

## Remembering Radyo Bandido

Interview with Gabe Mercado

Fernando A. Austria, Jr.



Broadcast from the Catholic station Radio Veritas—and later, the clandestine radio station ‘Radyo Bandido’ (‘Outlaw Radio’)—played a pivotal role as an effective and reliable source of news and information” during the EDSA Revolution in 1988. Hosted by June Keithley, the ad hoc radio station aired a “blow-by-blow” account (Templo, 2011) of the people’s uprising against strongman Ferdinand E. Marcos.

“Beside June [Keithley] were two young boys, Paulo, 15, and Gabe, 13 years, sons of Tony and Monina Allarey Mercado. They manned the VHF transceiver link with Fr. Reuter and Gen. Ramos” (Stuart-Santiago, 1996).

Today, Gabriel “Gabe” Mercado “shares his busy but fulfilling life as a business man, performer, solo parent and adoptive father to son Beeto” (Esguerra, 2011). He is founder and artistic director of the improvisational theater group SPIT (Silly People’s Improv

Theater). He applies his training in improvisational theater with Paul Sills to the corporate workplace by conducting workshops on creativity and innovation. Gabe Mercado hosts “Philippine Realty TV” on Studio 23 and ANC. He acts in movies and television commercials. He is best remembered for the TV commercial line “Ok ka ba tyan?”

During the height of EDSA 1, Gabe Mercado was only in grade school at Southridge in Alabang when he served as part of the radio broadcast crew of Radyo Bandido. From grade school to college, he was an active member of the theater groups in the schools he attended. Gabe worked with Paul Dumol, Tony Perez, Ricardo Abad and Fr. James B. Reuter. He says he learned his work attitude and ethics in the theater.

Gabe Mercado was one of the million Filipinos who became heroes during the 1st EDSA revolution. The EDSA Revolution of 1986 has largely been written from the words and accounts of VIPs and celebrities of that time. But given that this was a people’s revolution, what is the story of a non-celebrity, the common *tao* on the ground? The project of collecting the story from the people/heroes becomes of importance as “oral history provides information about the impact of events on the lives of ordinary people that would not necessarily be found in the documents left by elites” (Stille, 2001).

### **Jun Austria: How did you find yourself working with June Keithley in Radyo Bandido?**

**Gabe Mercado:** It’s important to understand it in the context of my involvement in theater work. *Mula nung* Grade 1 *may* interest *na talaga ako* sa theater. Towards the middle of grade school, I already got involved with Fr. James B. Reuter. Fr. Reuter was very influential with my work in the theater.

Fr. Reuter was also the head of two organizations: The Philippine Federation of Catholic Broadcasters and the Catholic Office of Mass Media. These are Catholic Church-run organizations. And we got to be part of it as much as Catholic radio stations in the Philippines.

When the snap elections came along, there was a need to get independent news gatherers for the Catholic stations. In short, they couldn’t trust the mainstream media because everything was under state control through cronies at that time.

There was a need for a different news-gathering mechanism. Like NAMFREL [National Movement for Free Elections] is a shadow of

COMELEC [Commission on Elections], Fr. Reuter wanted to set up a news-gathering team that would shadow the mainstream media.

*Ang source lang ng labor ni Fr. Reuter were his actors. At lahat kami bata, although ako yung pinakabata.* The oldest at that time was probably in Law School. *Merong* high school, the vast majority college graduates looking for their first jobs. We were just volunteer news gatherers. He simply gave us two-way radios, which we already knew how to use. There were some who worked in the office and there were those in the field. There were other actors and volunteers who were also doing the electoral count at the Xavier house in Sta. Ana where they lived. My brother and I, being the youngest, were assigned to work with June Keithley. June Keithley, at that time, was the spokesperson of the Philippine Federation of Catholic Broadcasters and she was stationed at Radio Veritas.

