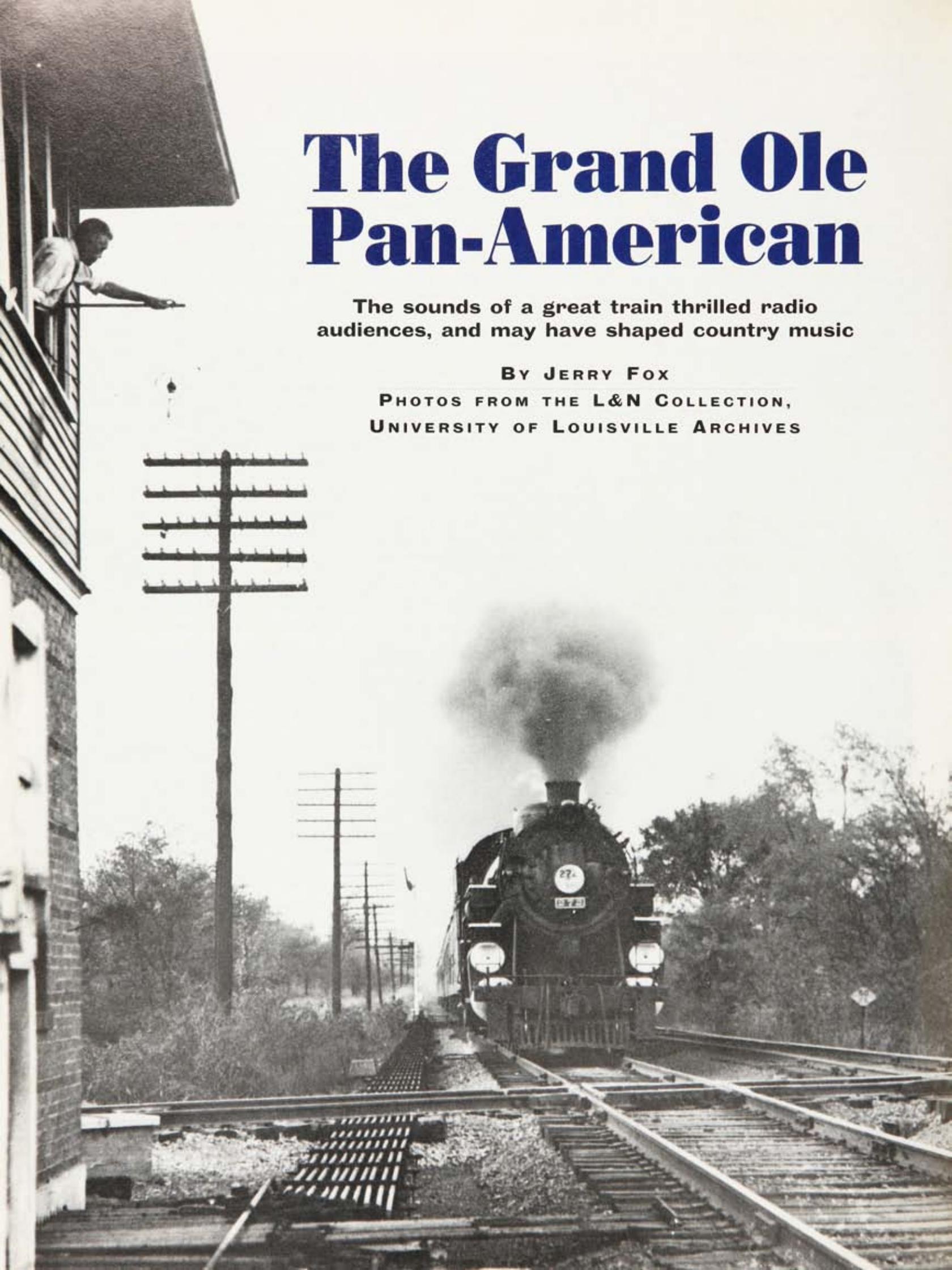


# The Grand Ole Pan-American

The sounds of a great train thrilled radio audiences, and may have shaped country music

BY JERRY FOX

PHOTOS FROM THE L&N COLLECTION,  
UNIVERSITY OF LOUISVILLE ARCHIVES



**T**HE YEAR was 1933. Times were hard; the Great Depression was on. Radio was king. The powerful new medium with its coast-to-coast networks could create national celebrities almost overnight.

Popular radio programs featured ex-vaudevillians Burns and Allen, Jack Benny, Amos 'n' Andy, and a ventriloquist named Edgar Bergen. Bandleaders-turned-radio stars included Ben Bernie, Rudy Vallee, and Guy Lombardo. There were sportscasters, news commentators, and—from Nashville, Tenn.—a different kind of radio star. A passenger train. The *Pan-American*.

Louisville & Nashville's all-Pullman flagship was the only train in the South, and perhaps the entire country, to have its own radio show, albeit a short one. The train, and the railroad, didn't simply sponsor the spot. No, the *Pan-American* starred in it!

The show premiered with attendant publicity on August 15, 1933, and was an instant hit. The daily 5:08 p.m. passing of the southbound "*Pan*"—aired over Nashville's 50,000-watt radio station WSM—generated bags of fan mail from curious and devoted listeners throughout the station's huge listening area.

