

The Nitecap Radio Movement 1964 to 1990

Appendix A in *Sounds in the Dark: All-night Radio in American Culture*
Iowa State University Press, 2001

“I am a Nitecap. I believe in the Nitecap Movement as a great vehicle to make the sentiments of the brotherhood of man among all nations, creeds and races a fact, not merely a saying. . . .” — The Nitecap Creed.

Herb?

Yes.

This is Shirley Stephens calling from Salt Lake.

Yes, Shirley.

I just wanted to say Happy Birthday to the Nitecap show. You know Herb, it was my mom’s whole life. She came here in 1964 She was Harriett Congers, a charter member Nitecap.

Oh yes! I remember her.

She just adored your show. We just think it’s just the most a wonderful service, as well as fun, and a network of friends for everybody. Oh, she loved the conventions; and I heard you’re going to have one in 1984.

We hope so. I think it’s time that we all got together again.

Fantastic! And we’re looking forward to the newsletter and the magazine. There’s no need for anybody to be lonely so long as you are around Herb.

Thank you.

I would like to say hello to my mom’s many Nitecap friends out there, for Harriet Congers, the ones that she wrote to and the ones that she loved. This was her whole life in the last decade before she left us at ninety-four. Herb we just adore you and your whole concept there. In nighttime radio there’s just nothing like what you do.

Thank you dear.

Love you.

Bye. Shirley Stephens here in Salt Lake this morning. That opens our Utah line for you now. . . .

The Herb Jepko Show, February, 1984.

It's hard to imagine a time before television, but for some, for those awake in the wee hours of the morning, the last television-free sanctuary stretched into the late 1970s. Nighttime then was filled, not by the ceaseless roar of cable television, 24-hour independent stations, VCRs and Blockbuster movie rentals, but by radio.

Yet it was radio that had been hammered by the impact of television and it was AM-only radio, radio before the emergence of FM. Even without overnight competition from television, most radio stations still signed off the air between midnight and five AM. Even some clear channel, 50,000-watt AM stations found no good reason to remain on the air overnight. Advertisers were loath to reach the small, disenfranchised, and older audience that was assumed to inhabit late-night radio. Media buyers were utterly unwilling to purchase time in a period not even measured by ratings services. With neither ratings, nor revenues, why stay on the air? By today's standards of the electronic media, late-night radio was a dark, abandoned desert, pockmarked by only a handful of radio stations offering the lowest cost programming possible.

In the high mountain desert surrounding the Great Salt Lake, the management of station KSL, a 50,000 watt, clear channel owned by the Mormon Church, reached similar conclusions. Why use a church-owned facility to broadcast to an audience who, one can

imagine church leaders concluding, had no business being awake in the middle of the night? Why use a church-run business to employ someone who ought to be home with family, especially at those hours?

Yet on February 11th, 1964, Herb Jepko opened a mike into that void and began what would become a nearly 30-year career of connecting the disenfranchised, widowed, lonely, fearful, elderly or just up-all-night oddballs into a true community. Within little over a year, dozens of local clubs had organized, a monthly magazine was launched, and tens of thousands of membership cards issued to listeners across the USA and Canada. The first national convention was held in Salt Lake in July of 1965 with listeners arriving, much to the surprise of KSL management, from over 30 states. Over 300 couples met and married as a direct result of the program. Hundreds of thousands of others developed friendships, exchanged photographs, ran up long distance bills, and traveled to meet in person. The success of the show was unprecedented and remains unequalled in the history of broadcasting. Before the World Wide Web, before “cyber community,” before Internet dating and virtual relationships, there were the Nitecaps connected by the old economy web of radio.

“I will do all in my power to help build the Nitecap organization and to carry out all of its projects designed to lend friendship, comfort and pleasure to all persons, particularly the ill, the aging, and the unfortunate.”

— The Nitecap Creed

Herb Jepko was born of unknown parents in Colorado in 1935. He was abandoned by his birth parents and adopted as an infant by a couple in Prescott, Arizona. Unfortunately his arrival didn't solve their marital problems, and by the age of four, Herb had lost his second mother. He would never have another, but years later, in a lonely nursing home outside Prescott Arizona, listening to the radio, she too would join his extended late-night family.

Herb was raised by his dad, Metro Jepko, a World War One veteran. Unfortunately, just as Herb began school, Metro's lingering war wounds forced him into a VA hospital for the following eight years.

Herb wrote in his journal:

“I was told that I had to live for a short while with a foster family in Phoenix and attend school until Dad was well again. That “short while” lasted for eight long years. As a result, I was shifted from home to home, from religion to religion, from one set of rules to another.”

