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radiodays

BY MARA TAPP

They came from all across the country, and once they'd been trained at Columbia, the voices of these mid-century radio alumni sang out across the airwaves

from posts as diverse as the Virgin Islands and Kalamazoo. WCUE: "Your cue to better listening." KATZ: "The first station—top o' the dial." WIVI: "The little station with the big reach." KR0S: "Keep Right On Smiling." Stations were as ubiquitous then as Starbucks are now, and the demand for trained on-air staff was great. Those who came to Columbia College—then the Columbia School of Speech and Drama—learned the craft from the top talents the big-city stations had to offer. "Our instructors were announcers, guys working in the field," recalls Howard Mendelsohn, who graduated in 1949 with a degree in speech. "They were really good. They took time with you, and taught you the language."

Like many of his peers in the late 1940s and early 1950s, Mendelsohn attended Columbia on the GI Bill, a transformative piece of post-World-War-II legislation that paid for many veterans' educations. Officially known as the Serviceman's Readjustment Act of 1944, the GI Bill of Rights provided federal aid to veterans in the areas of hospitalization, the purchase of homes, and perhaps most significantly, education. Between 1944 and 1951, approximately eight million veterans nationwide received education benefits through the program, including subsidized tuition, fees, books, and living expenses. Under the GI Bill, enrollment in higher-education institutions surged, and the traditional student demographic shifted dramatically, from an overwhelmingly young, privileged student body to one that reflected the diversity and maturity of the returning veteran population.

"The question of how to enter the field of radio has puzzled many intelligent people who have recognized the splendid opportunities offered by this new industry. The industry itself is faced with the problem of selecting from aspiring talents those who will do artistic work intelligently and who will help increase the effectiveness of radio in general. Radio, more than any other industry, needs skilled and competent people."

—"Radio as a Profession," introduction to the course schedule for the Radio Institute of Columbia School of Speech and Drama, 1942.

REPRESENTATIVES: HEADLEY-REED, NEW YORK, CHICAGO ☆ MICHIGAN SPOT SALES • DETROIT



KOSA

ODESSA BROADCASTING COMPANY ★ CBS RADIO NETWORK AND SOUTHWEST NETWORK

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ODESSA, TEXAS



Howard Mendelsohn ('49) interviews a character actor, c. 1951 (above), and as an announcer with the roller derby for ABC (right).



"I was poor. I came here on the GI Bill," Mendelsohn states simply. "All of us came back from the service and used our GI Bill to get that education," adds William T. Parker ('48), a percussionist who hailed from Canastota, New York. "It wasn't just broadcasters. It was engineers and producers. And it wasn't a frilly thing, you know, 'This is party time.' ... It was serious business: to get your education, get started ... because [we] were a little bit older—24, 25—and had to get going."

Many in that cohort were struck by Columbia's diversity. That too, came courtesy of the GI Bill. "Columbia College probably would have died during the war because so many of the young people were gone," Mendelsohn explains. "The GI Bill saved it."

The values of diversity and access to education for all were strongly ingrained at Columbia at that time, and remain to this day. "I'm from the old school, and I liked the fact that we were taking in everybody," says Mendelsohn, who has been a member of the college's board of trustees for 13 years. "If they graduated from high school, we took them, and a lot of them didn't finish, but they got into college, and we had some fabulous people."

After graduation, Mendelsohn started in radio as a summer replacement at a rural Minnesota station. It was culture shock for a man who'd spent his first 28 years of life in Chicago. "The school got me a job in a radio station in Red Wing," he says. "The only distinction about this radio station was that it was the first listed in the country." Accordingly, it was christened KAAA. "They had one studio and an office," recalls Mendelsohn. "They didn't have any bathrooms. You had to go out in the woods."

A Columbia buddy told him about his job announcing roller derby games, broadcast nationally, and alerted him to the opening of another derby unit. In October 1949, Mendelsohn began three years of traveling with the roller derby, doing commentary and commercials, eventually on the ABC television network. "The roller derby was a hot item," Mendelsohn recalls, "one of the very few sports shows on television."

