

PART I OF II

# 70 years of Philly radio

In celebration of the 70th anniversary, former KYW Newsradio reporter/anchor Larry Litwin tackled the challenge of highlighting Philadelphia radio's past seven decades. Here is Part One of a two-part series. The conclusion appears in the an upcoming issue of *Philly AD NEWS*. M. **Larry Litwin**, APR, Fellow PRSA currently teaches at The College of New Jersey after retiring after 42 years as associate professor from Rowan University. He has authored eight books including *The PR Practitioner's Playbook*, *Broadcast Journalism – A Potpourri*, *The ABCs of Strategic Communication and More ABCs*. [www.larrylitwin.com](http://www.larrylitwin.com).

If Guglielmo Marconi were alive what would he think of his invention today? In fact, how would personalities, engineers and other technicians feel about a studio without a “board,” “carts,” reel-to-reel tape, vinyl, turntables or phone lines for remote broadcasts?

When asked to reminisce about 70 years of Philadelphia radio, I knew I had work to do because my love of radio doesn't go back quite that far. I also recognized my approach would have to mirror that of broadcast journalist **Edward R. Murrow**, a master story teller. In fact, “60 Minutes” founding executive producer **Don Hewitt** borrowed Murrow's format — one which I used for more than 40 years at Rowan University and now at The College of New Jersey. Quite simply, write as if you were a radio reporter: “Tell me a story.” To assist me and a number of colleagues, we will be champion name droppers — all were household names in their day and most are legendary.

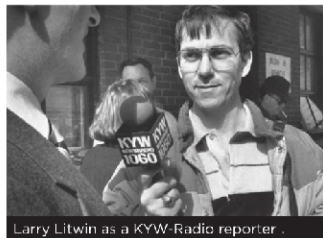
That said: My first recollections of radio date back only to the early 50s — during the transition from floor consoles, which were included as fine living room decor, to table tops and eventually transistor radios. Mine was among the first Silvertone brand transistor radios complete with earphone jack (a first back then) and beautiful genuine leather case. Manufactured by Sears, it retailed for only \$59.95.

Soon after, I was one of millions of young boys and girls, who took their transistor radios to bed (hiding them under their pillows listening to baseball on WIP or rock music on WIBG or WFIL-Famous 56.) But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Back in 1947, the year *AD NEWS* published its inaugural edition, listeners took radio for granted — much as they did their daily newspapers. No matter which station one listened to, when they turned on the family radio, it was much the same as turning on the faucet. But, instead of water coming out, it was sound. And whether it was a drama, soap opera, music or sports, the voice from that squawk box soon became your friend.

There was — as there remains today, in many cases — a certain intimacy. I speak first-hand in this instance — not as a listener, but as an anchor on KYW Newsradio. Often, I'd meet women who would joyfully say — in their husband's presence — “I go to bed with you every night.” If her husband were nearby, he would quickly chime in, “And I do, too.” No matter what I was thinking, I always responded with a smile and a “KYW thank you.” (As a side note: I was attending Parsons [Iowa] College in fall 1965 and read in *The Evening Bulletin* mailed to me along with *The Inquirer* and *Courier-Post* that KYW was going all news. As a news junkie, I immediately made it my professional goal, to work there.)

Over these past 70 years, dozens of personalities, broadcast journalists and news readers have come into our homes, cars and — via



Larry Litwin as a KYW-Radio reporter .



Frank Sinatra with Sid Mark.



WFIL boss jocks.

transistor and other “portable” radios — onto beaches and backyards and into sports venues (listening to play-by-play while watching the event) and even into schools as we tried to sneak a listen to the world series played in the afternoons. And who could forget trying to go to sleep on those September 1964 evenings listening to the Phillies' collapse with **By Saam**, **Bill Campbell** and **Richie Ashburn** behind the mike. (Yes, I was listening when **Chico Ruiz** stole home with **Frank Robinson** at bat on Sept. 21, 1964 — the start of the Phillies' collapse.)

Philadelphia-area communication guru **Dave Coskey**, now president and general manager of five Longport, NJ Media radio stations at the Jersey shore, shares some of his more recent recollections: “Growing up in the Philadelphia area in the 1970s gave listeners the opportunity to experience the end of the golden era of popular broadcast radio.

“We were exposed to some of the all-time greats anywhere in **Jerry Blavat**, **Butterball**, **Hy Lit** and **Joe Niagara** along with some of the biggest names in personality radio — **Don Cannon** on WIBG and WFIL, **Harvey in the Morning** on WIOQ, **The Morning Zoo** with **John DeBella** on MMR and even the introduction of **Howard Stern** simulcasting on WYSP,” says Coskey. “The Boss Jocks ruled at Famous 56. But we were also exposed to the launch of the FM band with WMMR (**Ed Sciaky**, **Pierre Robert**, etc.), WYSP — and what was probably the first MOR FM (middle-of-the-road) in WFIL 92. Let's not forget **Mike Bove** on MAGIC (WMGK) in AM and PM drive times.

