

# INSIDE RADIO

Monday, August 3, 2009

“Personalities INSIDE RADIO”

Sponsored by



## ONWARD CHRISTIAN SAGA

by Mike Kinosian, Special Features Editor

**G**ather together folks with a shared fervor for our beloved industry and non-stop storytelling punctuated with copious hilarity will inevitably ensue.

Only a handful of those spinning the yarns though can adroitly accomplish the feat with dexterity, smoothness and overall quintessential authority as this year's recipient of the NAB's National Radio Award. “[NAB Executive VP/Radio] John David called me about the selection and I was extremely grateful for the recognition,” modestly remarks Saga President/Chief Executive Officer/Chairman **Ed Christian** who is set to receive the (deserving) recognition during at a luncheon at next month's NAB Radio Show in Philadelphia. “It was totally unanticipated and a pleasant surprise.”

### CAR Show

No one American city can claim it possesses a stranglehold on producing the most consummate radio professionals. Few however could argue with Detroit's uncanny proficiency.

Spellbound by radio in elementary school, Motor City native Christian recollects listening to the bigger-than-life medium at night. “It was magical that these shows came into my bedroom,” he states in genuine awe. “It was Top 40's beginning and we were fortunate to have [AM outlets] ‘Keener’ [WKNR], CKLW and WXYZ [but] FMs were popping on left and right in Detroit.”

Volunteer weekend board-op Christian would conscientiously board a bus to get to work. “Stations were primitive by today's standards with egg cartons on the walls for soundproofing,” notes the Saga honcho who was 16 when he landed his first paying job at a now-silent St. Helen, MI day-timer. “It was during the summer for \$54 a week - I was really styling. That was great stuff.”

Post-high school graduation, Christian advanced to a 5,000-watt Rogers City, MI day-timer and worked his way through Michigan State University as a newsman at Lansing's WJIM and WITL. “I was booking bands and doing record hops,” he points out. “I was a mediocre student because I did too many other things.”

At \$1.75 an hour Christian was the highest-paid part-timer but an opportunity in Flint for nearly double that was apparently too good to resist for the college student who earned his Bachelor's Degree from Detroit's Wayne State University. “In Flint, I recognized I reached my on-air professional level and would always be relegated

to [those-size markets] – not that there's anything bad about that. I knew I'd always be a Triple A ballplayer [who'd] never get called up to ‘The Show.’”

Greater professional challenges are what Christian craved and one surfaced in the form of a Detroit ad agency media buying/copywriter job, subsequently leading to an interview for a sales position at Detroit's 50,000-watt WCAR. “I was [at that station for] several years before going to a rep firm and then returned as National Sales Manager.”

### Nice Move

By the time he was 27 Christian desperately desired to become a General Manager but understood such jobs were limited for a person that age. “My wife and I wanted to get back to Michigan so we bought into a small station [5,000-watt day-timer WCER] in a town of 8,230 people [Charlotte, MI].”

There for three years Christian recalls the first-third of his tenure was “idyllic” because he could walk out into his backyard and see WCER's blinking tower lights. “I was very active in the community in the second year. There's nothing wrong with [working] in small market radio. It's very dear to me [but] by year three [it was evident] I was in instant obscurity in this small farming community.”

Under markedly different circumstances another three-year assignment presented itself as Worcester, Massachusetts' State Mutual Life Assurance recruited the 30-year-old Christian to run Motown Beautiful Music outlet WNIC, which State Mutual had foreclosed on. “Van Patrick was one of [WNIC's] previous owners,” Christian notes. “When he died, his \$100,000 ‘Key Man’ life insurance policy was my operating money. I [humbly] went in and said we were a team and would get through it.”

Wall-to-wall instrumentals could also be heard at that time on several other Detroit outlets including WJR-FM (presently Citadel Hot AC WDVD), WLDM (currently Clear Channel CHR WKQI), WOMC (CBS Radio's Oldies station with the same calls) and WWJ-FM (now CBS Radio's all-Sports WXYT-FM).

### Significant Swap

While calling on San Francisco ad agencies, Christian was extremely impressed with “K-101” (KIOI) and felt strongly that with some modification, he could transport the contemporary FM's on-air sound. “I'd have a hit on my hands,” Christian retroactively

maintains with conviction. "It was exactly what I wanted to do." Alterations however couldn't be performed en masse so Christian planned WNIC's Adult Contemporary transition to eventuate over several months. "Each week I'd add/delete titles so I never had to say the station was changing format," he states. "Seven weeks into it, I just couldn't take [another] Donna Summer to Anne Murray-like [segue] so we made the complete switch. That was the birth of WNIC."

From the outset State Mutual informed Christian that since the company wasn't in the radio business, WNIC would be sold after three years which is exactly what transpired as talent agency International Creative Management acquired it. "ICM management wanted me to run WNIC and help them build a broadcast group," he explains. "That was a no-brainer and we [bought] WNOR/Norfolk and WSNY/Columbus."

