



CHARLIE COOK

A Little Luck, A Lot Of Talent



Last year's CRB President's Award recipient, Charlie Cook is known not only as one of Country's leading programming minds, but also and more important, as a true friend to the industry. His countless hours serving broadcasters in leadership and mentorship roles are well known, and he has recently embraced a fresh challenge by returning to West Virginia, where he

spent three formative years, to help West Virginia Radio Corp. take its business to the next level. (above) All-Star Lineup: Here's Charlie (left), at the Billboard Convention Awards dinner in the late '70s in Toronto, where he won Small Market Country DJ of the Year, congratulated by Ed Salamon (c) and WHN's Lee Arnold, who won Major Market DJ that evening.

My first day as a Country disc jockey did not get off to a good start. I had just been hired at WSDS/Ypsilanti, MI to do noon-3pm, and that day my show was to be a remote broadcast for a furniture store in Plymouth, a Detroit suburb. I was so nervous, thinking that people would actually be listening, that I was physically ill and missed the first couple of breaks. I remember being in the back of the store in the mop room/restroom, embarrassed and late on my first day.

Later on at WSDS, I did something I wasn't aware was a no-no. I was 22 or 23, and entered

I adopted the name Cook at WSDS. After Denver, I went to WWVA/Wheeling, WV, and replaced Bob Finnegan. There already was a Bob Berry, Bob Knight, Bob Cain and Bob Barwick on staff. They said I could be anyone but Bob Clayton, the name I'd used in Denver. I chose Charlie because Charlie Rich and Charley Pride were big acts, and because WSDS' owner was a great guy named Bob Koch [pron. "Cook"]. I took his last name, and Charlie Cook was born around 1975.

When I received the President's Award last year, I mentioned I have had three friends



time at KLAC, but Al Brady Law was in his firing phase at that point, and I was out when Don Kelly retired as GM and Law came in. Al stayed in that job 53 days.

It turned out to be "right place, right time" because I joined the fledgling McVay Media. Mike and I had been friends for years, and in 1983 I asked him if he wanted to branch out into Country. I spent the next 13 years with Mike and Doris, and they were the best bosses I ever had. One highlight has been the incredible number of people I met and worked

more recently, as Radio Committee Chair. The organization has grown so much over the past 30 years, with a charitable arm and staffed with real people who care so much about country music and Country radio.

This is an amazing business. Owners, managers and programmers take chances on people often based only on the applicant's desire. When Ross Biederman took a flyer on a raw kid from Detroit whose only fulltime job at that point was driving a dry cleaner's truck, most people thought he was crazy. He actually

“MY REAL LUCK HAS BEEN THAT I HAVE BEEN A DISC JOCKEY... AND I STILL CONSIDER MYSELF A HILLBILLY DJ.”

the *Billboard* Disc Jockey of the Year competition. Back then, *Billboard* gave out awards to personalities in various formats, regardless of market size. You can imagine how surprised I was to be a finalist. It was like Houston, Dallas Cincinnati ... and a guy from a 500-watt daytimer in Ypsilanti. I didn't win, but being nominated gave me the confidence to apply to bigger markets, and about a year later, I moved up to Denver.

WSDS was also my first PD job. I got the post because everyone else stepped back when the owner asked for volunteers. While PD, I also had to let someone go. Firing DJs has become an art form in recent years, but back in the early '70s it was very difficult for a 23-year-old kid.

for 30+ years who all came into my life over a short time span. I met Lon Helton at KLAK/Denver. Then, when I left Denver for Wheeling, I met Mike McVay, and then Ed Salamon at a *Billboard* convention while working at WWVA. That was my big break because in 1978, I went to work for Ed at WHN/New York. My daughter Izzy calls both Lon and Mike "uncle," and Ed is her godfather.

After WHN, I stayed with Storer Broadcasting by going to Miami, working for the recently retired Dan DiLoreto. He was a great manager and gave me a lot of room to grow and program. From there, it was off to Los Angeles in 1980 with Neil Rockoff, who had been GM at WHN. We switched KHJ-AM to Country to go against KLAC. By the time we flipped, KZLA-FM had jumped into the format. KHJ still did well because most of the Country fans in L.A. were still on AM. (Today, most of them are invisible!)

I like to take credit for Rick Dees' success. I failed to renew Rick's contract before we flipped to Country because I didn't see the format the way he did. He wanted to have characters like "Tammy WhyNot" and "Charlie Proud." I wish Rick would've paid me a nickel for every dollar he went on to make at KIIS-FM/Los Angeles and beyond. My letting his contract expire was the best thing that ever happened to him.

After a couple of years, I left KHJ to go across the street to KLAC. I really enjoyed my

with all over the country ... the world, really. I still hear from DJs and programmers who remind me we worked together. Some are actually nice about it.

By 1996 the stress of being on the road 230 days a year finally caught up with me. It had just taken 24 hours to fly from L.A. to a client station in Shreveport, including a bus from Dallas. I had had enough. Two days later, Ed Salamon called from Westwood One and said, "Are you ready yet?" That was all I needed to hear, and we worked together for the next 10 years.

When I joined West Virginia Radio earlier this year, a half-dozen colleagues wrote to welcome me and reminded me how I had consulted them 15-20 years ago. I think this says a great deal about the company because, so many years later, these people are still there.

I've been very lucky to do a syndicated show on and off since the early '80s. That has also allowed me to get acquainted with so many broadcasters. Every once in awhile, someone will tease me that they ran *Coor's Country News* or *Country Music's Top Ten*. Today, I host *The Road* for United Stations and can connect with programmers all over the country about the show.

Another big part of my career has been my long association with the ACM. They have been incredible supporters, having allowed me to participate as Chairman, President and

might have been, but things worked out. Ross is still active in Traverse City, MI, and I will bet that there are hundreds of broadcasters today that owe him their start.

I consider myself very fortunate to be going into the Hall of Fame with this particular class. I met Lee Rogers in the early '70s when I worked at KLAK. Lee did afternoons, I did 7pm-midnight and Lon did overnights. Not many stations can say three of their jocks made it to the Hall of Fame.

I met Dene Hallam just as he was getting into radio, and I remember that he sent me a box of matches when he was at WFEC/Harrisburg. Now, you might not think that this is much of a gift, but the matches were from an Italian restaurant there named Catalano's, which is my legal name.

I have respected the success that Dale Carter has had for so many years, and, of course, have enjoyed working with him on the Seminar.

My real luck has been that I have been a disc jockey... and I still consider myself a hillbilly DJ. I've been a programmer, served at a network and worked out of corporate offices twice. I've done a national radio show for Mutual, JB Productions, WW1 and now USRN. Either I simply can't keep a job, or I have tried to sample a little of everything. That way, when I grow up, I'll really know what I want to settle on. **CAC**



Friends In High Places: During his McVay Media days, Charlie hangs with a young Garth Brooks and Cap Cities/ABC executive Norm Schrutt.