

With a career spanning seven decades, all in major markets, Jim Duncan has touched all corners of the business, including on-air talent, MD, PD, syndicated host and Radio & Records VP/Country Editor.

Along the way, Duncan served the format on the CMA and CRB boards and was instrumental in the career development of influential industry leaders. He continues his work as a voiceover artist and production and recording engineer via his own Jim Duncan Creative.

Jim Duncan

A Multi-Faceted Influencer

I had polio when I was a kid and was in and out of hospitals most of my early life as one of the Salk babies. Dr. Jonas Salk lived in San Diego and developed the polio vaccine used to cure me. My dad was a Naval officer in the submarine service, so I only saw him approximately six months out of the year. Every time he went to Japan, he would get me and my brother and sisters gifts – porcelain Geisha dolls for the girls and new silk jackets for the boys. One year, he came in with a small box – a transistor radio. The first voice I ever heard on that radio was Wolfman Jack. He taught me how to be wacky and have fun, and “The Real” Don Steele at KHJ/Los Angeles taught me how to deliver a break.

I met my best friend, “Shotgun Tom” Kelly, at a taping of *The Regis Philbin Show*, which filmed at KOGO-TV/San Diego. Tom and I were there to see the radio station that was also in the building. We were 16 or 17 and, as we started talking, I asked if he was a Regis fan, and he said he was there to sneak into the radio station and meet the disc jockeys. I was there for the same reason, and we were instant friends! Tom later managed to convince Gary Owens’ producer at KMPC/Los Angeles to let us sit in on Gary’s show. That day, Gary told us a story about how he’d gotten the job on *Laugh-In* by striking up a conversation at a urinal. I never forgot that story, and Gary became a lifelong mentor for both Tom and me.

Wolfman Jack was being broadcast from Rosarita Beach in Mexico. That’s about a half hour drive from San Diego, just past Tijuana, where there’s a tower. Tom and I were still in high school and decided to go down there to see him. We started rattling on the gate around the transmitter, and a guy came outside with a machine gun screaming at us in broken English. We said we wanted to meet Wolfman, and he told us the show was taped and told us to scram. I did end up meeting Wolfman Jack a number of years later at a urinal shortly after I started at *R&R*. Long story short, he asked me to be the imaging voice for his syndicated show. Don’t worry about résumés, kids ... just hang out in bathrooms!

I studied radio, television and film at San Diego State and was part of the drama department, as well. We would put on musicals, and I had thoughts of becoming an actor. But one of my teachers told me acting could be tough to break into and that I should consider pursuing my passion of radio. One of the radio teachers, Ms. Elizabeth, listened to my demo and told me to give up on my dream because I’d never make it in the industry. My first column for *R&R* was entitled, “Dear Ms. Elizabeth,” and it was about why you should never quit pursuing a passion.

After college, I got my first gig as a board op at KLRO/San Diego inside the US Grant Hotel. It was a great training ground with just two turntables and a mixing board. When we signed off at midnight, we’d wait an hour and then turn it back on! We were basically running a pirate radio station in overnights and taking turns doing 15-minute shows with stupid on-air names like Al Catraz. When I started at KSON, I had to come up with an on-air name. I had a manager I really liked when I was working at a Kay Jewelry store whose name was Tom Duncan, so I decided I’d merge my legal name – James Chandler – and become Jim Duncan.

Rip-and-read serious news could be difficult, because you’d have a lot of Russian names and info about international relations. As a fill-in guy, I hardly ever got a copy of the pronunciation key for the week, so I remember times when I’d say the first part of a name as best I could then just put my finger between my lips and make a noise!

The call to be the Country editor at *Radio & Records* came while I was at KSON/San Diego, but I didn’t know if I could be a writer. I had taken some journalism in college and knew how to conduct an interview, but the job was outside of my comfort zone. Bob Wilson hired me and, when I asked about hours, said I had a set salary and had to have my column in by 6pm every Tuesday. There were no computers – they were setting type – old-school printing.



Tuesday was always a big night around *R&R*, because record companies would come in and bring food. But once my column was in, I was gone, because there were no restrictions on hours. I took a radio job just in case they determined I wasn’t good enough to keep around.



Potty Mouths: Duncan (l) and “Shotgun Tom” Kelly pay homage to their mentor, Gary Owens, at one of Duncan’s favorite places to land a gig – the urinal.

At one time, I had three full-time jobs. I was doing the morning show on the Westwood One satellite network; the afternoon drive show on KZLA/Los

Angeles, which started as a fill-in job and lasted for two years; and my job at *R&R*. They used to call me the Goose Gossage of radio. Goose was a relief pitcher – a closer – and was someone you could bring in if your guy went on vacation or was gone for a couple of weeks. It didn’t matter what shift it was, I could step in. That was my life for around 30 years ... just filling in.

I was proud to serve on the CRB and CMA Boards, and I always campaigned on behalf of radio. It was during a CMA Board meeting one January that I spoke up and said, “Artists come up to accept their CMA Awards, and they thank God, their mom, their teams and typically radio in their speech. Radio is such an important part of country music, and if it weren’t for the stations and personalities, none of this would be happening. I’d like to propose that every station or personality that wins a CMA Award should also come to Nashville and be recognized on the CMA Awards telecast.” To this day, both the CMA and ACM acknowledge radio winners.

Going into the Country Radio Hall of Fame was never a plan or a goal. A lofty dream, maybe, but I can’t say I ever held myself in such high esteem as those who have gone in before me. I have been lucky to take the career journey I’ve taken, meet the people I’ve met and do something I’ve been passionate about since I was 14. This honor is really a cherry on top of a giant sundae.

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