

CHAPTER ONE

Stories Of Old

Have you ever been told a story so amazing it remained with you, becoming impossible to forget? I have, and first heard it during the summer of 1999. I was at KROQ radio in Burbank, California, and had just gotten off the air after finishing my Flashback Lunch. Normally I would have been out of the building quickly, to either go home or head to a meeting, but that day the sales department had a stack of commercials waiting for me to voice, so they took priority and had to be recorded before I could leave, which meant finding an available production studio.

True to KROQ's miniscule budget, there were only two studios to cut tracks; the first was so small you could barely turn around in it, and I wasn't able to use that one because Doc on the ROQ had already commandeered it and was working on segments for the next day's Kevin & Bean show. The other, the larger production room, outfitted with all the high-tech bells and whistles, was the domain of our creative genius, John Frost, but as I knew John was on vacation, it's where I headed.

However, when I entered the main studio, decked out with movie posters and pictures of bikini babes, it was occupied. Mike Evans, the DJ I had replaced on the air in 1982 when I was first hired at KROQ, was sitting behind the controls working on a promo.

Mike was a unique character. Charming, engaging, and funny, he had been one half of the morning show at KROQ – Ramondo and Evans – from 1980 until July 1982 when he had a run-in with Freddy Snakeskin, the acting Program Director, and left to head across town to KMET. Over the next seventeen years, Mike returned to the station three times and was fired twice more, but every time there was a management change, he would be rehired, and his talent and quick wit was always a welcome addition to the station's on-air lineup. But today it was not his radio banter which would make an impression, it was a personal story he was about to reveal that would remain with me forever.

"Hey, homie," Mike grinned, "come on in. I'm nearly done. You can have the room in less than five minutes." Neither of us realized five minutes was about to turn into two hours and begin a decades-long quest to share what I had learned with the world.

I leaned back against the sound-proofed wall – chairs were always in short supply as they were considered a luxury item at KROQ – and waited as Mike transferred his voice track to a digital file, and then onto an old-fashioned tape cartridge, 'a cart', as KROQ's recently installed computer system was constantly crashing and carts were a reliable backup.

"All done." Mike slipped off his borrowed headphones and got up from behind the console. As he did, he caught my eye, and I could see a thought crossing his mind. "Are you still writing for the TV show?"

"Yes. I finished a script for them last week." I was a writer for a series on the UPN network called *7 Days*. It was a time-travel show, and the script I had just submitted, about a devastating global pandemic, would go on to be picked for their second season finale episode, *The Cure*.

"I've got a story you might like. Did I ever tell you about Johnny & Jesse?"

"Johnny & Jesse? I don't think so. Is it sci-fi?"

“No,” laughed Mike. “It actually happened. It’s something I did with my best friend, John, a long time ago.”

“Who was Jesse?”

“Me,” answered Mike.

“I’m lost. Mike’s your real name, right? Not Jesse?”

“Yup. Michael Evans.”

“Then who was Jesse?”

“I asked the same question, and it’s kind of how it all came about. Do you have a minute? I think you’ll get a kick out of it.”

For over an hour and a half I stood there, propped against the wall, my mouth falling open, as Mike told me the story of *Johnny & Jesse*. Finally, he finished, spread his arms out wide and with a huge smile stretching from ear to ear said, “What do you think, homie?”

I was silent as I tried to soak in the journey Mike had taken me on. I’d traveled extensively and experienced a lot in my forty-seven years but this was unlike anything I had encountered or even thought possible. It took me a moment to find the right thing to say, and when I did it was seven words, “That’s the best bullshit I’ve ever heard.”

My comment didn’t faze Mike. I think he’d been expecting it. Instead, he held his smile, “I’m going to show you something tomorrow. It’s what John and I called our grab bag. In it are all the press cuttings, photos, and telegrams we saved over the years. You’ll see it’s all real.”

“Do that and I’m buying you lunch.”

“Good,” laughed Mike. “I’ll be sure to skip breakfast so I’m nice and hungry if you’re picking up the tab.”

I slid the credit card across the table at Dalt’s restaurant and looked from the bill to Mike’s face. He wasn’t gloating, just pleased he’d been able to share his exploits with me and prove them to be true.

“What do you think now?”

I shook my head, “You guys pulled off something no one else has ever done, and for sure it couldn’t happen again, not in this day and age with the internet and cell phones. I’m honestly amazed.”

Mike paused for a second, then asked the question he had been holding back, “Would you write it for us? I talked to John last night and he’s excited to have you involved. Do you think it would make a good film?”

“Good? Great, is more like it. It’s a buddy movie with two boys on the run, and it has war, love, music, family, adventure, travel, history, tragedy, laughs, and it’s true.... I mean, it’s brilliant, unforgettable.”

“Will you write it?”

I drew in a deep breath. This was such a rare, totally original story, and I could think of nothing better than researching everything they had accomplished and then committing it to paper. It was a tale that had to be told. But there was one thing holding me back; an adventure of my own poised to begin. To explain my reticence to Mike, I had to reveal to him a secret no one outside of my relatives and my fiancé’s immediate family knew, “Mike, if I tell you something, you must give me your word not to repeat it to anyone. Particularly upstairs at KROQ. Do you promise?”

“You got my word. Nobody.”

“I’m leaving KROQ in a few months. I won’t be able to write *Johnny & Jesse* for you.”

Mike was shocked hearing this news, but after a moment continued, “You don’t have to be at KROQ to write it, do you?”

