

**“Too few people have careers they love and do work they are proud of. Fewer can honestly say they like where they work. I really do have the best of both worlds. I’m a lucky guy. I have the pleasure of working for a visionary leader like Alfred Liggins, who allows me to create and trusts me to follow through with his strategic direction.”**



# UNLEASHING A BOOM

BY EDITOR-IN-CHIEF ED RYAN

## Like most young kids

who fall in love with radio, Jay Stevens wanted to be a DJ, a guy on the radio, with no real plan to be a programmer. His radio career began while attending the State University College at Brockport in Upstate New York, where he worked at radio stations in Rochester – and was fired for the first time. Welcome to the business, kid. He then moved on to Indianapolis as a music director, and then to Lansing, where he landed his first PD job.

By now Stevens knew he wanted to be programming radio stations and leading and teaching others. So he returned to Rochester to program WBBF and WMJQ before taking a job with Clear Channel in New Orleans, where he programmed WQUE. Then it was on to Phoenix to program Y95, owned by Edens Broadcasting.

All that led Stevens to the nation's capital, where he would spend two decades as vice president of programming for WPGC. There, he helped take a good station and make it great.

Stevens loves radio today as much as he did when he was a little kid and his parents would take him to the mall so he could watch live broadcasts from a local radio station. "I guess I'm good at it because I'm so passionate about it and I love it so much," he says. "I can't get enough of it. The famous saying is, 'If you chase your passion, you will never work a day in your life.' So maybe that's it. I just love what I do."

Today, as senior vice president of programming at Radio One – a job he's held since 2007 – Stevens is sharing that passion and spreading his programming philosophy throughout the 60 Radio One stations across the country. We picked his brain about becoming a programmer, whether radio is fun anymore, redlining the studio, whether live and local matters, and much more, including the latest format success to hit radio, BOOM. BOOM is a Classic Hip-Hop format started by Stevens and the Radio One team that is now being copied by several of radio's bigger companies.

**RI: Did you always want to be a program director?**

**Stevens:** Well, no. I kind of fell into being a program director, as many of us have. I just wanted to be a DJ. Ever since I was a little kid, my parents would take me to live broadcasts at the mall where the radio station would be broadcasting, and I would stand there and watch the DJ. My parents would go off shopping and say, "OK, you stay right here." They would come back and get me an hour later.

I was that stalker of the DJ – and the kid who won all the albums. My parents would take me to the station to get my albums and I would get a tour of the station. I was just fascinated by it. None of my family or friends were in the business; it was just fascinating to me. I built a radio station in my basement, as many of us did.

My aspiration was to be a DJ – that's all I wanted to be. After doing it for a few years, I kind of thought, "You know what? Maybe I want to get into programming." I'd be sitting there on the air, and I would look at the liners and the promos and go, "Why are we doing this? If I was a program director, I would be doing something different. This doesn't seem right for the brand."

Then you start thinking, "Maybe I should be the coach. Maybe I'm a better coach than a player." So that's when I became a program director, and never in my wildest dreams thought I would be where I am now. This is much further beyond anything I ever thought.

**RI: When you became a PD, did you know right away you wanted to manage?**

**Stevens:** Oh, yes. Absolutely. I was OK on the air, but I was probably going to be one of those midday DJs who, every two years, has to pack up a U-Haul and go to another town. I thought there was a little bit more stability, where I could control my own destiny, as the program director. I had a lot of good ideas. There was a period of time where I was on the air as a PD, and then I went from being on the air to being off the air and a PD in management.

I'm not going to lie: To this day, I miss being on the radio. That was fun. That's where you get to be creative, and the expressive side comes out. I do miss that, but I have never looked back. Never.

**R:** Is it less fun being on the air for people now than it was for you?

**Stevens:** It's interesting because if I say yes, it makes me sound like some old guy: "Oh, back in the day...." I think it's just a different time. To the talent now, social media and all of these other things are part of being on the air. They would probably say now that this is a hell of a lot of fun.

We were editing tape and worrying about the splice breaking, and now they are on social media and everything is digital. Shoot, they just flip the button on the computer and the digital system plays all the music and drops. They can turn the audio down, be on social media, answer the phones, and all that. Obviously, we couldn't do that. I just think it is a different time. I think they are having a lot of fun. I certainly had a lot of fun when I was on the air.

**R:** You get to Washington, DC, a good size market compared to the smaller markets you worked in. What was that like?

**Stevens:** When I came to DC, I came into a number one radio station. That was the first time I had ever come into a number one station. I had always come in when a station was rebuilding. To come into a number one station like WPGC kind of scared me a little bit. I was like, "Man, if I screw this up, what would that do to my career? I could come in here and be a real goat."

So I was nervous about coming into a real champion, a Super Bowl team, and trying to make them better. But it worked out. We did make PGC better, and we created, I think, a legendary radio station.

