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**Lew Irwin Sets Record Straight on Origins of 1110/KRLA Credibility Gap**



Lew Irwin and The Credibility Gap with (left to right) John Gilliland, Thom Beck, Len Chandler, Richard Beebe, and Lew Irwin from *An Album Of Political Pornography*

(July 15, 2010) Lew Irwin created the Credibility Gap at KRLA. Lew read a transcript of an interview that Don Imus conducted with Harry Shearer that mentioned some of the origins of the 'Gap' that were in conflict with how it happened. Lew fired off a response to Harry and sent LARadio a copy of his response to Harry that he wanted to share with us to set the record straight Here is Lew's note to Harry:

I have just come across a transcript on the LARadio.com site of your interview earlier this year with Don Imus in which you discuss the origins of the Credibility Gap. You have continued to use your (well deserved) celebrity status to spread this fiction in several interviews. I have attempted to correct it whenever I have become aware of it, admittedly a self-serving -- and therefore embarrassing -- undertaking. I wish you would stop.

I was not an employee of KRLA at the time I began pitching the idea for the program to John Barrett, the station manager. I owned an independent news production company that provided "actualities" to California radio stations. KRLA was one of them. I also produced hour-long documentaries exclusively for the station, which aired once every six months and which the station promoted heavily on the air and in newspaper ads. They were usually focused on subjects of interest to

KRLA's primary teen-to-young-adult audience (e.g. "Left Foot March," about the Berkeley anti-war protests, "Down the Up Staircase," about LSD, etc.), but they were occasionally also presented merely to enhance the station's overall image. For example, I owned an extensive collection of recordings of Winston Churchill's speeches and post-war interviews, which I quickly compiled into a biographical documentary that aired on the day of his funeral in 1965. All of these programs received critical praise, news awards and big ratings. Again, although I used the station's resources - engineers, studio, equipment, announcers - I was not a member of the staff; my office and studio were located across town; and my own employees helped to collect the audio material for the programs. Nevertheless, I consulted frequently with Barrett and with the station's news director, Cecil Tuck, about the content and production budgets for these documentaries



Lew Irwin

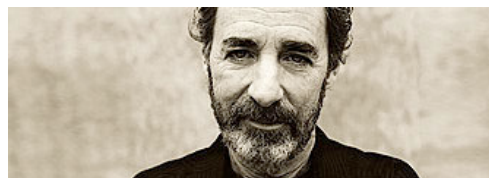
I had long harbored the idea of producing a radio program that would be, as my original pitch to Barrett put it, a combination of "That Was the Week that Was" and Time magazine. I had worked as an assistant to comedian Dick Gregory in 1964, when he was appearing as a guest with the Second City troupe, and at the time I had gotten to know Severn Darden, Jack Burns, and Avery Schreiber and marveled at their ability to improvise satirical sketches based on the news of the day. In 1965 I had also produced a documentary for ABC/TV, *What Will the Harvest Be?*, about the original Black Panther Party in Loundes County, Alabama, for which Len Chandler, a Greenwich Village folk singer and a friend of my business partner at the time, had written and performed a musical narrative. My original proposal to Barrett was that the radio program includes those four and that I serve as host-producer and develop features, using my staff.

Barrett was receptive to the idea from the beginning. Its traditional voice-of-god newscasts had always represented a tune-out factor for the station, even when it was -- far and away -- the top-rated radio station in Los Angeles. (Before deregulation, stations were required to devote a certain number of hours per day to news and information.) To get around that, Barrett and Tuck decided in 1967 to combine the five-minute hourly newscasts into 15-minute newscasts broadcast every three hours. Those 15-minute newscasts, however, resulted in bigger audience erosion than the 5-minute ones. To be sure, by 1967, KHJ had become a potent competitor, but it had not yet affected KRLA's revenue. Besides, the station was operating without a license. With most of its profits earmarked for KUSC/fm and a smaller part for KCET/TV, it was under less ratings pressure than other commercial broadcasters. At no time during my discussions with Barrett did the issue of ratings arise. The intent always was to find a compelling way to integrate the news into the station's rock-and-roll programming seamlessly.

By the spring of 1968 I was meeting with Barrett every Saturday morning to discuss these plans. We met on Saturdays because the regular news staff at the station did not work then, and we did not want to raise suspicions about what we might be up to. It was my proposal, after all, that we replace all of them. Doing so, however, proved to be a huge stumbling block. Each of them had worked for the station for many years. Firing them all at once would have resulted in enormous severance payments that would have angered the station's board of directors and brought **Larry Webb**, the figurehead general manager of the station, into the picture. There was also the question of, in effect, farming out all of the station's news programming to an outside company, mine. Finally to hire Len Chandler, we would have to renegotiate the station's contract with AFTRA. (The eventual contract included a provision for a staff singer, the first of its kind since the end of World War II.)