“The thing is, I’m moving far away. To the Caribbean. Krista and I have bought a house in St. Maarten, and we’re going to be living there and running a dive shop. It’s always been my dream and it’ll be a new life for us. I’m quitting everything; radio, TV, gigs, writing. And when you have a screenplay, you need someone here in L.A. to take meetings and pitch the project. It won’t work from a little island thousands of miles away. I wish it could.”

“But you like it, right?”

“I love it. It’s honestly the best story I’ve ever heard and should be shared. But not by me, not right now. It wouldn’t be fair to you.”

I could see how crestfallen the normally indomitable Mike Evans was and all I could offer was a simple platitude, “I’ll put together a synopsis for you. Feel free to use it to try and get someone else to write the script. And let’s go back up to KROQ and make copies of the pictures and press cuttings you brought. I’d like to keep a set for myself.”

Mike nodded and silently rose to his feet. As I stood, he caught my eyes with his piercing gaze, “If things change, will you write it for us?”

“*If* things change. But we are set to leave. I’m sorry.”

The one thing certain in life is things change. In 2003, after the death of both my wife’s mother and my own mother, we found ourselves back in L.A. to spend time with Krista’s family. I looked up Mike, who had been fired once again by KROQ and was now hosting a very successful syndicated radio feature airing on morning shows across the country, and asked if he was still interested in me writing the story of *Johnny & Jesse*. I thought my phone would melt from the excitement in his voice.

I got to work and drafted a screenplay. It immediately attracted the attention of a major production company on the Disney lot in Burbank, and for the next three months I was there almost every day, hustling up the stairs of the Old Animation Building past the original pencil sketches of Mickey, Dumbo, and Sleeping Beauty, as we refined the script. At last, it was ready, and the company sent it to their packaging agency, William Morris, to have it read and evaluated.

It was a hot night, August 5th, 2003, as Krista and I drove along Hollywood Boulevard heading for Grauman’s Chinese Theatre to attend the premiere of *S.W.A.T.*, when my cell rang. I answered it quickly.

“Hey, Richard, it’s Travis. We received the coverage back from William Morris and I wanted to call you right away.”

“What did they say?” I couldn’t wait to find out what the world’s biggest talent agency thought of my writing.

“It’s good news and bad news,” explained Travis. “Which do you want first?”

“Give me the good news,” I said, dreading the bad.

“The good news is it’s all ‘High Excellent’ and ‘Recommend’. They told me it’s their best reviewed script of the century so far.”

“And the bad news?”

“You’ll never get coverage this good again.” Travis laughed, “Well done. This is going to be fast-tracked. We’ve got a movie!”

Now you’re asking yourself, I don’t remember a film being released called *Johnny & Jesse*? And you are correct. So, what happened? The company at Disney was deservedly basking in the glow of having won six Academy Awards, including Best Picture, for *Chicago*, the previous March, and because of their success became the target for acquisition by several media companies. Three days after the William Morris coverage, they were bought and made to relocate from the legendary Disney lot to a faceless gray concrete building in Santa Monica. Their new owners called me in for a meeting and gushed, *we really adore your script, but it’s not what the company is looking to do right now*. When I asked what they were looking for, the exec flashed his custom crowns and replied, with a straight face, “Our dream project needs to be summed up in less than a sentence so the poster fits on the side of a bus. Bring us something like, ‘Tim Allen is an Avon lady’ and we can talk.”

They handed me back the script and told me to have a good day. Don’t you love Hollywood?

After that crushing disappointment I let *Johnny & Jesse* languish and moved on to other projects including producing *Bands Reunited* for VH1, writing and co-starring in the movie *Long Lost Son* for Lifetime, doing my radio shows on SiriusXM’s *1st Wave*, and finishing my autobiography, *World In My Eyes*, and then my first novel, *SPQR*.

I stayed in touch with Mike Evans and John Thomas, and we talked constantly about *Johnny & Jesse* and how it should be made into a film, or a series for Netflix, Amazon, or Hulu. It was Mike who suggested I write it as a book after he read *World In My Eyes*. I agreed, but kept dragging my feet. *Johnny & Jesse* was too special to be rushed. I wanted it to be perfect. Something we would all be proud of. Their story was so unique, I felt the book had to be equally great to become a worthy legacy for Mike Evans and John Thomas. We had time to wait.

I was wrong again.

It was Saturday morning, August 3rd, 2019, when I received news of his death. I was too shocked to cry. How was this possible? I had known him for decades and his story played through my brain every day as I chuckled to myself at everything the boys had done. But now one of them was gone, and Time had again shown it waits for no man.

I sat in my office and pulled out the dusty, acclaimed screenplay and read through it with misty eyes as I traveled once more with the two teenagers on their impossible journey. This has to be told, I said to myself, and for the next eight weeks I called around the country, tracing long-forgotten people and locations, speaking with agents and secretaries from the FBI and government offices on both coasts. Finally, I presented my exhaustive notes to the broken-hearted man who was still in deep mourning for the loss of his best friend. More tears flowed and the memories flooded back as he studied the destinations and map that for three years had been their lifeline. He poured through my findings, and combined with his previous collection of press cuttings and telegrams, suddenly those incredible escapades roared back to life as they exploded across the pages of this book.

And so I sit here today, ready to commit to print something which will excite, infuriate, amuse, and astonish you, as the world finally hears the true story of the two teenagers who survived America's most turbulent years and helped change the country by leaving behind Mike Evans and John Thomas, and becoming *Johnny & Jesse*.