

**CHRIS:** Welcome back to 'Cuse Conversations, I'm Chris Velardi. And this episode is a podcast about podcasting featuring a podcaster. Jon Gay or JAG, as he's known, is a 2002 Syracuse University grad who, after a 15-year career in radio, is the founder of JAG in Detroit, a successful podcasting business which helps companies and nonprofits share their stories through original audio content.

We'll get into what makes audio so compelling and why podcasting isn't going anywhere, but we'll start with what's been a bit of a podcasting passion project for the last year and a half.

Jon has been hosting a podcast featuring alumni of the student radio station WJPZ – Z89. The original plan was to produce about 50 podcasts to celebrate the station's 50th anniversary in 2023. Well, it's 2024, and as the radio station marks 51 years this month, Jon will be wrapping up the series with more than 120 total episodes.

**JON:** The idea was to showcase, we call it the world's greatest media classroom, you know as a fellow WJPZ alum, and to show that through 50 years of the radio station, a lot of the same stories played out. Whether you graduated in 1975 or 2022, the same lessons about teamwork and collaboration and overcoming obstacles and sometimes difficult coworkers, but also getting past that and working together, and then how it prepared people for so many different walks of life.

Whether you did TV, whether you did radio professionally, whether you did PR, became a business owner or any combination therein, it was really to show all these lessons that are universal, and I think really to show the family of JPZ. There is this aspect that is really hard to describe unless you've experienced it that is unlike anything I've ever experienced in my academic or professional life.

There is this feeling when we come back for this banquet every year, the first weekend in March, where it's a family and I know that I get that phrase and that word gets thrown around a lot, but there really is this vibe of lots of big hugs and lots of “I can't wait to see you” and everything.

Pete Giancesini, our alumnic president who was not a did not work at JPZ, but we had him on the podcast because he's been such a friend the WJPZ over the years. He said when he went to his first banquet, he said he saw the same thing play out 100 times - Big hug, “Buddy, how you doing?” “Great to see you.” And then the conversation gets cut off mid-sentence because they see yet another person they have to go say hello to and there's this unbelievable feeling and it comes down to helping each other with job hunting and all the networking stuff that Syracuse University as a whole does so well.

But this unbelievable feeling of pride and joy and sharing in each other's accomplishments I think was great and to show each other, different generations, how much similarity there is between them.

**CHRIS:** Yeah, there's something that that idea of pride and sharing of accomplishments and that truly is, as you listen to people talk about it, that sense of, hey, you know, this person got this great gig, they're doing this great job, and they're part of our family, so we're proud of them—whether or not they went to school together. And I think it's almost a microcosm of kind of the greater Syracuse University picture. There's just a sense of, you know, you see a Syracuse grad wearing a sweatshirt in an airport and suddenly you're like, all right, I got a friend. If my flight's delayed, I know who I'm talking to. And JPZ kind of has that same thing. And it definitely comes out.

What is it about the medium of a podcast that really allows those stories to be shared and experienced and I guess, for lack of a better word, better than other ways of doing this?

**JON:** Honestly, I'll bring it back to radio and bring it back to audio where this whole thing started with JPZ and that is the intimacy of audio as we'll get into at some point in the podcast. I worked professionally in radio for 15 years and there's an intimacy to audio that video simply doesn't have.

If you think about growing up with your favorite morning show where they were up in Syracuse, Boston, New York, Philadelphia, wherever, you felt like you knew that morning show host. If they were with you on the bus on the way to school or in your car on the way to school or work because of the intimacy of audio, it's a physiological fact that, and I tell potential clients this, that you that listening to audio engages your brain more than watching a video because when you've got video, the picture is right in front of you. You know, it's not hard to imagine what's going on, but if you're only hearing it and you're not seeing it, it engages your brain because you have to paint that mental picture and engage your brain to imagine what it is visually that's happening as only your ears are hearing it, if that makes sense.

**CHRIS:** Yeah. And you know, as somebody who, as listeners of this podcast may know, someone who, you know, went to Syracuse, got a degree in broadcast journalism, worked in television for a long time, I always felt like my radio training really prepared me well for being a morning anchor on television because I knew that my audience was getting their kids ready for school, was getting, you know, themselves ready for work, was running around doing a million things. My voice had to get their attention. My words had to be the thing that drew them. And, you know, I think when you're dealing with the people you were talking with for this podcast, you're dealing with some really, really great storytellers who know how to use those words and know how to use their voice. And I mean, my goodness, the compelling audio that came from that.

