I got a job on the radio. Sixteen years old. Not exactly “A Star is Born,” but a big deal to me.

Ever since I could remember, I’d been fascinated by radio; by the voices coming out of that magic box! Who were those people…what did they look like?. What a great job! Working in a modern studio, behind a microphone, talking to millions of people, and getting paid for it. Why would anyone want to do anything else? You actually get paid? For real? Heck, if I could get a job on radio, I’d do it for free.

Living on top of a remote mountain in West Virginia, and listening to radio stations from Pittsburg, Wheeling….Cincinnati… was magic! Those voices meant there was another world out there; where people lived in modern cities; went to work in suits and ties….and got paid to be entertaining! I tried to picture the people behind those voices. I envied them. I fantasized I’d be on the radio when I grew up.

I was probably 12 years old when I made a microphone out of a chunk of an old 2 x 4. I found a picture of an announcer talking into a mike. I carved that chunk of lumber to look like the microphone in the picture, then used a pencil to make the little holes. It looked pretty good. While my brother John was watching cartoons, and I had our room to myself, I’d shut the bedroom door, put that microphone on my desk, and pretend to be broadcasting to the world.
We had moved to Chillicothe by this time, and Chillicothe had two AM radio stations. Any time I’d go out in the car with Mom or Dad, I’d silently hope they’d drive by one of the radio stations. It was cool driving by when we were listening to the station. Boy, if I could just go in to look around….

There was a newsman on WCHI with the deepest voice I’d ever heard. The guy had to be in his 50’s, I thought; and weigh about 300 pounds. You know how you form a mental picture of someone just listening to their voice? Well, that’s how I pictured Steve Stevens. An old, polished, professional, real live Radio Announcer.

One day, when I was just starting my senior year at Chillicothe High, we had to go to assembly for an orientation program. The Principal, Mr. Wiley, was speaking. I was whispering to my pal Roger….not really paying attention to what Mr. W was saying. But then I heard him say something about Steve Stevens….I was instantly alert: Steve Stevens? Here? To speak to us? I was actually going to see a real Radio Announcer…in person.

But where was he? Nobody on the stage except for Mr. W at the podium…Ah! Behind the curtain! That’s where he is….gotta be.

Mr. Wiley was saying “and now, let’s welcome Steve Stevens of WCHI to our microphone “

I stared at the curtains, but no one came out. But then, the kids in the front of the auditorium started applauding. I looked over to where they were motioning and saw a kid walking up to the stage. I’d seen that kid in the hallways during class changes, but didn’t know him. Where the heck is that idiot going, I thought to myself.

The student walked to the podium, shook hands with Mr. Wiley; then moved to the mike and began speaking, in that wonderously deep resonate voice “ Good morning, fellow Cavalier fans (the football team was called the Cavaliers). I’m Steve Stevens”.

I almost fell out of my seat. THAT’S Steve Stevens? That little runt? Can’t be….can it?

It was. Steve Stevens was a senior, just like me. Same height, maybe a tad heavier, with a crewcut. Nowhere near 50, or 300 pounds.

I didn’t hear anything Steve said. A jumble of thoughts ricocheted through my mind; ’he’s my age…how the devil did he get on the radio? What’s he make? Probably $35,000 dollars…. (he’s in the entertainment business, right? Those guys make serious bucks)! How DID he get on radio?? I’m the one that wants to be on radio!’

I resolved to get to know Steve Stevens. No, not just get to know him; he’d be my best friend. Once we got to know one another, I’d casually drop a hint about maybe trying out for a job as an announcer.
My chance came within a week. I was in the school john, relieving myself, and someone walked up to the next urinal. I glanced over, (keeping my eyes at eye level)…and nearly lost control of my aim. Steve Stevens! I’m peeing right next to Steve Stevens of WCHI Radio….my big chance! What to say? Don’t miss this chance; they say the Lord works in mysterious ways. Maybe HE was responsible for co-ordinating the timing of our bladders.

We finished and were both washing our hands…

“You do a really radio job on the great, Steve” ….ah, crap…how did that happen? Did I just say what I think I said??

”I mean, I really enjoy listening to you do the news”. Wonderful. Now I feel my face turning red.

“Thank you” he replied in his Steve Stevens voice, and started to walk out of the bathroom.

He’s walking out; my big chance, and he’s leaving!! I gotta say something.

”Say Steve, how does someone get a chance to work in radio?”…. ratsratsrats….what a stupid thing to say. Bet he hears that all the time. I was mentally kicking myself for being so stupid.

But, instead of walking out the door, he stopped, turned to me and said, “well, the best thing is to come down to the station, make an audition tape, and get the Chief Announcer to listen to it.”

