

Bill Mercer

*Interview conducted by Mark Liptak in 2010.
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It was a very strange time for the White Sox from a broadcasting standpoint. The early / mid 1970's saw the arrival of one of the franchise's most popular voices, Harry Caray, who actually made listening to Sox baseball in good times or bad, interesting.

But some baggage came with Harry and outside issues took place that shaped the broadcasting end of things in ways that were hard to understand. In fact, some things happened that have never happened before or after to a major league team.

Despite 17 consecutive winning seasons, nationally known players and almost yearly pennant races from 1951 through 1967, by the start of the 1971 season, the White Sox had lost their commercial AM broadcasting outlet. Granted the three worst years in franchise history, collectively, from 1968 through 1970 had a lot to do with that but you'd think that 17 years out of 20 of good, exciting baseball would be enough to garner some broadcasting capital for the organization. Apparently not, because no AM radio outlet in Chicago wanted a thing to do with the White Sox.

This forced the Sox to take the only option they had, moving to FM radio at a time when no sports outlet would even consider doing such a thing. In 1971 and 1972 the Sox were heard on area FM stations headed up by WTAQ and WEAW based out of Evanston and LaGrange, Illinois. Finally in 1973, after the great season of 1972, WMAQ radio signed a deal to broadcast the Sox again.

The television situation was almost as chaotic. The move to the "new" WFLD after the 1967 season was a disaster. By the early 70's the station signal was better but the Sox decided to move to 'greener pastures' again and by 1973 signed up with WSNS-TV, channel 44, basically another new station but with better equipment and signal than WFLD.

It simply wasn't the best situation for the Sox.

As popular as Harry Caray was, and as good a broadcaster as he was at that time, finding a partner to work with him proved to be almost as trying as the station situation. Harry had a tremendous ego and didn't tolerate people he thought had no business being in a broadcasting booth. Frankly he treated some of his partner rather shabbily.

Until Jimmy Piersall came on-board before the start of the 1977 season Harry worked with Bob Waller, J.C. Martin, Lorn Brown, Ralph Faucher and Gene Osborn, who passed away within a few years of leaving the Sox. He also worked with Bill Mercer who was with the White Sox in both the 1974 and 1975 seasons. Mercer was a pro, spending many years in Texas covering minor league baseball beginning in 1951 as well as being one of the voices of the Dallas Cowboys (Author's Note: Mercer was one of the radio crew that broadcast the famous 1967 "Ice-Bowl".) He, along with Don Drysdale, was the first announcers for the 'new' Texas Rangers franchise in 1972. He knew the game, had a solid reputation and knew when a good laugh on the air was beneficial. To the public it seemed he worked well with Caray (behind the scenes though their relationship was anything but good.)

It seemed the Sox finally had stabilized that situation. But then came the sale of the franchise, new ownership, financial issues and Mercer was out the door joining the long list of individuals who worked in the White Sox booths from 1971 through 1976.

I caught up with Bill at his home in suburban Dallas. Now in his 80's Bill still does minor league baseball for two teams, the Frisco Roughriders and the Round Rock Express. During the interview he talked about how he came to the White Sox, his thoughts on working with Caray and Martin, and he explained why he was basically forced to leave even though he didn't want to go.

ML: Bill let's start with how you came to the White Sox in the first place.

BM: "It was pretty amazing. I had been doing baseball since 1951 then joined the Texas Rangers in 1972. I worked with Don Drysdale, a great guy. I remember one time that first year before a game, Don says to me, 'we're 35 games out of first place, what the hell are we going to talk about tonight?' (laughing) In 1973 the Rangers fired "Whitey" Herzog and replaced him with Billy Martin as manager and I got crossways with him right off the top. He was arrogant, and abused people and I didn't like that."

"During that season we were up in the booth and one of the front office folks came over and said that ownership was going to sell the club at the end of the year and that if we wanted to look for other work or leave, it was OK. There were no hard feelings. After the season I sent out a few resumes but honestly didn't expect anything. I had only been doing major league games for two years, but I got a call from the White Sox' Leo Breen, the Director of Business Operations."

"Leo said that the Sox were monitoring other broadcasters during the year and wanted to know if I'd be interested in coming to Chicago. I said sure I'd be interested and then Leo said that there could be a problem and that it was Harry Caray."

