

50 Crazy Years in Broadcasting by Bryan Norcross

1968-1971: RADIO – Disk Jockey

WTAI AM 1560, Eau Gallie (Melbourne), Florida

By late 1967, I had talked my way into one of the local Melbourne radio stations, WMMB AM 1240 to see how it all worked. They even let me run the board (the audio control console) now and then. Then in March of 1968, there was a new radio station in town – on 1560 AM. WTAI, which stood for *Where the Action Is*, produced a hodgepodge of programming, but middays and afternoons they were playing a new kind of rock – it came to be called “progressive rock” – mixed in with non-bubblegum Top 40.

Truth be told, I liked the bubblegum music on WKKO, but WTAI was new and local, and they let me answer the phones during the Jim “J the K” Kennedy show after school that spring.

I was a fish-out-of-water. I was still singing “I Wanna Hold Your Hand” and “Help Me Rhonda,” while pretty much everybody at WTAI was stretching 1967’s Summer of Love into a way of life. At some radio stations, the DJs were called “the Good Guys”. At TAI they were the “Head DJ’s” (derived from “pot head”, no doubt). But it was cool, we were cool, and I was thrilled.

Come summer, WTAI needed somebody to sign the station on the air and handle the early DJ chores on Saturday and Sunday mornings. Somehow, I convinced J the K and Pierre Begano, the General Manager, to let me go on the radio. Part of it had to be, my price was right. They gave me a coupon to pay for the gas to run my old Ford, and I got to be a disk jockey. The truth was, I would have done it without the gas.

The week before my first on-air shift, Jim Kennedy handed me a news summary from the United Press International wire machine – the only source of news at the radio station – and told me to handle the news segment coming up in about 5 minutes. The tricky thing was, I had to come up with a radio name – fast. The intro to the news was, “It’s 3:15, I’m (fill in your name), and I’ve got news for you”. And then you’d read the UPI news report.

My real name has always been hard for me to say. The two n’s – BryaN Norcross – are easy to stumble over. Most of the people I have worked with on TV, since I decided to roll with my real name in 1980, have needed a retake a time or two – as have I. Besides, in 1968, it was rare for a disk jockey to use his real name – real names are most often not cool. And “Bryan Norcross” was extremely uncool – as I knew radio-cool to be at the time. (Ironically, having a slightly uncommon name was an asset when I became better known as a meteorologist later in life.)

As obsessed as I was with being a disk jockey, you would have thought I would have figured out my radio name by then. But I hadn’t.



Barry O'Brian a.k.a.
Bryan Norcross in 1968

As it turned out, the local newspaper that morning carried a story about one of the WKKO disk jockeys, for a reason I don't remember. His radio name was Randy O'Day, and his real name was Barry something. My young radio mind combined what I had read in the paper with my name and came up with Barry O'Brian. On the fly.

When I started the news with, "I'm Barry O'Brian and I've got news for you", Jim Kennedy gave me a WTF look? But I was stuck with it.

A few days later the Barry O'Brian show premiered when I signed on the station at 6:15 AM. It was Saturday, June 8, 1968.

On the recording below, you'll hear me trying really hard to sound like those great disk jockeys I grew up listening to. It was way too much energy for WTAI, as I listen to it now, but I didn't get that at the time.

[Here's a clip of me on WTAI AM 1560 in Eau Gallie, Florida in August \(or September\) 1968](https://youtu.be/Q9CMRVdQ_cQ)

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Actually, I'm foggy on exactly when that recording was made. I say it's the "final Barry O'Brian Sunday show". If so, it could have been as late as September 8, 1968. The following weekend, dorms opened at FSU, so I would have been gone by then. FSU was on the quarter system at the time, so school started later than it does now.

I'm also foggy on another question of timing related the The Beatles mega-hit, *Hey Jude*. I came to work one day and there was a note in the studio saying, "Play *Hey Jude* every 15 minutes". Well, *Hey Jude* was 7 minutes and 11 seconds long, and WTAI ran a LOT of commercials. I might have played eight songs an hour, maybe... including *Hey Jude* four times.

Hey Jude was officially released on Monday, August 26, 1968. The possibilities are: 1) Somehow WTAI got a copy early and we premiered it on Sunday, August 25; or 2) I was filling in that Monday; or 3) Something else. I think it was #1, because I would have followed somebody else who presumably would have already been playing the record every 15 minutes, but I don't recall ever having heard it or heard of it before I came into the radio station. I recall clearly being the one to premier it, though my brain could be making that up. In any case, we wore out that original 45.

Most stations ended up playing a shortened version of *Hey Jude*, as did we once the initial hubbub died down.

WTAL AM 1450, Tallahassee, Florida

In mid-September of 1968, I started my freshman year at Florida State University in Tallahassee. Florida's capital was a broadcasting wasteland. There were four AM radio stations, three commercial FM's, and one commercial TV station. The dominant number one station was WTAL AM 1450, "The All American." It had a terribly noisy and distorted signal, and wasn't as polished as the Top 40 radio stations I grew up listening to. Still, it had the jingles, the reverb, and the music. It was certainly good enough for Barry O'Brian.

