

## Ken Dowe, Then And Now

*'The only rule is, there are no rules'*

The crucifixion took place over dinner. "Change the call letters," said the consultant. "Blow up the format. This station will never come back." Hyman Childs, owner of KKDA (K104)/Dallas lost his appetite. He turned to his friend, Ken Dowe. "Do you think it's true, Ken?" he asked. "Is this what's going to happen?"

Dowe, who knew all about station ownership, replied, "No, I don't think so. I don't think you'll have to do all that."

But K104 was in trouble. Its direct Urban competitor, Summit's KJMZ, was hipper, hotter and the acknowledged flavor of the month, and then there was the research. In September 1992 Dowe took over K104 and methodically went about applying the lessons 30 years of radio had taught him: Focus on mornings, make the station bigger than life, become part of the community.

"Ken's always had great instincts about local programming," says Infinity President Dan Mason. "People talk about his radio stations."

Two years after Dowe took KJMZ on, the station left the format. Today K104 is the No. 1 radio station in Dallas, and has been for quite a while.

Somewhere Gordon McLendon is smiling.

### MISSISSIPPI PUKER

Dowe spent his Sunday mornings haggling with preachers ("If you don't have the money, Brother Smith, I can't let you on"), but his real fight was to get on the air. He was "working" at his hometown station, WGBM in Greenville, MS, and, as it was for many of us former flunkies and gofers, his job was to hang out, get coffee and not ask too many questions. Some afternoons, once they got used to seeing him, he'd show up to watch Eddie Williams play rhythm and blues records and think to himself, "You know, I can do that."

But there was this voice thing. "It came out like Jimmy Carter's," Dowe admits. "Way up in the top of my throat."

Lose the accent. Learn to talk like they do in the movies. Dowe started going to matinees — not for the stars or stories, but for the voices. Then he'd go home and practice.

"One day I woke up and didn't talk like a Mississippi pucker anymore," says Dowe. "I was ever so grateful."

His first full-time job was in Hattiesburg, MS. He arrived, and a nanosecond later the owner named him PD — not that Dowe knew what to do. Inspiration,

however, was only 100 miles away. "I could hear WNOE/New Orleans like it was local," says Dowe. "That made me want to do this for the rest of my life."

He says that now and means it, but back then he was only 19 and worried that radio might not be his pass to fame and fortune. So he decided to become a fighter pilot. No kidding.

### A CHANGE OF PLANS

During high school Dowe had paged in the Mississippi House of Representatives, so he pulled some strings and was accepted for training at Kessler Air Force Base.

At the last minute, though, he heard about a radio job, junked his plane plans, flew across the border into Alabama and landed a job at Bernie Dittman's WABB/Mobile. His life was about to change.

"A guy named Jim Taber was there," Dowe recalls, fondly. "Jim was from Dallas and played me airchecks of KLIF and KBOX." Dowe had never heard radio like that before. "I went nuts," he says. "I wondered if I could ever do it."

Now we go to warp speed.

Before the year was out Dowe had met the love of his life, eloped, accepted a job at KDEO/San Diego and headed for California, where, after a series of strange events, he ended up in morning drive. "There was a guy on the air at KCBQ/San Diego named Happy Hare," Dowe says. "I was the first to ever beat him."

Then Chuck Dunaway, PD of KBOX, called (see Legends 1/19/01).

### DALLAS, ATLANTA, DALLAS, CINCINNATI

You may not know about the battle, but KBOX and KLIF fought it out like cats and dogs in Dallas, and in 1961 there were many, including Dowe, who thought KBOX sounded better.

Dunaway put Dowe in middays. One day, after only nine months, one of Dowe's heroes, KOMA/Oklahoma City's "Hot Rod Roddy" (*The Price Is Right* — "Come on down!") blasted through the door. "I'm on my way to WQXI/Atlanta," said Roddy. "When I get there, I'm going to get Kent Burkhardt to call you."

Burkhardt called, and Dowe went. At first the move was about money, but it turned out to be about the tremendous support that Burkhardt provided. "Kent was the first to give me the confidence to really be somebody on the radio," says Dowe.

Things were good in Atlanta, but when KLIF called, Dowe couldn't resist. He returned to Dallas. "I did

middays for a couple of heartbeats and then afternoons for maybe 2 1/2 years," he says.

So there he was — KLIF. And there he stayed, right? "I loved everything about it," Dowe says. Well, not everything. He wanted to program, but nobody at KLIF thought he was ready. "They said I was too young, too valuable on the air."

Frustrated, Dowe took matters into his own hands. "Pat O'Day just called from Seattle," he told his wife, Dottie. "He and Les Smith are putting on a new station in Cincinnati." So he went to Ohio, but it was the wrong move.

"The biggest downturn of my entire career," says Dowe. He loved O'Day, but from the start the city and the station ate him up — union hassles, personnel problems, stress. Where was the magic? He hadn't signed up for this! When the opportunity arose, he joined Scripps-Howard at WNOX/Knoxville, and then McLendon called again: "We want you to come back and do the morning show."

### KEN, GRANNY AND GORDON

Bill Stewart, KLIF's PD, had his demons, but the man knew his business.

"He was like a nasty history professor," Dowe recalls. Every morning for 2 1/2 years Stewart tore into Dowe: "Why'd you do that there? What happened during that break?"

"He taught me how to do a morning show," Dowe says.

"Ken was a nontraditional disc jockey, a real person," says New Northwest Broadcasting CEO Michael O'Shea. "He also had an alter-ego, 86-year-old Granny Emma."

"Dallas listeners thought she was real," Burkhardt confides. "When they discovered it was really Ken, the city was dumbfounded." Thirty-eight points worth of dumbfounded.

Then McLendon took Dowe off the air. "We sat down in my house until 3 or 4 in the morning," Dowe explains. "Gordon told me he needed someone to run his radio stations." Are we talking the keys to the kingdom? "I was his No. 1 guy," laughs Dowe, "but he never told me my name was McLendon." He did, however, name Dowe the first (and only) Executive VP of McLendon Broadcasting.

"There were two people who had remarkable relationships with McLendon," says O'Shea. "One was Don Keyes, the other was Ken. I think Ken understood Gordon's philosophy better than anybody."

In 1975 Gordon McLendon wrote Dowe a letter. In it was the phrase "I respect you as a creator and an innovator."

Dowe is still smiling.

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Ken Dowe