“Despite the numerous choices in and around the Philadelphia area on both the AM and FM bands, the station that ruled the ratings and was a maker of musical hits for several decades was Metromedia's WIP with **Ken Garland**, **Bill Weber**, **Tom Moran**, **Tom Lamaine** and **Nat “The Night Rat” Wright**. We even listened as WIP transitioned from a music giant to the first great all-sports talk radio station.” And Coskey asks, “Who would ever miss **Vince Lee**'s “Yes Virginia There is a Santa Claus” during the holidays on KYW?”

Speaking of WIP, it went from a Gimble Brothers Department Store-owned station to Metromedia, which purchased WIP-AM-FM in 1960. Gimbels expanded into the radio business in 1922 featuring “Uncle WIP's Bedtime Stories.” Under Metromedia, WIP targeted 25- to 49-year-old listeners. It adopted a middle-of-the-road sound, featuring some adult pop music and extensive news service — evolving into a full-service adult contemporary format in the 1970s, featuring strong personalities and robust local news. According to Philadelphia Broadcast Pioneers, WIP was the city's top-rated station in that era.

For those wondering, also in the 20s, Lit Brothers bought WDAR and changed its call letters to WLIT. Strawbridge and Clothier owned WFI. In 1935, the two merged to become WFIL. The three department stores owned three of the four

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corners of Eighth and Market Streets.

In addition to those Coskey named, WIP was home to the Morning Mayor **Joe McCauley**, **Chuck Dougherty** (Chuckie from Kentucky), **Tom Brown**, **Dick Clayton** and **Bill Hickok**. WIP was the station listeners turned to for up-to-the-minute news in the 50s through the 60s before KYW went all news replacing WIP as the city's top-rated station and perennial number one for decades.

During its heyday, WIP boasted a team of full-time broadcast journalists to complement its music — many of whom worked under news director **Paul Rust**. Do any of these names create an earworm in your brain? **Gordon Thomas**, **John Paul Weber** (whose given middle name was Peter, but didn't have the right cadence for radio — an extra syllable, he once said), **Samuel Hall**, **Ron Gold**, **Harley Flaum**, **Steve Ross**, **Robert Vaughn**, **Noel Heckerson**, **Frank Brookhouser**, **Paul Sullivan** and even **John Facenda**, before joining Channel 10. **Gene Kelly** (also a Phillies play-by-play man) and **Jim Leaming** did sports prior to his years at Channel 3. By the way, **John Paul** is the epitome of "luck" — preparation meeting opportunity.

According to his children **Vicki Weber** and **John Cameron Weber**, "Working for no pay at a Camden radio station, dad heard from a colleague of an opening at WIP. The colleague didn't get the job so he felt free to tell him about it. Owner **Ben Gimbel** was fascinated by fires. So, when John Paul was asked to fabricate describing a fire, as if he were there (for the audition), he landed the job." The Webers recall their father as professional, calm and smooth. John Paul must have done something right, he informed the Delaware Valley for 50 years.

It is always a challenge listing names of those who touched listeners' lives in one way or another — for "fear" of omitting some, but here are a few more voices from those earlier Philly radio days who shared your home and car offering peace of mind, comfort, entertainment and companionship. Many worked for more than one Philadelphia station: **Gene Milner**, **Bill Mann**, **Jack Pyle** and (I'm) **Bob Menefee** ("is who I am").

WIP alumnus and former Action News producer **Bob Timms** recalls **Paul Rust** and his expertise emulated by many newsrooms across the country.

"At WIP, it was Rust's policy not to bulletin stories unless big enough to overrule programming and cover wall-to-wall," says Timms. "Research proved doing so otherwise sent listeners up the dial to all-news KYW.

"My brief tenure at WIP had me in the company of industry giants — my heroes who accepted me as an equal from day one. I could not have known how short that department's days would be. I didn't want to leave for a full-time gig at WPVI, but it was an obvious choice. Uncle Pauly, as he was known, told me so. Soon after, the InfoTainment format arrived at WIP and, one-by-one, the magnificent journalists went away. **Steve Ross** became a writer at WCAU-TV, **Gordon Thomas** left for more work at the

advertising agency where he long part-timed and **John Paul Weber** retired.

Timms expresses concern over the future of local radio news in Philadelphia and elsewhere. "Paradoxically, listeners treat news as a tune-out. But when they perceive something to be happening, they expect it to be there (like the proverbial faucet)," he says. "You can't run a department of even one person on contingency. You either spend the money and it's there, or you do not. Sources are the same. They gravitate to those who cover them day-in-day-out."

Over the decades, Philly was home to two giant "rock" stations: WIBG and WFIL. According to Philadelphia Archive radio, "WIBG was best known for its wildly popular top-40 format that began in the mid-1950s when DJ **Joe Niagara** began slipping rock and roll songs into the station's pop standards format. By 1958, the station was playing rock and roll 24 hours a day, the only Philadelphia station to do so, well into the 1960s. WIBG, known as "Wibbage," ruled Philadelphia radio, especially among teenagers.

