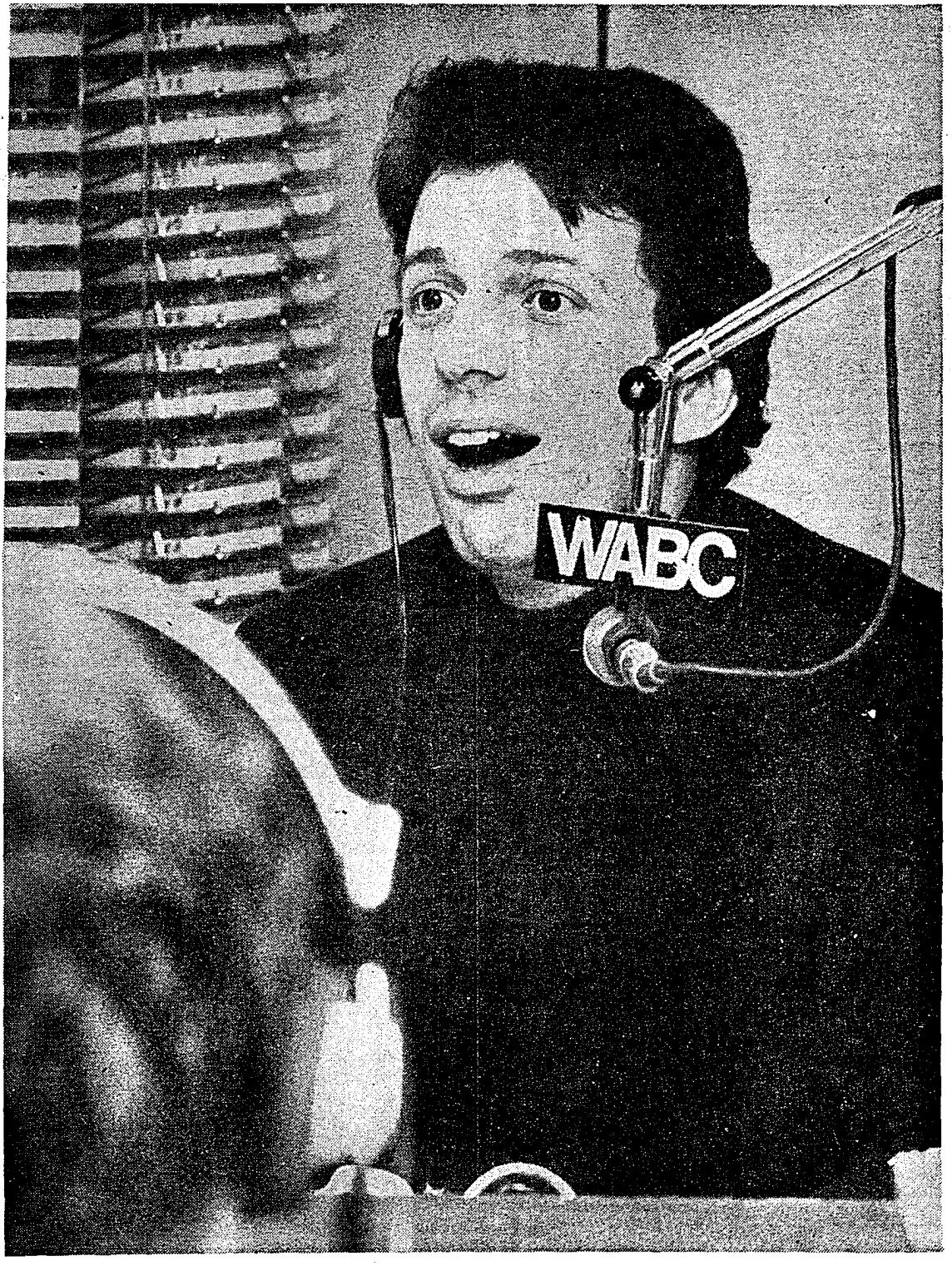
The A-B-Cs of Dan Ingram, D-J: The real Dan Ingram? He isn't exactly ...
Levine, Martin
Newsday (1940-); Mar 23, 1973; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Newsday
pg. 1A



Dan Ingram: Articulate stuntman of the airwaves. See Page 4A.