Phone: CRAWFORD 7-4100

Night: ROCKWELL 2-9461

RADIO STATION WEDC

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3848-60 WEST OGDEN AVENUE
CHICAGO 23, ILLINOIS



Donald Cunningham ('52), early 1950s.

Mendelsohn went on to a distinguished career as a publicist, heading his own company representing such luminaries as Sammy Davis Jr., Edward R. Murrow, Charles Shultz, George Gobel, and Jack Benny. He credits Columbia's radio program for giving him the "confidence to know that I could handle myself in front of people."

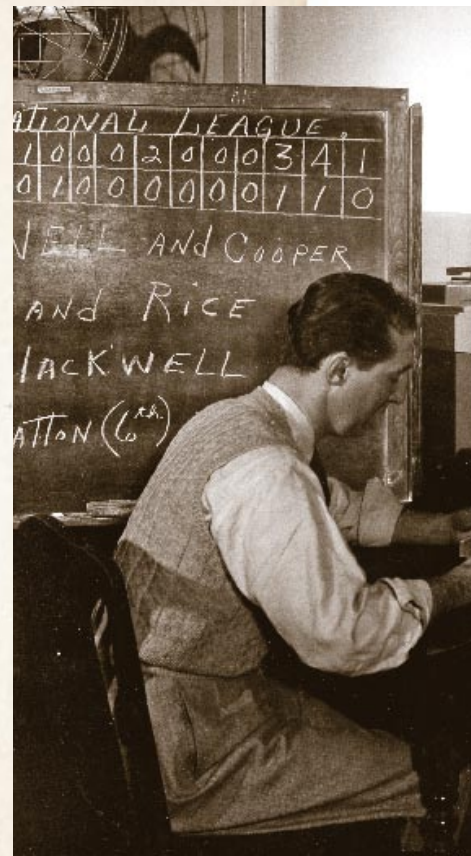
Then, as now, the college valued the inclusion of professionals in the field on its faculty. "Clyde Caswell was a big muckity-muck and I really liked him," recalls Donald H. Cunningham, a 1952 graduate of the television/radio broadcasting program. "I would say Clyde was probably the best. ... We just sort of clicked and got to be great friends, and when I had a problem he was the guy I could go and talk to."

Fresh from Columbia, Cunningham started at midwestern stations before heading to KROS in Clinton, Iowa. "I departed from the beloved halls of Columbia some 4 or 5 weeks ahead of schedule, and in quite a rush, to seek my future in this vast and awe inspiring industry—radio," he wrote in a 1955 letter to his colleagues back at Columbia. "My first job was that of a plain working staff announcer who did everything from filing records to donning a red suit and playing Santa for the kiddies (daily for 5 weeks from Sears) in a 250 watt, small town station, WGEZ in Beloit, Wisconsin. After being there for four months, my first manager was given the axe for reasons unknown, except to God and the owner. Then, as the saying goes, all 'hell' broke loose—the new Mgr. and I developed a fine dislike for each other.

"Since [the new manager's] name appeared at the bottom of the beloved weekly paycheck," Cunningham reached out to his first radio boss, asking for "a 'position' to pull in some long green and keep the ol' sabertooth away from the door." The result was a job as his assistant, along with "a neat raise in lettuce." Six months later, as he was just getting settled in his "plush-lined rut," an offer to be program director at a different station, with another raise, came his way. "So, after a very careful investigation (10 min. on phone) I gave notice." But when the new station sold, Cunningham found himself jobless again.

"My first job was that of a plain working staff announcer who did everything from filing records to donning a red suit and playing Santa for the kiddies."

—Donald Cunningham



Columbia students on the air, c. 1950.

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RADIO STATION
KROS
1340 KCS. 250 WATTS
KROS-FM
96.1 MCG. 14,000 WATTS

KEEP RIGHT ON SMILING

MUTUAL AND TALL CORN NETWORK
SERVING EASTERN IOWA AND WESTERN ILLINOIS

JACOBSEN BUILDING
CLINTON, IOWA

In 1954 he lucked into KROS, where, he wrote in the letter, "I have started two shows ... One is called 'Help Your Neighbor' where I talk on the 'beep' phone with the gals listening and exchange all kinds of household hints and their favorite recipes. The other is ... 'Spotlight Bandstand' on which I do the M.C. work from our beautiful Modernistic ballroom." Cunningham spent about five years at KROS. Then he met his wife, got married, and began selling ad time for a radio station. "I made more selling than I ever did announcing," he says.

