

Bobby Denton

For The People

A dyed-in-the-wool believer in the city of Knoxville and Country radio, the late Bobby Denton was as local as they come. An iconic figure both on air and in the community, Denton spent decades with WIVK/Knoxville as an on-air talent, PD, GM and VP. Lauded for community engagement and aggressive marketing and promotions, Denton helped turn WIVK into a powerhouse Country radio institution while launching the careers of other Hall of Famers – artists and radio personalities alike. He’s remembered here by several who knew him well.

Nephew Ron Morton

Most people would probably say Bobby’s greatest contributions were reflected in the growth of WIVK. But he would tell you his biggest contributions were reflected in the people he surrounded himself with. Bobby was the type who hired the person others thought was the least likely to succeed, for no other reason than he saw something special – a passion or a spark. He could find the truest form of someone’s talent and help them hone their craft to become something remarkable. When he passed away, so many people came forward with stories about Bobby plucking them out of obscurity and helping them build a career.

He formed a lot of great relationships through radio – people at WIVK, Country artists, community leaders and sports figures. He was an early supporter of Kenny Chesney, and he was very involved in Peyton Manning’s life. He made time for people. He once told me, “Ron, I always call people back the same day.” I would see him in his office, and sometimes all he would do for an entire day was return calls. But he thought it was important to be respectful of other people’s time and make that effort. He cared about people, whether he had met them or not, because he cared about the community.

Aside from radio, Bobby was big into motorsports. He served as the public address announcer at Talladega for 16 years. He was also the announcer at UT football games for 48 years, and he never forgot a player’s name or their stats. He was wonderful with name recognition. At the stadium, any number of the 100,000-plus people would walk up to him and, time after time, he would recount their name and how they’d known each other – even if it had been years since they’d seen one another.

