

# NETWORKS

## PROGRAM SUPPLIERS



REED BUNZEL

### INTERVIEW WITH GARY OWENS

# The World According To Gary

The voice and face are everywhere — from “Laugh-In” to “The Gong Show” to “Soundtrack of the '60s” and “Sesame Street.” With his hand deftly cupped behind his ear, Gary Owens’s mellifluous intonations have, in one way or another, found their way into virtually every American home. Now well into his fourth decade of broadcasting, Gary Owens is an incurable workaholic, shuttling from TV to voice work to radio and back to TV. This week’s column features the man behind the voice, discussing the man behind the voice — as well as his latest radio endeavor: Gary Owens’ “Supertracks,” from the Creative Radio Network.

**R&R:** It seems as if Gary Owens has been around as long as rock and roll itself — in radio, television, movies, and syndication. Can you summarize — in 25 words or less — how it all began?

**GO:** You don’t mean from day one, do you?

**R&R:** Actually, we don’t have room for the entire “Gary Owens Story” — so why don’t you start with your arrival in Los Angeles?

**GO:** All right. My first job in Hollywood was writing for television and doing cartoons. I’ve probably done about 1200 cartoons since I first came here, including “Bullwinkle,” “Fractured Fairytales,” “Space Ghost,” “Penelope Pitstop,” “Scooby Doo,” and “Roger Ramjet,” to name just a few. I also did “Laugh-In,” “McHale’s Navy,” “Bewitched,” “The Munsters,” and a lot of other TV. Of course, I’d been doing radio for years, and I kept that up as well. I got into syndication in the ‘60s — the good old days when I did “Gary Owens’s Special Report” with Mel and Noel Blanc — and continued it to the present, through “Soundtrack of the ‘60s” with ABC Watermark. All in all I’ve worked with six syndication companies, and they’ve all been successful. I guess I’ve been in syndication for quite some time.

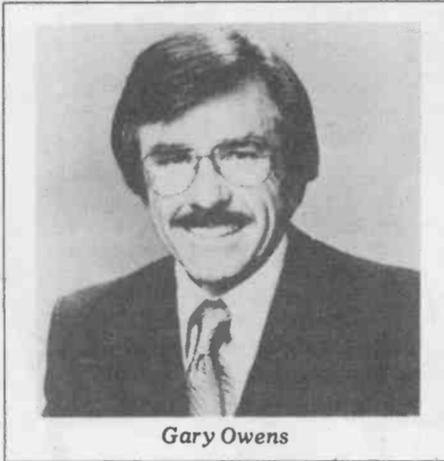
#### Radio’s Reaction

**R&R:** You’ve been doing radio and TV since the days before a lot of today’s jocks were born. Speaking from experience, how do you think they compare?

**GO:** The difference between radio and TV is the reaction of the audience. In radio the audience reaction is wonderful. For instance, when I helped the Three Stooges get a star on the walk of fame here, I got over 20,000 letters from everywhere. There is tremendous response on radio. The big difference is when they see you on TV, people will stop you on the street. They can’t stop a disembodied voice, because they don’t know what the face looks like. If TV has anything over radio, it is the adulation.

**R&R:** But you still prefer radio over television?

**GO:** I love radio. The thing is — I suppose I probably could have retired from radio six or seven years ago, and a lot of people thought I would when Golden West went Talk over at KMPC. But I still hadn’t had my fill of radio. When you do radio it takes a long time to get it out of your system. It gives the brain a great challenge every day. I do radio because I love it, and I always have. There’s a great emotional thrill — something Carl Jung has probably written



Gary Owens

about — that happens when you do something right and it just happens.

**R&R:** Can you get that from television as well as radio?

**GO:** I think you get it from anything you enjoy. I enjoy doing everything I do. I try to do it all these days just because I like to. That’s what life should be about — you have to have a little escapism, a little utopian village you can go to in your mind.

**R&R:** Obviously the money helps a bit.

**GO:** Of course. I love what I’m doing, but the money is nice, too. I grew up in an atmosphere where my folks said, “You have to be a businessman as well as being a performer.” This is just good common sense, because most of us know good creative people who just don’t invest. A lot of people end up slurping the braised beaver fetlock soup down at Goodwill Rescue Mission Number 8 for the rest of their lives.

#### From “Soundtrack” To “Supertracks”

**R&R:** Let’s make a clean segue now into syndication — and your latest enterprise. First — why did ABC Watermark cancel “Soundtrack of the 60s”?

**GO:** I don’t really know what happened. I was with the show for 3 1/2 years. I replaced Murray The K, who asked me to take over when he was ill. I talked it over with Tom Rounds and gave it serious thought. “Soundtrack” was a wonderful show, but it wasn’t the kind of show I had been used to doing — all of my shows prior to that were a little more silly. I guess Ben Hoberman and Ed McLaughlin at ABC perhaps felt that “Soundtrack” was not in the mainstream of what they were doing at the network. The network just wanted to diminish several of their programs, and concentrate on Casey Kasem’s “American Top 40” and Bob Kingsley’s “American Country

