Mike Joseph: A Top 40 Pioneer

More Top 40 program directors cite Mike Joseph as their inspiration than any other consultant. In 2002, Joseph celebrated his 50th year as a full-time radio professional.

Mike Joseph grew up in Youngstown, Ohio. During the week, following classes at St. Brendan’s Elementary School, 9-year-old Joseph would tend bar at his father’s tavern. “I would pick the songs on the jukebox,” Joseph recalls. “Between that and my ability to entertain all these guys, I was destined for a career in radio.”

Joseph’s dad wanted him to study medicine, but after a year of pre-med studies, 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.

During college, besides acting and announcing part-time, Joseph was a radio groupie. His advisor was Chaplain Paul Holliman, a priest who later became the first Archbishop of Atlanta. As Joseph’s college years came to a close, he had to make a decision: broadcasting or acting. Holliman suggested radio, but finding a job in Joseph’s hometown was difficult. Youngstown stations demanded that he have no less than three years’ experience.

Joseph migrated to WJEF/Grand Rapids in 1952. It 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 had seen 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. One of the stations was WDAF/Flint, MI, a directionless, underperforming outlet. After convincing Founders to make the switch to Rock, Joseph practically lived at record stores. He tirelessly grilled store managers on what was selling and who was buying.

Then he began to recruit an airstaff; then he 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.

In the first Hooper ratings, WDAF joined the entire industry with a breathtaking 8 share. Joseph was appointed PD for the entire Founders group and immediately dispatched to Honolulu to ready KPOA for a similar format.

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. WTIX was a Todd Storz station, while WNOE belonged to Gordon McClenon. 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.

Joseph sat himself in a hotel room for about a month and a half and kept meticulous program logs of both stations. He decided the best offense would be to hit the competitors “where they ain’t.” All stations had enormous news commitments in those days. Joseph decided to play music when his competitors were in talk segments. If a station had a five-minute newsbreak, he would counterprogram a countdown of the top two songs.

Joseph also instilled dayparting, which allowed him to soften the station’s sound while students were in class and assume a harder edge when they got out. The results were the same as before: No. 1 in one book.

Joseph subscribes to one basic tenet that informs all his other rules: “Give the listeners what they want, and the ratings will follow.”