**JON:** Well, it's funny you say that, Chris, because, yes, we've got such an unbelievable list of all-stars in our podcast. We've got Scotty McFarlane, who is, you know, the congressional correspondent for CBS News. You've got Howard Deneroff, who runs Westwood One Radio. But the thing about JPZ is it's not this ego-competitive thing. I've had folks on the podcast that never worked a day of their lives in media. They just worked at the radio station. I had some folks that either were recommended to me to come on the podcast or that I approached. They said, "What do you want to talk to me for?" It was a humbleness to these, to this group.

**CHRIS:** But everything they've done, no matter what they do professionally, they're always able to talk about the education and experience they got and how that serves them in whatever job it is that they wound up with.

b Absolutely. Absolutely. And I had probably a couple dozen conversations of, hey, it's not about what profile or what you're doing right now. It's about the only requisite for being on the podcast was, did you work at WJPZ? And if the answer to that question is yes, we even had a couple folks who were high schoolers who weren't there as summer staff that were never Syracuse University students. If you were to JPZ, I want to hear about your experience and all the similarities and then all the, you know, individual differences with each story.

**CHRIS:** You talk about radio and that was kind of your professional career start. Is it what brought you to Syracuse?

**JON:** Yeah, I think so. So, I wanted to be in communications like so many Syracuse and knew how students I was a big sports nut when I got to campus. I grew up in the Boston area. My dream gig was to be the play-by-play voice of the New England Patriots, and this is before they were good and so I got there wanting to be the next Gil Santos, who was the – rest in peace – the longtime voice of the New England Patriots. And I got there and I applied immediately to WAER, and I got into WAER and I did a semester where I was going in four in the morning to, you know, dictate a sports cast into a tape recorder. Google that if you don't know what a tape recorder is for your listeners. And then and then the second semester I did that in afternoons and I was getting close to getting to be on the air.

At the same time, I had a friend in the dorm who recommended I come to Z89. Her name is Andi DeCastro and the older brother of one of my best friends from high school, my high school friend Jill Person, her older brother Brian had graduated in 1998 just before I got there in the fall of 98. He had told me about Z89. My friend Andi in the dorm told me about Z89, and I said, all right, I'll go check this out.

And – and this came up in the podcast in almost all 100 plus episodes – the vibe that I got when I walked into Z89 was: “Welcome. Come on in. This is a collaborative environment. Tell us about you. What are you into? What do you want to do?”

I love being on the air. I fell in love—and I was never a big music guy growing up—but I fell in love with the art of being an on-air talent and deejaying and talking up a 15 second post over, you know, whoever would have been, you know, from Barenaked Ladies to Aliya at that time, whoever would have been. And I ended up becoming the chief announcer and in charge of all the DJs on Z89 before I was cleared to be on the air at WAER.

And no and no, no shade intended at air, their pedigree is, you know, limitless as as we know it. The amount of people that have graduated, they've gone on to amazing things. But I realized I'm not going to compete with the folks who were that diehard into sports.

I realized that if I have to work that hard and memorize all the stats of every West Coast college basketball player, sports is not going to be fun for me anymore. I just can't compete with... as much as I want to play-by-play, I kind of like this music thing. I kind of like this DJ thing. And so I said, okay, I'm going to pursue the music side of it. And no regrets, really. I'm glad I went that route.

**CHRIS:** And you also, you know, talked about that atmosphere when you first walked into the radio station and go back to that word that you've already used, which is family. They welcomed you into the family right away.

**JON:** Right. Harry Waring, who was the senior when I was a freshman, he was the general manager in the program director. He was class of 99. I was class of 02. you know, he's running a radio station as a senior in college. His plate is pretty full and he's a Long Island guy. He knew I was a Boston sports guy no matter what he was doing. When I walked into the radio station, he would say something about Jets, Patriots or Mets, Red Sox, or he would always take the time just to say hello and have a 30-second conversation with me. And that really went a long way.

**CHRIS:** Yeah, and look, as you know, as a first-year student on a on a big campus to make those connections with upperclassmen and just feel like you've got a place. And that's another story that's, that's come across.

**JON:** You know, if I could jump in for a second, I'm glad you said that because I will fully admit I was the homesick kid. When I got to Syracuse. I was 5 hours from home. I had never been away from home, even like, you know, overnight sleepover camp. I'd never really done that. And I was a mess. I was crying all opening weekend. I was anxious about going away to the point where my folks dropped me off. My dad said, "We'll be back to get him in six weeks." And my mom said, "Give him some time. I think you got to figure it out." And it wasn't until I got to JPZ and Z89 that I actually found my tribe, which is again, a phrase they just come up hundreds of times on the podcast, and four years later they had to drag me out kicking and screaming because I didn't want to leave.