Eventually, Herb and his dad were reunited, and lived as a family of two, for most of his high school years. At age 18, Herb was drafted into the US Army where he rose to become chief of radio-television operations for the 4th Army. At the height of the Korean War, Herb had mastered the art of military broadcasting, producing 18 radio shows, and one television show weekly. He also found time to write and produce two full-length motion pictures before returning to civilian life in 1954.

Following the army, Herb pursued a series of radio jobs in sales and sales management, eventually becoming promotion director for KFI in Los Angeles. During this time, he met Ben Hunter who was doing a late night talk show called the Night Owls. It was also in California that he met his life-long love, Patsy. Together they raised their five children from prior marriages and their son, Herb junior.

In 1961, the eight Jepkos, joined by Herb's dad Metro, returned to Patsy's hometown of Salt Lake City for help from her family in raising theirs. Herb was hired by KCPX to play late night jazz, but quickly found himself bored by only playing music. Between jazz cuts, Herb began talking to his listeners about the mountains, the weather and the news of the day. There were no facilities for broadcasting calls over the air, so Herb talked to his listeners over the phone off-air during the music. Mail began arriving from all over the Rocky Mountain west and it was not long before the management of KSL took note of the new, talented air-personality across town. While KSL had a history of hiring only Latter Day Saints (Mormons), exceptions were sometimes made for on-air talent. Herb's nominal Catholicism and occasional drinking would later create significant tensions.

In 1962 Herb began hosting KSL's midday program *Crossroads* and things began looking up for the family. But Herb realized that this was a different audience than the one he had been connecting with in his late night shift at KCPX. Perhaps due in part to the longings of his childhood, it was this late-night audience for whom he felt the greatest affinity.

He had so much confidence in his ability to make the time period work that he pitched it personally to the KSL board of directors. Following a few months of continued pressure from Herb, the board offered a make-it-or-break-it deal. Herb could have the midnight to six time period only if he would agree to a 50 percent pay cut, with a six-week deadline to prove he could make the show work, or be fired.

While it was a tremendous financial risk for the entire family, Patsy had unshakable confidence in “her man,” Metro provided unwavering support and both would quickly become integral parts of the Nitecap organization.

“We love to hear each other chat, to hear each glad hello. But most of all we love to hear the voice of our own Herb Jepko. We’re the Nitecaps, nightly Nitecaps, and our hearts are light and gay as we rally round our Nitecap show on the brand new side of the day. . . .”

The “Nitecap Song” by Dame Edmunds.

Just after midnight on February 11th, 1964, Herb began what would become the most successful program in KSL’s history. For the first few weeks station engineers had managed to rig only one phone line that could be put on the air. Yet even on that first night, Herb was not at a loss for callers. One of the first advertisers was the publisher of a venison cookbook and Patsy soon found herself listening to the show while filling orders all night on the kitchen table. The volume of letters from loyal listeners was literally overwhelming and Patsy struggled to keep up. Each morning, after a night on the air, Herb would return to shower, change clothes and begin making sales calls while

Patsy took care of Metro and the kids. For the first year of the show, they subsisted on 2 or 3 hours of sleep, catching up on the weekends.

The show, initially called *The Other Side of the Day* was an immediate success. Within a year, listeners, or “Nitecaps” as they became known following an on-air contest to choose a name, were meeting in five states in organized service clubs called “Nitestands.” Patsy was literally buried under a mountain of paper as every day brought well over 1,000 letters. By May 1965, as an alternative to responding to the correspondence, Patsy’s parents were hired to publish *The Wick*, a monthly Nitecap magazine. Wick articles included poems, short stories and recipes by Nitecap listeners, photographs from Nitestand meetings, and a mailing list of those seeking personal correspondence or telephone calls. Wick display advertising included specialty products related to the show — a “Herbie” nightlight, T-shirts, lapel pins, an album produced by Herb titled “A Time for Meditation,” “Nitecap” supplemental life insurance, “Nitecap” travel packages and cruises, home exercise equipment, “Nitecap” stickers and envelopes and the like.. In July of 1965, the first of many conventions was held in Salt Lake City drawing thousands of listeners from over 30 states. At the first convention contests were conducted to design a flag and logo, and to choose a theme song for the program from dozens of competing entries.

KSL managers and Mormon Church officials belatedly realized that they had unknowingly relinquished a perfect platform from which to reach those in need with proselytizing messages for the church. Rather than risk the backlash of replacing Herb,

they sought to place LDS Church advertising on the show, and encouraged Herb and those of his LDS listeners to move the talk toward the value of the church.

Perhaps due in part to being shuttled from foster home to foster home, and religion to religion, Herb adamantly refused to allow any discussion of “denominational religion” on the Nitecap program. Some church members pressured KSL station management to make a change, raising understandable concerns that such a successful program was being run on church owned facilities by a non-member. As tensions reached a boiling point, Arch Madsen, President of KSL, reached a novel compromise with Herb by allowing him to buy time from the KSL and operate as an independent contractor. The Nitecap operation moved out of KSL into their own broadcast studios and offices. But tensions between other KSL personnel and Herb’s staff continued to simmer and intensify.

