

# **Table of Contents**

**F O R W A R D**

**Chapter 1 Announce Go!**

**Chapter 2 Here He Comes**

**Chapter 3 Awopbopaloobop Alopbamboom!**

**Chapter 4 California Here He Comes**

**Chapter 5 Channel 98**

**Chapter 6 Extreme Southern California**

**Chapter 7 Cruising the Strip**

**Chapter 8 7th and Ash**

**Chapter 9 Mentor Otto Miller**

**Chapter 10 Oscar's And Other Things**

**Chapter 11 The Big Apple**

**Chapter 12 WRCA**

**Chapter 13 On the Air**

**Chapter 14 Salt Lake Saga**

**Chapter 15 Bill Ogden**

**Chapter 16 Snow and Go**

**Chapter 17 Honolulu**

**Chapter 18 Don Gone, Me Too – Almost**

**Chapter 19 Off Ballance**

**Chapter 20 In the Navy – Sort of**

**Chapter 21 Basil and Ba Moui Ba**

**Chapter 22 Backstage with the Lizard King**

**Chapter 23 The Heavy Eleven Seven**

**Chapter 24 The Sargasso Sea**

**Chapter 25 The Bay then L.A.**

**Chapter 26 L.A.'s The Place**

**Chapter 27 A God Damn Radio Announcer**

**Chapter 28 DLD and Me**

**Chapter 29 Long Hard Slog**

**Chapter 30 Breakthrough**

**Chapter 31 The Voice-Over Studios**

**Chapter 32 Voltron: Defender of the Universe**

**Chapter 33 G.I. Joe and Transformers**

**Chapter 34 The Movie and the Mini-Series**

**Chapter 35 Robotix Inhumanoids Visionaries**

**Chapter 36 Centurions Rambo Rock 'n' Wrestling**

**Chapter 37 Other Shows and Directors**

**Chapter 38 More Shows and Interesting People**

**Chapter 39 Commercials**

**Chapter 40 Movie Voice-overs**

**Chapter 41 On Camera in Dick Tracy**

**Chapter 42 Sitcoms**

**Chapter 43 Narration**

**Chapter 44 Games**

**Chapter 45 Live Events: Oscars Emmys AFI**

**Chapter 46 Changes**

**Chapter 47 Coming Full Circle**

**Chapter 48 Summing Up**

# F O R W A R D

When you think of Neil Ross, the word author may not be the first thing that comes to your mind. But, after reading his debut tome *Vocal Recall: A Life in Radio and Voiceovers*, you might think twice.

I have had the pleasure of knowing Neil since 1982, when we worked together at Los Angeles radio station 710/KMPC, frequently referred to as 'The Station of the Stars'. Back then, Neil was a talented on-air personality, whose fellow jocks included the likes of Robert W. Morgan, Gary Owens, and Wink Martindale. Neil was skilled at his craft and, like his more famous co-workers, had the same unique ability to really connect with his listeners. He was a true broadcaster in every sense of the word.

One of the things I respected most about his work was when he covered shifts for some of the aforementioned talent, he never tried to audition for the gig, like so many others stereotypically do. He was always genuinely humble and respectful of his role. I bring this up as it speaks to his character as a human being and fellow worker. In a business filled with insecure egomaniacs, it was a breath of fresh air to work with someone who kept most of those unnecessary traits in check.

When he made the transition from radio personality to voice actor, Neil was equally humble. As he voiced commercials, trailers, promos, live events and thousands of episodes of animation, Neil didn't brag about his success or name drop to pump himself up. He just put in the work and quietly reaped the rewards.

In voiceovers as in radio, Neil truly cared about the audience. It wasn't just a job or a vehicle to support his family...it was also his passion. And that comes through in all of Neil's work, including this book. Beginning with announcing the 75<sup>th</sup> Academy Awards and the rollercoaster of emotions involved with speaking to an audience of over 40 million...to great recollections of the good, the bad and the ugly that all of the business we call show has to offer.

It is a truly enjoyable read, whether you are in the entertainment business or not. And, if this book is your first introduction to Neil, then the title of author would certainly be appropriate.

*Sincerely,*

*Kevin Gershan  
Producer/Director  
Entertainment Tonight  
CBS Television Distribution*

## Chapter 1 Announce Go!

It is late in the afternoon on Sunday, March 23, 2003. I'm sitting in a small make-shift sound booth in the back of a large trailer in a parking area adjacent to what is then known as the Kodak Theater in Hollywood. This is probably the most important day of my working life. I am about to be the co-announcer for the *75<sup>th</sup> Annual Academy Awards* telecast - the Diamond Jubilee of Oscar.