**CHRIS:** And you come back every year and you get do podcasts with these folks.

**JON:** And folks always say, "You're going back for a reunion. Is it your five? Is it your ten?" No, we just go back every year because we genuinely enjoy spending time together.

**CHRIS:** Yeah, yeah. You did leave and get a job in in radio. Went back to New England, right. Got a job in radio?

**JON:** Yeah. So it took a while. It was. I graduated in '02, I was working. My summer job, became my full time job in a roadside assistance call center, which is a whole other podcast, but wel...

**CHRIS:** As the aforementioned Rick Wright would say, "Well, you had a microphone," right?

**JON:** I did. I had a headset. I had a headset.

**CHRIS:** So there you go. Yeah.

**JON:** So, there was a microphone of the headset. So I, I did that for a year. One of our other alumni, Jeff Wade from the Class of 97, got me a job doing part-time work in Providence, Rhode Island every Saturday. I got my foot in the door, and then a year later, through another connection. And this is always I love telling this story because Josh Wolfe, class of 2003, was a year younger than me, but he helped get me my first job after graduation. So you never know who can help you out, right? Long story short, through a connection from Josh Wolfe, I got a job working for what was then Clear Channel up in Burlington, Vermont. It was 3 hours from home. It was great. Worked there for two and a half years for Clear Channel. Got that go for budget cuts, went across the street and worked for the locally-owned station for another four years there, all total seven years in Burlington, Vermont. And then a year and a half of Detroit, three years in New Orleans, and then back to Detroit for another year.

**CHRIS:** And as has happened, unfortunately to many in the radio industry, there was a need to figure out something else eventually. Right?

**JON:** Yeah, there was in I give my wife a lot of credit here because I had been laid off and in my 15-year radio career, I was laid off for budget cuts three times.

**CHRIS:** Wow.

**JON:** The final time of which was the week, after my wedding in 2017. I had later found out that they were going to lay me off the week of my wedding, but my boss told his boss, I'm not going to lay this dude off on a Tuesday and go to his wedding on Saturday. That might be a little awkward, but which was glad. So I got a I got a reprieve for two weeks.

So I get let go from the job you know in between our little weekend mini moon and our actual honeymoon. And so now my wife, who God bless her, she knew that I had left my job in New Orleans voluntarily to come back here to Detroit to move in with her, because, you know, we weren't getting any younger and it was time to actually, you know, settle down and get married. So she was patient with me but she said, I know you love radio, I'll paraphrase here, but there seems to always be somebody waiting in line behind you to the same job for ten grand, less and more B.S. and I said, "Wow, honey, you're dead on." And tell all my single friends to do what I did, marry somebody smarter than you. And she was right, and so it was probably 1 to 2 years of trying to figure out what I was going to do.

And I and you and I have both had this conversation with radio and TV people when they get out of the industry. What do you do next? Because you have a skill set you don't realize. So I was trying for a social media jobs, I was trying for. I was trying for, you know, marketing jobs and nothing was really sticking. And then I started finally podcasting and couple connections from radio connecting with other people in radio.

I met this guy, Seth Westler here in Detroit, who was doing a Detroit arts and entertainment podcast. I said, Well, I'm not really working here.

I'll come in and I'll be your producer. And so I was his producer, and then his co-host left and I slid into the co-host chair, did that for a while, and there was a podcast convention called Podcast Movement that happens every year. And Seth said, Go to this convention. I said, Dude, I'm not working and I can't afford to go to Philadelphia for five days. He said, Put on your credit card. Go, trust me. And when I got to this podcast convention, I saw what a collaborative space it was and how welcoming it was. Similar a little bit to when I got to JPZ. Not quite to that level, of course, but this is wow, this is a lot of the skills that I've developed in a career radio.

It's producing high quality audio. It's knowing how to generate great content. It's all those things that I learned at JPZ and I was able to start this business where I create podcasts—branded podcasts—for businesses and nonprofits. Seth said, People pay you to do this, and this is probably 2018 or so. I said, No, people aren't going to pay me, and everybody has that imposter syndrome. But eventually I, you know, networked and used my network from being in different places, used my Syracuse network as well, and started building up a client base. And it grew from there. And now I produce podcasts full time.

It really took off in 2020, during the pandemic when everybody was at home creating and consuming content. And it's grown from there. And I'm very fortunate. And a big part of that is the JPZ and the Greater Syracuse University Network.

