Border Radio: Quacks, Yodelers, Pitchmen, Psychics, and Other Amazing Broadcasters of the American Airwaves.
By Gene Fowler and Bill Crawford. Foreword by Wolfman Jack. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002.)

The so-called “border radio” stations, which blasted their signals from just across the Rio Grande in Mexico northward into the United States, Canada, and beyond from the 1930s through the 1980s, created a colorful, complex, and sometimes bizarre concoction of music, news, commercial advertisements, and evangelical outreach.

In this revised and updated edition of Border Radio, Gene Fowler and Bill Crawford explore this fascinating phenomenon in which technological innovation, religious fundamentalism, product promotion, and popular music blended together in a rather freewheeling and often improvised campaign to mass market goods, ideas, and culture to an increasingly consumer-oriented American public. By combining solid scholarship with a generous helping of humor and social insight, Fowler and Crawford offer a very enlightening and thoroughly entertaining look at this important aspect of American music history.

As radio stations began to proliferate in the 1920s, the airwaves quickly became filled with broadcasts ranging from high-browed music and educational programs to medicine-show quackery promoting miracle cures for a variety of ailments, both real and imagined. By the 1930s, the federal government, in collaboration with large, privately owned broadcasting companies, began regulating the airwaves, pressuring smaller stations to adhere to more uniform programming standards or forcing them out of business altogether.

In order to avoid what they perceived as heavy-handed government regulation, some maverick broadcasters set up stations just across the border in Mexico. This allowed them to continue their innovative programming with relatively little interference from U.S. authorities. Mexican law also authorized these stations to broadcast with a signal strength many times greater than that permitted in the United States, thus allowing these “border blasters” to reach an unprecedented number of listeners across the continent and around the globe.

Dr. John Brinkley was one of the pioneers of border radio. This Kansas doctor earned national notoriety in the 1920s by transplanting goat glands into humans, ostensibly to restore male sexual potency. In 1931, he relocated to Del Rio, Texas, and opened his own radio station (XER) across the border in Ciudad Acuña. Now able to advertise his “miracle procedure” in millions of living rooms across the country, Brinkley was soon inundated with new patients. He expanded his radio programming to include music, a variety of commercial advertising, and spiritual guidance from such characters as astrologer and fortune-teller Rose Dawn, the “Star Girl.” Millions of Depression-weary Americans tuned in daily to Brinkley's broadcasts, desperate for entertainment, health or financial advice, and the reassurance of hope for some kind of improvement in their lives.

Other colorful figures, including radio announcer and future Texas governor W. Lee “Pappy” O’Daniel, also took advantage of these powerful broadcasting facilities and their innovative formatting to promote themselves and their products. Such companies as Crazy Water Crystals and Hillbilly Flour sponsored very popular variety shows as an effective way to expand their customer bases. Some of America’s most beloved and influential musical figures of the time performed on border radio, including Woody Guthrie, Lydia Mendoza, Cowboy Slim Rinehart, Patsy Montana, and the Carter Family. Radio evangelists also used border radio to reach larger audiences than previously possible. By the 1960s, border radio allowed such “rebel” DJs as Wolfman Jack to break new musical ground and redefine mainstream popular music by broadcasting controversial or less well-known rock and roll acts to a national audience.

The border radio phenomenon is as fascinating as it is important in helping shape American cultural history. Border Radio tells the story of this unique aspect of broadcasting history in a wonderfully entertaining way. Although scholars will probably lament the absence of footnotes, this is a well-researched and written book that will appeal to almost anyone interested in the development of American popular culture.

Gary Hartman