

A Dark and Stormy Night

It was a dark and stormy night...Well, not really. It was night, and it was dark, but there was no storm—in fact, it was starry as the pride of Harland and Woolf shipyard, RMS Titanic suffered her death throes.

In distant New York City, a young David Sarnoff sat at his wireless and was the first to receive the message sent by Titanic's radiomen--the ship was lost...Well, probably not.

Radio transmission was still novel in 1912, and on the night of the Titanic tragedy there was still no legal requirement to have a shipboard wireless operator on duty twenty-four hours a day. The fact that the Titanic's transmission was received in New York was surprising.

Sarnoff was a young Jewish immigrant from Russia. He was working as a low-level manager for the Marconi Company which had a lock on radio communications at the time. David was responsible for the Marconi facility operating as a leased department in Wanamaker's New York department store. The transmission was received on a Sunday while the store was closed. The operator on duty would have been one of Sarnoff's two junior assistants, but David Sarnoff was filled with drive, ambition, vision and imagination. In a move that would have brought a smile to P.T. Barnum, the young man claimed to have been the operator on duty, and went on to claim that he did not leave his receiver for three days, making sure he had total control of the continuing maritime drama.

Radio communication was a very different animal from what we know now. In 1912 there was no voice transmission. The spark-gap transmitters of the day allowed only Morse code transmission. Spark gap transmitters were gradually replaced by continuous wave transmitters, and in 1917 the U.S. Patent Office issued a patent to Edwin Armstrong for the superheterodyne receiver. It was the "superhet" that allowed the development of voice and music transmission.

The superheterodyne also allowed for the flowering of Sarnoff's imagination and vision.

Radio, from its genesis was viewed as a point to point service. Companies, Westinghouse was one of the first, set up transmitters and receivers at plants and

offices to allow company communications without the expense and bother of long-distance telephone or telegraph transmission. This was truly narrowcasting.

Sarnoff had bigger ideas. He understood the potential of talking to dozens, or hundreds, or thousands or hundreds of thousands at one time. He saw the power and the profit of broadcasting.

Barnum would have smiled.

Sarnoff sent memo after memo and proposal after proposal to his superiors promoting his ideas for broadcasting—speaking to people in their homes. The memos were ignored. Radio in its narrowcasting form was very profitable during the years of World War I and this experimental venture seemed superfluous.

General Electric purchased Marconi's American assets and created RCA, the Radio Corporation of America. Sarnoff started the pitch for broadcasting again, and again the pitch was ignored.

In 1921 everything changed. Somehow Sarnoff arranged for the radio transmission of the Dempsey-Carpenter fight and more than 300,000 people listened. I am amazed there were enough people with radio receivers to serve an audience this size, and I am curious as to how the count was taken since Arbitron, and Nielson were not part of the landscape.

The Dempsey fight got management's attention. RCA launched WEA, its first broadcasting station in 1925, and immediately created the National Broadcasting Company. WEA soon became WNBC and Sarnoff became NBC's President in 1929.

There were few broadcasting stations in the early years, and programming was unpredictable. All broadcasts were live. There was no tape delay, there were no disc jockeys, and while much of what was on the air was flying by the seat of the pants, the product was ripe with personality.

NBC took broadcasting very seriously. The concept of being invited into the listeners' homes was daunting. In the early years NBC Announcers working the evening shifts were expected to dress in formal attire as they sat alone in an announce booth, viewed only by the director and the engineer in the adjoining control room. NBC also created their own symphony orchestra in 1937. This was

no pick-up group. Arturo Toscanini was the conductor and they were an orchestra of note.

Radio broadcasting bloomed at the perfect moment. Between 1925 and 1929 the networks blossomed, NBC (Red and Blue), CBS and Mutual. To fill the hungry mouth of every day's need for programming, hundreds of shows were created, scripted, produced and broadcast. Lum and Abner, The Bickersons, The Great Gildersleeve, Amos and Andy, Baby Snooks, Jack Benny, Bob Hope, The Shadow, The Green Hornet, Ma Perkins, One Man's Family, sports of all sorts and amazing live music filled the airwaves and in the dark days of the depression allowed families with slim resources a chance for entertainment, drama and relief.

