



DAN O'DAY

AIR PERSONALITIES

The Babe Ruth Of Radio

Most of us are familiar with Gary Owens' credits: the voice of tens of thousands of radio and television commercials and animated cartoons, the Emmy he won for his contributions to "Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In," his comedy records, his early careers as cartoonist and sportswriter, and his charity work. For me, he will always be to disc jockeys what Babe Ruth was to baseball players: an awesome talent and an inspiration.

In this two-part interview, Owens talks about his early radio years, Todd Storz, Gordon McLendon, and Chuck Blore... about employers as small as KORN in Mitchell, SD, and as large as KMPC in Los Angeles... about silly jokes and blue material... and about successes and disappointments. I spoke with him just a few days before he began his most recent air personality assignment at KFI/Los Angeles.

R&R: Your dad was a sheriff?

OWENS: Yes, my father was a sheriff, and my mother was an English teacher. My father had a stroke and was very ill for the last 15 years of his life, so he couldn't sheriff any more. My mother had to get a job that paid more than an English teacher made, so she ran for office and won as County Auditor in Plankinton, South Dakota. Plankinton sounds like something that would wash up on shore.

R&R: Yeah, it sounds like something Jacques Cousteau might eat.

OWENS: Yes, he ate the whole town, and it caused \$1.49 in damages.

R&R: Tell me about your first radio job at KORN.

OWENS: I was still in high school when I started there, doing summer replacement newscasting. A gentleman named Bob Wood

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was the news director. He did seven newscasts a day, in addition to a sportscast. One day he phoned from California, where he had gone on vacation, and said, "I'm not coming back. I've decided to take a job in California." So I got the job fulltime, even though I probably wasn't ready for it yet.

R&R: Before getting involved in news, had you ever thought about being a disc jockey or an entertainer?

OWENS: No. Well, entertainer, yeah... because there really

wasn't that much difference between being, say, a cartoonist and drawing gags for cartoons and doing them on-the-air, on television, or in movies.

R&R: Was it at KORN that you were asked if you'd ever done disc jockey work?

OWENS: No, that was when I went to Omaha. I applied for a job as a newscaster, where I met Don Burden and Chick Crabtree. Chick was a man with a tremendous voice, and Don was a man with a tremendous temper. I didn't know that Don even existed. Chick hired me as a newscaster to work the early morning show. Then suddenly the morning disc jockey quit.

They were understaffed at the time, so they said, "You know how to run these turntables, don't you?" And I said, "Of course I do." I had no idea how to run a turntable. There were six turntables - three on each side - a lavalier microphone, two Magnecorder recorders... and you had to stand during the whole show.

This was around 1956, and it was a very fast-paced station, because they were competing with Todd Storz. The first day was the most horrible time I can remember. I kept goofing every record. During the first five minutes on the air at six in the morning, I probably made five technical errors. At that point, Don was back in town. He stormed into the booth and said, "Oh, God! You are the shittiest disc jockey I've ever heard in my life! How did you ever get hired here?" I didn't know who he was, so I said, "Well, thanks a lot." I didn't know he was the owner of the station. So I continued in my myriad of technical difficulties. Afterwards Don was just shaking his head, muttering, "Oh, God!" There's no question about it: I really was bad.

So I went back to our apartment - our dingy little tarpaper lean-to apartment - and rang the doorbell. My wife Arieta says I just stood there while a tear trickled from my eye, and I said I wanted to go back and write for Associated Press, which I had done while I was in school. She said, "Well, just give yourself one month. If you don't improve, you can always go back. But give yourself 30 days." And I did, and I guess I became

pretty good because I did beat Todd Storz in the morning. That was at the very beginning of rock & roll, and it was very competitive. I remember at the Christmas party that year at the Blackstone Hotel in Omaha, one of the waiters brought Storz beer. That's the Storz family, and Burden got so angry he picked up one of the bottles of beer and threw it through a stained glass window!

I'll never forget the second day I was there. I'm in an office which I shared with George Dunlevy and Jim Price, who were disc jockeys there. I've been a diabetic since I was nine years old, and I'm taking an insulin injection. Burden opens the door to my office, and here I am with a needle in my hand, ready to inject myself in the arm. So not only does Burden think I'm a lousy disc jockey, but now I have to explain this, too.

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R&R: Your next job was at KIMN/Denver?

OWENS: Yes. Ted Nelson was the program director. Now he's Vice-President of the Hilton Hotel in Las Vegas. Years later I asked him, "How did you know about me when I was in Omaha?" He said, "I got a tape on you." I said, "I never sent you a tape." "No," he said, "Todd Storz sent it."