On the desk is a loose-leaf binder with the script for the show, its multi-colored pages testament to the many re-writes that will continue to arrive even while the show is in progress. Hanging from a boom in front of me is a microphone, and below that a small electronic box with a number of volume controls. On the top of the box is a glowing red button.

When I push that red button, it will begin to blink, indicating that the mic is hot. And when I speak into that microphone, which I will in about 10 minutes, my voice will be heard by about 40 million people in the United States, and God knows how many more world-wide.

It's the largest audience I've ever had, or am ever likely to have. I'm dog-tired from days of rehearsals which have lasted from early morning until very late at night. I'm running on pure adrenaline and panic. The tension is almost unbearable. How the hell did I get into this!?

People who have come close to death report having their lives flash before them in those final moments. I don't think this show is going to kill me, but nonetheless I begin to have a slow-motion version of that experience.

Looking back, a series of seemingly random and chaotic events have all come together like an intricate jig-saw puzzle to bring me to this moment.

I think back to the 4<sup>th</sup> grade when I read aloud to classmates and then made my radio debut. I recall being seduced by the euphoria of early Rock ‘n’ Roll music which ultimately led me to the mad dream of becoming a radio disc jockey. I remember what it took to make that dream a reality. Driving coast to coast in a beat-up old Chevy to attend a broadcast school in New York City, and then on to the first two radio jobs which ended in me being fired and told that I had no future in the business.

Then on to an island paradise, a time spent as a roller-games track announcer, duking it out with a drunken skater in front of five thousand fans. Joining the Navy to cleverly beat the draft. Arriving in Saigon, South Viet Nam, just in time to report on one of the great disasters of that misbegotten war.

Countless hours spent in radio production studios in Honolulu, San Diego, San Francisco and Los Angeles painstakingly learning my craft. The day I heard the term “voice-over” for the first time, little suspecting that it would lead to a passion which would pretty much consume the rest of my professional life.

Trying to become a part of that amazing, then little-known industry, at a time when one of the top commercial agents in the country described it as the “most difficult” field to break into in all of show-business.

Being told I was nothing but a “God-damn radio announcer.” The years spent in workshops, acting classes, and the hundreds and hundreds of auditions that led absolutely nowhere.

I remembered the amazing year when some of the doors I'd been banging on for so long my knuckles were bloody, suddenly began to swing open and I found myself lucky enough to be a part of what was then a small, elite group of incredibly talented and respected people.

I thought of the endless recording sessions which ran the gamut from narrations for the prestigious PBS science series NOVA, to providing the voices of heroes, villains, bizarre and terrible monsters in cartoons and games, and everything in between.

Although things have turned out pretty well for me, I never thought for a moment that I was in control of anything and could never have dreamed of what would ultimately happen. Seized by a couple of powerful passions, I had no choice but to jump into the maelstrom and hope that the current would carry me to where I needed to go.

What follows is an expanded account of my “near death” recap of my life and career in radio and voice-overs. My vocal recall, if you will. But, for now, let's return to Hollywood on the evening of March 23, 2003.

My reverie is broken by a voice in my headphones. It's Louis J Horvitz, the man who is directing the Oscar telecast: “Have a great show everybody! We're on the air in five...four...three...two...”

So here it is. We're on the launching pad and there's no turning back. Will I indeed have a “great show?” Or will I go down in Academy Awards lore as the man who ruined the Diamond Jubilee of Oscar?

I hear the voice in my headphones: “Standby announce.” Then, what seems like an eternity later, “Announce go!” I take a deep breath as my finger pushes down on that red button.



## Chapter 2 Here He Comes

Whenever I meet people and they find out what I do for a living, the question they usually ask is, “How in the world did you ever get into voice-overs?” Over the years, I’ve worked up a pretty succinct, three or four sentence answer. They either accept that and we move on, or they ask follow-ups. The real answer however, is much longer and more complicated. In a way, I was preparing for a voice-over career beginning as early as the 4<sup>th</sup> grade, maybe even before that.

Looking back over my life it’s fairly easy to spot patterns, symmetry, omens of things to come. But none of these were remotely visible to me as I was living it. If you were able to parachute into my life at any given point and ask me if I knew what I was doing or where I was headed, the answer probably would be “nope.”

I was born on the last day of the year in 1944. As a result, it’s always been difficult for me to figure out how old I am – or how old I was at any given moment. I finally hit upon the scheme of pretending that I was born on January 1<sup>st</sup> 1945. That makes the calculation relatively easy and I’m only wrong once a year.

I am the child of an English stage actress who could include stints at the fabled Old Vic on her resume, and a Canadian who spent most of his life as a salesman. He was trapped in England by the war, she was already there. My father, having flat feet, was exempt from military service and had been put to work managing a theater on an army base.

