

About Joe Couch

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of January 16, 2023)

My friend Lynn Calvert called to ask if I knew Joe Couch. I did not, but Lynn assured me he was an influential Oak Ridger to teens growing up in the 1950s and 1960s. At Lynn's request, I am including an article written by his brother, Doug Calvert. Doug and Lynn hope the comments will bring about memories from others who enjoyed Joe during their teen years. You may add comments to the online version of this Historically Speaking column.

Doug began by saying, "I was informed by my brother that today's *Oak Ridger* carries the obituary of a very special person, Mr. Joe Couch. I read his obituary and realized that it spoke to his many years of residency in the Lexington area and his success as an insurance executive. I also noticed that his local Oak Ridge radio "work" was limited to part of a sentence.

I would never disagree with someone's obituary, and certainly never contradict any part of one, but Joe Couch was much more than just a radio DJ with a "Golden Voice." To thousands of Oak Ridge teenagers in the 50s and 60s, he was a nighttime visitor on our AM radios as we did our homework or cruised around town and visited the drive-ins like Da' Wabbit and the Blue Circle.

A few of us may have listened, parked down near the river, while we waited for the submarine races to start. He played love songs, ballads, the best of rock and roll, and a few old favorites from the 40s - many on request. We sat and listened during the summers, with bedroom windows wide open - no house had air conditioning - and all through the year, His radio voice and his selections of "our" music were cheerful constants in many of our lives.

I suspect that if your paper ran a poll of Oak Ridge's most popular people for each decade since 1945, Joe Couch would place very high for the 1950's, 60s and 70s.

When my brother sent me the link to Joe's obituary, I answered his text with my feelings about Joe. He and my sister, ORHS Classes of 1957 and 1960, suggested that I, Class of 1963, should send my writing to the *The Oak Ridger* and ask that it run as a follow on to his obituary.

My motivation is the hope that other Oak Riders who grew up with Joe's accompaniment, and the ones who were too late to hear him, will remember and know that we once had a great radio station host who made our lives better with his efforts.

To thousands of Oak Ridge kids in the 50s and 60s, Joe Couch was a celebrity, a hero, and sometimes, a messenger. He was the evening host of a very popular music show on WATO, one of our two hometown's AM radio stations.

The WATO radio broadcast studio was downtown, and underground. To reach it, to go and watch him doing his evening music broadcast, you went through double glass doors located between the entrance to the Davis Brothers Cafeteria on the left, and the breezeway, that held several small stores, on the right. Down a long flight of stairs, in the hallway, the WATO studio had a large glass window, behind which he sat at his console with record turntables on his left and right, and a stack of records in front of him.

With his microphone suspended in front of him, he would pull it close to talk on the air and push it away to use the intercom that let him talk with the teenagers who stood or sat in a few chairs in the hall. In between songs, he would ready the next 45 RPM single on the empty turntable while he used the intercom to talk with the kids, all of them fans of him and his show.

John Kinser and I, along with Dwight Moody, both long lost too soon, and other guys, would go there and sit on the floor and watch him and listen to Joe and the music and flirt with the girls who were always there and who adored him. He took requests on the call-in phone line, delivered dedications requested by the kids in the hall, and seemed to truly care that high school students would come to watch him do his show.

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He was the nicest person and always seemed to be having fun on the radio.

On rare occasions, Elizabeth would be in the studio and helped him pull the requested records that he didn't have on his play list. As soon as the song was played, she would get up and replace it in the racks where it belonged.

He adlibbed some commercials, read typed announcements about the upcoming events at the Wildcat Den, and read off scores from ballgames phoned in by his fans.

In the time of American Bandstand and Dick Clark, Wolfman Jack, and Dick Biondi, the self-proclaimed "Village Idiot" of Chicago's nighttime "flamethrower" super-powerful radio station, with its musical station ID, "WLS, in Chicago," on AM radio 890, Joe Couch was a hometown celebrity and a friend to kids who had no money for records but always had the latest music, free for all, with Joe on WATO, at 1290 on the AM radio dial.

When WATO went silent, due primarily to the growing presence of TV, with greater varieties of entertainment and visual advertising that almost killed radio advertising, someone locally assumed the station license and the WATO call sign. Unlike WOKI, still in use today by a local area FM station, NewsTalk 98.7, that alternately says it is in Knoxville or Oliver Springs, WATO is no longer listed as an active call sign in the FCC license registry.

Two now silent voices that will always be remembered by Wildcats from the 50s and 60s. RIP Joe.

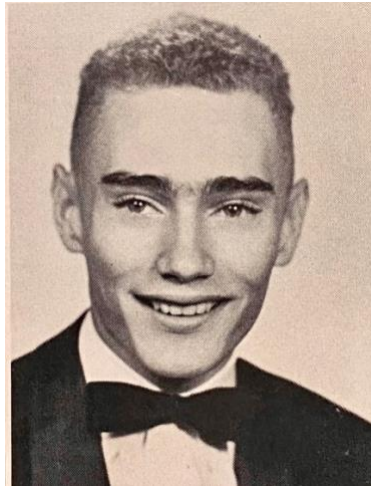
Thanks Doug and Lynn for contacting me about Historically Speaking including this follow on to the obituary of Joe Couch. Undoubtedly, there are others who recall him with a like fondness as you describe. Maybe we will hear from some of them in the comments to the online version of this Historically Speaking.



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Joe Couch senior picture