Sarnoff had been right and Barnum was no longer the world's greatest showman.

It is easy to think that all this magic in the ether was coming from New York, but it wasn't. Major production was pouring out of Chicago, Los Angeles and Cincinnati. Ma Perkins, one of the first soap operas, was sponsored by Procter and Gamble's Oxydol and originally produced in Cincinnati for broadcast by NBC, later NBC and CBS concurrently and ran for an astounding 7,065 episodes. Of absolutely no importance, my mother worked for several months as the liaison between Procter corporate and the New York production unit for Ma. My mother left the soap company because she could complete all of her tasks before lunch, but the company refused to give anything to fill the rest of her workday. Neil McElroy sat at the adjoining desk, stuck it out and eventually led the company.

WLW is the most obvious Cincinnati participant in national production and distribution. It along with WOR, a subsidiary of Macy's, WGN, a subsidiary of the Chicago Tribune, and WXYZ of Detroit formed the Mutual Broadcasting System. Mutual provided America with The Lone Ranger, Superman and Orson Welles as the Shadow. Mutual's first live event broadcast was the May twenty-fourth, 1935 airing of the Cincinnati Reds playing the Philadelphia Phillies at Crosley field—the first major league baseball game played under the lights.

WSAI was originally licensed to the U. S. Playing Card Company in Norwood. U. S. Playing Card had an imposing plant featuring a tower with a carillon. WSAI's mission was to broadcast a nightly carillon concert. My uncle, who grew up on nearby Sherman Avenue claimed he would ask his father if they could listen to the

radio broadcast of the carillon and always received the same reply. "You can hear it out on the porch and save the electricity". This was the depression.

U. S. Playing Card soon tired of the burden of radio production and sold the station to WLW. While the Nation's Station carried NBC Blue, WSAI broadcast the programming of NBC Red. The divestiture of NBC Red in the mid 1940s produced today's American Broadcasting Company, a Disney property.

By the time I was born, October fourth, 1946 (the month and day I share with Ruth Lyons, once of WSAI and long of WLW and WLWT, and literarians Tom Cuni, and Stewart Shillito Maxwell) radio had hit its apex. Commercial television was entering the fray, and David Sarnoff was leading the charge.

The smart money said radio was dead. Television would reign supreme.

No one bothered to tell that to radio.

Radio was cheap to produce. It was personal. It was portable. It could be local.

Thousands of small stations sprang up during the 1940s and 50s. Locally WNOP, WCIN, WZIP all came online, filling niches and providing services the big guys couldn't.

Cincinnati's first Black radio host was Ernie Waits who was one of the original staff of Covington's WZIP in 1947. In 1948 he crossed the river to join Rosemary Fischer, Sunny Pollack (daughter of Dr. Sam) and Jimmie Skinner as part of WNOP's charter staff.

I spent my first three years living with my parents in unit 3 of a four-family on Harrison Avenue in Westwood. At about the same time, Jean Shepard, author and voice of the classic holiday film Christmas Story lived several blocks away, and one of WLW's engineers and his wife resided in unit 4, just across the hall. We had no television so my entertainment was watching the number twenty-one streetcar passing by and listening to the large table model Philco radio in our living room. The Philco had been modified to serve as the amplifier and speaker of an outboard seventy-eight rpm record player. I listened to a lot of radio and especially liked Big Jon and Sparky. Locally produced by WSAI and aired nationally on ABC, the show included characters based on Cincinnati notables, including Mayor Plumbfront, a thinly disguised caricature of Cheviot's perennial

Mayor Edward Gingerich. I can still remember the lyrics from the show's theme, A Teddybear's Picnic.

By 1950 we had moved into a house and in 1952 the living room furniture was rearranged to make way for a seventeen inch black and white Philco television with a built in AM-FM radio and three speed record player.