My parents met when my mother came through with a group of actors performing Shakespeare for the troops. "We know you'll soon be off to die horribly in a ditch somewhere boys, but before you go, here's a bit of *Twelfth Night* for ya!" I have no doubt the lads greatly appreciated it.

I was born in London at Middlesex Hospital (no jokes, please) just in time to experience the V-2 rockets coming in from Germany. I lay there in my crib as the dreaded V-2s rained down on London, courtesy of Mr. Hitler and his pal Werner Von Braun.

In later years Mr. Von Braun became a big masher in the American space program. I narrated an episode of the PBS program NOVA which dealt in part with his contribution to the space race. I found it ironic to be standing in front of a microphone, lionizing a man who had tried to kill me. In fairness, of course, he wasn't just trying to kill *me* – he was trying to kill everybody in London. It was nothing personal, I'm sure.

At any rate, hostilities ended and my father, feeling there was no future in post-war Britain, decided to move us to Canada, thereby depriving me of any chance to have been in the Beatles or the Rolling Stones or even Freddie and the Dreamers. Of course, being in Canada, I suppose I could have gotten into the Guess Who or been Robert Goulet's accompanist, but it's just not the same. And since I haven't a shred of musical talent anyway, I'll just have to learn to live with it. Did I have any talent at all - for anything?

I detested school from start to finish but I did seem to have a facility for the English language. I never had to study for a spelling test. I could just look at a word on the page and somehow know if the spelling was correct. I slept through the grammar classes. I didn't need them. I could just look a sentence, or sound it out, and know if it worked or not. People occasionally ask me to write something and are delighted at the result and then ask, "How are you able to do that?" I'm amazed that they can't.

I also had a gift for mimicry. We had no TV, but I had access to a radio and a small record player with a few children's records. There was still a fair amount of drama and comedy on radio in those days. We could hear home grown Canadian productions, English radio programs from the BBC, and loads of stuff from the U.S.

I found myself fascinated by the seemingly endless variety of human voices that came out of the radio: the deep ones, the high ones, the raspy ones, the wheezy ones.

Accents amazed me. The way geography seemed to dictate the pronunciation of words. The pearl shaped tones of the British, which I heard in the home every day from my English mother, the strange things that happened to the language when spoken by a French or German person, the slow exotic twang of people from the southern United States, the gruff combative sound of New Yorkers, and so on.

At some point, in the privacy of my room, I began trying to reproduce these sounds and accents. There was no thought of ever making a living with this. It had no practical purpose at all. It was just fun to do. Some kids build model planes. I did voices, accents and silly noises.

One weekend, when I was eight or nine years old, my father brought home a tape recorder; it belonged to the company he worked for. Home tape recorders simply didn't exist at that point. The machines then were big and expensive. This one was about the size of a large suitcase. It occurred to me that I had never heard a recording of my voice.

Scarcely daring to hope, I asked my father if I could record something. To my amazement, he acquiesced. Rather than giggling and farting around, which is what most people did in those days on those rare occasions when they had access to a tape recorder, I knew exactly what to do.

I grabbed the funny papers out of the Sunday Montreal Star and proceeded to perform them. Six or seven different comic strips, all the voices and sound effects in one take. When it was played back I recall being quite analytical. It was important for me to know whether what I thought I was doing was actually occurring. As I listened to the playback I was delighted with what I heard. No ego trip, just a verification that what I was doing actually sounded the way I had wanted it to sound.

Around this same time, I got my first voice work. It was pro bono of course, but a gig's a gig. I was in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade at Kings Elementary school in the Westmount section of Montreal. On Friday afternoons, we did Art; yet another thing that I was lousy at. I couldn't draw, paint, make a papier-mâché Indian – anything. In my frustration, I started screwing around verbally and this got me in quite a bit of trouble with my teacher. Then I had wonderful idea.

I had always been good at reading aloud. So good, in fact, that the teachers quit calling on me so they could concentrate on the kids who needed the help. I would sit, bored to tears, listening to them stumbling through the simplest sentences. I was mystified. It was so easy, why couldn't they do it?

I approached my teacher and said something like, "You and I both know I'm hopeless at Art. Why don't you let me read aloud to the class while they paint and draw? It'll keep them quiet and perhaps more important, it will keep me out of trouble."

God bless the woman, she went for it. For the rest of the school year I sat in front of the class and read them *Tom Sawyer* and then *Huckleberry Finn*. They seemed to enjoy it and I enjoyed it too. It beat the hell out of trying to paint a pony.

Then a local Montreal radio station asked if they could record one of our school assemblies for a show they did called *Time for Youth*. There was great excitement and auditions were held. My teacher suggested to the Principal that I audition for the role of Emcee. I auditioned and beat out a bunch of fifth and sixth graders.

