

Morons with Microphones-The Real Life Crazyies of Top 40 Radio

I remember the first time I became enchanted with the airwaves-the Christmas season of 1972. I had just turned thirteen years old, peering in the windows of the Kaufman's department store in downtown Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The display windows on the sidewalk level were filled with a tantalizing array of toys, mannequins in designer sweaters, and small kitchen appliances. But I wasn't looking at any of them-I was listening. Top 40 music was ported to the sidewalk through low fidelity speakers and the morning personality of KDKA, was popping in between. He was cool; young girls giggled as he spewed pithy banter and winked. His words teleported from his microphone to car radios driving by. It was magical; and I took my first step to becoming a moron with a microphone.

So, by the title of this book, am I saying that all people on the radio are morons? No, I use the word in the kindest way possible. It's just that many people in the radio business are eccentric to the point of bizarre; it's as if broadcasting allows them to exist and magnifies their oddities. Without a microphone, many would probably just disappear. It seems that the business of radio has made them what they are- or is it the other way around?

Believe me- if I hadn't been there, I wouldn't believe these stories myself. My radio career spanned two decades, from a tiny station in Greenville, Ohio to San Francisco, from tiny markets to major markets, from late night shows to morning drive, and during the entire time I was attracted and repelled to the business. Can people and places like this actually exist? Yep...and you need to meet these personalities and visit these radio stations just for bragging rights at your next party.

Bumper Crop

I had my buddy Joe roll a tape during my first radio show. He spliced together all the voice parts to create a rather nice air check tape. A few months later I decided that it was time; I would drive to Columbus and get myself an air personality gig at WING's sister station in Columbus- 1230 WCOL. This is an example of my extreme naïveté. It is usually very difficult to get an on air personality job in a medium/ large market- especially if you have no experience as a disk jockey. Normal people, (not me) usually shotgunned air checks to stations for weeks or months before getting any interest. I was eighteen years old, and just figured I would let some lucky station in on my talent. I walked into the studios of WCOL with my air tape in hand and asked to see the program director.

Programmers are busy people who rarely accept interviews from walk-ins. WCOL's program director was Jerry Dean; He was a very kind and fatherly individual who always seemed to go the extra mile for people. His heyday on the air was the previous decade, he now enjoyed finding and staffing his station with young talent. God was on my side that day...Jerry generously took time to meet an aspiring 18 year old disc jockey. What

he did next, in retrospect, was shocking; after listening to my air check tape (of my first only only night as a disk jockey), he hired me on the spot.

My first large market radio job in Columbus also introduced me to my first bumper crop of morons with microphones. In smaller markets, most announcers get their feet wet in broadcasting and either tire of it, or get tired of waiting for their next big break which never comes. Only one in a hundred move up the ladder from small market stations to medium/ large market radio stations. Then from this small group, only one in a thousand reach a major/ top ten market. Although I didn't know it at the time, I was very fortunate to get my first radio personality gig in a large market.

Jerry Dean said that he had liked my voice and smooth delivery, so he gave me the 10am to noon slot on WCOL. I would then do a few hours of producing and voicing commercials before going home in the afternoon. although the hours seem short to those outside of radio, remember that to do a good show on radio requires at least an hour of preparation for each hour on the air. So, I spent about six hours a day, six days a week at the station. The lack of weekends off really became an issue for many people in the business. It seems the rest of the world was totally out of sync when working in radio and TV, especially for those working at night. Radio people are an esoteric lot, so isolation just seems to magnify their oddness.

It was 1977 and a really good time for Rock music; bands such as Foreigner, Bad Company, Fleetwood Mac, Journey and The Eagles dominated popular music. Although the stations were owned by the same company and played the same music, 1230 WCOL was nothing like WING. WING had mostly jocks who were past their prime. WCOL had jocks in their thirties or below, and at eighteen, I was by far the youngest. These jocks were created in a day where high personality was king and the most outrageous personalities were often rewarded with high ratings. But working with them was often quite a challenge.

The Windbag

Jack was the morning disk jockey...one of the craziest people I ever met- 33 years of age and unmarried with absolutely no prospects. He was rather odd looking with his unkempt hair, mousy mustache and thick wire-framed glasses. He had been adopted at a young age and raised in Montana as an only child. His doting parents were affluent ranch owners and provided for his every wish. Every aspect of Jack seemed to be an exaggeration; when he was sad, he was crushed- when he was happy, hold on tight, you were going for a ride!

