

# Radio World

REPRINTED FROM JANUARY 5, 2005

WWW.RWONLINE.COM

FIRST PERSON

## Memphis Fan Keeps Radio Love Alive

by John King

*"Tiger Radio is a labor of love ... of top 40 Radio, '50s and '60s pop culture, and a deep love for the city of Memphis, Tenn."*

*Visit Tiger Radio's Web site and you'll be greeted with that introduction. We asked John King to tell us how Tiger Radio — and its collection of 26,000 singles and 2,500 radio commercials — came to be.*

Radio has fascinated me since I was a child, and I was fortunate to have grown up in Memphis, where great radio was abundant.

I was exposed to it when I was 8. I grew up on a farm, and our housekeeper and her husband lived with us. I could climb out of my window and into their house after my parents were asleep.

My days and nights were filled with the magic of Wink Martindale and Dewey Phillips at WHBQ(AM). WDIA(AM), the finest black

station in the country and possibly the finest Memphis station ever, had Nat D. Williams, Martha Jean, Theo "Bless My Bones" Wade, Honeyboy Thomas, Rufus Thomas and A.C. Williams.

At night, WLAC(AM) barreled in from Nashville. From 9 p.m. to midnight, Randy's, Buckley's and Ernie's, area record shops, had programs touting various packages of several records for a few dollars.

John R. — John Richbourg, on WLAC — offered 100 baby chicks for \$1, with promises of plump fryers and fresh eggs ahead. After they arrived, my father pointed out that there were only two hens in the lot. So much for my diving into the poultry business.

When I was a teen, there were Harry Chapman ("Harry with the hits") and Jack Parnell blasting the hits on WHBQ. On WMPS(AM), later Rick Dees' first Memphis station, engineer Harry Simpson used to do overnights from the transmitter site. Every time he opened his microphone you could hear the roar of the transmitter fans in the background. He also used to cart each week's play-list ads on the air, which provided rather startling "whacks" that helped keep you alert driving home.

The station I held in the greatest affection was WHHM(AM), where for 12 months in 1962, Bill Grumbles, former WHBQ general manager, sculpted some of the finest, frenetic top 40 radio I've ever heard. Given a boost in power to 1,000 watts, Grumbles sent out several hundred radios with their dials locked on 1340. He took the promotion one step further by having the radios playing in the package.

Great publicity. Alarm ensued as the Memphis post office first confiscated, then refused to deliver them.

### Pitching in New York

WHHM was the epitome of scrappy radio. Unfortunately, even with brilliant programming



The author in his studio. It is located in what he calls 'a beautiful old building in midtown Memphis.'

and promotions, money problems plagued the station; in March of 1963, it filed for bankruptcy. Grumbles moved to New York state, where he had family. From time to time I'd call to tell him how much his station had meant to me. I don't know whether he understood my adoration, but he was always polite.

When I was 13, my parents took me to New York to see my sister graduate college. I brought several Sun records with me, and I took them by WABC(AM). They actually allowed me to meet with someone there, who listened patiently while I extolled the virtues of Sun Records.

While sharing my culture, I absorbed some of New York's. Sneaking out of the hotel at night, I would go to Colony Records on Broadway. They allowed me in the back where the 45s were kept; I pulled 50 to 60 songs by some of the greatest doo-wop artists on the East Coast.

In 1958, two friends, John Fry and Fred Smith, and I started our own record label, Ardent. We had a top-20 hit on WHBQ, "The

### Studio Equipment

LPB Signature III Console  
360 Systems Instant Replay 2.0  
360 Systems TCR-8 Master Recorder  
360 Systems Short/cut 2000 Editor  
Manley Pultec EQP1A Equalizer  
Charles McHan Custom Tube Compressor  
Summit Audio DCL-200 Compressor  
HHB CDR800 CD Recorder  
Otari 5050B III-2 Reel-to-Reel  
Pioneer CDJ700S CD Players  
Tascam DA-20 MKII DAT  
Technics SL-1200 MKII Turntables  
Harris CB-1201 Turntable  
McIntosh MC 2005 Amp  
Denon DN-720R Cassette Deck  
Denon DN-680 CD Player  
Tannoy S1000 Speakers  
AKG Solid Tube Mic  
Shure SM7A Mic  
Sound Forge 7.0 Editing Software  
Vegas 4.0 Editing Software

Hucklebuck,” by the Ole Miss Downbeats. Fry, civic and music leader, has made Ardent into one of the finest recording studios on the world. Smith founded Federal Express, the globe’s largest shipping company.

At the ripe age of 18, Fry and I helped Jerry Scanlon, an established engineer in the mid-South, put on one of the first full-time black radio facilities in Arkansas. The FCC had given Jerry KJBS(AM). Fry found that the calls KCAT were available, and suddenly Pine Bluff, Ark., had Tiger Radio, patterned after the wonderful facility WQAM(AM) in Miami. An early CRC single package was ordered. We edited down several segments of 1 to 2 seconds and were off.

After several weeks of tweaking, KCAT was ready to hit the air. Before the first broadcast, John Fry and I left the station around 2 a.m., bone-tired, but set the alarm at 5 so we could hear the sign-on. At 5:30 sharp, the pre-recorded sign-on came through loud and clear.

