The Babe Ruth Of Radio

Most of us are familiar with Gary Owens's credits: the thousands of hours on 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 disc jockey Gary Owens on the baseball team players: an awesome talent and an inspiration.

In this two-part interview, Owens talks about his early radio years, Todd Storz, Gordon McLeod, and Chuck Blorre, employs the language of the KOMP 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 had gone on 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 in ill for the last 20 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 officer 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 doing summer replacement newscasting. A gentleman named Bob Wood

"The first day in Omaha was the most horrible time I can remember. Don Burden stormed into the booth and said 'Oh God, you are the shittiest disc jockey I've ever heard in my life! I really was bad.'"

was the news director. He did seven newscasts a day, in addition to a sportscast. One day he phoned from California where he was on vacation, and said, "I'm not coming back. I've decided to take a job in California." 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 ever did jazz or 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 very picky, and a tremendous temper. I didn't know that Don even existed; Chuck hired me on the very early morning show. Then suddenly the morning disc jockey quit. That was 1958, I think, I've got my time right, 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 lavaliere microphone, two Magnetrol 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 going every record. During the first five minutes of 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! 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! 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! 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! 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! 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! 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.

So I went back to our apartment in our dirty little tarpaper lease apartment and rang the doorbell. My wife Arleta 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 the military. I gave you 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, who was a better disc jockey. That was at the very beginning of rock and 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.

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

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

R&R: What did you do for McLeod?

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 KYA in San Antonio... KLIF and KLIT very briefly... and then I worked for WFLM in St. Louis. I was in on the mornings and John Carney was on in the afternoons.

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

OWENS: Chuck Blorre, 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 KFMB. We've just purchased KEBW, 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, "I've got a tag on you, Sid. 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, I fell in love with Santa Monica and said, "This is where I want to live."

I was just taking it from day to day. The only plan was I wanted to work in California. When I was 14, I fell in love with Santa Monica and said, "This is where I want to live."