

CHARLIE COOK

I've Got Friends In "Know" Places

PRESIDENT'S AWARD



Celebrating his 40th year in radio, it is fitting that Charlie Cook is the 2010 recipient of the Country Radio Broadcasters' President's Award. A CRB Board member for 25 years, he's served as President and has played an instrumental role in guiding the organization's research efforts to better understand Country radio consumers. Currently Sr. Manager/ Programming at KKG0/Los Angeles, Charlie has worked with McVay

Media as a consultant since the early '80s, and has served in executive roles with Westwood One and Cumulus in addition to programming in New York, L.A., Miami and other markets. A perpetual student of the game, Charlie traces his success to a handful of people and specific moments in time, most notably a certain CRS in his early years in radio.

I grew up in Detroit, and one reason I got interested in radio is because it's such a great radio town, especially for a kid in his teens during the era of Motown and the Beatles. Three guys were appointment listening for me: Dick Purtan (WXYZ), Tom Clay (CKLW) and Johnny Randall, also on WXYZ, who I thought was the smoothest-sounding disc jockey ever.

The debate club did a presentation at the one PTA meeting my mother ever attended in her life. I was 15 at the time. She came home and told me, "The debate team was pretty cool. That would be something you would be good at." She died that summer, and I vowed that when I got back to school I'd look into it. I got involved in "forensics" – speechmaking – and won a contest for reading *John Brown's Body*. My prize was an engraved dictionary from the *Detroit News*. I carried it with me for almost 50 years until it was lost in a fire last year. The speech teacher said, "You have a good voice; you should look into radio." I had wanted to be an attorney, but that would mean six or seven years of school. A disc jockey is pretty much about whether you can put a sentence together. So I figured out which was easiest [laughs], and at age 19 got my first fulltime job from Ross Biederman at WMBN/Petoskey, MI.

Married with a kid making \$2.10 an hour, I did 3pm to signoff at 11:30pm or so. It was a tough putt for a young kid; I worked 10 hours of overtime per week to help make ends meet. Soon, a fraternity brother, Bob Osborn, who was working at suburban Detroit Country station WSDS/Ypsilanti, called with a noon-3pm opening at \$125 per week, and I also worked at WPAG/Ann Arbor, trying to make whatever I could.

I went to my first CRS after becoming PD and morning guy at WSDS at age 21. It was the first time I'd been on an airplane. In those days, they had somebody pick you up at the airport, and I have never felt more comfortable or more welcomed in my life than I did at that first Seminar. It was important to them that you were there and that you got out of it what you expected to. It built a love for the Seminar in me absolutely instantly. "Belly up to the registration table and we'll get you all taken care of," they said. And then RCA took us to see Elvis at MTSU. It felt like the coolest place to be.

At WSDS, I did something I didn't know was wrong, coming from a 500-watt daytimer in Ypsilanti: I entered the *Billboard* Country



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Disc Jockey of the Year contest. I ended up as one of the five finalists among personalities from big cities. Based on that, I got a 7pm-midnight job at KLAK/Denver, where I met overnighter Lon Helton. That was one of my truly lucky days of my life, as we became fast friends. Lon is my biggest cheerleader, and one of three people I've met in the business whom I don't want to disappoint because they've been so encouraging and supportive.

Another one of those three has been Ed Salamon. I met Ed at a *Billboard* convention in New Orleans around 1976 when I was PD/mornings at WWVA/Wheeling, WV. I walked up to him, cleared my throat and said, "My name's Charlie Cook, and I know you used to be from Pittsburgh. I'm from Wheeling. If you let me hang around with you, I think I'll probably learn something." He looked at me and nodded, "Yeah, sure!"

I don't think I left Ed's side for the entire weekend. I'd walk him to his room, and would be there in the morning when he came out. I basically stalked him. I ate meals with him, sat next to him at the panels, and listened to everything he said. He was so welcoming to me. About six months afterwards, I called him to discuss an offer I had received to go to WCOP/Boston. Ed said, "Just wait. Don't take that job." A few months later, he called and said, "I've got a job for you here in New York at WHN!" I went from Wheeling, WV to New York City as his Asst. PD and one or two shifts per week. I don't know if anybody's done a jump like that. Ed's been great to me. He's always looked out for me and has been an important part of my life.

