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THE MUZAK MAKERS

Excerpted from a 1979 Cleveland Magazine article by Mark Kmetzko

To many, Muzak is what jazz pianist Thelonious Monk once called "chewing gum for the brain." The bland, laundered music accompanies a hundred million people around the world in their daily activities—from working to banking to shopping to waiting while their kids get their braces adjusted. But do they know that the multimillion-dollar industry (built around music that people hear but, hopefully, don't listen to) cut its teeth some 45 [now 65] years ago in Lakewood?

Major General George O. Squier, who served in World War I as Chief Signal Officer of the U.S. Army, did not have modern Muzak in mind in 1922 when he conceived of sending music and news into homes via power lines. Squier peddled his idea to North American Company, a New York-based company which owned the Cleveland Electric Illuminating Company at the time. After working out the electronic details, the company tried out the concept in Lakewood and a few other cities around the country.

CEI's substation in Lakewood proved perfect for the transmission of live music (phonograph records had not been invented yet) into homes in the western suburbs. Not long after these first experiments, North American amplified its Cleveland project into the main source of developments and established a locally based subsidiary, Muzak Corporation of Ohio.

Fairview Park resident Walter Thoma still remembers the early days of Muzak. His parents, who lived on Lake Avenue, were among the service's estimated 200 to 300 customers of the early '30s. Thoma recalls that the receiving unit was a console roughly the size of a twenty-five inch television set. "The fidelity was nothing to brag about," Thoma says, "but that was fifty years ago and a long way from the audio technology of today."

Nonetheless, Muzak delivered a lot of entertainment and novelty for its \$8 monthly charge.

But Lakewood's involvement with in-home Muzak was short-lived. Between the electrical generators causing technical difficulties and the advent of commercial radio, Muzak Corporation of Ohio soon found itself operating at a financial loss. So after Lakewood (and Cleveland) had helped realize General Squier's dream, the company's executives moved the business to New York. There, the means of transmission shifted from power to telephone lines, and Muzak Corporation scrapped home service in favor of sending music into hotels and restaurants.