On the appointed day, several men in suits and ties came into the gymnasium and set up a huge, professional tape recorder on wheels, with tape reels twice the size of the ones my father had brought home. Microphones, emblazoned with the call letters CF CF, were strategically placed. I took my position and spoke the first words I would ever speak on radio. I still remember what they were.

It was close to Christmas, so our assembly had a Yuletide theme, celebrating the birth of the Prince of Peace. The first thing I ever said on radio was: “This...is the story...of a birthday.” I don’t remember anything else. The show aired a week or two later on a Sunday afternoon. I missed it. I was out playing ball and forgot to come home and listen.

To this day, I’m never very anxious to hear my own stuff. The joy for me is in the performance. Not the playback. But, I had made my radio debut! I was nine years old. It would be another nine years before radio listeners would again be able to enjoy my dulcet tones.

It was around this time that I stumbled across a radio show that would have a huge influence on me and a lot of others, most notably the guys in Monty Python, who listened as kids. It was a BBC import called *The Goon Show*. The show was surrealistic, featuring a regular cast of characters that writer/creator Spike Milligan would plug into various genres that he wanted to satirize. Sci-Fi films, biographies, historical drama, what have you.

The show was a riot of puns, running jokes, outrageous sound effects and audio sight gags; such as a character running up endless flights of stairs in search of someone after which one of the other characters observes, “That’s very strange you know... we live in a bungalow.” The show was one of those things you either “get” or you don’t. My father and I got it. My mother didn’t.

There were only three cast members even though there were many characters in the show. A lot of the characters were played by a young, then unknown actor named Peter Sellers, who would go on to become a movie star. Most notably in a string of *Pink Panther* films and a strange, compelling movie made late in his life titled: *Being There*.

I was fascinated by Sellers. Sometimes you could tell it was him doing the voice, sometimes you weren't sure. But whether you knew it was him or not, what struck me was how well defined the characters were. With just an adjustment in his voice and his amazing skill as an actor, Sellers created characters so real you could see them in your mind's eye. They weren't just silly voices. While bizarre, they were still believable characters, who seemed to actually exist. I marveled at his ability to do that. And, as I listened and laughed, I somehow knew I wanted to do that too.

When I was in the 6th grade, my father took a trip to Los Angeles, California to visit members of his family who had moved there. When he called my mother long distance to report on his adventures, he regaled her with tales of a land of milk and honey. A wondrous land where one could go swimming in the ocean in the morning and be up in the mountains skiing in the afternoon! (Theoretically possible, but I seriously doubt if many have actually done it.) He also reported another amazing fact. But first I have to set the scene.

We were regular listeners of the Jack Benny Show on radio, a comedy program from the U.S. The *Jack Benny Show* was wonderful and it still holds up today. Periodically the plot would call for Jack to go down to Union Station in downtown Los Angeles to catch a train.

Whenever this happened one of the running gags would be actor Mel Blanc, in the role of train announcer, echoing through the station and informing all and sundry that a train was now leaving on track nine for..... At this point he would launch into a litany of destinations always ending with “Anaheim, Azusa and Cuc....amonga.” My parents and I would laugh hysterically at these ridiculous sounding cities made up, no doubt, by the writers.

In his phone call, my father breathlessly reported that these places were real! It was *Rancho Cucamonga* actually, but why quibble? “They exist!” reported my father. “I was in Anaheim only last night!” Then my father reported a huge point in LA’s favor – for him at least. The liquor stores were open on Sundays, something that wasn’t allowed in heavily Catholic Montreal!

My father and others had been inconvenienced many times by the Montreal blue laws. The only folks who seemed to be all right with it were the guys who owned the gas station across the street. They did a brisk business selling beer on Sundays. It was something we gradually figured out as we watched a steady stream of cars pull in. The drivers would walk into the office and emerge with bulging paper sacks under their arms and depart. Nobody ever seemed to buy any gas.



When my father returned from California, he immediately started pushing for us to move there. He was fed up with the terrible Montreal winters and felt that there would be more and better job opportunities in the Golden State. It took him about six months to wear my mother down and another six months to make the necessary arrangements, but by December of 1956, my father was in California renting an apartment and looking for a job. My mother and I were poised to follow.

## Chapter 3 Awopbopalooobop Alopbamboom!

It was during that last year of so in Canada that I had a life changing experience. I can follow the thread from this moment all the way through the rest of my life.

My best friend's family lived right next door to the elementary school, so most afternoons I would stop off at his house before heading home. One afternoon as we stood in the kitchen, his older sister walked in and turned on a small radio on the counter. A commercial was playing. Then it ended, a station jingle played and then time stood still. A song came on. No, not a song; a hurricane, a tornado, a force of nature.

