

Gordon Hinkley, Pianist

by Rich Regent

Many Milwaukeeans remember **Gordon Hinkley** and his **Ask Your Neighbor** radio show on 620 WTMJ-AM. For his 50-year on-the-air career and as best-known radio personality, Gordon was inducted into the Radio Hall of Fame in 1997. He will be 83 years old on November 15.

I worked with Gordon as a Broadcast Engineer on his shows from 1963 to 1969. We never were sure what a caller would say on the live phone-in shows. So I invented a tape delay system. First, an Ampex rack-mounted tape recorder was used to record the show. Next, the tape was routed back and forth through some wheels to an auxiliary play head and then played on the air. The resulting five seconds delay allowed Engineers to cut offensive audio before it got broadcast, critical in a few instances to ensure programs were squeaky clean to comply with strict FCC regulations.

Usually on Friday I taped Sunday's **Invitation to Beauty** music program with Gordon. It featured the Claire de Lune theme song and was sponsored by Chalet on the Lake. Gordon's voice was so distinctive and authoritative it was even used on the station's CONELRAD and later the Emergency Broadcast System tests, which were aired weekly on WTMJ. "This is a test, this is only a test of the..." was a method of emergency broadcasting to the public in the event of an enemy attack during the cold war.

Gordon is retired and resides at the Village at Manor Park in West Allis. Yet you might see Gordon on TV commercials for Manor Park or "They're saying nice things about Church and Chapel." This native Wisconsinite keeps busy, like being on the Board of Directors for the Salvation Army.

So when the **Dixie Doodlers** were hired to play at the Manor on July 9, 2008, for a Doorway Dedication followed by an Ice Cream Social, tubist John Knurr arranged for Gordon to sit-in at the Grand Piano. We all wonder, while setting up to play, if Gordon will stop in. Suddenly, there he is, with white hair, distinguished fuzzy white eyebrows, a black suit and pleasant manners. Recognizable, except in his younger years his hair was black and he never wore such comfortable white tennis shoes when working at Radio City. As we take turns shaking his hand I notice that Gordy is still taller than me and his voice is very familiar.

We reminisce about the old radio days when Sam Armato, clarinetist, was Music Librarian at WTMJ. A few jingles, commercial spots and music were on 78 RPM records. Most were on modern 33 RPM style records, although self-cuing 60-second tape cassettes were coming into use. Sam would select and carry in huge stacks of records to the Control Room. On the top was his handwritten form listing record numbers, sides and cuts for the Engineers to play for musical shows. The tunes flowed musically from one to another, sometimes matching key or style. Sam was such a record genius. Gordon fondly remembers Sam and says "He must be 92 now."

It is a thrill for the audience to listen to and for the Doodlers to play along with Gordon Hinkley. Besides being a great radio personality, many of us are pleasantly surprised to learn that he is a talented pianist, too! "Pick a tune," Gordon says, as he smoothly plays Elmer's Tune, Darktown Strutter's Ball and Bill Bailey from memory. He politely signals us "Out..." when we play the chorus for the end of the last tune.