

Franklin Raff

Raff Radio/
Executive Producer
G. Gordon Liddy Show
Radio America
Washington, DC

by Jerry Vigil

Franklin Raff, at thirty, is a Washington insider with some fifteen years in the radio business, spanning local and national sales, station management, production, and talk. He's the founder of the unusual advertising/consultancy shop Raff Radio (www.raffradio.com), and though he's a senior network producer – and G. Gordon Liddy's right hand man – there's nothing he likes better than a long night in the production studio. So either he's doing something right, or he's just plain nuts. RAP mag wanted the skinny. Be sure to check out a sampling of Franklin's work on the RAP CD.

JV: When, where, and how did you get your start in the biz?

Franklin: Well I learned how to make coffee as an intern for WRQX in Washington DC, and Jack Diamond gave me a few golden nuggets of advice: *Visualize your listener, driving alone. Life is sup-*

posed to be fun – be disciplined enough to keep it fun. Rinse the filter. At that time I could only get on the reel-to-reels in the middle of the night, and this was when it would take ten hours or more to do, what I thought was, a really startlingly good piece, so there was a lot of sleep depriva-



tion and bloody fingers.

But there was a certain inevitability about radio for me. I was nuts about *The Greaseman* as a boy, wondering how he managed to incorporate all those wonderful sounds in such a seamless, centralized way. And I remember long winter nights in the eighties in Quebec. I'd be curled up in the top bunk of a boarding school dorm room after "lights out," listening to local college radio. That was when I was first struck by the warmth, unlimitedness, and accessibility of the medium, and I wanted to create that magic. So I puked my way through early shows, imitating my heroes. Later, in college at WYBC – Yale Broadcasting, 94.3FM in what was market 96 – I made a number of decisions that, while eventually propelling our 3 kilowatt station to #1 12+ in the market, also destroyed what I most loved about college radio to begin with. So I do have some wonderful mentors – PDs, SMs, and GMs alike – but sometimes I feel I will always be atoning for early sins, and always just starting out. I think it's that way for a lot of people who really love radio.

JV: You started an unusual business – Raff Radio – ten years or so ago. A "radiocentric" ad agency. This was about the time Roy Williams was firing up his famous shop. How did Raff Radio

come about?

Franklin: At one point I worked for a duopoly that changed parent ownership three or four times in the space of a year, and when the talent started getting blown out here and there, I negotiated a commission and hit the streets to supplement my air income and secure my job. Well, I really liked sales, I enjoyed solving gross sales problems, writing copy, producing

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JV: Are you pleased with the work that comes out of Raff Radio ?

Franklin: Yes. But in preparing for this interview I dug into the archives and pulled out some old spots and gave them a listen. There are, naturally, some fan-

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the spots; and I started to study the lives of Lasker, Ogilvy, Clow - the old ad greats. I was writing too many time orders for my competitors, and I was, in fact, pretty inspired by Roy Williams and did go out to Buda, TX to meet him.

To make a long story short, for the benefit of those interested in going it alone, I put a little client roster together, and with the blessing of my GM and SM, I left my talk show and sales job and started Raff Radio. My fellow reps were thrilled to get my list, and I was thrilled to keep serving my biggest clients. Radio is like a small business; it's a good idea to know how to make *and* sell the widgets. Roy Williams has been a formative influence, although we're not colleagues in any way, and I think Edwin Arlington Robinson was a bit of a hack. But along these lines, I now feel compelled to tell you, for the benefit of that one reader out there who is wide-eyed and just getting started in radio, that there is a myth of sorts about "who you know" in this business. It is true that a T&R rarely lands a gig, but neither does a recommendation, unless it's nepotistic, in which case you don't want to work with 'em anyway. And job titles don't mean beans. Your life in radio really is about the quality - the purity and depth - of your work. If you

tastic spots in the can and some very well-executed and commercially successful campaigns, past and present. But the fun stories and the best lessons are the nightmare stories, so here's one more reason God gave us tape bulkers and delete buttons: We did a campaign for The Music & Arts Centers - a client that grew from twenty-some to eighty-some stores with Raff Radio - and I was dead-set on a certain direction for a fall music instrument rentals spot - we'd custom-tag these market by market. The unique selling proposition is that the employees at M&AC are, on the whole, teachers and musicians, that they truly care about kids and music, and that they are uniquely qualified to guide schoolchildren through the instrument choice, sales and rentals process. Well I had something entirely different in mind. I had a vision of a child *transformed* by the power of music, and I wanted to paint the picture of an imaginative young girl who forsakes prime-time TV to sit outside on a dark fall night and listen to the "symphonies" of the crickets. I was addicted to the concept of a 60-second spot that started with ten seconds of nothing but crickets, and I went so far as to get a well-known young actress - a personal friend - to break a SAG work strike to cut the spot for me. And

she, in turn, dug deep into her character as a pubescent Ophelia searching for identity and meaning in the Era of Interminable Sales Messages or some such nonsense. There's a way to get the best out of actors. You must never, never, ever give them line readings.

