[Snap Judgment]

[upbeat music]

**Glynn:** Okay, so I'm in law school. I'm going to a job interview. The pleasant, well-dressed man across me smiles, gives me the "Please sit down." I smile back. I've been through this process a million times. He pulls up my transcripts, he looks. And on cue, the puzzled expression, the slight tilting of the head, [gasps] inhaling of breath, and I know what he's seeing. Now, my grades aren't horrible exactly. No, he begins where they all begin. "Mr. Washington, it says here you studied imaginary worlds of fantasy literature in law school?" "Well, I can explain that." "And ancient Chinese calligraphy." "Uh-huh." "Elmo music theory, as part of a law curriculum?" "Right, well--"

So, here's what happened, if one was to look back at the fine print of law school admittance, which you're supposed to do as a lawyer, if you examine the fine print, it says you can take a certain amount of high-level courses from any discipline. So, two semesters in, I figure, "I have had all the law. I can stand. Surely, I'll be a better lawyer if I can bring something else to the table." "This is all very interesting. And you're telling me butterflies sing? And what do you have against Tolkien anyway?" We have a spirited, enjoyable discussion. Then, he glances at his watch, "Mr. Washington, it's been truly wonderful getting to meet you." He smiles. I smile. "So, do I get the job?" [laughs] We both laugh.

[upbeat music]

Today, Snap Judgement proudly presents Stuff and Nonsense. My name is Glynn Washington. Study singing butterflies if you want to. Just make sure it's not on your transcript. Well, you're listening to Snap Judgment.

[upbeat music]

Now then, we're going tune your radio to a very special station. You can hear this station in your car, you can't play it on the phone because it only exists in one man's imagination. Jeff Maysh has a story.

[upbeat music]

**Deke:** Hi, this is Deke Duncan right here, on Radio 77. My real name is, of course, Eric Duncan Thorp. But you're listening to me right now on the air, in the air chair as Deke Duncan, did you get that?

While I'm recording this for you, I have turned off the some of the processing on the mic. I normally have 139-second delay on the mic, which fills out the sound of the voice. Did you want me to put that on?

**Jeff:** Yeah.

**Deke:** Okay. It will just take me a second. It's on now. Deke Duncan right here on the air chair. A mountain of music guaranteed. [chuckles] How did that sound?

[Deke Duncan show intro]

**Jeff:** Deke Duncan, nicknamed himself after a character in an Elvis movie. He grew up obsessed with Rock Records. Then in 1965, when he was 20 years old, Deke heard a brand-new sound.

**DJ:** Okay, here we go, it's three-hours of the best music you ever heard.

[Radio Caroline theme playing]

**Deke:** The first time I heard Radio Caroline, I was driving in my car along the coastal highway in North Wales, and a friend who was with me, he said, "There's a pirate radio station anchored somewhere around here. Why don't we tune in and have a listen to it?"

**DJ:** It's someday on Radio Caroline International and for the next three hours--

**Deke:** We found the station and I thought, "Wow, this is just incredible."

**DJ:** Yes, indeed, daddy-o, that's me. One and the same.

**Jeff:** Radio Caroline was called a pirate radio station because it broadcast from a ship in international waters, playing wall-to-wall hits. And at that moment, something turned on in Deke that he would never be able to turn off.

**Deke:** They were so cool and they were very smooth, and the delivery was just so professional and very, very slick. A disc jockey would talk over the introduction, right up to the vocal line.

**DJ:** Fontella Bass on Caroline International, and this is *Rescue Me*.

[*Rescue Me* song playing]

**Deke:** This is sonic artwork. Compared to the BBC, this is a revolution.

**Jeff:** Deke's talking about the British Broadcasting Corporation, run by the government.

**Reporter:** This is the BBC Home Service.

**Jeff:** In England, we sometimes call it "Auntie Beeb."

**Deke:** Auntie Beeb, yeah. My aunt, A-U-N-T.

**Jeff:** Back then, Auntie Beeb only played about six hours of pop music every week. The rest of the time, it was pretty dull.