**JA:** **So this was during the snap elections in 1986? Where were you? And what exactly did you do at the station?**

**GM:** *Oo, during the snap elections, for about a week yun lang ang trabaho namin. Nasa Radio Veritas kami sa Novaliches.* Our work was to man the two-way radios and get incoming messages and relay them to June Keithley. *Ganun ka-simple, ganun ka-safe.* Simple clerical work. It was simply to write down the reports we got from the two-way radio and indicate if the report was verified or not. Verified would mean stand *mismo ng sino nagreport. Kapag hindi nakita ng nagreport,* then it was an unverified report. June Keithley would tell us that the report is still considered unverified *kahit malinis na tao man ang nagpadala* [if the report was not actually witnessed by the reporter]. Remember, aside from the units in Metro Manila, the Philippine Federation of Catholic Broadcasters has radio stations all over the Philippines. So we would get relays from then.

I won't over-sentimentalize, but my role was to get messages from other members of our team in the field, write them down legibly and then we relayed them to June Keithley, who was the voice of the revolution. Simply that, I was an errand boy (laughs).

*At walang pasok din naman nun eh, so okay lang.* After the elections were over, about a week, *balik na kami sa school.*

**JA:** The atmosphere at that time was highly politicized and polarized. Did you have any political consciousness at that time, considering that you were only 13 years old? How aware were you of what was happening between the Marcoses and those who were opposed to him?

**GM:** *Meron. Malakas.* My mother worked for the Ayala Foundation. My mother was an editor. And what she edited then was a wonderful journal, the *Filipinas Heritage* journal. It was a scientific journal funded by the Ayala Foundation that focused on the natural sciences, with a little bit of history on the natural sciences. Her office was on Ayala Avenue. So after school, *sinusundo namin yung nanay ko sa Ayala Avenue.* And at that time, every Friday *ba yon, may mga rally talaga.* That was an awakening for me. Well, the very first of my political awakenings was the presidential elections —yun kay Ninoy [Benigno Aquino]. I was already hearing about LABAN [Lakas ng Bayan] and KBL [Kilusang Bagong Lipunan]. I was so much younger, I was 7 or 8 years old. So wow, *laban. Tumatak na yun sa akin.*

On the day of Ninoy's assassination, there was already a sense that something very important or something very tragic happened. Especially when we saw the funeral. And at that time, *usong-uso na yung betamax tapes. Yun mga Japanese documentary about it, kumakalat na yun. Kumakalat na din yung mga Mr. & Ms. special editions* which were always in the house.

And *yun nga, sinusundo namin yung nanay ko* and you can see the rallies every Friday, *nakakakita na rin kami ng confetti.*

My older siblings, Anne particularly, was already in college at the Ateneo and she was a student leader. So very high *ang* political consciousness *namin* at that time. We also would frequently have an American house guest who was a journalist *din*, a writer. He wanted to write about what was going on. So the conversations were more in-depth. Very in-depth *na nga ang* parents *ko, meron pang* American writer *diyana, tapos* student leader *pa yung mga kapatid ko, so malalim yung pagtatalakay ng mga* issues. I was probably one of the most politically aware and conscious 10, 11, or 13 year old kid at that time.

And although yes, I was politically aware, *hindi rin naman ganun ka-rare. Marami sa mga kaklase ko ang ganyan, kami kami ang naghihiraman ng* betamax about the Ninoy Aquino assassination.

The environment in school at that time, and I was told that it was also prevalent in most Metro Manila schools, *may mga students na pumapasok na may Cory pin, may mga Marcos pin*. Really, it was a very political time for me even at a young age. Grade school *pa lang*. At that time, *wala ka naman mga distractions eh—walang cable TV eh, ilan lang ang television stations, walang Internet*. So it [politics] was something to become passionate about *nung nag-snap elections nung 1986*.

At that time, because of the environment at home, what I was exposed to, the media I would read, you felt that there was one thing that was very clear: that “hey, how come in other countries they have regular elections? How come with other countries you could talk about press freedom? And things like that.” So that’s more of the real issues at that time, I understood. I saw that transition from fear to courage.

**JA:** **Going back to the snap elections and Radyo Bandido. So you were back in school when the EDSA revolution began. That was a Saturday, February 22, 1986. At 9:00 pm, Cardinal Sin on Radio Veritas called on the people to support then-Minister of Defense Juan Ponce Enrile and Lt. General Ramos at Camp Aguinaldo. The next day, the Radio Veritas transmitter was destroyed (Stuart-Santiago, 1996). How was your group reactivated?**

**GM:** Saturday, *meron pa kaming sportsfest sa school although marami nang hindi nag-attend kasi nandun na nagpe-presscon na sila Enrile at Ramos*. Towards the afternoon of Saturday *nakauwi na kami*. We got another call from Fr. Reuter *mismo*, basically saying report for duty. So we were reactivating the June Keithley routine.

