

Step right up, folks, for the television circus at Ch. 13

The circus came to town last week, pitched its tent on Television Hill and moved into the offices of WJZ-Ch. 13.

On Monday evening, the big show under the big top was "mentalist" Mark Stone and his amazing Super Bowl "predictions." Monday through Friday, it was time for "Eyewitness Roots," an interest-defying bit of self-promotion that was less absorbing than even the flimsiest paper towel. And in newspapers around town, WJZ's morning attraction, "People Are Talking," was advertised with headlines so tasteless they made *True Confessions* look like *Forbes*.

Television news has been a crazy carnival for some time now, but the shenanigans at Ch. 13 last week were so bizarre and so blatant that it's a wonder the station didn't rename its newscast — a movie-ish "Al and Jerry and Klaus and Bob," or a sitcom-y "Hello, Jerry," or a Lardneresque "You Know Me Al."

In the center ring, attracting attention, catcalls and cries of "Hoo, boy!," was the Monday evening appearance of Mark Stone, who at one time claimed he was a "mentalist," whatever that means. (Evidently, it's a step up from psychic and two steps up from magician.)

Late last year, Stone showed up on Ch. 13's "Eyewitness News" to offer his sealed predictions for pro football's championship games. Amid much fanfare, the predictions were locked in a box, and a security company carted them away for safe-keeping.

Stone had done well predicting the outcome of last season's World Series, so Ch. 13 officials were pleased as punch that he returned to offer pigskin-picks; they promoted the event with great gusto. No one, it seemed, questioned what news value all this had.

On Monday, when Stone returned for the not-so-grand opening of the locked box, things began to look even more ridiculous.

For one thing, the charade took up an incredible amount of air-time. For another, it was obvious that something was awry when Stone himself had to open one of the boxes.



Television

Steven Reddicliffe

The predictions, naturally, were almost right on the money. Stone had close-to-correct statistics on the AFC and NFC championship games, and a nearly accurate account of the Super Bowl, including the play in which Jackie Smith dropped a Roger Staubach touchdown pass. (Stone didn't have the names, of course, but he did "predict" the error.)

After the show, Klaus Wagner, Ch. 13's sports person, discovered that Stone had used a trick box, which had enabled the magician to slip in some after-the-fact facts.

Horrors!, everyone cried. Foul play! We was had!

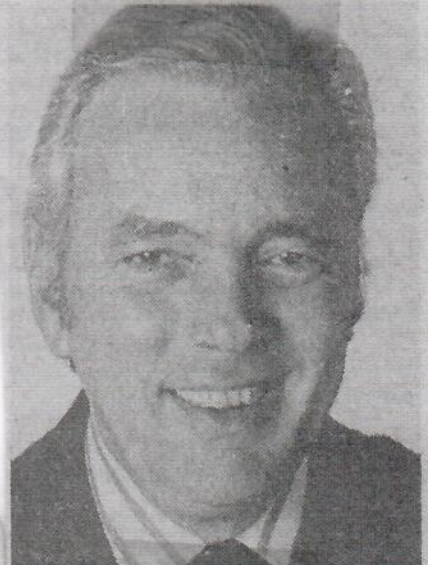
Ch. 13 led its 11 o'clock newscast that night with a report on the hoax and, the next evening at 6, actually went through the whole thing again, running a replay of Stone's appearance.

Anchorman Jerry Turner and Wagner were very solemn. "We were had," said Wagner, looking as if Nick Charles had just announced a return to Baltimore.

Turner looked even more concerned. He furrowed his brow and said the station news personnel "were not" part of the "publicity stunt."

Wrong. First, the station made the decision to devote a great deal of its news broadcast to a magician's appearance. Then, they used even more time discussing how they had been tricked.

Klaus Wagner, meet Harry Houdini. From the beginning, the prediction project was absurd. It wasn't even as much fun as a barroom bet, since everyone at the station acted as if the predictions were as newsworthy as the Ten Commandments.



Jerry Turner

Ch. 13 news director Scott Goodfellow said last week that the Stone appearance was meant as a "light touch."

Maybe so, but that "light touch" raised a lot of questions even before it became a heavy embarrassment. Surely there must have been more important sports news than a few guesses about a couple of games. Surely the time taken up by Stone's appearance could have been used for something else — real news, for instance.

Mark Stone may have tried to fool everyone, but he didn't come out looking like a fool himself. That distinction was reserved for the news staff at Ch. 13, the people who invited a magician to their news show and then wore long faces when their gullibility was exposed.