[*Sing Something Simple* theme playing]

**Deke:** That was the music that your parents liked. It's an establishment figure, a little like the teachers were when I was at school. "Now, you behave yourself." "Now, this is a bit brash." Don't enjoy yourself." Stop that, that's too much fun."

**Anchor:** For the next half hour, we're on *Sing Something Simple* along with the--[crosstalk]

**Jeff:** Deke called the BBC to apply for a job. He spoke to a receptionist.

**Deke:** I said, "I'd like to be a DJ on radio. Could I send you an air check and you could review it and then maybe let me know?" She asked me how old I was. And then, this is unbelievable, she said, "This is a very, very precarious way to earn a living, a young man like you. I suggest you go away and get yourself a real job." I was speechless.

**Jeff:** Then, he had an idea, "What if he could have his own radio station?" He could choose the songs. He could DJ all night if he wanted. And it wouldn't be illegal if he didn't actually broadcast on the airwaves. He borrowed a tape recorder from his brother and bought a job lot of secondhand radio jingles from a catalogue.

**Deke:** Amazing jingles from the WABC 77. Just edited out the WABC and I was left with the 77, that sounds like a good name. My station can be Radio 77.

**Jeff:** Alone in his bedroom, Deke transformed himself into a pirate DJ, worthy of Radio Caroline.

**Deke:** I would just pretend that I was on the air, play the records and the time checks, give the weather reports and I would analyze it. I would think, "Does this sound like a radio?" Eventually, I got it right and it did sound like a radio.

**Jeff:** In 1967, the British government shut down Radio Caroline. The ship was towed away. They also made it illegal for British citizens to work on pirate radio stations. That didn't stop Deke.

**Deke:** I saw the ad in the Musical Press, disc jockey is required, must be prepared to work at sea, that was from Radio North Sea.

[Radio North Sea theme]

**Jeff:** Radio North Sea was a pirate station on the ship, Mebo II, anchored off the coast of Holland.

**Deke:** I applied for. I sent them an air check. They actually said, "Yeah, you can come and work for us." They recognized that I was okay. Not like the woman from the BBC, who said, "Get yourself a real job." I quit my job. I said goodbye to all my friends. This is it. I would board the tender and then make the 18-hour trip across the North Sea to where the ship was anchored. Actually, I was even looking forward to being seasick. I was so excited. How nice that would be to be isolated like that on that ship and have nothing to do, but do your radio show. It would have been a dream come true.

**Jeff:** But days before he was set to board, the extreme was blown to pieces.

[retro music]

**DJ:** This is the Radio Ship Mebo II. Mebo II, SOS, SOS.

**Jeff:** Don't be fooled by the jaunty music. This is a real mayday call sent from Radio North Sea on May 15th,1971.

**DJ:** We have an emergency on border, a fire in the engine room. This was caused by a bomb thrown on board from a motorboat.

**Jeff:** You heard that right. A bomb.

**DJ:** We may have to abandon ship. We carry enough fuel on the ship to blow the half the North Sea into the sky.

**Jeff:** The ship was bombed by a rival Dutch station, who kind of didn't like these upstarts coming along and taking their listeners. The ship did survive and the station survived, but they were gone off the air for a long time. I thought I could have been on that ship. So, maybe my life was saved there.

[upbeat music]

**Glynn:** It is not over. If you think a bomb is about to stop Deke from DJing, you better think again when The Stuff and Nonsense episode continue, Snappers. Stay tuned.

[upbeat music]

Welcome back to Snap Judgment, The Stuff and Nonsense episode. My name is Glynn Washington. When last we left, Deke had just lost his dream pirate radio gig after the ship's last radio station was blown up. Jeff Maysh fills us in on what happens next.

[upbeat music]

**Jeff:** Deke had no other choice but to go back to his job in construction.

**Deke:** Carry on. I still have my imagination. So, carry on. We'll take it from there.

**Jeff:** Deke lived in Stevenage, a suburb north of London, with rows of identical homes, manicured lawns, and a shiny motorcar in each driveway.

