



photo by David Carter



# TONY WELCH

## *An Early Morning Light*

by Bill Lazarus

The stories just roll on and on: stories about the old television news shows where Tony Welch broadcast live while the single camera focused on Associated Press photos placed one-by-one on a rolodex; stories about the time he took radio legends Don Imus and Wolfman Jack to dinner, and both spent the endless hours trying to outdo each other; stories about his years traipsing from one radio or TV station to another, from New York to San Francisco, Ohio to Texas.

Welch, now almost 64 and perhaps

through the 1970s.

The same steady stream of cigarette smoke still fills the air. "There are two ways to be preserved: formaldehyde and smoking. I prefer smoking," says Welch, who claims he goes through two packs a day, but probably is underestimating his intake. And there's the regular ring of the phone, the visitors waiting to talk to him.

Even the corny, occasionally earthy, jokes and old stories continue unabated.

Yet, things are different. There's the sense of change in the air. The new

satellite from Texas to fill the hours between 6 p.m. and 6 a.m. – until they don't hear Welch's familiar tenor. That's what's really going to be different. Sandpapered a bit by cigarettes and age, that almost melodious voice has dominated the local airwaves since 1986.

It's still very evident on WROD. Welch does voiceovers for some announcements and handles a couple of talk shows. Mostly, though, he's teaching the other employees all the things he used to do.

On April 1, that all ends. Welch plans

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the best known radio personality in Volusia county, is retiring as owner and general manager of WROD radio April 1. The stories won't end, just the endless hours, seven days a week. "I'm getting too old for this," explains Welch.

He's not in his usual office anymore, the one overflowing with mail, magazines and pictures. New general manager Paul Kempff now has it. Welch's current office, which is where the receptionist used to sit, features the same old autographed photos on the wall – Frank Sinatra and Mandy Patinkin are prominent – and old Judy Garland movie posters, all apropos for a station focused on nostalgic music from the 1930s

company Gore Overgaard (named for partners who live in Vero Beach and Tucson, Arizona) already owns about 10 stations. The format will stay the same. After all, with more than 30 percent of the local population retired, there's a built-in audience for big band music and the dated songs of Dean Martin, the Pied Pipers, Don Cornell, Connie Francis and others.

The nine-member staff is staying, too: Bill Matthews and Ron Coker will remain on the air. Most of the regular audience probably won't realize the station is sold, any more than they realize that except for occasional programs, the station now uses shows broadcast via

to become a broker, selling stations. He knows something about that business; that's how he was introduced to WROD. And he's thinking about starting a small advertising agency, building on the many contacts he's made since arriving here. "It's been 13 years, 10 months and 2 days, but who's counting?" Welch says with a laugh, a sound that accompanies most of his comments.

He still plans to participate in the community. Good thing. Within two years of showing up in Daytona Beach, Welch was on the board of the Heart Association, WORC, the Symphony

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Society and a host of other groups. Since then, he's been on dozens more, including an advisory board to the Halifax Advertising Authority, the Ad Council and you name it.

He's emceed Christmas pageants and parades, special flag-raising ceremonies and roasts. Under the WROD banner, he's developed and run everything from retirement expos to fund-raisers to help needy seniors at Christmas. If there was some special local event going on, Welch and his team invariably broadcast live from the site.

"Being a reporter helped," Welch says. "I was used to going to places you didn't know the people, asking questions and listening to answers. You'd be

into the national "Music of Your Life" nostalgia format.

The decision of a local Daytona Beach station definitely didn't reach the ears of the migratory Texan. Welch had never been in Florida before purchasing the station. "I knew I only had enough money to buy a radio station in a small town," he says. He and wife Shirley could have moved anywhere, like North Dakota with its bitter winters, or enjoyed the climate of Daytona Beach. It wasn't a hard decision.

Moving wasn't much of a chore either. "By the time our kids were 12, they could book a flight, make an airplane reservation and check into a hotel," Welch says. "Shirley knows how to pack."

