

REAL

CLOSE

(AND WAY OUT)

*Ken Layne's strange and wonderful
Desert Oracle magazine and radio show lures
followers into the deep, dark Mojave.*

BY STEVEN BILLER
PHOTOGRAPHS BY PETER YANG





A coyote's howl pierces the evening silence, and the slow-plucked, low-pitched notes of an electric guitar wander and linger like the soundtrack of an old Western movie, pacing to the voice of a woman with an improbable accent:

Transmitting from the Mojave wilderness in Joshua Tree, California, now is the time for "Desert Oracle Radio" — the voice of the desert.

It's 10 p.m. Friday night, and devoted listeners within range of KCDZ 107.7 FM in Joshua Tree tune in, while others from Echo Park to Boston stream the atmospheric show online.

"Night has fallen on the American desert," host Ken Layne says in his deep, hypnotic drawl. He lulls listeners into the quietude of the desert, then rattles them with chilling tales of Bigfoot sightings, secret military UFO programs, missing hikers, and any number of myths and conspiracies involving an eclectic and eccentric cast of oddballs and experts who phone in from across the Southwest.

Layne's delivery registers somewhere between William S. Burroughs' stream-of-consciousness meanderings ("He's one of those writers who's better heard than read," Layne says) and Garrison Keillor's Lake Wobegon monologues.



We come to you from Joshua Tree: miles of scattered mobile homes, auto graveyards, and strange scenes behind the Circle K — gateway community to Joshua Tree National Park ... where tourists disappear.

His deadpan intro gets right to the point of the week's absurdity: the "hellish July" when two visitors from Orange County — a young man who worked as a security guard and his ex-girlfriend — vanished during a day hike at Joshua Tree National Park. Layne marvels at the official report after the bodies were found last October. The man, described as a survivalist, "was put in the friend zone" before he took the woman to the desert with a loaded handgun, Layne reasons. When they were deep into their hike, he shot her and then himself, presumably because they were lost, exhausted, and hopelessly dehydrated. They were found in an embrace, with their pants pulled down. "I wonder who was doing the embracing," Layne speculates. The report claims there was no indication he wanted to harm her. "That's

the dumbest damn thing I've ever heard, and I used to cover the police beat full time."

Layne launches into the narrative as he sees it, then into his hallucinatory vision of a National Park Investigative Service with broad powers to solve crimes of the physical and metaphysical.

Expert investigators of the paranormal, trained clergy and accredited scientists, astronomers, biologists, masters of criminal intent and analysis. Expert marksmen, true survivalists intent on the survival of the Earth and its species, including but not limited to humanity.

No one tunes in to "Desert Oracle Radio" for news. Occasionally, however — like last November, when "Mad" Mike Hughes tried to launch himself 1,800 feet over Amboy in a homemade, steam-powered rocket to prove the Earth is flat — the weirdness packs too much temptation to resist.

“I found a copy of Desert Solitaire by Edward Abbey. I read that and thought, ‘This is it. This is the path.’”

You need your desert crackpot story to reinforce the city-people idea of the desert as some vast uncontrolled landscape where anybody can do anything, instead of being what it is: a massive and unwieldy patchwork of public land and private real estate and bio-regions layered over with ever-clashing corporate and environmental interests, off-road motorcycle manufacturers and strip miners, state and federal and county municipalities, tribal reservations, wildlife preserves, national parks, conservation easements, forest, watersheds, rivers and aquifers, wildfire-prone woodlands of Joshua tree and juniper and piñon and invasive weeds ...

The Bureau of Land Management office in Barstow stopped “Mad” Mike, because he had no permit. While the farcicality was delicious, regular listeners know Layne prefers to lean into the lore of the land, spinning tales of Yucca Man, the desert’s own Sasquatch; the mysterious Department of Defense UFO program at Skinwalker Ranch in Utah that *The New York Times* mentioned in a Jan. 16, 2017, article; and how the American desert gave birth to the atomic bomb.

“I like the stories that introduce people to the little-known folklore of where they live,” he says. “Stories about a place that’s in view: legends and monsters. People can walk away from it and think, ‘Wow, I’m a part of this place.’”

“I like the Yucca Man stories. In the Northwest they embrace their Sasquatch stories. We have a much better version that’s all but unknown. There’s a whole bunch of Yucca Men in the desert: Marvin of the Mojave, Old Blue Eyes near Edwards [Air Force Base], and Tahquitz [the shaman banished to the canyon] in Palm Springs.”

Layne launched the radio program and podcast last July as a spinoff of his quarterly *Desert Oracle*, “a pocket field guide to the strange and mysterious Mojave.”

He started the magazine almost three years ago “as a compromise,” he says. “I couldn’t get anyone interested in a radio program.” Now, readers who listen to the show can “hear” his distinctive voice while perusing the publication.

Desert Oracle takes inspiration from magazines and guides of the past, including Randall Henderson’s *Desert Magazine*, which published on and off between the 1930s and the ’80s. Layne’s 5-by-7-inch reader always has a yellow cover with black type and illustrations. “It’s phone-sized, intimate, and not too taxing on scattered brains. I’ve done away with leads and just go right into the stories.”

Layne writes and designs most of the 44-page publication. As the only employee, he also stuffs 2,800 copies into envelopes for subscribers and delivers another 2,000 copies to “cool and interesting” outposts in five states, from Joshua Tree to Moab, in his Subaru Forester. “Driving around the desert is part of the job,” he says. “The newsstand is my marketing.”