**Reporter:** Here then is the design for living of the future. A town planned down to the last nail.

**Jeff:** On the weekends, he DJed at a local club under the name Deke Dino.

**Deke:** Maybe they might think I'm Italian or something. I would do the show in the style of a radio DJ rather than a club DJ where you would stand up and dance and do silly things. So, I thought, "No, I'll sit there with headphones. I'll present the whole show with jingles, radio jingles," and it went down very well. People loved it.

**Jeff:** He really looked the part.

**Deke:** Velvet pants with the bellbottoms, Cuban heel shoes, sometimes a frilly shirt, kipper ties, a massive hair, sometimes permed, a drooping mustache, which struck round thinking, "Am I cool or what?" I don't think it was what.

**Jeff:** On Saturday night, the club was packed with girls, like Teresa who loved to let down her hair after a long week of work.

**Teresa:** I worked in the factory, sewing machine and making shirts. And we had music on all day.

**Deke:** She was a friend of one of the go-go dancers.

**Jeff:** Teresa shared Deke's love of pirate radio.

**Teresa:** Before that, we only had an hour a week of pop music on the radio. There was none. Nothing else. And when they came out, it was fantastic.

**Deke:** She was a very happy-go-lucky girl and bouncy, bubbly.

**Teresa:** We were only going out together for about three months before we got married.

**Jeff:** Deke continued to record his radio show on his own, just for himself, not broadcasting to anyone. But then, he told a few friends at the club.

**Rick:** I'm one of these people that just love anything in the top 40, really. I love old records, but I'm a top 40 man. I just listen to top 40 all day.

**Jeff:** This is Rick.

**Rick:** My DJ name back in those days was Richard St. John.

**Jeff:** Rick and another one of his friends, Clive, decided to help Deke build a radio studio at home.

**Deke:** The station would have been in a bedroom before then. And we thought it doesn't feel right. A radio station in our bedroom. We thought, "Well, why don't we build a shed in the garden and it would feel like we were on a ship?"

**Jeff:** To his neighbors, it just looked like an ordinary garden shed with a pointed roof.

**Deke:** But it wasn't like that. That little building housed a very professional-sounding radio station.

**Jeff:** Deke's radio dreams were becoming something close to reality.

**Presenter:** One of my favorite shows in 1974, Maria Muldaur.

[*Midnight at the Oasis* playing]

**Deke:** The guys would turn up on a Friday evening, we'd stock up with food, and we were doing three-hours shows, rolling shows right through the whole weekend.

**Clive:** 6o'clock, Clive Christie here in the air chair, manipulating the mountain of music.

**Deke:** Absolutely lovely.

**Richard:** Good morning to you. My name is Richard St. John here on 77.

**Clive:** Our dream was to be like that pirate radio. That's what we were doing. We were actually being that.

**Richard:** 10 past 7 o'clock without further ado for you and the sky is blue, more music. Six degrees is expected to the outside--

**Jeff:** They made up the weather.

**Richard:** Not too warm, but it's not too cold.

**Jeff:** And they made up the news.

**Clive:** Vandalisms of supermarket trolleys has prompted Stevenage Development Corporation to introduce trolley parks in the downtown carpark.

**Jeff:** They made up the adverts.

**Clive:** Diamonds are a girl's best friend. But Code 45 tastes better.

**Jeff:** But of course, none of this was broadcast to anyone.

**Clive:** Well, it was done it as if there were listeners, but we knew obviously there wasn't.

**Richard:** Thanks for tuning our way. And if you're listening in your car right now, thanks for the ride.

**Clive:** Nobody's going to give you a license for that kind of radio. In the UK, it didn't happen. You couldn't do it. That's why nobody had set up a radio station in England like that.

**Jeff:** The only output was a speaker in Deke's living room so Teresa could listen.

**Teresa:** That was always in the background. When he got home from work, he'd have his dinner and go out there until 12 o'clock at night, every night.

**Deke:** It was just so much fun, I just wanted to do it forever.

**Jeff:** But eventually, Auntie Beeb caught wind of what they were doing. Word had spread around town.

**Deke:** We were kind of local celebrities, [chuckles] really. These weird guys that have this radio station in a house.

