

Air Waves and Chocolate Malts

Through four years during the 1990s, I shared a table and air space with Walt Bodine during his twice-a-month Food Critics Show, as a restaurant reviewer for PitchWeekly. In a small sound booth at the KCUR studio, several of us talked for an hour with listeners and Walt, our consummate radio host and passionate food lover.

Despite his diminutive stature – Walt stands about 5 ½ feet tall – his presence always filled the room. He was, simultaneously, eager participant and ringmaster on the freewheeling, fast-paced show and he clearly had a ball doing it. Walt made sure that every reviewer spoke and no single caller monopolized the show. By that time he had already worked in broadcasting for upwards of 50 years.

Walt first addressed a microphone at the ripe old age of four or five, when he sang ‘I Faw Down An’ Go Boom’ for a radio program, while his aunt accompanied him on the piano. And the rest, as they say, is history.

Walt has worked behind a ‘mic’ for more than 60 years, besting Walter Cronkite, Harry Reasoner and Charles Gibson’s records by a long shot. Though he doesn’t focus on the public recognition he has received, Walt has been recognized for his accomplishments several times, including a Kansas City Spirit Award and a Bishop John J. Sullivan Award for Communication.

During his career, Walt spent a week as a less-than-enthusiastic sportscaster in Sedalia, Missouri, and a year as a weather man. He piloted a call-in show called Nitebeat on WHB radio, and later hosted a five-hour public affairs show that ran for the better part of six years on the same station. Walt also offered hundreds of restaurant and humor pieces at KMBC-TV.

“A lot of the time I had radio and TV jobs simultaneously,” Walt says. “I used to take a radio job whenever it aired.” But Walt found his current broadcasting niche when he opened The Walt Bodine Show at KCUR-FM, 24 years ago.

“There was a one room news department when I came to KCUR, with a talk studio across the hall,” he says. Today, the KCUR office includes three news booths plus production control and master control areas. The station is mostly digital, from microphone to transmitter, and broadcasts via HD radio and streaming Internet; making all programming available worldwide.

This 86 years young fellow still relishes his daily morning gig, and dresses impeccably each day despite the fact that his listeners won’t notice. Walt talks to his guests about everything from great restaurants and lousy movies to the latest research in fighting cancer and mortgage fraud. Friday has become his favorite day of the week, largely because of episodes that feature food and movie critics on alternate weeks.

“I like public radio because I don’t have people trying to influence who you have on your show,” he says. “We have time enough to select guests pretty carefully and I have a brilliant co-host, Kelley Weiss.

“Every Tuesday, after the show, I have a meeting with Hayley Salvo (Walt’s producer) and Kelley, and everybody brings up potential people (as guests). We sometimes save a date for a particular person.” For instance, on the Monday following the Super Bowl, several ad executives talked with Walt about commercials that interspersed the game broadcast.

The reporter

After broadcasting gigs in Sedalia, Mo., Port Arthur, Texas and Atchison, Kan., Walt entered broadcasting in Kansas City’s metropolitan market. He worked at WDAF for nearly 20 years, WHB and KMBC for approximately a decade, each, and KMBZ for about four years. Walt also completed a brief stint as news director for KCIT Channel 41.

He has many memorable interviews in his archives, from artists to musicians, politicians and other public figures. And Walt has a talent for finding every interview subject fascinating.

“I interviewed Robert Kennedy when John (Kennedy) had been nominated for President,” Walt says. “I’m short and we were almost eyeball to eyeball. When we shook hands we both had fairly small hands and that’s not what I’m used to.

“Martin Luther King came on (my) half hour prime time show for Channel 4, shortly after his release from jail. He seemed nervous and edgy and he hadn’t done a lot of television yet.”

Walt felt nervous and edgy when he had to interview a French atomic scientist for WHB’s Nitebeat, a topic he knew little about. But he plowed through it with gusto.

“The first 10 to 15 minutes were a grave situation as we tried to make sense of it, for the audience,” Walt says. “When I’m suddenly thrown into something I’m not prepared for, I try to kid myself out of being nervous and think of all the ways to approach it – how I will piece this together.”

