

Stan Klees: The original Canadian music man



Over the past few months I've been privileged to attend several lunches, both of which were also attended by legendary Canadian music pioneer Stan Klees, whose stories are always entertaining. And he has a million of them.

In case you're not familiar with Stan, he started Red Leaf Records in the 1960s and had several chart hits years before Cancon regulations were introduced. Along with long-time friend and business partner Walt Grealis, Stan created *RPM Magazine* and The JUNO Awards, and that's only scratching the surface of his accomplishments. But we'll get to all of that in due time.

Music runs through Stan Klees' bloodstream. When he wasn't at school, he was listening to music either on the radio or on his record player. One fateful radio-related event began a life-long career in the Canadian music industry. Relaxing in a comfortable easy chair, Stan begins telling his tale.

"In 1947 I was 15, and listening to the radio one night," Klees recalled, "when Lee Hamilton, a disc jockey on CHUM, said, 'I'm gonna play a song that's going to be number one in Billboard next week. It's called *Near You*, but I'm going to have to play the Billy Vaughn version because the version by Francis

Craig won't be coming out in Canada for several months.'

"See, back then the record companies would either smuggle the 78 across the border and press copies from that or wait two months for the tape to arrive from the U.S. I had been corresponding with a pen pal in New Jersey and she had sent me the Francis Craig 78 of *Near You*, so I called the station, got through to Lee Hamilton and told him I had a copy of the Francis Craig version."

Klees chuckles as he remembers Hamilton's reaction.

"He practically jumped down the phone line and told me to get to the station with the record *FAST*. I was 15 years old and didn't own a car, so I took the streetcar. CHUM at the time was at 225 Mutual Street, near Maple Leaf Gardens, and when I got there Lee thanked me, then said, 'I'm going to play the record right now and interview you afterwards', so the first time I was ever on the radio was that night in 1947."

It wouldn't be Stan's last time on air. After Hamilton's shift was over, he gave Klees a tour of the station that included the music library. Stan recalls that it was not a pretty sight.

"It was a mess, nobody knew where anything was, records were all over the place, in boxes or stacked on top of one another."

The disorganization gave Stan an idea. "I said, 'can I come here every day after school and organize your library and put in a system so that you can find things?'"

Station management readily agreed. CHUM had no money to pay the youngster, but Stan had a plan.

"I said, 'I know you get theatre tickets and extra tickets to big band concerts. I also know the record companies send you duplicates of their new releases. You give me some of those and I'll be happy to clean up your library'. They said, 'sure we can do that' and a week later, that library was totally organized."

Eventually Stan ended up with his own daily radio show.

"Larry Mann was the program director at the time (Mann later became a well known Hollywood character actor) and in 1948, he called me into his office and said, 'We'd like you to do a show for teenagers every day from 4 'til 5 called *Tunes and Teens*.' I came up with the concept which was to get popular students from various high schools to talk about and play their favourite records. I'd sit in the studio with them to keep it rolling.

"Many of the records the kids wanted to play were only available from Sam Sniderman, who had Sniderman's Music Hall and imported most of these records from Buffalo. So Sam would help me out and that was my start in this crazy business."

The story of Stan Klees and his important role in Canadian radio and music history simply cannot be told in one column. So, more next time.

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