The *Pan's* promotional spot was the brainchild of Ed Kirby of WSM and Jesse McGinnis, advertising manager of *The L&N Magazine*, employee oracle of "the Old Reliable." On the first broadcast, announcer Jack Harris intoned, "We take you now to a point 12 miles south of Nashville to hear the actual sound of the L&N crack passenger train, the *Pan-American*, as it passes the 878-foot tower of WSM."

Many listeners checked the time of day by the *Pan* broadcast. If

**A microphone held out the window of Vine Hill Tower in 1940 captures the sounds of the *Pan-American* passing by. Earlier broadcasts were made from WSM's transmitter south of Nashville.**



*She leaves Cincinnati headed down  
that Dixie Line.*

*She'll pass the Nashville tower, you can  
hear that whistle whine.*

*Stick your head right out the window  
and feel that Southern breeze.*

*You're on the Pan-American on the  
way to New Orleans.*

"The Pan-American"  
Hank Williams

the train happened to be a few minutes late, it became a topic of conversation that evening. In response to fan mail, the announcers began to mention who the engineer was, relate the train's major stops, and give a brief description of its accommodations.

After a few years, the pickup point for the broadcast was moved to Vine Hill Tower, at the crossing of the Tennessee Central's belt line 2 miles south of Union Station on L&N's Nashville-Birmingham mainline. The clank and clatter made by the *Pan's* galloping USRA-style K-5 class Pacific locomotive and train as they hit the TC diamond were picked up by a microphone suspended outside a second-story window of the interlocking tower.

The *Pan's* engineers took advantage of the opportunity to display their finest "whistle art" as they pulled the cord for the Berry Road crossing just south of the TC junction. The cacophony was beamed into living rooms from the Gulf Coast to Canada.

To a radio listener daily besieged by depressing economic news, this brief interlude showcasing the melodious wail of a steam-locomotive whistle inspired daydreams of traveling in the lap of luxury, rubbing shoulders with intriguing people, and visiting exotic destinations.

For a dozen years, the *Pan-American* broadcast played a role in developing what was later to become a major American art form.

WSM, an acronym for "We Shield Millions," was owned by

*The*  
**PAN-AMERICAN**  
*On the Air!*

Over Radio Station WSM (Nashville)

5:08 P. M.

L & N<sup>o</sup> CRACK TRAIN RUSHING  
PAST AMERICA'S TALLEST RADIO  
TOWER (878 Feet) WHERE ITS  
Sound AND ITS Whistle  
ARE BROADCAST OVER WSM'S  
50,000 WATTS EVERY DAY

Tune in 650 on Your  
DIALS



The National Life and Accident Insurance Company. George D. Hay, one of the station's program managers, astutely recognized the appeal that the rural folk music of the region might have for prospective policyholders living in the hills and hollows of Tennessee and surrounding states.

In 1925, the Saturday night "WSM Barn Dance" had gone on the air with a troupe of local amateur instrumentalists. The program, subsequently renamed "The Grand Ole Opry," attracted a radio audience of millions. With its "Opry" broadcasts, WSM introduced country music into American popular culture.

To a Depression-era farm boy with any musical talent, his family's Atwater Kent or Philco radio was a lifeline to a distant musical mecca. The local passenger train serving his town became a magic carpet beckoning him to this new "hillbilly Hollywood." Thus did Nashville evolve into a music capital.

Rural musicians found the staccato steam-locomotive exhaust and rhythmic *clickity-clack* of steel wheels on jointed rails a natural accompaniment for their stringed instruments and high, lonesome vocals. Train songs and travel ballads soon became *de rigueur* for the country or bluegrass musician. Songs about hard drinking, cheating, and love triangles would come later, in the 1940's, after the country boy had gone off to war and experienced city life. Still, through it all, the loping 2/4 train rhythm was a thread that can still be heard in the country music of today.

The L&N-sponsored spot on WSM continued after the *Pan* was dieselized in 1942, but the murmur of internal combustion and blaring air horn from its E6 cab units didn't quite have the aural appeal of a K-5 4-6-2, or a larger L-1 class 4-8-2.

Eventually WSM resorted to a recorded version of the passing of the train in order to meet network scheduling requirements

and reduce production costs. The final broadcast aired without fanfare on June 1, 1945.

In what was soon to become known as Music City U.S.A. and the songwriting capital of the world, it's not hard to imagine a struggling tunesmith strumming his guitar and awaiting the muse while the melancholy wail of the *Pan-American* calls from a radio speaker across the room. The country boy's guitar strumming suddenly takes on a railroad feel.

His latest country song takes form, and once again echoes the rhythm of the rails, a phenomenon traceable to the promotional brainchild of men of radio and the railroad. **I**

*JERRY FOX, 49, of Nashville, was a founding member of the country band "Bandana." He is now in the insurance business. This is his first TRAINS byline.*

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Early publicity artwork (left) shows the *Pan* passing the WSM antenna and broadcast shanty. L&N men examine the microphone in Vine Hill (right). Their whistling heard by millions, *Pan* engineers like Arthur Faulkner (being interviewed, below) were celebrities.