I loved Howdy Doody, Super Circus and Zoo Parade, but the radio was still my favorite, and by age seven I had my own small radio, salvaged from a neighbor's spring cleaning. The case was cracked, but it sounded great and the variety of programming up and down the AM dial left the three tv channels in the dust.

By the late 1950s radio was changing. For years, block programming had prevailed. The same station might air a farm show, a show for women, several hours of pop music, an hour or two of classical and perhaps a ballgame or a fight. Now stations were turning to format branding. All programs were aimed at a specific audience and variety required changing the dial. In Cincinnati WSAI owned the 10 to 30 market. Skinny Bobby Harper, Dusty Rhodes, Ron Britton and Jim Scott had a lock on rock. WCIN had no competition in the Black market, and WCKY covered country and western like no other. WKRC and especially WLW stuck with the traditional block programming and maintained commanding audiences.

Barnum, with his passion for spectacle and the need to have something for everyone, would not have been pleased with this turn of events.

In 1960 Newport's WNOP dropped the block to adopt a jazz format. Jazz seems a format particularly suited for evening and night listening. WNOP was a daytime station. Their one thousand watt signal was regulated by sunrise and sunset. In the summer WNOP was on the air from 6:00 in the morning till 9:00 at night. In winter the broadcast day could shrink to 7:00 am to 6:00 pm.

Despite the unfortunate broadcast schedule WNOP, Radio Free Newport, Skid Row Radio achieved modest success.

A gifted staff including Dick Pike, the bearded bard of the broadcast beat, Ray Scott, the gray wolf, Leo, old undies, Underhill, and Ty Williams knew the music, provided wit, and mixed in a large helping of comedy from Brother Dave Gardener, Moms Mabley, Bob Newhart, Jack Sheldon and Elaine May.

It worked surprisingly well, and the station developed a cult following.

I discovered WNOP by accident one Saturday afternoon in 1960. The format was still new--a total surprise to me, and I was hooked. If I were near a radio during the day, it was tuned to AM 740, WNOP.

After getting my driver's license in 1962 my first project was to learn how to drive to Newport, Kentucky and to locate 608 Monmouth Street, the home of my station. Life was different in 1962. At WNOP security meant locking the front door after signing off for the day. On my first visit the door was wide open and I climbed the stairs, finding the control room on my left with its door propped open as well.

Ray Scott was on the board that afternoon, bringing in a remote from the Coal Hole, a downtown Cincinnati nightclub. Riding the board for a remote was mind-numbing. There was nothing to do for long periods of time, and a two-hour shift could feel like a day. A visitor, even if only a high school sophomore, was a welcome diversion. We were soon on a first name basis.

During the next two and one half years I spent hundreds of hours visiting 'NOP. I learned how to bring in a remote, cue a disc, edit tape and plan a set list. When I first started my visits, WNOP had a United Press Association teletype machine. Their service provided world, state and national news along with regional weather reports. WLW, WKRC and WCKY all had news staffs to cull and edit the hourly five minute newsbreaks. At WNOP, like most small stations, it was a one man show. The host on air pulled his own records from the library, loaded and cued the open reel tape machines, cued and played the records and adlibbed the commentary. If it were past office hours answering the phone was added to the duty roster. There was no time for news editing. It was rip and read.

In 1965 Morehead State University launched a student radio station, WMKY. The Federal Communications Commission had set aside some space at the bottom of the FM dial for educational broadcasting. Few people had FM radios and they were uncommon in cars. The FM dial was considered expendable. Many of the licenses given to universities limited operations to ten watts of power. Morehead was one of these.

The university had invested significantly and the well-equipped new broadcast studio was on the second floor of a four story classroom building. The station's antenna was mounted to a twenty-foot mast on the building's roof. The original plans called for the transmitter to be placed adjacent to the antenna tower with remote control of power and meters in the studios two floors below. Remote power control and metering is common and it was a surprise to all when the transmitter was delivered with a note from the Gates Broadcast Equipment Company stating that ten watt transmitters could not be fitted for remote control. The only solution was to place the transmitter in the control room and run a coaxial cable to the antenna on the roof. When the transmitter was finally powered up we learned that almost a quarter of our allotted power was lost in the cable between the control room and the antenna.

