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SONY MUSIC

“You’d sound good on the radio.” Tim Wilson called his classmate’s bet and raised him a 45-year Country radio career. His journey started inside a two-watt campus radio station barely heard past the parking lot, continued through an old farmhouse with a transmitter in a cow pasture and concluded with a 26-year stint at WAXX/Eau Claire, WI, where he spent time as PD, MD and an on-air personality. Despite the journey’s end in 2003, with his focus now on voiceover work, Wilson says Country radio is still who he is and who he will always be.

When I was a 17-year-old freshman at St. Olaf College studying music theory and composition, I had no idea what I wanted to do with my life. A classmate told me, “You’d sound good on the radio,” so, I went to the campus station, KSTO – a two-watt carrier current station that could barely be heard past the parking lot. I remember how nervous and excited I was playing the first record and stumbling through a few words, but I felt it. This radio thing might be something special. I was hooked and needed a plan. It was off to Brown Institute School of Broadcasting in Minneapolis, followed by graduating, marrying Pam and heading off in a ‘62 Ford Falcon to start our lives together.

My dad strongly encouraged me to get a first-class radio license, and he was right. My first job was at KWBG/Boone, IA, and I wasn’t hired because I had any on-air skills. I didn’t. I did have that license, though, so I could cut power and go directional with the AM station. After a year or so of doing my air shift from an old farmhouse with the transmitter out in a cow



Prom King: With George Strait at one of the shows WAXX booked at the local high school auditorium.

pasture, I moved on to WLBH/Mattoon, IL, which they were taking Country. I didn’t know anything about country music, other than the Tammy Wynette’s hits album a buddy lent me in high school, and I didn’t especially like country music. So, of course, I was the perfect guy for the job. The station owner had strong opinions on what was (and was not) country music, and I could only play artists he approved of. John Denver, Ronnie Milsap – even Don Williams – weren’t country enough. But I received an education on the history and heritage of the genre and developed a love of it in between swap shop and reading news, sports, weather, obituaries and farm reports.

The first country show I emceed was one of those *Grand Ole Opry* packages they used to have just south of Mattoon featuring Bill Monroe, Grandpa Jones, George Morgan and Jerry Clower. I was young, not used to being in front of people and so nervous I could hardly see straight. Jerry Clower picked up on that and encouraged, guided and helped me through it. I’ll never forget his kindness. It showed me firsthand the kind of people there were in country music.

I went from a two-watt carrier current station to a blowtorch. WAXX/Eau Claire, WI’s 100,000 watts of power on a 2,000-foot tower. Seeing something in me, Station Mgr. Bob Holden taught me how to do good radio, running the station on creativity, audience involvement, community service and fun. A lot of fun. We strived to be a great radio station that happened to play country music. We were fully immersed in

Tim Wilson

Sounding Good



our huge coverage area, doing everything from chicken flying to lefse throwing contests. I remember bringing in some new guy named Randy Travis for our annual Fourth of July picnic. Over the years at WAXX, I had a lot of positions, from on-air to MD, PD, station imaging and promotion. Everyone worked hard, cared about radio and believed in what we were doing. One of those people was [Country Radio Hall of Famer] Tim Closson, who went on to do great things everywhere he went.

I got to WAXX before the big country music festivals we have today, before country artists were doing arena and stadium tours. To help popularize the genre and Country radio up here in the Northland, we started booking shows ourselves at the local high school auditorium. If we needed a bigger venue,



Insta-Jam: Interviewing Randy Travis at *Country Jam USA*.

we booked it at the local university. We had ushers that were handing out programs we had printed up with coupons from clients in them and, man, we had everybody up here. Johnny Cash, Conway Twitty, Statler Brothers, Oak Ridge Boys, Ricky Skaggs, Emmylou Harris, George Strait. It was before the era of meet-and-greets and, because of that, I had many memorable one-on-one interactions with artists. One of those special moments was just sitting on a couple of stools to the side of the stage with Tammy Wynette. We were chatting as we watched The Kendalls perform, and she was commenting on a

million things, including how Jeannie Kendall’s voice sounded similar to that of Dolly Parton.

When I won CMA Disc Jockey of the Year in 1981, my wife Pam and I flew down to Nashville for the awards. We were driven to the Opry House in a limo and I got to stand up on national television to be recognized by host Barbara Mandrell. The award totally says who I am: a Country DJ. The following year, NBC Radio Network brought me in to be a roving reporter for their coverage of the CMA post-awards party, which back then, was at the Opry House. It was before everybody split up and went to separate parties. There was only this one, big party. I was paired with producer Carson Schreiber, and our job was to find artists and send names to the network producer, and we’d get a red or green light back. We interviewed a couple of artists, like Ronnie Milsap and Eddy Arnold, but then Carson must have gotten bored because he starts radioing, “We have [hilarious fake name],” and they’re radioing back, “Who the hell is he?” We kept repeating the same thing a few times, and we could tell the network producer was getting a little miffed, but it all stopped when we ended up laughing too much.

I’m very thankful the station sent me to CRS for 25 years straight. I can’t overstate how important those events have been professionally and personally. It was an incredible learning experience. I’ve always been impressed and amazed, really, with all of the major market programmers who would share ideas and talk about what they were doing at their stations with a small market guy like me. You learn as much or more in the hallway just being around those guys.

One of the greatest gifts of being in Country radio was all of the wonderful people I’ve met, learned from and became friends with. I’m fortunate and blessed to have known leaders in our industry including Jaye Albright, Beverlee Brannigan and Joel Raab. There are those people you want to more like once you get to know them: Bob Kingsley, David Haley, Lon Helton and Jim Fogelsong. It’s an honor to even be mentioned in the same breath with those other Hall of Famers. Though my radio career ended in 2003, Country radio is still who I am and, because of it, I’ve been blessed with unforgettable moments and lifelong friends. I could have never imagined being a Country DJ would lead to such a great life. **CAC**