He had decided long ago on the things that pleased him and he surrounded himself with them. His watch was a Bulova; he liked the style so much that he bought three to last him the rest of his life. Jack loved Christmas tree bubble lights; he bought strings of them and decorated his entire apartment. "The only car that's worthwhile is a Ford, and the only Ford that's worthwhile is a Torino!" Jack would say. You guessed it- he owned a 1970 Torino that had been hot rodded by his only buddies in Columbus, the filling station crew at Skip's Exxon. His Torino would have been a fun ride, I suspect, if he ever

got to drive it. Jack had no drivers license. Drinking beer was one of the activities that he loved, so swilling ale was what he did most waking hours. After getting off the air, he would walk next door to his favorite (and only) bar, Spiro's. One Wednesday afternoon, when he was driving his Torino out of a downtown parking garage, he struck and injured a police officer who was crossing the street. Refusing to take a breathalyzer test, his license was automatically revoked for two years. So, everyday Jack was on the air, someone was assigned to pick him up and take him home.

Jack came to Columbus from San Francisco and was highly influenced by the manic styles of jocks on the legendary AM station in the Bay City, KFRC. He would do his breaks over the tail and intro of songs, and interject a mix of time, weather, traffic, and bits from subscription radio joke sheets. When Jack would do a joke bit, he would add pre-recorded laugh tracks, just like television sit coms, or he would play something much more personal. He never was required to record commercials or do any production after his shift, but every once in a while, he would be seen darting into the recording studio for a few seconds, then back into the air studio. What he was doing, I discovered later, was recording his flatulence. Whenever he'd feel a bubble forming, he would try to make it across the hall to document it. If the wind came on too quickly, he would pause whatever he was saying on the air, crank up his microphone, peg the VU meter, then continue with the bit. Morning listeners were sometimes treated to a series of flutterblasts which were timed to the beat of whatever song was playing. You could then hear Jack cackling on the other side of the studio door. If another jock walked by the window, He'd pop his head out of the door and exclaim "I just farted in the faces of twenty thousand people!" These studio-recorded gems were his prized professional possessions- he had been collecting them for years. He would dub them onto carts at different speeds and carry them in his knapsack. Just like a gourmet chef, he would add just the proper ingredients to the programming whether it be music, talk or sometimes- McDonalds commercials.

Getting To Know Me

There is an old adage, "if you want to impress someone, be yourself! It is most certainly true, but knowing yourself at age eighteen is somewhat nebulous. I had landed myself in a large market radio station, complete with high personality radio professionals, but trying to develop my own unique style seemed insurmountable. So I did what most people would do in a similar situation- I copied the style of others! Tom became my hero at 1230 WCOL; he had an uncannily deep voice and silky smooth delivery. Tom was a very private man, but he did mention that he had been married several times by the time he was thirty and had been a jock on the renowned Rock station, WKLO in Louisville. Tom had an awesome way of saying the call letters; he would stretch out the syllables until they were ready to snap. "Twelve thirty...double you, see, oh, eeeel...this is Tom rocking the hits!" It was nearly the same every break, but it sounded so cool! I studied his style for weeks and could do a rather realistic impression. Unfortunately, my air shift was directly before his, and I think listeners wondered just whom was copying whom?

The Smell of Liquor and Unemployment

An interesting aspect of a large/medium market radio station, is that it would attract two types of air talent: jocks on their way up the career ladder, and jocks on their way down. Tom left WCOL for another station and his replacement was the latter- an unfortunate victim of self indulgence and excesses. Mark was in his late thirties and had worked at several major stations in top 10 markets, but the last few years, he had seen his share of getting "blown out" (radio jargon for getting fired) and "walking the beach" (being unemployed for a long stretch of time). Although his birth certificate indicated that he was young, his body revealed a different timetable. He looked every day of fifty and had a raspy voice that sounded like the last stages of emphysema. The term chain smoker was spot on with Mark- I once measured the time between cigarettes at about seven minutes. He was almost proud when he would announce that he was up to six packs of cigarettes a day! Mark always looked tired, which he claimed was because he never slept more than four hours a night due to excessive partying and bar hopping.