At that time, there was already a disagreement between June Keithley and Radio Veritas. The details I can’t really recall from memory right now, but [it had to do] with June Keithley really wanting to be partisan towards Cory while Radio Veritas wanted to be safe and more neutral. Radio Veritas wanted to go by their greater mission of spreading the Gospel to Asia. And we cannot compromise that with what was happening locally. On the other hand, June Keithley was saying that people were getting killed and cheated in our elections and if you don’t make a stand on this, how are you spreading the Gospel? *Yun ang stand niya*. She was eventually asked to leave Veritas. So this

happened a few days before the revolution broke out. And when the revolution broke out and na-bomba na yung Veritas transmitter, we had no place to go. So we were shopping for radio stations.

Anyway, this is something you can verify *naman* from sources. When the transmitter of Radio Veritas was bombed, there was another transmitter which still worked. So they could have continued broadcasting if they wanted to. But they said they didn't want to. Basically *natakot na*. Yeah, kasi they got a very big warning. And they decided to go off-air.

**JA: Where was Fr. Reuter at that time? Did he not facilitate your operations with Radio Veritas? What happened between Fr. Reuter and Radyo Veritas?**

**GM:** *Magkaaway na sila 'non. Ang alam ko, very tragic. Kasi, on a side note, na-stroke si Fr. Reuter the other day. So unconscious na siya. Comatose na. Anyway, I don't know if he said this on the record, but he would tell us back then... He was obviously very sympathetic to Cory and the revolution and remember, very close si Fr. Reuter and Cardinal Sin. He was also sympathetic to Enrile and Ramos. It was a very strong point of disagreement. Because of their [Radio Veritas] position nga na to be non-partisan and their duties to broadcasting in Asia. And the disagreement was already showing up to the week before the revolution, when there was tremendous fear about the news, opinions that June Keithley would express. She was often told, pati kami, na "easy-easy lang, baka masarapan, eh yung Ministry of Information [nakikinig]." It was bound to happen whether there was a bombing or not. Nakipagsigawan pa nga si June Keithley sa Veritas because of their disagreement. So whether there was bombing or not, magspi-split talaga. Magspi-split talaga yung grupo ni Fr. Reuter from Radio Veritas.*

**JA: So the group looked for a new station and transferred to DZRJ on Sta Mesa. What was it like then, at the height of the revolution?**

**GM:** Through Enrile's sources we were able to transfer to DZRJ. Late Saturday night, we were now broadcasting and it was just the technician, June Keithley, me and my brother. The rest of the team was already out there in the field.



**Figure 1.** In February 1986, Gabe Mercado, 13, and his brother Paulo, 15, foreground right to left, take notes from callers, assisting June Keithley who was then the voice of Radyo Bandido. (Photo from “June Keithley: ‘Sosyal’ turns radical,” by C. C. Tejero, 2013, Philippine Daily Inquirer Digital Edition.)

There was also a time *na kumalat yung balita na umalis na daw si Marcos*. We announced that. We were taking shifts, my brother [and I]. *Kasi nung pumutok na umalis si Marcos*, shift *ng* brother *ko*. *Natutulog ako, pagkagising ko nag-cecelebrate, naghihiyawan na ang mga tao*. It was morning, I can remember. *Talagang wow*. I thought that it was all over, I thought that it was, and then *hindi pa pala*.

Our involvement with Radyo Bandido lasted very short. Radyo Bandido lasted only from Saturday night up to Sunday a little after lunch. *Kasi Sunday a little after lunch, nag-fall na ang PTV—ay Maharlika pala yon, Maharlika. So nung lumipat na si June dun, hindi na kami kasama dun*.

**JA:** **What were you feeling at that time?**

**GM:** Honestly, exhausted. *Kasi* remember the day before, *galing kaming sportsfest sa school*. I was only 13. *Hindi pa naman ganun kalakas yung resistensya ko sa puyatan* at that age. It only sank in many hours after *na hindi pa pala tapos. Puyat na puyat ka, kaya* eventually you don't know how to feel. It was a blur, yeah.

