

RADIO YOUTH OF A CITY BOY

by Walt Breville

My interests are spread out; listening to AM, FM, occasionally shortwave, broadcast and station history, history of popular music, antique radios, and I'd do without television instead of radio if I had the choice of only one.

My radio awareness started in 1945 at age six, with the earliest new song I remember liking "Rum and Coca-Cola". Then, President Roosevelt died, the first news story I can recall. I grew up in Affton, MO, a blue-collar suburb of St. Louis. (*It's in southern St. Louis County, for you geography buffs-eb*) I also recall Walter Winchell, a rapid-fire type newsmen. On January 1, 1947, the St. Louis area had eight radio stations as follows: 550 KSD, 630 KXOK, 770 WEW, 850 KFJO, 1120 KMOX, 1230 WIL, 1380 KWK, 1490 WTMV. On January 21, 1947, KXLW 1320 (Clayton, MO) signed on the air, daytime only. The other two daytimers were WEW and KFJO; the rest were fulltime. I can recall listening to a kids' program on WTMV with background interference, since the transmitter was ten miles away in East St. Louis. At the time I thought a mob of people were trying to interfere with my story listening. In the late 1940s, WTMV was heavily news and sports-oriented. I remember little about the various network programs as other things distracted me, such as playing outside or going to the movie theatre, five blocks away. I recall riding in a car with the radio playing the Harmonicats' "Peg-O-My-Heart". I thought, "What a neat way to travel". Back then, only a minority of cars had radios.

KSD-TV (Channel 5) was the first television station in St. Louis, in February 1947. (*The exact sign-on date was February 8, 1947-eb*) 1948 was a watershed year in entertainment, as our family got our first TV set with other families on our street! That killed what interest I had in radio network stories or comedy, with the television set, as well as the movie theater, superceding that. Television was not called TV until sometime in the early 1950s, coined by manufacturer "Madman" Muntz. (*Leonard's TV was the longtime Muntz dealer in St. Louis; the spokesman was "Uncle Leonard"-eb*) In the fall of 1948, regular network programming began, with the Milton Berle comedy show pulling people into stores selling television.

About this time, I was growing fascinated with the living room radio console, a 1942 vintage Philco with a nice mellow boomy-sounding twelve-inch speaker. It had the old 42-48 MHz FM band, which was replaced with the present 88-108 MHz FM band in 1946. A few 1945-46 vintage radios, especially Zenith and General Electric, had both FM bands. In the late 1940s and into the 1950s, St. Louis had a half-dozen FM stations, mostly sisters of the fulltime AMs. They all went belly-up except two, KFJO-FM (99.1 MHz) and KCFM (93.7 MHz, which started as KXOK-FM and is now KSD-eb). I recall FM radios feeding speakers in buses then; this did not last long as people protested it.

Television diverted not only people's interest, but also their budgets. \$200-400 for the first television sets was like \$1,500-3,000 in 2001 dollars. Plus, many families were also buying their first automatic dishwashers for a similar sum. Dryers and power lawn mowers also diverted money from FM as these new things soon became necessities. This was twenty years before FM radios became available in cars.

We did not get our first radio with FM until 1959. FM programming was nothing but classical and background, or "beautiful" music (*later known as "easy listening"-eb*) until 1967. That was when KSHE 94.7 MHz (Crestwood, MO) switched to progressive rock; the start of a revolutionary trend that gave FM a massive shot in the arm! Also, WGNU-FM 106.5 MHz (Granite City, IL, now WSSM) started country music then.