I couldn’t believe my ears. STEVE STEVENS himself had just spoken to me. Actually given me some advice! Wait; maybe this is some cruel trick. Maybe he’s just making fun of me.

“You mean, just come to the station and make a tape? Who would I talk to there?’

“Are you really serious about getting into radio?” he came back into the bathroom. ”It’s a serious time commitment. Lot’s of weekend work. Early mornings too. And it’s not as glamorous as you might think”

Steverino, ol’ buddy ol pal, (I thought to myself) if you want to experience a non-glamorous job, come with me on my paper route some evening.

I looked Steve directly in the eye and said “Steve, I’d work for nothing just to get the chance to do what you do. I’m as serious as a heart attack.”
I watched his face slowly soften into a smile. He said…”call me some evening, at the station. After 5:15. That’s my last newscast. If you’re serious, I’ll help you with the tape.”

Now, at this very moment, I am convinced that there is, without doubt, a loving and caring God in Heaven. I can practically hear trumpets playing somewhere. I have heard of miracles, read about them, and I, Ed Friel, have now experienced one.

A few days later, I called WCHI. I’d been listening to the station, and had heard Steve do the news. I recognized the voice on the telephone. It was the DJ who had just introduced the Beachboy’s hit, Surf City….imagine that! I’m talking directly to a real DJ! I asked for Steve Stevens, terrified I might get the disappointment of my life; that Steve wasn’t available….or he’d died….or didn’t work there anymore….

“Hang on just a minute” the DJ said.” Then… “Stevens” he hollered … “get line 1…and where the hell’s the promo for the bowling news?”

Steve came on the line. I told him who I was, reminded him of our talk in the bathroom. Steve said “can you come down here later this evening?” It was a Friday…no school tomorrow, so I said yes (providing, God and the Old Man willing) I can borrow Dad’s maroon Nash Ambassador.

“Great,” Steve said. “Come down around 8:30. Bang on the door hard, it’ll be locked. I have to come back to work the late shift ‘til signoff at midnight. You can do the 11:30 news headlines for me. I’ll tape that, and that’ll be your audition tape.”

I’m hearing trumpets again. God is signaling me….Me?? Do the 11:30 news headlines? Live? On the air? Did I hear that correctly, or am I delirious?? Maybe I just died, and I’m in Heaven.

I asked Dad if I could borrow the car. ”What for?”, he asked with a frown.

Guess he assumed I was going to meet Roger at Johnnie’s Drive Inn, and then cruise out to the Sumburger on U.S. 23 where, rumor was, lots of girls from out in the county ‘hot to trot’ hung out. So far, the only girl I had ever talked to at the Sumburger, and thought I was making progress, was Mary Kay, a sophomore at CHS. I’d heard about Mary Kay…boy, had I heard about Mary Kay! She was…hot! Even the other girls said, a little scornfully, that she was ‘hot to trot’.

What I HADN’T heard was that Mary Kay was dating a Marine. A Marine who happened to be home on leave that particular weekend, and had been in the Sumburger bathroom. He came out, walked straight up to me as I was talking to Mary Kay, (using my best Elvis inflection). He didn’t miss a step; just walked up to me and, almost as an afterthought, slapped me with his open hand on the side of my head. I dropped ignominiously to the pavement, my ears ringing…on my knees, tears beginning to stream, I heard him say “sorry about that insect, Mary Kay, I think I got ‘im”
Anyway, I really needed the old Ambassador. “Dad”, I said seriously, “I gotta go down to WCHI…you know, the radio station. Steve Stevens wants me to do the 11:30 news”

Now, if I had told my Dad I had just won the Irish Sweepstakes, been made Pope, or that Kim Novak was dropping by for cocktails, he could not possibly have been more surprised. He actually dropped his newspaper, and as his head snapped up to meet my eyes.


I quickly told Dad the story…wanting to be on radio more than life itself; of meeting Steve Stevens (Steve Stevens is a TEENAGER?? Dad asked increduously. And, of Steve offering me a chance to do an audition tape…live, on the radio.

“You mean you’ll be on the radio, tonight at 11:30? We’ll be able to hear you??”

I told Dad “that’s what Steve says”…

My Old Man grinned slightly, stood up to get the keys out of his pocket, and handed me a dollar bill. “Better put 3 gallons in the tank before you get too far. darn thing’s runnin’ on fumes”.

Then…”you really going to be on the radio?” I told him it sounded like it. The Old Man just grinned and shook his head.

I drove down to WCHI. The station was in a small one story brick building on the edge of town, with a big red neon “WCHI” out front. There was one car in the parking lot. Talk about excited! I’m about to pee my pants! Here I am, about to walk into a real radio station, with the promise of a chance to sit down in front of a real microphone, and to actually talk to millions…. My little kid’s dream is at hand….