“I think that programs like this, that don’t get involved in denominational religion, can make fences fall down. Regardless of where a person votes, or worships, or color of their skin, we are all human beings.”

Herb Jepko, Louisville Convention Address 1978.

Prior to the success demonstrated by Herb and the Nitecap show, most programmers in the industry felt that “all talk is local.” In other words, programmers felt there weren’t enough national issues of importance to generate sufficient interest among enough local listeners to achieve ratings success. While local issues, where local

listeners felt their opinion might make a difference in the outcome, were thought to be the key to talk radio programming success.

Running against this thinking, network talk radio was born in January 1968, when KXIV in Phoenix signed on as the first Nitecap Radio Network affiliate. The following month, in February 1968, WRFM New York announced a “Nitecap” format would originate locally in New York, hosted by Gordon Owen. An article in *The Wick* announced that the Nitecap Radio Network would be built in the west via affiliates carrying Herb Jepko program from the flagship station KSL, while affiliates east of the Mississippi would join flagship station WRFM with Gordon Owen in New York City.

In April 1968, KBIG became the third Nitecap affiliate, joining KSL and KXIV in the west. Unfortunately WRFM dropped the Nitecap format in June 1968. The first talk radio network ended operations in August 1968 when both KBIG and KXIV dropped the show. While some listeners were disappointed, most could still hear the program over KSL. In an era before overnight radio ratings, an article in August 1969 *Wick* blamed a lack of listener letters to the stations as the cause of loss of the affiliates.

Network talk radio was reborn a little over a year later, in October 1969, when 50,000 watt clear channel KVOO, Tulsa, affiliated with The Nightcap Radio Network. This incarnation of network talk radio lasted almost two years, but ended when KVOO dropped the show in September 1971. .

For Herb and Nitecaps everywhere, the third time proves to be a charm. In January 1973, WHAS Louisville, another 50,000 watt clear channel, affiliated with NCRN. KSL and WHAS were situated perfectly for the geography of the North America and together gave Herb the first ever coast-to-coast coverage for an independent broadcaster. By mid1974, over 80 Nitestands were active, with members meeting for socializing and organized service to others in their areas. When KIRO in Seattle, and KRLA in Los Angeles also signed on as affiliates the program began to generate some interest among the radio networks.

Arbitron, the radio ratings company was now measuring radio listening between midnight and 1 AM, the first hour of Herb's show. Estimates showed a surprising number of 18-24 year olds in the first hour of the program. Based on calls to the show, many appeared to be lonely college students, studying late at night. But the show retained a reputation for attracting a mostly older, rural audience. Outside of the cities where NCRN affiliates were based, their sky wave AM signals were too easily distorted by the normal electrical noise of a city to be heard clearly. Thus most of the audience was found in less populated rural areas, where distant AM signals could still be heard clearly. Understandably, this largely rural, older audience was not especially attractive to advertisers, or to the national radio networks.

“We screen the products we advertise. Our following is so dependent upon us that we want to back up everything we advertise. We don't advertise anything that we don't believe in ourselves.”

— Herb Jepko, March 1975.

Almost all revenue for the show was derived from direct-response advertising and Herb insisted, with very few exceptions, that all order fulfillment be handled personally by the Nitecap staff. Too often he had seen listeners to other programs robbed by direct-response advertisers who went bankrupt without fulfilling paid orders. So Herb required almost all Nitecap Radio Network advertisers to ship sufficient inventory to cover anticipated orders to his Salt Lake offices. Only after inventory had arrived would he allow the commercials to air. Other revenue streams included commissions earned by a travel agency and a supplemental life insurance company operated by Nitecaps International. At its peak, a staff of 26 employees handled order fulfillment, insurance policies, Nitecap tours, cruises, membership cards, publishing of “The Wick,” engineering, newscasts and other activities associated with the show. Many listeners, as if on a pilgrimage to Mecca, would show up unannounced at the Salt Lake City studios expecting to meet Herb and drink peppermint tea in the studio lobby.

In November 1974, WBAL, Baltimore affiliated with the Nitecap Radio network, providing a clear signal into Washington, DC, Philadelphia and New York. This provided the first exposure to the program for many media executives living on the East Coast and would result in the tragic demise of the program.

“From Salt Lake City, high in the Mountain West, the Mutual Broadcasting System presents, the Herb Jepko Nitecap Show.”

Mutual’s network intro

On November 4th 1975, the Mutual Broadcasting System (MBS) began carrying the Nitecap program nationally. Thanks to the dozens of new affiliates, the number of requests for membership cards in the Nitecaps International Association soared to over 300,000. Within a year, Arbitron estimated 10 million listeners were tuned into the program nightly. NIA memberships likewise soared as new Nitestands were established across the nation. Following the affiliation with Mutual, rather than move to Washington DC, the Nitecap organization moved into even larger, and more expensive, studios and office space in Salt Lake City.

