

RUTH MEYER: THE FIRST LADY

"She was really ahead of her time and showed 'em all"

In the Middle East a woman can be arrested for being in a car with a man who's not her husband. In the United States during the 1950s a woman who wanted to program a radio station couldn't get arrested. But there was an exception. Her name is Ruth Meyer.

Meyer lived in Kansas City. She was 18 and wanted to be a newspaper reporter, but newspapers only gave jobs to those with experience. So, in desperation, she started pitching local radio stations for a job writing commercials. It was either that or secretarial school. Destiny intervened when KCKN, a 250-watt AM, hired Meyer as a continuity writer. She was also allowed to pick music for the station.

Todd Storz, one of the fathers of Top 40, was in his 20s then. When he came to Kansas City to run the station he'd just bought, WHB, he heard about Ruth and offered her a job. Meyer says that Storz taught her the basics and "made radio so exciting to me that I never wanted to do anything else."

THE BIG APPLE

People (read *men*) who were established in radio laughed at the idea of playing 40 records, but the disciples of Storz and Gordon McLendon knew better. In 1958, at the urging of WMGM/New York talent Peter Tripp — who knew her from Kansas City — Meyer went to New York. WMGM management didn't get the fundamentals of Top 40, however, and after only three months Meyer accepted a job across town at WMCA.

Her title was Production Director, but she did everything a PD does. In those days, though, a woman didn't get the title. Today Meyer laughs about it and insists that she's not bitter. She does acknowledge, however, that if she'd been a man, she would have gotten a lot further in her career. "Everyone used to ask, 'Who's really programming the station?'" she says, "because they didn't believe a woman could be doing it."

"I wanted to do the stuff that I heard in my imagination. I didn't think of myself as a woman program director, but as a programmer." She also says that it never occurred to her to fight for women's rights.

Meyer was at WMCA. The phone rang. On the other end was Bob Sharon, a friend from Kansas City. Sharon told her that Chuck Blore, the Program Director of KFVB/Los Angeles, was using a line on

the air that she should know about. Blore, he said, was calling the KFVB airstaff "The Good Guys," but not really doing much with it.

"I got excited and wanted to use the phrase on WMCA, but my boss thought it was a dumb idea," says Meyer. WABC/New York started using the line. It drove Meyer crazy. So, despite her boss' objections, she started to use Good Guys on the air and to build a team around the name.

TEAM BUILDING

At first the men at WMCA didn't take Meyer very seriously.

"The talent thought of me as a 'Dotty Dippy' and humored me by doing what I told them to do," she says. One of the things she told them was that they didn't have to like each other but that they had to behave as if they did. She wanted a united front.

Despite their skepticism, the WMCA Good Guys — among them Joe O'Brien, Harry Harrison, Jack Spector, Dan Daniel, B. Mitchell Reed and Gary Stevens — played along and found out that being a team worked.

Stevens, now a successful broker, says Ruth was ahead of her time. "In retrospect," he says, "I believe her appointment to PD was a function of management's disdain for the programming function and its desire to assert control over what it figured would be a weak leader. They were to be disappointed on both counts."

The team — and this may be hard to believe — had the same haircuts, dressed alike (sometimes in their Good Guy sweatshirts) and showed up everywhere together. Record hops, personal appearances — you name it, the Good Guys were there. Ruth even wrote a song called "We're the Good Guys" that the station played. WMCA was a big deal, but Meyer grabbed no credit. "I wanted the jocks to be the stars," she says.

Did she get any recognition from her peers or the radio press of the day? "None whatsoever, but I didn't need a lot of adulation," she says. "I got my kicks from watching it all happen."

GOING COUNTRY

In 1968 Meyer left WMCA and, from her base in New York, consulted Radio Luxembourg and Radio Caroline, stations that defined radio for England and Western Europe in the late '60s.

In 1973 she took on a new challenge.

WMGM/New York had been middle of the road — Sinatra, Ella, etc. — but the plan was to change the call letters to WHN and to change the format. "I didn't like Country," Meyer says. "In fact, when I found out, I quit." But when she overheard someone in the sales department complaining, "Country will never work in New York," she changed her mind and agreed to stay for a year.

WHN, at 50,000 watts, was New York's first full-time Country outlet. "You started to hear it in cabs," says Steve Warren, the station's first country Music Director, who's now with Sirius Radio. "We started to bring artists in to do concerts, and the advertising community became aware of us."

As she'd done at WMCA, Ruth Meyer stayed behind the scenes and built her team. "Ruth was never an attention grabber," says Warren, "because she worked with people who knew how to grab attention, and anything that would pull focus from them was counterproductive."

Her radio stations are always built on personality, he says, and one of Meyer's great talents was that she "marshaled groups of extremely talented and diverse people and aimed them in the same direction, like a ball team."

Warren explains that WHN was a great New York radio station that happened to play country music, which isn't much of a departure from what today's great Country stations are, is it?

BACK HOME AGAIN

After WHN Meyer went to WNEW for a short time, where she worked with a sales guy named Karmizan, and then returned to WMCA to lead its new Talk format. That's where she discovered Sally Jessy Raphael.

In 1978 Meyer was named VP/Programming at the NBC Radio Network and was instrumental in creating *The Source*. "We did concerts and news and even created a program called *Sex, Drugs and Rock and Roll*," she says. "That drove NBC management bananas."

From there she went to the ABC Radio Network but found that "women were almost invisible and had no impact on decisionmaking" there. Frustrated, Meyer returned to WHN.

Today Meyer lives in Kansas City again and has trouble listening to radio. "I always want to fix the problems I hear," she explains.

So what does she do? "I listen to Sports radio, because I don't know anything about it," she says.

She does know a lot about teams however. And, Ruth, we sure do miss what you brought to the game.

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

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