

Mike Joseph: A Top 40 Pioneer

Legendary programmer has influenced PDs in six decades

By Ron Rodrigues

Editor-In-Chief
ronr@ronline.com

There aren't many radio pioneers around these days. After all, most of the formats are derivatives of things that originated years ago.

However, nearly a half century ago Mike Joseph had to invent new concepts in radio. The medium was quickly being replaced by television as the country's primary nighttime entertainment, and programmers were being asked to come up with new things for listeners to tune in to. With the dawn of rock 'n' roll in the mid-'50s, Joseph developed a new format and ended up influencing generations of PDs.

GETTING STARTED

Joseph grew up in Youngstown, OH, a city of steel mills not far from Cleveland. Like many of Great Lakes cities in the 1930s, Youngstown thrived on the booming demand for automobiles. And, like many blue-collar communities of the day, it was a mosaic of ethnic neighborhoods.

During the week, following classes at St. Brendan's Elementary School, 9-year-old Joseph would tend bar at his father's tavern, chatting it up with the steelworkers who stopped in at the end of their shifts. "I would pick the songs on the jukebox," recalls Joseph. "Between that and my ability to entertain all these guys, I was destined for a career in radio."

On the weekend he led hymns at Catholic mass and visited his uncles. One of them owned the No. 1 nightclub in town, and another was a \$35-per-week staff announcer at WKBN, the 5,000-watt Youngstown station whose signal spanned the upper Midwest.

Joseph pursued his love of music in high school. He became an accomplished percussionist and a classical music devotee. "High school was a virtual United Nations," he says. "Each kid would bring a different perspective on music with him or her. The more ethnic they were, the more rhythmic the music was. I was fascinated by all of it."

RADIO GROUPIE

Joseph's dad wanted him to study medicine, but after a year of pre-med studies at Western Reserve College in Cleveland Joseph decided to switch to pre-law. Broadcasting programs didn't exist in those days, but Mike made up for it by taking courses in drama, speech and music history. One of his classes required him to scrutinize the *New York Times* each week.

While pulling all-nighters, Joseph would alternate between listening to Dave Garroway on WMAQ/Chicago and an all-night jazz show on WJZ/New York, later to be known as WABC, a client of Joseph's consulting practice (a story we'll save for a future episode).

During college, besides acting and announcing part-time, Joseph was a radio groupie, spending all his spare time hanging out at various Cleveland and Youngstown studios, peppering PDs with questions, watching the jocks in the booth and assisting the announcers with their tasks. He also frequented the ballroom circuit, checking out the top big bands in America, such as Tommy Dorsey, Duke Ellington, Count Basie and Xavier Cugat.

"I interviewed them for the radio stations — what an experience," Joseph says. He even had an *Almost*

Famous moment, watching Frank Sinatra and Cugat cavort with a young starlet on a tour bus while he conducted interviews.

In college, Mike's advisor was Chaplain Paul Hollinan, a priest who later became the first Archbishop of Atlanta and leader of the ecumenical council in Rome. He was a trailblazer who integrated the Catholic church in the South. Joseph's parish, led by Hollinan, was the first to conduct the dialogue mass in English.



Mike Joseph

A BIG DECISION

As Joseph's college years came to a close, he had to make a decision: broadcasting or acting. Hollinan suggested radio. Joseph took his advice, but finding a job in his hometown was difficult. The Youngstown stations demanded that he have no less than three years' experience before he would qualify for a full-time job, so he ventured to the town of Coshocton, OH for a news/PD/announcing job at WTNS, a daytimer with variety programming.

Joseph migrated to WJEF/Grand Rapids in 1952. It was a prestigious CBS affiliate that featured the likes of Arthur Godfrey, Edward Murrow and other radio stars of the day. The station also had a once-a-week countdown of the biggest *Billboard* hits.

By 1955 Joseph saw the future. Rock 'n' roll dominated the sales charts and teens flocked to record stores to buy the new music, but the radio industry largely ignored the genre. Joseph knew it was time to find a station that would play Rock music. He came across a four-station chain called Founders, owned by the brother-in-law of popular newsman Hugh Downs. One of the stations was WDAC/Flint, MI, a directionless, underperforming outlet.