Jerry Lewis once visited Walt’s show and Walt perceived he was being somewhat dismissive of callers who complimented his work. “I told him that, ‘Midwest folks mean what they say when they call in,’” Walt says. Lewis appeared stricken when he realized he might have offended some callers, and then stayed an hour beyond the initial half-hour slot he’d agreed to. It was just one example of why Walt believes the Midwest is the best area to live, in the U.S.

“People greet you more often [than they do on the coasts],” he says. “They’re more ‘straight up’ and you don’t have to avoid eye contact like in some other places.”

One of Walt’s most enjoyable reporting experiences was when he visited an air station in Minneapolis and then returned to Kansas City on a gigantic military aircraft, with fighter planes flying on either side. Because of its size, the plane had to make two passes at the airport before landing.

“I was looking down on rows of school buses and thinking ‘that’s tranquility, down there,’ and this (plane) is chance-y,” Walt says.

One story of human loss haunts him to this day. While Walt was a news director for Channel 4, he visited and reported from the scene of an enormous fire in a fuel storage area, located near 31st Street and Southwest Boulevard.

“There was high-pitched ‘eeee’ sound right before a large tank blew, sky high,” he says. “Seven firemen were overtaken by the fire and died. The ambulances were lined up like cabs at the airport.”

A brief detour

Always an advocate of fairness and even-handedness, Walt’s practical side caused him to make a brief career detour when money for broadcast work was tight, and his brood had grown to include five children. Although he never totally abandoned the microphone, Walt served as regional director for the National Conference of Christians and Jews (the National Conference for Community and Justice, since 1998) from 1974 to 1979.

“I had just come out of a job, and was light on income when I had lunch with the president of the board of the National Catholic Reporter (who told me about the job),” Walt says. “He was on the Board of the organization and he backed me.” Walt continued to work a radio job at night while his wife, ‘Bernie’ took care of the family.

The family man and friend

Walt was married to Bernadine Beisner Bodine for 52 years, until her death in 2002. They caught each other’s attention during party. “I was 30 years old and getting tired of crossing names out of this black book I had, whenever one of (the girls) got married,” he says.

A medical social worker by profession, Bernie put her career aside to raise their five children. Walt says one secret to their successful marriage was their ability to hold everything together even when there was plenty of tension related to his work.

He and Bernie also attended Visitation Church throughout their marriage, a weekly habit that Walt continues. In addition, they shared a board position with the Jackson County Board for the Mentally Disabled - first Walt, for several years, and then Bernie took his place for another decade.

“Our son, Damian Joseph Bodine, was born with Down syndrome, and our kids were wonderful with him,” Walt says. “He’s in his 50s now. He has worked in sheltered workshops and lived in apartments with friends.”

Walt’s grown sons, Marty, Tom and Damian Joseph and one daughter, Rebecca, live in the Kansas City area. Daughter and artist Mary, lives in Tucson. Walt also has four grandchildren, one great-grandchild and a handful of very close friends.

“My son, Tom, is one of my best friends. Then there’s Rob Forsythe, who’s a producer of television commercials and other advertising. We go to lunch every Friday. “Another one is Father Norman Rotert, a former pastor of Visitation Church. And Patty Cahill, KCUR’s general manager, is a great, straightforward gal.”

The versatile communicator

There was a time when Walt thought he might try his hand at acting. As a young adult, he attended the Resident Theater School, in Kansas City. The traditional two-year program ended abruptly, a year early, when the man who ran it left. However, Walt says the experience clearly benefited his broadcast career.

“We were taped a lot and it gave us a chance to hear our voices. I was horrified by mine, but I didn’t let that stop me. We also learned how to project your voice.”

But broadcasting isn’t the only area of media Walt has delved into. As a child, Walt created a neighborhood newspaper that he sold to his neighbors. As an adult, he moonlighted in gag writing, advertising and political consulting. He wrote a script for Katz drugstores, to publicize a big sale, and put words in the mouths of Paul Winchell, Goldie Hawn and others. Walt also wrote numerous columns for Tom Leathers’ publication, *The Squire*.