But, folks, the fun didn't stop there. "Eyewitness Roots" was next and, believe it or not, it may have been of less value than Mark Stone's dandy feats of now-you-see-me, now-you-don't.

In this "Roots," Jerry Turner and co-anchorman Al Sanders visited their hometowns, where they discovered old friends and new uses for cliches.

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These reports may have been some of the most stupid news segments ever. Turner went to Meridian, Miss., where he looked at vacant lots, an old school and an old girlfriend. Sanders went to St. Louis for more of the same.

There was absolutely no information of any importance in these reports; they weren't even remotely interesting. They didn't explain how to trace one's family history, or how life in the towns had changed.

Instead, these turned out to be commercials for Ch. 13 news, pieces of pluggola that tried to establish Jerry and Al as sensitive personalities, guys with heart and soul.

It didn't work out that way. It was quickly apparent that this "Roots" wasn't much more than a puff of publicity, a feature so lightweight it should have sailed right out of the newsroom.

Starting today, there's more: Oprah Winfrey and Richard Sher, two more Ch. 13 personalities, examine their hometowns. Buy your popcorn on the way in, friends.

But, folks, the fun didn't stop there, either.

Last week, in *National Enquirer-*

style, the station advertised its morning talk show, "People Are Talking."

One newspaper ad screamed, "I Was Raped By My Psychiatrist." Another asked, "Does Your Pooch Poop on the Rug?" Well.

A Ch. 13 spokesman defended the first ad by saying that abuse of patients by psychiatrists was a real problem, and that women needed assistance to fight it. The show, the spokesman said, explained how one woman became a winner.

Granted, the topic is important, but the ad seemed to promise cheap thrills, not an educated discussion of an issue.

As for the second ad, though it was rejected by *TV Guide* (as was the first), the language wasn't disgusting or offensive — just silly.

As if all this wasn't enough, Ch. 13's circus had a sideshow, too. One early-evening news story starred Oprah Winfrey; an animal scratched her on "People Are Talking," and the event, being of such significance, was replayed on the 6 p.m. broadcast.

And then there was Klaus Wagner's empty-headed telephone interview with Jerold Hoffberger, which contained nothing of substance but did allow Wagner to try out a few jokes on the owner of the Orioles.

"Would you take \$3 million from me?" Wagner joked. What a funny guy.

Ch. 13 for some time now has been regarded as the class act of Baltimore television, a profitable station that is not reluctant to spend money on news and public affairs shows.

But last week, the ringmasters did

their best to destroy that image.

"Send in the Clowns" apparently is not just a song at WJZ; it has recently become a way of life.

THE LOCAL LINE

William F. Baker, vice president and general manager of Ch. 13, is leaving the station to become head of Group W (Westinghouse) Productions in Los Angeles.

"Mike Douglas" and "Everyday" are two Group W shows.

Baker came to the Baltimore Westinghouse station from WEWS in Cleveland in February 1978.

Stephen Seymour will become the station's acting general manager.

Currently vice president of television sales for Group W, Seymour was general manager of Ch. 13 from 1972-74.

TV & radio

Why the Gong Show news at Channel 13?

"What's going on with Channel 13's news? It looks like the Gong Show."

That's a fair question to be asking these days. A friend asked me that Monday, the first day I was back from Los Angeles.

The trip caused me to miss the latest and greatest aberration of Channel 13's news, the infamous magic act. Television news has been known to go to many show-biz extremes, but when you stoop to putting on charlatans with patently impossible sports predictions—and thus give them the credence of being associated with a "news" broadcast—you pass the level of comedy and sink to the level of dangerous ridiculousness.

I saw Channel 13's sideshow featuring Mark Stone back in October after the World Series when his so-called "predictions" were revealed on the air. Even then anyone with a normal degree of skepticism would have had to have some doubts about a man's ability to predict not only the scores but the key plays of games in advance.

Channel 13's store of skepticism is apparently as low as its store of news judgment. And that's rock bottom. Even before this thoroughly embarrassing episode, Channel 13 had displayed the kind of judgment usually reserved for vaudeville booking agents.

The sports prediction fiasco has suddenly caused people to notice some of the other atrocities of Channel 13's news department. It is an interesting coincidence that it happened in the same week Channel 13 was running (and promoting the starch out of) a "news series" called "Eyewitness Roots," a "This-Is-Your-Life" mini-series starring the Channel 13 news "talent."