Mark was highly intelligent and a member of Mensa, but was downright stupid in making decisions about his life. His air shift lasted until three pm, and then he worked another hour doing voice work in the production studio and he was off...to one of the many bars in downtown Columbus. By dinner time, Mark was buzzed, a few hours later, downright drunk. By 11pm, he would search the town for card games. About four am, he would zig zag home on the back roads, catch a few hours of shut eye, then up at eight am to start the cycle over again. I felt a bit sorry for the poor wretch during the week, but on the weekends he would make me downright pissed! I manned the Saturday morning air shift, and would be sitting on pins and needles every week wondering when he would arrive, and in what condition. Since the station was empty of employees on weekends, Mark would normally stagger into the studio about twenty minutes late with a screaming hangover. One particular Saturday morning, he arrived at exactly ten am, slapped a wad of bills on the console (his winnings from the night's gambling) and asked me to count it for him (it added up to over two hundred bucks). Instead of starting his air shift, he left to sit on the toilet for a half hour while I segued records separated by jingles and voice drops. When a very sweaty and shaky Mark finally took over his air shift, he needed my assistance to prop him onto the barstool and push him up to the microphone. Now I knew that he was in no condition to go on the air, but after months of covering for his sorry ass, I decided that this day...he was on his own.

By the time I reached the parking garage, started my Camaro, and turned on the radio, Mark was doing his first break. The record faded to nothing, then after a few seconds of dead air, the microphone snapped on and Mike told the world with slurring syllables " twelve thirdly dubbya see oh well...Isn't it great to be alive? Here's da carp-ners!" He mashed the cart button, but the cart was missing. There was nothing but the hiss of the compressors in the audio chain as I switched the radio to another station. Mark was blown out shorty afterwards and promptly disappeared. My last contact with Mark came five years later- he called me while I was on the air in San Francisco. He'd been drifting from station to station and was just passing through. I was glad to hear from him, and happily surprised that he was still alive.

WCOL was at the forefront of a couple of radio revolutions at the same time, the rapid switch in listeners from AM to FM, and the Progressive Rock movement. Both would change radio broadcasting forever. When the FCC created AM radio, there were very few radio stations, and virtually no high fidelity sound equipment producing programming. Receivers were even worse; hobbyists often listened with single tube radios or crystal sets with metal diaphragm headphones. Superheterodyne circuits, which reduced background noise, had not yet been invented. To early listeners, the magic of pulling entertainment out of thin air was magic! Low broadcasting frequencies were chosen to allow early radio signals to travel long distances, bouncing around the globe with the assistance of the ionosphere. The days of radio dramas and Big Bands provided high quality programming with low quality sound, but the stations could be received over hundreds and sometimes thousands of miles.

FM broadcasting also began early in the century, but languished for fifty years until becoming popular due to several technical advantages over the AM band. By the 1960's, hundreds of AM radio stations had sprung up all over the country, resulting in short spacing between them, and constant interference. FM was intended for local programming only since the high frequency signals don't bounce off of the ionosphere. FM stations only broadcast in the line of sight and do not extend past the curvature of the earth. Frequency Modulation requires much more room between radio stations, and this extra space allows more information (or bandwidth) to be transmitted. The physics are much improved for providing better signal to noise (quietness), better frequency response, and less atmospheric interference (static). There are three components of an FM signal, the main carrier and two side bands. Without getting into complex discussions of radio propagation, understand this: The three components allow three separate audio channels to be broadcast. It didn't take long for radio engineers to develop FM stereo and with it, the eventual decline of AM radio.

WCOL FM was the sister station down the hall...a red-haired stepsister-type of station. It was one of the first Progressive Rock stations in America, and oddly born out of a religious music format back in the 1960's. Incredibly, the station played Gospel during the day to a very conservative and white-haired audience, then pulled out all stops at night with album cuts from the legends of long-hair Rock; Frank Zappa, Led Zepplin and Black Sabbath cranked from 6 at night till 6 in the morning. Many of the jocks were social misfits from the underground Ohio State University music scene. Some were radio hobbyists, just trying to be part of a movement. Others were genuine radio programming prodigies who would design similar formats around the country for the next several decades.

Fred

One of the oddest characters on WCOL FM was known only as "Fred." I'm confident that he actually had a surname, but nobody...NOBODY seemed to know what it was. What most people did know, Fred looked startlingly like Charles Manson and left a vapor trail down the halls that lingered for hours. No one needed to ask if he was in the building, it was very apparent by the stench, a cross somewhere between rotting meat, crusty socks, and diapers on a hot summer day. The rumor among the AM jocks was that he lived in a flop house somewhere on the Ohio State campus. Although Fred

looked scary, the few times I talked with him, he was quite friendly and soft spoken...a good example of the book not matching the cover.

