

Retiring After a Half-Century Broadcast Career Finan Still Has Plenty Left to Say

by Mark Morelli, *Focus*, 2004

At age 77, WNIR's Joe Finan will soon sign off the air after a broadcasting career spanning more than 50 years. But once the microphone at WNIR is turned off, another communications tool will be turned on. His computer.

He's writing a book. Finan promises it will be a revealing, firsthand observation of the post-World War II media age.

He should know. He lived it.

After a stint in the U.S. Navy at the very tail end of World War II, the Butler, PA native studied acting at Carnegie Mellon. He did summer stock, was part of a touring children's theater group and eventually wound up living the starving artist's life in New York City. (Starving is no exaggeration. He drank vinegar to shrink his stomach. Less food to buy.)

In New York, some of Finan's best acting was pretending to enjoy the horrible droning poetry of a downstairs neighbor. "My roommate and I would let him come up and recite poetry to us if he brought a bottle. When the bourbon was gone, we sent him home," he says.

Finan auditioned to many shows, including a tryout to be in the road company to South Pacific. No luck. An old friend whose family owned WISR in Butler, invited Joe to come back home to work at the station. Finan -- tired of rejection and vinegar -- accepted eagerly.

At WISR, Joe Finan did everything. Everything. Finan recalls how his steelworker father saw him washing windows at the radio station. "Some big star!" said the elder Finan.

While polishing windows, he also polished his radio patter. This led to more job offers. Within two years he hit the big time --

WTAM in Cleveland. Still in his mid-twenties, Finan was a hot young radio deejay and a famous TV weatherman.

"The night life and success came fast," says Finan. "Too fast."

Night life notwithstanding, Finan experienced Cleveland's heyday when broadcasters were pop star kingmakers. He met many stars including Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers, singer Johnnie Ray, Bo Diddley and Della Reese, to name a few.

His memoirs will tell more, Finan says, including the sad chapter in American pop music industry when music industry managers cheated fortunes out of black performers who brought R&B and rock & roll to mass audiences.

Finan has another great story to tell. Today, radio talk show stations are dime a dozen. Finan started the third radio talk show in the nation, WTLN in Denver, in 1962. As a talk show pioneer, Finan valued intellect. "I hired no experienced broadcasters" he said. "I looked for good conversationalists. They came from academe and elsewhere -- but not from broadcasting."

Finan returned to Cleveland and for the past 18 years has hosted a call-in show on WNIR-FM, the "talk of Akron." WNIR is one of America's last independently-owned broadcast stations. That's perfect for an independent spirit like Finan.

"They don't tell me what to say," Finan asserts. "But believe me, some of my callers do," he adds. "There's one nice old lady who calls to give me hell every time I get worked up."

Finan is a proud, well-read liberal. He is secure enough to express his deep admiration of Nancy Reagan's love for her husband while still railing against right wing policies. For months, callers of all political stripes have been calling to say thanks -- and goodbye.

"That makes it worthwhile," Finan says. "All the thanks they've been giving me."

He's retiring as soon as WNIR can find a replacement. Management tried an "Akron Idol" contest, giving amateurs on-air auditions. Bill Klaus still can't decide who will replace Finan -- as if anyone can.