"I told Leo that I knew Harry, that we broadcast a Cotton Bowl together back in the 1960's and that we seemed to get along fine. We'd run into each other occasionally during our broadcasting travels."

"Leo said that the White Sox expected Harry to leave in two years when his contract was up because it was just a bad situation between him, the players and the organization. When that happened he said, the White Sox thought that I'd take over as lead announcer if I did my homework the previous two years...then he offered to double my salary. I was making 25 thousand dollars and had four kids, one of whom was getting ready to go to college; that was a lot of money for those days. The White Sox wanted an answer by that evening."

"I tried to get in touch with people in the Rangers organization to let them know what happened and to see what they thought but I just couldn't reach anybody. I then called Jack Buck, the Cardinals announcer who worked with Harry in St. Louis to ask him what he thought. Jack said that he thought I'd be fine, that Harry had "mellowed." Time was running short so I talked it over with my wife and we decided to take the offer and go up to Chicago.

I understood that Harry *was* Chicago; that I was going to be second fiddle and that was fine, I didn't have any problems with that."

ML: So you and Harry went down to Sarasota that spring to do some pre-season games. How did that go?

BM: “Well first off that winter I went on the White Sox caravan. I brought my wife and daughter with me for it. Naturally right in the middle of it we got caught in a blizzard, it sure was a lot different than Texas but I and my family were enjoying things.”

“Yes, that spring we went down to Florida and did some games and things were fine. In fact when cleaning out our house I actually found a letter from that spring that I wrote to my wife and in it I said that Harry and I were getting along fine, I thought things were going to be OK.”

“But when the regular season started things went wrong. I don’t know exactly how but it wasn’t working. I don’t like to be a homer but I also don’t like to criticize everything that goes wrong in a game. Harry would just beat it to death.”

“Early in 1974 Stan Bahnsen was having trouble in the first inning of games. I actually asked him about it and he told me that it didn’t seem to matter how long he warmed up it just didn’t click right at the start. Some pitchers just have trouble that way. Sure enough I’m on the radio and Stan gets in trouble in the first and gives up two runs. I forget who the Sox were playing but he settled down and it’s still 2-0 in the 4th inning when Harry comes in to do the middle innings on the radio. One of the first things he says on the air is, ‘that Bahnsen doesn’t know how to pitch...’ So I said that I talked to him and he (Bahnsen) said it wasn’t a question of warming up enough, it just wasn’t working. I said that some pitchers are like that. So Harry shoots back *on air*, ‘you never say anything bad do you?’ After that it didn’t matter what I said, he’d put it down on air.

“Jim Kaat was another guy. You remember how he started out Mark, he was awful. Harry just raved on him saying how he was done; he was too old and so on. Well Jim changed his delivery; he went to that ‘quick pitch’ style and just started winning games. I don’t know how many he won in a row but he won 21 games that year, Harry never said a word about him turning things around, never. Harry just never got into that mode of changing his tune.”

(Author’s Note: When I interviewed Jim about his time in Chicago, the subject of Harry came up. “Kitty” had this to say about the situation. *“I remember early in 1974 I was getting hammered and manager Chuck Tanner called me into his office. I thought I was going to get released, instead Chuck told me I was going through a tough spell and he wanted me to work out of the bullpen for a while to work out my troubles. Well Harry was absolutely relentless on me. He’d say things like, ‘you know when your fastball and your curve ball are the same speed maybe it’s time to retire. It turns out I wound up having a good year and the last week Harry asked me to be on his pre-game show, he said I was his ‘Pitcher of the Year’ and that I’d get a TV out of it. I told him to shove his TV, to give it to Terry Forster. Just so everybody knows, I’d see Harry often in spring training or on the road and we’d have a drink and talk, it’s not like we wouldn’t socialize, but his way just grated players a lot. One time in the clubhouse guys were talking about it and how much they hated what he was saying and I said, ‘listen the radio has a knob on it, just turn it off, or turn the dial.’”*

ML: The first regular season game you ever worked in a White Sox booth was quite “interesting” to say the least, April 5, 1974, California and Nolan Ryan versus Wilbur Wood and the White Sox. It’s freezing cold but that didn’t stop some folks who decided to “streak” nor did it slow down a very shapely female that seemed to get Harry’s attention as well as the players and many of the fans. Seriously the bi-play between you two in the booth was one of the funniest

things I've ever heard. Quite a beginning! (Author's Note: The Angels easily won the game 8-2 before over 30,000)