**Jeff:** A film crew from the BBC's *Nationwide* show, that's the British equivalent of *60 Minutes*, came to film a typical day in the life of Radio 77.

**Reporter:** Mrs. Duncan of Gonville Crescent, Stevenage is doing her housework, the music of her favorite radio station. Right now, she's tuned into her favorite DJ.

**Deke:** Here to try and put a grin around your chin, a special hello, hi going out right now to Mrs. Teresa Duncan. 57 Gonville Crescent, Stevenage. How in the world you're feeling, my darling? It's 9:40 on 77. These are the OJs.

**Jeff:** Teresa, wearing a very 1970s dress, is filmed leaving the house.

**Teresa:** I'm going to the shops, alright, Deke?

**Deke:** Okay.

**Deke:** Radio 77's ratings, it could be in for a bad morning now that the station's entire audience has decided to go down the shops.

**Deke:** The TV people made up this story that we had done this purely to play for my wife. They thought that was a good angle.

**Deke:** Well, the interest in radio came from the pirates.

**Deke:** It wasn’t actually the case. The case was we wanted to be radio DJs and we wanted this radio station to be authentic.

**Deke:** My ultimate ambition would be to broadcast this to the rest of Stevenage. I'd like to share it with them.

**Jeff:** But the appearance on nationwide was not Radio 77's big break.

**Richard:** I don't think anybody was interested in it, to be honest. Nothing ever came of that at all at that time.

**Deke:** Radio 77 fizzled out in the early to mid-80s. I was quite sad. Actually, I was very sad.

**Jeff:** Deke worked long hours at his construction job. He and Teresa had three children. Life moved on. But there was a jaunty little jingle in his head that he just couldn't ignore.

**Deke:** I thought there's nothing here in England for me as a radio jock. I'll just go to the Fatherland.

**Jeff:** He decided to take one more shot at becoming a disc jockey in America.

**Deke:** The land of the free, where music radio is abundant. We sold our house, up sticks, and off we went.

**Jeff:** He had friends in San Diego. So, that's where they went. Deke knocked on the door of every radio station he could find.

**Deke:** Two stations said that we'll take you on on the graveyard shift, which was-- well, you know that's from midnight till 6:00 AM, which I would have loved that. But the pay was just so bad.

**Jeff:** The lady from the BBC had been right. Making radio is no way to earn a living.

[flight takes off]

**Deke:** I just went back home with my tail between my legs. You yourself imagine coming back from San Diego and landing in London in November. Everything seems so gray and dark. Yeah, it was a big comedown.

**Teresa:** Really, when we went to America, it was for what he wanted to do, and it didn't work out. And then, we came back and it was just terrible, to be honest.

**Jeff:** Teresa had had enough.

**Teresa:** He's done what he wants, his dream, whatever he's wanted to do for his life.

**Jeff:** All that time, Deke had been making Radio 77, she'd felt abandoned.

**Teresa:** I was, yeah. Basically, we never spent any time together at all.

**Deke:** I would cut off all the outside world, and my whole world would be on the radio. It's really weird that it's only now, now that I'm an old man, that I realize how selfish I was.

**Jeff:** After the divorce, Deke was alone. And all he had left were a handful of recordings from Radio 77.

**Deke:** Maybe a dozen on the old-fashioned cassettes in my car. I must have left the car open one night, and somebody opened the door and helped themselves and took them. I wish maybe one day, I could find out who that was and buy them back.

**Jeff:** It was like the thieves had stolen the best years of his life. Now, Radio 77 was truly, finally gone, just like his family. Deke packed away his records and hung up his headphones. And how old are you now, Deke?

**Deke:** 75 in June.

**Jeff:** And how old do you feel?

**Deke:** I feel 12 and three quarters.

[laughter]

**Jeff:** The woman Deke is laughing with in the background is his new wife, Pamela.

**Deke:** She's here now. Would you want her to check the air chair?

**Pamela:** Hi.

**Jeff:** Deke and Pamela have known each other since they were teenagers. Back in the 70s, he even came to her house and taught her how to DJ.

