

Cannon Fodder

Retired WCCO radio jokester Steve Cannon dives into a mess of memories

Recently, we were in the Pavac Museum of Broadcasting in St. Louis Park and saw a poster of Minnesota WCCO radio icon Steve Cannon. In it, he's posed with his alter egos, Morgan Mundane, Ma Linger and Backlash LaRue. Cannon retired in 1997, and spends his winters in Naples, Fla., with a good many WCCO alums, including Roger Erickson, Charlie Boone, and Howard Viken. But he keeps a home in Kenwood, where he spends his summers, so we looked him up. He's still got the pipes and is never at a loss for words.

You're a good-lookin' guy. Why not television?

Hey, I did TV. But TV was just starting then. I was a radio guy. To me, TV was just extra duty. When I was at KSTP, I did the sports and anchored the 6 and the 10 [o'clock newscasts] for a while. But come on, I was doing my morning show then, playing the fool, doing the voices. I couldn't have been taken seriously as an anchor. As far as I was concerned, the radio I was doing was a hell of a lot more creative than TV. Those guys read scripts and that was about it.

You were a contemporary of WCCO TV's Dave Moore. Did you two compare notes?

That's a good "what if" story. Dave and I were at the University of Minnesota together. I was at [W]LOL doing a morning show. I lost my partner. Dave and I had done some acting together, "Dial M for Murder" at a small theater in St. Paul. We were friends. Dave was a great actor and a talented radio guy. All he was doing at WCCO-TV was "Bowling for Dollars" then. So I called him and asked him about partnering on 'LOL together. He says, "If you'd called a week earlier, I might have taken you up on it. Don't tell anyone else, please,

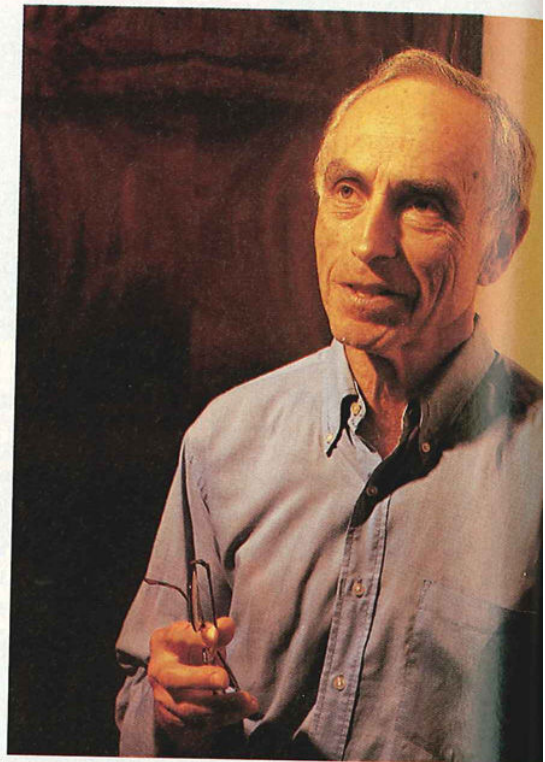
but they want me to start reading the news around here. Don't know what it's going to amount to, but thought I'd give it a try." Well, just think if I had called him a week earlier. Even when he started doing the news on TV, Dave still talked like a radio guy and that made him distinctive.

How does talking like a radio guy help you out on TV?

[Cannon looks straight at us, his head still, only his mouth moving, ad libbing a headline.] See? That's how they read on TV. They look like that bit on Conan O'Brien's show where he has the figure on a monitor and only the lips move. That's how anchors do it. Dave moved his head around like a radio guy does to vary the sound and pitch of his voice and put some personality into it. People responded to that.

Dave had the same problem I did when I read the news on KSTP—he couldn't stop picking up the script. In radio, you hold the script in your hands. Can't do that in TV. Old man Hubbard used to get ticked off at me, "Tell Cannon to stop picking up the damn script." I don't know how those guys read off the TelePrompTer.

You two would have made a



great team. But then you would have had no reason to invent Morgan Mundane, Ma Linger, and Backlash LaRue. Were these people you knew back on the Range growing up, or what?

There's a lot of me in Morgan. He's outspoken, not pedestrian, not a corporate guy. There's a lot of me in Ma, too. She's an older lady, but still sexy, still full of life and passion. Backlash LaRue, well, he's an amalgam of people I've known. He's flamboyant. A reporter once hesitantly asked if Backlash was gay. This was at a time before it was OK to be out. I told her, "I've known and worked with the guy for 15 years and he's never made a pass at me."

Your listeners probably have their own idea of what Morgan, Ma, and Backlash look like, but we can't help but wonder: Who are those

three characters behind you in the corner of the room?

We had a sponsor, NAPA Auto Parts, and they wanted to do poster promoting the show and them. They got a sculptor and he asked me my vision of what they look like, and I told him. LaRue there I'd always pictured as something of a fop in Lisbon, Portugal. Ever been over there? Those guys know how to dress. And he had to work some mink into the outfit. 'Lash had all his clothes custom-made by his tailor in Glendive, Montana. That was my little joke. You ever been to Glendive, Montana? There's no way you could have a tailor in Glendive making you custom European-cut suits. And Ma, she's a sexy old dame, see that little bit of slip showing, a little décolletage?

CONTINUED ON PAGE 32

Just Asking

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 30

Did anybody think these folks were real?

A lot of people thought they were real. Especially Morgan. There was a St. Paul bookmaker—this was in the day when you could shop around for better odds—anyway, this guy didn't set his odds until he heard Morgan's predictions.

You dubbed your drive-time show "The Cannon Mess." Why?

I never had an office. Didn't even have a desk. Didn't want one. I just kept my stuff in boxes on the floor. I can remember walking in there some afternoons with a couple of shopping bags full of stuff, newspaper and magazine articles. I'd just dump it all on the floor. I felt comfortable that way. I didn't walk into the studio until the dogs were barking [Cannon's trademark]. To an outside observer it probably looked like chaos, and that I was walking in there cold. But I never walked into that studio unprepared.

Who discovered you? How did you make it to the big time?

My first job was at a station in Iowa. Got fired after three weeks. Got a job with a station in Stillwater. Fired. So, based on that success, I went to New York City and got nowhere. Couldn't get hired. I bounced around. But I finally got around to actually honing my skills in Bemidji. The owners were great, let me do anything. Humor, they let me play jazz. Everybody else was playing hillbilly music up there and I was playing jazz!

But that's not the official story of my success. I had just graduated from the University of Minnesota and was working as a janitor polishing floors. I ate breakfast every morning at Schneider's Drug Store across the street from KSTP. It's still there. I'd tell reporters that I was discovered one morning while in line to pay my tab. I had some conversation with the owner at the cash register. Behind me in line was Brooks Henderson, program director at KSTP. He heard my voice and says, "Why don't you come by my office and see me. We could use a guy like you."

Brooks always went along with it. That was my story.

So, how do you want to be remembered in the pantheon of Minnesota broadcasting?

What'll be my epitaph? "He did a great time and temperature." [Laughs.] So many announcers I worked with, that's all they could do. MM

Jim Leinfelder is a writer and producer for print, TV, and radio. He lives in St. Paul.