

The Forgotten History of Sherlock Holmes on Australian Radio:

Sherlock Holmes' First Appearance on Australian Radio

by Robert Veld

A Brief Introduction to the Beginnings of Radio in Australia...

The first official public broadcast in Australia occurred on the evening of 23 November, 1923 following several experimental broadcasts over the previous few months. Station 2SB Sydney, owned by Broadcasters (Sydney) Ltd, was officially opened with a speech by the Postmaster-General Mr Gerard Gibson on the future of wireless broadcasting before a studio concert recital was performed by the soprano Miss Dorothy Deering, a bass, a contralto, cellist, a baritone, and quartet. The baritone, a man by the name of George Saunders who was the station's first announcer, would rise to Australian radio prominence in the 1930s as wireless broadcasting's 'Uncle George'.

At the time, 2SB's incredibly small studio and homemade 500 watt transmitter were located on the top floor of the Daily Guardian building in Philip Street, the home of Sir Joynton Smith's publication, *Smith's Weekly*.



Listening to the radio in the 1920s

On this historic occasion not all listeners who heard the inaugural broadcast were within the confines of their homes. A number of Sydney theatres installed special receiving sets to enable their patrons to hear the musical recital via horn-type loudspeakers. A concert was also held in Martin Place with the performance program further embellished by receiving sets that had been outfitted with loudspeakers to convey the broadcast from 2SB.

Less than two weeks later on 5 December 1923, a second station, 2FC Sydney, owned by department store Farmer and Company and operating out of a studio in Farmer's building in Market Street, began transmitting. With a much more powerful 5000 watt transmitter located out of the city centre in Willoughby, it was huge compared to 2SB's meagre 500 watts.

When officially opened on 10 January 1924, 2FC's celebrations also surpassed those of their rival with a full performance of the musical *Southern Maid* direct from Her Majesty's Theatre. This was followed a few weeks later by performances of *The Merry Widow* and *Sybil*.

Due to the belief that confusion was arising amongst listeners due to 2SB sounding very similar to 2FC the Postmaster-General approved a name change in March 1924 and 2SB became 2BL to reflect the new company name Broadcasters Limited.

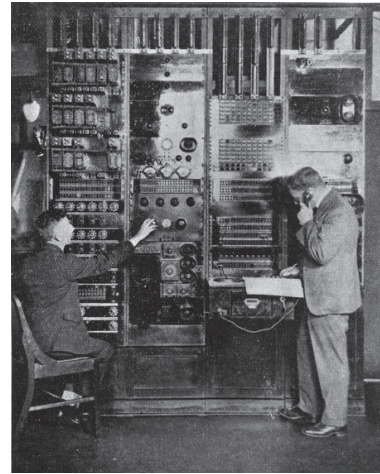
And it is to 2BL and their tiny studio in Philip Street where our attention must now be drawn...

Saturday 24 January, 1925

Radio Station 2BL, Phillip Street, Sydney...

It was a grand experiment. No one had attempted such a feat in Australia before...

Hastily packing into the small 14 feet by 12 feet studio that was totally inappropriate for such an undertaking for their 8:00pm start, a cast of seven - six men and one woman, huddled together around a lone primitive microphone with their scripts in-hand. Between them, they will attempt to play a total of fifteen characters over a two-hour period. Each of them are experienced theatre performers who know their craft well, but tonight is different. Tonight, they will have to convey their performances only through their voices. Tonight, their audience will not see their performances. They will only hear them...



The control room at the studio of radio station 2BL, Sydney

So it was that the first full-length radio play to be performed and broadcast on Australian radio took place only fourteen months after the very first official broadcast that ushered in the era of public broadcasting in Australia. There was little if any significant promotion. The radio, or wireless as it was commonly referred to at the time, was still very much in its infancy and the true potential of public broadcasting had not yet been realised.

There are no recordings of the performance, and the names of those people involved in this historical endeavour have been all but forgotten. All that remains today are a few scattered words spread across a handful of newspapers and periodicals from the day. This is all that is left to tell the story of Australia's first full-length radio play.

