

Jeff Garrison

A Career As Big As Texas

Nacogdoches to San Antonio is about a five-hour drive, but for Cox Country format leader and KCYY PD Jeff Garrison, it's the journey of a career – with more than a few stops along the way. From helping the late Dene Hallam launch KKBQ/Houston to South Carolina to Phoenix and back, with a pivotal run as CBS Radio's Format Captain, Garrison has covered some ground. But they're used to that in Texas.

Music was my passion. So much so that I became a drummer. My band was one of four contestants in the Longview High School talent show and played REO Speedwagon's "Ridin' The Storm Out." It wasn't that great, but in that show was a band whose lead guitar player was future country singer Ricky Lynn Gregg. They won. Second place went to the school's stage band, which had a guy in it named Mark Bright – who went on to produce Carrie Underwood – and a guy by the name of Russell Terrell, who's one of Nashville's biggest studio background singers. Four of us end up in the country music scene? Crazy.

I played music, hung out in record stores, and bought a quadrophonic eight-track. My mom got me into theater because I stuttered back then. I was just out of high school, doing community theater and working at a night-club hanging out with the DJs. They started taking me up to the radio station. Radio kind of found me.

The guy who owned the radio station where I was hanging out was my next door neighbor. One of the DJs said I should make a tape. I knew his daughter, and she said she'd take it to him. He called me about 15 minutes later and invited me to the station. When I got there, he said, "Well, I've seen you perform theater and you're working at the night club. If you can do that, you can do this. Let's get you on the air." That was the summer of 1983, and I've been in radio ever since.

I got a job doing overnights at Country KJCS/Nacogdoches. I remember playing The Judds, Eddy Raven and Alabama. One of the guys who helped me get the job there ended up going to Top 40 KKBQ/Houston. Shortly thereafter, he brought me in to run weekend countdowns. I worked overnights in Nacogdoches Monday through Friday, nightclubs at night, then I'd drive to Houston getting in at 3am Saturday, sleep two hours on the couch and then run countdowns until 10am. Crash, go out, wake up Sunday, run another countdown, then drive back. I don't remember a lot of those drives. I do remember drinking a lot of strong coffee.

My first goal was to work in a market that had an airport, which happened in San Angelo. I became a *Radio & Records* reporter there and, all of a sudden, I had a lot of friends. That was fun, but then I said, I'd like to work somewhere that has jet service. So I got a job in Midland-Odessa. My final goal was to work somewhere that had an NFL team.

I have a lot of respect for and pride in small market radio. You're the promotions director, the music director, the engineer and the remote crew. That experience helped mold me into who I am today.

I didn't have any money, but I put \$300 on a credit card to register for the *NAB Radio Show* in New Orleans in the late '80s. I drove over from Nacogdoches and met a guy who let me stay in his room. I'd never been exposed to research, but they had Bolton Research's Ted Bolton interviewing a diary keeper. I took notes the whole time and that became a tipping point for me to being a successful programmer. I didn't know how I was going to pay that \$300, but I knew if I didn't invest in myself, nobody else would.

The main takeaway was, it's about the listener, not about me. As a young programmer, I thought I knew everything, but that changed my whole paradigm. Think about what the audience expects from a station and give it to them. Always ask, is it right for the listener?



About nine years passed from when I started in radio to when I got permanently into Country. I was doing a Hot AC remote at South Padre Island in the early '90s and they were playing Garth Brooks' "Friends In Low Places" in a college club during spring break. There were 3,000 kids singing along. Milli Vanilli were having their Grammy taken away, Top 40 was playing Michael Bolton, Ice T was talking about killing cops. I looked at my buddy and said, "Top 40 is in big trouble." I kind of knew where the ball was going to go. I didn't know my station, KFRQ/McAllen, would soon flip to Country, but when they did I was the PD, and within one week we were two shares away from KTEX.



Gone Country: Rockin' out at KDEY (above) and pulling a hat trick with the late Dene Hallam, and Clint Black (c).



That was the heyday of Garth, Clint Black, Reba and George Strait. I felt like I was in the right place for my career. Then, obviously, the relationships; it felt more like a family than Pop did – not just the artists but everybody around it. My first meet-and-greet was Reba. I remember how comfortable it felt and how genuine she was about the station supporting her by playing her music. I'd never felt that before.

We had a 27-share at K-Frog and consultant Lee Randall recruited me. He invited me to dinner at the Holiday Inn and said, "Your station sounds really good and the ratings prove it." That relationship helped launch my career. Without it, I don't know if I would've gotten out of Nacogdoches. He got me to San Angelo, got me into using research and introduced me to Joel Raab, Larry Rosin and [the late] Dene Hallam. Not just the art of radio, but the science of it.

I did not know about Dene Hallam's reputation when I got the job in Houston. We were 10th row at a Rockets game one night and he said, "Pal. It's a long way from Nacogdoches to where you're sitting right now!" We were close. When consolidation happened, I had the opportunity to program two stations in Greenville, SC. I'd been with Dene for two years but felt that was where the puck was going in the business. I told him, and he said – using one of my many nicknames – "Gomer, I'll be honest. I'm not sure I know where that is. Is it anywhere near Mayberry?"

The AM/FM days were great and we launched a lot of artists. Mick Anselmo, Mac Daniels, Gregg Swedberg and others in that group would come together, listen to a project and commit to it. We broke acts including Rascal Flatts, Brad Paisley and Sara Evans – really one of the first radio groups to do something like that, which today is pretty common. That forged a lot of great relationships.

CBS Radio hadn't really been in the Country format. After a couple of years working with Dan Mason, Scott Herman and those guys, they asked me to be format leader. I remember going to 1515 Broadway in New York City where, not like today, people kind of were like, "What do you boys do? Ride horses, get on cows and wear big hats?" It was a great experience, though, working with so many great PDs.

I've been blessed to have a passion for this business and be part of a community. We started the first St. Jude radiothons in Phoenix and Houston, raising more than \$10 million. Being a companion during the hurricane in Houston – you never know when you're going to make a difference in someone's life. And music helps people, too. The relationships, the communities and the people I'm still friends with from every stop along the way – this is really more their award. Only credit I can take for myself is I asked a lot of questions and listened to a lot of people who were smarter than me. It's humbling to be recognized. God, I hope they put Charlie Monk last. **CAC**