She's had many opportunities to practice. Welch started as a radio announcer

est paid radio newsmen (at \$135 a week.) Soon after, a Cincinnati station offered \$175 a week. Welch jumped.

The allure of some distant station kept him on the move. Radio and television are rarely steady jobs — a new manager often changes the format, doesn't like the sound of someone's voice or just wants to exert some authority. Welch spent time as a newsmen, reporter, news director or related position at radio and/or television stations in Buffalo, Philadelphia, New York City and Corpus Christi. "Corpus Christi may not be the end of the world, but you can certainly see it from there," Welch jokes. Then, he jetted to San Francisco and then to Kansas City. Soon after, the Missouri company transferred him back to Dallas.

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surprised how many friends you can make just asking someone else a few questions and listening."

He has asked questions and listened seemingly nonstop.

A decade ago, that kind of Herculean effort made tiny 1,000-watt WROD the top station in the region. Now, it's number 2 in Daytona Beach (behind FROG). Of course, when WROD was the biggie, it was also just one of five local stations. There are now nine radio stations in the area.

That's just another change in the business. WROD has seen a lot of them. Created in 1947 and still located in the same seedy-looking building on Wilder Boulevard, just a few yards from the Wilder Cut on the Halifax River, the station shifted from rock to country and to every option in between over the years. In 1983, the turntable stopped when then-owner Frank Ward bought

in the late 1950s in his hometown of Dallas. "I was the classic little kid under the covers with the radio," he says, promptly launching into a routine into the old Amos 'N Andy radio show.

He was drawn by the creative nature of radio, limited only by the listener's imagination, and its ability to provide instant communication. "If I could spell, I'd probably have worked in newspaper," Welch says facetiously. "In radio, spelling doesn't matter."

Graduated from St. Mary's (TX) University with a B.A. degree in English and philosophy, Welch spent two years in the U.S. Army as a second lieutenant. Of his rank, he says, "That proves even the military can make mistakes."

Stationed in Fort Benning, Georgia, he spent his off-hours at local radio and television stations. When his stint ended, he returned to Dallas as the high-

Welch did have some stability in his life: he and Shirley have been married 40 years and have raised five children. "I couldn't have done it without her," Welch says. "We're equal partners. If something happened to me, Shirley could run the station. If something happened to her, I'd be lost."

Shirley was home this day, trying to wrap up the paperwork on the sale, and no doubt wondering where the next move will be.

There probably won't be another major one. Welch is due in Philadelphia for a sales meeting at the end of the month. And, as a broker, he'll be on the road occasionally to show off stations to prospective buyers. Shirley might even travel with him, but they both expect to return to Daytona Beach.

That'll be a real change. Welch never really settled any place for very long before Daytona Beach. A tall man with



gray hair that still shows flashes of blond coloring, Welch looks like a newscaster and exudes a warm presence abetted by his wonderful voice. "People must like the sound of it," he says. "I kept getting hired."

His last stop in Dallas, however, must have reminded him that some folks don't keep moving companies on their speed dial.

Welch contacted a broker and soon spent two days in a Daytona Beach motel room listening to WROD. After that, he signed the purchase agreement, drawing on his savings and a hefty bank loan. "After you sign a paper saying you'll pay someone \$1.1 million, you go home and change your underwear. Trust me," says Welch.

At least he didn't have to pack it up yet again.

He maintained the same nostalgic format WROD had pioneered locally. "We never play any music that features any instrument that has to be plugged into a wall," Welch teases. "If you can't hum along, we won't play it."

If it rocks, raps or reggaes, forget it, too.

The formula has worked well. Welch sold the station for more than he paid for it. Now, his office belongs to someone else. And, now, he's walking out the door for the last time, leaving some long-time colleagues behind. Unlike typical stations, WROD employees stick around. At least one person, operations manager Dave Kasey, has been there as long as Welch. Another, newsman Bob Edwards, boasts a tenure stretching back maybe 25 years – with occasional breaks. "This is a stable place... and we all know what's on the floor of a stable," Welch adds.

