

CHAPTER 18 CHUCK DUNAWAY: THE ROUND MOUND OF SOUND

Chuck Dunaway thinks radio people have gone crazy. “Back then,” he says, “it was war. Today I hear stories about program directors that hang out with their competition. What’s that about?” By back then Dunaway means the ‘50s and early ‘60s. “Disc Jockeys were stars and the audience cared about us. It was just a different game.”

For Dunaway the game began when he was seventeen. “A friend of mine had a ’46 Plymouth and we took off from Houston and stopped in every town that had a radio station. We’d check the phone book, drive over and I’d audition for a job.” He passed the audition at KBST/Big Spring, Texas, where he says the most important part of the job was making sure the commercials got played. “We had so many spots to cram into a thirty minute segment that we’d play half a record, stop it, play the spots, then finish playing the record. “It was stupid,” he laughs, “but that’s the way we were taught to do it.”

KBST only paid sixty cents an hour, so part of Dunaway’s ambition was focused on money. He says he left Big Spring and went to Galveston for a fifteen cent raise, was off to Freeport for twenty-five cents more, and then KXOL/ Ft. Worth called and offered him eighty dollars a week.

“A pretty good wage,” he says.

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Ft. Worth was about forty miles west of Dallas, but it was a world away. How far? Well, there’s an old joke about it being noon in Dallas and 11:55 in Ft. Worth. KXOL wasn’t KLIF/Dallas, but it was still a place to be discovered, and Dunaway got noticed quickly. “Chuck was extraordinarily good,” says Kent Burkhart, founder of Burkhart/Abrams. “He had some sort of communication deal with his audience. You know what that’s like. You’ve heard it.”

Whatever *it* was, it got ratings which brought Dunaway to the attention of Gordon McLendon's boys at KLIF. He took their call but, as it turned out, they didn't want him for KLIF, they wanted him for WRIT/Milwaukee. Or, more to the point, they wanted to get him out of town.

Dunaway accepted the job. "Within thirty days we beat WOKY/Milwaukee with our Top 40 concept," he remembers. "We played a tight list, which was a brand new concept at the time."

His name and what he was doing on the air began to be talked about within the industry. In 1958 he was hired by Danny Williams at WKY/Oklahoma City, and his horizons expanded. "Besides radio, they allowed me to do television, too," he says. The TV show was an after school cowboy affair and Dunaway, playing the part of Hog Waller, quickly became a celebrity to the under-ten set. But, it was the radio show that got him noticed in New York City. An 86.7 Hooper rating! "That's when WABC found out who I was," says Dunaway.

The journey from Oklahoma City to The Big Apple began with a call from WABC's in-house consultant, Mike Joseph. "We've been listening to your show," Joseph told him. "We're interested in bringing you to WABC, to fill the 7:15 to 10 p.m. time slot."

Dunaway believed he was happy at WKY. More than that, if asked, he might have said he'd be happy to stay in Oklahoma till his dying day. But, the WABC overture changed everything. "Sounds good to me," he told Joseph. "Let's talk." Within a week or so, not a bit shy, he'd told everyone at WKY about the ABC offer. "I said it loud and many times and thought nothing of it," he says.

But, when it came time to hit the air, the WABC offer was all he thought about. He convinced himself they were listening to everything he did on the air.

So, when he walked into the studio one day, put on his headphones

and discovered he couldn't hear anything, he got angry. "I messed up the first intro on my show," Dunaway says. He called for an engineer, but was forced to do two or three more breaks without working headphones. He started to see red.

Mad as hell, he put a record on and stormed into William's office to complain. "Someone turned off my cans!" he exclaimed. Jerry Kunkle, one of the other WKY jocks, was sitting in front of William's desk. He stood up, looked at Dunaway and said, "I did it."

Dunaway exploded. "I hit him in the face as hard as I could and then turned and went back to the control room."

Shortly thereafter, he was relieved from his shift and told to report to the General Manager's office. Danny Williams was there waiting. "I'm sorry, Chuck," Williams told him, "but you can't do things like that. I'm going to have to let you go."

In his book, "The Way I Remember It," Dunaway says there was no further discussion. "I left the best job I ever had, working for people I truly had affection for. It was the saddest day of my career."

But, he had WABC in his back pocket.

At least, that's what he thought.



Dunaway had a family to support and, since nothing with WABC was carved in stone, he called WKY's competition, KOMA. He thought they might be interested in him. The PD and Manager of KOMA agreed to meet with him and suggested he get in touch with Bud Armstrong, the Manager of WHB/Kansas City. "WHB," says Dunaway, "was to the Storz organization what KLIF/Dallas was to McLendon."

A dominant #1 in Kansas City, WHB was interested in Dunaway,