To add one more (and the most significant) difficulty is the fact that history appears to have forgotten that it ever happened. A search of many major texts on the subject of Australian radio history will tell you that *The Barbarous Barber*, broadcast almost two months later on 21 March, 1925 from Melbourne station 3LO, was Australia's first full-length radio play. This is erroneous.

The first full-length play produced for, and performed by a cast of actors on Australian radio, was adapted from the 1910 stage play 'The Speckled Band' written by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

The Announcements...

During the first few years of Australian radio broadcasting very little attention was given to the shows and features being broadcast on the wireless. Newspapers in particular saw the broadcasters as being in direct competition for their circulation. Even Australia's first regular radio specific publication *Wireless Weekly*¹ had not yet started to advertise or promote broadcasters' programs, instead maintaining its format as a technical publication concerned with wireless sets.

¹ *Wireless Weekly* was first published in Sydney in 1922 by William John Maclardy (also one of the founders of Australia's first radio station 2SB – later 2BL). Issue number 1 was 12 pages in length (including the cover) and carried the full title of *The Wireless Weekly* and an issue date of 4th August, 1922. Starting life as a technical journal for amateur wireless hobbyists, it later grew into more of a weekly listeners' radio broadcast periodical that featured broadcaster program listings, articles about forthcoming radio programs and interviews with radio stars of the day.

It is therefore no surprise that finding anything of significance that mentions Australia's first full-length radio play is difficult. Fortunately, a number of newspapers carried daily broadcasters' program listings, and it is within these that we find the first mentions of 'The Speckled Band'.

Under BROADCASTING on page six of the Sydney newspaper *The Sun* on Saturday 24 January, 1925 (the day of the broadcast), there appeared the following mention of the play amongst the day's programming:

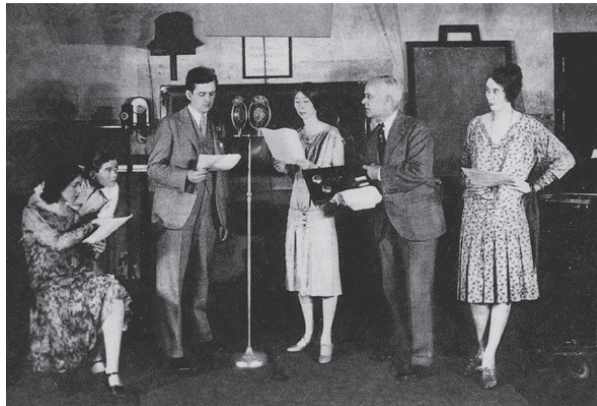
Night Session. – 8: "The Speckled band" a play in three acts played by the Radio Dramatic Club.

Of note in regards to this brief listing is the lack of any reference to Sherlock Holmes. However, another more detailed listing for the play under the day's programming for 2BL appeared on page two of *The Daily Telegraph* on the same day:

8 pm.- "The Speckled band" - a play in three acts. An episode of Sherlock Holmes, by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Played by the Radio Dramatic Club, with incidental music by Broadcasters' Instrumental Trio.

The Cast...

Many of the earliest radio plays and similar performances were often done by members of theatre groups for little or no money who organised themselves into radio players or radio club performers, and it became quite common for many radio stations to have their own in-house performers. It was these 'radio players' who were the true pioneers in Australia of radio 'acting' and by the early 1930s many actors had graduated into full-time radio performers, often forming their own companies.



Actors performing a live radio broadcast in the 1920s

Unfortunately, details concerning many of these early radio performers are scarce and many of them are destined to be forgotten for all time. Such was the fate that I believed would befall the members of the Radio Dramatic Club.

Fortunately, a chance discovery gave up the secret when I found a small review of 'The Speckled Band' radio play on page thirty-five of the 4 February, 1925 issue of the periodical *Everyones*.

The finding of the names of the Radio Dramatic Club was a monumental moment in my research. Up to this point, everything that I had done was missing its most significant piece...the cast.