R&R: Storz wanted you out of the market?

OWENS: That's right, and it was great for me. I went to a large city for more money.

R&R: During those first few years as a disc jockey, were you formulating any kind of career plan?

OWENS: I was just taking it from day to day. The only plan was I wanted to work in California. When I was 14 years old, my buddy Lee Harris and I both drove out here, and I fell in love with Santa Monica. We came in at 3am and saw the palm trees and the ocean, heard the waves crash against the shore, and I said, "This is where I want to live."

R&R: Where did you go after KIMN?

OWENS: The next stop was for Gordon McLendon and Don Keyes, who was Gordon's national program director. I learned a lot about radio there, too. I learned how to have a good time as a disc jockey,

to make it succinct, make it happen - but also make it funny. That's what they stressed. And McLendon always told me, "You should prepare an hour off the air for every hour on the air." And I've always kept those tenets... pretty much.

R&R: But you don't still do that today, with your schedule?

OWENS: Well, almost that. At least 40 minutes for every hour.

R&R: What did you do for McLendon?

OWENS: I was kind of a trouble-shooter for Gordon's chain. I worked for all of his stations, except the one in El Paso. I worked in New Orleans at WNOE and at KTSA/San Antonio... KLIF and KLLT very briefly... and then I worked for WIL/St. Louis. I was on in the mornings and Jack Carney was on in the afternoons.

R&R: What brought you to California from St. Louis?

OWENS: Chuck Blore, who was head of programming for the Crowell-Collier stations, called me one day and said, "Gary, we're going to do in San Francisco what we've done in Los Angeles with KFVB. We've just purchased KEWB, a Classical station in Oakland. We're going to make it into rock & roll, and we'd like to have you be the morning man."

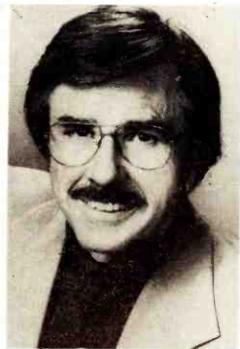
I said, "That's great, Chuck! Tell me about it!" And he said, "Well, let's talk about everything except money." It was about \$12,000 a year less than I was making in St. Louis.

I talked to my wife about it. I said, "I don't know what to do." and she said, "Well, let's think about it." That evening a tornado leveled the place next to ours, and guess who got on the phone the next morning! I said, "Chuck, I'm sure there's a bonus that can be worked out." And there was. He said he'd give me a \$5000 bonus if I could beat Don Sherwood, who did mornings at KSFO in San Francisco and had never been beaten.

Don was a powerhouse. I didn't know how hard it would be to get that \$5000, but within the first year I beat Sherwood. I believe I had a 25 share, and he had a 24. We had a great total sound, as you must with a successful CHR station, and we became #1 in a very short period of time.

R&R: What was Chuck like to work for?

OWENS: As a program director, he was a very methodical man who had great vibrancy and great euphoria. We'd have program meetings, and he'd be filled with kinetic energy: "C'mon, gang, let's go get 'em!" It was euphoric; he would bring our spirits up to say, "Yeah! We are the best, we are number



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one, we're the top radio station in the world!" He was a very good leader.

R&R: Given that Chuck was a methodical person who liked to plot things out, did that type of personality allow you to go on the air and break rules?

OWENS: Well, I never really was one to break rules.

R&R: I guess I'm asking if you ever felt stifled there.

OWENS: No, I didn't, because what he said made sense. It was like the McLendon format, to make things succinct. But if you wanted to tell a joke, you'd tell a joke. If the joke took 30 seconds, that was okay. He did leave room for a lot of levity, a lot of freedom of creativity. So you knew the format up front. You had to play 17 or 18 records per hour, then you knew up front that your job was to make that program as entertaining as you could, given the limitations.

Even in those days I would have the opening line and the end line of each commercial written out for me by the traffic department. So if I was going into, say, a Chevrolet commercial that opened with, "We haven't heard anything that good in 50 years," then I might say something like, "You know, I real-

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ly don't feel good today. As a matter of fact, I'm going to go hang myself with an eel down in La Jolla." And then the announcer would say, "We haven't heard anything that good in 50 years!"

So I could write intro lines and outro lines. It's like the Question Man, which Bob Arbogast created many years ago for Steve Allen. Since then it's been followed by the Great Carnac on "The Tonight Show" and the game show "Jeopardy," where you work inside out. You've already got the line; now make something funny happen with it.

NEXT TIME: KFVB, KMPC, Zoo formats... and "Premature Jubilation."