I knocked on the front door…hard. Through the glass, I saw Steve emerge from a room on the right. He opened the door and I stepped inside.

“Let me show you around. I’ve got a network feed on, so we have some time.” Man, I thought, that voice coming out of a kid my age.

And I was in my version of Heaven! A real radio station, broadcasting to millions! “Well, actually”, Steve said “our signal only goes out about 30 miles,” but we’re real strong all over town”.

My mental picture of the surrounding 30 miles took in a lot of corn fields and rail yards. Okay, so this isn’t NBC….but hey, it’s the first real radio station I’ve ever seen! I was like a starving man at a smorgsborg!! Let’s get on with the tour!
He showed me the main studio, on the immediate right…a room with a small desk; a microphone (WCHI nameplate on top), a few folding chairs and a piano. There was a glass window behind the desk that looked into the control room. We went down the hall, and stepped inside the control room.

Alllllrrrigggght….I thought to myself; this is definitely where I want to spend the rest of my life. I took a deep, satisfying breath. I had finally arrived…

I was facing a big console filled with dials, switches, buttons, red lights. On top of the console, a notebook, containing, Steve told me “advertising copy”…

Copy…I thought. A real radio buzzword; gotta use that with the Old Man.

Two huge turntables flanked the console, the announcers chair between the turntables. Behind the chair, a bank of reel to reel tape decks. The microphone was suspended on a flex rod mounted to the wall; it could be raised or lowered, depending if the announcer wanted to sit or stand.

Shelves filled with records lined every available square foot of the walls. Soundproof tiles covered the ceiling, door, and the walls of the main studio, visible through the glass. This was a state of the art, AM radio station, in 1960.

Steve explained the general arrangement, and what the various buttons and dials did. A speaker on the wall monitored the program on the air. Steve glanced at the big clock on the wall above the console, and said “sit over there and don’t say anything…I’ve got to do a station break.“

Well, I thought; truly, I have died and gone to Heaven. I am actually going to be in the studio where a REAL Radio Guy is going to do a station break. This is beyond cool.

It was, to me, anyway…Steve put on earphones, held up his hand as a signal to be quiet. (Lord, I thought…don’t let me sneeze).” Steve flipped a switch, a red light instantly appeared on the console, and Steve spoke into the mike: “WCHI Radio, Chillicothe, Ohio, 1350 on your dial. Stay tuned for the 9:00 pm news from Mutual Radio. He flipped another switch, took off his headset, and said to me “just like a real radio station!”

Heck, this is pretty cool. Steve Stevens joking with me. I was accepted into his world!

I managed to get through the 11:30 news without too many mistakes. Steve ran the board from the control room; I sat at the little desk in the studio, wishing I’d thought to bring my camera. Think how impressed Mary Kay would be to see a picture of me behind this microphone!
Taking no chances, I had called the Old Man from the station office at 11:15 and told him I was really going to be on the air. I could picture Mom and Dad leaning toward the radio as, solemnly, I delivered the news.

Steve promised to get the tape to the Chief Announcer “soon”. Why not tomorrow, I thought. I’m ready to go to work NOW.

The days passed. Every day, I’d come home and ask Mom if I’d had any calls. Mom could read the disappointment on my face when she had to tell me “none today…except for Roger…”

Crap. Roger’s all right, but I’m waiting for Fame to call!

Late one afternoon, after I’d gotten home from school the phone rang. Probably good ol’ Roger.

“Hey, Rog”, I said.

The deep voice on the other end asked for me, by name. My heart leaped….yup…it’s Mr. Hughes, from the station. ” I’ve listened to your tape, son.” He paused.

“Thanks,” I blurted out. ”For my first time, I thought it was pretty good”

“What you think doesn’t matter” he snapped. ”Here’s the deal. You come in Saturday morning at 4:30. You’ll do the 5AM to 7 shift. Curly will be here; you’ll do the first two hours of his show. He’ll show you the ropes. I’m not gonna pay you for the two hours. If you do okay, we’ll talk. If you bomb, you’re through. Got it? 4:30 AM. Saturday. Don’t be late.”

WOW! Me? Doing the first two hours of the Curly Wilson Show? Curly was only the biggest country and western DJ on Chillicothe radio…a Famous Personality!! The Old Man listened to Curly Wilson on his way to work at the Federal prison. Curly was on six days a week, from 5am until 9; then back in from 2 until 5:00. I was not only going to meet this star of Radio; I was going to work with him! Me and THE Curly Wilson. We’d become fast friends, I thought. I’d impress my friends when I would introduce them to “my good buddy, Curly Wilson. “

I hung up the phone…my hands shaking; in absolute shock. God in Heaven, I’ve got a CHANCE!