**JA:** Didn't you fear for your lives? What did you think about the security at DZRJ?

**GM:** DZRJ was supposed to be guarded by the Enrile forces. We never saw them. *Siguro nakatago* somewhere but we were given access to the station. The funny thing is, we personally never saw the security. If you look at Sta. Mesa right now, it's the same layout, same building, you go up maybe 10, 12 floors and then *may* tower with a spiral staircase. It was very difficult to escape from there *kasi* to get down you have to use the staircase and take the elevator 10, 12 storeys down. There was a roof deck, the only way to escape was maybe jump to the other buildings; in short, no escape *talaga*. We didn't see any soldiers back then. We didn't know what to do but we were assured that someone was watching us. So *hindi ko alam kung sniper yon sa taas ng building*. Never, never *namin silang nakita*.

And remember if you know where DZRJ is, it is three or four kilometers away from Malacañang. Towards the early morning hours of Sunday, *nagpadala ng mga madre*, specifically Assumption nuns. Assumption nuns lahat ang nagpunta and they blocked the spiral staircase well enough. *Nakakaiyak yon* in that respect because what that really meant was *papatayin sila* before *maabutan kami*. It was the psychological impact that Fr. Reuter wanted.

And it was also indicated in the People Power book that my mom wanted my brother and I back and Fr. Reuter, very tough love *yung tao na yun eh*. *Sabi niya*, "Your children have the chance to die as heroes. Let them die as heroes." Remember what he lived through, he was a prisoner of war. *Ganun klaseng tao siya*. It is really more of his decision than ours at that time. We were very obedient soldiers. What I always say when I'm asked about that time was, if you are 13 years old, that's an adventure, it was exciting. And really you have nothing to lose. But the prospect of that is so scary. I am more scared of death now than I was then *kasi may mga inaalaan ka na*. *May mga naipundar ka na*, *may responsibilities ka na*. *At 13 wala*. So *okay lang*.

It was the same fear that you would have before an important basketball game, an important role where you will act and sing, it's the same fear. *Walang extra fear*. It was real that we were told *na pwede kang mamatay*.



**JA:** **But there was a realization that you could die?**

**GM:** *Oo naman.* They [the Assumption Sisters] would pray with us, pray over us before we started broadcasting. So the attitude was *patay kung patay. Patay kung patay. Oo.*

**JA:** **Do you consider yourself a hero?**

**GM:** Hmmmm, in the same way, as one of my most-quoted teachers would say at that time, “I come from a country of a million heroes.” So in that sense, yes. As long as you consider that everyone in EDSA was a hero. As long as you consider everyone in our team a hero. Yes. Because all of us were in clear and imminent danger of dying. So were the people in EDSA. So the short answer is ‘yes,’ but in the same way as millions of other people.

**JA:** **Have you considered the importance of what you have done?**

**GM:** Of course. Only because there was no one else to do it at that time. I don’t think I possess anything supernatural or super special powers: special courage, special skills, special knowledge. *Hindi naman.* It was just that I rose up to the challenge. But I was just at the right place at the right time.

Honestly, I’ve only raised this to people like you whom I know have a deeper need to understand. The mainstream press, they want sound bites and they want to sentimentalize *na*, “Wow, child hero.” I hate that (laughs).

It’s a service to the people, sacrifices you made with other people during the Martial Law years and the EDSA revolution. I don’t want it just to be reduced to a sound bite.

**JA:** **On hindsight, would you have done what you did? Would you do it again?**

**GM:** If I were back in that same age, given the same situation I would do the same thing. But if you ask me right now, at my age, my responsibilities, I would tell you the decision would be much, much, much, much, much, more, difficult. Much more agonizing in the same way it was with June Keithley at that time. Diego Castro was 9 at that time—same

age as my son right now. That was the real sacrifice. *Kumbaga may pagtataya talaga yung desision niya.* I don't know if I would have the same strength. My political convictions are still the same. I still believe in it strongly right now, same as back then. But the willingness...that's what I'm not sure about.

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