



JOE LADD

Engineering A Great Air Career

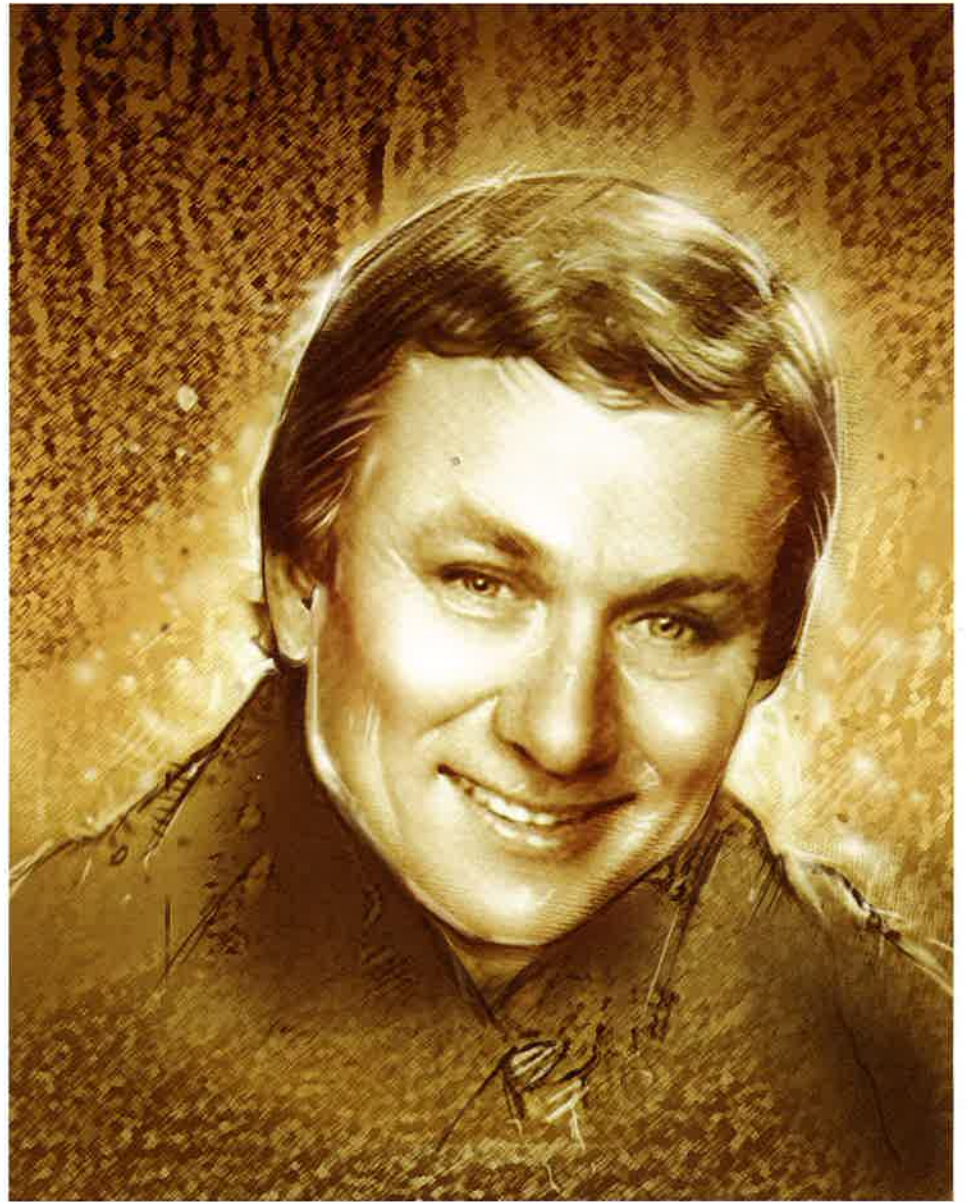
A childhood fascination with crystal and ham radio while growing up in rural south Texas led Joe Ladd to professional broadcasting. His early interest in engineering eventually led to the first of only three radio jobs in his career — KANI/Wharton, TX for \$2 an hour and “all the records you could eat.” Shortly thereafter, he was doing almost everything at



KWBA/Baymont, TX, where he stayed five years. Joe’s technical interests eventually gave way to focusing on being a strong air personality and on the programming side, ultimately earning him one of Country radio’s most sought-after positions at legendary KIKK/Houston. Joe was a fixture at KIKK for 25 years, and during that stretch was recognized twice as the CMA Music Director of the Year. He also shouldered many additional duties: charity fundraising, artist management for a young singer named Mark Chesnutt, house announcer at Gilley’s before and during its glory years, and co-owning a 100-kw FM in Midland-Odessa with Dr. Bruce Nelson. Already enshrined in the Texas Music Hall of Fame, Joe now joins his former radio ownership partner in the Country Music Disc Jockey Hall of Fame.