He has been a voracious reader and enthusiastic writer throughout his life, with four books and countless journalistic pieces under his belt. Walt spontaneously creates rhymes as he talks, and loves a good quote. In fact, he prides himself on his collection of quote books and parlayed his appreciation of quotes into a nighttime radio show entitled ‘Note the Quote,’ for more than four years.

The foodie

Walt also loves good food, although that doesn’t necessarily mean gourmet fare. But he has hated to eat chicken ever since childhood. It all started when he watched his Uncle Joe pick and then kill a chicken for the family’s Sunday dinner. “The head came off and the body kept running around and I decided that was a really dumb animal,” Walt says.

On the other hand, he’s a sucker for a good hotdog with plenty of mustard and a chocolate malt on the side. Walt believes some of the best malts in this area come from Town Topic.

He likes his fried eggs a little runny, freshly baked cinnamon rolls, and Eggs Benedict at the Raphael Hotel. For a ‘damn good menu’ and service he calls the best in town, Walt favors Houston’s, on the Country Club Plaza. And if budget isn’t an issue, he thinks Skies offers a very good selection and view.

Decades ago, Walt parlayed his love of food and restaurants into a primary topic of his broadcast conversations. Throughout almost two decades, he offered commentaries on KMBC-TV about what he affectionately dubbed ‘loveable joints,’ telling human interest stories behind beloved eateries. For quite awhile, Walt fulfilled that gig simultaneously with the KCUR Food Critics Show.

“Based on covering food places from Paola to the other side of the metro, I think there are probably approximately 3,000 places to eat, (in Kansas City)” he says.

The traveler

Walt loved the perfectly cooked beef he found at several restaurants that were housed in England’s stately old hotels. He also has appreciated the sights in Hawaii, Panama,

some of Europe, and a little bit of Asia, and he thoroughly enjoyed the Colorado mountains where his family vacationed.

“I wish I had done more traveling in Asia and even more in Europe,” Walt says. However, his work did bring some memorable travel opportunities.

“One time I was flying with an Air Force group as a reporter,” he says. “I was asked up to the cabin and the pilot turned the plane over to me. He said, ‘I’ll be here if you need me but we’re coming up on a storm so you have to decide whether you’ll go above or below it.’ I can’t remember whether I went above or below.”

The philosopher

Walt learned, early on, not to assume what people did, based on their appearance. During his mid-teens, he worked at his father’s drug store soda fountain with one of his cousins. Most of the time, Walt’s customers paid him little attention, but Nancy was different. She drank Cokes and smoked cigarettes with a small group of nicely dressed women who came in to visit, late every afternoon.

“She was the only one who took the time to talk to me and I told my cousin, ‘I would love to have a wife just like Nancy.’ Then he told me they were all whores, and the next day I couldn’t look her in the eye.”

Walt also believes that humor, creativity and curiosity promote success in journalism and life as a whole. “I don’t think there’s any profession that doesn’t benefit from humor,” he says. “I think creativity is when you have a chance to be boring and obvious but you do something different. And I think there should be more curiosity in journalism.”

With age, Walt has developed problems in his knees and legs, wears hearing aids in both ears and has very poor vision, but he rolls along with the changes and continues to work and play with limited assistance. What he misses most is driving.

“I often dream about driving a sports car, in London,” he says. “I wonder ‘what if the police pull me over?’ They do, and then I wake up.”

Despite Walt’s observation of television’s rise, locally, and the formulation of FM radio, he finds the current rate of change in everyday life – particularly regarding technology – ‘enough to make you gasp.’ He types on a computer but doesn’t have much use for its other functions.

However, sharing his passion for communication has given Walt great satisfaction. He taught courses in the communications department, at University of Missouri – Kansas City for many years. “It keeps you sharp, and there are some very smart kids in that department,” he says.

Walt worries about the dim view he feels the rest of the world currently has regarding the United States and he believes it has a lot to do with our current political leadership. “We have an administration that has alienated another country at every turn,” he says. “And I bet that 80 percent of talk shows, in the United States, are pretty strongly right wing but I try to keep a pretty middle of the road show. What we need, now, is a more

enlightened voting public; people who really care, and think about the things they want to vote on.”

Now what do you say to that? [Walt's favorite sign-off]