**CHRIS:** Yeah, you know, we talk about it all the time, that that idea that: hey, I'm looking for somebody who may be able to help me with this or somebody who needs this kind of help that I might be able to supply that kind of defines what the Syracuse University alumni population is and does. And, you know, JPZ to an even more kind of concentrated impact, I think.

**JON:** It really... any time I was out of it, out of work, I lost a gig. Anytime there was a budget cut and I was found myself, as they say, in the in the industry, on the beach, not, not, not without a job.

**CHRIS:** It's never as good as we try to make it sound when we say we're on the beach.

**JON:** No, it's the craziest euphemism of all time. But the first people I would hear from every time without fail were definitely Syracuse people and mostly JPZ people. How can I help? Hey, I know this guy. I know this woman. Talk to this person. You know, I know this person in your area. I know this person in your field. It would happen so much.

And I go back to what they drilled into our heads at the career development center at Newhouse: "Network, network, network." And don't just network when you need something, maintain that network, which as you and I both know, is so easy to do specifically within JPZ, but also within Syracuse, they're always the first people to come to the rescue.

**CHRIS:** Yeah, well, that's and you've heard me say it. And you know, people who I've had as students have heard me say, and I think a lot of people have heard me say, I hate networking as a verb.

I hate that. Right? I like network as a noun, but you build relationships to have that network.

**JON:** You said that in your episode of the podcast!

**CHRIS:** I think I did. In the podcast where we were in reverse roles here--on the JPZ at 50 podcast. And I believe it and I see it and I see the benefit and the value of it. But, but I think you hit the nail on the head when you said not just when you need something, right? Networking feels like when you need something. Building relationships is just, hey, I happen to need something right now. I've built relationships. I've got a network of people who I know can help me out.

I want to ask you because you, you know, you worked in in the mainstream radio industry. You now are doing this specialized work in podcasting with nonprofit clients, with businesses, things like that. And and look, we see it, if you're familiar, anybody who's familiar with marketing knows that the ability to tell your own story these is just so crucial, so important. And that's what podcasting allows.

But as you look kind of at this audio space, where are we heading? You know, is radio dying/dead? Is podcasting, you know, going to hit the bubble at some point? Where do you see it?

**JON:** I think it really comes down to media consumption as a whole. There are studies out there. The infinite dial study, I believe, is the one from Edison Research that that posits that podcast consumption will surpass talk radio consumption in 2024, which is certainly a major landmark from where we were ten years ago.

I think music radio is really in dire straits and I have a number of friends who work in music, radio and love what they do and are very talented and very hardworking at what they do. But not to go too far on a tangent here, but as you know, in radio, when the rating systems changed about the beginning of the 2010s, they told the DJs, shut up and play the music. And that, and that seemed to be the good idea based on the research they looked at, because they saw that people were tuning out. When deejays talked too long, they turned out when bad deejays talked to us, they didn't find out when good deejays talked too long.

And so the idea became, okay, well, you know, you're here for the music, not for you. Well, a year or two later, Spotify, Pandora, Sirius XM, all those things come in. And why am I going to listen to a music playlist curated by somebody else when I can make my own?

So, it was kind of backwards for music radio because now it music radio has realized to their credit is people are there for the personalities. Yes, the music is a significant part of it. But you're going to win and you're going to keep up with what happens in between the songs. And they're realizing that that personality piece is so important. And also why podcasting has grown because people are connecting with podcasters for the same things we talked about earlier. Intimacy of audio, that personal connection that you feel you have with a radio host or a podcast host.

So, I don't think radio is dead. I think radio is having an identity crisis and radio really needs to reinvent itself on a personality driven thing. And I know it's cliché to say, but local can really be important because, you know, when I was when I was in Detroit, we had some budget cuts and we had a voice track or a prerecorded show recording a show from Detroit, from California. The woman recording the show from California had never seen snow, which I say specifically knowing that we have a Syracuse audience here and it didn't play well. She was mispronouncing town names and street names because it was it was a budget cut and it was the cheapest, easiest way to do it. You've got to have people that need that know and understand the communities. It is so vitally important to the personality and also understanding the community you're serving.

**CHRIS:** Yeah, no, I think you're 100% right. It's you know, it is it is now the person and what they're going to bring to the table and that connection that they can make. And it's a lot harder to make a connection to somebody who's never been to your town or your community.

**JON:** I'll mention, I'll mention Rick Roberts, who was one of our high schoolers who worked at Z89 when he was in high school. Now he's the program director of 93Q and he's been there 25 years, and he he's spent his whole life in Syracuse. Who would you rather have, you know, running your radio station than somebody who has spent their entire life in the 315 and knows the ins and outs of the biz, of the entire town?

