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Radio Towns

About cities we lived in before I was four and came to Santa Barbara, few impressions remain. I do remember my grandfather's farm in Brandenburg, Kentucky, and my other grandparents' house in Ohio, which was modest and white, box-like amid the vacant fields. Those days, my father always seemed to be on the road chasing down a new job at a radio station. My mother and I were mostly on the farm, sometimes at his parents in Washington Court House, a small town between Columbus and Chillacothe. So cities, downtown areas I should say, are mostly a blur – all similar in recalled image, strange from a child's point of view, low to the ground and the long cars of those days. Each place gives back a widespread grey, and each street is much the same with buildings shouldering up to each other and blocking out the sky. The glass store fronts with manikins, the dull or glimmering stuff of the world went by overhead with little endearment or lyricism to mark it or make it remain and resonate in memory.

One town that does come back a little is Charleston, West Virginia. I still see a pink fog from the neon call letters aglow above the doorway of the station where my father worked. I still see the glass booth-like room where he sat in front of the microphone which rested on a table; it looked like a huge bronze star with a metal halo around it. I was just tall enough to see over the bottom of the booth to where the glass started and so could watch as he finished reading the news – "The Five Star Final." After that, we would all drive home in the Buick, a light green boat of a car with a line of silver ovals along each side of the hood and a figurine on the front. With its wings spread, with all that shiny chrome, it looked as if we were going somewhere very fast.

After Charleston, my father had an offer from CBS in New York which he turned down in favor of a job in Santa Barbara which offered a lot less pay and prestige. Perhaps he was thinking that a sleepy little coastal town was a better place to raise a child, and if so, it was the most unselfish thing he ever did. Moving to Santa Barbara, I immediately noticed that the main street downtown, State Street, seemed more open

to the sky; most buildings were shorter, two stories only; there was a wider and more constant light. There were only two stoplights the entire length of State; over the street's wide four lanes, they hung on wires stretching across the blue. One of my earliest memories is of huge artificial Christmas trees, thirty-feet high at least, with round candy-cane like bases. They would place them in the middle of the street each season and drivers had to slow down and swerve a little in the middle of each block to avoid them, but no one seemed to mind. There must have been speakers in those trees for piped-in Christmas music – somehow I always remember "Silver Bells" by the McGuire Sisters on the air.

There were only two really tall buildings, the Granada Building and the Balboa Building – the first I knew for its movie theater on the first floor and the other I knew for the radio station. The Balboa was a tall place with red letters on one side spelling out KIST bigger than the windows; it also housed KTMS, the station where my father had just taken a job. This was the 50s and everyone smoked; it was glamorous in the movies and magazine ads, the 40s had not altogether lost their hold and people still wanted glamor, romance, and were largely oblivious to the future and to consequences. The big room at KTMS looked like a newspaper room with desks lined up and all the phones. On my father's there were always pipes in a big circular ashtray, a red tin of Velvet pipe tobacco, and one of those funny rubber U-shaped wedges on the phone to cradle it against your shoulder so you could talk and still use both of your hands. I played with the pipes and sometimes got a sheet of paper to put in the old Underwood office typer; I would punch out capital letters which seemed familiar in groups of threes and fours until I finally gave way to a long string of nonsense which still looked fine and important to me.

Later, he worked for another station, KDB, which had a small round office and broadcast tower in an empty field on the beach side of the freeway – there too a layer of smoke and men drinking many cups of coffee. Years following, he switched back and forth between stations and jobs. The clearest parts of this time are those Saturday mornings when I'd go with him to the Copper Coffee Pot, a cafeteria type restaurant downtown, where one of the stations hosted a weekly round table discussion program. He would emcee and various members of the Junior Chamber of Commerce would talk about the pressing issues of the community there in 1953. I was at the far end of the long table with a plate full of waffle, beyond range of my father at the head of the table and the conferring men. I remember that same outerspace microphone on top of the table in front of him, his camel hair sport coat and green knit tie,

the white shirt stiff from the laundry with staves in the collar and the cardboard pulled out by me. I can still see his cordovan wing tips as I scurried beneath the table among the wires. I was four or five and these were businessmen serious in their suits. I was quiet and hardly seen or heard. This was business in the 50s, the bedrock of America; this was high mass in the small social and political order of those times, and so, aside from the diversion of a waffle, this was no place of real interest to a child. But this still hums over the air waves of memory because it was a place I got to be with him, at least once a week for a year or so.

Our car radio was always on. Those times when we went places together, it seemed the radio – chromed, large and glowing the yellow of an autumn moon – was often the center of things. Songs. He knew who had a hit, who could really sing and who couldn't, kept a running count and made pronouncements to my mother and me to that effect. And then commercials recurring, claiming some portion of consciousness – "Mr. & Mrs. North" was "brought to us by" Halo shampoo and before every episode of "Gunsmoke" someone would shout to "Call for Phillip Morris." But I understood little more than my father's prerecorded voice when it promoted some product or local service, wondered how it could happen with him sitting right next to me, driving our car. He would sing along if it was a ballad and not a "sock song," or he would whistle and tap his college ring in time on the steering wheel. His ring was large and gold with a cut green stone, and the plastic wheel had three chrome inserts at intervals which he would tap with the narrow underside while Perry Como or Gordon McRae were singing. He never sang along with Sinatra. Although in his youth he had been a singer with a big band, he always let Sinatra do his own work, respectful of his style, his phrasing. Not long before that, during the late 40s or early 50s, Sinatra had lost favor with the public, not because of his singing or selection of material, but because the public, in its collective moral wisdom, had taken great umbrage at his divorce from Ava Gardner and perhaps his social life in general. My father was one of the few DJs who continued to play Sinatra's records then; the art and romance of the singing for him were more important than the social climate and mores of the times – only music could so move him beyond convention and politics.