In the end, we agreed on a compromise: I would sell my company to City News Service, which had been itching to buy it for more than a year. I would become news director of the station (Tuck would become program director) and use three KRLA newscasters who I thought could handle topical satire for the program. I would fire two other members who I thought could not, as well as the weekend part-timers, and replace them with Len Chandler and my company's staff. I would handle the weekend programs myself - from my home. The news budget for the station would thereby remain unchanged. By early May I had flown Len Chandler from New York to L.A. at my personal expense to meet with Barrett and to record a demo for him. I had also held a secret meeting at the apartment of one of the three KRLA newscasters to discuss my plans and to solicit ideas from them. (Contrary to what you have suggested, no drugs were involved in this discussion.) I arranged to tape an audition recording with them and Len on Wednesday, May 29. They were so enthusiastic about the result that, without consulting Barrett, I put it on the air in place of the regular 6 p.m. newscast that night - which, of course, tipped off the guys who were going to be fired (which probably would have resulted in a huge ruckus the next day if it hadn't been for the Memorial Day holiday, which cleared out the station management, leaving me, whom they barely knew, to break the news to them).

The original plan was for the revamped newscast to begin after June 15, the day the sale of my company to City News Service was to be completed. But we now had to act quickly. Over the weekend I moved all of my automatic playback equipment to KRLA and began feeding stations from there. In addition, I had a contract with the Robert Kennedy campaign to feed excerpts from Kennedy's campaign speeches to radio stations in Oregon and California during the primaries in those two states.



Harry Shearer

The newscast went on the air on June 3, with **Thom Beck**, **Richard Beebe**, **John Gilliland**, Len Chandler and myself, and we taped three shows on that day and on June 4, the day of the California primary. That evening, I had just edited Kennedy's victory speech and given the tape to **Stephanie Greenwald**, one of my employees, to feed to the stations when we received news that Kennedy had been shot. (A freelancer working for me was also shot - in the leg.) For the next two days, the regular newscasts went off the air, and I worked with Len Chandler, developing features about the aftermath of the shooting, accompanied by Len's songs, and putting them on the air as soon as they were recorded.

Over the next few weeks, we agreed that there should be a title for the program. It was Richard Beebe's wife Heidi who came up with it, The Credibility Gap. It also became apparent that two of the three newscasters working on the show were burning out, and I began replacing them with full- and part-timers. The new employees eventually included Darden, Burns, Schreiber and many others, including **David Lander** -- and yourself.

Comments

#7 **Ted Alvy** 2010-07-16 08:27 -1  
 Lew Irwin deserves KRLA Credibility Gap credit. Gap left KRLA to KPPC FM 106.7 Pasadena when Les Carter became PD 4-1-70: Beebe, Harry Shearer and David L. Lander (Fall Down, Laughing: How Squiggly Caught Multiple Sclerosis and Didn't Tell Nobody), joined by singer guitarist Michael McKean (Albert Brooks guest performer) on CDs A Great Gift Idea LP and The Bronze Age of Radio LP (KPPC material). Woodschtick And More LP not on CD. The Gap became very popular after KPPC greatly increased its power September 1970 (entire KPPC airstaff fired 10-24-71; November 1971 ratings show KPPC the number one Rock radio station in L.A. 18 to 34 age Adults). Beebe, Shearer, Lander and McKean came into the KPPC production studios around 3PM Monday through Friday, with production wizard Zach Zenor (then Bob Gowa), The Gap recorded an original daily newscast, no limits on length or content, airing 6PM rebroadcast 11PM and 1PM. Harry Shearer should be proud of his KPPC and KMET Credibility Gap experience.

Quote

#6 **Rick Scarry** 2010-07-16 06:27 +2  
 I can always brag that over my radio years I worked at one time or another with Lew Irwin, Richard Beebe and Thom Beck....damn what talent.

Quote

#5 **Joseph Blough** 2010-07-15 21:22 0  
 Quoting Frank Lopez:  
 I have never cared much for Harry...I suppose he is funny at times...so it is interesting to see he has his own credibility gap.

Nedward Flanders is such a doofus too--who would want to go camping with him?

Quote

#4 **jeffrey Leonard** 2010-07-15 17:24 +1

Glad to see that Lew Irwin has set the record straight. This is the story that I remember from over 40 years ago. I had the 'honor' of meeting Lew and being the guy who manufactured "Earth News" belt buckles for him back in 1977. I owned a promotion company named JSL Enterprises. I now have every one of the Credibility Gap albums on my iTunes. They still sound as great today as they did way back when.

Quote

#3 **Mike Nolan** 2010-07-15 16:34

+1

Just one more reason I feel blessed to have grown up listening to LA Radio. I wouldn't miss the C.G broadcasts.....and I was jealous when my former colleague Pete Howard spent some time working for Lew Irwin.

Quote

#2 **Frank Lopez** 2010-07-15 08:38

-4

I have never cared much for Harry...I suppose he is funny at times...so it is interesting to see he has his own credibility gap.

Quote

#1 **Ann Beebe** 2010-07-15 07:44

+4

I can confirm Lew Irwin's story. I was working at KRLA in 1968 (my first job). It was crazy, reels of tape being tossed downstairs from the second floor studio, just in time for the news at Noon.

Quote

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August 3

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**Former KNXer Andrew Mollenbeck**