The air personalities of WCOL AM & FM were total opposites. The Top 40 jocks on AM were clean cut and known on the air as "WCOL Good Guys," while the FM jocks looked as if they lived at the bus station with unkempt long hair, wearing thrashed bell bottom jeans with ragged t-shirts from Rock concerts. The two groups usually stayed on opposite sides of the building and would give sneers to each other as they passed in the halls. Since the AM station had much higher ratings and paid most of the bills, the FM'ers resented their second class status. The AM jocks had paid appearances many nights, they drove British sports cars and had their photos on the Top 40 hit lists which were distributed to records stores every week. The AM guys walked with an air of superiority until the mid 1970's, but secretly worried about the steadily increasing audiences on FM.

Late one evening as I was doing a show on the AM station, I delivered a commercial cart to the FM studio. When I opened the heavy studio door, a thick cloud of smoke billowed out. When the acrid air cleared, it became obvious that I had stumbled in on a genuine Woodstock-style pot party; at least ten college-age hippies were slouched on the cigarette-burned carpet. They were passing around a bong, taking hits and eating munchies to classic rock. There were groans and protests as I sidestepped to the cart racks, as the pot heads made it clear that I had crashed the party. I found out later that studio stoner parties were a rather common occurrence at WCOL FM; the bong was conveniently stored in the desk drawer below the console.

Ned

If there was ever a poster boy for excess, it would have to be Ned. He was the early evening jock on the FM station and always seemed to be in some kind of stupor. He was surprisingly functional for being under the influence much of his daily life. He was a genuine folk hero to the university rockers and to a large portion of the permanent white underclass which lived on the west side of Columbus. He only spoke to me once- my first week at the station. He stuck his head through the AM studio door, flipped me the tall finger with a sly grin, and mumbled "Hey! F*** you!" Although he was crass as Hell, I've gotta admit he was pretty compelling on the air and, from hearsay, a fine partier.

Get The Lead Out

Ned was the official cruise director of the WCOL Party Bus. He oozed confidence and smoothness and you felt lucky if you got to hang with him. WCOL FM sponsored its share of amazing Rock concerts. Promoters gladly provided tickets for the first several rows in exchange for free advertising on the station. The most legendary Rock concert of the Seventies was a WCOL FM promoted gig as Led Zeppelin came to town. Ned accompanied the winning listeners on the Party Bus for the trip to Cleveland, working the crowd by chatting up and down the aisle for the two hour trip. At the concert gate, Ned prevented a sure riot as the ticket booth workers refused the odd promotional tickets, believing them to be fakes. It took twenty minutes of calls to record company officials, colosseum officials and the program director to sort things out, but Ned

became the hero again as he led the group to the front seats. With just minutes before Jimmie Page and the band took the stage, Ned took beer orders and set out for the concession stand. As the first notes of "Black Dog" screamed from the stage, Ned- with armfuls of beers- fumbled for his ticket. A different worker was at the gate this time as he passed through. "Stop right there Dickhead...this ticket's fake!" said the gatekeeper, tugging at his shoulder. This time Ned had no posse, the gatekeeper had no patience, and the denizens of the Party Bus had no beers. With the help of rental cops, Ned was tackled and hustled downstairs to a portable jail cell which had been provided- compliments of the Cleveland Police Department.

By the time Zeppelin was into the first guitar riff from "Stairway to Heaven," Ned was already forgotten by the driver of the Party Bus, his lucky listeners, and the security guards. But Ned was making new friends as the jail cell began slowly filling up with concert-going proletariat. After two hours listening to muffled tunes from upstairs, the cell was packed to the bars with arrested stoners. Police pulled up to the building with a rented twenty-two-foot U-Haul truck which had been converted into a makeshift paddy wagon. With night sticks in hand, the cops loaded the hoard of malcontents aboard. A bit of rebellious attitude was snuffed out as the sliding door of the truck was pulled shut, leaving the group in pitch darkness for the trip to the city lockup. But these hooligans came prepared- within a minute, the first doobie was lit, soon another...and another.

At nine o'clock in the morning, the city judge began hearing the individual cases. By the time Ned was acquitted of all charges, his Party Bus was long gone and back in Columbus. But it didn't matter. Ned had new friends from the lockup who gladly gave their new hero a ride back to the Capital City.

Triple Play

Ned's career on WCOL FM had a magnificent flame out- which came to be known as the infamous "Triple Play." One evening, during a clam bake in the studio, he lost control of his buzz and decided to play three killer tunes- at the same time. At the end of the performance, with the bank of phone lights totally lit up, he uttered the now famous line- "WCOL FM...wow...great f---ing record!" Ned was fired immediately and disappeared from the local scene for decades. When he returned to WCOL in the Nineties he was cleaned up, friendly and successful as a salesman.