Unfortunately ICM was undergoing its own problems and elected to sell the radio division. "God gives people certain talents - mine is an absolute crazy - almost fanatic - passion for radio," proclaims Christian who readily admits he didn't possess abundant knowledge about the money part of the business. "A friend got me on a Paul Kagan panel. I told bankers I'd [share] every insight about a station they needed [in exchange for information] about deal structures and venture capital. I partnered with Boston Ventures. The people I befriended knew I was 'bankable' and we created Saga."

### Ice Cold Facts

Something reflective of his Icelandic heritage is what the Honorary Consul for the Republic of Iceland had in mind in naming the new entity and the answer came to him as he and his wife were on a motor scooter. "I told her I wanted to call [the company] Saga Communications," Christian recounts. "'Saga' means an ongoing adventure and that's what this is. We built it with very simple philosophies [including] only grow at your capacity; buy what you can afford; and always know you have to pay it back. Banks don't [necessarily] want your money [as much as they] want to know you can pay off a loan."

Limited downside risk was another essential part to the quality company Christian was constructing. "That's why we're in state capitals, college towns and recession-resistant areas," Christian points out. "People will listen to compelling radio. If they do,

you can contact advertisers in good conscience. If you provide quality advertising, merchants will get results and will come back [to] advertise more."

One simple directive was dispatched to his managers. "I said send me money, not problems," Christian remarks. "We want them to marry and super-serve the community. If you are good to the enterprise, the enterprise will be good to you. You'll win the game by being intellectually part of the community. It won't work if you try to serve passively."

Lack of commitment is one label that will never be affixed to Christian and helps to explain his immensely laudable service to a plethora of organizations including the Broadcasters Foundation. "[Radio] has no safety net for older broadcasters," he laments. "That's one of this industry's tragedies. We have a tendency to take [those] who've served us well for 40 years and send them on their way. If something goes awry, they have [in trouble]."

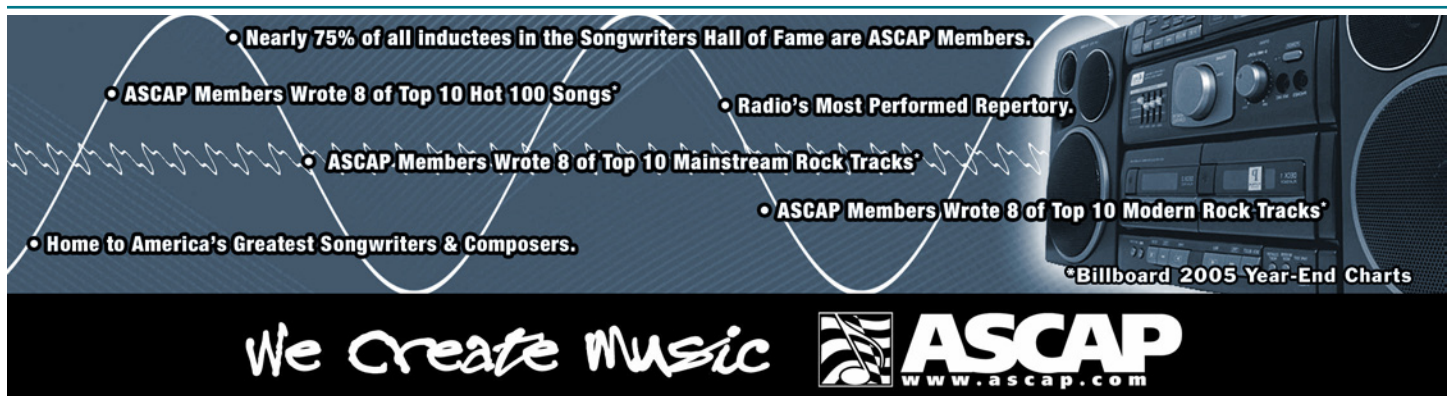
Tremendous satisfaction he gets in helping in this noble endeavor is tempered with emotional lows. "I weep because I know some names on the list," Christian quietly remarks.

### Uncompromised Spirit

Traditional ways of running a radio station have been re-invented and Christian maintains monumental industry changes have made operating Saga one giant Whac-a-Mole game. "We can do a tremendous [job with] Customer Needs Analysis. Our job is telling customers how we can increase their sales. They want to know how we can make their business better. We write great copy, develop business plans and make them our partner. [Rarely though] do we perform a CNA on ourselves [but we must]."

It's often stated radio is among the first indicators of when the economy begins to worsen and when it improves. "It's [as if] we can sense seismic shocks in advance," Christian hypothesizes.