**R:** Today you're one of the most respected programmers in the industry. Why is that?

**Stevens:** (Laughs) I'm just sitting here doing my thing. I love radio. I'm passionate about what I do. I live it 24/7. This isn't a job for me, it's my life. If you ask my wife or my family, this is what I do all the time. I'm listening to the radio on an app somewhere, I'm on vacation and I'm sitting on the beach with an app on my mobile device, listening to one of my radio stations.

I guess maybe I am good at it because I am so passionate about it and I love it so much. I can't get enough of it. The famous saying is "If you chase your passion, you will never work a day in your life." Maybe that's it. I don't know. There's nobody you will meet in this business who is more "all in" than me, 24 hours a day. I cannot shut it off. I sometimes wish I could have an on/off switch on my brain to shut it off. I can't.

**R:** As a senior VP, have you ever called into a studio if you heard something you didn't like?

**Stevens:** (Laughs) You mean on a hotline? Maybe now I would text them, absolutely. Now I won't go as granular as calling one of our DJs on the air, because if in my role, I call one of the DJs, they are ruined. It's bad enough if the program director calls, but if the senior VP of programming calls them on the air, they are going to be ruined. I would work through the PD. But there is no doubt, I will alert the PD if I hear something, immediately. Absolutely.

**R:** On that topic, is there a horror story from your past you can share?

**Stevens:** Yes. When I was a PD, I was always very careful in how I hotlined or communicated with talent



while they were on the air. If they did something — if there was dead air or I heard them play a wrong song or something, or an EMS test once fired in the middle of a song, things like that — absolutely, I would call them.

But I was always very careful about how I did it, because, and this PD will remain nameless, one time I was at a radio station, and I can't even remember what I did, it wasn't anything earth-shattering, but it was obviously something I did wrong. The PD called me and screamed at me so loudly that I couldn't even understand what he was saying. He was screaming, curse words and everything. And then he followed it up with a drive to the station. He came storming into the studio.

"I can't believe you!" I said. "Dude, you just screamed at me on the phone while I am on the air." He absolutely lost his mind. Obviously, I would never, ever do that. But I also believe that if something serious that can't wait until after the show happens while a talent is on the air, it should be communicated to the talent in a way that doesn't ruin them, but in a way that they understand, "Look, you've got to pay attention."

**RI: What is the secret to programming a great radio station — not only what comes out of the speakers, but getting the talent to execute it in the way the company plans?**

**Stevens:** I think that is through proper coaching. Our talent have room to maneuver within our formats, as they should. Their job is to be creating. They need to be capturing the moment. In other words, if something serious happens, they stop what they're doing and they get it on the air. It could be a bad accident or one of the big freeways in town is shut down, and they stop what they're doing to talk about that. It could be something horrific happens with ISIS. It could be something positive. If something positive happens, it needs to be reflected on the air.

On our younger stations, where new music is important, on the mainstream stations, that is not only pop culture news stories, whether it is Bobbi Kristina [Brown] being found in a bathtub in Atlanta, which is horrible, but it could be a new song we found on the Internet from a mix tape from Drake that we're playing. That is all part of the urgent, compelling content that makes great radio.

Back when I was on the air, the compelling content like that, you would find on the old newswire. You would hear a bell ringing outside the studio door and you would go rip it off the wire. Now we find it on social media, on the Internet, from CNN on a TV screen in our studio. What I say to our program directors and our talent is, "Each quarter-hour is a show." So if you do a four-hour program, there are 16 shows. Each quarter-hour is a show within your show. So each quarter-hour, you'd better be creating compelling content, whether it's new music, a factoid about the artist, a phone call, or a contest. The pressure is on. During these quarter-hours you had better be creating compelling content.

It doesn't matter what format it is. It doesn't matter if you're doing Gospel or Urban AC or mainstream, it goes with any format — creating that compelling, urgent content 24/7.

**RI: A lot of smaller companies try to pigeonhole bigger companies by saying radio has to be live and local to win. But sometimes a station is live and local, but the content is horrible. What's the answer?**

**Stevens:** I think that's a good question. By the way, our company believes in live and local, as much if not more than any other company. That's what we preach all the

time. But live and local isn't doing the birth announcements or the obituaries like we used to do in small markets. Live and local is serving your community and being out on the streets, and talking about that on the air. But also, live and local is talking about urgent content, like I said. There could be something big that happened in your community that is backing up traffic, it could be a big weather issue, or all of a sudden a big snowstorm is coming in.

Live and local is not every time you crack the mic. Because at the end of the day, people are coming to us to be entertained. So live and local is part of that entertainment mix, but the reality is, for a lot of people, life sucks. People are being laid off from their jobs, or have low-paying jobs. Kids are having trouble making their student loan payments. There are a lot of negative things going on in our world, and it is up to us to not only be live and local and provide news and things that are going on in the streets, but also to entertain.