Well, to start, the entire spot was whispered. I had the talent on a huge diaphragm mic that picked up her heartbeat, for goodness sakes! And then there was this din of crickets all over the piece. It was a spooky commercial designed to utterly subvert the spot set. And if it had ever aired, it would have done just that. But though the concept was nifty, the execution missed "sixty second sales call" by about three exits and turned right into the parking lot of the Bates Motel. I could not, for instance, let go of the part of the copy where the girl, speaking of our worthy arthropods, whispers: "*in the winter they hibernate, or die... But that's a kind of music, too...*" At the time, you see, I was just so in love with the "big idea" that I couldn't see that the spot would have been unacceptably risky as a sales tool. And I negated my own focus group - a bunch of people you pay to sit on a couch together - whose response was frankly one of utter emotional distress. So there I am in the boardroom, fresh out of Leonard Cohen negotiating tricks, pleading with the client to accept a spaced-out, morbid introvert and a handful of crickets as their national spokespeople. I crack up just thinking about it. The point is that you make mistakes along the way, often for entirely noble reasons, but that pushing the envelope is never really wrong, and your clients know it. As Leo Burnett used to say, if you reach for the stars you might not get one, but you won't get a handful of mud, either. Crickets, maybe, but not mud. We kept the client.

JV: When and how did the imaging/executive producer gig for the Liddy show come about?

Franklin: Radio America brought me aboard to work on The Michael Reagan Show, and the focus of the work was imaging - that is to say, the intros, the bumps, etc. Joseph Farah, of WorldNet-Daily, was also here at the time, and he is a beloved friend and mentor to me. We

developed an unusually complex but thematically consistent emotional signature for the show, and it serves Mike reasonably well. He is an extraordinarily hard-working broadcaster with — I swear it — an amazing ability to distil big ideas into highly entertaining visual pictures, some of them outrageously funny, some of them heart-wrenching. I once disliked his show. I like it very much now. It would be ridiculous for anyone but Mike to claim any major stake in the show's affiliate explosion these past years. The show, and his success, is very deeply his. The job of an imager is to fuel and focus the fire and accelerate or foil the emotional temperature of the host. Radio America puts the right people on the job; Mike makes it distressingly easy.

When G. Gordon Liddy came to Radio America, I became the Executive Producer of the show. This title is a bit of a misnomer, in that it implies a certain degree of authority and control. Nobody controls G. Gordon Liddy in any imaginable way. I can happily say, however, that Gordon is doing well here, in that the show is adding affiliates to the tune of one or two a week and is re-accumulating the big-market flamethrowers, but, again, the work is Gordon's. I produce the audio elements, engage in a certain degree of banter and interaction on and off the air, book guests, and work with Gordon and the gang on the grand design of show execution and affiliate service. I know this sounds terribly boardroom bin-

go, but unless someone needs to be fired, I never feel as if I have, or am, a "boss." Teamwork is the key to success, and in some cases, to wildly successful accelerations in affiliate recruitment, ratings, and sales. There's a reason, by the way, that such sayings as "teamwork is the key" become clichés; they are worthy of careful study, revision, and repetition. Here's another: we all have our strengths and weaknesses. Make a habit of innocuously covering for your coworkers' weaknesses — no matter their job title — and help them optimize their strengths. I've found, when I make a conscious effort to do this, they do the same for me.

I can tell you that Gordon is shockingly intelligent and sensitive. I like him personally, and I enjoy working with him. We also share a certain level of cultural and historical literacy — his trumps mine, of course! — and this complimentary relationship has, I think, had a positive effect on the air product. Gordon has a sense of the theatrical as well, and this he brings to work with him. Furthermore, he has assiduously tapped every telephone at the network. On the day of Gordon's arrival, after various and sundry logistical complications had been worked out with regard to parking a few of his terrifyingly exotic personal vehicles so close to the White House, and after our palatial studios were further improved to his satisfaction, a certain embittered, unwary veteran talker at Radio America telephoned her husband to complain about "the ego-

maniacal alpha-male who wants everything just-so..." That was shortly before her well-publicized accident with the neckerchief and the cart-machine.

JV: As an imager, do you have a favorite piece, or body of production work?

Franklin: I'm a heavy audio element layering kind of guy. I like explosions, pitch-shift matches, custom compositions and elements — I have a Yamaha Motif 8 in my home studio: a remarkable toolbox — and those tantalizing beats of "think-about-it-for-a-moment" negative space accelerations. I also use a lot of archival speeches and audio to create thesis-antithesis-synthesis sort of conflict theory opportunities to let the listener come to new conclusions. Listen, for instance, to Lindbergh's 1941 speech on the futility of war. He sounds just like Howard Dean. The History Channel website has some great stuff.