I briefly wondered if this was how Walter Cronkite got started….on a 5 am country music show?

Coulda been, I thought to myself.
I had trouble sleeping that Friday night. First, I sat down at the desk my brother John and I shared for homework. “Gotta write my show”, I said importantly to Mom and Dad, who just smiled and nodded. Dad had asked me at least a dozen times since the phone call “you REALLY going to be on the radio for two hours??”

I think that’s the first time I’d ever done anything that impressed the Old Man.

After about an hour, I gave up trying to “write my show”. Actually, the only thing Curly did was introduce country records, read commercials, and give time and weather reports…all in a relaxed and raspy drawl. His banter occasionally interrupted by what sounded like a smokers cough.

I tossed and turned in bed….my stomach in a knot of excitement, nervousness; my head swimming with thoughts of tomorrow. Mom had promised to get me up at 3:30 and fix me a nice breakfast before I had to “go to work”!

I left the house at 4:15, Mom fussing with my shirt. ”You want to look nice for the audience”, she said.

“Mom…it’s radio, remember?” Geez.

“I don’t care. Mr. Wilson will see you, and you want to make a good impression”!

God broke the mold after he made Mom.

I arrived at the radio station at 4:30am. Still dark. The red neon sign with the call letters…MY call letters…WCHI. Behind the station, the tower rose several hundred feet up, topped with a blinking red light. In a half hour, that tower will be beaming my voice across south central Ohio, I thought; wonder if Mary Kay will be listening?

The lights were on in the station, and there was an old pickup truck in the parking lot. Must be Curly’s, I reasoned. I parked the maroon Ambassador next to it and got out. I noticed the pickup was missing the left front fender, and a piece of cardboard was duct taped over the passenger window.

I walked through the unlocked door, went inside and down the hall to the control room. Curly (I supposed) was standing in the transmitter room, directly behind the control room, trying to pour coffee into a mug. His hands were shaking so badly that coffee was spilling onto the shelf that held a hotplate, and dripping onto the floor.

“Curly Wilson?” I asked.

I must have startled him.
"HOLY SHIT!" he screamed, jerking the coffee cup, coffee sloshing out in all directions. He slammed the cup down on the counter and turned around unsteadily to see who had come in, shaking his left hand in pain from the hot coffee he’d spilled.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Wilson! I didn’t mean to scare you!” Crapcrapcrap. Just what I needed. A rocky start with the star of Chillicothe radio.

“Ah hell, boy” he said, still shaking his hand to ease the pain” Don’t worry about it. Guess I’m a little jumpy. Didn’t get to bed last night. Hell, I just left the card game about an hour ago.” He reached back to his cup on the counter, and held it in his shaking right hand.

Curly was a little shorter than me, in spite of the scuffed high heel cowboy boots he wore. His worn jeans were faded; traces of grease and coffee stains on them. He wore an old blue plaid shirt with a yellowed undershirt showing at the neck, and a well-worn black cowboy hat. With at least three days growth of scragily gray beard, he could have been 35 or 65. He took stock of me, his bloodshot eyes staring out from behind thick glasses. Scotch tape held the left ear piece to the frame.

He turned back to refill his coffee, carefully holding the hot pot. I walked on into the control room, and that’s when I got a whiff of Curly…a sour combination of beer, cigarettes, sweat; and clothes that definitely hadn’t been near soap and water in a long time.

Curly turned to me, and said “I’m glad you’re here, son. You’ll give me a chance to catch a few winks on the couch in the office. Ol’ Hank William’s his ownself never had a hangover like I got right now ….not after his longest night of drinkin’. Wake me up during the 7 o’clock news.”

He started out of the control room towards the small front office; stopped in the hallway, lifted his left foot…and farted, an ominious, bubbly fart. Then continued unsteadily into the office.

“Uh….Mr. Wilson” I said uncertainly. ”This is my first time on the radio. I’ve never done this before”

He stopped, dead still. He stood there, his back to me, and then shook his head. He turned slowly;squinting his bloodshot eyes to focus on me.

“You gotta be shittin’ me, boy….you ain’t never done this? This is your first time? You don’t even know how to run the board?”

He shook his head in disgust. ”Hell, they didn’t tell me you was a complete greenhorn.”

I stammered an apology. ”I’m sorry, Mr. Wilson…I really am.”
He cut me off with a snort and another shake of his head. "Guess it serves me right. Hell, I won about $23 dollars playin’ poker last night. Spent ever cent and then some on Pabst Blue Ribbon….and a few shots of Jack. Guess you’re just the Lord’s way of puttin’ me in my place.”

He sighed, shook his head again, and said, “well come on. Lemme show you how to turn on the transmitter. Damn…my head is gonna explode.”