Live and local is part of what we do. We have local DJs. We don't believe in voicetracking or syndicating every show. Do we have syndicated morning shows? Absolutely. But is live and local a part of those syndicated shows? Absolutely. We do local breaks within our syndicated morning shows — Tom Joyner, Rickey Smiley, all of those shows, and it is very, very important. It is important that live and local is part of the mix in everything that we do, but we also have to be relevant. We have to be pop-culture driven — and that changes, pop culture, depending upon the demo of your format.

We have to be timely. We have to be urgent. We have to be inspirational. We have to be entertaining. We have to be all of those things. There's a lot of pressure on us and our radio stations to be all of those things, but in this day and age, when we are under siege from Pandora and Spotify and YouTube and fill-in-the-blank, it is important that we are doing every one of those things 24 hours a day, or, quite frankly, there is no need for us; we have suddenly become irrelevant.

**RI: What kind of impact has PPM had on Radio One's formats?**

**Stevens:** It has had a major impact on us. In fact, it has probably had a larger impact on us than the general market because we have fewer meters in the field.

Because, in any given market, depending on what the percentage there is of African Americans in the market, there are fewer African-American meters. That's a fact. It's been dropping over time. As a result, we have to be that much better. It puts pressure on us to create more compelling content, to be more urgent, all of those things that I mentioned earlier. We've got to be great. There is very little room for error.

**RI: Are you getting a sense that Nielsen will improve the PPM for Radio One's formats?**

**Stevens:** Yes, I do, because not only are they doing things like increasing sample sizes and other things to address the sample issues, they are also addressing streaming. We've got to figure out a way to capture streaming listening, because we know many of our listeners are listening to us on mobile devices. Unless they are plugging the PPM device into their mobile device and listening on their earbuds, which I think it is common sense that they are not, we have got to find a way to capture that streaming. Once they can match that data with PPM data, I think it is going to help us immensely.

**“Radio One has a fast-moving culture that requires its employees to be innovative and nimble. The beauty of this place is that no day is the same, and I get to fully show up to work every day. I’m challenged and rewarded.”**





**RI:** When you started your new format, BOOM, were you just all sitting around a table and someone says, “I have a great idea”?

**Stevens:** We did a research project to find opportunities in the market when the decision was made that we were not going to continue with the News format in Houston. By the way, the News format is an awesome format. We had an incredible staff, people who put their blood, sweat, and tears into that format. For some reason, despite the fact that we marketed it heavily, and had a really good format and a good station, people in Houston just weren't excited about it. So the decision was made, after we lost millions of dollars, that we needed to do something else. So we did a research project to find opportunities. This was one of the opportunities that we found.

**RI:** What was the thinking behind “This is going to work”?

**Stevens:** The passion levels for this music are so high. That's not just Houston, that's several markets that we have tested in. People love classic hip-hop music. We have looked at it from every angle, and I think we've gotten pretty good at this format now. This music is from the late '80s, '90s, and a little bit into the 2000s, and these songs were massive. And they were not getting exposed on a regular basis on any radio stations. There are specialty shows or mix shows, or things like that.

When we tested this music and saw all these passion levels, we said, “We are on to something. This is a format.” Then, part two is, not only were the passion levels high in the music, but there is a tremendous amount of this music. There is a depth of this classic hip hop. Think about it, you are playing from late '80s to early 2000s. What is that, 15 to 18 years of music that we can tap into? There is a lot of music, there is high passion. We felt that this is going to be big. It has lived up to exactly what we thought.

**RI:** Among the brain trust, what was the biggest objection?

**Stevens:** There really wasn't any. There weren't any objections. The only objection – and it wasn't an objection – is us just feeling kind of bad for everyone at News-92 in Houston, feeling bad about changing the format. This all started with Alfred [Radio One CEO Alfred Liggins]. Alfred was the guy who drove that bus to do news. He felt bad about it. There wasn't any objection to doing the BOOM format whatsoever, it was more just feeling bad about having to displace all those people and change formats.

**RI:** Did you talk to any of the artists and ask them, “We're thinking about this format. What do you think?”

**Stevens:** Yes. In Houston, for example, there are a lot of local artists, and we have reached out to them and they recorded testimonials and endorsements for us. Absolutely. In fact, when we launched in Houston, you probably heard that we did a stunt calling the station “B92,” and it was a takeoff of Beyoncé. We played all Beyoncé music for three or four days. It was exploding on social media. It wasn't just in Houston – it was exploding nationwide. Her fan club, the BeyHive, was part of that, enlisting people worldwide to stream our station. They were sending out links of our stream – this was worldwide. The BBC even picked it up. It was huge.