Once former student Mike Rapchak got on the air, on the other hand, he stayed on the air until 1995, establishing himself as an intelligent, outspoken jazz host and broadcaster with a fondness for the overnight shift. When he died this March at age 85, shortly after completing this interview, Chicago newspapers lauded him as "the dean of the big band era" and a "late-night legend."

As a young man, Rapchak worked the swing shift at the Hammond, Indiana Lever Brothers plant, loading and delivering Lifebuoy and other soaps. "When I worked the four-to-12, I would drive around and listen to the radio in my car," Rapchak said. Dave Garroway was his idol. One night the radio star asked listeners for their favorite records. Rapchak's was *Stardust*, a recording he'd bought for 39 cents at Sears. When he escorted the record to Garroway's show at NBC in Chicago, Garroway tried to keep the record, but also asked, "You ever thought about getting into this business?" recalled Rapchak with a chuckle. "'You've got a good set of pipes and you know a lot.' So that planted a seed."

It was the late 1940s, and Rapchak had GI benefits as yet unused. He'd heard of Columbia and sought out its registrar. "She said, 'Why do you want to be an announcer?' and I said, 'Well, Ma'am, the reason I'm here is I come from a little town in Indiana and the announcers there are pretty bad.'" The registrar was taken aback when he mentioned the station, since she'd just sent two announcers there from Columbia. Despite the awkward exchange, Rapchak was accepted and started driving in to Columbia from his native Whiting, Indiana, with the radio as his only companion. Rapchak ended up taking a job in radio instead of earning a degree. When interviewed, he still retained a certain disdain for the actors on the faculty, particularly one who shall remain nameless. "I said to him, 'What do you know about radio?' He said, 'You ask the toughest questions. I can't answer them,' and I said, 'I can see that.'"

"She said, 'Why do you want to be an announcer?' and I said, 'Well, Ma'am, the reason I'm here is I come from a little town in Indiana and the announcers there are pretty bad.'"

—Mike Rapchak



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WLBC-TV / WLBC • WMUN
CBS-MBC-ABC-DUNMONT NETWORKS CBS RADIO NETWORK
Tri-City Radio Corporation
RADIO CENTER, MUNCIE, INDIANA
PHONE 4403

“There’s only one other guy coming for the audition and, if he’s worse than you are, you’ll get the job.”

—Mike Rapchak

Rapchak was still a student when the registrar told him about a job in Decatur, Illinois at WSOY: “soybean capitol of the world,” and he auditioned for the program director. “When I got through the audition, he said, ‘You’re not very good,’” Rapchak recalled. “There’s only one other guy coming for the audition and, if he’s worse than you are, you’ll get the job.” Rapchak started the following Monday.

Rapchak held several jobs at stations in Illinois and Indiana, working as a laborer in Whiting in between, until he landed a four-year stint at WAAF in Chicago. There he worked his way up to chief announcer and did a “gently swinging jazz record show.” *Downbeat* called him “one of Chicago’s leading jazz disc jockeys.” Next stop was WCFL. “I was there about five years until they switched to rock and roll,” he recalled. Known for his devotion to jazz, Rapchak was not pleased with the change. He’d heard about a new station, WLS-FM, and he shortly got a call from the station asking him if he wanted to play the stuff he used to. Enticed by the offer, he quit WCFL while on the air. “I said, ‘I’m not going to play this junk any more.’” Rapchak joined WLS in 1965, later working as a staff announcer at WLS-TV as well. Called back to WCFL in the late 1970s, Rapchak became a regular weekend presence before moving to WGN, where he spent the next six years hosting “When Music Was Music,” a Saturday evening radio show.

