



COUNTRY BOY

By Allison McGaughey '99

Lon Helton proudly displays his National Broadcast Personality of the Year award, following November's CMA Awards in Nashville.

Each week, country music fans across the country tune in to hear MC graduate and nationally-syndicated radio host Lon Helton count down the bits... and bring their favorite stars to the 'kitchen table'

ON HELTON '72 DOESN'T GET STARSTRUCK.

He chats comfortably with Keith Urban. He knows Kenny Chesney. And he gets famous people to tell him personal details about their lives.

As the host of the nationally syndicated CMT *Country Countdown USA*, Helton has spent time with seemingly every star in the country-music constellation—everyone from Carrie Underwood to Willie Nelson. Each week, Helton brings a country music chart-topper into the studio in Nashville to chat and help count down the top 30 hits of the week.

For more than 20 years, Helton worked for the country division of *Radio and Records*, a trade magazine chronicling the radio and record industry. Last year, he formed his own company, Country Aircheck, a country music and radio information service—but there were two other career highlights more likely to stand out on his resume. In February, Helton was inducted into the Country Radio DJ Hall of Fame. And during the Country Music Awards in November, he was surprised by Vince Gill with the National Broadcast Personality of the Year Award—an honor he has received three times in six years.

Helton's radio career included stints in Chicago, Denver, and L.A. before he became host of the countdown in 1992.

But the first time he was ever on the air was at Monmouth College.

Monmouth Magazine: How did you initially hear about Monmouth or decide to attend?

Lon Helton: I grew up on the south side of Chicago, in the suburb of Chicago Heights. There was a drama teacher at Bloom Township High School, Cleo Fowler, who was also the mother of my best friend, Dan Fowler '72. She graduated from Monmouth in 1936, and she talked about it all the time. Dan's mother was the biggest advocate—she was the reason a lot of people in Chicago Heights went to Monmouth. (My sister and a brother, Susan Helton Haley '74 and Greg Helton '87, went there too.)

MM: When you came to Monmouth did you know that you wanted to pursue a career in radio?

Lon: I actually came to Monmouth as a chemistry major. Monmouth had a top-notch chemistry department. But I did some things in the theater, got involved in radio, and pretty soon I started to realize that's where I had the most fun.

When I first got to Monmouth there was an information night with tables set up advertising all the college activities. The radio station, WFS, [WMCR] had a booth, so I signed up. Dan and I signed up for shows, and I guess they gave the freshman the less desirable times. I got the slot on Friday nights from 6 to 8 p.m. We were trying to think of theme songs... I used *Get Ready* by The Temptations. My saying was, "Get ready for your big heavy date." So I played music to get you ready for that. And that's how I really started in radio. I'd never even thought of it before that.

MM: Did you start to feel that you had a talent for it? Did people compliment you on your voice or delivery?

Lon: No—it was more like we were lucky to get through it! But we had a captive audience, because the only two other stations in Monmouth were WVPC—"beautiful music," which college students aren't going to listen to, and WRAM, which played adult contemporary—both stations where I later worked.

MM: So what kind of experience did you have at Monmouth? What comes to mind when you think back on your college career?

Lon: I think, especially for a school the size of Monmouth, it had some amazing people. I was exposed to some amazing minds. Just to name a few, Dr. Sam Thompson ['24, professor of philosophy] and Dr. Stafford Weeks [professor of Bible and religion]. Also, Jim DeYoung [professor of communication and theater arts] was an influence on me.

I learned so much even outside my own direct area. The thing about Monmouth is that even though you might be in chemistry, you can go play in radio, and hang out in the theater, and try to keep up with these amazing minds like Weeks and Thompson in philosophy and religion. It challenges you to think about yourself and the world around you.

I think the key to a liberal arts education is that it prepares you to do a variety of things. In my own case, 23 years ago when I had the chance to work for *Radio and Records* writing 2,000 words a week, I was asked, "Can you write?" I had no idea. Because I'd been on radio, on the air. But because of the courses you're forced to take outside your major, all those papers you have to write, it preps you for opportunities that

might come up. Looking back, that's what Monmouth gave me: the experience in all kinds of areas—to be able to say, yeah, I guess I can do that.

MM: What did you do directly after graduating?

Lon: I was done with school in December of '71 [earning a degree in speech, communication and theatre arts], but I stayed in Monmouth to work at WVPC, and then WRAM, on the air. A few months later I went to work for WGIL in Galesburg. And the next thing I knew I was in radio.

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MM: So how did you break into bigger markets?

Lon: I was minding my own business in Galesburg when I got a call from a guy in the Quad City airport—he ran a station in Denver and said he had an opening for an overnight jock. I had sent in an entry for a contest at *Billboard* magazine, and this guy had been a judge. He'd heard my tape, and then when he was going through Quad Cities, he tuned in to hear me live. It was kind of an accident. Everything that's happened to me has been an accident. (My wife is a Monmouth grad, by the way: **Anne Buckhouse Helton** '73. My sophomore year I did an independent study, directing *The Fantastiks*. There was just one female part. She was cast as the female lead. The rest is history.)

I guess my biggest break was in 1975, when I was doing overnights in Denver. Through a total fluke, I got lucky and got noticed by somebody in Chicago. So I worked in Chicago country radio for five years. In 1983, I started with *Radio and Records*. There were 13 different formats, and I did country, and in 1986 moved to Nashville to run the country office. It puts you in a lot of interesting positions: you know a lot of singers before the rest of the world does, you hear the background, you hear the stories. And that's what I can bring to the show, because I have already gotten to know them through my day job.

MM: How do you go about doing the show each week? Are the conversations with your famous co-hosts as real as they sound?

Lon: We sit down and just chat. We don't have much of a script. The artist comes in; we take a look at the top 30, and then I ask

them to tell me four or five people they want to talk about—and now a lot come in armed with stories to tell on each other and keep it light. We spend about an hour and a half, then we lay in the music.

The goal is to make the third person, that listener at the kitchen table, feel like they're part of the conversation. Somebody once said to treat the fans like stars, and treat the stars like regular people. You just go along that way. I'm usually talking to them like friends. In fact once I was talking to Keith Urban, and he started talking about [actress wife] Nicole [Kidman], and then he was saying, "wait—I'm talking to you like a friend—but I don't want to talk about her [publicly]." He had to stop himself. So you create this real feeling of just chatting.

MM: Most country fans would surely think you've got the best job in the world.

Lon: I did pop radio for awhile before I got into country, and the country artists are a lot more fun because they're more like real people. Every one of them has a different story, from Trace Adkins who worked in oil rigs to Carrie Underwood who grew up in this tiny town in Oklahoma to Taylor Swift, who grew up on tree farm in Pennsylvania.

In country you generally don't have the overnight success. People work and pay their dues before exploding, so they're generally more appreciative. The connection between country artists and radio listeners is unlike the kind in other formats... It's about the closeness with the fan. Country artists know that fans want to hear about their real lives. There's not a country singer on the charts that hasn't agreed to come on our show.

It can be great fun. These are interesting people who lead very interesting lives. My job is really getting them to say it.

MM: What about you—did you grow up as a country music fan?

Lon: When you grow up on the south side of Chicago, country is not your first love. Dad was a country fan, so we always argued over control of the radio.

But I grew up listening to Larry Lujack and WLS. I believe Chicago is the greatest radio city in America. Pound for pound, it had more top talent than any city in America. So I guess maybe not even knowing it, growing up as a kid listening to that great radio helped shape my career.

Country to me is defined as lyric oriented songs with adult themes. You can't really understand it or appreciate it 'til you're about 25 and life has slapped you around a little bit. It's about real life. ■