THE COVER. Photo by Dick Yarwood. More than 2,000,000 tune in each week to hear a disc jockey playing mass-appeal rock—but they're listening for Dan Ingram. The music, says Martin Levine, often is no more than a regrettable necessity. A day in the life of the real Dan Ingram is described on Page 4A.

New York's biggest afternoon-radio draw, Dan Ingram, doing his WABC stint.

The A-B-Cs of Dan Ingram, D-J

The real Dan Ingram? He isn't exactly the way he sounds on WABC's 'Musicradio.' He is a hard-working disc jockey, a trade that, like singing or telling jokes, is an act. But that's not all he does.

Ingram, the TV host, being made up for 'AM New York' by Dennis Eyer of West Babylon, an ABC makeup man.

By Martin Levine

On afternoons when you're knocking about the house, or crawling along the Grand Central Parkway, there is, six times a week, a remedy, a low-level but real pleasure, a distraction. It is to listen to Dan Ingram, from 2 to 6 on WABC radio. He is a disc jockey, playing mass-appeal rock. Often the music seems no more than a regrettable necessity. What you listen for—what more than 2,200,000 people a week listen for, making the show New York's biggest draw in afternoon radio—is Ingram.

An evil bass voice. A vocabulary you don't associate with AM radio (". . . on the Ingram travesty" . . . "ah, that was a thrilling denouement . . ."). Jokes that show familiarity with reading matter beyond Billboard ("Jeansville Jeans. That's Like Jean Valjean, only American"). Surrealistic stunts like playing all of the station's jingles in one 30-second montage. Impersonations, microskits that last for the space of a sentence or a phrase, immediately giving way to another. A rare sense of professionalism, of self-criticism (one day ended with the reflection: "Terrible. If you liked today's show, you'll settle for anything"). And, with style and intelligence, even "Musicradio's" trademark, the manic, bell-ringing style can be invigorating.

Of course, only the naive would expect the real Dan Ingram to be just the way he is on the air. Ingram himself says that his broadcast personality is "an exaggeration" of himself, "a caricature." Though the skill of the performance, or its informality, may mislead, being a disc jockey—like singing, telling jokes or writing—is an act.

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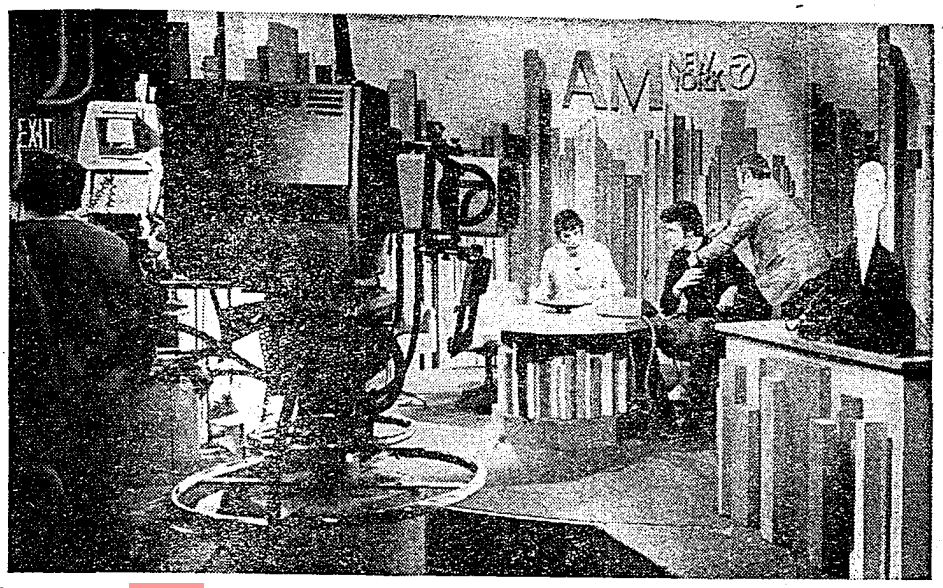
Daniel Trombley Ingram is not only a clever but an exceeding hard-working man. During a recent week, besides his Monday-through-Saturday



Newsday Photos by Dick Yarwood

Preparations: Ingram and co-host Leonard Nimoy put the finishing touches on the script.