I recently saw a documentary on the late metal musician Lemmy Kilmister, lead singer and bass player for the group Motorhead. He was about my age and he described speaking to a much younger rock musician. "Y'see the difference between you'n me," he told the lad, "is I remember when there was no Rock 'n' Roll. And it was fuckin' 'orrible!" Amen, Lemmy.

Up to this point in my life I had never heard Rock music. And the music I *was* hearing just didn't fire my rocket. Certainly not the sappy pop music that was popular in the early fifties. Unlike Patti Page, I had no desire to know the price of that doggie in the window (the one with the wagully taaaaail). And if Johnny Ray was cryin' in the rain, why didn't the dumb schmuck just come indoors?

I also detested the classical music that droned out of the living room as his highness, my father, sat in the easy chair perusing a magazine. And don't even mention the opera he used to tune in on Sunday's. Why didn't somebody put that poor woman out of her misery?

Once in a while I would attend a live performance of band music. Some of the up-tempo stuff worked for me, but only if I closed my eyes and pictured a chase scene in a western movie. I loved cowboy movies when I was a kid. I soaked them in, little suspecting that one day I would work for one of the biggest cowboy stars that ever was.

But when music played on the radio, I was gone, tuning around the dial listening for someone speaking. A drama, a comedy, even a talk show discussing a topic I couldn't understand was better than music. At least the music I had heard up to that point. Effin' 'orrible indeed!

But what I heard coming out of that little radio in my friend's kitchen was a whole other matter. It was utterly amazing. It began with the vocal, a capella, singing – no hoarsely screaming out what sounded like nonsense. A staccato stream of vowels and consonants uttered at an amazing speed. The second the singer finished, drums and piano leapt in laying down a fast-paced, infectious boogie beat.

Then the singer was back, repeating a new phrase over and over: "Tutti Frutti, aw rootie, tutti frutti, aw rootie!" This was followed again by the nonsense phrase and then the singer sang about two lady friends of his. There was Sue, who knew just what to do and Daisy who almost drove the singer crazy. There followed more tutti fruttis and at the end, just after the instruments slammed to a finish, once again, a capella, the nonsense phrase screamed out again.

The announcer informed us that we had just heard *Tutti Frutti* performed by someone named Little Richard. Astonishing! This cat didn't even bother with a last name! And the sound he put out was like nothing I'd ever heard before.

Unlike the polished, mannered male crooners I'd been subjected to so far, this singer sounded raw and untrained. His voice had a peculiar high end rasp, almost a squeal, all of which should have counted against him but instead made him strangely more compelling to my ear. This guy sounded like he was pulling out all the stops, singing at the top of his lungs, balls to the wall, holding nothing back. This guy sounded like he really meant it. The tune itself was also like nothing I had ever heard before; an infectious, pounding rhythm that never let up.

Standing in that kitchen listening to that song gave me the most astounding rush I'd ever experienced in my young life. From the tips of my toes to the top of my head it sent an energy throbbing through me and gave me an overwhelming feeling of joy. When it was over I remember thinking: 'My God, somebody finally got it right. I've been waiting my whole life to hear this!'

The song was *Tutti Frutti*, sung by Little Richard Penniman who had been recording and performing since 1951 without much success. This song, recorded in three takes at a studio in New Orleans, changed all that. In 2007, a panel of recording artists at the behest of Mojo Magazine, voted *Tutti Frutti* number one on their list of the top 100 records that changed the world. In 2010, the Library of Congress added the song to its National Recording Registry saying that its "unique vocalizing over the irresistible beat announced a new era in music".

Rolling Stone magazine called the phrase that opens and closes the song, the most inspired Rock lyric ever recorded. What sounded like gibberish was actually Little Richard vocalizing a drum beat he heard in his head. I've seen it written out a number of ways.

The one I think comes closest was written by author Nik Cohn who used it as the title of his book on Rock music. To my way of thinking it most closely captures what I hear when I listen to *Tutti Frutti*. I've taken the liberty of using it as the title of this chapter. "Awopbopalooop Alopbamboom!"

Many years later, in Hollywood, I would meet Little Richard and have a chance to tell him how much he and his music meant to me. But that story is for later on. Back we go again to late 1955.

I wanted to hear *Tutti Frutti* again. For all I knew it was the only record like that in the world and there might never be another. My friend's sister told that there was more of this stuff available on the program we were listening to on Montreal station CJAD. They had decided to try playing an hour of this new Rock 'n' Roll music in the afternoons. I became a new listener.