The station hosted local "record hops" and was the first to publish weekly "Top 99" surveys of the most popular music that could be found at local record stores. (Its frequency was 990-AM or 99 on the AM dial.) The jocks were known as the WIBG "Good Guys" and included **Niagara**, **Dean Tyler**, **Jerry Stevens**, **Frank X. Feller**, **George Gilbert**, **Jack Star**, **Don L. Brink**, **Bill Wright Sr.** and **Hy Lit**.

Not to be outdone by WIBG, WFIL (560) made a major programming change in September 1966. The station, owned by *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, transformed, starting — co-incidentally — in 1947, from a low-powered AM station to "the pop explosion station" eventually featuring the "Boss Jocks," according to Philadelphia Archives. WFIL switched to top-40 music, became Famous 56 providing "a bright, exciting sound of truly modern radio; the sound of popular music; young, personable air personalities; a station that immediately attracted the attention of literally thousands."

The air personalities, known as "Boss Jocks" included **Chuck Browning**, **Jay Cook**, **George Michael**, **Jim Nettleton**, **Dave Parks**, **Frank Smith** and **Long John Wade**. WFIL personalities in the later years of the top-40 era included **Dr. Don Rose**, **Jim O'Brien**, **Dick Heatherton** and **Banana Joe Montione**.

News was delivered at 55 minutes after the hour by the ABC Radio Network supplemented by a strong local news team under the direction of **Jack Hyland**: **Allen Stone**, **Larry Kane**, **Glenn Barton**, **Randy Brock**, **Tony Bruno**, **Ira Mellman** and **Gene Dillard**, to name a few. All had stereotypical broadcast voices and delivered up-tempo "rock" newscasts

When **Walter Annenberg** and *The Inquirer* were forced to divest themselves of their radio properties in 1971 because of changes in Federal Communications Commission regulations, **Jack Richer** bought WFIL-FM for the bargain price of \$1 million. Richer changed the call letters to WIOQ-FM. With program director **Dave Klahr** at the helm, the station — among the first computer-automated nationwide — was "tightly" formatted playing "middle of the road" music and softer pop hits. Long-time Philly voice **Art Andrews** and newcomer **Jere Sullivan** were

among the jocks.

Significant to Philadelphia's radio history was the introduction of all-news radio, which made its Philadelphia debut at noon on Sept. 21, 1965 when disc jockey **Bill (Wee Willie) Webber** introduced general manager **Richard Harris** who handed off to KYW Radio's **Steve Porter**. The first promo after the headline package urged listeners to dial their car radio to 1060 and then "set the center button" to get "all the news all the time."

Not only have that slogan and jingle changed (morphed into the popular KYW Newsradio-1060), but so has the way in which listeners receive and "tune in" to their favorite stations. In fact, radio these past seven decades has evolved from the floor console with vacuum tubes transmitted from towers to digital radio streamed to computers, smart phones and other devices via Wi-Fi.

A piece of radio trivia few might remember is that two-way talk radio debuted in Philadelphia on Sun Ray Drug-owned station WPEN.

"I was the first one in the country to do two-way talk where the caller could be heard as well as the host," said **Frank Ford** who had one of the longest runs of any of Philadelphia's air personalities. Ford explained to his listeners, this writer among them, the technology behind it and how callers would be on a 15-second delay (just in case). As Ford often said, "The rest is history."

Another Philadelphia radio phenomenon is today's B-101 (WBEB) — originally WDVR. Founded in May 1963 by **David Kurtz**, a Philco Electronics engineer, it soon became the top FMer in the city. It was truly a David vs. the Goliath AM radio. In fact, most cars were equipped with only AM radios.

*Radio Archives* reports that WDVR started an industry trend by broadcasting in stereo 24 hours a day, seven days a week. It was not the only ground-breaking event undertaken by Kurtz and business partner **Jerry Lee**. In 1968, WDVR became the first FM station anywhere to gross \$1 million a year. 101.1 morphed into WEAZ (EZ-101) in September 1980 and eventually WBEB. For as far back as anyone can remember, WDVR-WEAZ-WBEB has been playing an all-Christmas music format for a month preceding the holiday. I remember listening to it in my father's Camden food market in the 60s.

Later, Kurtz and Lee would give away 50,000 radios to local businesses. The only catch was the radios were permanently tuned to 101.1 FM and had no external knob for changing the frequency. They were high quality table units in a rosewood cabinet weighing almost 13 pounds and featuring a six-inch speaker. An optional matching speaker-only attachment was also available.

Over 60 of these past 70 years there has been one constant: **Sid Mark** and "The Sounds of Sinatra." It all began with "Friday with Frank" starting in 1957 over WHAT-FM, where Mark was a disc jockey. It has been running continuously — now on WPHT-AM. Co-incidentally, Mark and WIP's **John Paul Weber** are graduates of Camden's Woodrow Wilson High School.

*New decades bring new changes.  
Watch for Part II. 📻*