'Commercials are the main thing. Radio is a sideline. Television is a side sideline.'

radio program, he was hosting Ch. 7's Monday-through-Friday morning interview show ("You can fairly call it an on-the-air audition") and continuing a heavy schedule of taping commercials.

"Commercials are the main thing," he said at one point in what turned out to be a 13½-hour day. "Radio is a sideline. Television is a side sideline." Why, then, do TV at all? "I like occasionally to throw a little bit of grass into the patch and see what grows."

This morning he had left his 18-room house in Oyster Bay shortly after 4 AM because the forecast had said snow. (There are 18 rooms because there are eight children; this is both Ingram's and his wife's second marriage.) At the TV studio on West 66th Street before 6, he broadcast "A.M. New York" live from 7 to 9.

The day's guests were a policeman-turned-gardener wearing a green suit; Rip Torn, promoting his new movie unshaved; a brigadier general who praised the work of "females" in the Army reserve; a woman who had written a book psychoanalyzing the Kennedys, and Leonard Nimoy (Mr. Spock of "Star Trek"), the co-host, who had written a book himself and read poetry and showed photographs from it.

Over breakfast in a coffeeshop near Lincoln Center, the staff agreed that it had gone well. Ingram ate three orders of scrambled eggs and bacon: A low-carbohydrate diet ("It's expensive, but that's not a problem") has enabled him to lose about 70 of the 260 pounds that, as "Big Dan," used to carry on his six-foot, three-inch frame. After more talk back in his office, he went off to a hotel to get an hour or two of sleep.

Let us skip the afternoon—we'll come back to it and the radio show—to rejoin Ingram at 7 PM, as he sits in a recording studio above Radio City Music Hall. An afternoon phone call had told him that he was wanted for commercials. He was taping radio spots and the "voice over" for spots on TV. It is work he does an estimated four days a week.

Of an income "considerably in the six figures," Ingram is "in the six figures at WABC alone" and "in the double six figures for commercials." Given the enormous financial rewards of advertising, he believes, the field attracts "all your creative people."

Ingram finished his working day recording for what can be known here only as "a certain make of automobile." In a hot, half-lit theater so tucked away in the Music Hall that you have to take an elevator and then walk past the Rockettes' hospital and up another floor to get to it. Inside a little black booth, he made faces to get the required warmth and friendliness in his voice.

* * *

Ingram was born in Oceanside on Sept. 7, 1934, and spent his childhood in Flushing. His father was a saxophonist in the days when radio used studio orchetras. The boy used to steal scripts and go home and pretend he was doing the shows.

At the age of 13, as one of six on-the-air finalists in a local disc-jockey contest, he came in last. "The guy who won it is a carpenter in New Jersey," he says. At Malverne High School, he handled the PA announcements. At Hofstra, where he majored in drama, he worked on the campus radio station—"jazz and a program called 'Scouting in Review.'"

He got married, however, and left college in his second year to join WNRC in New Rochelle. A dispute over getting paid led to a brief engagement in the toll booths of the Southern State Parkway, but he returned to radio with Patchogue's WALK ("'Walk on air.' They come back to me. I have pretty good recall"). Next came WNHC and Ch. 8 in New Haven—radio in the morning, TV in the afternoon. Ingram says his whole radio career changed because of a Thanksgiving morning show in New Haven. "The world was dead. Nobody on the streets. Nothing happening in the studio. I stopped my usual announcer tones. I said, 'Is anybody out there? Will somebody call?' The phone never stopped ringing. I took that tape home and realized that getting *human contact* was the important thing."