BM: "Oh man was it cold. We don't have that kind of cold weather in Texas in April. I was dressed like I was for the "Ice Bowl" in Green Bay. I had on gloves, an overcoat, a hat, it was freezing. I don't remember if it was this game or another time when the Sox faced Nolan Ryan and it was early in the season but I remember looking up and it was actually snowing! I mean really snowing. What wound up happening was I was sitting in the booth and the wind was blowing and I'm doing the 'poor me, poor me routine' because I was so miserable and I actually missed an Angels pitching change! (laughing) I'm calling the game talking about how Ryan was just sailing along and never noticed anything until the next day."

"Nolan and I knew each other and I'm on the field when one of the Angel P.R. guys stops me and says that Nolan wanted me to know he was in the clubhouse for the inning or two that I still had him on the mound! That's a lesson that I still impart to my students that you have to maintain your concentration regardless of anything else that's going on." (Author's Note: Bill has taught broadcasting and play by play at North Texas University in Denton for over 40 years. Many of his students are now working professionally including Rangers announcer Dave Barnett)

ML: How did you prepare for a game?

BM: "It was a daily thing for me, even on off-days. That's another thing I tell my students, if you don't like to do research, to read newspapers and spend time on the internet this isn't the business for you. Preparation is a daily thing; you have to work on it every single day. When I was doing the White Sox, we didn't have the internet or satellite TV so I'd read at least two newspapers and if we were on the road, I'd call back to the station to see if anything was in the Chicago newspapers that I needed to know. I'd read The Sporting News as well. I kept my own stats, including some areas that you usually didn't get from the teams."

"I'd get to the park for a night game about three or 3:30. I'd work out for a bit even if it was just hitting a tennis ball at one of the walls at Comiskey Park. Then I'd go into the clubhouse and talk to the players, talk to Chuck (Tanner), just get a sense of what was going on that day. By the time you do all that, three hours or so have passed and it was time to get into the booth and get ready to go on."

ML: Did you do radio and TV or just radio for the Sox?

BM: "I did both. The first year, 1974, I was strictly radio but the next year after Bob Waller was fired, I did both. (Author's Note: Waller was a rising young broadcaster who came to the White Sox from Cincinnati. The final day of the 1974 season he did a live interview with Chuck Tanner on the pre-game show that caused Tanner to get so angry he walked away in the middle of it. Waller was very critical in his questioning of Tanner and the club that finished 80-80 that season. Mercer told me in the interview that Waller got "Harry-itis")"

ML: J.C. Martin in his interview with me talked a lot about how Harry basically just left him on his own with little help, guidance or conversation during a broadcast but that you went out of your way to try to help him in the business. Talk to me about J.C.'s situation and I understand that didn't exactly endear you to Harry in the process.

BM: "I got a call that winter from Leo Breen and he said that he thought the Sox had found a color guy to take the place of Bob Waller. Leo said he played with the Sox and was in an

important World Series and that his name was J.C. Martin. I told Leo I had heard of J.C. but never met him.”

“Leo said that there was a problem though and I asked what it was. That’s when Leo said that J.C. had a really bad accent and asked if I could help him. Well I’m a teacher and I said that I’d try if J.C. was willing to work at it. We met in Peoria I think it was, and we had either lunch or dinner, I don’t remember. I brought some material with me for him to work on. It was class every day with J.C.”

“So then we went to spring training. The first day Harry walks in and starts yelling at me. “What are you doing working with this guy?” He was raving at me. I said, “Harry I’m a teacher and this is something that management asked me to do.” Harry said, “that’s the trouble with you teachers you’ve got hundreds of guys trying to get into the business and instead of starting out down in the low minors like you and me, they’re trying to learn here.” That set the tone and it was a miserable year.”

“Starting in the spring we’d record the games and I’d critique them with J.C. J.C. worked as hard as he possibly could and he was making progress but Harry ignored him. J.C. would tell me, “Harry won’t listen to me during the game. He just ignores me.” Harry came out and told me, “I’m not talking to that son-of-a-bitch. He’s got nothing to say anyway.”

