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Death Of A Radio Salesman

by [Fred Jacobs](#) · June 18, 2021



The radio broadcasting industry has lost an icon – a guy who spent his entire career working for one radio station. While many great radio leaders have made their mark on the medium, none has impacted the image and reputation of radio sales more than this man:

Herb Tarlek

Played by the brilliant character actor Frank Bonner, Herb led the sales effort at the fictitious WKRP in Cincinnati. Like all great role models, Tarlek had an unmistakable signature look. Week after week, he abused plaid, herringbone, madras, and other fabrics to create a garish image that was both blinding but eye-catching at the same time.

It's hard to think of another TV sitcom character who gave his role at the station a more embarrassing reputation this side of how Ted Baxter brilliantly sullied news anchors on *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*.

Will Ferrell would go on to honor Baxter with his own pathetic anchorman, Ron Burgundy. But no one ever tried to out-Tarlek the WKRP sales sleaze – it was that good.

As many of you know, my brother Paul comes out of radio sales. And he is convinced the Tarlek character effectively dissuaded an entire generation of radio wannabes from going into sales.

Hardly a day goes by without someone on the Jacobs Media team who doesn't invoke Herb's name, always in association with underhanded, heinous sales practices. We refer to this behavior as "Tarlekian."

Bonner consistently made *WKRP* a truly funny sitcom. While Johnny Fever, Venus Flytrap, Bailey Quarters, Andy Travis, and Mr. Carlson ("The Big Guy") were cartoon versions of radio staffers, Herb Tarlek exuded a certain truth. In his own exaggerated, unprofessional way, he was the real deal. Those of us fortunate enough to have worked in radio when the show first aired saw many of the worst sales rep traits in the Tarlek character. Everyone knew a Herb.

Twitter blew up yesterday at the news of Frank Bonner's passing, and I'll leave you with a potpourri of some of the best tweets.



John Derringer 
@JohnDerringer



Can't count the number of times someone's walked into our station sales office and said "So, is there a Herb Tarlek around here?" The answer has always been "Yes". A perfect character. RIP Frank Bonner.

12:28 PM · Jun 17, 2021



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Big Dave
@BigDaveB105



Ever since I moved to Cincinnati to do radio, I've heard two questions/jokes from people...

1- Do you work for WKRP?

2- Do you know Herb Tarlek?

The answers?

1 -No.

2- No, but there have been some guys who were close.

RIP Frank Bonner

4:49 PM · Jun 17, 2021



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Marke Driesschen
@ctv_marke



Every radio station had a Herb Tarlek working for them, but no one other than Frank Bonner could bring him to life. Thanks Frank. [#FrankBonner](#) [#WKRP](#)

1:43 PM · Jun 17, 2021



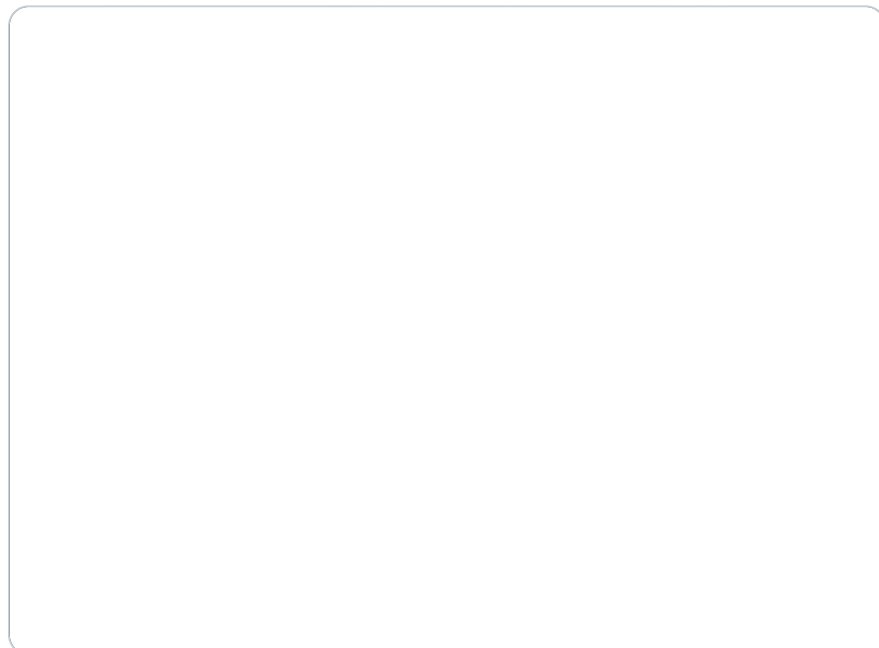
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Danny Deraney ✓
@DannyDeraney



Herb Tarlek at his finest, explaining how to write the perfect copy to Bailey.