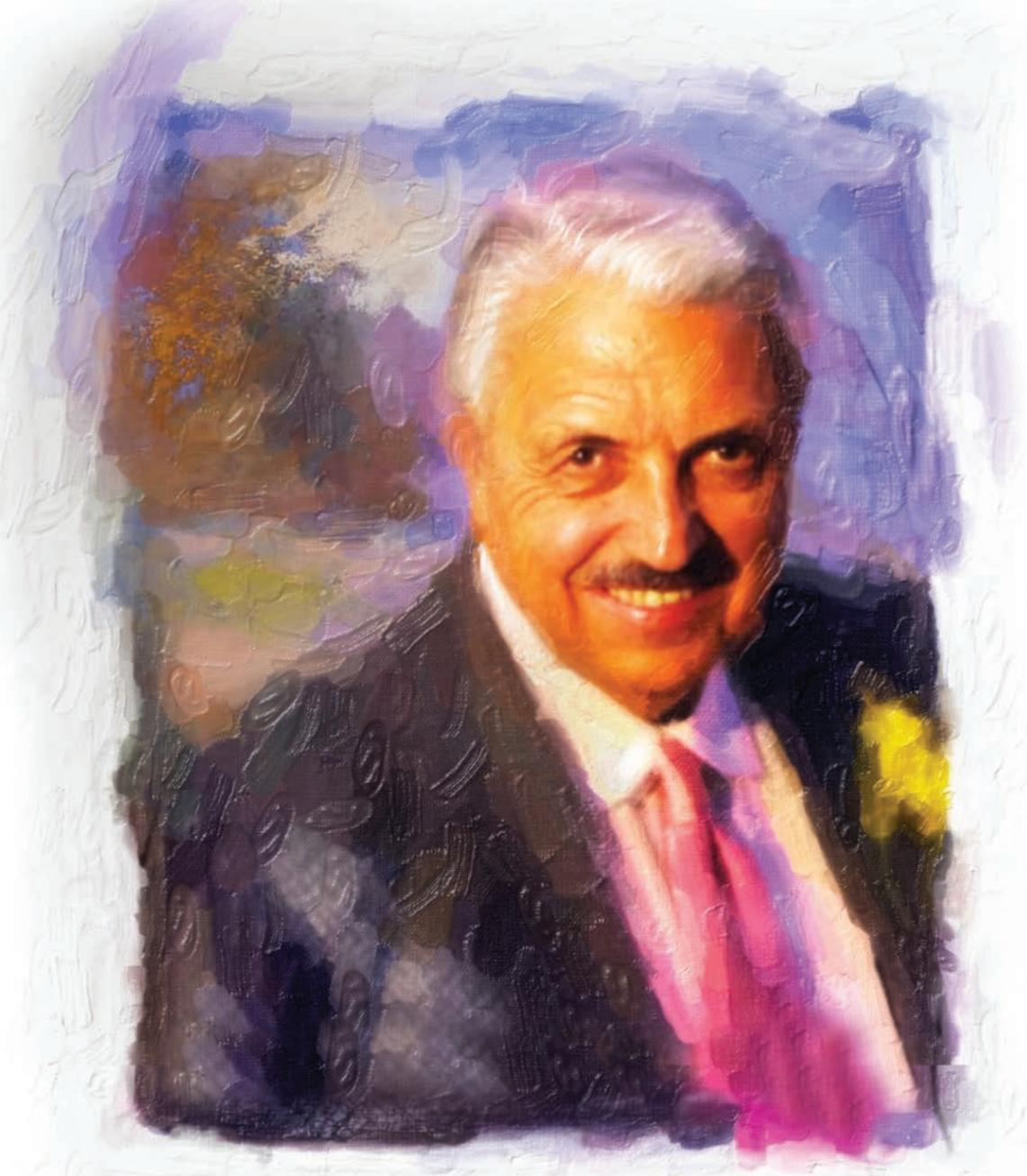
Knoxville Radio Vet Ed Brantley

For more than 30 years, Bobby taught me how to effectively sell radio, the importance of promoting new talent, ideas and so much more. He was the best idea man I’ve ever seen. But, as the story goes, he might not have been the best date. How do I know? I once asked Dolly Parton! Dolly had apparently dated Bobby when she was young, and I once asked her how it went. As only Dolly can, she replied, “Well, he took me to the drag strip, and all he cared about were the cars!”

Former WIVK Morning Co-Host Alison Mencer

Bobby took care of everyone at that radio station. It was like a family with everyone helping to make WIVK great. We worked hard, but we also played hard under Bobby’s leadership. He taught us that people matter, and WIVK became legendary within the community and the radio industry as a whole for putting people first. He made everyone feel important, from the receptionist to the on-air talent. Everyone inside the station and across the listening area loved him.

Andy and I were only the third morning show in WIVK history, and Bobby took a chance on us based on an aircheck we sent him. After getting the job, I told Bobby I was going to have a hard time convincing my 13-year-old son to move to Knoxville. Bobby said he would take care of that and arranged to have lunch with my son. Not only did Bobby’s personality win my



son over, but he also promised to pay for my son to go to the University of Tennessee’s basketball camp if we made the move. Bobby hooked him up with swag and a signed basketball from the UT coach, too. Needless to say, my son wanted to know how soon we could move. Thank goodness, because it was the best move I – and my son – ever made.

Former WIVK Morning Co-Host Andy Ritchie

Bobby was an idea guy, and he taught me to think big. In fact, he encouraged everyone around him to do so and, without his support, Alison and I would have never been able to successfully pull off some of the promotions and stunts we attempted. We were free to think and plan without barriers or limitations, and he was the biggest cheerleader for our show.



Frog-get Me Not: Bobby Denton with station mascot WIVICK The Frog.

He was so ingrained in the community that it’s still hard to imagine Knoxville without Bobby Denton. He knew people were the foundation of the station’s success, and his impact on those who were lucky enough to know him has been profound. Ask anyone who ever worked for or with Bobby, and you’ll get similar stories of his kindness, generosity and humor. Some of those stories are fit for

public consumption. Some are not.

He threw the station family a fiesta-themed bash with prizes, margaritas, a mariachi band and more. Bobby lived in the ritzy part of Knoxville called Sequoyah Hills, and a day or two after the WIVK fiesta, the society section of the local newspaper ran a story describing the party and mentioned that one of Bobby’s older neighbors had called the police to complain that the party was so loud she couldn’t hear her television. Bobby’s response was so very Bobby: “Well, tell her to turn it up!” That was Bobby Denton.

KILT/Houston’s Chris Huff [WIVK MD 1996-1999]

Bobby Denton helped oversee WIVK’s move to Country in the mid 1960s, its embrace of FM in the early 1970s, and its rise as one of the most dominant stations in the nation. As an essential part of WIVK for nearly 40 years, Bobby served as an on-air personality, PD, GM, and VP, but it was his community involvement that resonated with me most. Everyone in Knoxville knew Bobby, and it seemed that he knew everyone in Knoxville!

Bobby was also a champion of the format and its up-and-coming artists. My favorite story involves a time when he was doing afternoons at WIVK, and a guy stopped by the station to drop off a copy of his band’s new single. This guy comes rolling up in an El Camino he had been driving around the southeast, stopping at every radio station he could find. Bobby invited him in and took one of the 45s he was handing out, and as the guy was rolling out of town in his El Camino, he heard Bobby start talking about this new group called “The Alabama Band.” It was the first time Randy Owen ever heard himself on the radio. Randy remembers that to this day, and when I had the chance to talk to him a few years back, I mentioned how I used to work at WIVK. Randy started rattling off that story and told me Alabama would have never had the success they had without the support of Bobby Denton.

That willingness to be aggressive and progressive helped build WIVK into an unparalleled Country radio powerhouse over the past 50 years. The station owns the longest No. 1 streak in Arbitron/Nielsen history, and WIVK is totally unique in its place in Country radio history. I can’t help but think we owe a lot of that to Bobby Denton.

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