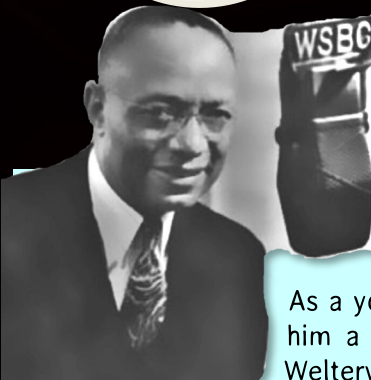


The Clerk's Black History Series

Debra DeBerry Clerk of Superior Court DeKalb County



Jack Leroy Cooper (September 18, 1888 – January 12, 1970) “Pioneering Black Radio Announcer and Deejay”



Jack Leroy Cooper was born September 18, 1888 in Memphis, Tennessee. He was the youngest of 10 children raised in a poor, single parent household. By the fifth grade, Jack moved to Cincinnati, Ohio, where he dropped out of school and began working at a racetrack. As a young teenager, Jack entered boxing matches to win prize money. His talents for boxing earned him a living, winning over 100 bouts, including the Cincinnati newsboy title and the Ohio Negro Welterweight Title. Around the age of 17, Jack began working in vaudeville shows, singing, dancing, and later writing and performing skits with his wife, Estelle. Together they created the Cooper and Lamar Music Company.

While touring across the mid-west, Jack began writing for black newspapers in Memphis and Indianapolis. In 1924, Jack was offered a position of Assistant Theater Editor with the Chicago Defender, a popular newspaper that advocated for racial, economic, and social justice. There Jack wrote a weekly column called “Coop’s Chatter.” Jack’s influence was so impactful that he was chosen to help open the paper’s new Washington, D.C. office in 1925.

A producer for Washington station, WCAP, hired Jack to work as an actor on comedy skits based on the “negro” dialect. The show was successful, but required Jack to perform minstrel shows aimed at white listeners. Because of the degrading nature of the show, Jack left the station and returned to Chicago hoping to create a radio program aimed at black audiences.

In 1929, a small, low-signal station in Chicago, WSBC, agreed to air Jack’s show “The All-Negro Hour,” hosted a variety of live music and vaudeville comedy and specifically hired black performers that sought to avoid the perpetuation of negative racial stereotypes. His success during these performances, led him to develop his skills as a radio mogul. Jack began playing music records on the radio. By 1937, Jack was heard on WSBC five days a week, hosting a variety of programs that played an eclectic blend of black music, ranging from blues to jazz to gospel. Jack’s success created a radio industry boom for black disc jockeys across the country.

Jack realized the importance of reaching a wider audience through his radio presence and began utilizing radio as a social force on behalf of the black community. In 1938, he created a programming slot called “Search For Missing Persons” - a show focused on reuniting families after the migration from the south to the north. During this time Jack built his own radio studio and earned income from selling radio advertising to both black and white customers as well as local entertainment spots.

By the 1940s, Jack created multiple social radio programs such as “Listen Chicago” focused on news about current events. By the late 1940’s Jack Cooper had built the largest black radio operation in the United States and was earning over \$200,000.00 a year. Jack pioneered syndication and also remote broadcasting, by having wires from some stations sent to his house.

Jack retired from radio in 1959. His success laid the groundwork for generations of black radio personalities and “deejays”. Jack L. Cooper died on January 12, 1970 at the age of 81 and is buried in Cook County, Illinois.

In 1975, West Pullman, Chicago named a city park after Jack Cooper.

In 2012, Jack Leroy Cooper was posthumously inducted into the Radio Hall of Fame.