Also as part of the agreement with Mutual Herb relinquished control over both order fulfillment and sales strategy to the network. MBS sales executives attempted to sell the program on a cost-per-thousand (CPM) basis to national advertisers. However the reputation of the show as appealing primarily to an older, less affluent, rural audience made this a nearly impossible sale. MBS account executives quickly moved on to more profitable dayparts, and Herb, while enjoying the largest audience in the history of the program, began to suffer extraordinary financial losses. The combination of the increased expenses of operating his own studios and the decrease in revenue from the shift in sales strategy away from proven direct response advertising would quickly prove a fatal combination.

I believe it is my obligation as a Nitecap not to carp and criticize, but to support and encourage my fellow Nitecaps. To this end I hereby pledge myself to the building and supporting of Nitecaps International Association, N.I.A., its founder, Herb Jepko, this Nitestand and every sincere Nitecap.

— The Nitecap Creed

By the fall of 1976, Herb was under intense pressure from MBS to change the program content in an attempt to attract a younger audience. MBS felt more controversy and conflict would serve to attract the younger demos, which would be easier to sell on a CPM basis to national advertisers. Herb in turn pressured MBS to continue to serve the audience with whom he had developed such strong friendships and for whom he felt such a strong public service commitment. With MBS account executives unwilling, or unable, to work deals for sufficient direct-response advertising, and with Herb unwilling to compromise, the show began to collapse. On May 28th 1977 MBS replaced the Nitecap program with Long John Neble and Candy Jones. When Long John died less than a year later, MBS gave Larry King his first shot at a national audience. (Larry King and others later mistakenly cite King's program as the first network radio talk show.)

Immediately following the Mutual cancellation, The Nitecap Radio Network was reborn with 10 affiliates, including KSL but without WHAS. By 1977, 14 affiliates had joined the network, but most were low power at night and the vast majority of the core audience felt betrayed by the inability to receive their program. Network radio, in an era before satellite distribution, required expensive AT&T landlines, which were only feasible with the economies of scale offered by scores of stations sharing the cost. Larry King's Mutual program, other all-night radio programs, FM stations, 24-hour broadcast

television, and cable TV had fractionalized the late night radio audience. Where Herb had found a pockmarked desert in 1964, he now found himself attempting to stand out in a cacophony of late night media entertainment options. As renewal of “Wick” subscriptions dropped, Nitestands disbanded, and orders from direct response appeals declined, old tensions between KSL management and Herb resurfaced, aggravated by Herb’s increased drinking. In August of 1978 KSL, without advance notice to listeners or to Herb, dropped the Nitecap program.

“I will seek and exalt the good I find in all persons and seek to overlook their errors and weaknesses just as I trust others will accept me with both my strengths and weaknesses.

— The Nitecap Creed

The NRCN continued on for one year before going off the air in August of 1979. Two significant attempts were made to resurrect the program. The first in 1983/84 by purchasing time on WOAI, a 50,000 watt clear channel in San Antonio. A second attempt was made to restart the program over KTKK in Salt Lake in 1990 with Randy Jepko, Herb’s son from Patsy’s first marriage, serving as co-host. But the show lasted only a few months. When Herb and Patsy’s son Herb junior died an untimely death in 1992, it proved to be the final tragedy from which Herb could not recover. He died in Salt Lake City of complications from his drinking on March 31st. 1995.

The legacy of Herb Jepko’s contribution to radio endures even today. While no other show has demonstrated such loyal audience, others such as Rush Limbaugh have developed successful newsletters and direct audience response. Some Art Bell listeners

have formed local chapters, but without a social service commitment lack the organizing force of the Nitestands. Bruce Williams personifies the friendly non-controversial style that Herb pioneered, but with a narrower focus on financial matters. Larry King masterfully built on the Mutual Broadcasting System's all-night talk strategy, interviewing sometime controversial guests with brief calls from listeners and creating a program environment suitable for national advertisers. But no one has yet duplicated what Herb had created through the intense love and passion of his audience — a true radio movement designed to bring to reality the “brotherhood of man.”

“We need to stop looking at people suspiciously and questioning about their motives but accept them more generously as human beings with kindness in our hearts. With this motive and with this purpose, I think we can achieve better communications between each other. Radio is one way, person to person communications -- letters, telephone calls between each other -- is another way. But always considering that the other person has something to offer in the way of friendship by reaching out their hands, as each one of you have here tonight to each other, and each one of you certainly must do every single time you tune in the program and place your call to us.”

— Herb Jepko, 1978 Louisville Convention.