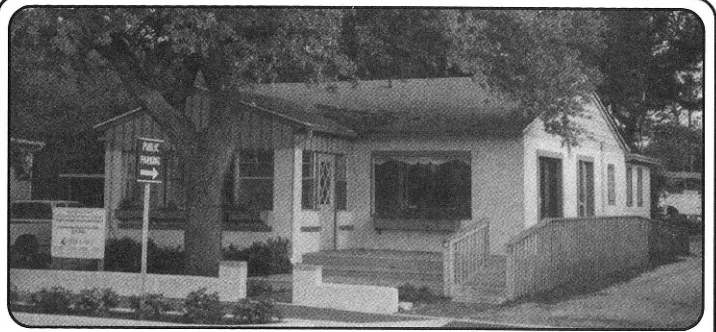
The jokes keep coming. He has a collection of them, a necessity to fill in the gaps during presentations. Add a quick wit, and the combination has made him very popular on the dinner circuit.

Not all the comments are light. Welch knows what he's leaving behind. The sale is bittersweet. "It's like a child you watch grow up, like a daughter getting married. You hate to lose her, but you know she's going on to better things," he says.

"It's been fun."

Welch lights another cigarette. He glances to his left. Through his office window, he can see morning DJ Bill Matthews at work. The red, on-air light is on.

He turns back. After more than 40 years, Welch's light is going off.



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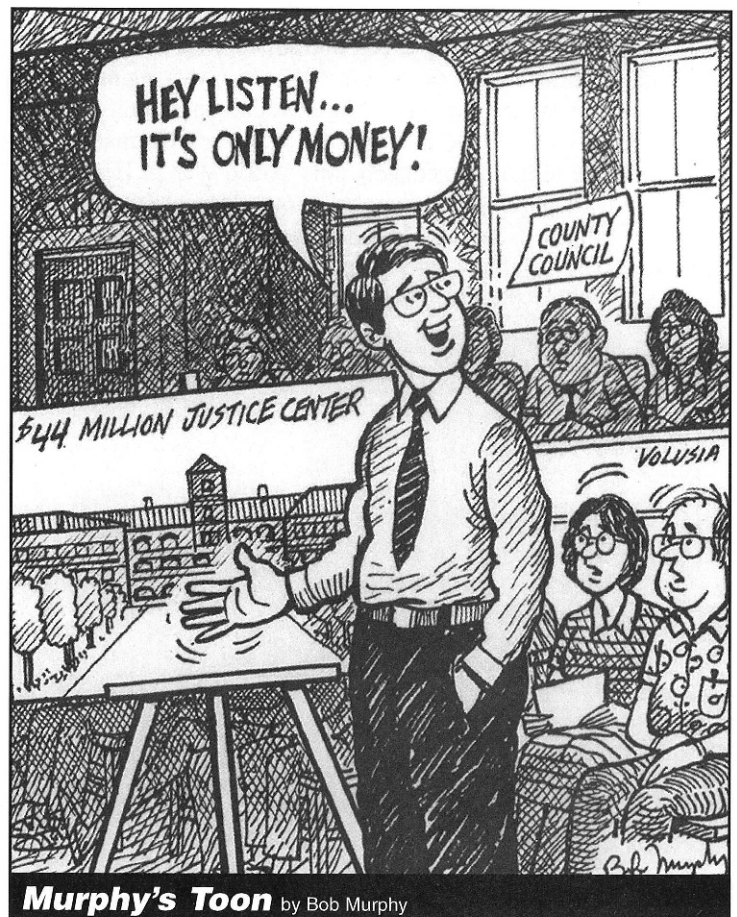


(904) 427-8381 • 1-800-401-8222

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