

Kent Burkhardt: He Did It All

"The R word [retire] is not in my vocabulary"

It wasn't easy.

Still, he sat down and, in longhand, wrote 30 letters to people he knew, people who understood that his true love was programming. Suddenly, he had a dozen clients, then 13, then 14. Within a year, he needed help.

The day after their first phone call, Kent Burkhardt met Lee Abrams. Abrams was still in his teens, Burkhardt wasn't, but age didn't matter. "It was like instant love," recalls Burkhardt.

It began in the early '70s, with a handshake. By the end of the decade it was the largest and, some say, most influential radio consultancy in the nation, Burkhardt/Abrams.

If this were a movie, the screen would get fuzzy now, and we'd start time-tunneling. Indulge me.

BAY CITY ROLLER

Bay City is south of Houston, Burkhardt was south of 14, and Johnny Long owned a radio station.

"I went to him," says Burkhardt, "and said, 'Listen, I'd like to play music for 15 minutes a day for all the kids. Is that OK?'"

"Sure. When do you want to be on?" Long replied.

By the time Burkhardt graduated high school in 1952, he had his jock chops down. "You'd call him laid back," says Texas radio legend Chuck Dunaway. Burkhardt did the night show at KXOL/Ft. Worth while attending TCU and filled in during summers at McLendon's KLBS/Houston.

Burkhardt says, "I stayed in college 3 1/2 years and then had an opportunity to go to New Orleans with McLendon. I thought, 'Hell, I'll get my degree later.'" He never did.

He stayed at WNOE/New Orleans for a year.

By 1956 Burkhardt was 22, had been in radio for nine years and had already worked for Gordon McLendon. He was about to come face to face with Todd Storz, the other father of Top 40.

TO ROCK 'N' ROLL OR NOT?

Believe it or not, there were major discussions within the Storz Group about rock 'n' roll. "Todd wasn't in favor of it," Burkhardt says, "but Bill Stewart and I argued 'How the hell can you ignore Elvis Presley?'" They compromised by playing only the softer Elvis, but once that cat was out of the bag, there was no putting it back.

Burkhardt's next move was about records too.

In 1958 Storz sent him to WQAM/Miami to clean up



Kent Burkhardt

a payola mess. "WQAM had a 'payola' rate card," Burkhardt says. The GM was oblivious, but the PD and one of the jocks — a big personality with a 40 share — were cashing checks.

The first day, Burkhardt fired the PD and cleaned up the playlist. On the second day a record guy showed up with two henchmen who looked like words weren't their strength. "I want my records back on the air!" the promoter demanded. "I paid for them." Burkhardt stood his ground. "Talk to the guys who made the deal," he said. "Maybe they need to reimburse you."

You takes your chances.

A LITTLE TEXAS TOWN

Five grand down and \$456.10 a month.

Burkhardt bought KTXL in San Angelo, TX and learned how to do everything. Up at 4, on the air, out at 9, sell, back at 6, write, produce, sweep — you get it. After a year he said "Enough" and started making calls.

Earl Fletcher, GM of KXOL/Ft. Worth, needed programming help. "I'm running the Mays stations now," he said, "and I can use you in Waco and Oklahoma City." It wasn't full-time, it was consulting for \$200 a month per station, but Fletcher upped the ante by calling in markers with friends with stations in Little Rock and Lake Charles, LA.

Not big money, but it put food on the table. Pack up the babies and drive. Two weeks in a rundown apartment, always praying the checks would catch up before he hit the road again. "It was frightening and wasn't going to work very long," Burkhardt says.

After eight months he realized he needed a real job.

"In the spring of 1961 Barry Sherman, *Esquire* magazine's radio guy, told me *Esquire* was going to build a radio group," Burkhardt says. Their first station was WQXI/Atlanta, and it was in trouble. "We've lost 50% of our ratings and 50% of our revenue," said Sherman. "We don't understand."

Burkhardt flew to Atlanta, parked himself at the old Riviera Hotel and listened. "It was one of the worst radio stations I'd ever heard," he says. "Total clutter — wrong music, wrong people." When he discovered that *Esquire* had run a full-page newspaper ad that announced "Big-time radio by *Esquire* magazine from New York City comes to Atlanta," he could only shake his head.

For \$12,000 a year Burkhardt took the programming reins at WQXI but never went out of his way to let people in Atlanta know that his boss' name was Sherman.

PREPARATION H AND SCAPEGOAT

Now it gets sticky.

Burkhardt cleaned up 'QXI, and things were on a roll until John Smart, *Esquire's* Chairman of the Board, came to town and heard a Preparation H spot on the air. He went ballistic. Within 24 hours the station was on the block.

Fast-forward. New owners came, fired the GM and gave Burkhardt six months to prove he could be a large-market manager. "My test," he says.

Fast-forward again. During Burkhardt's tenure at WQXI ratings doubled, an Atlanta FM was acquired and, when the company expanded in 1967, Burkhardt was named President/Pacific and Southern Broadcasting.

His job was to acquire new stations, and, in quick succession, he bought KIMN/Denver; KYXI/Portland, OR; and KRHM-FM/Los Angeles — the station that would become Kiss FM. Looking back, Burkhardt attributes much of the group's success to its National Program Director, George Burns.

Fast-forward one more time. The chairman of the parent company wanted a New York City presence. Burkhardt told him that the station he'd selected, WJRZ, had a lousy nighttime signal. They went back and forth: buy it, don't, buy it, don't. The chairman was always pro, Burkhardt always con.

You know what happened.

When the station started hemorrhaging red ink, Mr. Chairman blamed Burkhardt. "We came to blows," Burkhardt says, "and even though the radio division was making a pot-load of money, the board elected to say goodbye to me.

"The next day I was jobless."

FULL CIRCLE

Now we're back to the birth of Burkhardt/Abrams. After all he's done, and all he'll do in the future, Burkhardt gives the impression that that's what he holds most dear. "I couldn't have asked for anything better in my life," he says.

Still, in 1995, after 23 years, he sold the company to Mike McVay and set his sights on the future.

Today, among other things, he directs the programming for American View, a boutique (his words) syndication company.

Tomorrow? (Remember, he was a co-founder of SMN and has a sense about these things.) "Satellite and Internet radio are not going away," he says, "and within 10 years, buffering won't be an issue."

As for consolidation, "In the next three or four years the listeners will tell us, but my ears tell me that what I hear ain't as good as it used to be.

"It's not going to be easy."

He's right.

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