During his time at Columbia, Rapchak had been enlisted by fellow student Norman Pellegrini ('50) to participate in one of his radio plays. As noted in the course schedule of the time, the college put on “dramatic programs to run regularly on a major broadcasting station ... to offer practical experience to our radio drama students and the opportunity of being heard by sponsors.” Pellegrini, who would become a legend in Chicago radio, was drawn to the theatrical side of the business. At Columbia, teachers would “throw various scripts at us for reading, including one of classical names, which was right up my alley,” Pellegrini says. But training encompassed all aspects of radio, including morning hosting. When Pellegrini selected music that was too loud, his teachers said, “No, no, you don’t wake people up that way,” he recalls with a laugh. “We built shows and we put them on. We played radio.”

Pellegrini got a part-time job at WOAK, the station that later became WFMT, where he spent the next 45 years as an on-air presence and program director. “It was a case of what it always is in radio: somebody walks through the door and, if you need them, you give them a job if they’re halfway good,” he says. The station devoted the last two hours of each day, and all day Sunday, to classical music. Pellegrini brought in his own records to supplement WOAK’s “meager” classical collection.



Norman Pellegrini ('50) left, and Ray Nostrand of WFMT on a phone-in talk show, early 1960s.



Phone Chestnut 1-1567

KATZ

ST. LOUIS BROADCASTING CO.
ARCADE BLDG.
ST. LOUIS, MO.

1000 WATTS
1600 KC.

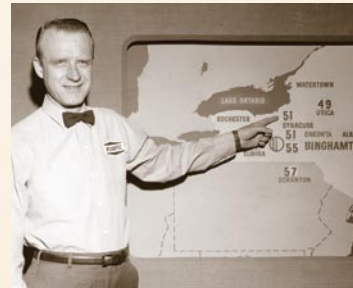
"THE FIRST STATION—TOP 'O THE DIAL"

Perhaps the best unofficial guide to the last several decades of the broadcast business is the career of William Parker. "Each decade, communications broadcasting changed," says the 1948 graduate. "Each decade was a memory of a special reality."

Parker was attracted to the field by "an old veteran broadcaster in Syracuse" who ran a voice school above a music store. He got Parker a summer replacement job in Batavia, New York. Parker was hooked. "Columbia sort of stood out in my mind and so I applied and they said, 'OK come along,'" he recalls. Living in Chicago, Parker kept his eye on the help-wanted ads in *Broadcasting* magazine. Finally, he saw "one in Utica, and that was near home, so I packed my bags and my drums and that was it."



After working briefly in radio, Parker set his sights on the nascent medium of television. A combination of family and professional connections got him to his next job at a new Binghamton, New York television station, on the air as of December 1, 1949. Parker did news and sports. Within nine months, the station added specialized programming. "We started out in the '50s with a cowboy show," he says. "It was called the 'TV Ranch Club.' ... We're approaching the late '50s and early '60s and we came into the Kennedy man-in-space era, and so kids' programs all changed to space programs. ... Then the '60s era came along, the Vietnam War, the college unrest ... and it was what we call 'disrespect for the law,' the police were the pigs, they were the bad guys, blah blah blah. So we created a program called 'Officer Bill' that created respect for the police. ... That was the biggie. That lasted almost ten years."



(This page, from top:) William Parker ('48) in various broadcasting roles as host of "The Officer Bill Show" (1964-1972), "TV Ranch Club" (1951-1957), and doing the weather on WNBC-TV, Binghamton, NY, 1965.

WKZO

FETZER BROADCASTING COMPANY

JOHN E. FETZER
President & General Manager



KALAMAZOO, MICHIGAN
Studios: 124 West Michigan Ave.
Columbia Broadcasting System



A Columbia student on the air, c.1950.

“What Columbia College did for me, honestly, was it gave me the courage to look for a job in radio.”

—Norman Pellegrini

The broadcast landscape continued to change in the 1980s and 1990s, and Parker again reinvented himself as a radio talk-show host. “We had the doctors. We had the veterinarians. We had the psychics. We had the entertainers,” Parker says. “In the late '90s I think talk radio wanted to change again and become more in-your-face, and that’s not my image, and I said, ‘I’m not comfortable with this,’ so I kind of shook hands and left.”