Morehead, Kentucky is in the Appalachian foothills. The university campus is backed up against steep hills and some of the buildings are in branch hollows. FM radio transmission, like television is largely line of sight and massive objects like hills can destroy reception. With our seven and one half watts of power and the rugged surrounding terrain we had a listening area marginally larger than the campus.

WMKY's faculty advisor and General Manager though young, was trying to return to broadcasting as practiced in the 1940s. While nearly all commercial stations were now operated "combo" style with one person performing all air duties, WMKY was fully staffed with an engineer, a director, an announcer and talent on duty for every shift. We were expected to have four people distributed between the announce booth, the control room and the big studio to do even the most basic show.

Our control room was impressive. The console was a Gates President, the very top of the Gates line. Although a sophisticated piece of equipment with impressive capabilities, it was a disaster as a training facility. Complicated and confusing, new engineers would occasionally break down in tears while they tried to figure out their latest self-created disaster. I once entered the control room to find a new engineer on his first solo shift simply staring blankly. In the rack behind him two open reel tape machines were running and to his left both

turntables were also running. The girl who was the announcer/talent and had no engineering knowledge or experience sat in the studio shaking her head; the monitor speakers were silent, indicating there was no signal on air, and the red light flashing angrily on the board told of an incoming phone call.

I sorted out the audio mystery, and within two minutes had signal on air. I then answered the telephone. The General Manager was calling to find out why there was dead air and reprimanded me for answering the phone since it was not my assigned shift. I took over and worked the board till the next crew checked in and the new kid never returned.

Our first year on the air, the G. M. was frugal. He decided that we did not need a wire machine of our own and that those above him would appreciate his creativity in providing news without subscribing to a service. The solution was to share the wire service subscription held by WMOR, the local commercial station. A.P and U.P.I. both offered teletype paper interleaved with carbon paper. This was a product conceived in hell. Teletype ribbons were smeary on the best of days and the carbon was worse. WMOR was three blocks away from our studios. Fifteen minutes before the hour someone would have to run to WMOR, grab the copy for the upcoming newscast and run back to WMKY. We had to do this hourly, summer, winter, spring, and fall, heat, rain, wind and snow. We were masters of rip and run and read.

The real challenge came in trying to read news printed with smeared carbon on yellow pulp paper that had just made a three block trip through driving rain.

Although WMKY staff were not required to wear evening attire after 6:00, we were required to take an announcing exam before speaking on air. The exam was two pages of copy that NBC had created decades before. It was a simple affair--if you could say Washington rather than Warshington or tire rather than tar, you passed. To add a bit of spice, it also included Goethe, pas de deux and Chopin. One freshman announcing candidate came out of the booth after cutting his audition tape exclaiming, "That mothuh is a bitch on wheels!" Review of his tape gave us: news from Warshington, safe motoring from General Tar and Rubber, goth, chopin, and pass the ducks, all carefully enunciated.

Every county had its own little radio station. Most were thousand waters, most were daytimers, most were country, and all were AM. Saturdays and Sundays

when time allowed, a couple of us would get in a car, pick up a couple of six-packs at the bootleggers and explore country roads looking for local stations. As bright young college men we tended to milk these trips for humor, making fun of our rustic broadcasting brothers. Fifty years later I look back to those men and boys, I never ran across any women on air, who were the hearts and souls of WKKS, WFTM, WMST and so many others. We got a good laugh from one station which played a singing jingle for the local readymix concrete company.