## Network Spots . . .

**Radio Espanol**, the Spanish-language network of **Westwood One**, will premiere its “En Concierto” program with **Menudo** on April 28. On that day Westwood One will also be offering two live stereo satellite simulcasts, one featuring **Culture Club**, the other spotlighting the **Hagar/Schon/Aaronson/Shrleve Band**. . . Houston-based **Starstream Communications Group** recently completed its Miller High Life “Rock To Riches” talent search by handing rock group **24 Karat** the “national title” following the National Finals at the Hollywood Palace. First prize included \$25,000 of sound equipment and a recording contract with **MCA Records**. . . **Syndicate It** is now offering “Olympic Dreams,” a daily two-minute syndicated program featuring the Olympics. The

show, scheduled to air for 13 weeks from May 14 through the end of the 1984 Summer Games, includes interviews and comments from current Olympic hopefuls. . . Oakland-based **The Syndicate** is marketing a daily three-minute program, “The Sound Economist,” with UCLA professor **William Allen** on a free, market exclusive basis. . . **Mark Richards of The Game Show Co.** is preparing to offer his “Radio Game Show” format to stations across the country. Designed to air one hour each day, Monday through Friday, the program plays at least eight games, including radio versions of “Family Feud,” “Tic Tac Dough,” and “Jeopardy.” The one-hour format will also enable stations to program at least seven songs per hour.

**Countdown.** What may have happened is that the ‘60s was a wonderfully specialized time, but it’s only a ten-year period. That’s why my new “Supertracks” will deal with the ‘50s, ‘60s, ‘70s — some music from today, too.

**R&R:** Obviously you’d like to say a few words about your new venture. What is Gary Owens’ “Supertracks” about?

**GO:** Supertracks will contain three magic eras. We’ll start with the ‘50s with **Fats Domino**, then go into the ‘60s, and touch on the ‘70s with **Neil Diamond**. Plus we’ll have some surprises with today’s music, too. There’s nothing that says because you’re doing a nostalgia show you can’t feature some things today.

**R&R:** Nostalgia-type shows deal with a lot of “remember when” segments. Is it possible to have a show that blends reminiscent facts with the Gary Owens brand of humor?

**GO:** “Soundtrack of the ‘60s” had a lot of facts, although we didn’t have some of the zany things I like to do. I always include facts of whatever memorabilia there is. If I come up with an anecdote there might be a joke connected with it, but the anecdote is real, because, after all, I was there. I became a DJ in the ‘50s at that wonderful time when everything was breaking loose. Rock and roll evolved from the earlier music from the ‘40s, but it didn’t really get the nomenclature until **Alan Freed** started doing something about it in Cleveland — as well as **Tod Storz** and **Gordon McLendon**. I learned from those people. It was a wonderful time in radio. I worked with **Elvis**, **Buddy Holly**, then the **Beatles** come along. I’ve just been so fortunate for being in the right place at the right time. I’m dwelling on all this because that is sort of the time we’ll include with “Supertracks.”

**R&R:** When **ABC Watermark** decided to cancel “Soundtrack,” you had a number of offers from a number of companies to develop a new syndicated show. Why did you decide on this show, and the Creative Radio Network?

**GO:** I had maybe nine or ten offers when the “Soundtrack” story broke in **Radio & Records**, and I weighed them all very carefully — but I had to hurry, because I didn’t want a gap between my old show and my new one. I went with this one because I’ve known **Tom Shovan** and **Darwin Lamm** for a lot of years. I knew them when they were **Sacco and Vanzetti**, selling syndication on the street corners of New York. They’re very imaginative, they love bizarre humor, and they love research — and we will have a lot of research on this show. We’re not just going to say “Here’s a tune from 1958” and let it go at that. There will be a lot of Gary Owens in it. In the framework of my last show we didn’t do that. We were silly at times, but not outlandish. This will give the stations something to talk about.

#### Preserving Spontaneity

**R&R:** A lot of your humor is off-the-cuff, culled from an overactive imagination. Do you lose a bit of that when you do a taped, syndicated show?

**GO:** With syndication you don’t really lose the spontaneity of live radio. We play the intro and the outro to the record. For instance, you go into the **Beatles** and say “And now: the Beatles, with ‘I Want To Hold Your Hand.’” At the very last part you come out of it, and if you’ve got hand jokes — or hand jobs — you go with that. The spontaneity is still there.

**R&R:** As you mentioned before, you started in radio back when it was still radio — when it was still personality. What’s happened to all that?

**GO:** I think personality will always win in radio. I think some people — probably a lot of consultants — lost sight of what radio was there for. A radio station exists to make as much money as it can, and there are ways to do that. You can certainly hire the lowest priced people in the world, but the audience isn’t going to remember them when it comes to ratings, which affects advertising — and advertising is how you make your money. Personalities have been the big thing ever since radio began, and that’s why a personality is more lasting in a market than a non-personality — the guy who just does time and temperature. The personality resurgence came after the ‘70s, which was when everyone withdrew and said, “We’re paying too much for these guys, so let’s find some guys who’ll give us a good job and work eight hours a day.”



CREATIVE  
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**R&R:** So is personality really coming back?

**GO:** Well, what happened was they discovered that the non-personality thing really didn’t work. They discovered that the people who cause the commotion are the personalities. This has always been the case. It was true in the ‘50s, ‘60s, and early ‘70s. What they found was you make money by spending money. It brings to mind the old adage, “Some people know the cost of everything but the value of nothing.” You get what you pay for. The sad thing is for a long time there weren’t that many new personalities coming up, because everyone needs role models — and there weren’t any.

Then a few years ago some smart programmers went against the tide and mounted a coup. They went and hired a couple of personalities for their station, because they not only build ratingwise, but also businesswise. They knew that was the key — to get as many blue-chip accounts as they could, and keep them for 52 weeks a year.

And, speaking of mounting a coup, **Queen Elizabeth** was a bit worried about **Prince Andrew** for exactly the same reason.