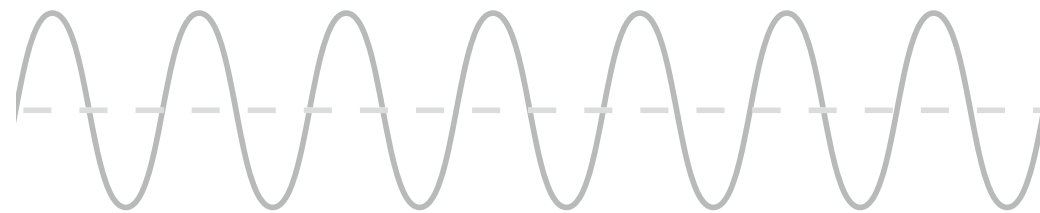


SUPER SUMMER SPECTACULAR

ramp. What happened on July 16, 1970, was one of many causes, small in comparison to Vietnam, Watts, and other troubles. Still, I'm sure that accident helped make the Southland less carefree. The Supreme Court published their opinion on August 21, 1975. I was a lawyer then but wouldn't read it until I became a judge, two decades later. It took a while for Justice Mosk's scolding to work its way through the system and for insurance companies to restrain their radio clients. By the time I noticed our local deejays calming down, I was too old to play their games. A middle-aged man screeching into a mall to pick up bread from a boss jock? Ridiculous. Better to park in an assigned space and walk to a desk, there to earn more money—even if modest government pay—than Robert Sentner could have ever won from The Real Don Steele.

The Super Summer Spectacular is over forty years away now; high school, half a century. I grew up in a special place—Los Angeles—just as the world intruded and I felt the easy days become a gleam that bounced and slid, flew and whirled, no longer near. Maybe that's why memories of the era cut so deep. Pool parties on summer nights. The beach on warm days. A radio contest on July 16, 1970, and the choices I faced that day. I chose but I still think of Robert and Marsha's record run on the 101, two California kids, archetypes of the golden state at the end of its golden time, ebullient, the wind in their faces, shouting and waving and weaving and shouting while KHJ played the hits.



WITNESS TO HISTORY: D-DAY ON THE AIR

STEPHANIE FEUER

D-Day was approaching. Literally. It was May 1994, just weeks before the 50th anniversary of the biggest battle of World War II, a huge milestone for the listeners of our American Popular Standards radio station, WQEW-AM in New York. I was the director of marketing & promotion there, as well as the legendary classical station WQXR-FM, both then owned by The New York Times Company.

D-Day was one of those “where were you?” moments for our listeners, a collective experience of a momentous event. It went without saying that we'd do something special on the air to commemorate it. The station's program director suggested we write a couple of historical tags and feature songs from artists on the USO tours – Bob Hope, Frank Sinatra, The Andrews Sisters.

Good stuff. But it didn't feel like enough. I had another idea. “Can we ask listeners who were actually there to share their stories?” I suggested.

“How many people do you think will call in for that?” the program director said in a tone that suggested I was chasing windmills.

“And how will you know they’re real?” his sidekick added.

I wasn’t backing down. I said I’d manage the entire feature. I had, after all, been on the air myself for several years doing weekends and swing shifts for WGIR-FM in Manchester, New Hampshire. The benefit of working at a small station is that you had to do it all—writing and reading news, voicing and editing commercial spots and promos, checking the antenna logs, and in my case, promotional duties like driving to live broadcasts all over the state to show off the Porsche that the station was giving away. Much to the envy of the rest of the staff, all male, I could both drive stick and had a clean driving record. There are some beautiful roads up there.

I had enough basic production skills to tape the interviews and edit them down to usable clips, which we could pair with appropriate music and air as vignettes. We broadcast a promo, voiced by the program director, asking listeners to call in and let us know if they had a D-Day story they’d be willing to share.

