



LES ACREE

Big Stations, Big Talent, Big Heart

Raised on a farm in Memphis, Les Acree felt destined for radio listening to his heroes Bob Neal, Wink Martindale, Dewey Phillips and John Froland, and seeing them at the local fair. Mentored by such key figures as Dean Osmundson, Bruce Nelson, Bob Young and Jonathan Fricke, Les worked his way up from small markets to programming several of Country's crown jewels — WMC/Memphis, WGKX/Memphis, WIVK/Knoxville, WTQR/Raleigh-Durham, WNOE/New Orleans and KRMD/Shreveport, among others, winning several national awards. His legacy for outstanding community service includes being the first major market station to do fundraising for St. Jude Children's Hospital. While Les feels blessed to have collaborated with so many talented broadcasters and recording artists, the list of luminaries who feel the same about having worked with, learned from and supported by him would fill many pages. Of his induction into the Country Disc Jockey Hall of Fame, the irrepressible 45-year veteran says, "I ain't dead yet. I'm just as excited about radio today as I was back when I started in 1961."



Music was a big part of my family. We had a radio in the barn when we were milking cows, and in the field while pulling peanuts. I decided at nine years old I wanted to be in radio. In ninth grade my English teacher had us stand up and read a poem. She said, "My gosh, I need to tell some people about you and see if we can get you into some speech competitions." We didn't have a speech class, but I was in the Future Farmers of America, which had a creed contest where you recite the FFA creed. I won that, and went on to win the FFA West Tennessee Public Speaking Contest. That gave me the confidence that I could do this as a career.

We were fortunate enough to have a radio school in Memphis. My parents said, "Well give this a try. But if you fall on your face, you're going to college." I said, "Okay, that's a deal." I was at Keegan's School of

Broadcasting and playing drums in a band. The manager from KDKD/Clinton, MO called wanting someone to do an afternoon rock and roll show. The instructor said, "Well, we've got a pretty good student here who plays in a rock and roll band." The GM got me on the line and told me, "Grab some copy," and I

I got off the bus with two suitcases at the town square in Clinton, Missouri. I didn't know a soul, but was ready for an adventure. I caught a cab to the station, and on the way the driver had a heart attack. An ambulance was called, and I was 30 minutes late my first day. The station was actually in a house because

A station's license means it's there to support its community, and I was a recipient myself of a Goodwill Industries Christmas when I was in the sixth grade. Our house had burned down and we lost everything. I always appreciated charity from that day forward. I knew I hadn't done anything wrong and

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auditioned right over the telephone. We made a deal for \$60 a week, and I was about to jump out of my pants. My folks didn't believe me at first: "You auditioned over the telephone? Are you kidding me?"

they figured in case it didn't go over, they could always sell it as a home! I was so nervous. I was intent on using "Les Allen" on the air, as Acree was an unusual name, and I liked Steve Allen, who was popular at that time. One break I'd say Les Allen, but the next break I'd say Les Acree, and back and forth. Finally, the manager said, "By God, I don't care which name you use, just stick to one of them!" I figured I'd never forget my real name, and that's how Les Acree became Les Acree.

We only had one turntable so we had to talk between every song, which taught me how to be a semi-personality. We finally got two turntables and a new board with audition channels so we could do production while on the air. One Friday I had a stack of about nine spots and a hot date. I put the mike in audition, and got started, clearing my throat and saying cuss words after each spot. I got through them all, smiled, turned that mic off audition and then realized that the board was still in program. The mike was on either way, and everything I'd done went on the air. No wonder the phone was ringing!

Two years later I was programming WTUP/Tupelo — my first PD job — and we had an opening. A guy came in wearing a pair of tight jeans, boots and ducktail. I said, "Who in the world is *that* walking down the hall?" He was looking for a job, and I said, "Well, I'll never hire that guy." The manager brought him back and said, "This is Bruce Nelson. He goes by the name *Phil Harmonic*. He wants a job." After I listened to his tape, I said, "This guy's great." Later on he would become my PD at WUBE/Cincinnati. Today Bruce is a member of the Country DJ Hall Of Fame and a great friend.

wasn't trying to take advantage of anyone; we just needed help.

I remember standing in the kitchen in the late '50s. Mom and dad were reading the paper, and said, "Danny Thomas is going to build a hospital in Memphis that treats kids for cancer and does research. It's going to be absolutely free." I thought it was so profound that he'd do that for all these kids he doesn't know. While programming WMQM/Memphis these sorority gals came to me and said, "We want to have a fundraiser for St. Jude. Can you get us some artists? We'll get some auction items and call it the St. Jude Life-A-Thon." Everything fell into place. We did it for two-three years there and three more years at WMC, with Ronnie McDowell, John Anderson, Jerry Lee Lewis, Charly McClain and others. These gals would rent a truck and drive around to furniture stores, asking, "What can you give us?" They were pretty nice-looking ladies; it was hard for those men to turn them down. When it came time for the first national St. Jude fundraiser, I hopped on board at WTQR and have been involved one way or another ever since. It's always been special to me and always will be.

I go back to that kid standing on that square with two suitcases ready for the world, and I never dreamed this day would come. Thank God for [founder] Chuck Chellman ... I didn't even know there would ever be such a thing as a Country Disc Jockey and Radio Hall of Fame. It's pretty darn humbling, especially when you look at who has gone in and those I'm going in with. Other than accepting the Lord Jesus Christ as my savior, getting married and my kids, this would rank next in line, that's how big it is." **CAC**



Team Building: Acree (above) at CRS with (l-r) Louise Mandrell, RC Bannon, Ronnie Milsap and Wayne Edwards. At right, he's pictured (left) with WMC/Memphis staffers.

