



September 7, 2008

FROZEN IN TIME

Oldies DJ's life story would make a great love song

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Have you heard Mr. Wilson on WHTG's Great Gold 1410 AM?

From nine to noon on Saturdays, over the Press Communications-owned WHTG, Mr. Wilson spins hits from his favorite era, 1950-1964: The Elegants' "Little Star," The Ronettes' "Baby I Love You," Bill Haley & the Comets' "Rock Around the Clock."

At noon, he speeds back up north to Wilson's Homemade Ice Cream, in Ursula Plaza in Long Branch, where he's got to make the Apple Pie Spice and the Black Forest Cherry. But the real reason he's rushing back is to rejoin the blue-eyed Mrs. Wilson behind the counter, spinning records and churning cookie dough. What a renaissance guy!

Dan and Muriel Wilson were once sweethearts at Long Branch High School. But back in the '50s, folks weren't so broad-minded as today. Muriel's devout Catholic family and Dan's Baptist-preacher father were not about to let these two lovebirds fly off together. Dan went into computers, eventually married, had a family and settled in Denver, Colo. Muriel married and became a housewife, with a part-time job at the Beach Plum, a homemade ice cream place then in Long Branch.

But fate had another plan. On a visit home in 1989 to see his dad, Dan ran into Muriel at the West Long Branch Fair. Each confided that they had decided to end their marriages. ("Good Timin' " by Jimmy Jones — I'll bet Mr. Wilson plays that one.)

Muriel joined Dan in Denver for awhile, but missed her children back in Jersey. The two brainstormed on a business they could do together back in New Jersey. Muriel asked her old boss at the Beach Plum if he'd teach them how to make ice cream. And so it went.

They opened Wilson's Homemade Ice Cream 9 years ago last June. High school portraits of the two hang discreetly from the inside wall over a cooler.

Dan has been a music fan with 5,000 records of his own and a radiophile ever since 1965, when one of his bosses set up a 1-watt handmade radio station in a garage in Kingston, N.Y. So when it was time to advertise his shop, he contacted WHTG.

He sponsored a two-hour Christmas doo-wop show in 2002. Then, last July, Wilson sponsored Press Communication's Radio Greats Weekend. That's how Dan got to meet a legend from his youth — radio personality Herb Oscar Anderson. For people of a certain age, Anderson's voice — god-like, thanks to an echo effect — never failed to convince you that you could venture forth on a biting cold morning, after listening over a cup of hot chocolate, and nothing bad would happen.

Dan didn't hold back in expressing his admiration for his idol. After which Anderson turned to a station executive and said, "Put this man on the air!"

The rest is radio history. Dan debuted his "Mr. Wilson Plays the Oldies" on Sept. 8 of last year. Since then, Muriel has made sure there's a radio on wherever she is, so she doesn't miss a word while Dan is on.

Sitting at Wilson's ice cream parlor on a recent summer afternoon while a small railroad circles over our heads, past three-dimensional kites that float above murals of rolling hillsides, Dan shares his plans to continue interviewing entertainers appearing at local events and venues on Saturdays. Muriel inserts a few more celebrity names, corrects a date, all between explaining the benefits of fresh bananas over bottled flavoring, hard ice cream versus soft for malteds. "She never stops working," says Dan.

Book-sized photo albums piled on a ledge by the door tell endless happy stories of customers who smiled and laughed away a few memorable moments here. The wall below the main counter sports pages of crayoned ice cream cones, the coloring efforts of numerous young satisfied customers. A bookcase holds copies of Reminisce magazine and paperbacks for musing while sampling the dozen or so fresh flavors Dan crafts each day — seven days a week from noon until 10 p.m.

And, when you dial in 1410 next Saturday, you may just hear a little kid, saying, "Mr. Wilson? Oh, Mr. Wilson." And a second voice: "What is it, Dennis?"

Asbury Park Press radio correspondent Maureen Nevin Duffy created and hosted "Asbury Radio — The Radio Voice of Asbury Park," a weekly public affairs talk show at the City's WYGG, 88.1FM station, for more than six years.

Please send your comments and suggestions regarding Radio Somewhere by e-mail to AsburyRadio@aol.com or write 3 Deal Lake Court, Asbury Park, NJ 07712.