**Pamela:** The one phrase I remember what he taught me was, "A very good evening to you, one and all. This is yours truly Pamela, [unintelligible [00:21:31] found right here in the [unintelligible [00:21:34] the nitty gritty."

**Jeff:** They reconnected after Deke's marriage ended and as hers was falling apart. All that remained of Radio 77 was a one-hour-long tape the thieves hadn't managed to grab.

**Deke:** I would dream about Radio 77. I would constantly have dreams. Very pleasant dreams about constructing the studio and going back into it, talking into the mic and editing the jingles. And I would tell Pamela, I would say, "I have dreamt about Radio 77 again."

**Pamela:** I thought if somebody feels it that much that they dream about it, then they should do it.

**Deke:** One day, she said, "Well, why don't we just go and get some broadcast equipment and do the whole thing again? Why not?" I'll do it in the garage. I had plans to build a soundproof room in the garage. But then one day, I had this pain in my chest, I ended up on the floor and Pamela quickly and very levelheadedly she called 999. Actually, I believe that she called 911 first. She watches too much CSI. I was in the hospital within 10 minutes on the theater table.

**Pamela:** They said to him if they hadn't succeeded in the three hours that he would have died.

**Deke:** I had a near fatal heart attack. They did all kinds of things to me, put stents in my arteries and my life was saved. And I felt like a new man.

**Jeff:** As soon as Deke recovered, he built the studio in the garage in his backyard.

**Deke:** This studio here feels very much like the studios on those pirate ships all those years ago. Very intimate. If you close the curtains of the window, you could think that you are in a ship. It's rather cool.

**Jeff:** Radio 77 was back.

[Radio 77 intro]

[rock music playing]

**Jeff:** This time, Deke set up two speakers for his wife, and Pamela listened every day.

**Pamela:** And he thought maybe I could read the news, which he schooled me in.

**Deke:** You don't read the news, you deliver it.

[77 News with Pamela Duncan]

**Pamela:** Primary Minister Boris the Animal has announced his intention to remove all speed bumps from Britain's road system. Mr. Johnson says, "These devices do nothing more than damage our cars and strain our tempers."

**Jeff:** Deke and Pamela were happy to keep Radio 77 to themselves, but that's not what happened. Instead, an almost magical sequence of events connected the Radio 77 shed with the BBC mothership.

**Deke:** Radio 77's ratings, they could be in for a bad--[crosstalk]

**Jeff:** After 45 years, the BBC put their video of young Deke Duncan in the 70s on Facebook.

**Deke:** Well, the interest in radio came from the pirates, Radio Caroline.

**Jeff:** A local DJ noticed the footage.

**Justin:** My name is Justin Dealey. I work for BBC Three Counties Radio in England. Here, we had a man in a shed broadcasting to one person and not getting paid a single penny for doing so. And we had to find-- [crosstalk]

**Jeff:** Justin then launched a massive manhunt.

**Deke:** I saw a message with an email address that it was *bbc.co.uk*, so I thought, "No, that's a real guy. That's not just some weirdo."

**Justin:** We found him. Here he is, Deke Duncan.

[laughter]

**Jeff:** Justin invited Deke to be a guest on his show. They replayed the old documentary.

**Deke:** My ultimate ambition would be to broadcast this to the rest of Stevenage. I'd like to share it with them.

**Jeff:** Then, the station manager came on air with a bombshell.

**Manager:** I want to offer you a one-hour special over Christmas on Three Counties Radio.

**Jeff:** The BBC offered Deke his own show, giving him an hour during primetime on New Year's Eve.

**Deke:** That feels really nice. Actually, first time in my life, I'm speechless.

**Jeff:** You can't hear it, he's clearly shaken and turns pale.

**Deke:** You've been passing the tissues. [chuckles]

**Jeff:** Deke recorded the show at home, in his studio. In the end, millions tuned in. Millions of real listeners.

[Deke Duncan radio intro]

**Jeff:** And now without further ado, here it is.

**Deke:** Good evening. Welcome to the big, wide, wonderful world. I'm Deke Duncan. I'm in the air chair for the next 60 minutes. My aim is to put a grin on your chin, smile across your radio dial.