He showed me the 6 switches that needed to be turned on to allow the huge transmitter to warm up…’we’ll punch the 7th one right at 5” he said….”turn it on before 5 o’clock, and those ol’ boys down to the FCC office get their shorts in a knot”…

Then he gave me a lesson on ‘runnin’ the board’. Which switches did what; how to cue records on the big turntables so the song started as soon as the button was pushed. “The Boss will jump yore tail if he hears any dead air. Don’t let tht happen!”

Several times Curly got close enough that I got a direct blast of his breath. If the folks from Webster had been in the room, they’d have gone into immediate re-write mode on the definition of halitosis…adding a lot more adjectives and exclamation points!

Now it was 4:56…four minutes until showtime. Curly showed me how to cue the tape of the National Anthem “We always start the day with that song” he said solemnly.

At 4:59, Curly sat down in a folding chair he’d set up close to turntable 1, (the one on the left). ”Okay, boy….go hit that big red button on the transmitter, then come back in here and start the National Anthem. When it ends, hit the stop button, and read that intro”….his gnawed and callused finger pointed shakily to the big 3 ring binder on top of the console, opened to the first page.

The second hand on the big wall clock swept past 5:00am. I hit the tape button, and the sounds of the recorded Anthem filled the room….the needle on the VU meter in the center of the board bouncing back and forth. My heart was pounding; my legs jiggling rapidly, my breathing shallow…throat tight. Would I be able to get the words out? Were Mom and Dad hearing the National Anthem, their hearts bursting with pride? Was my brother John….forget it. John wouldn’t get up unless the Little Rascals were on tv. Wait! Maybe Mary Kay is stirring in her bed at this very moment, and will jolt upright when she hears my voice…her heart yearning for me.

The anthem ended…and I started to read, my normally deep voice high-pitched and shaking.

“Good morning. This is WCHI, 1350 on your dial” Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Curly raise his eyes Heavenward. Then he slowly stood up, leaned over the turntable and put his hand on the mike switch.
He fixed me with his rheamy, bloodshot eyes and with a tired sigh said “Main thing about radio, Ace, is always make sure you turn on your microphone before you start to talk” He switched on the mike with his right hand; with his left, he pointed back to the beginning of the intro, then slumped back into his chair, groaning slightly and burying his face in his hands.

“Good morning” I started again. ”This is WCHI…..”

The two hours passed with a heart stopping disaster for me every couple of minutes. “Where’s the Ford commercial, Curly!”…..”damn, wrong George Jones cut…sorry, Curly”…..where do I find the 5:30 news stuff, Curly?”…..the record’s stuck! What now, Curly?”…..Crap, Curly, I cue’d Hank Snow to a hymn instead of Honky Tonk Momma.” And so on.

Thank God for the numbing effects of alcohol. Curly took it all in stride, much like a patient pet owner with a new, untrained puppy. More than once, he reached over to find the right page in the big 3 ring binder; cue’d a record for me…or pointed to the right button to push. His halitosis was starting to have the soothing affect of a mother’s soft assurance. Think of the catastrophe this would be without him!

Finally, it was 7 o’clock. I read the intro for the Mutual Network news, and flipped the switch that put the network feed on the air.

I sat back, and looked over at Curly. His head was drooping, a soft, wet snore just barely audible.

“Curly, I can’t thank you enough for putting up with me. I hope I get another chance”

Curly looked up; took off his hat and scratched his head through matted hair, then put the hat back on.

“Hell, boy; we all gotta start sometime and someplace” He stood up, lifted his left leg, and farted again….this time, a less threatening sound…

“Sometime, I’ll tell you about my first job,” he yawned, standing slowly and scratching his crotch.

We exchanged places. I wanted to stick around and see a professional in action. And, Curly was just that. When the news ended, he started the theme music for “The Curly Wilson Show.” (I made a mental note to find some theme music for “The Easy Ed Show” which, in my fantasies, I would have soon).

Curly lapsed into the friendly, raspy banter that endeared him to fans across south central Ohio, mixing the latest country hits with a smooth flow of commercials, weather tips, hog reports; his callused fingers playing the control board effortlessly. Not a second of dead air….not a moment of panic. He was smooth; a real pro.
The control room door opened just after 8am. A short, stocky and balding man wearing dress slacks and an open necked, white, short sleeved shirt entered. He stuck out his hand. “Don Hughes”, he said.

I jumped up. Don Hughes!! He did sports on the air, and Steve had told me he was the Chief Announcer! My stomach knotted…my shoulders tightened. My fate was in his hands. Please, God…please.