Norman Barrington, Harrington Reynolds, John Trevor, Morrie Lynch, Miriam Beeby and Bert Beeby were all Australian theatre performers in their time who were active in their stage work (in most cases) in the pre-World War I era and right up to the end of the 1930s. It appears that at least a couple of them continued in radio in some capacity after their performances in 'The Speckled Band', as some of their names do spasmodically re-appear in a handful of mid-to-late 1920s radio programme announcements. However, their work in the theatre appears to have remained their most prominent form of performance.

The seventh member of the cast, Scott Alexander,² is the most interesting and most intriguing of them all. In addition to being one of the actors, he was also the producer of ‘The Speckled Band’ and the man responsible for putting together the Radio Dramatic Club.

In regards to pioneering radio plays on Australian radio it is Scott Alexander who could rightly be labelled one of the genuine pioneers. Not only did he produce and perform in the first full-length radio play on Australian radio but he also wrote and produced the first radio serial to be broadcast called *The Green Diamond Mystery*.³ He also experimented extensively with effective sound effects and voice techniques for radio and was one of the first to master playing multiple characters during the one production.

Unfortunately, it is at this point that I must confess that one key element is still missing – which actors played which characters. History has, in this regard, managed to hang on to one of its secrets...

Australian Radio pioneers...

From primitive technical equipment to inadequate facilities, Australia’s radio pioneers faced many challenges. An insight into some of the issues encountered by the pioneering radio actors can be gleaned from much of what appeared in a number of published articles and interviews in issues of *Wireless Weekly* from the late 1920s and early 1930s.

In an article from the November 24, 1933 issue of *Wireless Weekly* called ‘A Decade of Broadcasting in Australia’ published to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the country’s first professional broadcast, the founder of 2BL William John Maclardy shared the following information during the interview:

And 2BL broadcast the first radio play. It was Conan Doyle’s ‘The Speckled Band,’ early in 1924⁴. I shall never forget it. Radio plays were always a nuisance in those days. We had only one very small room, and we had to go off air for every rehearsal.

² Scott King Alexander’s real name was William Barwell Codrington Ball. He was born in Donegal, Ireland on 9 September 1870. He was the great, great grandson of Henry Lidgebird Ball, the commander of *H.M.S Supply* in the First Fleet. Before arriving in Australia he was already an established theatre actor, scenic artist and a theatre manager, and he had done some early work in radio for the BBC. He also claimed to have produced the first film in Britain – a film 60 feet in length in 1894, at Reading. Scott Alexander came to Australia twice before arriving back for a third time in 1924. He wasted little time getting on to the theatrical stage before then getting himself heavily involved in radio. He wasn’t shy about seeking publicity during this period. In 1932, he took over what was originally a church at 420 Kent Street in Sydney and it became the home for his New Sydney Repertory Company and fitted it out as a theatre (The Sydney Repertory Theatre) which had its official opening on 9 May of that year. The name was later changed to Kursaal. In 1938, he relocated the Kursaal Theatre to a new site in Miller Street, North Sydney where the first performance took place on 1 October, 1938. Unfortunately, Scott Alexander died in Sydney Hospital on 2 November, 1938 and the Kursaal Theatre then became Doris Fitton’s Independent Theatre. The church at 420 Kent Street that housed the original Kursaal Theatre became a hostel for destitute men before being refurbished and refitted to again become a theatre in April 1954 – its new name: The Genesian Theatre, where members of the Sydney Sherlock Holmes Society: The Sydney Passengers have attended three Sherlock Holmes plays: *Sherlock Holmes and the Speckled Band*, *Sherlock Holmes and the Ripper Murders*, and *Sherlock Holmes and the Death on Thor Bridge*.

³ As early as 1928, Scott Alexander had already written and put to air over one hundred and seventy sketches and plays for radio in Australia.

⁴ As is quite a common occurrence when recounting events long after they originally occurred, Maclardy’s recollections are incorrect in relation to the year in which the play was broadcast. It took place in early 1925 not 1924.