So he worked on developing that. Today he believes that—like Arthur Godfrey in the past, Dave Garroway still—he has the gift of "making people think you're talking to them." That's the reason he'll switch constantly from one dialect, approach or *shtik* to another. He's proud that a black engineer once said, "You know, you're the only white jock that's acceptable in black New York."

As for his classic out-of-town apprenticeship, it continued with KBOX in Dallas ("'KBOX, the station that wished on Dallas and became a star.' I wrote that myself. Means nothing but sounds great"). He remembers KBOX as "probably the hottest rock station in the country" and a place where the jocks could do things like agree that, for a week, they'd speak only in whispers.

When the owner of KBOX moved him to St. Louis WIL, which he also owned, Ingram attracted the city's highest ratings; but he began to pine for New York. He got his job at WABC by urging the general manager to admit that his current afternoon man was no good, and then by dropping off a tape of the man's show with the records and commercials unchanged but with his own patter.

That Ingram made it to the big time at the age of 26 is perhaps less impressive than his achievement in staying there. While the average life of a disc jockey *in the business* is three to five years, by August he will have been with WABC for 12; he signed his latest five-year contract in February. (It is true, however, that most of the station's personalities have shown unusual staying power: Bruce Morrow has also been there for more than 11 years, for example.)

"My life has been a series of fairly easy times," Ingram says. "I've had some bad times, like everybody else—my first wife died in an automobile accident, my youngest son is retarded—but professionally its been a series of upward steps."

* * *

After lunch (two filet mignons, very rare), Ingram walks to the ABC building at Sixth Avenue and 54th Street, arriving in the eighth-floor studio only a few minutes before air time. It is a pegboard-lined room, perhaps 25 feet square, in the middle of which the disc jockey and engineer sit opposite each other. (The engineer will change from time to time during the afternoon, because the union strictly limits working hours, but he will always be young.)

Facing the disc jockey is a signboard—the sort you see outside churches and synagogues—reading

THE MUSIC'S ON US

MUSICRADIO WABC

WABC MUSIC TIME

GET THE BEST

NEW MUSIC AND THE

BEST OF THE GOLD

ON

MUSICRADIO 77

WABC.

These are the station's main current slogans. The disc jockeys also have a card file of others that they're supposed to work their way through during a show.

"What's the opening? Steely Dan? Another piece of crap for the people who love it," Ingram tells the engineer, giving him the proper cartridge to insert in the tape machines. D. J.s. (or their engneers) no longer spin platters; jingles, commercials and recordings are all on pre-cued tape loops in little plastic containers. The cartridges here are stored in four large revolving stands.

To drumbeats, a soprano "ABC's Dan Ingram!" and a baritone "Go-go-go-go-go!," the show begins (Ingram admits that some of his jingles sound a little '50s-ish, but insists on the value of "continuity." "The kind of radio we do has to be terribly predictable," he says. "There have to be comfortable parts so that people will know what they're listening to.")

And the Top 40—even the Top 30—has gone

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The A-B-Cs of Dan Ingram, D-J

—*Continued from Page 5A*

the way of the discs. "We play a total of 17 [hit-] records for the week," Ingram says, noting, however, that "we're playing a lot more old records now—four an hour. I play the Gold Records 1 through 500 and then start again." Although he "occasionally" programs music to reflect his mood, "it's not necessary," he's found.

One wonders how it can even be possible, for WABC disc jockeys are under another constraint: They must play records No. 1, 2, 3, and 4 on the "Musicradio Survey" every 70, 75, 80 and 90 minutes, respectively. Little clocks keep track of these periods, and at the proper time light a bulb whose filament is in the shape of Robert Indiana's LOVE sculpture.

Ingram's radio voice is different from his ordinary speaking one—lower, with a leathery base. He explains that this is because he works close to the mike: "It's easier. I'm lazy. That's my image of myself, despite the fact that I'm a hustler." The difference may also be partly due to the device, out at the WABC transmitter in Lodi, N.J., that adds a two to three-second echo to everything broadcast.

"Carly Simon gonna sing 'You're So Vain' for the 6,493rd time," Ingram informs his engineer, tossing him the cartridge. He himself, meanwhile, is checking the computer-printout Program Log, which tells him which commercials are scheduled, and writing down what else has been played, to meet FCC regulations that it be an accurate record to within five seconds.