Journalists are rarely accused of being sentimental, but looking back, these radio stars waxes rather rhapsodic about what Columbia’s radio program did for them. For some, it was all about the training and connections. “You got to know people, and some of ‘em said, ‘If you ever need a reference, give my name,’” says Don Cunningham. “When you got out of there and you realized what people did for you, you realized how special it was.”

For others, it was the job experience. “I did everything: news, disc-jockey work, interviews, farm news, religious shows,” recalls Howard Mendelsohn of his first radio gig, “and I owe it to Columbia because they got me the job.”

The lessons are life long. “It gave me the sense of knowing the standards of a broadcaster,” says William Parker. “Wherever I go, whether it be a dinner in a fine restaurant, whether it be in a church, whether it be an appearance, I keep those standards I learned from those days.”

“What Columbia College did for me, honestly,” muses Norman Pellegrini, “was it gave me the courage to look for a job in radio. ...It gave me the chutzpah, the self-confidence, fragile though it was and shallow, to go out and look. ... And it was fun.”

Mara Tapp is an award-winning journalist and broadcaster whose work has appeared recently in *Chicago* magazine, the *Chicago Reader*, the *Chicago Tribune*, and *Bookforum*. Known for her insightful interviews, she has hosted several radio programs, including “Conversations from Wingspread,” which aired for two years on Wisconsin Public Radio and on some 50 public-access television stations around the country, and “The Mara Tapp Show” for seven years on Chicago’s National Public Radio affiliate, WBEZ. She is proud to be a substitute teacher in the Chicago Public Schools, and is part-time faculty in the English department at Columbia.

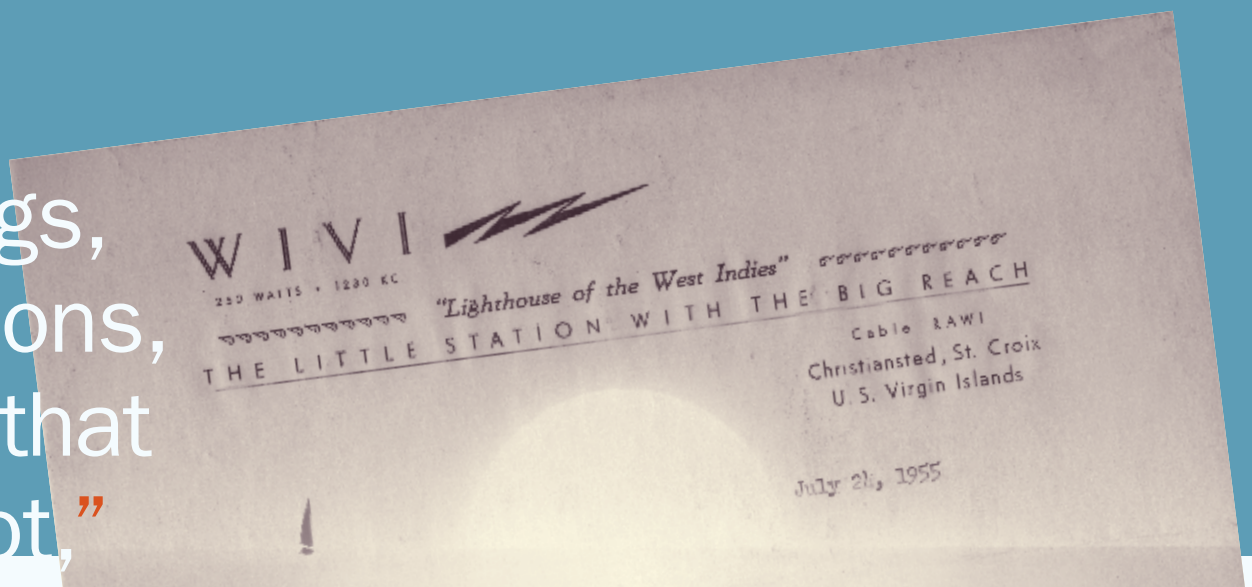
WKZO-TV
Kalamazoo

THE FETZER STATIONS
WJEF
Grand Rapids

WKZO
Kalamazoo

WJEF-FM
Grand Rapids

“Greetings,
salutations,
and all that
other rot,”



