Dick Clark Before Bandstand

By 1983 Dick Clark’s radio career was nearing 40 years, and he had also started, with partners Nick Verbitsky and Ed Samson, United Stations Radio Networks. That year Clark began doing TV endorsement spots for AC/KOST/Los Angeles, a concept that has since been syndicated to markets nationwide.

The career of America’s first national pop music DJ started at the tender age of 13. “I saw a radio show done by Garry Moore and Jimmy Durante and decided that’s what I wanted to do,” explains Dick Clark. In 1946, when Clark was 16, his uncle, who owned a newspaper in their hometown of Utica, NY, sought help from Clark’s dad to get a new radio station on the air. Clark’s father had been in the cosmetics business, but broadcasting appealed to him, and he remained in radio until his retirement. The younger Clark recalls starting in the station’s mailroom, but he was soon on the air on the FM station, which he says “nobody listened to in those days.”

Clark later attended Syracuse University. “I went to study radio, but they didn’t have a course in it,” he says. So he studied business administration, labeled radio an extracurricular activity and found time to work at 250-watt WOLF. “Prior to the well-known guys, McLeonard and Storz, there was a guy named Sherm Marshall, who hired kids from the college at a dollar an hour,” Clark recalls. Clark did a country show called The WOLF Buckaroos and hosted The Sandmon Serenade, the all-night Top 40 show.

Not long after, Clark was offered the evening news post back in Utica at WKTV-TV, where he did the 6pm and 11pm newscasts. “I probably did it pretty well, because I started getting job offers,” he says. But the GM didn’t want to let him go. “He would call the guy offering me a job and say, ‘You can’t take this kid away,’” Clark says.

So Clark stayed at WKTV-TV but continued to send out tapes. “Like all disc jockeys do, though I was in TV, I said to myself, ‘You need to get into a bigger market.’” he explains.

One day his father called the station manager at WFLI-TV in Philadelphia and said, “I’ve got this kid. Would you have somebody look at him?”

At the audition, Clark says, “They gave me a copy of the contract and said, ‘OK, we’re going to put you in the control room, and we’ll call you after you’ve had a chance to look it over. Just read into the camera.” In Utica Clark had discovered a secret: “We recorded the copy on audiotape and then fed the recording into my ear. They didn’t want I could spit it back at the camera verbatim.”

They called down from the booth: “Are you ready?”

“Yes, I said,” Clark recalls. “And then I reach it back to myself absolutely verbatim. They were flabbergasted, because there wasn’t a TelePrompTer or cue cards. And that’s how got into television in Philadelphia.”

However, WFLI-TV thought he looked too young, so they assigned him a radio show instead and allowed him to do TV fill-in. One of the shows he subbed on was called Bandstand.

On Aug. 5, 1957, Bandstand went national. “We got a seven-week trial,” says Clark. Within four weeks it was the No. 1 daytime TV show in America.