But politics didn't leave him untouched. After years of working with engineers, he built his own radio station, the first FM stereo multiplex station in the United States, KMUZ. He was committed to what was called "easy listening" and to "soft-sell" ads. And also committed – more each year it seemed – to a conservative political agenda he used his editorial and public service spots to promote, often against some

active local opposition. McCarthy was gone but the Communists were still there, still coming – at the borders of Mexico, in the UN – and he was vigilant and going to point out each clear and present danger. It wasn't "Politics" for him really, left or right, it wasn't as simple and fatuous as George Bush using phrases like "The L Word" – no it was good and evil, it was absolute, and well, those liberals were either "dupes" for the Communists or sinister, or worse. For him, these were questions of the highest order. All of this combined to keep him gone from home most days and nights, down in the basement of the Carillo Hotel cuing albums on the large flat turntables, cupping his hand over his right ear to announce the promotional spots, lining up the huge spools on the tall machines for taped programming – Mantovani, 101 strings, Keely Smith with "You Go to My Head" and "I Wish You Love." It all would play for half an hour or so and reach all over the Tri-County area, sometimes to San Francisco. And even though he still gave air time to Sinatra, he would, after the music, read a speech by Barry Goldwater from the *Congressional Record* to alert the listening public. And then he'd again bend his ear over with his hand, slowly and sonorously pronouncing the call letters – KMUZ – and say "The sound of Music" while in the background, the recorded surf was breaking and you could hear sandpipers, a gull or two calling out.

After my parents divorced and my father re-married, he was still gone about as often. Radio Business – the selling of commercial spots and a brand of music – was his real and only joy. I was getting to that age when radio/music would become important, but of course not his station. All the kids listened to rock stations, KACY from Oxnard, KIST locally, and a station broadcast from just over the border in Mexico that first had Wolf Man Jack as a DJ, a station whose call letters now are lost along with most of the lyrics to those 50 teen tunes I then kept by heart, those dreamy repetitions of love lost and found from Kathy Young & The Innocents, The Fleetwoods, The Flamingos, Dion and the Belmonts. Doo Wop and the harmonies of heartbreak passed solitary evenings spent avoiding math homework, staring out to a dark blue sky blinking with distant light, light sourced in the dark centers of galaxies which were also sending our radio signals, inscrutable then as now. As the 50s ended and the 60s set in, Roy Orbison gave us "Only the Lonely" and "Blue Angel" and though a group of us were always together, we all had a vague feeling that it had something to do with us and the years right ahead.

With my own car for the last two years of high school, we cruised State Street religiously, and always with the radio on. I drove a '59 Chevy

with wide, flattened tail fins, and usually Orsua, Schiefen, Rosales or Bonilla road along. In 1964 we were all wearing the same thing – white Levis, white t-shirts, wool Pendletons and blue Sperry deck shoes; the surfer style had caught on for most everyone. There was really no place to go then – one pizza parlor up on the Mesa, Me & Ed's, which was great but you had to buy pizza and couldn't simply sit around most of the night and talk – there were no malls or other such places to hang out. So, with gas about 25¢ a gallon we cruised all night, three or four to a car, switching radio stations to find a new song by the Beatles or Rolling Stones, perfectly content to drive up and down the wide four-lane main street for hours. Now and then we would all sing along with some popular refrain; I can remember rolling down every window in the Chevy, boosting the volume up all the way and all of us shouting more than singing, "Everybody's gone surfin', surfin' U.S.A." We were more and more on our own, and found some meaning in most any lyric or tune, though with cars passing slowly on every side of you, each one with a different station blaring, there was often an overriding cacophony hanging above the street like the neon lights from the theaters. We drove along punching a new button on the radio after every song. I hadn't heard my father on the air in years.

Sometime during my first year in college, through a series of bad business deals or some involvement in politics that was never made clear to me, he was forced to sell his station to an arm of Kemper Insurance. They got it for a song, you could say, and knew it – paying about one tenth of what it was worth. He moved to Arizona and took time off, and after over twenty years in the business, he never returned to radio. And soon radio moved into the background of the times. Viet Nam came through the TV each night, Armstrong walked on the moon, and we saw it live one afternoon, without commercial interruption. For years thereafter, 40s and 50s music disappeared from the air, the easy listening and popular melody, the lush romantic stylings of Julie London and Mel Torme were gone. Dialing around, you never ran into Perry Como, Julius La Rosa, Steve Lawrence and Edie Gormé, the slightly too-sweet instrumental versions of Broadway tunes; only Sinatra kept his head above water, trying to adjust, and not too successfully, to the late 60s. Folk music, protest, Jimi Hendrix, Dylan and The Doors were what was wanted, what was coming in now over larger speakers with volume and with force. Life, more harsh and more real, was immediate now and the music was part of it – much less romance, next to no nostalgia. The Stones had a big hit that repeated, "Hey, you, get off of my cloud!" FM stations from L.A. had whatever

audiences there were and most were playing the first heavy metal music. No one was going to turn on the radio and relax, sing softly along.

Often driving 101 between San Francisco and Santa Barbara, I'd dial around for a station when I found myself in one of those remote areas where there were still no housing tracts or businesses, where things were flat for miles except for the sea greens and blues of eucalyptus groves planted as wind breaks for fields of broccoli and cauliflower. Punching one of the buttons, never finding something slower with melody or romantic flare, I'd turn it off and think of my father driving that old Pontiac station wagon, tuning in a June Christy ballad, or I'd see him in Arizona watering the little grass and rocks of his back yard in the late afternoon, whistling something, lamenting how business and music had changed, knowing nothing would ever again sound the same.