

# SHOWER OF STARS

**The Beatles, Rolling Stones and Elvis: For Alabama radio pioneer Dan Brennan, career was filled with music, celebrity**

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"Ladies and gentlemen ... the Beatles." How many people have been able to say this at a concert, facing a roaring crowd? In Alabama, we know of only one man who's had the honor: Dan Brennan, a former radio host, station manager, concert promoter and prime mover at WVOK-AM.

Brennan, now 86, introduced the Beatles at the Gator Bowl in Jacksonville, Florida, when the Fab Four played there on Sept. 11, 1964. The 8:30 p.m. show — which happened in the windy aftermath of Hurricane Dora — came courtesy of WAPE-AM, a radio station owned by the Brennan family. To be honest, Brennan doesn't precisely recall what he said to the audience that evening, just before the mop-topped John Lennon, Paul McCartney, George Harrison and Ringo Starr took the stage. But he's sure the introduction was brief, wasting no time as Beatlemania raged. "I didn't stay up there too long," Brennan says, laughing. "It was quite a thing."

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fans were ready to twist and shout in the Southeast, and the Brennan clan had made it happen.

"People were going crazy, and you couldn't hear anything because the girls were screaming so loud," Bartolotti says. "It didn't matter. It was just the coolest thing."

The Beatles were paid a fee of \$50,000 — a hefty sum in those days, Brennan says — and in the thick of the civil rights movement, the band's contract specified that they wouldn't perform for a segregated audience. Brennan also remembers that Starr requested reinforcements to the stage area near his drum kit, because strong gusts lingered after the hurricane.

"Ringo had a riser above the stage, and of course this is all outdoors, and the winds were blowing up to 70 miles an hour," Brennan says. "Ringo said, 'I'm not getting up there unless you build me a bannister around this thing.' So we had to delay the start of the show about 15 minutes or so while the carpenters came out and put these rails together. I think we had at least 15,000-16,000 people there."

Looking back on it, Brennan realizes that bringing the Beatles to the Gator Bowl was a milestone event. The



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"The level of excitement was unbelievable," Bartoletti says. "There was a police line for the Beatles to run through, and the stage was built up so people couldn't get to them."

Despite her young age — she was 7 that year — Bartoletti felt another emotion at the Gator Bowl: extreme pride. Her very own father was on stage, standing close to four of the most famous musicians in the world. Thousands of Beatles

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These are just a few of the acts presented by the Brennans during the 1950s, '60s and early '70s. In most cases, the concerts were multi-act affairs, featuring the hottest names the radio stations could secure. Tickets were priced at \$1.50-\$5.50 per show, Brennan says, and artists' fees usually ran about \$300-\$7,500 per act.

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also included the Righteous Brothers, Marty Robbins, Sonny James, Skeeter Davis, Del Reeves, Archie "Rinderella" Campbell and Cannibal and the Headhunters.

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"Elvis was an opening act," Brennan says. "That was before he became very big. He showed up about five minutes before his show was to go on. His clothes were all rumpled, and he said, 'Dan, I need to go on later in the show. I've got to change clothes and everything.' I said, 'Well, this is Roy's show. If it's all right with him, it's all right with me. We'll have to ask him.'"

"We went over there and asked Roy, and he said, 'No, we're not going to do that. He pulls this at every one of our shows. He wants to go on late in the show.' I said, 'Elvis, I'm sorry, but we can't accommodate you, because it is his show.' Things changed a little bit after that. I think he could call his own shots."

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Some of the concerts took place in a single location — most often, Jacksonville. But in the stations' 1960s heyday, shows usually kicked off on Fridays in Montgomery at Garrett Coliseum and moved to Birmingham on Saturdays at Municipal Audi-

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In Brennan's view, that's a satisfying legacy. "I don't have any regrets," he says. "What's that Frank Sinatra song? 'I did it my way.'"

In advance, then, rush inside to secure their favorite general-admission seats.

Brennan, headquartered in Birmingham, rode herd over the Shower of Stars and was the primary talent buyer for the concerts, along with his other duties at WVOK. (The station's nickname, "the Mighty 690," referred to its spot on the AM dial.)

In the minds of Alabama listeners, WVOK and WBAM ruled supreme, and the stations were closely linked by their concert series. Four dates per year were standard — in winter, spring, summer and fall — and total attendance topped out at 15,000 people for each three-show stint in Birmingham. Garrett Coliseum, in contrast, could hold 10,000-plus for a single performance in Montgomery.

"We never had a flop," Brennan says, "but we had some shows that were a little bit bigger than others. We occasionally wouldn't fill all three seatings in Birmingham, but I don't think we ever had one that was less than about 70 percent full, with all three together. ... I don't know, I guess people got to trust us. They would buy so many tickets in advance, we didn't have to worry about whether they were going to come or not."

Brennan and his wife, Clara, who handled ticketing, estimate that one-third of the tickets for any Shower of Stars date were purchased on faith, before the lineup was ever announced. Fans would mail their orders to the station, requesting a specific showtime, and the envelopes often included suggestions for artists they'd like to see.

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