Even the most naive of viewers could recognize this lamentable charade for what it is—an extended news promotion inside the newscast. There are supposed to be restrictions on this sort of thing. A concerned citizen's group might be filing it away somewhere for a possible challenge to Channel 13's broadcast license the next time it comes up for renewal.

But there is really nothing new in Channel 13's descent into shlockdom. It has been going on for some time. The sleight-of-hand trick last week was only the most noticeable in a long line of whiz-bang moves Channel 13 has tried in an effort to make its newscast the equivalent of a televised happy hour.

Consider the way this station plays stories. The first story on a TV newscast is basically the same thing as the lead story in a newspaper. But how often does a newspaper, or any other TV station for that matter, sanction as lead story an item created by the organization itself? Channel 13 does this regularly.



Bill Carter

The station apparently believes making the news is more important than covering the news. Last Sunday night, for example, Channel 13 led its news with a confused and emotionally delivered item about an ill 28-year-old man being located—thanks to Channel 13's efforts in publicizing the fact that the man had been lost.

This had the news value of a one paragraph filler in a newspaper, but Channel 13 blared it out as though it deserved a banner headline. Actually all it wanted to do was toot its own trumpet. Nothing was said about whether the man was subject to violence, whether he had been doing anything dangerous, why there was any reason to read the story with the breathless style of a story of a sniper incident.

This was not an isolated example. For months Channel 13 has been throwing stories on the air for no reason other than the fact that they can be connected to something Channel 13 has done.

When two former Baltimore anchormen appeared on the station's morning talk show, *People are Talking*, and said they thought Jerry Turner was an unbeatable anchorman, the tape found its way onto Channel 13's newscast. What a hot story!

Incredibly, when the station debuted its superhyped new weather gizmo, *Sky-Eye*, it led the late newscast. Nothing in the entire world was deemed more important than the introduction of a new-fangled weather map. And what a hit *Sky-Eye* has been. Its major achievement has been the addition of a new meaningless term to the language—ground clutter.

Channel 13's news suffers from shlock clutter. The station is obsessed with video machinery. It will play up the most worthless, vapid of non-stories if there is any conceivable way the story can be done live on "Instant-Eye." My favorite in an endless series of examples of this idiocy was the night we got a live report on why there wasn't a shortage of Christmas trees in Baltimore.

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The big losers in this mess are the viewers, but the folks in Channel 13's news department who consider themselves real journalists are close behind.

The "Roots" series is a standing joke in Channel 13's news department, and one has to feel sorry for people like Jerry Turner, George Bauman and Al Sanders whose respectable news credentials are being sullied by the station's insistence on putting them in clown suits.

Probably it is not only the station that is responsible. Many of these black comedy routines probably emanate from the wild and crazy TV executives at Westinghouse Broadcasting in New York. This outfit, Channel 13's parent company, is a paragon of the modern TV conglomerate. Westinghouse invests heavily in things like research and consultants to give them directions for their programs.

That's why they come up with abominations such as EveryDay. Westinghouse also believes in code words. The company has a cute name for everything—"communicators" on Evening, "the family" on EveryDay—and they get these ideas from slick advertising outfits who test people for their "now" impulses.

Channel 13's sickeningly oversaturated "People like you" campaign was devised by a firm in Los Angeles (Klein & Co.) who studied Channel 13 and decided the station needed to "identify" its news people and newscasts with the "soul" of the city.

It is only a couple of steps beyond that to news series featuring how Richard Sher grew up and became a big-time TV star.

There is plenty of justification for making jokes about the mockery Channel 13 has made of its news, but TV news is much too serious an issue to be dismissed as a crass effort to make bucks. Poll after poll indicates that the majority of people now depend on TV news for the bulk of their information.

And in Baltimore Channel 13 is by far the most-watched news. The last ratings indicated Channel 13 was

reaching over 140,000 homes every night with these Gong Show newscasts. That means an awful lot of people are being sold sleight-of-hand tricks instead of news.

It also indicates that superficial show-biz tactics still work in TV news so there is little likelihood Channel 13 is going to clean up its act and suddenly become responsible. An organization that recognized its duty to the community would do just that—but Channel 13 is apparently too busy celebrating its ratings successes.

The only hope for change would be a sudden adverse reaction from the news viewers of Baltimore to this kind of shabby treatment. Admittedly the alternatives on Channel 2 and 11 are not so much better that they deserve praise.

But maybe if Channel 13 saw some evidence that Baltimore was tired of news as comedy its news department, which has the best resources in the city, could begin working on journalism—instead of magic acts.