“Gimme a minute with Curly, will you, kid?” he said, motioning me to step out. He closed the door. I walked toward the front door; from the corner of my eye I could see Mr. Hughes through the control room window, talking seriously to Curly. Curly was leaning back in the chair, his hands behind his head, a Bill Anderson tear-jerker coming from the hall speakers. Hughes’ face was expressionless as he listened to what ever Curly was saying.

Finally Hughes nodded and started to open the door to come out into the hallway. He walked up to me put his hands on his hips and looked me square in the eye. I swallowed…my heart pounding.

“Curly says you did okay, kid. If you still want the job, it’s yours. Pays a dollar an hour. You’ll be low man on the totem pole, so you take the hours I give you, when I need you. Can you start tomorrow?”

God in Heaven. I wanted to drop to the floor and kiss his shoes. Could I start tomorrow?!! Can I start right now!! Why wait??

But I said, “thank you Mr. Hughes. I am honored with the offer. I certainly can start tomorrow. Thank you.” We shook hands and he turned to go into his office. “Be here at noon” he said over his shoulder. ”You’ll work with one of the other part-timers until 5:00. Make sure you pay attention. Next time, you’ll be on your own. Nobody to wet nurse you”.

I floated out to the car….couldn’t wait to get home to see the expression in the Old Man’s eyes when I told him I was the new announcer for WCHI, 1350 on your dial.

Mary Kay, eat your heart out!

I got all the rotten hours, but I didn’t care. 5:00 am until 5:00pm every Sunday. 5:00am until 7:00am on Saturdays. ”Curly wants to cut back on weekends”, Mr. Hughes told me.

And later, as I got more experience, 4:00pm until 8:00pm weekdays. I’d leave Chillicothe High School after my last class; drive to the station, and become “Easy Ed” from 4 until 8, playing rock and roll on my own radio show. I was in Hog Heaven.

Sundays were the most profitable day the station had. Chillicothe was in the middle
of the Bible belt, and the station happily sold time to any of the hundreds of small, church’s or preachers who had the money. Fifteen dollars for fifteen minutes. Twenty seven fifty for a half hour. And, sure, we’ll sell you a full hour…that’ll be $56 bucks.

The radio log for the each day’s programming was typed on 8 ½ x 14 paper. It listed everything that was to go on the air, with times; news on the hour and half hour, weather, bowling news, hog reports, and commercials. Paid commercials were typed in red. On Sundays, the entire log was typed in red. Every hour was sold, mostly in fifteen or thirty minute segments.

Some of the church programs were taped, but many were live. Mostly, these were small Pentecostal churches with self anointed “pastors”….Pastor Al, Pastor Hubert. These folks would come to the station to do their program, often bringing a piano player, singers, wives, kids, etc. Sometimes I’d have as many as thirty people milling around in the hall, waiting to go on, while another group would be in the studio, on the air.

Sundays turned the station into a nuthouse. Nervous first time preachers pacing the hall, sometimes wandering into the control room, despite the “Strictly No Admittance” sign; others staring in wonder through the control room window. My job was to run the board for the various programs from the control room; I’d introduce the program, then open the mike in the studio. From then until the end of that program, I’d monitor the VU meter, collect money from the incoming preachers, try to keep order in the hall; all while watching the clock. I had to get the Church of The Bleeding Hands of Jesus off the air by 9:58, so that the Full Gospel Church of Loaves and Fish’s from East Nosebleed, Ohio could go on at 10:00. Two minutes for one group to leave the studio, and another group to set up, while I did a station break. It was like herding cockroach’s.

Most of the time, after introducing one of the church groups, I’d listen for a minute or so, then switch the speakers from “Air Monitor” to “cue”, and put a rock record on the turntable. I’d listen to Buddy Holly, while Pastor Barney or whoever railed against sin and fornication. Occasionally, I’d glanced at the meters to be sure the good pastor hadn’t accidently knocked himself off the air.

During one of the afternoon programs, I had Duane Eddy on the speakers. There was a group of probably fifteen sweating people in the studio; a bald guy in a plaid shirt mouthing into the microphone. I hadn’t been listening to him; just groovin to Rebel Rouser. The light on the control room phone lit up. Probably my favorite girl at the time. ”WCHI”, I answered in my best Radio Announcer voice. It was my Dad.

“Eddie, are you listening to that guy you got on the radio?”

“Uh, no….haven’t checked him for a few minutes. Why”

“Eddie, that’s the worst stuff I’ve ever heard. You better listen to what he saying…it’s awful.”
I immediately switched the speaker to “air”. “You heard me right, all of you out there in radioland…HUH! The end is right around the corner…but I am your Salvation! HUH! Send $5 to Pastor Woodrow in care of this station…HUH!…and I’ll send you a genuine, bloodstained piece of wood taken from the Cross of Jesus…HUH! I guarentee it’s the real thing…HUH! For $10 dollars I’ll guarantee you a seat in Glorious Heaven at the foot of God Himself…HUH!