Oh, they called. The phone lines were flooded. I also oversaw the mailroom and reception desk, and the receptionist was ready to call the union because of the unprecedented volume of calls. I asked the mail clerk to handle the overflow. The traffic department couldn’t get order instructions for the commercials we were to air because the phones were tied up. People missed personal calls. And no one could talk to me or my assistant; we were too busy talking to listeners who wouldn’t get off the phone. No one wanted to wait for

us to call back to record them. They wanted to tell their stories. Right away.

“This is already unmanageable,” the program director admonished me at a drop-everything meeting he called, “and poorly planned.”

He was a big voice in a station management filled with fiery personalities. They all looked at me, all of them some 20 years older than me (when that was an asset, not a detriment) and had been working in New York radio for years. How was I going to fix this? they asked, implying that dropping the project immediately and getting back to my regular work would be the best course of action.

“This matters to our listeners.” I pleaded. D-Day was a radio moment—then and now. Our audience had first heard of the invasion of Omaha beach in radio news flashes. I’d listened to those clips in graduate school and they were some of the best examples of restrained, competent, and concerned news reporting on record.

Words flew out of my mouth unfiltered as I attempted to remind them of the power of radio to touch individuals. I told them of listening to the radio as a child during the blackout in the northeast in 1965, not knowing where my mother was; that she was struggling to drive in the dark, through streets in chaos because there were no traffic lights, driving to pick me up from dance class. A janitor had a transistor radio and the crackly sounds soothed me from my fear that this was some kind of attack, the undercurrent of cold war fear as a result of the bomb shelter drills we dutifully practiced in grade school.

I might have told them how radio became an oracle of possibilities for teen me, listening to Allison Steele, the Nightbird on WNEW-FM. She'd play Vangelis or King Crimson, her silken voice soothing my anxiety about facing the day. In the wee hours scribbling in my journal, nascent creativity, the radio transported me. I wanted to grow up fast, and hoped it might happen faster if I stayed up late.

I might have told them how radio contributed to my activist awakening. While many of my friends spent their spare time with the TV—Dark Shadows and afternoon soaps—I preferred politics. I was part of Al Lowenstein's youth brigade, waiting at the train station to convince people my parents' age why they had to vote for Lowenstein for Congress, and later on, to do anything possible to dump Nixon. I'd listen to Steve Post and Bob Fass on Radio Unnameable on WBAI, learning about protests to attend. Sometimes I'd board the train and troll the city for music or Patti Smith reading her poetry at the Mercer Arts Center.

It was like the tectonic plates of the world were shifting in the 60s and early 70s as my generation collectively bulldozed our way to change, the rock music we heard on the radio as our fuel. This remembrance of D-Day, I argued, was a significant moment. We were giving our listeners a means to relive and share their powerful memories.

It worked. Or they just wanted me to get off my soapbox. Grudgingly my boss said I could keep going with the D-Day project, but I had to "keep it under control."

For several days, I spent most of my waking hours in the tiny production studio interviewing listeners, recording their voices, labeling tape. I didn't see the light of day. I told my fiancé to have dinner without me. I'd set up ten minute slots to call and record listener stories. A dentist from Manhattan remembered two classmates killed during the landing. He described it in a way that felt more raw than a memory that had aged 50 years, and sobbed when he told me his classmates had been buried side by side.

Other listeners remembered being in school and gathering for special assemblies. A woman from the Bronx described a spontaneous neighborhood celebration when the invasion was over, and recalled the joyful noises of her neighbors banging on pots and pans. A Navy radioman read from one of his letters from the front.

Instead of being exhausted by the insane number of hours I put in to the project, I was energized by the intensity of emotion as our listeners shared their stories. It all felt important. The station president, my boss, didn't see it that way. He called me in to say he saw a lot of time being spent, station resources being used, without obvious return. It was poor judgement. The project was out of scope. Plus, I had to be careful not to cross a line with our union—although management could perform some production tasks, all my time editing was raising concerns. I felt like my job was on shaky ground.