... wrote **Jerry Bellehumeur** ('54), in a letter to old friends and colleagues at Columbia dated July 24, 1955. "I may as well smuggle in a special 'HI' to Dirty Nick, the last of the red-hot flyboys ..." The broadcasters who attended Columbia in the 1940s and 1950s were trained to speak, to be sure, but in keeping with the demands of their day, they could write too. Bellehumeur's was among a treasure trove of old letters discovered in a storage closet during building renovations last year. * In a letter dated April 23, 1955, **Sam Berland** ('50) wrote that he enjoyed brief success with several dramatic shows for WGN-TV, including "They Stand Accused," and a part on the Dumont network's "Hands of Mystery," before heading for a theater stock company in Philadelphia. Unfortunately, before the first show opened, he was called back to the Marine Reserves where he "served ungloriously for 18 Mos. reading out loud from an Anti-Aircraft manual to a group of disinterested Reservists." Things eventually improved: "Upon release from this ennui I came to Hollywood," he wrote. "Have appeared in various little theatre shows around town. Worked for a bit in a Religious Drama Circuit endeavoring to spread the word around through theatre, but dropped it as it was a lousy showcase. ... And ... I keep myself in hamburgers and bourbon by working as a boss of the Universal Int. Lumber Yard." * Other epistles were more straight-laced. In an undated letter to college registrar Jean Ward, **Allan W. Cook** ('42) wrote, "My advice to those who want to get into radio and television is to never stop studying all aspects of the associated media, do their level best, recognize their potentialities and most importantly their limitations." Writing on letterhead from WKZO in Kalamazoo, Michigan, he noted, "Good, stable radio and TV operations need conscientious, able and dependable personnel. Such are far more in demand than the 'here today-gone tomorrow hotshots.'" * In July 1944, **Lilja Tilander** wrote to Norman Alexandroff, president of Columbia, that his favorable recommendations had not landed her a job. "I had very interesting talks with everyone, but they frankly were not taking on women announcers," she wrote. "Their sponsors did not want their advertisements read by women." She added that the stations had "tried to put women on" but ended up reducing them to one to two announcements "and are looking for discharged service men."

Tilander tried advertising, but found little that matched her talents. Visits to NBC and CBS turned up nothing. "After all this I am of the opinion that I should forget the whole thing," she wrote. "Consequently I start tomorrow as a secretary in the comptroller's department at Bell & Howell Co., at a much more lucrative salary than I would make for years in the radio or advertising professions." * Within a decade, the picture for some women graduates brightened. **Leslie Young Lund** wrote in May 1955 from WCUE in Akron, Ohio. After three years of daily air work, she became, by choice, continuity director, at what she described as "one of the nation's top independents." The same year, **Betty J. Barth** ('52) wrote that she was "producing two weekly television series on WISH-TV and WFBM-TV" in Indianapolis, and had previously worked as "a TV producer-director with WOI-TV in Ames, Iowa," where she "directed/and/or produced every type of television show from straight news to dramatic presentations." * Around this same time, **Al Hernandez** wrote that he was "looking for girl announcers and WAC clerks" for the 308th Radio Broadcasting Company, Mobile that he was commanding as an Army Reserve captain. His prior experience included promoting "Latin shows" in Chicago and producing and starring in variety and musical shows on the East Coast. * The most charming letter in the bunch was Bellehumeur's, written from the tropics. "I'm just dropping a little line to say 'Hello' to everyone up in civilization at Columbia," he wrote from WIVI, "the Little Station with the Big Reach." "This is a terrific place to live—the sun is always out and the temperature never goes above 84 nor below 70 ... The water is the beautiful Carib blue. It is so clear that you can see clearly for 50 feet down. BUT—You, or at least I won't venture near the water as the stuff is infested with shark, barracuda, etc. The land is nice except that you have scorpions, centipedes, gongolas, etc. (No rest for the wicked)." * He continued, "Please don't refer anyone from Columbia to this station. The pay is lousy, the management doesn't give a hoot for the station, and they have no record library or news service to speak of. For these reasons, I have secured a job at WSTA, St. Thomas, which is a 'RADIO STATION.' The starting pay is \$100 per week, which is good for a 250 watter."