

It's A Bird, It's A Plane, It's Gary Owens!

'I want to do something creative every day'

Gary Owens collects South Dakotans.

They're stashed in a little box in his desk drawer, a box he pulls out whenever he has to prove that he comes from someplace earthly, as opposed to, say, the planet Ork. ("Look, here's a tiny Tom Brokaw. This is my miniature Mary Hart. Oops, where's Cheryl Ladd? Be careful. Watch where you step.")

As he shakes their little hands and puts them back into the corn-lined box — Owens is nothing if not friendly — I sneak in the hard question: "Are you really as twisted as you seem?"

Owens laughs. "I have an offbeat sense of humor," he says. "Don Imus told George Carlin that he thinks I'm awfully squirrely, and George just said, 'Well, of course he is.'" Is this starting to make sense?



Gary Owens

go into radio and television," Owens says. He drew 10 different characters and sent them to Minneapolis, in response to a pitch ("Draw me and win a scholarship") on the back of a matchbook cover. He struck gold and won a scholarship. The kicker is that the judge was Charles Schulz — as in Snoopy, Lucy and Charlie Brown.

A year or so later, after his fateful trip to California, the radio bug bit. Owens didn't give up cartoons though. They would become a big part of his life, but not in the way he imagined.

At 16, with a voice that had changed from a prepubescent squeak to an announcer's mellifluous tones, he joined KORN/Mitchell as a "hyphenated teenaged newsman-dance band remote announcer." He remembers it well: "The only way you could hear yourself on those remotes was to put your hand up to your ear."

NO BEEF WITH OMAHA, NO CHICKEN IN DENVER

Don Burden, owner of KOIL/Omaha, was colorful. Owens arrived at the station in '57 — as a newsman, not a jock. He was teamed with a morning man with a head full of steam. One morning the jock exploded, shot an expetive at Burden and walked off the air. The phone rang. "Gary, you've got to take over."

Disaster. Owens couldn't run a board, so he spent half the show apologizing for his technical mistakes. But he got better. Quickly. In fact, he was a natural, which explains why Todd Storz and Bill Stewart, across town at KOWH, conspired to get him out of town.

He moved to KIMN/Denver. Radio in the morning and a kids' TV show in the afternoon, immediately followed by a local newscast. For the kiddie show he wore a bad chicken suit and had only a few minutes to shuck it before doing the news. One day, on his way to change, he ran into a friend in the hall and lost track of time. The stage manager panicked. "My God, Gary, you've only got two minutes." Time for a quick change, but the zipper broke. "So," Owens says, "I'm doing a newscast with a beak over my head — 'Good afternoon. Federal mediators on Capitol Hill....'"

The station manager's feathers were ruffled, and Owens kissed news-anchoring goodbye. He kept the kids' show, though, and fell in love with television. Shortly thereafter the McLendon boys called.

WESTWARD HO!

Don Keyes was Gordon McLendon's National PD.

"A wonderful radio man who should be in the Hall of Fame," says Owens. Keyes called about KILT/Houston. "I was a troubleshooter for McLendon," Owens continues. "We'd get the ratings up, and I'd go somewhere else."

KLIF/Dallas, WNOE/New Orleans, then KTSA/San Antonio. "I learned so much about Top 40," Owens says. "McLendon had it down to a science. We'd prepare three hours off the air for every three hours on."

In 1958 Owens left McLendon for WIL/St. Louis. "I think we were the last music station in St. Louis to be No. 1," Owens says. Then, in 1959, Chuck Blore [see Legends, 7/13] called with an offer to go to KEWB/San Francisco. "I'm embarrassed," said Blore. "You're probably making more in St. Louis." Owens, however, was still tempted. He still dreamed of California. "Can I think about it overnight?" he asked.

That night a tornado hit St. Louis. The next day a rattled Owens accepted the job and headed west, where, in short order, he blew KSFO's Don Sherwood out of the water.

From there it was a short trip to Los Angeles and KFWB.

DREAMS CAN COME TRUE

Someone should make a movie. Owens hit his stride on KFWB. It was Top 40 heaven, top of the heap, but he wanted more. Despite the risk, in 1962 he left his No. 1 morning show. "I was taking a tremendous chance," he says.

KMPC/Los Angeles, owned by Gene Autry, was different. No rock 'n' roll, no way. KMPC was about Sinatra and Ella, but the real deal was that it had the ears of Hollywood's movers and shakers. Owens hoped it might lead to voice work, cartoons, television and movies.

It did. Step back and look at his career: top 40 pioneer; voice of the television networks; thousands of commercials; tons of cartoon work (*Garfield*, *Roger Ramjet*, *Ren and Stimpy*, *Disney*); movies — and, no, we'll never forget *Laugh-In* and beautiful downtown Burbank.

Owens has won virtually every award that broadcasting can bestow. Walk down Hollywood Boulevard today, and you'll find his star right next to Walt Disney's. Simply said, this man is loved. Why? Because the way he's gone about the business of doing business stands as a shining example of how to do it: with character, heart and a sense of humor.

"I'm a great fan," says Jonathan Winters.

He's not the only one.

NEXT WEEK: John Rook

Bob Shannon writes, voices, produces and consults from his Bainbridge Island, WA-based business, bobshannon-works. Shannon, who continues to consult his former employer, TM Century, can be reached at bob@shannonworks.com.

A GREAT FRIEND

"A woman came up to the house," says Jonathan Winters. "We'd left the iron gate to my property open. She said, 'Oh, Mr. Winters, I see there's a man pushing you in a wheelchair, and I've obviously come at a bad time.'"

The wheelchair was easy to explain: Owens and Winters were doing a photo shoot for their comedy CD *Outpatients*. Owens, however, took control. "I'm Dr. Nedlinger," he said. "Please don't bother Mr. Winters now. Even though we've got him taped to this chair and under heavy medication, he could spring out and hurt you."

The woman turned and ran. "Gary's quick and has a very imaginative mind," says Winters. "We're always doing crazy things. Friends are hard to come by, period. I've found him to be a great friend in many ways."

Nice guys can finish first.

PALM TREES, CARTOONS AND KORN

Plankenton, SD, Owens' hometown, is 25 miles west of Mitchell, which is 75 miles west of Sioux Falls, a hop, skip and a jump north of the Iowa state line.

"We told my folks we were going to Iowa for the weekend," says Owens. Instead, he and his best friend, Lee Harris, both about 15, crossed the Rockies and drove to California. "I'd never seen a palm tree or the ocean before," Owens continues. "I said to myself, 'This is where I've got to be.'"

But he was still a kid. The '50s had barely dawned, and his dreams were still on the drawing board. "I didn't know whether I was going to be a cartoonist or

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