We were hoping that we would get her attention and we would get her to acknowledge it. She never did. Her dad did. But, if I remember correctly, I think she was in Europe at the time. We really wanted her to acknowledge it, but she didn't.

**RI:** So clearly you created the buzz you want to start something new. How did it go after that?

**Stevens:** We knew that the station, when we launched in each market, was the new, shiny object. There was going to be a newness of the

format, the curiosity factor, that was going to launch it. It's funny, every single market was the same. Then, after the dust settled, things are kind of balancing out as we expected.

**Rl:** After Houston, did you worry at all that maybe you were adding BOOM stations too soon in other markets?

**Stevens:** We were confident it was going to work again, for the same reason. We did research in all of those markets, by the way. We haven't just thrown this on. We saw the passion level in other markets, as we did in Houston.

**Rl:** Others started to copy you quickly. How do you deal with that?

**Stevens:** We look at it as, "Imitation is the most sincere form of flattery." We can't control what these other guys do. It is flattering, that they've imitated us and have launched these formats in other markets. That's cool. Good for them. The only thing we can control is our markets and our radio stations.

**Rl:** Where do you go from here with that format?

**Stevens:** In the markets we are in right now, phase one was getting it on the air and getting it established, focusing on getting the right music in place, which we have done. Phase two is identifying talent now who represent the lifestyle and can engage the community. That's next. Of course, there are phases three, four, and five.

We have a lot of phases that will go beyond that, because our quest is to keep this format fresh and to keep this format relevant. I have heard a lot of people say, "We think this is going to be the Jammin' Oldies of 2015," and I don't believe that it is.

**Rl:** Why not?

**Stevens:** Because of the tremendous depth to this music. I think there is tremendous passion to this music. It's a lifestyle. Jammin' Oldies was not a lifestyle. Remember, hip hop is fashion, it is beauty, it is business, it is philanthropy. There is so much depth to the hip hop format. I think there is much more to it than Jammin' Oldies.

**Rl:** Obviously you feel it has staying power. How does it feel to be part of creating a new format?

**Stevens:** Well, let me tell you, from a radio geek perspective — which is what I am, I'm that radio geek that just can't get enough of this stuff — I think it is awesome. I think anybody who can come up with a new format to get people excited about radio, and to create a social media buzz for a format, I applaud them. Whether it was me or our company or anyone else who did this, I would've been the first to say, "That's awesome."

I think we have got to be innovators. We are all in this together. Broadcasters have got to be innovators.

It's been a long time. Think about it. When was the last time a new format was created? If we are going to remain relevant, and radio is going to be part of American lives, we've got to be innovating, and it has got to be every day. We've got to be creating new formats and getting people excited about radio. I am really excited about this format.

# Sidelines

## WHAT ARE YOUR HOBBIES (OUTSIDE OF RADIO)?

My life is family, radio (oops), golf, and the Buffalo Bills.

## WHO IS/WAS YOUR ROLE MODEL, AND WHY?

I can't name just one. There have been many people who have been big influences in my life, but most importantly, my parents. They taught me a strong work ethic and encouraged me to chase my passion, and it has worked out OK.

## WHAT ARE YOU READING RIGHT NOW?

*Radio Ink* (lol). I am a quick-read guy who likes magazines, blogs, and the *Wall Street Journal*.

## FAVORITE TV SHOW?

*Empire*.

## NAME THREE APPS ON YOUR PHONE RIGHT NOW THAT WOULD SURPRISE PEOPLE.

No big surprise — Indycar, Starbucks, and NFL Mobile.

## WHO IS THE MOST INTERESTING PERSON YOU KNOW (OUTSIDE YOUR FAMILY OR WORK)?

The Dos Equis man. Other than that, I can't name just one.

## IF YOU HAD 30 MINUTES, A TAPE RECORDER, AND YOUR CHOICE, WHO WOULD YOU INTERVIEW, AND WHY?

Bill Clinton. Much like the Dos Equis man, I think he is the most interesting man in the world.

## NAME THREE STATIONS YOU LISTENED TO AS A KID.

WLS, WABC, and WBBF.

## WHAT ONE GOAL HAS ELUDED YOU?

Shoot in the 80s consistently and win the lottery.

## MOST PROUD CAREER ACHIEVEMENT?

Where I am now. This is so much further than I ever imagined I would be in this business.

## WHAT IRKS YOU THE MOST ABOUT RADIO?

Negativity about radio. This is a great business. Let's be proud of it!

## DESCRIBE YOURSELF IN THREE WORDS OR LESS.

Fun, energetic, positive.

## WHEN YOU DIE, WHAT WILL PEOPLE SAY ABOUT YOU?

A man who loved his family, cared about others, and left this earth better than he found it.

**"I work with the best people. This team is dedicated to the Radio One mission of being the most trusted source in the African-American community that informs, entertains and inspires."**