Once I was settled in at school, I called up the radio station to see about something part-time. They finally invited me to stop by in late September. Would I fill in now and then for \$1.60 an hour? I was thrilled... mostly.

In the lobby there were two 45 rpm records broken in half and thumbtacked to the wall: *People Gotta Be Free* by the Rascals, and one other equally subversive song. It was freaky that they wouldn't play the song that had been number one in the country for the month of August, but I was living in the South in 1968. In fact, the times they were a changin'. Not fast enough and I should have had a stronger reaction than I did, looking back. It was ridiculous.



A couple weeks later I got the call. They needed me for the following Sunday evening. So the night before my shift, I stopped by the studio to see how the place worked. The (audio control) console was a nasty old Western Electric model. It was the oldest piece of radio equipment I had ever seen. The whole place was held together with tape and paper clips.

The disk jockey working that Saturday had a portable radio with him, which was weird. He turned it up now and then for no obvious reason, so I asked. He said the air monitor (the receiver that lets you hear the live signal off the air, as opposed to simply the output of the audio console) was terrible at night, and he wanted to be sure the transmitter was working. So the next night I brought my Penncrest seven-transistor with me, just in case.

At that time, the ABC Radio Network produced a newscast at 55 minutes after the hour called American Contemporary Radio. It was fast-paced and had a flair designed especially for Top 40 stations. Contemporary news ended at 59:30 and American Information Radio news, ABC's stodgier news product, started at the top of the hour on the same network line.

The point is, you had to turn down the knob on the audio console – called "the board" – that controlled the volume of the ABC news feed when Contemporary News was finished, or suddenly Information News would start, and you'd hear it on your radio station. Every DJ knew that.



An example of a "board" for a radio station.

That first night, the first hour went well. ABC news was on the air and I was ready for the second hour of Barry-O on the radio. At the end of the network news, I went through the top-

of-the hour sequence of announcements – the station identification, the weather, a jingle, and I got into my first record cleanly. It was all good until I switched off the microphone, which simultaneously turned on speakers fed by that off-air receiver.

Something was seriously wrong. I wasn't hearing music. ABC Information News was coming out of the overhead speakers.

I about had a heart attack. I thought I had forgotten to turn off the network feed. No. The turntable was spinning, the needle on the audio meter was bouncing the way it should for music, not the voice I was hearing. Maybe the transmitter was off the air. What could be happening?



Bryan in 1969

Then I remembered my Penncrest radio. I turned it on and lo and behold the record was coming through, playing on the radio station after all. This must have been what the DJ from the previous night had been talking about!

I came to learn that the air monitor was picking up a station on the same frequency, 1450 AM, from Pensacola, about 200 miles away. Such was the power and quality of the WTAL signal at night. The station's 250-watt nighttime signal had to have been working, the phones were ringing with listener calls. But for some reason, the air monitor at the studio – two miles from the transmitter – would occasionally get better reception from WBSR in Pensacola than it did from WTAL. I was never fooled again. I used my Penncrest to occasionally check that the transmitter was indeed pumping out the Barry O'Brian show.

In fairness to Wally and Barbara Hoy, who owned and ran WTAL, they were building a new studio, so the decrepit state of the old place was going to be resolved soon. I filled in a few more times that fall, and when I came back from Christmas break, the station had moved to a new building next to a cow pasture east of town.

In January 1969, they asked me to fill in again. Here's a clip from Sunday night, January 19, 1969. It starts with the very end of Rich Bartlett's show - he had been called in to work that night from 6:00 to 9:00 PM. Then you'll hear a snippet of ABC Contemporary News, followed by the top of the hour, which Rich handles. Then the Barry O'Brian show. Here's the link:

[Here I am on WTAL AM 1450 in Tallahassee on Sunday, January, 19, 1969](https://youtu.be/qsuwAhnw6Ws)

<https://youtu.be/qsuwAhnw6Ws>

The recording is poor – I recorded it at home feeding my AM radio into a Norelco reel-to-reel tape recorder. Because I had to start the tape before I left home, I set it to record at 1 7/8 inches per second, which was super slow and poorer quality, but it used up less tape. And the crappy WTAL signal was part of the sound-quality issue as well.

I didn't get a regular gig at WTAL until the fall of 1970. They asked if I wanted to take over the overnight shift, which included handling Saturday evenings as well. How could I say no?

So even though I had another job as a stereo repairman in the afternoon after class, I agreed to be on the radio from midnight to 6:00 AM Monday through Friday and 6:00 PM to midnight on Saturday. I was also taking a full load of classes. There was not much time for sleep, except on Sundays when I slept all day.

The worst of it was, I got the only C that I ever received in a math class. Differential Equations II met at 8:00 AM Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. I slept at my desk through most of the classes. On those days, I got a short nap at 1:00 PM, and then a longer nap in the evening before heading to the station at 11:30 PM.

I only did that shift for about six weeks. When I left Tallahassee for Christmas break, I was done.

WTAI AM 1560, Eau Gallie (Melbourne), Florida

For the summer of 1969, surprisingly WTAI took me back, so I moved back home that May. This time I got paid – \$1.60 an hour – but only if I sold enough commercial time to cover my salary. I did it, and the Barry O'Brian show was back.

