

## How I Got Here

Those who forget history...

When I wrote about Bob Henabery a few weeks ago (1/26), space limitations precluded me from mentioning that in 1976 ABC, Henabery's former employer, asked him to write an argument challenging the FCC's authority to regulate format changes. Fortunately, the case he presented was persuasive. But that's not why I bring it up.

My focus is on a comment Henabery made that was almost a throwaway: "The leaders in radio programming," he wrote, "do not leave behind an oeuvre for students to analyze."

OK, I admit it, *oeuvre* isn't a word I would normally use in conversation, so I ran to the dictionary. An oeuvre, according to Merriam-Webster, is "a substantial body of work constituting the life work of a writer, artist or composer." In the context Henabery intended, the word means *history*.

### WHAT'S GOING ON

The idea for this column came about when R&R Publisher/CEO Erica Farber told me about the newspaper's efforts to get veteran broadcaster Gary Owens to moderate a panel at last year's convention. The problem — let me see if I can put this delicately — was that some of the younger panelists weren't very excited about Owens, because they didn't know who he was.

Of course, we shouldn't be surprised. Think about it: If you're 28 today, you weren't alive when Owens first appeared on *Laugh-In* in 1968, and unless you grew up in L.A., where he was on the air for nearly four decades, or were a fan of *Space Ghost* or *Roger Ramjet*, cartoons for which he provided voices, it's unlikely you'd have any idea who he is or what his many contributions to the industry have been.

Still, it was funny, weird and sad, if only because, as Erica said, the response she got from the panel was as if they thought our industry's history began when Kevin Weatherly left San Diego to take over KROQ/L.A. in the early '90s. It didn't.

### BAR TALK

We tell our history in bars. We order a round, and someone says, "Did you know that KHJ/L.A. produced *The History of Rock and Roll* in less than 90 days and that they did it in the hallway?" Someone else remembers something about a record guy who was so intent on getting to WABC/New York's Rick

Sklar that he camped out in a bathroom stall and jumped out with record in hand, scaring poor Mr. Sklar half to death.

And what about the time a promo guy tried to get AOR pioneer Tom Donahue to play the bubblegum act The 1910 Fruitgum Company on KMPX/San Francisco by pointing out that the band's greatest hits collection was, after all, an album.

These stories — and there are hundreds of others — paint a picture of a time gone by, a time that needs to be recorded, shared and passed on to the generations that follow, so that 50 years from now, when broadcasting is a totally different animal, we'll know something about where we came from and the pioneers who built our business.

### THE GOLDEN AGE

The Golden Age of Radio began on Nov. 4, 1920, when KDKA/Pittsburgh first broadcast presidential election returns. It ended in the late '40s, when the radio networks cast their lot with a newfangled thing called television and left radio to the local operators.

It was a far simpler time, at least from our vantage point today, but don't think for a minute that the broadcasters of the '50s thought they had it easy. TV was going to kill radio, and, as if to prove that point, the big stars of radio — Jack Benny, George Burns, Fibber McGee, etc. — jumped ship for the smoother sailing that TV promised.

Radio, at least for a time, became little more than a sleeping giant. But it was destined to awaken, flail its arms through the sea change and start treading water as if its very life depended on it. Because it did.

### THE SECOND GOLDEN AGE OF RADIO

There is a romantic notion that the fathers of Top 40, Gordon McLendon and Todd Storz, invented the format because they loved the music. Don't believe it. They invented it because they wanted — no, *needed* — to make money. They invented it because they had to replace the programming the national networks had taken away, and besides, a disc jockey playing records made good financial sense. That rock 'n' roll was giving birth to itself at the same time is less a coincidence than the catalyst that got the whole thing going.

There are those who will say, "Who cares?" After all, it's ancient history, and things are totally different

now. True enough. But in the years before deregulation and consolidation, when disc jockeys were stars and PDs built stations that reflected their own personalities, and even later, as research became a tool and consultants began to appear on the horizon, it was an exciting time in American radio, the second Golden Age of Radio, a time that will never be repeated.

### HELP

I got a voice mail from WPLJ/New York's Scott Shannon. Shannon, whom R&R, in 1990, named the most influential broadcaster of the '80s, told me that he liked the idea of this column and that it was "doing a great job with some people who deserve some accolades and a little attention."

Others have called and e-mailed, suggesting names and stories that I ought to look into: McLendon and Storz, Sklar and Blore and Draper. Buzz Bennett and Jack McCoy and John Rook. Color Radio, Boss Radio, the Wolfman, Cousin Brucie, Hy Lit, Allison Steele and the Real Don and Robert W.

And don't forget splicing blocks and slip-cueing and hitting the post and sprinting to the john because the song you were playing was less than two minutes long. Add to that rubber clocking and speeded-up records and Urban radio before it was called that and Country before it was cool and the Talk pioneers who said things that had never been said on the air before ... and on and on and on.

I can't do this by myself. Your suggestions are not only wanted, but also needed. Get in touch with me at the e-mail address below and tell me who and what you'd like to know about. Better yet, start thinking about the stories you know and get ready to tell them. Believe me, inquiring minds want to know.

Today the radio business is more biz than it is show biz. Some complain that we don't teach our history. They say it's because, in a clustered-up world, we just don't have time.

It is the role of this column to make the time.

Next week: Jerry Boulding.

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