5:31 PM · Jun 17, 2021



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And my favorite:



Nik Carter ✓
@TheNotoriousNIK



Tomorrow, all [#radio](#) people shall wear a white belt and white patent leather shoes to honor this great man!. Rest in power Frank/Herb Tarlek

'WKRP in Cincinnati' Star Frank Bonner Dead at 79
Frank Bonner is dead.
[tmz.com](#)

1:33 PM · Jun 17, 2021



♡ 1.2K 💬 57 ↗ Share this Tweet

R.I.P. Frank Bonner, but bask in the memory that as long as there are radio stations, sales reps will emulate Herb Tarlek.

Author



Fred Jacobs

President & Founder at [Jacobs Media](#)

Fred Jacobs founded Jacobs Media in 1983, and quickly became known for the creation of the Classic Rock radio format.

Jacobs Media has consistently walked the walk in the digital space, providing insights and guidance through its well-read national Techsurveys.

In 2008, jacapps was launched - a mobile apps company that has designed and built more than 1,300 apps for both the Apple and Android platforms. In 2013, the DASH Conference was created - a mashup of radio and automotive, designed to foster better understanding of the "connected car" and its impact.

Along with providing the creative and intellectual direction for the company, Fred consults many of Jacobs Media's commercial and public radio clients, in addition to media brands looking to thrive in the rapidly changing tech environment.

Fred was inducted into the Radio Hall of Fame in 2018.

Comments

Ken Mills says

June 18, 2021 at 9:10 AM

Very nice tribute, Fred. There is a bit of Herb in me and you.

[Reply](#)

Fred Jacobs says

June 18, 2021 at 11:51 AM

Speak for yourself, Ken!

[Reply](#)

Barry Michaels says

June 18, 2021 at 9:50 AM

I was lucky enough to be doing radio while WKRP was on...and yes! I met many Herbs! Great tribute!

[Reply](#)**Fred Jacobs says**

June 18, 2021 at 11:51 AM

Thank you, Barry!

[Reply](#)**Jack Taddeo says**

June 18, 2021 at 9:52 AM

Knew a few Herbs in my career but always appreciated what they had to accomplish. Loved the character Frank Bonner created but wonder if they'll find 10k of unapprovrd personal trade on the books at 'KRP.

[Reply](#)**Fred Jacobs says**

June 18, 2021 at 11:52 AM

No doubt about it, Jack. Herb was the kind of guy who carpeted his home, replaced his windows, and took his vacation – on trade!

[Reply](#)**Peter Bolger says**

June 18, 2021 at 10:12 AM

For a few years, I was a radio salesperson. On the first day at one of those jobs, I dressed in grey slacks, a blue button down shirt, Brooks Brothers blazer and tie. The GM/SM said for me to be an effective salesperson, I must make an impression on my clients and suggested I wear more memorable clothing. I guess that meant to dress like him, which was just like Herb, except with much wider ties. He was actually a really good guy. And perhaps he was right. I did 'OK" as a salesperson – and maybe I woulda done better if I had taken his sartorial advice.

[Reply](#)**Fred Jacobs says**

June 18, 2021 at 11:54 AM

I sold time myself (don't ask) for about 9 months – long enough to realize it was not in my personal makeup to make my living as a rep. I was bad at the clothes/lunches part of the gig. Thanks for chiming in, Peter.

[Reply](#)

Don Cristi says

June 18, 2021 at 10:50 AM

Doing Morning Radio back-in-the-day in Little Rock, this lifelong Razorback fan (note the coffee cup on his desk) graced us with a visit. We introduced our "Herb Tarlek" to Frank Bonner who blessed him with a quick hug. It was a phenomenal moment in my career. RIP Herb. 😞

[Reply](#)

Fred Jacobs says

June 18, 2021 at 11:54 AM

What a great experience, Don. Thanks for sharing it here.