The highlight of the summer was, of course, Apollo 11's trip to the moon. Half the families in our neighborhood were intimately involved with the Apollo program. My father worked on the communications system that had to be developed to receive data and voice from Command Module Columbia during the flight to the moon and back, not to mention from the moon itself.

On Monday morning, July 16, 1969, I walked three-and-a-half blocks from our house down to the beach and stood in the surf. There was a clear view of the majestic 35-story-high Saturn V rocket with the Apollo capsule on top sitting on Launch Pad 39A at the Kennedy Space Center some 37 miles to the north. With my transistor radio in my hand, I watched man leave for the moon at 9:32 AM.



Apollo 11 heads for the moon – July 16, 1969

Below is a close-up video of the launch. I don't think I realized at the time what a miraculous and magnificent moment that was. It took some 400,000 Americans, including my father, working together to make it happen – they were indeed the Greatest Generation, to use Tom Brokaw's term. The Saturn V had a some three-million parts, and it flew every time.

Here is an A&E program of that indelible event as it was covered by NBC News. The last minute of the countdown begins 11 minutes into the video:

NBC's Apollo 11 launch coverage compiled by A&E

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fY02SoExbhs>

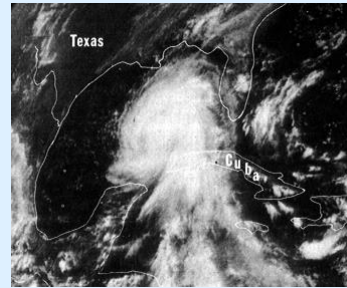
A month later, on Saturday, August 16, I was doing the afternoon shift on WTAI. In the top-of-the-hour news segment, I covered the Apollo 11 astronauts' parade in Houston, Hurricane Camille heading for the Gulf Coast, and the problems at a rock festival that got out of control that weekend in rural New York State. (The concert was called the *Woodstock Music & Arts Fair*. The location was closest to a village named White Lake, New York, over 40 miles from the town of Woodstock. But the name stuck.)

Here's the link for part of the 4:00 PM hour that Saturday afternoon:

Here I am on WTAI AM 1560 in Eau Gallie, Florida on August, 16 1969

<https://youtu.be/TkqPtN3ebGE>

That clip includes the Hurricane Camille advisory issued by the New Orleans Weather Bureau at 3:00 PM CDT. At that time, the storm was expected to hit the Florida Panhandle. Here's the link for just the Camille advisory:



Camille on August 16, 1969

The following morning, the warnings were extended west to include Alabama and Mississippi. Camille slammed into the Mississippi coast late that Sunday with winds estimated at 175 mph.

WFSU-FM 91.5, Tallahassee, Florida

My next big chance came when WFSU-FM, the university radio station, advertised for a disk jockey for their late-night show called, *The Underground Scene*. That sounded right up my alley, considering my experience at WTAI playing “progressive rock”.

In between classes, I went in for an audition. There was a student already in the studio, who I could see through the soundproof glass. He was reading a script leftover from the station's daytime classical-music programming.

The poor guy was struggling with the classical composers' names, and when Richard Wagner's last name came out Wag-ner (as in wag your tail) the people listening in the lobby broke into hysterics. Who doesn't know that Wagner is pronounced Vog-ner? Well, me for one, but I did then.

In my audition, I cruised through Richard Wagner and got the job.

The Underground Scene ran from 11:00 PM until 1:00 AM, Monday through Friday. Nobody told me what to play, they just showed me a big stack of albums – today we'd call the music Classic Rock, but most of it had a mellow bent.

For a reason I don't remember, I changed my radio name. I suspect that I thought Barry O'Brian wasn't heavy enough for *The Underground Scene*. Somewhere I came up with Barry Allen. (Never being into comics, I didn't know I was ripping off The Flash.) In any case, it stuck. Until I left Tallahassee more than a year later, people that knew I was on the radio called me Barry.

I'd been doing it a few months when this recording was made, so I had the format down:

[Here I am as Barry Allen on WFSU-FM's The Underground Scene on December 9, 1971](https://youtu.be/uNCtGp7dD44)

<https://youtu.be/uNCtGp7dD44>

A good thing about that show was the songs were long. Two- to three-minute Top 40 songs created a big dilemma – when to go to the bathroom. But some of those progressive-rock songs went on for 10 or 15 minutes, so the problem was mostly solved.

The WFSU-FM studios were in the basement of the music building – making *The Underground Scene* an appropriate name. Since it was a campus building, the FSU police would come by now and then to be sure the doors were locked tight. A few times, I was in the bathroom and a diligent cop would come by and lock the door I had left ajar – they didn't trust students with keys. In the days before cellphones, I had to sprint to the police station, and get them to come back and let me in.

On more than one occasion the song was over and the tone arm on the turntable was bumping up against the record label. Nobody ever noticed, or at least they didn't call. I assume they were asleep or stoned.

[Click here to continue](#), as the TV journey begins. Next up: 1972 – Engineer to Director