

The Round Mound Of Sound

'We're still playing to Arbitron and not the listener'

Chuck Dunaway thinks you're crazy.

"Back then it wasn't a game; it was war," he says. "I hear stories today about program directors who are buddies and hang out with their competition. What is that all about?"

By "back then," Dunaway means the '50s and early '60s. "We were big stars," he recalls. "The audience cared about us. It was a different game."

About his start in the business, he says, "I think I was 17. A friend of mine had a '46 Plymouth, and we took off from Houston and stopped in every town that had a radio station. We'd check the phone book, drive over, and I'd audition for a job."

Dunaway passed the audition at KBST/Big Spring, TX. "I remember that we had so many commercials to cram into a 30-minute segment that we'd play half a record, stop it, play the spots and then finish the record — which is stupid," he

laughs, "but that's the way we were taught to do it."

They paid him 60 cents an hour, so part of his ambition was about money: Big Spring to Galveston for a 15-cent raise, off to Freeport for a quarter more, and then, "KXOL in Ft. Worth called and offered me \$80 a week — a pretty good wage," he says. It was also, as it turned out, about the market climb.

COWTOWN AND MCLENDON

Ft. Worth was about 40 miles west of Dallas and KLIF, but it was a world apart. Some people used to say that when it was noon in Big D, it was 11:55 in Ft. Worth. No kidding.

But if KXOL wasn't the big time, it was still a place to be discovered. "He was extraordinarily good," says Kent Burkhardt, founder of Burkhardt/Abrams. "He had some sort of communication deal with his audience. You know what that's like. You've heard it."

Whatever it was, it got ratings and brought Dunaway to the attention of Gordon McLendon's boys up the road at KLIF. They didn't want him for KLIF though; they

wanted him for WRIT/Milwaukee — or, most likely, they just wanted to get him out of town.

Dunaway recalls, "Within 30 days we beat WOKY/Milwaukee with our Top 40 concept. We played a tight list, and this was a new concept at the time. Brand-new."

In 1958 Danny Williams called from WKY/Oklahoma City, and Dunaway's horizons expanded.

"They allowed me to do television too," he says. The TV show was an after-school cowboy affair, and Dunaway, as Hog Waller, was a hit with the under-10s. But it was his radio show that got him noticed in New York. An 86.7 Hooper rating! "That's when WABC found out who I was," he says.



Chuck Dunaway

FILL FREED'S SHOES

The job was to replace Alan Freed.

The new WABC staff included Herb Oscar Anderson, Charlie Greer, Jack Carney, Dunaway and Scott Muni, and

the played a lot of music.

"We were playing 77 records plus album cuts," says Dunaway. "It was silly. I'd been with McLendon, Jack had been with Storz, and we knew the magic number was 40! We did go up 250% in one week, but the station didn't really kick in until we took the playlist down."

Dunaway didn't like New York though — think that line about taking the boy out of the country, etc. — so he headed home to Texas and a litany of impressive call letters: KBOX, KLIF, KILT. He got disc-jockey famous. In Dallas he was even nicknamed "The Round Mound of Sound."

Now, laugh if you want, but this was all very cool — until it wasn't. "When Tom Donahue got the idea to play album cuts, it started messing around with Top 40," says Dunaway, and that meant things changed.

In 1971, when he was programming WIXY/Cleveland, Dunaway spoke at a programming conference in San Juan, Puerto Rico. "I said, 'You know, folks, if you don't realize it, AM radio is in trouble. FM is about to kick our ass,'" he recalls. Later he explained that he didn't mean

that radio was over, just that there was now a new place to do it. Sound familiar?

BUZZY AND ME

Dunaway and KCBQ/San Diego PD Buzz Bennett decided to do some research.

"We put people in these 'eggshell' things with speakers in them and played tapes of radio shows, complete with commercials," Dunaway says. "When the jock came on, they lost interest; when spots came on, their interest went down further; and the more commercials we played, the more they didn't give a shit."

"But when the music started again, the listeners started to pay attention again."

Based on this, Bennett and Dunaway decided that the best places to say the call letters were as the last thing into the music and the first thing out. Sound familiar?

WILLIE, WAYLON AND CHUCK

In the years that followed Dunaway programmed stations in Tucson, Phoenix and Dallas (progressive Country KAFM). He took some side trips into record promotion and magazine publishing in the late '70s, but by the early '80s he was back managing stations in Austin, Nashville and the Carolinas.

Burkhardt says that when Dunaway became a General Manager, all of his experience and talent came together. "His enthusiasm for the administrative and sales side was really as good as his programming capabilities, and you very rarely find that," he explains.

In 1998, after close to 50 years in radio, Dunaway and his partners sold a cluster of stations he'd been managing in Joplin, MO, and he and his wife retired to Houston. But he's still listening.

"The formats haven't changed in all these years; it's just the music that changes," he says. "I still hear the stopsets falling in the same places, and we're still playing and programming to Arbitron and not the listener."

Hmmmmmm. You can take the boy out of radio....

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