While visiting WKKS in Vanceburg I learned a lesson. We had no idea there was a radio station in Vanceburg, but our road trip went that way and entering town we discovered a repurposed filling station. There was a tall steel tower similar to the television antenna masts found on the local farms, no signage and an open front door. The single service bay was now a radio control room, and studio, and office, and transmitter shack. Everything was right there, and the jock on duty was smiling and happy for company. This was a two hundred fifty watt AM station with no discernable format and little apparent reason for being. The console was home built and the furniture had already been rejected by Goodwill. Shortly after our arrival, Ron, our host, announced a contest. The first caller to identify the next record he played would win a LARGE jar of Skippy peanut butter. Ten seconds into the record the phone rang and Ron answered, "Oh, hi Vera, yuhp...you nailed it...How Much is That Doggie in the Window...send one of the kids down. I've got the peanut butter right here." Minutes later a little girl, maybe seven years old came through the door to claim the prize.

That little girl and her family needed that jar of peanut butter; Ron needed that job and the hard knocks town of Vanceburg needed WKKS and radio football games on fall Friday nights, basketball in the winter, Little league all summer, the radio swap shop, birth announcements and funeral listings. Barnum might have considered WKKS a freak--something to put on display as a curiosity. I found it vital and affirming, and never again viewed any station as a joke.

After graduation I became an armchair radio participant. The industry was going through a massive change. New radios were generally equipped for AM and FM, and car radios received both bands. FM provided better sound quality and less atmospheric interference. Music migrated to the FM spectrum and the AM stations, at least in large metropolitan markets became the realm of endless talk

and call-in shows, mostly sports, or politically conservative. A passel of Christian stations moved onto the AM dial as well, and in Cincinnati a Roman Catholic outlet eventually joined the throng.

My day job in advertising included writing and producing radio spots. After hours I served on the community advisory board of WNKU, did field recording of concerts and other musical events, and covered shifts for vacationing WNKU staff.

By this time WNOP had vacated their 1948 facility, its record library, announce booth-turned book keeper's office, control room and big studio, complete with Steinway grand, and moved to a first-floor studio space in the same building featuring an air studio with a picture window facing Monmouth Street, and the Brass Ass Lounge. Ray Scott and Old Undies were still the heart of the air staff.

Jim Lang, WNOP's owner, and a former Campbell County Sheriff, was looking for an exit from tri-state radio. Profitability was a growing issue, and he had already cashed in the station's biggest asset, the license for a UHF television station, the current WXIX. The solution came in the person of Al Vontz, a most successful beer and wine distributor, who loved the quirky station and had pockets deep enough to keep it afloat.

Vontz had ideas and imagination. The top priority was a new studio. The result was a beautifully crafted trio of large steel drums, conjoined to form a sort of floating venn diagram and conspicuously placed at the foot of the Newport floodwall near the Central Bridge. WNOP was not just Radio Free Newport, it was the free and floating jazz ark, literally kept afloat by the generous Vontz.

Programming remained the same, Scott and Underhill remained the senior staff, joined through the years by Robin Carey Allgeier; Gary, Norwood Fats, Stevenson; Geof Nimmo, and others. It was during these years that the station claimed affiliation with the Indian Hill Free Clinic and Food Pantry.

Eventually the extended Vontz family tired of subsidizing Skid Row Radio and curtailed operations. Air hosts were released, the floating studios were shuttered and a spare control room/studio was placed in vacant space in one of the beer and wine company's buildings. To maintain the license, programming of a sort continued. CNN news was aired for the entire broadcast day—every day. The reliable Ray Scott spent forty hours a week for several years listening to CNN

news, taking required transmitter meter readings, and giving station IDs every thirty minutes. Somehow the Gray Wolf maintained his sanity.

In 1997 jazz returned to WNOP. A group of jazz enthusiasts worked out an arrangement with the Vontz interests to staff and operate the station. Heidelberg Distributing, the Vontz corporate body would retain license ownership, but the consortium would take care of day to day expenses. The effort was underfunded and none of the principals seemed to have any skill in radio time sales. The lack of cash forced the recruitment of a volunteer staff. The studios moved several times as one free or trade-out location after another fell to the wrecking ball.