[Reply](#)

John Ford says

June 18, 2021 at 11:29 AM

Was on the air at WSHE during the days of WKRP. Herb was the one character that, as you say Fred, the show really did nail. When I heard about Bonner's death yesterday, my tweet was, and only half jokingly.... "The only radio sales guy I ever liked, has died" That is all.

[Reply](#)

Fred Jacobs says

June 18, 2021 at 11:55 AM

Ditto, John. I never found the other ones especially funny.

[Reply](#)

Kevin Fodor says

June 18, 2021 at 12:04 PM

Hey, Fred:

Over my going on 48 year radio career, I swear I've worked with everyone in the WKRP cast. I knew a sales guy who WAS Herb Tarlek. Jocks like Johnny Fever and Venus Flytrap. Marketing people who looked like Bailey...and receptionists like Jennifer. And, oh yes...a Big Guy or two and many engineers like Bucky Dornster.

[Reply](#)**Fred Jacobs says**

June 18, 2021 at 12:23 PM

Kevin, the show did a nice job of nailing down the stereotypes, no doubt about it. Looking back on it, I actually miss many of them.

[Reply](#)**Mike McKay says**

June 18, 2021 at 1:15 PM

Thanks for this, Fred. It sort of made me sad and made my day at the same time.

[Reply](#)**Fred Jacobs says**

June 18, 2021 at 1:52 PM

I just watched an old episode, "The Book." Same emotions, my friend.

[Reply](#)**Keith Mitchell says**

June 18, 2021 at 1:35 PM

Who are these sales people you speak of? Haven't seen one in person in a long time. Kidding aside, we've all worked with a few Herbs – had one that doubled as a lounge singer, even put out an album. Came up with some half baked plan to “take all the real estate advertising” in the market. Needless to say we did not take all the real estate dollars.

[Reply](#)

Fred Jacobs says

June 18, 2021 at 1:51 PM

Perfect, Keith. Yes, they could be a strange lot.

[Reply](#)

Bob Olhsson says

June 18, 2021 at 2:49 PM

“Tomorrow, all #radio people shall wear a white belt and white patent leather shoes to honor this great man!.”

I'll never forget when Bill Drake showed up at one of Motown's studios around 1969. He was wearing a white belt and white patent leather shoes!

[Reply](#)

Fred Jacobs says

June 18, 2021 at 3:12 PM

I may try it when I start traveling again. Drake was one smart dude.

[Reply](#)

K.M. Richards says

June 18, 2021 at 4:19 PM

At the very first station I programmed, our GSM was a Herb. His trademark (besides the wardrobe) was not understanding what could and could not be accomplished with the state-of-the-art equipment of the late 1970s.

I actually executed my programming on a Schafer 903 automation system, using local voicetracking. This let us do other work around the station while the 903 "produced and engineered" our airshifts. Well, my Herb once sold, without checking with anyone first, a spot which was to be "60 seconds of peace and quiet" sponsored by the advertiser. It took me three attempts, and our owner/GM another two, to get him to realize that the silence sensor would switch to the next event almost immediately after the "peace and quiet" began, because it was set to a three-second threshold.

Undeterred, he wanted to know if that could be disabled whenever his client's spots aired. (Sound like a Herb Tarlek reaction?) I finally salvaged the buy for him by replacing the dead air with a non-descript downtempo orchestra track from the production library and changed the "hook" to "60 seconds of pure relaxation".

Herb Tarlek had many of those dense moments. But Frank Bonner brought him to life so well! RIP, sir, and thanks for making us laugh.

Reply

Fred Jacobs says

June 18, 2021 at 5:59 PM

Herb/Frank were funny. The types of encounters you describe were not. I remember so many that started out with an absurd request (they knew would be a "no"), followed up by "OK then, what about this?" They would wear you down. And it wasn't funny. Thank goodness for WKRP.

Reply

Eric Jon Magnuson says

June 20, 2021 at 4:02 PM

One episode that's especially noteworthy and even prescient is the series' take on "A Christmas Carol" ("Bah, Humbug", from the third season). Watching it today (or, really, anytime over the past decade or two), it shouldn't be surprising that the "future" WKRP has exactly one human employee: Herb. On the flipside, the new sales manager at the "past" WKRP (Christmas 1954) happened to be Mr. Carlson (who was the episode's Scrooge).

Reply

Fred Jacobs says

June 20, 2021 at 4:44 PM

Do not remember that one! Thanks for the memory.

[Reply](#)

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