The phone lit up again. This time it was Mr. Hughes…

“Friel, take that jerk off the air …..NOW! And get’em out of the station. But make sure you get the money he owes for today. Put some hymns on or something”

“Yes, Mr. Hughes. I’ve been concerned about his pitch. I was just about to call you.”

Thank God for the Old Man.

“Just get ‘em outta there”. He hung up.

I killed the studio mike and started an album of hymns by Tennessee Ernie Ford. (The Old Man liked Tennessee Ernie…he’ll be pleased) I thought.

Pastor Woodrow didn’t notice the “On Air” light had blinked off in the studio for a second. When he did, I was already marching my 17 year old skinny butt past the 2:00pm group in the hall (from the Rosebud, Ohio Church of the Bloody Nails) and into the studio to “throw that jerk out”. 

I opened the studio door. ”What’s goin’ on? Is my mike off? “Pastor Woodrow asked.

“Yup….the Boss called. Ordered me to take you off the air” Tennessee Ernie was just starting “Take My Hand Precious Lord” when the good pastor erupted.

“%$#@!, I paid for this *%&*$ half hour, and want you to put me back on the #@$%! air,” he hollered.

“Sorry. It ain’t my call. I’m just hired help. Now, I gotta ask you to leave. Oh, yeah; the Boss says to get the twenty seven fifty you owe”

The color drained from Pastor Woodrow’s face.” You little $#@! You can tell your Boss to kiss my God fearing $#! I ain’t payin’ you &*%!” He pushed past me and motioned his entourage to follow.

Looking back, Pastor Woodrow made Jim and Tammy Faye look downright respectable.

Helen O’Connor was the class act of WCHI. A distinguished woman in her early 60’s, I suppose. She had a one hour daily program from 11:00 until noon. She had guests from
around the area, recipes, advice for daily life, and her program was sponsored by the local phone company. Helen made the station a lot of money.

Helen did her show from the studio, rather than from the control room. Seated at the small desk, behind the microphone. She had no interest in learning the complexities of the control board. That meant that one of the other announcers had to run the board for her. There was a window between the studio and the control room; Helen’s desk was at the window, so that she faced into the control room.

One of Helen’s requests was that whoever was running the board should stay seated at the board and not move around the control room. It made her nervous, she said. She wanted to be sure that she could immediately get attention if something went wrong.

The engineer had installed a ‘cough button’ on Helen’s mike, so that if she had to cough, she could kill the mike herself. Invariably, when she coughed, she would always say “excuse me” when she turned the mike back on. The listener would hear a few seconds of silence, then “excuse me”.

One of the full time air personalities for a time was John, who followed Curly’s show. John had board duty from 9:00am until 4; that meant he had Helen’s program to handle. John absolutely hated doing Helen’s show. The first few days, after putting Helen on the air, John would go into the DJ lounge across the hall to relax or get a coke. He’d wander around the control room, selecting records for his show, or reading Playboy. That drove Helen nuts. She complained to Mr. Hughes. John didn’t have a chance, since Helen was the source of much of the sponsor money that made up the station’s revenue.

So John seethed at the board, while pretending to be enjoying every minute of Helen’s show (John had learned Mr. Hughes was not someone you wanted in your face twice on the same issue). But John had a plan. He told me one day he was going to do it. I thought it sounded like a sure fire way to get fired. But that didn’t faze John.

The next day, I learned later, John carried out his plan….and was fired before Helen’s show was over.

Helen was in the midst of an interview with a guest when John, watching from the control room, saw her press her cough button. At that instant, John hit the tape “play” button….and the massive fart he had taped earlier was broadcast all over south central Ohio. The next thing Helen’s large audience heard was her sweet, almost musical voice, saying “excuse me”.

The station secretary told me Mr. Hughes went into the control room, escorted John out of the building and fired him, paying him through the end of Helen’s show. She also said that Hughes and John were laughing heartily in the parking lot, where John’s car was already loaded with all his belongings.
Most DJ’s at small town stations in those days drifted from station to station, seldom staying longer than six months, always looking for a bigger and better gig. So, for John, this was just a wonderfully memorable way to say goodbye to Chillicothe, and to Helen O’Connor; then head down the road to the next small town with a radio station, one step closer, hopefully, to a distant shot at the ‘big time’.

Mr. Hughes was in the front office one afternoon with the station secretary, going over the next day’s log. It was around 3:30; I’d just gotten out of school and was due to go on the air for “The Easy Ed Show” at 4 o’clock. He looked up as I walked in, and said “some guy just called for you. From the Rotary Club. They want you to be their guest speaker at lunch next week.”