The show was hosted by a man and a woman who obviously didn't relish the assignment. They came off like a couple of uptight schoolmarms: "Only one Elvis record per show kids – you know the rules!"

Speaking of Elvis.....I first heard him on radio and then I both heard and saw him on the newly acquired little black and white television I had finally pestered my parents into renting. Much has been made of Elvis' appearances on the Ed Sullivan show, but months earlier he was on The Dorsey Brothers Stage Show. That's where I saw him first, and it was a mind-blower for little eleven- year old me.

Unlike the Sullivan show, where Elvis was only visible from the waist up, the Dorseys gave us the “full monty,” so to speak. That patented Presley pelvic thrust which outraged adults and excited the kids for reasons they were only dimly beginning to understand, was on full display.

We tuned in because the Dorsey brothers were old time Big Band era guys who my parents liked. Also, they had read about the Presley phenomenon somewhere and wanted to see what the fuss was all about.

It’s hard to describe what it was like the first time I saw Elvis. If you’re younger than me and have always had Rock music in your life, or if you’re even younger and regard it as “old people’s music” it’s even harder. I’d almost have to put you into a time machine and let you experience the stultifying conformity of the uptight, postwar fifties.

People who walk around these days in all manner of dress, sporting outlandish tattoos, body piercings and modifications and hair colored pink or blue, simply have no idea of the cataclysmic changes that had to ripple through western society in order to make that kind of behavior even marginally acceptable.

In the fifties we all dressed alike, groomed alike, walked, talked and thought alike and God help those who didn’t. Canada was, I think, even more conformist than the U.S. in those days. Some folks wish it was still that way. I am not one of them.

Elvis Presley seemed like a creature from another planet descending into the sea of crew-cut conformity. With that mop of jet black hair framing a handsome face, a grin that seemed to threaten to break into a sneer at any moment and sometimes did, the big assed guitar behind which his hips swiveled and bumped and that strangely compelling slightly nasal voice that could croon one minute and growl the next, he was just about the most amazing thing I had ever seen.

The music, of course, was Rock 'n' Roll. To see him sing *Hound Dog* was thrilling. The whole package, the look, the sound, the attitude, the energy seemed to convey an irresistible combination of anarchy, rebellion, menace, danger and most of all, freedom.

There was also a powerful authenticity so lacking in the calculated performances I had seen in my young life. It was total commitment. Like Little Richard, Elvis wasn't screwing around. He sounded and looked as though he really meant it. He was here to kick ass and take names!

My parents were not pleased. My father spoke first, professing himself astonished that someone like that was even permitted to be on television. "All shock," opined my mother, "He hasn't got a shred of talent. He'll be forgotten in a couple of months." She then asked my father, sotto voce, if he thought Elvis was a homosexual? I was afraid to say anything.

The next day at school was another matter. We kids could speak of nothing else. I felt sorry for the ones who hadn't seen it. I'm sure those playground discussions were replicated in schools and playgrounds all over North America as Elvis made more television appearances. It was the baby boom generation coming together for the first time, rallying around something that was ours. Elvis had single-handedly cracked open a chasm that would come to be called the "generation gap." In the coming years, the gap would get much wider.

It was perfectly understandable, of course. Our parents had endured a decade long financial depression followed by a World War in which millions died. From 1929 until 1945, everything pretty much sucked. An experience like that might make any person a trifle pessimistic, a bit gloomy. That was our parents. We kids, on the other hand, had experienced none of this. We awoke in a bright, sunny, optimistic, post-war world and wondered what the hell was wrong with our grumpy parents?

Then, along came Rock. They hated it, we loved it. And unlike now, when all the emphasis is on youth, everything back then, movies, television, print media, all of it was for adults. Rock was the only thing we kids had that we could call our own.

While writing this chapter I periodically went on the internet to listen to tunes from that era.



While listening to the Dell-Vikings wonderful doo-wop recording of *Whispering Bells*, I glanced at the comments below the video. The first one was from a writer who called himself “Jack Sprat.” The simple sentence he wrote summed up the feeling so beautifully. I can’t improve on it. I hope “Mr. Sprat” won’t mind me using it. This is what he said: “Strong, optimistic, joyous music that's also rebellious; because it's youth saying, ‘This is mine and I don't care what you say, it's true and I like it!’ ”

This wonderful new music led me to do something I hadn’t done before and that was to start listening to music on the radio. Before long I would begin to pay attention to what was happening between the records, and that would lead me to the first big passion of my professional life. But before that we have to pack up, board the plane and leave snowy Montreal for the sunny shores of the Golden State. Buckle up!

