

Sweet fifteen

PAUL DONOVAN RADIO WAVES

Clint Eastwood loves jazz, and talked about it on Radio 2 on Tuesday. Asked by Jamie Cullum when he had fallen under its spell, he replied: "When I was a kid, there was a little 15-minute radio programme that came on called Dixieland Jubilee, and they played stuff dating way back, like King Oliver, and I just got liking it."

Eastwood is now 80 and listened to that show in California during the second world war. The first thing he recalls about it

now, decades later, is not its content but its length. So what is it about 15 minutes that makes it such a perfect duration for a programme? Why is this quadrant of time so potent?

The Archers, Farming Today, the Daily Service, Book of the Week, Book at Bedtime, the Woman's Hour drama, Profile, Radio 4's afternoon story and Radio 3's nightly essay are all this length. As were the fabled Letter from America, Listen with Mother, Mrs Dale's Diary and so on. In the United States, 15 minutes was the duration of many radio music shows other than Dixieland Jubilee, and also for the longest-ever soap,

Guiding Light, which began in 15-minute episodes on NBC Radio in 1937, later switched to television, and lasted until 2009. (The Archers, by contrast, clocks up a mere 60 years next January.) By the late 1960s, 15-minute shows were common throughout the world, and their prevalence might have subconsciously encouraged Andy Warhol to make his famous forecast in 1968 that "in the future, everyone will be world-famous for 15 minutes".

Fifteen minutes is universal, partly because it accords with the clock — the best ones chime on the quarter-hour as well as the hour and half-hour — and also because it works across all genres. It is ideal for a single chapter of a book, as people will discover if they listen to Picnic at

Hanging Rock tomorrow. It is just long enough (but not so long that the mind wanders off) to provide a forensic examination of, say, a sultan's signature in A History of the World in 100 Objects, another highlight tomorrow as Neil MacGregor's global odyssey begins its final run. And it is the best length for a talk: it is no coincidence that most of those on BBC radio have lasted 15 minutes ever since the earliest ones in the 1920s. A 15-minute slot yields just under 14 minutes of actual speech, which is about 1,500 words, or the length of a main article in a newspaper. Enough space in which to make a considered and substantial case, in other words.

Britain's first professor of radio, Sean Street of Bournemouth, who is also a

broadcaster on Radios 3 and 4, emphasises the versatility: "The 15-minute slot works so well because the idea can either stand alone or be part of a number of related ideas within a series," he says. Jane Ellison, Radio 4's commissioning editor for general factual programmes, puts it more poetically. "The 15-minute programme is like a gem. It can shine in isolation or, as part of a series, act like a jewel in a bigger crown. It can play to one of radio's great strengths — the intimacy of a single voice in a reading." She adds that it also offers "great nuggets to podcast".

Long may they sparkle, whether on the West Coast in the 1940s or anywhere else now.

paul.donovan@sunday-times.co.uk