

Radio World®

M A G A Z I N E

Growing Up with New York Radio

by Judith Gross

Sometime in the summer of '64 or '65 it became clear that radio was to be an inseparable part of my life. It was New York City—Queens to be exact—stifling hot and my girlfriends and I hung out at the neighborhood playground and talked music non-stop.

"Do You Want to Know a Secret" had shot to number one and we debated over whether John was better looking than Paul and agreed that all four were cuter than any boys we knew.

We underscored our undying devotion by keeping individual transistor radios glued relentlessly to our ears. What a sight: six pre-adolescents in lipstick, listening separately, together, to the exact same music in an ecstatic clump of love-sickness on an urban summer day.

Radio and Cocoa Puffs

Maybe, because the Big Apple was blessed with so many flagship stations, I took radio for granted, and grew up believing that music, talk, voices of every sort emanating from a little plastic box were as natural as milk for breakfast and the rumble of the elevated subways through ethnic neighborhoods nearby.

My earliest memories are of my father "shushing" us as WNEW-AM's sounder signaled the beginning of the half-hourly newscasts and the all-important weather forecast. Later, when I became a radio newscaster, I imitated those stately, serious five-minute casts that were deeply ingrained in my subconscious.

WNEW gave me a love for the classics of pop: Nat King Cole, Tony Bennett, Ella Fitzgerald. William B. Williams, having inherited the "make believe ballroom," filled me with reverence for The Chairman of the Board, old Blue Eyes himself. To this day, I can't put on my Sinatra CDs without the feeling that I am back in my mother's kitchen, eating Cocoa Puffs and hearing those golden voices from the 1130 dial position.

I discovered transistor radios at the same time I heard The Beatles for the first time on 77, WABC. At five minutes before the hour, when 77 aired ABC news, by reflex we switched over to 540 WMCA for the Good Guys, to hear five more minutes of the Fab Four before that station then aired news and we'd go back down the AM band to what became my radio home for many years after.

Go to sleep

WABC. The avuncular cheer of Harry Harrison, the maniacal laughter of Ron ("Hello Love") Lundy and the double entendres of Kimosabe Big Dan Ingram were my constant companions. Then, at night, everybody's Cousin Brucie Morrow counted down the top 20 songs.

After my mother told me for the third time to go to sleep, I'd

shut out the lights and put the transistor under my pillow, volume just loud enough to hear the songs without giving my insomnia away. WABC's "chime" gave the time at the end of nearly every cut. To this day, there are songs I remember that sound completely unnatural when they end without that little bell.

W-A-Beatle-C was my best friend until college days, when psychedelic FM with its long album cuts, stereophonic fidelity and music-knowledgeable DJs took over. WNEW-FM led the way, with WPIX-FM and later WPLJ-FM, pioneering the new sound that was to force the stations of my childhood into an all-talk format to survive AM's declining popularity.


FM changed everything. Then came the anti-war movement, the protest song era, the LSD quality to the music. I spent a decade on the radio doing news upstate and came back to a different world of New York City radio. Gone were the days when 77 commanded 25 percent of the listening audience. With some 30-40 signals tunable in Gotham, variety, if not loyalty is at least assured.

Smorgasbord for every taste

New York has become a smorgasbord for every niche taste imaginable. I wake up to news on WCBS-AM or WINS. I cringe at Rush Limbaugh on WABC and shake my head at the latest bad-boyism from Howard Stern on WXRK-FM or Imus on WFAN. I can still catch my beloved Mets (in last place, of course) with announcer Bob Murphy on all-sports WFAN. Country, rap, soul, classic rock are all just a push-button away.

WDRE-FM in nearby Long Island pioneers the modern rock sound that has become so much a part of today's mainstream radio; CD-101 (WQCD-FM) introduces a new style of popular jazz; while WBGO-FM across the river in New Jersey sends the sweetest sounds of traditional jazz into a Saturday cocktail rendezvous or brunch on a Sunday afternoon.

Now there's radio to jog through Central Park to; radio to eat takeout to and radio to catch snippets of as we New Yorkers hurry—and we always hurry—from one fast-paced moment to the next.

And on one summer Saturday recently, as I was cabbing it from the east side to the west side through the park, there was Big Dan Ingram's sexy voice, over WCBS-FM on his weekend gig. He was naming the honor group of the day (people who talk with their mouths full) and counting down the songs from the '60s. "Do You Want To Know A Secret" once again filled my ears. I smiled at my radio memories. I was truly home. 

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