**Jeff:** Deke had been through it all. Marriage, divorce, a narrow escape from a maritime bombing.

**Deke:** This made my life. I've broadcast Radio 77 via the BBC's transmitters. There were no producers and nobody waving the finger at me and saying, "You must do this, you must do that, you mustn't say this, you mustn't say that. Just go ahead and do it," with the freedom that the Radio Caroline DJs had.

**Deke:** Step inside here, fellow, what have you got to say to me?

[*I Knew the Bride (When She Used to Rock 'n' Roll)* playing]

**Deke:** Oh, you did?

[*I Knew the Bride (When She Used to Rock 'n' Roll)* playing]

**Deke:** Ah, okay. Tell us more.

[*I Knew the Bride (When She Used to Rock 'n' Roll)* continues playing]

**Deke:** This is going to be interesting.

[*I Knew the Bride (When She Used to Rock 'n' Roll)* playing]

**Deke:** The dedication for Pamela was her favorite song, *Maggie May*. And I played my favorite album track, *If I'm Sleeping*.

[*If I'm Sleeping* playing]

**Deke:** And the line is, "if I'm sleeping, don't wake me up." But my interpretation of that is, "If I'm dreaming, don't wake me up," which sums up my life. My whole life has been a dream, really. Whole life living in my imagination.

**Jeff:** Sitting in his cozy studio in his backyard, Deke had finally become a professional DJ. It took him his entire life to do it.

**Deke:** I would say sometimes living the dream can be more enjoyable than realizing the dream. Live the dream, dude. [laughs]

**Deke:** This is the glorious sound of Marilyn McCoo & Billy Davis, Jr. Uncle Deacon in the air chair. A mountain of music guaranteed. Yes, indeed. *You Don't Have to be a Star*. Sing it to me now.

[*You Don't Have to be a Star* playing]

[upbeat music]

**Glynn:** Thank you for tuning into Radio 77. That episode was recorded entirely at home by Jeff Maysh.

**Jeff:** Deke, do you have any advice for the rest of us who are stuck at home with this coronavirus thing?

**Glynn:** And Deke Duncan.

**Deke:** Yeah. Become a radio disc jockey. [chuckles] You notice they don't call disc jockeys disc jockeys anymore? I hate that.

**Glynn:** The original score for that story was by Renzo Gorrio. The store was coproduced in partnership with Narratively and its founder Noah Rosenberg. Reporting came from Jeff Maysh. It was produced by Jeff Maysh and John Fecile.

[upbeat music]

**Glynn:** It happened again, Snappers. It happened again. But if you missed even a moment of day Snap, don't wander off, don't be ashamed. There's no need for all that. Just subscribe to the Snap Judgment podcast. Let everyone know. If you love Snap storytelling, if your world has ever been changed by putting on someone else's skin, support the show that made it possible. Go to our Patreon, support Snap storytelling that you love, *patreon.com/snapjudgment*. If you have a story that you need to share with our Snap family, we would love to hear it. Email us *pitches@snapjudgment.org*.

Snap was brought to you by the team that has absolutely nothing to hide. What you see is what you get. Except, of course, for the uber producer, Mr. Mark Ristich, there are skeletons in that man's closet. Anna Sussman, Renzo Gorrio. There's Pat Mesiti-Miller, John Fecile, Shaina Shealy, Marisa Dodge, Nikka Singh, Eliza Smith, Lauren Newsome, Teo Ducot, Flo Wiley, Nancy López, Regina Bediako, and Leon Morimoto.

But this is not the news. No way is this the news. You might have heard, in fact, you can make a radio show in your shed that no one would ever hear, advertising products that were never made like chocolate-coated mittens, which you eat right off the fingers. And then, one day you could see a guy wearing chocolate-covered mittens, he was eating right off his fingers and he sees us and turns away all guilty. And you would still, still not be as far away from the news as this is. But this is PRX.

[upbeat music]