themselves.

Sometimes this even meant expressing concern and dissatisfaction with prison life. Possibly the most compelling example of both inmate unhappiness and how violence could be unmasked was an interview on the seventh program in 1938. Charles H. Allison, convict #43015, a white farmer turned murderer, had served forty-five years of his ninety-nine-year sentence by the time he appeared on *Thirty Minutes*. Besides one other inmate, Charles had been serving the longest at the facility. When Olmsted asked about how that felt, he answered, “I don’t hardly know how to tell you that... One thing, it feels like I’ve almost never been any place but here – like there isn’t any other world except this one.”<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Blue, *Doing Time in the Depression*, 137.

<sup>81</sup> Recordings of Lawrence Evan’s “Cat and Dog Fight” are available on the East Texas History website, sourced from the American Folklife Center, Library of Congress. <https://easttexashistory.org/files/show/57>

<sup>82</sup> *Thirty Minutes Behind the Walls*, 28, aired September 28, 1928, on WBAP.

<sup>83</sup> *Thirty Minutes Behind the Walls*, 7, aired May 4, 1938, on WBAP.

When Olmsted inquired about what “the Good Old Days” of the prison were like, Charles responded, “Mister, you can say that if you want to – but I’ve got a different idea about the ‘good old days!’ The ‘good old days’ were just about as bad as you can imagine – plenty bad.”<sup>84</sup> Charles continued that it was bad “in every possible way you could think of – the convicts were tough and the officials were tougher... the more punishment they could deal you, the better they seemed to like it...” As for the efficiency of the prison’s approach, Charles said, “the best it did was put hate in a man’s heart; against the officials for doing it, and against the State for letting it be done.”<sup>85</sup>

As for interpretations of *Thirty Minutes* which accuse it of “masking” violence, his following brutal description of what he witnessed earlier in his stay did anything but that. Charles told a story of when he first came in:

“I saw a young convict beat to death in the field – cut to pieces, almost, with a Bull Whip. I had to stand there with the rest of my squad and hear him scream – and beg – and plead! ... trying to keep them from killing him! It was like he knew he was going to be whipped to death, the way he was pleading. Then I saw him fall! And they kept on whipping him – but he was already dead then, I think. That’s something I won’t ever forget.”<sup>86</sup>

While Charles warned that “the farther away from crime a man can stay, the better off he’ll be,” he also claimed that about half of the inmates, the youngsters in particular, “are reformed before their names get dry on the records.”<sup>87</sup>

Charles did go on to say that in the past couple of years, improvements had been made.<sup>88</sup> However, he soon clarified that “no matter how good the place is now, or how much better it gets,

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<sup>84</sup> *Thirty Minutes*, 7.

<sup>85</sup> *Thirty Minutes*, 7.

<sup>86</sup> *Thirty Minutes*, 7.

<sup>87</sup> *Thirty Minutes*, 7.

<sup>88</sup> *Thirty Minutes*, 7.

it's still prison to me. And that means it's something to stay away from – just as far away from as you can get!”<sup>89</sup>

The anti-prison sentiment continues on the eleventh program, where Harold Bomberger, convict #69621, a white man incarcerated for robbery, is asked by Olmsted, “do you think crime ever pays anyone?”<sup>90</sup> He responded by addressing the previous interviewees first, stating, “Well, the first man you talked to has spent most of his time here, most of his life. He's old and broken down – with a few years left at best. Crime paid him that way.”<sup>91</sup> He continued to describe the next as “a talented writer with a keen mind and plenty of determination. Outside, he might have gone a long, long way. As it is, he's spent the best years of his life doing time, the hard way! Crime paid him, too!” Bomberger, who himself was in the process of serving 9 life terms plus an extra 50 years, concluded that “Yeah! All in all, I'd say crime's a swell Paymaster!”<sup>92</sup>

*Thirty Minutes* provided a platform for inmates to publicly reflect on their lives in prison. This served as both a moment for the inmates to step back and contemplate their life stories and for the audience to understand the struggles and harsh realities those in prison face. This sense of authenticity and genuine performative value was noted in the fan response.

Letters and postcards from the fans provided a direct insight into the attitudes of the audience. These letters were often requested by the performers. For example, as the 138<sup>th</sup> broadcast in 1940 was closing out, the announcer stated, “It's always hard to let you go, but come back to see us, won't you ...? Meanwhile, a card or a letter will cheer us up with the thought that you like

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<sup>89</sup> *Thirty Minutes*, 7.

<sup>90</sup> *Thirty Minutes*, 11.

<sup>91</sup> *Thirty Minutes*, 11.

<sup>92</sup> *Thirty Minutes*, 11.

us as much as we like you.”<sup>93</sup> There was a mutual benefit to *Thirty Minutes*. The audience had a brilliant, unique source of entertainment, and the inmates received unprecedented, direct sense of reassurance and appreciation from a wide range of viewers.

