

Country deejay relates to GIs

By Marc Yablonka

Special to Stripes

To borrow from the Merle Haggard song, "The roots of Gene Price's raisin' run deep." Since 1972, "Gene Price's Country World" has aired on the Armed Forces Radio and Television network all over Asia, Europe and Alaska. However, even with that notoriety, the announcer hasn't forgotten his upbringing and the poverty from which he rose.

"My family was really strapped. One of the saddest moments in my life was watching my mother make two cotton sacks out of old canvas, stitched on an old Singer pedal-type sewing machine. She and my dad boarded a truck and took off to go pick cotton. They made five dollars for the whole day."

"The thing I loved my dad for," he added, "was that he was not too good to take a job that paid little if it was honest work."

The native of Lubbock, Texas also remembers how, at 16, he and his brother worked as ushers in a movie house. They pooled their money with their father, then a school janitor, to buy their first car — a used 1955 Ford.

However, the deejay does not have to reach far to find humor even in the face of the extreme situation in which he grew.

"Man, we spelled poor with 14 Os."

About 1.5 million GIs who listen to his country music show have heard "Hi, this is Gene Price. How are ya?" at the top of the hour. Almost half a billion listeners, including military dependents and residents in the cities where AFRTS can be picked up, tune in daily, he said.

Though he tapes his shows in Los Angeles, Price strives to make his audience feel as if he were entertaining them right on the base.

According to announcer Akiko Shima, formerly of Radio Pacific Japan and United Television Broadcasting, that strategy works.

"He is so funny. I used to listen to him in Japan. I thought he lived in Tokyo," she said.

And his fans, both military and otherwise, let him know how they feel.

"I try to answer my fan mail as often as I can, though sometimes I do lose a letter. I've been known to answer some a year later. From time to time, a letter gets lost and then I'll find it. If anybody has written and not heard from me, somehow I misplaced your note," he said. "I try to get back to listeners as soon as I can, but sometimes my schedule is very difficult."

Price remembers one fan who wrote him 15 years ago. The fellow had been incarcerated in Perth, Australia for first-degree murder and picked the show up on short-wave radio.

"He said he liked 'Country World,' that it gave him a lot of solace. He was allowed a dinky little record player and told me his favorite artist was Johnny Cash, so I sent him a couple albums."

Price never heard back from the inmate, but that doesn't bother him at all.

Listeners worldwide have also come to know his famous sidekick the gravel-voiced, dimwitted Willard W. Willard. He calls Willard his trusted side-kick and alter-ego and admits to having a

little bit of his imaginary partner inside himself.

"A great set of pipes," he jokes, immediately breaking into a voice that sounds like truck tires barreling down an unpaved, rocky road. Price admits Willard was inspired by Oregon dentist-turned-western actor Edgar Buchanan, perhaps best known for the role of Uncle Joe on the TV show "Petticoat Junction."

"Whenever I want to say something cornball, I give it to Willard. He's the fall guy. He takes the brunt. Don't call me, call Willard."

But Price's on-air humor does not stop with his "friend." He also does right on the mark

impressions of Presidents Carter, Reagan and Bush; George C. Scott portraying General George Patton and others. He does so many voices so well that one might think his humor off the cuff.

Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, Price spends hours at a time studying those he desires to mimic, writing material for their "appearances" on his shows.

"I try to be as clever and as funny as I can. But, as anyone will tell you, sometimes you get writer's block and can't think of anything. I'm like any other guy who writes comedy. If I hear a line on some obscure TV show, I'll use it. Milton Berle built a whole career out of stealing other people's lines," he says, slightly weary of being taken for a comedic thief himself.

He credits impressionists Frank Gorshin, Vietnam veteran Fred Travalena, Marilyn Michaels and Canadian Rich Little as being his biggest in-

fluences.

Of Gorshin he says, "He's probably the only comedian that can take on physical appearances. The way that, without makeup, he can turn his back on an audience and contort his face . . . his Burt Lancaster and Kirk Douglas are absolute classics. He does a marvelous Dustin Hoffman."

Price's own talent landed him voice-over work on the television shows "Magnum P. I." and "Hill Street Blues," on which he sounded like a dead ringer for President Reagan.

At one time, Price had aspirations for being in front of the camera; as a member of the Film Industry Workshop on the lot at Columbia Pictures. Actors James Brolin and Sam Elliot were classmates.

He also had a part in the little-known 1979 film "Making It."

"If you ever find that film, burn it! If you see it collecting dust on the shelf of your local video store, I was never in that movie. It was someone else calling himself Gene Price," he said.

Though no longer seeking a film career, he has gone on to portray Scott's General Patton for a national Nissan Motors TV commercial and done local spots for Dodge and Plymouth as well.

Price started his radio career in Lubbock at

rock station KSEL after serving in the U.S. Army's 7774 Signal Service Battalion near Heidelberg, Germany and later graduating from Texas Tech University. He then moved across town to KLBK. He stopped paying his dues when an aircheck landed him a job at KEWB-San Francisco, one of that city's 1960's powerhouse rock stations.

He will always remember introducing the Beatles to a packed house at the Cow Palace during their last American tour. Price recalls them being very protected by their entourage and is still amazed at the ease with which Beatles records made station playlists in those days.

"If it was a Beatles' record, program directors would just say 'Add this,' and it was a done deal."

Price is not shy about his feelings toward the state of radio and music today.

"There's a lot of moral decadence in certain formats. Some of the lyrics in songs today should never go out (over the air). Some four letter words should never be broadcast. Heavy metal people might get mad at me now and ask 'what about that stupid country stuff?' Some of it is, but I don't recall hearing any gross four-letter words coming out. Maybe a lot of double negatives and things of that nature."

Price is also concerned about the effect the music has on the young generation.

"We've seen a lot of teen suicides that have been connected (to the music) even though not the cause of them."

By contrast, Price believes that country music has gone from so-so to much better.

"In the 80's, we had the Urban Cowboy thing," referring to an era when country artists were heavily influenced by pop music and their songs often did cross over onto the pop music charts. "But today we've got Garth Brooks, Reba MacIntyre, Alabama, Highway 101 and Paul Overstreet. They sing about the positive things in life. All these great artists have that traditional sound. That's what country music should be."

If anyone should know the music, it's Gene Price. He has been spinning country records since coming aboard Armed Forces Radio 20 years ago. Almost simultaneously, he went to work for KLAC, L.A.'s famous country station. Though Price has worked elsewhere in the market since, KLAC is his home today.

Price feels fulfilled by the career that he has had. He confessed, however, that if he had another life to live, he would like to be an Air Force pilot.

He recently had a chance to realize that dream in part when the Blue Angels invited him to ride shotgun with Lt. Wayne Mulnaur during an exhibition at El Toro Marine Corps Air Station in Santa Ana, Calif.

For Price, flying was very much like the film Top Gun.

"People either react positively or negatively to flying a jet. I reacted positively. It was incredible. And I'll tell you, if I had a son who needed a role model," the father of two teen-aged girls said, "I would introduce him to the Blue Angels. The guys were so nice taking the time to sign autographs, talking with everybody who'd come out to see them."

His flight time with the Angels inspired him to obtain his own pilot's license and he

has since logged more than 200 hours in a Piper Tomahawk.

Price is a prideful man who dreams of continuing to fly and owning his own airplane.

"I can come home from a stressful day, go log some airtime and come back a completely different person," he admitted.

He and his wife Janet dream of having their own radio station in Montana, a state that they often escape to for vacations — when they can.

— Marc Yablonka is a freelance writer from Burbank, Calif.



Photo courtesy of AFRTS

Price: Country king on Armed Forces Radio.

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