What we're presently experiencing is unprecedented in recent history although Christian stresses there will indubitably be a recovery owing to the fact the fundamentals remain in-place. "We have localism, we're free and have links to the communities - we cannot forget that," Christian stresses. "Like any [other] storm, it will end. It's just been a very turbulent one and we must



• Nearly 75% of all inductees in the Songwriters Hall of Fame are ASCAP Members.

• ASCAP Members Wrote 8 of Top 10 Hot 100 Songs\*

• Radio's Most Performed Repertory.


• ASCAP Members Wrote 8 of Top 10 Mainstream Rock Tracks\*

• ASCAP Members Wrote 8 of Top 10 Modern Rock Tracks\*

• Home to America's Greatest Songwriters & Composers.

\*Billboard 2005 Year-End Charts

**We Create Music**

 **ASCAP**  
www.ascap.com

be very cautious our boat doesn't turn sideways and get swamped by waves."

Somewhat within that same imagery an avalanche of layoffs has hit the industry and a clearly reflective Christian somberly states it's taken "an unimaginable toll" on him. "This isn't the way I envisioned doing radio. This is a people business [and] I built a people-centric company. Our assets go home every night. We've had to rewire our brains on how to do more with less. We looked at every station in every market. We asked how things could be redesigned, without cutting into the bone and without affecting our [on-air sound]."

Compromises and adjustments were nonetheless instituted. "In crisis situations, you have to communicate," Christian remarks. "People must understand these things aren't done out of malice or because we're hard-ass business people. We may have changed [Saga's culture], but we still have the spirit. The happiest day of my life will be when I reinstate people and raise the money back to where it was."

### Quality versus Quantity Quandary

Disappearance of Arbitron at several of Saga's 91 radio properties wasn't economy-related. "In today's marketplace, the diary is a failed mechanism [and] I don't want to pay for inefficient information," declares the past Chairman of Arbitron's Radio Advisory Council. "No one wants to record their listening in diary form over a five-day period. When an Arbitron book comes out, everybody treats the information as rock solid numbers delivered from the mount. Arbitron says there'll be a 7% increase in diary markets - I wish I could mandate 7% increases. Arbitron needs to be more focused on its customer base."

Considerable ballyhoo surrounding the rating company's electronic-based PPM methodology notwithstanding, Christian remains skeptical of that as well. "There are only two accredited MRC markets so we know there are inherent problems," he suggests. "People are being asked to be on a panel for at least one year and wear something on their belt. There are huge flaws in that. Arbitron is accessorizing meters for women. Women carry [it] in their purse [but] the first thing they do when they get to work is lock their purse in a drawer."

This doesn't necessarily mean Christian is a Nielsen partisan. "The way radio should be sold is that, if you don't get results, you're kicked out. I love our smaller markets. When I go to a bank to deposit money, no one ever says it can't be taken because [it's from a small town]. It is just as green as from anywhere else."

Qualitative is what Christian wants to sell since he opines, "That's what our business is all about. It's not just about asses in seats or ears. It's about the types of people who listen and what you can do to reach them."

Central Michigan University undergraduate students are the beneficiary of Christian's unlimited expertise.

Not only does he hold a Master of Arts degree (in Management) from the Mt. Pleasant institution, he's also an Adjunct Professor in Broadcast Arts there. "I might [only] light up five of 20 kids [in the classroom]," he concedes. "Those are the joys - the others just show up. We have a different quality of [student from when I went to college]. We need to go into colleges and make them understand radio's magic."

### Survivor Quells Injustices

Harsh Michigan winters usually prompt Christian to temporarily relocate to Florida where he methodically swims 100 pool lengths a day. "I count each one because if I do it on timing [it generally takes one hour], my brain wanders. I have to focus on counting. I need to have that escapist time to let my brain cool off."

Historical mysteries are especially satisfying to this voracious reader. "It can place me in a different time," he comments.

Entire workdays spent on the phone are commonplace for Christian who occasionally misses being on-air although readily concedes he couldn't do it in today's environment. "You have to know when to take your final curtain call," he advises. "There's nothing worse than seeing an aging actor who comes back for one more encore when the audience is walking out. Sure it's in my blood. It has to be because this is what it's all about [but] I [also] know you can't go back. I'm saddened about what's happened to radio. We can't forget the wizardry of [this medium]."

Although only 65 years old - and clearly exceptionally vibrant - Christian envisions himself taking on more of a senior statesman's role. "I'm doing what I love," remarks an emphatic Christian who recently re-signed for another five years. "I've been getting a paycheck from this industry for the last 49 years. I'm not afraid of being critical of it. I'm very vocal about things. If there's an injustice, someone has to speak up about it. It's another issue whether I'm disregarded but I have a responsibility to, at least, weigh-in. I wear my passion on my sleeve. I'm going to get our company through this. We are a survivor and I won't be an embarrassment to the industry I cherish."



**WHO:** Ed Christian

**WHAT:** President/Chief Executive Officer/Chairman

**WHERE:** Saga Communications

**HOW LONG:** Since 1986