In the same session, they read a letter from a married couple of Kansas fans, that the inmate announcer said “[filled] our souls with music.”<sup>94</sup> He read:

Dear Folks: Wife and I listen to your program each Wednesday night. We appreciate these programs because of the quality and the place in which they originate. Music in the soul is the soul of all music. Music in the soul helps to purify the soul. If only those who have done no wrong could sing, there would be no music. Birds that are free are prone to chirp and chatter; but the caged birds produce earth’s sweetest notes. If your music brings harmony in homes where there is discord, you have done more for a sorrowing world than is done by many of the great leaders of men. We accept your sweet notes from within, and it is our wish that you accept some of the sunshine from without. Yours in appreciation, ... Mr. and Mrs. F. H. Wheat.<sup>95</sup>

The inmates, to express their appreciation and return the compliment, had the earlier mentioned Ruby Morace perform “You’re the Gold in My Rainbow of Dreams.”<sup>96</sup>

Such a beautiful interaction between the free and the convicted is evidence of a genuine human-to-human love that transcended judgmental barriers. This letter was not only referring to the white interviewees, rather, it was aimed towards the music artists, which was a largely diverse crowd of inmates. This shows that *Thirty Minutes* was effective in humanizing and capturing a more wholesome picture of those who were incarcerated at the time.

Another fan, a young woman who reportedly drove out from Dallas to watch the program live, wrote in for the twenty-fifth broadcast in 1938. She was quoted from her letter, stating, “We

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<sup>93</sup> *Thirty Minutes*, 138.

<sup>94</sup> *Thirty Minutes*, 138.

<sup>95</sup> *Thirty Minutes*, 138.

<sup>96</sup> *Thirty Minutes*, 138.

enjoyed every minute of it! I'm sure it takes lots of courage to concentrate on music under those conditions; but I know that if those men can concentrate on music they can concentrate on being better men. Thanks for a very enjoyable half-hour."<sup>97</sup>

Yet another fan, Rosalie, wrote in for the ninth program, also in 1938. She wrote, "To the Prisoners at Huntsville: Hello! May I come in? I would like to speak to each of you, shake your hand, and tell you how very much I enjoy your program every Wednesday night."<sup>98</sup> This fan spoke directly to the humanizing effect that putting a voice to the inmates had, stating that "Like many of the people of Texas, I hadn't given the prison a great deal of thought until your prison broadcasts started. But now, as your announcer describes the scenes, the big gates, the various farms and other things, I imagine I know each of you personally." She continues nicely, "Perhaps some of you feel you have no friends. Well, cheer up! You have! And even if those friends haven't a lot of money or power to do great things for you – there are still other things: A smile, a handclasp; a feeling of friendship that is worth far more than money." She then describes some poems she sent, as well as a prayer.<sup>99</sup>

This letter was taken quite warmly, with the announcer stating "this letter... meant a great deal to these men; much more than you might imagine. Such letters, and the hope and encouragement they derive from them, constitute their only compensation for the time and effort they spend in preparing these broadcasts. Whenever you write, you may know that you are helping these men, helping them help themselves."<sup>100</sup> The impact such kind words had on this group of people goes without saying; being arguably the most ostracized and practically exiled group from

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<sup>97</sup> *Thirty Minutes Behind the Walls*, 25, aired September 7, 1938, on WBAP.

<sup>98</sup> *Thirty Minutes Behind the Walls*, 9, aired May 18, 1938, on WBAP.

<sup>99</sup> *Thirty Minutes*, 9.

<sup>100</sup> *Thirty Minutes*, 9.

general society can take an incredible toll. *Thirty Minutes* served as an opportunity for the public to better understand inmates, and possibly more importantly, gave inmates the opportunity to feel love, respect, and admiration, even in the most confining and degrading circumstances.

One WBAP representative, speaking on behalf of the personnel and important figures of the station like Mr. Amon G. Carter, explained that “This program was launched under a series of handicaps and in the face of possible criticism on the part of our listeners. But tonight – after fifty-two weeks of prison broadcasting – we are mighty glad to say that none of our fears in this direction have been realized.” The representative credited “efforts put forth by prison officials and the inmates in their charge, and to the outstanding interest which you – our audience – have manifest in a movement which we find to be exceptionally worthwhile.” He concluded, “We hope this continues, and we’re sure it will. We also hope that, as these programs continue, the link connecting the outside and inside worlds will become stronger and stronger. And in this we shall realize our objective. I thank you.”<sup>101</sup>

*Thirty Minutes* was not perfect. However, by only measuring the show by its shortcomings, history will fail to appreciate what it did accomplish. While speaking roles for women and male inmates of color were rare, they existed, nevertheless. Beyond this, they often had the opportunity to perform as musical entertainers, gaining them fame and admiration from the community outside the walls. In making perfect diversity the enemy of good-for-the-times diversity, the show and its performers are done an injustice. In the free world, mothers, fathers, and children alike, made it a point to regularly listen and write to the show, demonstrating the great appreciation and admiration that grew for the inmates as a result of the series. *Thirty Minutes* succeeded in both humanizing

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<sup>101</sup> *Thirty Minutes Behind the Walls*, 52, aired March 15, 1939, on WBAP.

Texas inmates and encouraging intercultural artistic communication. In doing so, the broadcast bravely challenged social and political status quo.



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