While John and I were congratulating each other, the announcer’s mic opened with a loud *whack*. The announcer had turned his mic pot wide open. In the background we could hear birds chirping outside the studio. As soon as the announcer uttered his first words, the transmitter was blown off, shut down for over-modulation. The local paper mill wasn’t the only thing stinking up the air that morning.

Later that week, a potentially harsh thunderstorm entered the market. While John and I were monitoring in the car, a record ended and the needle began rattling in the dead air. Off to the studio we went, where we found our afternoon man, afraid of lightning, hiding under a table.

We had two newscasts: Five minutes at the top of the hour, then news headlines and weather highlights at :30. This same announcer called them both “news headlights” — until one day Fry, in the middle of a newscast, got up and kicked open the door to the main control room and shouted at the poor man, “*Headlines! It’s called headlines!*”

Our main competitor was KOTN(AM), where legend Buzz Bennett was program director. I know we amused him.

It is worth noting that KCAT has prospered these last 42 years, with its original owner, Jerry Scanlon, providing hands-on management.

### **An Ardent supporter**

By 1966, my mediocre performance as a college student rendered me fit for a few courses in the U.S. Army. With the Army’s state-of-the-art Gestetner mimeograph, I started a music programming publication, the Gideon

Matthews Record Report. This kept me in contact with both broadcasting and record companies while in the service.

I was stationed at Homestead Air Force Base south of Miami, where I got to hang out with Jim Dunlap and Lee Sherwood at WQAM and Mike E. Harvey at WFUN (AM). I was there when Jimi Hendrix was opening for the Monkees and when Jim Morrison of the Doors was exposing more than his pain

Rock Magazine: “Rock Writers Convene in Memphis, Find Each Other Absurd.”

### **A dream realized**

In 1984 I was in Manhattan when Shannon cranked up Z-100. With a bottom I hadn’t heard since the 1960s, and compression, limiting and equalization that would make your ears bleed, WHYZ(FM) destroyed the competition. I guess the Lord really was in New York City.

---

---

## **M**y labors can be heard at [www.tigerradio.com](http://www.tigerradio.com), a tongue-in-cheek paean to that time when radio was fun and only the GM wore a suit.

---

---

onstage. I also loved to hang out at Henry Stone’s Tone Distributors, where Howard Casie, later of K.C. & the Sunshine Band, was pulling record orders.

By the early 1970s I was back at Ardent. Fry had reactivated the label, which was distributed by Stax. With those financial resources, I was allowed to travel the East Coast and promote such great outlets as WBCN(FM), WRKO (AM), WFIL(AM) and WNEW(FM). What a blast it was buzzing in and out of those great stations, meeting with PDs and MDs and, if their time permitted, with engineers about which processing equipment they used.

One of our priorities was the band Big Star, fronted by Box Tops lead Alex Chilton. Their “#1 Record” and “Radio City” LPs are collector’s items and have influenced groups like REM and the Rembrandts. I can still feel the tremendous rush the first time I heard their songs on WNEW(FM) and saw the Big Star Christmas poster (three wise men on camels pointing to a big neon star) on the control room wall at WRBQ(AM) in Tampa, where Scott Shannon was PD. Original members Chilton and Jody Stephens recently joined two of the Posies and finished a CD at Ardent that will be releases in early 2005.

Also during this time, in the tradition of scrappy promotions, we formed the National Rock Writers associations, an imaginary group comprising leading music critics in the country. One weekend we flew in writers from all over the world to see Memphis, enjoy barbecue and booze, and hear Big Star give what we thought would be their last concert. Richard Meltzer, Lester Bangs, Stanley Booth, Chet Flippo, Nick Tosches and Cameron Crowe, along with 100 or so other writers, danced to Big Star that Saturday night. Among many complimentary reviews was this headline from Jack Daniels of

The next year personal business took me to Houston, where I worked for Tune In Publications, a group of music and lifestyle magazines marketed through radio stations. I had the opportunity to work with every major record label and such illustrious stations as WJLB(FM) Detroit, KNIX(FM) Phoenix, KDAY(AM) Los Angeles, KKBQ(FM) in Houston, KKDA(FM) Dallas and WAVA (AM) Washington.

My record collection grew exponentially.

In 1995, I traded my boots for barbecue again. I moved back to Memphis and finally realized my lifelong dream of my own radio studio.

After several months of research and false starts, I got in touch with Broadcast Richmond, which has since been acquired by Richardson Electronics. The company guided me to a state-of-the-art installation that blended the best of old and new technology. They ordered everything, assembled the necessary support devices and sent a fantastic engineer to Memphis to install everything.

I now have a functional radio production studio. The cost of the studio was about \$60,000. My library consists of more than 26,000 singles; 11,000 CDs; 2,500 radio commercials from the 1950s to early ’70s; and Billboard on microfilm from 1955 to 1971. The value of my catalog, conservatively, is \$390,000.

My labors can be heard at [www.tigerradio.com](http://www.tigerradio.com), a tongue-in-cheek paean to that rough-and-tumble time when radio was fun and the only one who wore a suit was the GM.

I hope to find distribution for Tiger Radio via satellite. I’d also welcome an institution that would be interested in acquiring my library and equipment. I’m happy to consider donation to the right organization.

E-mail the author in Memphis at [jkingsii@bellsouth.net](mailto:jkingsii@bellsouth.net). 