Mike Joseph: A Top 40 Pioneer

Legendary programmer has influenced PDs in six decades

By Ron Rodrigues

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 America, such as Tommy Dorsey. The medium was quickly being replaced by television as the country’s primary nighttime entertainment. And, like many blue-collar communities of the day, it was a mosaic of ethnic neighborhoods.

Youngstown was the first stop on Joseph’s journey to radio. His first job was at WBN, 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 University of Music,” he says. That would provide 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.”

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 WIZ/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 hotspots, 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 the area.

One weekend, while hanging out at the Rochester Midget World’s Fair, a news story broke about the recent Big Band Baby Boomers Maurice Ravelle. Joseph didn’t have much to do, so he went to the fair to see what was going on. It turns out that Ravelle was conducting a symphony orchestra. Joseph, intrigued by the conductor’s style, decided to follow his career and eventually became a close friend.

Joseph’s career began in earnest in 1958 when he took a job at WJEF/Flint, MI, the week after the pop music legend Bing Crosby died. He was one of the few announcers who actually knew Crosby personally. Joseph’s next job was at WANE/Tonawanda, NY, where he was the first PD to use jingles in their programming.

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

**OVERTIME SUCCESS**

In the first Hooper ratings, WDAC jolted the entire industry with a breathing 85 share. Joseph was appointed PD for the entire Founders group and immediately dispatched to Honolulu to ready KJOA 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 Jacobson 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 good fathers of Top 40 radio. WTIX was a Todd Storz station, while WNOE belonged to Gordon McClendon. The stations were beating each other’s 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. WTIX was programmed by Storz geniuses 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 programming logs of both stations. He would write down every element he heard — song titles, promos, spots and news. In between 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 pioneered dayparting, which allowed him to segment the station’s sound while students were in class and 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.

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