Neither this nor his on-the-air comments, however, take up all his attention. A copy of the Daily News is spread out before him, a phone kept close at hand. "Phone I want to see," he mutters. "Phone is important. Money comes in over the phone."

And so it does. Before the end of the show, his agent calls to report the arrival of a check for $15,000—residuals from a commercial. "Five more years is all I want," Ingram tells the reporter. "Five years and no more. I'm a very lucky guy."

* * *

Despite the barrier of a four-inch-thick door with double glass, a steady stream of visitors troops in and out of the studio while the show is on the air. There's a former secretary with a baby, high-school students participating in some sort of contest, a prospective advertiser whose product's name will demand careful enunciation ("That's as bad as Schickhaus the most carefully-pronounced meats in the world," Ingram observes).

A woman from the advertising department has a complaint "Mr. Ingram," she says. "Did you sing along with the Castro commercial? The agency called. Play it straight. I've been asked to ask you." The reply is: "Okay, I'll hum."

What all the interruptions emphasize is how little a disc jockey actually *says*. From that, however, the listener, out of half-attention, or loneliness and wish fulfillment, constructs a whole person. The D.J. supplies an occasional phrase, some mannerisms, and, as Ingram puts it, "you fill in the blanks."

By now, the news has come and gone a couple of times, the Top 17 have been reshuffled. "And now," Ingram tells radioland, "here THEY are, Bette Midler." Off the air, he says that he doubts he will ever make the off-color joke about Miss Midler's endowments any more explicit. Asked whether the station management has ever criticized him for something he's said, he recalls the time that he pretended Stevie Wonder, the blind singer-composer-musician, was in the studio. "They say I never should have said. 'Hey, Stevie! No, not that way, Stevie! Will somebody turn him around?" But in general, he says, "They understand. The numbers [audience ratings] are there. They're very pragmatic people."

To the engineer: "We need a Clearasil, followed by Eine Kleine 12-jingle, bunched up adroitly with a Blue Cross." To himself, having wheeled his chair back to the stand of Old Gold: "Oh, I ain't gonna play that _ _ _ _ . I'm gonna play *this* _ _ _ _."

A languid wave toward himself with his right

hand signals the engineer that he wants his mike on (that this is carefully done before he laughs shatters any illusions about radio's spontaneity). An equally languid throat-cutting gesture with the left hand shuts the mike off. There is also a cough switch that he controls himself.

In the studio, the conversation between disc jockey and engineer touches on people who swore they'd never do commercials and are now doing them, and on whether Ingram will or will not sing along with the next Castro convertible spot. "You wouldn't dare," says the engineer. "It isn't that I dare or don't dare," Ingram says, "I really don't care." He remains silent when the spot comes on.

Now Ingram is reading a packet of material for the next morning's "AM New York" show. There is a book by the man who will transform him with makeup, another by the woman who will tell how to travel with your pet.

A nice job, the reporter comments—you don't have to apply more than half your mind to it. "A tenth. A tenth," Ingram says. "If you are so disposed. I think it's similar to what—who was it? Lindbergh—said about flying. Radio is long periods of boredom punctuated by moments of sheer terror."

More music, with Ingram doing things like reading the weather report over the opening of a record and finishing just as the vocal begins. "I was one of the first people who did talkups," he says. "I have a clock in my head. I can sit down and do it the first time." Today, however, WABC and most other stations print the length of intros on their playlists and have digital clocks that tick off the seconds as the tape starts.

The end of the "Ingram Outrage" is drawing near—and also some kind of minimoment of truth: the last playing of the Castro spot. It's on! The chorus is hymning sofas that turn into beds! Ingram is briefly still, then, having reached a compromise, he beckons with his hand. "Boo - boo - boo - boo," he sings, but softly and not for many bars.

A few minutes later come his closing theme, the ad-lib routine over it, and "I love you" in Norwegian to his wife. He rushes off to record commercials. /H