

Kyle Cantrell

Finding Meaning From The Start

A rarity in radio, the furthest Kyle Cantrell ever worked from Nashville was about 30 miles south in Murfreesboro, TN. From the beginning, his radio ambitions were centered around what he has always considered one of the greatest stations in the history of broadcasting: WSM-AM/Nashville. And in 1982, at just 20 years old, he started a two-decade tenure at the institution, during which he served as board operator, producer, PD, OM and, his favorite job of all, announcer for the Grand Ole Opry. At SiriusXM's Bluegrass Junction channel since 2005, Cantrell sums up his radio career in one word: blessed.

I was in college at the University of Tennessee and didn't know if I really wanted to be in radio or not. That's what I was studying, but your first year of college you take all kinds of courses. So, I decided I would get a summer job. I called every station around Middle Tennessee and couldn't find anything. Nobody wanted to hire someone without experience. I finally got in touch with a guy named Dan Jaynes at WMTS/Murfreesboro and sent him a tape and résumé. I didn't hear back and called a couple of weeks later. He said, "That's the worst tape I've ever heard. When can you start?"

I always wanted to work at WSM-AM, and I heard there was an opening. I had a couple years of experience and was overly self-confident to even think I could get on there. But I did. I actually ended up taking a cut in pay, but I was able to finish school. By the time I graduated, I had a full-time job and ended up working there for 21 years.

I was always interested in country music and pretty much spent my entire career working in some form of it. We had a lot of bluegrass connections at WSM – the *Grand Ole Opry* is where bluegrass began – so I knew a lot of those artists. But I never really entertained the idea of programming full-time in that field until XM came along. Satellite radio is a completely different enterprise. We aren't so concerned with ratings as we are with keeping our subscribers satisfied with what we bring them. You have to get in a little different way of thinking. Also, because we have so many channels, we can afford to drill down a bit into formats traditional radio can't do.

Charlie Chase is just a gem. He really helped me a lot in those early days. When I was working with WMTS, our PD said, "If there's anybody I want you guys to sound like it's Charlie Chase on WSM, so listen to him and sound like that." Getting to work with him and have him show me some of the things he knew about the business – having him believe in me – that was another thing. I don't know why he did, and I still think he's half crazy, but he did.

Charlie Douglas came to work at WSM about a year after I got there. Charlie had been a well-known air personality and, more than that, a well-known programming visionary. I worked 10 years for him – one of the greatest people I've ever known. He showed me how to operate, teaching me what was important and what wasn't. In a lot of ways, he was like a second father. I miss him every day. Then, there was Ray Knight, who



hired me to take over the XM bluegrass channel and displayed so much confidence in what I was doing.

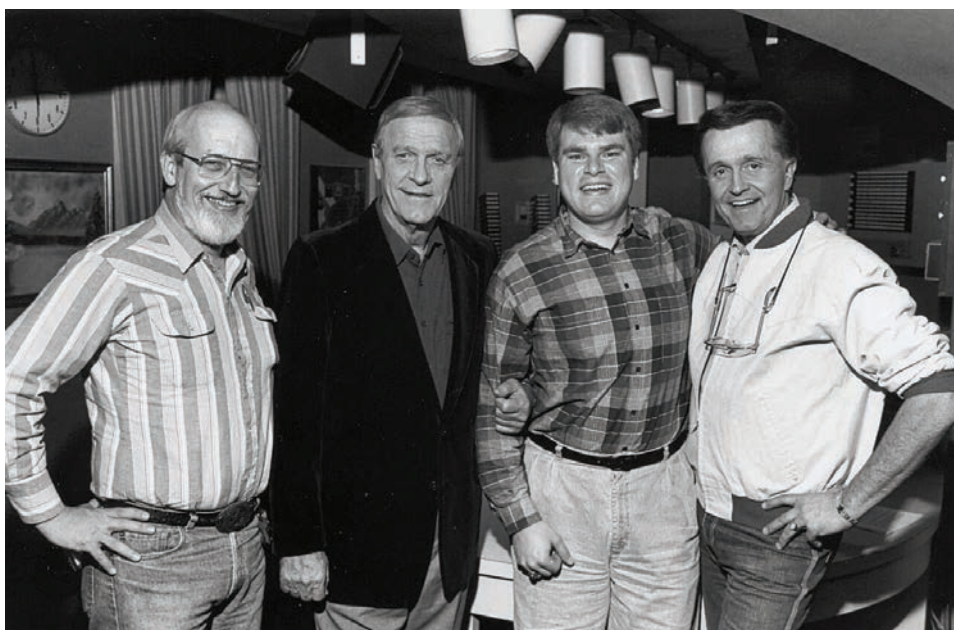
The worst interview I ever did was with Willie Nelson. I hope he doesn't remember it. I was very, very green in the business. Charlie Douglas hooked me up to do a television interview with Willie for TNN, saying, "I want you to fly down to Austin tomorrow for this interview." I had never done anything for television ... or even so much as been on a commercial flight before. I bet I didn't get

One of the first interviews I did at WSM was with Bill Monroe, which was sort of prophetic. He was not the kind of guy you think would be an incredibly sparkling interview, at least on the surface. Keith Bilbrey called and said, "My wife has gone into labor, and I need you to do my show for me." After I agreed but before I hung up he said, "Oh, by the way, Bill Monroe is your guest." I prayed Bill wouldn't show up. As it turned out, he was extremely kind, a good interview and animated. I had been so convinced it wouldn't be any good that I didn't record. Now I

wish I had. About 25 years later, I was at church one Sunday and this lady introduced me to her son, who was visiting from Mississippi. He said, "Kyle Cantrell, didn't you work at WSM? Didn't you used to do the Friday night *Opry* warm-up show?" I told him no, but that I'd filled in a few times. He said, "Well I thought I heard you interviewing Bill Monroe." I told him it was one of the first things I did for the station and he said, "You know what? I think I've got a tape of that somewhere." This guy had taped that off the air.

If I had my career to do over, I'd do it all again. When I started out, I thought the end-all for me would be to work at WSM and to be an announcer on the *Grand Ole Opry*. It's not because of my ability, it's because of God's blessings I was able to do those things by the time I was 23. This business, for whatever reason, has been incredibly good to me. I simply loved radio and didn't care if anybody knew who I was. When I heard I was going in the Hall of Fame, I was incredibly surprised because I didn't think it was going to happen. I am incredibly honored. Maybe what I've done over these years has been noticed, worthwhile and perhaps that closes the loop for me. Maybe that's it ... having something I've done be meaningful to someone. Maybe that has made it worthwhile.

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Through The Yesteryears: Late Nashville journalist Otto Kitsinger, the late Eddy Arnold, Cantrell and Country Music Hall of Famer Bill Anderson (l-r) at a taping of Anderson's radio show, *Yesteryear*.

a wink of sleep that night, and the next day I arrived in Austin on the hottest day of the year, completely exhausted. I had a camera crew, we went in and I sat down in front of Willie thinking, "Now what?" I had no idea what to talk to him about. Years later, I listened to an audio tape I have of that interview thinking, "Well, this is probably not going to be so bad." It was worse than I remembered.

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