But the Reagan Tribute stands out as a meaningful favorite. Mike called me in the middle of the night sometime before his father passed and wanted me to have something special ready for when the time came. It's not a technically complicated piece but there's a purity to it and I approached it with love in my heart. 9/11/01 changed me irrevocably. I became less interested in the Ford account and more interested in communicating big ideas — the inalienable rights of the individual, the importance of a limited government, the perfectness and fragility of our origi-

The logo for "VO to GO" is displayed in a stylized, white, 3D font with a drop shadow effect. The letters "VO" are larger and more prominent than "to GO".

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nal constitutional principles. So Reagan's legacy is really at the heart of my heart, and I wanted to tell the story of his presidency in a few minutes. I hope you'll listen to it.

JV: What's your imaging philosophy, as applied to production and programming?

Franklin: I could answer this question for hours, format specificity be damned. But let me try to get as much as possible in, and throw in a magic-wand wish or two. I believe that we need to hearken back to the blood-and-guts, high-density, "no air failure" mandates of guys like Bill Drake, who was at the helm of CKLW in the seventies. Breaking news. Comment. Opinion. Audio from the field. Music. Surprise guests. All on one mind-bogglingly successful 50,000 watt AM. We have two extraordinary tools that were not available then. The first is digital editing. The second is the cell phone – a Marti in the hand of every listener. Think of a million, or thousand dollar annual listener prize, not for calling up on line ninety-seven, but for giving us the best audio of the year. Congratulations; your ten thousand new reporters are presently filing sixty-second local stories into voicemail. Pick one.

We have these tools, but they do not quite make up for the one thing that radio has largely forgotten: the importance of quality people on the air side. We need a *No Station Left Behind* initiative. Standardized testing for PDs, producers and talent. I don't care if your relationship problems and love of primetime TV drops make for giggle-fodder on the morning show. If you don't also have an intimate grasp of the names, dates, and events that shaped the history of the world in the last century, you're out. How will we win your replacement over to radio? Literate, creative soldiers don't work for money. They work for freedom. We need to give them the freedom to create, maintain, and organically reinvent from time to time that thematic consistency we call "stationality" rather than have two-bit consultants like myself foist it upon them between books.

Stations don't have personalities. The word "stationality" grows from our mistaken belief in an interchangeable-parts HR culture on the air side. *People* have personality. Listeners don't want to be bombarded by some consultant's idea of audio branding. They want a meaningful, interdependent relationship with you. Give it to them. Give them your best. The *brand* is you.

We need programmers and managers to experiment with visualizing radio as an audio canvas, a Laundromat bulletin-board, and an eyewitness, in tears, in the middle of the night. The last Neighborhood in America. In an age of nationally declining audience share, where we, on the aggregate, are losing millions of advertising dollars not just to cable television but to outfits with names like "Fred's Yellow Pages," we need to re-think the nature of our product. Dollars follow brains, and brains follow hearts. How hard are we willing to work to make sure that what we're producing is emotionally engaging? Station by station, we need to utterly rethink the scope of what we can do. Why, for instance, are we letting TV stations – networks, no less –



"Life is supposed to be fun... Be disciplined enough to keep it fun." Franklin cuts loose on the high seas. But "Raff Radio's venerable attack cutter," the sailing yacht AMANTHA, is also equipped with a Mac-based micro-studio. Pelican cases and desiccants keep sensitive electronics dry.

break the news? Why are our jocks watching TV all day? Our vetting and preproduction time is a fraction of theirs, the internet breaks everything a day ahead of time, and for pennies we can put a college grad out on the street with a police scanner, an mp3 recorder, and a cell phone. We are now at somewhat of a disadvantage, in that radio has for some time neglected to attract the sharpest tools in the shed. So I, too, will be blunt: there are too many people in the trenches who are here because they're contentious, complacent copycats. I'd like to blow those "radio's no fun anymore" types out en masse, recruit a whole new batch of creatives from art colleges and journalism programs, train them to use the equipment, and give them just as much freedom as they need to keep them up late at night thinking about new applications for their unlimited audio palette. What do we have to lose? National audience share?

JV: Sailboats. Beautiful women. Cutting-edge studios. Riding Harleys with the G-Man. Do you have advice for new producers and imagers?

Franklin: My father, Samuel Raff, who is now eighty-four, once gave me the simplest, wisest piece of work advice I've ever gotten. Wear a tie. Now hold on; you get used to it after awhile. It simplifies your wardrobe, and you're always dressed as nicely as that client or Senator who might pop by the station. Also, you see, there's some natty middle manager from Newark, Delaware who is thinking of blowing out five guys at your duopoly. He doesn't know you, he doesn't know your work, and he doesn't care that your wife is pregnant. What he does remember is that you're the guy in the tie. Blow out the guy in the tie?

No way.

I've never been fired.

I never blow out the guy in the tie.



Our thanks to Franklin for this month's inspirational visit.