I'd heard about a book that was coming out, an oral history of D-Day. The book validated what we were doing. The author's impetus, the press release said, was to preserve the oral history before it was too late. So many

of our listeners were in their eighties, their generation was dying, chased by the ga-doying ga-doying sound of the dialup lines of the very nascent internet, a harbinger of another tectonic change. It felt urgent.

I asked the program director (PD) to interview the author, Gerald Astor, for a vignette. Instead of agreeing, he said, “I need to understand why we are still committing all these resources. There’s plenty of material from the stories you’ve collected already.”

I knew we needed a sponsor or he was going to pull the plug. I thought of the listeners still on my list. I’d promised them I’d call back. They, too, had stories to tell. I went to my friend Chris, a young salesman at the station, and told him about the vignettes and how the PD had put me off about the interview and that I was in trouble with my boss. He said that if I loved the project that much, he could sell it – we could sell it – and told me to join his clients for drinks before he took them to dinner to talk about it.

We talked about those where-were-you moments of our own lives, a conversation that would haunt me when Chris was killed in the North Tower of the World Trade Center on 9/11. I left them to talk over dinner, and true to his word, Chris secured sponsorship of the program from Barnes & Noble. The interview was on. Not to be outdone by “the kid,” our VP of sales convinced Citibank to be a sponsor, too. My D-Day vignettes were a legitimate program.

The PD opened his rolodex and my assistant started contacting enter-

tainers who were involved in the 1944 USO effort. Hildegarde, the American singer, told us that on D-Day, General Omar Bradley called her to ask her to dedicate a song to the D-Day troops during her performance at The Persian Room. Author and columnist Pete Hamill described how he watched the lights of the New York skyline, which had been dark throughout the war effort, magically turn on again that night. Performers Barbara Carroll, Alice Faye, and Maureen McGovern all shared their remembrances with our now-enthusiastic PD.

My assistant contacted the Normandy Foundation, numerous Veterans’ organizations, and even found members of the 332nd Airborne—the Tuskegee Airmen, the all-Black brigade of fighter pilots. The phones continued to ring long after we’d pulled the promo from the air. There were so many stories to tell.

We all gathered in the studio for the interview I’d arranged with British journalist and author Russell Miller, who spoke to us from London (a big deal in very pre-Skype 1994). He reflected on the differences he found among the American, British, and German soldiers he’d interviewed for his book oral history book of D-Day, *Nothing Less than Victory*.

The most memorable conversation for me was with a listener named Jerome Richard, who’d served in the motion picture unit and had been assigned to film the D-Day invasion. I could not imagine the horror of having to focus on the detail of line after line of young boys being shot

down. And he was on the frontlines, unprotected, shooting film, not bullets. He was truly a witness to history.

I went way over my 10-minute time slot, and I didn't care. I moved to the back studio so I didn't disrupt the rest of the production and called him to keep talking. Richard described how he felt his war experiences had changed him. I still have it on cassette.

"After you've seen the bowels of the earth open before you and come home to a land that was unblemished by war and blessed with the light of liberty, you'll always care. You'll care for the dignity of life, and you'll always care about humankind. We must care if the race is to endure. We have to care for those who are nearest and those who are far off." His bravery and perspective touched me profoundly, as did his heartfelt patriotism.

In all we compiled more than 80 vignettes and paired each story with an appropriate song, from "A String of Pearls" by Glenn Miller, to Kay Kyser's "The White Cliffs of Dover," to Bing Crosby's, "I'll Be Seeing You." Since D-Day was on a Saturday that year, we broadcast the vignettes throughout the weekend. Each time one aired, listener calls lit up the phones. They called to tell us they, too, had stories to share; ordinary people remembering an extraordinary day, or to thank us for igniting their memories and paying authentic tribute to the heroes of that day.

That tribute to D-Day, the start of the end of World War II, was the start of the end of my radio career. I never found the same level of engagement

in another project, although there were fun, important, and imaginative ones; they just paled in comparison. Besides, soon after, The New York Times would tap me to work at the newspaper and another dream began.