## Chapter 4 California Here He Comes

Moving from Montreal to Los Angeles for an eleven-soon-to-be-twelve-year-old kid was like going to Mars. Ahead lay a new country, a new climate, a new way of living and of course, new friends. I said goodbye to all my Montreal chums. I never saw or heard from any of them again. I hope life treated them kindly.

My mother and I flew from Montreal to New York. Then we boarded the trans-continental flight and left the snow and gloom of a New York December, disembarking some five or six hours later into the sunshine and warmth of Los Angeles. My father, who had been in L.A. for several months getting set up with a job, apartment and car, was there to greet us wearing a loud Hawaiian shirt and sporting a tan!

He piled us pale people into the car and gave us a tour of our new surroundings. He took us for a spin up the Sunset Strip (although he didn't identify it as such) saying, "Here's where all the movie stars spend their time." I craned my neck, but I didn't see any.

I remember being amazed at the sight of palm trees. In Montreal, a palm tree is something you see on a post card or in the botanical garden. Here they just grew, out in the open, apparently unsupervised. I stared at them in amazement.

Then my father, with perfect timing announced, “When we top this rise, you’ll be able to see the world’s largest outdoor swimming pool!” Right on cue as we came over the hill, there it was before us; a vast expanse of grey/blue reaching all the way to the horizon - almost too huge to comprehend. The great Pacific Ocean. I can still recall the feeling of awe the first time I saw it. Then we drove to our new home. It was a small apartment on Ocean Boulevard near the corner of Falcon Avenue in Long Beach.

From the balcony of the house my wife and I now occupy in the hills of Rancho Palos Verdes, we have an amazing view. Below us is the city of San Pedro. Beyond that is the entrance to Los Angeles harbor. Beyond that we can see the coast of California all the way down to Dana Point, weather permitting.

Looking to the left I can see the rest of L.A. Harbor, Long Beach Harbor and beyond that, Long Beach itself. If I look over the smoke stacks of the Queen Mary, now permanently moored in Long Beach Harbor, and focus on the shoreline beyond, I’m looking at the area where that apartment building still stands. With a powerful enough telescope, I could probably spot the building we moved into in December of 1957. When people come to visit us I sometimes point this out. “It’s taken me 58 years to get up this hill,” I tell them, “with a few detours of course.”

Living in California required making a few adjustments. School was quite a change for me. At Westmount Junior High (as middle school was then known) blazers and ties were mandatory school attire. Sometimes, one of the rebels in class would show up in a sweater and tie. That was tolerated but it was best not to do that too often. There was also corporal punishment. Kids would get whacked on the hands in the cloakroom with “the strap.”

On a sunny morning in January of 1957, I reported for duty at Franklin Junior High in Long Beach to finish up the 7<sup>th</sup> grade. I was wearing my blazer and tie. It was like walking on to the set of *Rebel Without a Cause* or, for you younger readers, *Grease*. I was surrounded by a sea of slicked down duck tail haircuts, black leather jackets, T shirts, with cigarettes rolled up in the sleeves in some cases, levis and motorcycle boots. And that was just the girls – rim shot!

Actually, I don't recall what the girls were wearing. In Canada, they had segregated the sexes beginning in the fifth grade. It was shocking enough to suddenly be around girls again, let alone worry about their attire.

With my natty blazer and tie I stood out like a cockroach in the blancmange. Nobody knew what to make of me. Several times I was stopped in the hallway by kids wanting to know who or what I was. "Are you a teacher?" several asked me. I looked like I was their age, but what kid would voluntarily dress like that? I don't think even the real teachers at Franklin ever wore ties. They didn't hit kids with the strap either. I went home after school. "It's a little different around here," I told my mother. The blazer and tie went into the closet, never to be worn again.

Thanks to the vastly more demanding Canadian curriculum I had experienced, I was able to coast through the next three or four years of school in the U.S. My laziness and sloth only started catching up with me in the tenth or eleventh grade.

My radio listening had to take a back seat for a while – or should I say a front seat? We were pretty broke in those days and the only radio we possessed for quite a while was the one in the family car. I would have to ask my father for permission (and the car keys) so I could go downstairs and sit in the car and listen to the radio. He acquiesced, but only for a half an hour so I wouldn't run the battery down.

I immediately started tuning up and down the dial. Did anyone out here have a show like one on CJAD? Eventually I stumbled across Johnny Otis, who was heard nightly on Long Beach station KFOX.

Johnny Otis was a really interesting guy. He was the son of Greek immigrants and his birth name was Ioannis Alexandres Veliotes. That long Greek name gradually morphed into Johnny Otis and Johnny Otis gradually morphed into being a singer, musician, composer, arranger, bandleader, talent scout, record producer, television host, artist, author, journalist, minister, impresario and – oh yes, disc jockey. Now that's what I call a true renaissance cat!