Also of particular interest is what Scott Alexander himself said during a detailed piece from the 11 March 1927 issue of *Wireless Weekly* in which he outlined what would have perhaps been the greatest challenge facing the 1925 broadcast of ‘The Speckled Band’:

I have had many difficulties to overcome, the greatest of all, in the use of the vocal organs. I found that in radio, too many voices sounded alike, and confused the listeners, since they had no means of seeing the lips of the person speaking... The similarity of voices killed the whole presentation.

There was indeed a concern that there could be an element of confusion amongst 2BL's listeners in being able to follow the action of the play over the course of the performance. On the day of the broadcast a character listing that also detailed the settings and locations for each of the play's three acts and different scenes was published in a number of major newspapers. The following example under BROADCASTERS' SERVICE appeared in the *Newcastle Sun*:



8 p.m.: "The Speckled Band", a play in three acts, an episode of Sherlock Holmes, by Sir A. Conan Doyle. Characters (in order in which they are heard) : Rodgers, a butler; Enid Stoner, Dr. Rylott's step-daughter; Ali, an Indian servant; Dr Grimsby Rylott, a retired Anglo-Indian surgeon; Dr. Watson, friend of Sherlock Holmes; Mr. Longbrace, the coroner; foreman of jury; Mr. Armytage, an inquisitive juryman; Scott Wilson, engaged to Enid's sister; Mrs. Staunton, housekeeper to Dr. Rylott; Billy, page to Holmes; Mr. Loaming (a bookmaker); Montague (a murderer); Milverton (a blackmailer); clients of Sherlock Holmes. ACT I.: The hall of Stoke Place, Stoke Moran. ACT II. – Scene 1: Dr. Rylott's study, Stoke Place. Scene 2: Mr. Sherlock Holmes' rooms, Upper Baker Street, London. ACT III.: Scene 1 – The hall of Stoke Place. Scene 2: Enid's bedroom, Stoke Place. Played by the Radio Dramatic Club, with incidental music by Broadcasters' Instrumental trio.

In regards to the sound effects that were utilised to accompany the play's performance over the air nothing is known, except perhaps that traditional sound effect tools and techniques of the theatre were put into service over the radio for Australia's first attempt at a play produced out of a radio studio.

In another interview from the 25 January, 1929 issue of *Wireless Weekly* Scott Alexander offers a clue as to the unperfected, experimental nature of what may have been attempted:

Realism is often attempted and when I first came on the air I thought any old effect would do. For a cannon shot I hit a big drum, as we did in the theatre. But the drum effect in the studio is a joke. The sound of a drum being hit by an ordinary drum stick, instead of a deep-noted boom, is simply a "poof" to the listeners.

However, despite any perceived concerns, the broadcast of ‘The Speckled Band’ appears to have been well received. Despite calling the three-act radio play ‘novelty entertainment’, the same small review from *Everyones* that revealed the names of the cast also called it ‘a big success’.

The potential of radio plays as a serious form of entertainment on the wireless was soon recognised and acknowledged by the broadcasters as their popularity grew. Before 1925 came to a close, *The Green*

Diamond Mystery,⁵ the first radio serial to be broadcast on Australian radio, was produced by 2BL's arch rival 2FC and proved extremely popular with listeners. Not to be outdone, 2BL broadcast their own radio serial called *Scarlet Circle* shortly thereafter.

The era of the radio play on Australian radio had begun.

The First of Many More to Come...

When those seven actors gathered around that single microphone in the small studio of 2BL in Sydney late in January 1925, they made history in Australia. Today there is no one still living who heard the broadcast over the airwaves. And, with no recording of the performance in existence, it is gone for all time.

However, for Sherlock Holmes on the radio in Australia, this very first performance of 'The Speckled Band' was just the beginning. There would be much more to come...

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⁵ A collection, contained in a single box, of Scott Alexander's (Codrington Ball) miscellaneous papers (1894-1929) and radio scripts (1925-1929) are held by the State Library of NSW (Call No: MLMSS 3218, Reference Code: 918308). The script of *The Green Diamond Mystery* is present but there are no scripts or any other documentation concerning 'The Speckled Band' amongst the collection.