Then there's Mike McVay. Around 1975-76, I'm at WWVA and Mike is across town at WNEU; we're both doing mornings. The circus came to town, and they had the morning personalities riding elephants down Main Street. So I get on this elephant, look over and there's a guy in a turban, harem pants and no

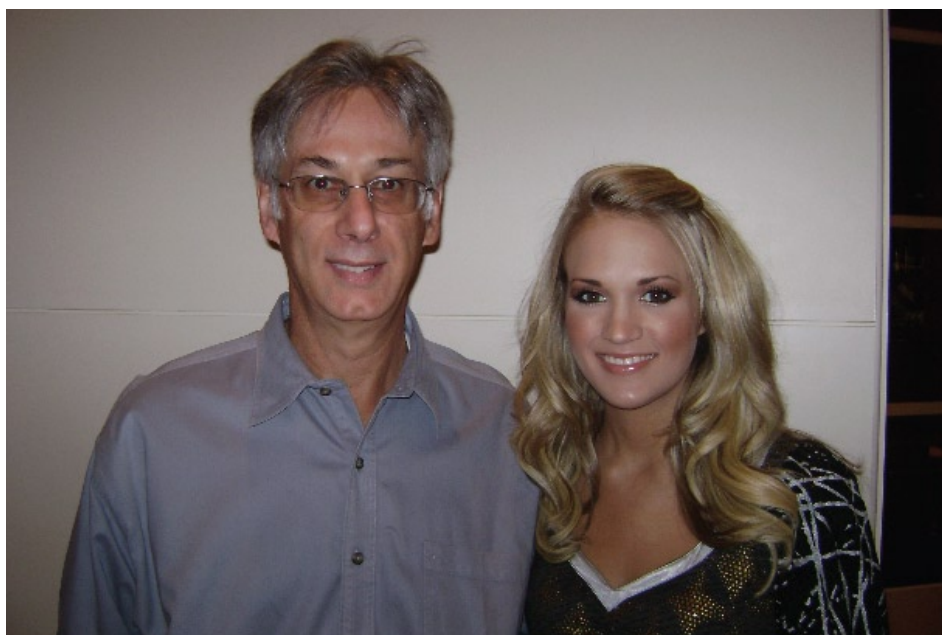
shirt. I thought, "I don't know *who* he is, but I just gotta meet him." I introduced myself and we became instant friends that day. Mike's probably the smartest radio guy I've ever met, and we still talk a few times every week.

When I made my way to PD at KHJ/Los Angeles, I was invited by Jim Ray to be on the CRS agenda committee, and later chaired it. CRS has always been about the people you meet and the acquaintances that you renew, and I've learned so much from them. We haven't done our job in 40-plus years if we don't send everybody home with one thing they can use. At my first Seminar, I came in not knowing *anything*. At WSDS, it had been pretty much "play whatever you want." But when I came back to the station, I started a crude music rotation, putting the most popular records in a different-colored sleeve, with one to be played at least every quarter-hour. CRS is great because of the effort put on by the board to design something that will be actionable immediately.

I was so blessed to be involved in the Research Committee and to get close to two great guys, Edison Research's Larry Rosin and Tom Webster. I was able to participate in building the research for the Seminar, which was always enlightening.

Because I served on the CRB board so much, I know the process that this award goes through. It's a very nice gesture, and I appreciate it very much. That Becky Brenner was kind enough to choose me as the one person for this year is a real honor.

To those coming up in the business: Meet as many people in the industry as you can. That meeting with Ed Salamon that day in New Orleans changed my entire life, and it was only because I somehow had the nerve that day to reach my hand out and introduce myself. I can't even imagine what my life would be like had I not taken that one step. **CAC**



Before He Eats: Among Charlie Cook's many executive roles was a stint at VP/Country for Cumulus Broadcasting, based in Atlanta. During that time about three years ago, Carrie Underwood stopped by for breakfast and this photo with Charlie at the Inter-Continental.