**CHRIS:** Yeah, I think we're pretty lucky in the Syracuse market. And, you know, I don't know that that, you know, listeners of this podcast who, you know, haven't been here for a while or, you know, maybe aren't aware, but there are, definitely is an effort to be local on the radio. Ed Levine, who owns Galaxy Media, of course, is an alum who has certainly leaned into to local and that's that makes a big difference. It certainly does.

I want to wrap it up, but we've certainly touched on it. I have a sense of where you may go with this answer, but what does it mean to you to be a part of the Orange family to be forever Orange?

**JON:** It, it's, it's not often I'm speechless. You have me speechless with that question, Chris. Wow.

There is such a feeling of community. You know, you touch down, you see a Syracuse hat in the airport, you know, knowing. And it goes beyond just, you know, the football team or the basketball team or the lacrosse team or any sport for that matter. There is this understanding, whether it's joking about dealing, you know, walking to class uphill both ways and snow, which we all literally do, depending on which dorm you lived on when you were on campus, you know,

**CHRIS:** Several times a day.

**JON:** Right. And that came through in doing the—back to the JPZ podcast—where I was talking to alumni from the seventies and I was talking to alumni for the 2020s and all years in between and you can make a reference to the Mount or you make a reference to the weather, or you make a reference to Dinosaur Barbecue or, you know, but or certain professors, whether it's Rick Wright or so many of the other amazing professors at Syracuse, there's that sense of community that it feels like, especially having worked in media, where almost anywhere you go, but I just treat other areas as well. You see that that connection. You see somebody went to Syracuse or you see some or you had something in common at Syracuse, whether it's JPZ or any or any other organization, there is just this it's like a cocktail party. You need that one thing to connect with somebody over, you're from the same hometown or you're a fan of the same team. Having that for your experience, probably the best for years of my life, knowing that you have that in common with somebody that and it's such a strong enough bond to bring us back to the tough frozen tundra of Syracuse in the first weekend of March every single year for the JPZ reunion, there's this feeling in addition to the people we talked about, but there's this feeling where I step onto that campus. And even though it looks way different than it did when I graduated in 2002, you know that all the restaurants and stores on Marshall Street are different. And there's there's schools and buildings and dorms that didn't exist 22 years ago and all that. In some ways, I don't recognize this place, but I do because what I recognize is not the buildings and the facades and the stores. It's the it's just that there's this feeling that if you're not if you didn't go there and spend four years there, it's really hard to put into words. But there's just just this I have a smile on my face because I have a smile on my face whenever I set foot on that campus.

The first time I brought my wife and we were just dating, you know, and she she picked up on it like, wow, you've got this incredible vibe and sense of community here. And it she said, my wife always jokes. I won't say where she went to school on this podcast, but it wasn't Syracuse. She jokes that she goes, "You know, I talked like two or three people from college. You have so many. You're on the phone with somebody from Syracuse almost every single day. And I never understood this until I came to campus with you and saw that vibe and saw that interaction and saw that community between so many of you. Now I get it. Now I understand why you talk to Syracuse people all the time."

**CHRIS:** Yeah, it's something that we wish we could figure out the recipe for. We're just happy it's there and, you know, whatever, whatever that is. That's the kind of story that you hear from so many people. I, you know, you come to campus, and it looks different, but it's still always familiar and you always have that sense of home.

**JON:** That's perfect way to put it. It's that sense of home.

It's, you know, I have a little bit of that nostalgia when I, you know, visit places that I worked in my professional career Burlington, Vermont, New Orleans, you know, things like that. But there's something about Syracuse where I think from 18 to 21, we all did so much personal growth of those at that age, learned about ourselves and learned about who we were as people and how to interact with other people and and people that weren't from the same hometown as us and may have had different opinions on the world and views in the world. And I think there's so much packed into that for years that when you come back, it's just it is that magic.



**CHRIS:** I think that's a great place to leave it. JAG, thanks so much for spending a few minutes and getting on the other side of a podcast interview.

**JON:** Thank you.

Look, as a JPZ alum myself, I may be a little biased, but there are really some amazing guests and great stories, great Syracuse stories on the JPZ at 50 podcast, if you'd like to check it out. There's a link in this episode's show notes.

I hope you enjoyed our 'Cuse Conversation with John JAG Gay.

I'm Chris Velardi. Thanks for listening.

Stay well and Go Orange!