

Les Garland, Programming Innovator

Missouri kid parlays his passion for music into a memorable radio career

By Ron Rodrigues

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Les Garland is on the phone from his home in Miami Beach, as effervescent as ever. "I squeezed in a round of golf this afternoon — shot a 79 and walked all 18 holes," he says. "So what am I complaining about? Life is good!" Such is Garland's positive outlook on life and his profession.

He's been a world-famous PD and a record-industry executive and helped develop MTV, among other interesting things. The common thread among those careers has been Garland's ability to manage and inspire a wide variety of talents and personalities.

Growing up in Springfield, MO, Garland hung out with all the local music professionals, including Wayne Carson Thompson, the songwriter who penned "The Letter," recorded by The Box Tops, and the Willie Nelson-Elvis Presley classic "Always on My Mind."

"We were a bunch of long-haired guys who were passionate about music and wanted to pursue something in music," says Garland. He and his buddies operated a recording studio, and he even dabbled in booking acts.



Les Garland

IN HIS BLOOD

When it was time to go college, Garland had every intention of enrolling at Southern Methodist University in Dallas. But on the drive into town, he, like hundreds of budding radio professionals, was mesmerized by the legendary KLIF. It turned out that the night jock, Jimmy Rabbit, had broken his leg in a skiing accident and needed someone to help with the board.

"I was that guy," says Garland. "And radio got in my blood."

He took a pass on SMU and enrolled at an FCC license school. The instructors were so impressed with his work that they recommended him for a job in the control room of KERA/Dallas, the educational TV station.

In between changing tapes of TV shows, Garland would scurry into the announce booth to practice. One day, when the regular announcer called in sick, a fully prepared Garland subbed with so much aplomb that he got the chance to do a weekly radio show on an affiliated radio station.

At this point the radio bug was all-consuming. Garland knew he needed full-time radio experience, so he packed his bags and headed back to Missouri, this time to KSWM in Aurora (population 5,000). We're talking typical small-town radio, and Les did it all: signed the thing on at sunrise, read the farm and stock reports, announced who had died and even sold advertising.

UP THE LADDER

From there he went to KICK/Springfield, MO ("The station I grew up on — how crazy is that?"). KICK played '60s pop, which wasn't rockin' enough for Garland, so he went across town to

5,000-watt KWTO and convinced management to take it Rock from 4pm-on.

"One night while I was doing the 7pm-midnight shift, I got a call from a John Steel, who was driving through town," Garland says. "He went by the name of The Real John Steel and was programming KELI/Tulsa. He asked me if I'd be interested in making a move."

Off Garland went to his first medium-market job and the fateful opportunity to go up against KAKC, a Bill Drake-consulted station. Garland supplemented his radio salary with voiceover work, DJ gigs and TV shows.

In Tulsa he hosted the Saturday-afternoon television program *Dance Party*, which was syndicated over a four-state area.

A couple of years later Garland picked up the phone and found himself speaking to legendary consultant Mike Joseph. "I had heard about Mike from all his success at WABC and on the East Coast," says Garland. "He was opening the first FM Pop Rock station in Milwaukee, which turned out to be WZUU (Zoo FM)."

Garland accepted a job as Asst. PD and DJ, and he spent the first three months with his co-workers, doing dry runs and learning Joseph's philosophies.

"As it turns out, the dry runs didn't have that much to do with what we did," says Garland. "We signed on with 17 records on the playlist. That's it — 17 records!"

"I respect the hell out of Mike Joseph and I understand what he was trying to do, but I was a hippy who was doing this Pop radio, and it sort of shattered me. I didn't last very long playing 17 records, some of which I played three times a day. It wasn't right for me."

BACK TO DRAWING BOARD

Garland put out his feelers and heard about a job opening at KYNO/Fresno, a slick Top 40 station owned by Gene Chenault and consulted by Bill Drake that was used as an incubator for the RKO chain, which Drake also consulted.

Amazingly enough, this was the first time that Garland had ever had to send out an aircheck. He recalls wrapping the reel in scraps of brown grocery bag and scrawling his name on it. It didn't matter how it looked, though, it got him the job. With Garland at the PD helm, KYNO screamed into double-digit ratings, despite fierce competition.

This success earned Garland trips to Drake's Beverly Hills mansion on the weekends. "I would tell people it was like going to Elvis' house," Garland says. "He was king of the world — the most important guy in Pop radio in the world."

In the early '70s Drake's ties with RKO began to unravel, and he and Chenault bought KIQQ/Los Angeles to compete with KHJ. The station featured a jock lineup that included former KHJ mainstays

Robert W. Morgan and The Real Don Steele. The station's programming department was filled with Drake cronies, but Garland coveted the opportunity to work in L.A.

"One day I was visiting Drake at his house," he recalls. "Bill is upstairs, shaving in bathroom. He calls me up to chat. He invites me to have a seat, and I take the only available seat — the toilet. While he's shaving — and I'm listening to him, sitting on the toilet — he tells me what a bright guy I am and how I've got my finger on the pulse and so on. He then says, 'I want you to program KIQQ.'"

What should have been Garland's crowning achievement turned out to be, in his words, a classic mistake. "Truth be told, I was green, in my 20s and going to Bill Drake's first owned radio station," he says.

Indeed, the competition was fierce in Los Angeles. KHJ didn't take things lying down, and there were a number of bloodthirsty FM competitors. Add to that the fact that Garland felt that it was unfair that he received virtually no pay raise to move south. So, with maybe eight months under his belt and his tail tucked between his legs, he split.

HEADING EAST

Garland went back to Fresno to regroup, and it wasn't long before Paul Drew, who became RKO's new head of programming, connected Garland to the PD job at WAVZ/New Haven. The station was already humming, thanks to the previous work of John Long and Bobby Rich, and Garland remembers the experience as one of his most rewarding.

"WAVZ was owned by cool guys who respected programming," he says. "The station was ruled by the programming department, and the sales department sold what the programmers achieved in the ratings. It wasn't the other way around, the way you hear about these days."

As he was beginning to fall in love with the East Coast, Garland got another call from Paul Drew. The PD job at CKLW/Detroit was open. Prime station, incredible facility, respected GM.

Garland got on a plane to Detroit and met up with CKLW GM Herb McCord. He spent three days at the McCord residence, learning about the station and the market. He took the job.

Garland will tell you that his relationship with McCord was special. McCord taught him many things about managing a major-market station — one of the most important being the art of writing.

"Herb wrote great letters," Garland says. "He taught me how to write great letters. That helped me become a better writer. I wrote better memos, better promos."

Indeed, Garland is a great writer who would devote a lot of his time to penning the elements that were exposed to his audiences. "I would spend all night writing a promo," he says. "The next day I'd read it aloud to myself to hear how it sounded, then I'd hand it to someone else in the station to read it to me. If it still sounded good, I'd put it on the air."

After three years at CKLW Garland began eyeing the PD job at KFRC/San Francisco. Problem was, it wasn't open. It wasn't long, however, before Paul Drew was on the phone again, summoning Les for an open spot in the RKO lineup. Could his dream job be open?

Tune in next week!

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