The wide-open desert seduced Layne soon after he

turned 16 in San Diego. He got his driver’s license and started taking long road trips with his friends to Joshua Tree, Death Valley, and what is now the Mojave National Preserve.

“When I got back from the first trip, I went to my high school library in San Diego and asked for the desert books,” he recalls. “I found a copy of *Desert Solitaire* by Edward Abbey. It was last checked out five years earlier. I read that and thought, ‘This is it. This is the path.’ I wanted to keep [the book], but I had to return it to graduate.” (Layne eventually met and corresponded with Abbey, who died in 1989, leaving volumes of colorful, pointed prose about the desert Southwest.)

Layne, 51, was born in Louisiana and grew up poor in the Lower Ninth Ward neighborhood of New Orleans. His father suffered from black lung, contracted while working in a coal mine, and relocated to Phoenix. “Move the lungers out to the West for the dry air,” Layne intones. The sentiment echoes the opening monologue he delivered at a rare live broadcast at the Ace Hotel & Swim Club.

Anglo-Americans showed up around the Gold Rush, as usual, and by the early 1900s there were health resorts. There were health resorts catering to the lungers. The lungers who suffered various diseases, tuberculosis primarily among them. They came to the desert for the dry air and for the mineral baths, in the time before the antibiotic cure was discovered for tuberculosis in 1949.

Layne attended middle school in Arizona, where “my parents clawed their way into the middle class,” and then a magnet high school with a broadcast journalism program in San Diego. “I learned how to write news and do field and studio production. I anchored a show and for two years was editor of the school newspaper.”

A few years after graduation, he bought a cabin in Anza Borrego and started working as a reporter covering the sports and police beats at the old *North County Blade and Tribune*. “There’s no better education. It’s romantic. You’re like the king of town. But it burns you out.

“After the Berlin Wall fell I worked for the first English-language paper in Prague,” he says of his journeyman days, which also included writing about country music in Macedonia and technology in Budapest. He also writes novels and records his own music.

Along with a generation of journalists, Layne followed the industry to the internet in 1997, immersing himself in the 24-hour international news cycle. For almost 18 years he ran and wrote for the click-bait websites Wonkette, Gawker, Tabloid.net, and Sploid. “All of that I did from the desert, and no one knew,” he says. “I traveled to debates, protests, Tea Party stuff.” His provocations drew death threats, and Keith Olbermann declared him the “worst person in the world.”



Ken Layne, “the voice of the desert,” in his office in Joshua Tree.

*“I say the magic words and invite people into this night desert landscape.
You listen to the show and feel like you’re here.”*



“Desert Oracle was born of a deep desire to change careers,” Layne says from behind his desk in his one-room office along the main drag in Joshua Tree. “I got tired of writing about the news and politics. This makes sense, doing something spiritually or morally correct in your work.”

He records the radio show in his Joshua Tree home, at a desk he set up in a quiet closet, rather than at the office. “Highway 62 is a truck route, with carcinogens just flowing and particulate matter. It’s so loud. I’d never be able to record in here. I would love to do it in a real studio. It’s fun to do it live. I’m more focused. But the radio station isn’t open at night.”

Layne describes “Desert Oracle Radio” as a regional show for a national audience; likewise, the magazine has more subscribers in Echo Park and Brooklyn than in

Joshua Tree. “I say the magic words and invite people into this night desert landscape,” he explains. “You listen to the show and feel like you’re here.”

After his sermon of a monologue, he introduces listeners to a cast of correspondents who phone in with stories teetering on the unbelievable. There’s Jeremy Corbell, filmmaker and editor of ExtraordinaryBeliefs.com, and his reports of UFO sightings, aliens, and government cover-ups. Doc Daniels shares his adventures with The Mojave Phone Booth, the subject of a book and (soon) a movie. And Brendan Maze makes listeners squirm with outrageous dispatches from his mindfulness institute, marijuana operation, and online fulfillment and distribution warehouse, where down-and-out, elderly workers toil in unsafe and unhealthy work and living conditions.

More than anything else, *Desert Oracle* is about place: people, plants, wildlife, and the natural and

unnatural forces affecting them. He generally sticks to the Mojave, but when appearing at the Ace Hotel for his campfire stories the first Thursday night of every month, he kicks up some low-desert sand. Talking about early Palm Springs settlers, after the native Cahuilla, Layne begins:

These desert rats were artists, philosophers, misfits, outlaws, generally not fond of busy cities and the busywork of American life. They were talented painters, they were writers, and they also included a strange character named Edmund Jaeger, the man we call Doctor Jaeger. A pioneering desert biologist, he lived in a wooden shack in Palm Canyon. He built it himself... and he traveled these desert lands his whole adult life, making great discoveries. His best-known discovery was of the first-known hibernating bird, the common poorwill.

“I found I have an inexhaustible list of topics,” Layne says. “I could just follow the places Edward Abbey lived.”

He reveres the author and plans to reprint a chapter from *Desert Solitaire* along with notes from Abbey’s journals in an issue commemorating the book’s 50th anniversary. Meanwhile, at press time, issue No. 7 of *Desert Oracle* was three months behind schedule, and Layne had yet to write that Friday’s show, which would consider the wisdom of living on the frontier while wildfires tear through the bone-dry terrain of Southern California, or plan his next appearance at the Ace.

Layne loves that he has realized his teenage fantasy. His taste for the desert — he has lived in four of them — and knack for parlaying the gritty life of this extreme landscape into rich, flavorful essays and monologues has him on a trajectory to take over where Abbey left off: lifting the rocks, revealing the underbelly, and getting ever closer to the beating heart of the Mojave. ■