About 1949 the back of a Philco console fascinated me with what looked like eight inverted glass bottles containing micro-size towers with orange lights casting a magic spell by aping the huge transmitter towers with red lights to bring forth voices and music! I enjoyed Cardinal baseball games as a young, lively Harry Caray was gradually taking over from the dull-sounding France Laux doing play-by-play. I was amazed whenever the Browns won a game, as these were the days when St. Louis was "first in shoes, first in booze (in this case, beer), and last in the American League!" (*Not so in 1944; the Browns won the American League pennant that year-eb*)

New stations appearing in the late 1940s were 690 KSTL (*now announcing their city of license as East St. Louis, IL-eb*); 1260 WIBV Belleville, IL (*now WSDZ-eb*); 1570 WOKZ Alton, IL (*which became WBGZ in 1983-eb*); 730 KWRE Warrenton, MO; 1010 KJCF Festus, MO (*now KXEN-eb*); all were daytimers then. WIL moved from 1230 to 1430 in 1948 (*WIL is now on 92.3 MHz-eb*). Two stations were already all-night broadcasters; KMOX and WIL. I recall WIL's all night "Dawn Patrol" (*hosted by Ray Manning-eb*), a Top Twenty pop DJ request program. Two of these daytimers, 730 KWRE and 770 WEW, sound almost the same today as they did fifty years ago. KWRE put a good signal into Affton for being 1,000 watts and fifty miles away in Warrenton, now a fast-growing outer suburb (*they added 99.9 KFAV in 1991-eb*). KWRE still has the classic small-town sound; primarily country oldies, live-sounding (*with some ABC Real Country thrown in-eb*), with excellent local news and local sponsors; it's locally owned (*Kaspar Broadcasting, based in Warrenton, also owns WILO 1570 and WSHW 99.7 in Frankfort, IN-eb*).

WEW has always been a somewhat jazz-oriented variety format, only instead of Adult Standards-type recordings, they used their own house band, the Russ David Orchestra. In addition, WEW had ethnic and polka bands, heard on some of the other stations. WEW is the oldest St. Louis area station (*and also the oldest station in the State of Missouri-eb*), established in 1921 just doing continuous weather reports (*the domain of NOAA Weather Radio stations between 162.4 and 162.55 MHz today-eb*).

In the 1940s, KMOX had at least two of its own orchestras. 690 KSTL was basically a country music-oriented station with a DJ named Skeets Yaney in the 1950s, along with ethnic programs. Most of the other stations ran mostly top twenty pop music of the day, as they phased out network non-music entertainment shows as television overwhelmingly turned people away from the medium in the early 1950s. (*CBS did not cancel its last non-music entertainment shows until 1962-eb*)

Before age 12-13, I don't recall hearing anything beyond semi-locals until I was able to stay up later while gradually paying more attention to radio and a bit less to television evenings. I was more and more searching for lively music. The late 1940s and early 1950s were a very conservative period of music, compared to the 1920s Jazz Age and the 1930s swing era to about 1945, as well as the future rock revolution. I was not real fond of the ballads by Patti Page, Eddie Fisher, and other such artists. The honky-tonk sounds of Del Wood's "Down Yonder", Hank Williams, Sr. and Spike Jones (*let's not forget his City Slickers-eb*) attracted me more. Les Paul and Mary Ford were quite good; much of the rest of the era's music was a wasteland to my young ears.

From ages 10 to 13, I got into mischief when our family would visit relatives and friends. I would sneak into their bedroom and play with their radios. Scoldings and punishments did not cure me of it until my parents started giving me radios. The Philco console got moved from the living room to the basement, giving me more frequent access to it. A five-tube RCA table radio of 1938 vintage was also given to me; a bare-chassis radio with its cabinet broken. The Philco's old FM band was empty except for a paging station, KAA893 (*the band is dominated today by the Missouri Highway Patrol's KAA203 and the Illinois State Police's KSB235-eb*). Occasionally, I tuned to shortwave. With its noises, deep fading and foreign languages, it never held my interest long compared to AM listening.

The AM band became more interesting in 1952-53 when in eighth grade, with discovering the Mexican English-language 100 to 250 kW stations putting local-like nighttime signals into St. Louis. My favorite program was "The All Night Long Show" on XERF 1570 with Paul Kallinger, in his cheery manner, saying "I'm your good neighbor along the way..." "The Station That Covers Every State In The Nation!" (*Kallinger remained at XERF until the mid-1980s; I remember his show in my early DXing days-eb*). At the time, the 48 continental states (*the "Lower 48"-eb*) were every state; Alaska and Hawaii were still territories. Years later, I learned Paul made a mistake in 1954. A young man phoned telling him of his two new records just taking off. Paul replied: "I'm sorry, but we play only straight country music". The young man politely thanked him for considering, and hung up. Paul had just turned down Elvis Presley.