I’d probably been working at WCHI for about six months by this time. I’d had my own regular show from 4-8 weekdays for about 3 months, and usually worked most of the day Saturday, and all day Sunday, loving every minute of it.

“The Rotary Club? What’s that?” I asked.

“It’s a businessmans club, stupid. Everybody’s heard of the Rotary Club. They meet every month, down at the Hotel”. He handed me a scrap of paper with the name ‘Matt Lynn’ and a phone number.

“Here’s the guys name. Give’im a call” He turned back to his work.

I had some time before going on the air. I went in the control room, said “hi” to Bill who would be getting off at 4, and went into the DJ lounge to make the call.

“Mr. Lynn? Ed Friel…WCHI Radio”. (In my best Radio Announcer voice.)

“Mr. Friel! Thank you for calling. It’s an honor to speak to you” he said in a voice twinged with excitement…

An honor to speak to me? What the heck?

He continued “We’d like for you to be the speaker at our lunch meeting next week. Talk about what it’s like to work in radio; a little about your life before coming to WCHI”.

Fine by me, I thought. Wonder if I can get a pass to get out of school for a couple of hours? Hey, this is the Rotary Club. Surely Mr. Wiley would let me speak to the Rotary Club.

So I said “Mr. Lynn, I am delighted to accept”. We discussed the time and place to meet, and I hung up right after saying “see you at the Hotel at 11:30”.
The following Monday, I wore a suit to school. My pal Roger and several other guys razed me mercilessly. "Where you preachin’, Reverend”; and “you sure look purty in that red tie….you steal it from your Old Man?”

I left school and drove downtown in the snazzy ’52 Ford I’d bought from Steve Stevens for $300. Found a place to park and walked up the granite steps of the hotel. There…a sign that said Rotary Club lunch, with an arrow pointing down the hall.

I walked into the meeting room. About 10 big round tables, each seating 8 Rotarians. So far, about 30 businessmen, most dressed in suits, were scattered among the tables. At the front of the room, the Head Table and, centered on the table, the lectern with the Rotarian seal. Two men were standing near the head table; one of them, I reasoned, had to be my new friend and fan, Mr. Lynn.

I walked up to them. They continued their conversation. Hmm, I thought…must be pretty important. I stood there expectantly, waiting for a break in the conversation. Heck, they were just talking about golf, and they continued to ignore me.

After about five minutes, I said “excuse me.”

Both men now turned to me, looking mildly irritated at being interrupted.

“Whaddya want, kid?”, one of them asked…

“I’m looking for Mr. Lynn. I’m Ed Friel”.

Both men reacted as if they’d been slapped. Their jaws dropped, and for some reason, that seemed funny; just like in the movies.

“YOU!! YOU’RE ED FRIEL?? How the hell old are you, anyway?” the taller man asked, shaking his head in disbelief.

I told him;“seventeen, sir. I’m a senior at CHS.”

“Seventeen? I can’t believe this! You sure you’re Ed Friel, the radio Ed Friel?” asked the man, who I now assumed was Mr. Lynn.

I assured him I was, indeed, Ed Friel of WCHI Radio. His face seemed to soften slightly as he recognized my voice.

“Hell, Ed, forgive me for being shocked. We all figured with that voice, you had to be at least 50 years old, and tip the scales at 250 pounds!”

Yup, I thought to myself, Mom told everyone that even my cry was deeper than the other babies in the hospital.
My radio career continued through high school and college. WCHI and WBEX in Chillicothe, and brief stints at stations in Jackson, Ohio and Welch, West Virginia. If I’d stayed with it, who knows what might have happened. But, when I got out of Ohio State, reality told me it was time to find a real job. I’d gotten married to my childhood sweetheart during my senior year at Ohio State and, hormones being what they are, I quickly had not only a wife, but also a mother and child to support and care for. So I needed a job that paid real money, instead of minimum wage, which was the norm back then in small town radio.

Most of the DJ’s I had worked with also did what I did. They lived their fantasy for a brief while, then followed the money. A few stayed with radio and a few of those even made it to major markets. But radio is a career dependent on “the past six months ratings” as one friend put it, just before he lost his afternoon drive time show in Upstate New York.

I recently took a tour of a “state of the art” radio station. Talk about disappointment! No turntables. No tape decks. Just a bank of computers. And a mike. Not one of the classic microphones like at WCHI, WBEX, or NBC, either. Hell, that “state of the art” studio mike could have come from Radio Shack. And, everybody and their brother has a computer these days. So, what’s the big deal about seeing a radio station?

I’m glad I was there when a radio studio was something special, something unique, something boys built up into fantasies, and that I actually got to live it out, to make it part of my reality and now part of my memory.