

CHAPTER 14

Fire That Guy — No, Wait a Minute!

It's probable that Brian Beck has been fired more often than any other jingle singer in Dallas. But he's also sung more jingles than almost anyone during his career, which began in 1958. He started singing full time in 1959 with Marie Callahan, who had an advertising agency in Dallas. Here he met Clark Gassman and Jackie Stotts (later Dickson and now known as Jackie Merriman), with whom he would sing at several studios in the years to come.

In 1959, he moved to one of the great early jingle companies in Big D, Futursonic Productions. "I was still in college, so I scheduled my classes in the morning and sang every afternoon," said Beck. "A former PAMS guy named Jim Wells was the head honcho. We recorded some great stuff there."

The vocal group consisted of Stotts, Libba Weeks, Judy Parma, Jerry Whitman and Beck. One famous package in which he participated was "The Versatiles." Each cut was heard on the demo tape in four vocal styles. "We had different combinations of singers and we could sound like The Four Freshmen, The Hi-Los, The Maguire Sisters (with me as Phyllis or whatever her name was) or The Kirby Stone Four." With writer/singer/arranger Jodie Lyons on lead, Beck said, the group's "Four Freshman" sound was very good. Beck also was the entire production department, editing, duping tapes and sending them to clients. "One day we had a 'Black Friday,' and Jodie and I were fired. I'm not sure why," Beck said.

Shortly thereafter, Beck was walking down the street toward Commercial Recording Corp., a competing jingle company. "Tommy Gwin drove by. He asked me what was going on. When I told him I'd just got fired, he asked if I could start Monday at CRC playing bass and singing." CRC was a happening studio in those days, with Tom Merriman and Bob Farrar writing big-band charts. The vocal group became Beck, Susie McCune, Libba Weeks, Dick Cole (who also played trombone), Billy Ainsworth and Charlie Thompson.

In stories from that era, the same dozen or so singers keep popping up in connection with almost every studio in town. Jingle firms would come and go; but groups of talented vocalists would form and reform in varying combinations. Some of these performers are still singing. "Tommy Loy was the engineer at CRC, and he was probably the most under-appreciated guy in the industry," Beck said. "If you wanted a great instrumental session with 47 individual pots mixed down to two tracks perfectly, he could do it. We had these little sub-mixers all over the place, and it all happened live. It was awesome."

Beck remembers several CRC packages fondly. "Music Music Music" was popular in syndication. Another package, with a Mitch Miller sound, didn't fare so well; but Beck said he enjoyed the camaraderie of singing unison with seven other guys. "The first instrumental session I played on was Series 19, which featured a 40-piece orchestra. It was also the first time I got to watch

Tom (Merriman) in action. He was in the conference room writing the parts without benefit of a piano, and Jackie (Stotts) and I were copying out parts as quickly as we could,” Beck said. “I stayed at CRC for about a year, and then got fired again. Two days later I was back at Futursonic.”

A pause for the cause

In late 1961, Beck was tapped by Uncle Sam and spent five years in the Air Force. Whenever he could grab a short leave, he would return from his base in Omaha to Dallas and sing as many sessions as he could. When he became a civilian again in early 1967, Beck and his fellow singers-for-hire began freelancing at Gwinsound (founded by CRC renegade Tommy Gwin), CRC, Futursonic and even PAMS. He was singing at PAMS in 1969 when its president, Bill Meeks, offered him a staff job. “It was a lot of fun, in fact probably the best time I ever had,” Beck said. He played bass, sang and did some arranging, beginning with Series 35 in 1968. “That was the birth of the now-standard seven-voice group. I think it was Bob Farrar’s brainchild.” The group was Beck, Carol Piper, Jackie Dickson (nee Stotts), Gleni Rutheford, Marv Shaw, Jim Clancy and either Billy Ainsworth or Charlie Thompson, depending on who was available that day. Around this time, 1969, Meeks fired several of his best writers and appointed himself musical director at PAMS.

“Series 36 was a bit schizophrenic,” Beck said. “A bunch of us writers were getting away from the big-band sound; and even though Bill tossed out some ideas, we wrote what we felt like.” Series 36, known as “The 24-Hour Excitement” or “The Music Machine” depending on who was writing the box labels, featured hard-rock cuts in the style of Jimi Hendrix, experimental Moog jingles and tracks that were straight middle-of-the-road. “Bill Meeks, God love him, had no talent for writing,” Beck said. “He snatched defeat from the jaws of victory. What he did have was a gift for marketing. When clients came to town, they were entertained royally; and they got a good product, too.”

One of the people at PAMS in those days who scheduled sessions and did a bit of writing was Whitey Thomas. “He was a very talented keyboard man from Minnesota, and he brought in a singer named Trella Hart, whom he soon married. Trella sang Series 32 (‘Swiszle’) and Series 33 (‘Fun Vibrations’), among others.”

Beck stayed at PAMS for a year and a half, and then — guess what? — he was fired. “Well, I did a moonlighting gig somewhere else, and instead of letting me off with a warning, Bill fired me,” Beck said. “I immediately doubled my income when I went back to freelancing, and in fact began singing more and more at PAMS as a freelancer. “Fire me and you fire the best, I always say.” I asked Beck why he seemed to collect an unusually high number of pink slips. The answer seemed to elude him. “I honestly don’t know,” he said. “I always thought I was a congenial fellow to work with. I respected and truly liked the people I worked with. And besides that, I’m just a hell of a nice guy.”

A new studio called TM Productions opened in Dallas in about 1969. Tom Merriman, one of the principals from CRC, was involved. He invited experienced session singers Beck, Judy Parma, Libba Weeks, Clark Womack and Dan Alexander to lunch to ask them to join him in his endeavor. Beck offered an interesting piece of trivia. Most jingle fans assume that TM was named after Tom Merriman, who founded it along with Jim Long. "But Jim Long was just a radio name. His real name was Tim Moynihan," said Beck. "So you decide."

Beck sang at TM — without being fired — through the 1970s, then began to pick up freelance jobs again as the jingle industry hit a slump toward the end of the decade. A highlight of his career was singing jingles at TM with some of the original members of the former Hi-Los vocal group. "We did a package called 'Warm and Wonderful' for WPEN(AM) in Philadelphia, and Don Shelton, Gene Puerling and Len Dresslar, who were my idols, came in to sing with me on that one," said Beck. "I thought I died and went to heaven." Puerling at that time was involved in the fine mixed vocal group "The Singers Unlimited," which made several classic albums.

Brian Beck has been involved with barbershop quartet singing since 1954, when he was 14. He is the only man to have made the top 10 in international competition singing all four parts in a quartet at various times. He became a charter member of the best-known barbershop chorus in the world, The Vocal Majority, with fellow Dallas jingle singer Jim Clancy, in 1972. The group is still setting trends and winning awards. While Beck was a chorus member the last five years he was in Dallas, he is unable to participate from Colorado Springs, where he moved in 2002.

Beck is a perfectionist. He produced a cassette and printed-manual course that teaches aspiring singers how to sight-read music. When I interviewed him recently, he was practicing with his new barbershop group, Saturday Evening Post. "I think we have the potential to become international champions," said Beck.

If he isn't fired, that is.