“When J.C. and I were on the air we had a good time. Baseball like all sports shouldn’t always be so serious and there were times when we’d have a laugh or tell some stories on the air. We’d do a lot outside of the booth too. I taught J.C. tennis. He must have broken three rackets, he’d get so frustrated but one day he beat me. Remember J.C. was a professional athlete and eventually he picked up the sport. When he beat me he just started laughing!”

(Author’s Note: In my interview with J.C. I asked him about Harry and the tension in the broadcast booth. “I didn’t really fit in with Harry. He didn’t want to work with me. We didn’t hit it off at all. I wasn’t used to working with a guy that had that kind of authority and Harry used that against me. I was only there for one year. Now Bill Mercer was a great guy, he helped me out a lot. If I had Bill when I started out, I think I’d have been a lot better and things would have worked out. Harry just left me out to dry.

I’ll give you an example, we were in Milwaukee doing a game and the Brewers had a pre-game activity which saw the Milwaukee wives playing a game before the regularly scheduled one. That game caused the regular game to start late. Harry opened the telecast and then just left the booth. He left me there by myself for it must have been 15, 20 minutes.”

ML: This was a tough time for the franchise because owner John Allyn was basically going broke due to some outside business ventures that didn’t pan out. There were rumors about the club moving and like I said it was a bad situation. How much did you know about what was going on with ownership?

BM: “I knew what was going on. You look at that 1975 roster and see guys who had nothing left anymore, Bill Gogolewski...Claude Osteen, they were on the cheap. There was also a recession going on in the country and that didn’t help things.”

ML: Yet you were ready to return weren’t you?

BM: “I was. I knew the relationship between Harry and management was bad. I was sure that I was going to be back, in fact I eventually signed a deal for the 1976 season. But then John Allyn

sold the team to Bill Veeck and my deal was null and void. I tried to get in touch with Bill and was never able to reach him. Knowing what I know now, I probably should have flown up to Chicago and met with him. When Bill got the club, I think in the back of my mind I knew that Harry was going to be back. That surprised me because no place else would anybody in authority put up with what Harry was doing.”

ML: What did you think about the original Comiskey Park?

BM: “I loved it. The way I’d always categorize Comiskey Park was that it was a “wonderful dump.” (laughing) The scoreboard, the fights in the stands... it was just a wonderful time. And I had a great relationship with the players. Wilbur Wood was a friend. Ken Henderson was a great guy and a close friend. They were good people to be around. I’ve got to tell you a story and this is kind of how the guys operated.”

“We were in Baltimore playing the Orioles and I had Ed Herrmann up in the booth with me. This was during the time of Watergate. For a while I was actually doing the games by myself. Harry had gotten suspended. He was kicked off WMAQ radio because he did an illegal interview, he was trying to destroy the station and I was asked if I could do nine innings by myself. I asked for how long and was told that Harry could be done for the season. I said, ‘well I did games in the minor leagues for years by myself so I can do it,’ but whenever possible the Sox would try to get me some help. Ed was hurt at the time so he’s up in the booth with me and I’m talking about how I had visited some friends in Washington D.C. and how beautiful that city is with the monuments and the Capitol and everything and Eddie chimes in, “Yea it’s great to see the country’s still running even with Tricky Dick (Nixon) in charge...” (laughing)

ML: You liked Comiskey even with the Astro turf infield and natural grass outfield right? (laughing)

BM: “Oh that was awful!”

ML: I understand why the White Sox did that, they thought it would save money because of maintenance issues.

BM: “But it really didn’t. We were in Kansas City, Royals Stadium had recently opened and they had an all turf field. I was talking with George Toma their groundskeeper and he absolutely hated the stuff. He said it was harder to maintain than grass because bubble gum would get on it or tobacco juice.

ML: Have you kept up with the Sox through the years? What did you think about the World Series?

BM: “That was wonderful wasn’t it? I kept up with the players after I left as long as they were there. I’d check the box scores just to see how they were doing.

ML: Bill you’ve been around the business a long time, over 50 years. What do you think about it all? Is it better or worse than when you were doing Sox games and by business I just mean the sports broadcasting business in general?

BM: “I’ve got mixed emotions about it... in general I think the business itself is sad. The technology is wonderful but today there are so many technical interruptions during the TV broadcast that take away from the game itself. You got things covering up the picture which usually are irrelevant to the broadcast.”