This is when I truly became part of WNOP. After expressing interest in getting back on air I was interviewed by the Program Director, who asked only when I could start. There was no announcer's test and I did not have to say Goethe, Chopin or pas de deux. I was given a four-hour slot on Saturday afternoons.

I will set the scene. WNOP's studios were in one small room of the former Cincinnati Chamber of Commerce. The building was adjacent to the Millennium Hotel and the Parkade Garage. It was largely vacant. While the jazz ark had been beautifully equipped with new turntables, two new Magnecord open reel tape machines, mics on counterbalanced booms, and a new board and three cart machines, I now entered a third world experience. I had truly found skid row radio. The board which had been on the ark and later in the warehouse studio was on an abused chipboard desk. There were two CD players, a three-deck cart machine two chairs, one microphone and a card table. There were two phone lines. One line took our audio signal to the transmitter and towers in Delhi and the other was our lifeline to the rest of the world. The single microphone meant that any interviews were done cheek to cheek. Several of the sliders on the board had failed and two of the three cart decks no longer functioned. We had three sponsors and a number of PI, per inquiry, accounts.

Damn, it was good! I began writing stories about Ersatz County, Amish Kingdom and the Smiley Brothers Mega-Mortuary Mall, filled the three to four slot each week with the Dead Musicians' Hour, dragged thirty of my own CDs in week after week to augment the station's growing collection, and had a ball.

A year and a half later I replaced the station's sole paid employee and became the Music Director, Program Director and mid-morning host. We moved from the

haunted tower to the first floor of a restored three-story Italianate house in Camp Washington, got a new board, thanks to some creative bartering, and stabilized the still-volunteer staff.

The next years were amazing. There was little cash coming in, but we had an audience. WNOP even appeared in the ratings. We had few advertisers, so I created my own. Don Nodeal pitched the Zen Clapper, the Self-anesthetizing Frog Gig and Grits on a Stick. We had Ronnie's New Millennium Ice and the American Lint Council. People listened to WNOP to learn what we were pitching.

Amazingly, in 1999 the parent company agreed to again float the station. Suddenly the staff was paid, moral skyrocketed and the sun shone through blue skies. Even the pagans and atheists on staff found this a come-to-Jesus moment.

Things seemed good. Bills were paid. Fan phone calls were frequent and positive, staff put in extra hours without pay.

Then we learned that the station was on the block. A group of conservative Roman Catholics wanted to buy us and rebrand us. The staff went into panic mode. I found someone to make a counteroffer for purchase; Phil Tucker, the Dark Soldier, worked overtime selling air time, and everyone worked harder and longer, trying to save the station.

By October it was apparent that the owners were committed to the Catholic buyer group. It was also apparent that the owners expected us to politely fade to black.

It didn't happen. We designed, printed and sold hundreds of T-shirts with the station logo and the text, "The Day the Music Died, December 31, 2000." We created a memorial CD with every staff person's voice...including the secretary/office manager. We upped our attitude, and we made plans for our demise.

New Year's eve, eight PM, 2000, I took my place at the board for the last time. A serious listener delivered 6 cases of beer guaranteed not to be from our parent company—the one selling us out. Another listener brought a half dozen pizzas. It was not a wake. It was a celebration.

We played four final hours of great jazz. Monk, Kenton Holiday, Wilson, Basie, Ellington and Dorrough filled the evening.

We understood that Sacred Heart Broadcasting, the new owners, planned to initiate their broadcast schedule at one minute past midnight, January first 2001.

They didn't.

The media leaked that my last music cut would be Tom Lehrer's classic Vatican Rag..."Time to get down on your knees, fiddle with your rosaries, bow your head with great respect, genuflect, genuflect, genuflect..."

Sacred Heart, fearing their funders would hear our final middle finger to the world, allowed the station to go dark for six hours.

That was the end of a remarkable broadcasting heritage.

Sarnoff created the concept. Barnum cheered the hutzpah.

In the end...It was a dark, and stormy night.

Well, not really.