

# SA radio legend Stan Katz still voicing his opinion

 By [Brendan Seery](#)

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Old radio broadcasters, you might say, don't die ... they just fade to commercial.



Former Primedia CEO Stan Katz at the Radio Today studios in Belair Shopping Centre, Northriding | Photographer: Mchel Bega

And, with Stan Katz (aka “Stan the Man” in his 702 days), you get the sense his last breath will be from behind a microphone. But that’s not going to happen for a long time...

On Thursday evenings, you’ll find him in a Radio Today studio in Randburg doing a one-hour talk show (also broadcast on Facebook) with various South African icons.

And, this week, he launched an online course in radio sales.



What reps are selling is not necessarily what clients are buying

Stan Katz 20 Sep 2012



But can't you just retire and put your feet up?

He chuckles. “I’ve tried that before. A number of times. And I just get bored...”

Even now, as he pushes 70 (he looks 15 years younger, though), there’s a barely suppressed energy and a probing curiosity which makes you understand how he became such an irresistible force in South African radio in the 1980s and why his ideas changed the broadcasting landscape forever.

Katz, the brand, is associated in the minds of many with 702 Talk Radio, the station which was born via an apartheid loophole but which went on to give the Nat government of the ’80s and ’90s some of its worst nightmares.

So you might think he’s always been a man from “702 Land” (the name the station gave to the then PWV province – now Gauteng) ... but he actually hails from Mahikeng in the North West (the place dreams go to die, he says wryly). His dad owned a creamery in the town taking in milk daily from scores of farmers.

“It was the biggest in the southern hemisphere at the time,” he says with a hint of pride.

No multiple-cow farming dorp was ever going to be enough for the young Katz, who had already picked up a love of music and for radio.

After heading to the bright lights of Joburg and getting a BCom (“my parents believed an education was the greatest gift they could give to their kids”) he went into business briefly – and unsuccessfully – with his brother, before deciding to try out for a job on the then Swazi Radio.

Based in studios in Joburg, but broadcasting from a rickety diesel-powered transmitter just over the border in Swaziland (now Eswatini), the station flew tapes daily to Swaziland.

Then owned by the Kirsch family (which went on to build the massive Primedia empire), the station had already nurtured some of the best talent in local radio.

At his interview, he was asked: “What do you know about programming?”

“It told them straight: ‘I will know whatever you tell me about it...’”

Not surprisingly, that was the end of the interview and he was thanked for coming and sent on his way.

“As I left, I shouted out: ‘I have a BCom!’” And that was his foot in the door to Swazi Radio ... and to broadcasting.

He eventually pestered people long enough that they gave him a slot on the station and that was the experience he needed when he left – after telling the then station manager, effectively, that he was useless – to help secure himself a number of other gigs on radio stations.

He had a show on the SABC’s English service (doing it at the same time as being a copywriter at JWT ad agency in Joburg) but that didn’t go well when he tried to ween the audience on to “revolutionary” rock like The Eagles and Linda Ronstadt.

He laughs about that now – “but you must understand, they were playing Max Bygraves and the Andrews sisters.”

After some interesting (and hair-raising) adventures in showbiz (managing one band turned into something straight out of a rock n roll acid trip) – including a stint in radio in the US – Katz found himself with the startup station 702, so named because of the AM frequency on which it broadcast.

“It was a bizarre set-up if you think about it. We had our studios and offices in Johannesburg and then we were connected to our transmitter in Bophuthatswana via a Post Office cable.”

Initially, the station was music-only (and Katz had an evening show and then a prime-time drive show and was eventually made manager) – but when the SABC gave 5FM the prime FM frequencies, the penny dropped for 702 that they would have to change.

“And that was how talk radio came about. The sales people were horrified – nobody had done it before. We decided to do what the SABC was not doing: telling the truth and allowing people to call in...”



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Mfundo Ntsibande 12 Jun 2013



The idea took off – “we set ourselves up, in those days remember – to be strongly against racism” and it wasn’t long before the idea of news crept in.

“The government didn’t like it but they couldn’t pull the plug because that would have exposed the farce of the homelands as independent governments. So they demanded to see all the bulletins before we aired them. We bombarded them with faxes that would take a whole room of people a whole day to go through just for one bulletin, so they eventually gave up...”



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The station was a licence to print money and, on the back of its success, Primedia Broadcasting was formed and eventually became the Primedia group ... with Katz as head of broadcasting.

“I made a helluva lot of money and so did a lot of people.” That huge treasure chest enabled the group to outbid all comers and buy Highveld Stereo (which became 94.7) and was an even bigger licence to print money.

Since retiring from active roles in the group in the late 1990s, Katz has been involved in various ventures – some successful, some not (“Trust me, I learned a lot of expensive lessons in my time”) – and also did training in how to monetise radio in various African countries.

His new online radio sales training is “really the way I want to give something back, leave a legacy...”

As for growing old gracefully, you get the feeling Katz won’t ... even though he’s no longer the fast-living oke he was back in the day, the rock ’n roll rebel, the man who loves to play Jimmy Hendrix riffs on his electric guitar, is still not far in the background.

## ABOUT BRENDAN SEERY

Brendan Seery has been in the news business for most of his life, covering coups, wars, famines - and some funny stories - across Africa. Brendan Seery's *Orchids and Onions* column ran each week in the *Saturday Star* in Johannesburg and the *Weekend Argus* in Cape Town.

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