

Gregg Lindahl

With A Little Luck

As an on-air talent, MD, PD and GM, Gregg Lindahl's 20-year Country radio career took him to 10 stations in seven markets. As an executive, it was his ability to remain humble in his accomplishments and eager to learn that made him a respected leader. Lindahl joined the radio ranks at age 15 and never looked back, turning that part-time position into a multi-faceted media career that includes work in the research, digital and interactive realms. Lindahl, who was shocked to be nominated for induction, tells us about his journey. Spoiler alert: he thinks he's been quite fortunate.



My Country radio career is a lot like the Mark Wills song – it was 1970-something and 1980-something. I didn't pursue it, but when the radio bug bit, it bit hard and got way down deep in my blood. I even loved the smell of radio stations. To this day, being on-air is my favorite thing I've ever done.

I was 15 years old and got a call from one of the owners of KDIO/Orntonville, MN asking me to join their staff as the high school part-timer. My actual response was, "Well, it beats carrying out groceries." This was a little daytime radio station in my hometown, which was a farming community, but it employed 14 full-time people and there were three owners. You don't find that today.

The first record I ever played was Charley Pride's "Kiss An Angel Good Morning." I cleared my throat an awful lot, and every time I made a mistake, I said I was "sorry" in my thick Minnesota accent. My mom and dad told me I didn't have to say I was sorry every time I made a mistake. Without that first part-time opportunity in high school, the rest of my career wouldn't have happened, and I'm honored to have one of the owners of that first radio station at the Hall of Fame ceremony.

We moved around every three to four years for a promotion or new opportunity. I met my wife, Libby, in Oklahoma City, and we've been married for 36 years. She was the continuity director at the station, and we were both new to the building. She has always been the continuity director of our lives. I couldn't have done it without Libby.

I had a lot of great mentors, bosses and friends during my career, but I was lucky to have Dan Halyburton as my first PD at my first big-time Country station, WDGY/Minneapolis. Dan taught me about making a radio station fun and giving it personality. Paul Johnson, who I had the opportunity to work with in Charlotte and Oklahoma City, taught me about research and clocks. My time in Nashville at WSM-AM taught me about the inner workings of the business.

When I was MD at WDGY/Minneapolis, Charlie Daniels was at the peak of his career arc. He was playing a sold-out show in the market one Saturday night, and he stopped by the station that afternoon. I wasn't in the studio because I was at a car dealership doing a remote, so he called me. Charlie said, "Where are you? Give me the address, and I'll come by." Wouldn't you know it? Charlie Daniels pulls up in a limo at the car dealership and stood outside signing autographs. Talk about impressing your dealership client!

I was on a plane from Nashville to Oklahoma City in 1985 when I found myself sitting next to George Strait during a layover in Dallas. He didn't have his hat on, so most people didn't recognize him. I knew who he was, of course, and we had met before, so I started chatting with him about the business. I was young and plucky and started telling King George

why the texture of songs like "Fool Hearted Memory" tested better in call-out research than songs like "The Fireman." He acted genuinely interested and was gracious, but in the years following, I've marked that as one of my most embarrassing moments. For a while, I couldn't listen to a Strait song on the radio without turning red just thinking about what an idiot I was that day.



Willie Good Radio: With Willie Nelson at WDGY/Minneapolis in 1979.

Turn, Turn, Turntable: As a teenager spinning records at KDIO/Orntonville, MN in 1972.



WSM is such a special place that on any given day, I could look out my office window and see cars with West Virginia, Kentucky or Ohio license plates in the parking lot. People would come by just to scoop dirt out of the flower garden as a souvenir, and that has always served as a reminder how much the format, the artists and the music means to people across the country.

I was lucky enough to program two of the stations I listened to growing up: WLS/Chicago and

KOMA/Oklahoma City. They were 50,000-watt clear channel Rock 'n' Roll radio stations. Both times, I was hired to flip them to Country. When I was called to flip KOMA, my first response was, "I don't want to take that Country! It's one of my favorite Rock 'n' Roll stations!" But, I did, and we had great success.

Nick Trigoni was a mentor, friend and supporter my entire career. He offered me a job programming KIKK/Houston, and I told him no. As luck would have it, not three months later Nick called and said, "I'm going to Cox, and I want you to be a GM for me." After Nick introduced me to the staff at WSOC/Charlotte, he said, "Just run it like you own it." That was terrific advice, and I took it to heart. But six weeks later, Nick called and said, "Hey, remember me? I'm your boss, and you don't really own the place. I'd like to hear from you once in a while."

I was still at WSOC when Hurricane Hugo came through in 1989. Charleston took the brunt of it, but by the time it got to Charlotte, it was still a Category 3. We provided coverage that so many of our team members would later say was a career highlight despite the devastation within the community. The service we provided is something we are all proud of to this day.

I booked Garth Brooks to play our station's *Family Reunion Concert* in September 1990. I locked him in the day after he played a now-infamous showcase luncheon at CRS, and if memory serves, I paid \$5,000. As the date in September got closer, we kept waiting for him to pull out of the show because he had released "Friends In Low Places" and his career was blowing up. Not only did he play the date, but when I saw him at Capitol's *CMA Awards* after party a few months later, he came up to me and thanked me for hiring him for that show. You never forget moments like that.

The last time I worked in a Country radio station was 1997, and that's a lifetime ago. But I got lucky because I got to have two careers. I've spent the past two-plus decades [with Cox Media Group as SVP/Digital & Strategy until retiring in 2012] trying to help media companies figure out what they should be doing with all of the opportunities the internet offers. The ability to marry my backgrounds and stay involved in the business this long has been a dream.

I'm from Minnesota, and we don't like when people call attention to us, so this honor has been both overwhelming and embarrassing, to some degree. I got more out of this career than I ever contributed. I have lifelong friends all over the country, and I got to live life with a backstage pass. I've been trying to put it in perspective since I found out, because it wasn't something I expected or sought out. I don't know that I belong, but it's nice that my work is remembered and, in some small way, to feel like I've made a contribution to something I love. I just got lucky. **CAC**