After convincing Founders to make the switch to Rock, Joseph practically lived in Flint's record stores. He relentlessly grilled store managers about what was selling and who was buying. He wanted to know the ages, genders and ethnic backgrounds of the buyers. He cross-referenced this data with the neighborhoods these customers came from. This, in 1956, was the first research conducted for Top 40 radio.

What Joseph discovered was that young music fans were far more open-minded about music than anyone realized. Flint was home to an automobile assembly line and drew a white and black labor force primarily from the lower Mississippi valley. Thus, everything from rockabilly to R&B was popular. Bo Diddley, Little Richard and Elvis Presley, among other emerging artists on independent labels, were on the leading edge of a new sound in America, and they became fixtures on Joseph's playlists.

Joseph then began to recruit an airstaff. Included in the stack of audition tapes was one from a green but promising 21-year-old just out of the Army. There was a problem, however: The jock's name was Joseph McCarthy — the same as the reviled Communist-hunting U.S. Senator from Wisconsin. Joseph changed McCarthy's name to "Jay McCarthy," and he went on to become a Detroit legend at WJR and other stations.

Then Joseph had to build a format. He remembered the lessons he'd learned while directing radio dramas: Keep the action moving, don't leave a second of dead air, use jingles, and limit the talk segments to 10 seconds.

OVERNIGHT SUCCESS

In the first Hooper ratings, WDAC jolted the entire industry with a breathtaking 85 share. Joseph was appointed PD for the entire Founders group and immediately dispatched to Honolulu to ready KPOA for a similar format.

As he had in Flint, Joseph planted himself in the market and learned everything he could about his potential listeners and competitors. He found a young local prospect by the name of Ron Jacobs to program the station, and the results were quite satisfying.

In 1958 Joseph was sent to the company's New Orleans stations, where he came face to face with the two godfathers of Top 40 radio. WTIW was a Todd Storz station, while WNOE belonged to Gordon McClendon. The stations were beating each others' brains out, as Top 40 competitors did in those days, and Founders decided to initiate a three-way battle by switching its WSMB to the format.

Until then Joseph hadn't faced a direct competitor, but suddenly he had two — and two of the best. WTIW was programmed by Storz gunslinger Bill Stewart, while WNOE was under the guidance of the legendary Don Keys.

Joseph arrived in the Crescent City, sat himself in a hotel room for about a month and a half and kept meticulous program logs of both stations. He would write down every element he heard — song titles, promos, spots and news. In between listens Joseph would spend hours in New Orleans' record stores, watching who was buying what.

By the time his research was complete, Joseph had decided that his best offense would be to hit his competitors "where they ain't." All stations had enormous news commitments in those days. Many were still affiliated with networks, which meant they ran five minutes of news at the top of each hour. Joseph decided to play music when his competitors were in talk segments. If a station had a five-minute newscast, he would counterprogram a countdown of the top two songs. If a newscast was 10 minutes, the countdown would include the top three songs. He even had a plan if a competitor had an hourlong talk block: a countdown of 15 records.

Joseph also instituted dayparting, which allowed him to soften the station's sound while students were in class and to assume a harder edge when they got out. He made sure he knew the start and end times of classes throughout the market, as well as school holidays.

The results were the same as before: No. 1 in one book.

THE FIRST CONSULTANCY

Founders had no more stations for Joseph to program, but the company permitted him to work with other stations on a contract basis — thus, the first radio consultancy was born. Among his first clients: WKBW/Buffalo.

Joseph's playbook was now set in stone: He went into a market and researched it for weeks. He then recruited an airstaff (many of whom came from McClendon and Storz stations, since there was nowhere else to find Top 40 talent) and trained them in his philosophies. After the training was complete, Joseph would pick the best student and recommend him for program director.

Many of Joseph's students will tell you that he is precise and demanding. Joseph explains that his precision is a result of years of tweaking his vision of Top 40 radio. And Joseph subscribes to one basic tenet that informs all of his other rules: "Give the listeners what they want, and the ratings will follow."