Raised in a black neighborhood and in love with the music and the culture, Mr. Otis began to identify as a black person. Most people thought he was. When I started listening to the Johnny Otis show I assumed he was playing Rock 'n' Roll like I'd heard on CJAD, but he was, in fact, playing Rhythm and Blues. And most, if not all the records he played, were by black artists. I didn't know this at the time, nor would I have cared. I just loved the sound.

Actually, this music sounded better than the stuff on CJAD. Truthfully, looking back, they played quite a few clunkers. Everything Johnny Otis played sounded great. This music had a low down, righteously funky sound (terms I wouldn't have understood back then) that was irresistible.

One memorable evening, as I listened in, Mr. Otis announced that he had spent the day at Capitol Records with his band recording a song. It wouldn't be released for a couple of months but he had a test pressing and he wanted us to hear it.

"This is a world premiere, folks," said Johnny and he proceeded to play *Willie and the Hand Jive*, with its kick ass guitar licks and Bo Diddley beat. The song would go on to reach number nine on the Billboard Hot 100 and number 5 on the R&B charts. And I was one of the first people in the world to hear it.

But, much as I enjoyed Mr. Otis, he was only on in the evening and the rest of what happened on KFOX wasn't my cup of tea. If only someone would create a station that would play this music all the time. In January of 1958 somebody did!

## Chapter 5 Channel 98

In late 1957, Crowell-Collier was searching for a new format for their recently acquired station, KFVB in Los Angeles. They decided to give a guy named Chuck Blore a crack at it. Mr. Blore was born and raised in Los Angeles, but had spent a number of years in Arizona and Texas learning the radio craft. Most recently he had been at the helm of radio station KERP in El Paso, Texas and had taken the station to previously unheard of success in the ratings. The Crowell-Collier folks hoped he could do the same for KFVB.

He could and did. He called the station “KFVB - Color Channel 98.” Color television was becoming a reality and TV stations broadcast on “channels.” It sounded so hip to be using TV terminology for a radio station. The music was the new stuff, popular with the kids, but presented with tremendous flare and showmanship.

There was a slick new jingle package ramming home the call letters and frequency. The jingles, commissioned by Mr. Blore, featured a full orchestra along with the Johnny Mann singers. The sound of the jingles was inspired by the score of a Broadway musical Mr. Blore had just seen that had knocked his socks off. It was called *West Side Story*. There had never been anything quite like those jingles on radio before.

The core of the KFVB sound was its personalities. Billed collectively as “the seven swingin’ gentlemen,” they were a crew of DJs who were all showmen. They sounded like they really enjoyed the station and the music and were having a ball. A big part of the reason they sounded as good as they did was that Chuck Blore insisted on preparation.

Unlike most DJs who just show up and wing it, the seven swingin’ gentlemen were expected to prepare their shows – in writing. Chuck Blore was known to stand at the studio door and ask to see a DJ’s preparation before he’d let him in the studio. It was probably a pain in the ass for the guys, but it made for great radio.

In addition to the music, the top 40 tunes of the day, referred to as the “fabulous forty,” the DJs and the amazing, exciting jingles, the station was also chock full of contests, zany promotions and all kinds of clever schtick; stuff that is old hat today but was new and exciting back then.

KFVB, Color Channel 98, started the new format on January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1958. I probably became a listener on January 2<sup>nd</sup> when I went back to school. The buzz was all over Franklin Jr. High, probably all over all the schools in L.A. Kids were carrying transistor radios around so they wouldn’t miss anything. I, of course, was in hog heaven.

It was as if Mr. Blore had come over to our apartment and sat me down and said, “Now then young master Ross, what exactly would you like to hear on the radio?” And then, had proceeded to make it a reality. Actually, it was better than anything I could have envisioned. Finally, the music I loved, presented in an exciting and compelling way, and it was there for me round the clock!



I listened to KFWB as much as was humanly possible. I became so obsessed with it that when my father sat me down in the summer of 1958 and informed me that we were going to pack up and move south to a city called San Diego and asked if I had any questions about the move, the only question I had was, “will I still be able to hear KFWB?”

My father thought I was nuts, of course, but this was a terribly important point to me. I had waited years for a station like this. I didn't want to lose it. In a time when a young person who wants to hear a song can just go on the internet and stream or download it at will, it's hard to convey how important that station was to me. If I wanted to hear a song, the only alternatives I had were to go down to the record store and part with what was then a lot of dough, or find a radio station that would play it. Had I finally found that station only to lose it?

San Diego is only about a hundred and twenty miles south of Los Angeles. My father said he was pretty sure I'd still be able to hear KFWB. I'm not sure what would have happened if he'd indicated otherwise.