I was always interested in electronics as a kid, toying around with little one-tube radios and crystal sets. I grew up on a farm in a little town called East Bernard, TX — we called it East Barnyard — hell, we didn’t even have a telephone out there. There were no phone lines, so I became a ham radio operator when I

had just signed on the air. My mom had become ill, and I thought it was an opportune time to move back home for a little bit. I checked to see if I could work on the transmitter or something as an engineer. The only opening they had was a sales job. I took it, but it didn’t pan out too good, so eventually I did



“I can do a better job,” and they made me chief engineer. It was a directional three-tower system, but I worked with consultant engineers and still was disc jockey, PD, all that stuff. I really learned my trade there. I was 23-24 years old, trying to build a career, and was engulfed with living radio day and

weren’t even getting that kind of activity on the AM. The next day I told the PD and GM, “Hey guys, there’s something to this FM. A lot of people are listening to this damn thing.” Car radios with AM & FM became mandatory, and I told them FM was going to blow up, and it did. FM saved KIKK

“ I FELT LIKE I NEVER HAD A JOB IN RADIO — IT WAS EXCITING AND A PLEASURE TO BE THERE. I JUST HOPE THE KIDS IN RADIO TODAY ARE GOING TO HAVE AS MUCH FUN AS I DID. ”

was 14 years old; that was my contact with the outside world. It was a passion for me. I listened to AM stations, DX’ing at night to pick up those that were the most further away. I studied electronics after high school and earned radiotelephone licenses which let me work on commercial broadcast equipment.

Living in Houston in 1963, I was working on two-way radio gear for an oil company. KANI, which was close to my home town,

some airwork there in the morning and kind of got the feel of it. After a half-year or so, I moved on because I thought I knew everything at that time. After all, by then I had been in radio six months!

I took a job as a jock at Country KWBA/Baytown, across the ship channel from Houston. When the engineer badly screwed something up, I said to the manager,

“night. We’d sign off at 10PM and I’d sometimes work ’til five in the morning fixing things. It was just the love of being able to work. I started going back to college, too. I was just eat up.

Being an air personality was more challenging and fun than the electronics end. I began devoting myself to being an air personality, programming the station and being more involved in the community. KWBA flipped formats to rock for about a year during the Beatles era, and we’d do outside promotions and have all these girls showing up. I thought, “Hey, this is pretty cool.” But Country just worked better for that market.

Of course I listened to KIKK. I asked a salesman who worked there if he would check for any on-air openings. He called me one day in 1968 and said, “I think they’re going to let a guy go.” I went over there and asked about a job. The PD said, “When can you start?” I said, “Right away,” and got the midday shift!

It was just amazing how everything changed in my life. I was thrown right into the middle of the No.1 station and one of the top stations in the country. I was getting phone calls from people I hadn’t heard from in years, and meeting all the country artists, promoters, songwriters. I didn’t think it could get any better than that.

We eventually evolved from KIKK-AM to the FM, which was downtown. It simulcast during the day and at night programmed music with very little talk. No one was listening, at least they didn’t think so. One night I had to work the FM all-night show when a jock got sick. I couldn’t believe it: the phones would never quit ringing. We

because competitor KENR 1070 was beginning to kick our butt. Of course, then our FM went into play and we remained the market powerhouse for years.

You’d see a lot of talent in Houston. We’d play their songs on-air and tried to get them record deals, saying “We’ve got a guy here just singing his butt off. You need to take a look at him.” A lot of them who signed came out of Houston: Gene Watson, Mickey Gilley, Freddy Fender, Randy Cornor, Kenny Dale — on and on.

I was an announcer at Gilley’s, and great acts would come through there. We were right there when they started writing stories about it and *Urban Cowboy* was being made there ... we were all in it. The Hollywood producer told the owner, “If this movie is successful, Gilley’s will be the most successful club in the country.” And it was. For years, a line wrapped around the building a mile long with people trying to get in there every night. It was just phenomenal.

There was the opportunity to work with a lot of charity organizations, and because we had Nashville contacts we could get artists to help. Some of the best feelings I ever had were also sad, such as presenting at Texas Children’s Hospital, where you see young kids suffering but how their faces would light up when we would bring somebody by. It was a good time in my life.

For some reason or another, I always seemed to survive at KIKK through several ownerships, managers and PDs and it was one hell of a career. I felt like I never had a job in radio — it was exciting and a pleasure to be there. I just hope the kids in radio today are going to have as much fun as I did. CAC



Good Times: An early '90s seminar shot from the MCA suite pictures (l-r, standing) Gary McCartie, McBride & The Ride’s Ray Herndon, Shelia Shipley Bidby, Joe Ladd, Mick Anselmo; (l-r, kneeling) Rick Stephenson, MB&R’s Billy Thomas, Scott Borchetta, Terry McBride and David Haley.