From 1952 on, I enjoyed catching the IDs of the 50 kW AM stations as far away as KSL and WBZ; I was thrilled to discover Alan

Freed on WABC about 1957-58. The Philco became my boom-box with a 45 rpm RCA changer hooked up to it in 1955. Also in 1955, KATZ 1600 signed on the air with an R&B format. I kept on fishing for new pop/rock recordings to hear.

The 1948-53 period saw stations moving their towers to the flatlands of Illinois after using towers atop downtown high-rise buildings for their first 20 to 30 years. WIL's tower was atop the Melbourne Hotel, four miles west of downtown. With this central location, they covered most of the metro area population surprisingly well at night for being on 1230. Then, of course, the built-up areas were much more compact with the open country much closer than today. The move to 1430 (*where it is now WRTH-eb*) resulted in a move to four new towers in the Dupo/East Carondelet area in Illinois. (*KSLG 1380's nighttime transmitter site is also in Dupo, but a bit closer to Columbia, IL-eb*)

In 1956, I was excited to discover 5,000-watt stations hundreds of miles away, such as 1290 KOIL, 1320 KXYZ, 1360 WSAI, and the like (*KOIL is now on 1180, WSAI now on 1530; only KXYZ remains on its 1956 frequency-eb*). The Philco console was fun tuning with its good sound, but sensitivity wasn't one of its attributes. Discovering the NRC, IRCA and other clubs was still seven years in the future. I did not know what I was missing, such as frequency checks, Monday morning silent periods, and the like. I recall being puzzled by occasional tones on the dial after midnight on the few occasions I was up that late.

Much of the time in my teenage years was taken up by the Boy Scouts. Dad got me involved in it; he did not encourage my radio interests. He said I needed to "get socialized". This objective failed; I always had and still have a strong streak of being a loner. So, when he would drive me to Scouting events, I would sneak back to his 1951 Kaiser, and play with its good radio instead of socializing when I could.

In the mid-1950s, KXOK 630 started a Top 30 pop/rock format, interrupted only by news and a bit of Christian programming on Sundays (*I remember hearing Johnny Rabbitt, Pat Riley, Robert Fox and Robert R. Lynn on OK-63 in the 1970s-eb*). Soon, it was the teenagers' favorite; KXOK evolved into targeting them as advertisers discovered the increasing number of them (*one business that advertised on competitor WIL was Wild Clothing; Jack Carney mentioned them in his "Cruisin' 1958" album-eb*). For example, I graduated from Affton High School in 1957 with my class of 100. My cousin's Class of 1959 had over 180; by 1962, there were 300 in each grade. This was the leading edge of the huge bulge in the population dubbed the "Baby Boomers". I recall in 1956 a screaming ad: "Dave Trigg will take the shirt off his back to put you in a new Mercury!"

Other long-gone sponsors, more dignified, were Robert Hall Men's Clothes (*the last Robert Hall closed its doors in St. Louis in the early 1970s-eb*), S&H Green Stamps (*those were discontinued in the early 1980s-eb*), and Chuck-A-Burger (*once a local fast-food chain; there's still one left, in Overland, MO-eb*). In about 1958-59, the first McDonald's opened in the area, on what was then U.S. 66 (*Watson Road-eb*) in Crestwood.

In September 1957, I entered college. Since it was just 100 miles away in Rolla, I often came home on the weekends, or DXed there then. I got a new Zenith six-tube set with a six-by-nine-inch speaker in 1958; it was a better puller of weak DX than the old Philco. I discovered 5 kW stations from the West Coast, such as KFWB 980; I thought that was a tremendous feat at the time (*try KVON 1440 on a DX test!-eb*). Also, the Vane Jones Radio-TV Station Guide I had just acquired was better than the White's I had been using for several years. About that time, St. Charles and St. Louis got a new simulcaster on both bands with frequent IDs: "We're the Kady Twins, KADY 1460 and KADI 96.5 FM". Both ran the typical FM format of those days; easy listening, beautiful music or light classical, which I thought was a drag. Now, 40 years later, I'm delighted when I find an FM station running Beautiful or Big Band music instead of the usual rock, country or talk formats!

In 1959, KSTP had a nice Saturday night Jazz show hosted by "No-Doz" Don Doty. The late 1950s and early 1960s were the days of great radio dial twisting; rock/pop stations of this era were wonderful to listen to, compared to today's music stations. Many had a very large playlist of not just rock songs, but Jazz tunes, Big Band songs, plus country crossover numbers with the DJs announcing the title and artist of each number. DJ talk was fun to listen to without

the gutter language found on some of today's FM rockers. (*I'd say most of them-eb*) Plus, frequent news (local as well as national), weather, and frequent singing IDs (jingles). Today's radio executives ought to be forced to listen to airchecks of this era to learn how to do radio right! (*Amen, Walt! Let's not forget Public Radio, too-eb*) I guess my age is showing. A fine example is WIL in the 1958-62 period that can be found in the "Cruisin'" series of LPs (*WIL is featured on Cruisin' 1958; it's also available on cassette and compact disc, too-eb*) that also feature seven other stations and cities from 1955 to 1962. (*Increase Records also released seven more "Cruisin'" albums, covering the period 1963-1969, from six additional cities-eb*) Look in stores or flea markets selling used LPs for these fine airchecks in high fidelity.

I finally found NRC, IRCA and other clubs in 1963-64; by this time, I was in the Air Force in Greenland. I soldered together a Knight-Kit R-100A that did not work very well, so I borrowed a Zenith Transoceanic on occasion. I was thrilled to hear various Alaskans, Canadians and Pacific Northwest stations, even Los Angeles' KNX. For some reason, I never found good reception from Atlantic Canada or the eastern United States. Also, faint foreign language signals, never IDed. I was thrilled enough to get distant U.S. stations then. Then, I got sent to Watertown, NY, where I found a BCB far different from Missouri, with French Canadians clogging up the band almost as bad as the Spanish stations do here in Florida now.

Back home in 1965-66, I got my first good communications set, the Hallicrafters SX-122 which had outstanding selectivity. It enabled me to snag foreign splits like Dakar (Senegal) on 764 kHz, with a Roberts tube tape recorder that I used to send a tape to verify them. I was more thrilled to tape good stuff like Wolfman Jack on XERF, which I still have transferred to cassette! I got tired of the poor audio quality of the SX-122, so I got a Drake SW-4A and enjoyed radios in the various cars I had, with their good sound giving better magical enhancement to DXing than the SX-122.

I was over age 30 in 1969, still a youth compared to today's DXers and Hams, with the average age said to be 55 to 60 years old. That seemed about right when I attended the St. Louis IRCA convention this past August. 1969-70 was a time of change for me. After 1965 the trend of all-night broadcasting accelerated; by 1970, I found DXing more difficult just as my interests were changing. I got into collecting radios, cars and records more than stations-logged or verified. I quit sending reports in 1978. Local NRCers periodically bust onto the St. Louis scene, getting me involved for a short while, then they would "burn out" and be gone. In the meantime, I kept on tolerating the DXing pastime by not taking it too seriously, taking the advice of the late, great writer **C.M. Stanbury**. He eloquently denounced racking up totals of states, countries and stations while preaching the magical enchantment of DX listening, NOT competition.

Now, I'm no longer a youth, but still have the urge to twist the knobs of every radio I see as I did at age 13. Special thanks to **John Tudenham** (W0JRP), whose near-photographic memory of 1940s-'50s St. Louis radio was a great help in putting this together.