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Posted on Thu, Jun. 05, 2003

THE KANSAS CITY STAR.

KC station pioneered Top 40 format 50 years ago

By BRIAN BURNES
The Kansas City Star

The Top 40 is 50.

It was 50 years ago that the radio format known for its heavy rotation of popular songs began to find vast audiences for stations desperate to remain relevant as television grew.

The format is credited to the Storz broadcasting family, whose network of stations was anchored by WHB of Kansas City, the AM station it purchased in the early '50s.

To those who once worked there, it meant being part of something much larger than themselves.

"I felt like an extra in a great Hollywood epic," Dan Oberholtz, a former WHB disc jockey known on the air as Dan Diamond, said Wednesday.

Oberholtz is one of several WHB disc jockeys -- once known as the World's Happiest Broadcasters -- gathering this week at Chapman Recording Studios in Kansas City. They are being interviewed by Tom McCourt, a Fordham University professor studying the evolution of radio after World War II.

"This is an area of media history woefully underscrutinized," said McCourt. "With the rise of television in the 1950s, radio really had to redefine itself."

When the Storz family of Nebraska bought Omaha station KOWH in 1949, it was ranked seventh among Omaha stations. Not long after, the station ruled that market, due in part to stunts such as treasure



Former WHB disc jockeys Dan Oberholtz (foreground), and Jim Gammon recounted their experiences at one of the nation's first Top 40 stations at a recording studio Wednesday. - Jim Barcus/The Kansas City Star



BREAKING NEWS

Updated Friday, Jun 13, 2003

- >> John Waters to direct 'A Dirty Shame' - 06:24 AM PDT
- >> Lee wins temporary halt to Spike TV - 06:14 AM PDT
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hunts.

Storz tried the same trick in Kansas City. One 1955 treasure hunt featured checks of steadily escalating value hidden at four spots across Kansas City. The last prize, a \$1,000 check, was awarded to a listener who found a turtle bearing the station's call letters planted near the Loose Park pond.

The result was four different traffic jams and lots of WHB listeners wading into the water at Loose Park.

The Kansas City police chief, not amused, suggested that such contests cease. But *Time* magazine, the next year, christened R. Todd Storz, the network's chief, "the fastest-rising figure in U.S. radio."

Beyond contests, WHB became known for its carnival-like sound effects, such as echo chambers and musical station identification jingles.

But above all else, WHB offered music.

The origins of the Top 40 format date to World War II. While Storz was serving in the U.S. Army, he noticed how restaurant customers, faced with perhaps 70 choices in the jukebox, often selected the same 10 or 12 songs. Then he watched with wonder when waitresses, after several hours of hearing the same songs, used their tip money to play those songs yet again.

Storz refined the idea through the early 1950s, and the format received its formal name at the second Storz station, WTIK, in New Orleans, purchased in 1953.

In Kansas City, where the Storz group purchased WHB in 1954, the concept was combined with sheer power.

The Storz station in Omaha had been a daytime-only operation. The New Orleans station was powered by only 250 watts. WHB, however, featured a 10,000-watt signal. During the day it could be heard in four states, and at night in Canada and the Caribbean.

"It was the revved-up version of what Storz had pioneered in Omaha and New Orleans," said former WHB disc jockey Richard Fatherley.

With the rise of rock 'n' roll, WHB became the beacon around which a vast new demographic -- teenagers listening to rock -- grew. What is today called the "Big Chill" generation first heard the eclectic mix of music it calls its own on stations playing Top 40.

Opinions differ as to whether all this was on the Storz agenda. Fatherley says no.

"WHB wasn't in the entertainment business. It was in the audience business," he said. "It was in the business of delivering audience, and they found a way to do that through popular music."

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Contemporary broadcasters can only dream about an audience share as big as WHB's at its peak. The winter 2003 ratings listed KPRS-FM as the highest-rated Kansas City station, with a 7.9 percent share of the listening audience.

"Back then, in certain times of the day, the WHB share was close to 50 percent," said Fatherley.

As a result, radio station managers from across the country booked Kansas City hotel rooms specifically to record WHB broadcasts, said Fatherley, and bring the Storz sound to their own markets.

"Usually media trends started at the coast and came inland," Fatherley said. "But Top 40 was just the opposite."

Storz died in 1964. The growth of the FM band splintered the listening audience, and WHB's young audience grew up. WHB, once at 710 on the AM dial, is today a sports talk station at 810, following a recent frequency swap with KCMO.

The Top 40 format still exists, sometimes called "contemporary hits radio." The same concept -- a heavy rotation of a limited number of songs -- is common to stations playing country, rock or other varieties of music.

But the audience that Top 40 used to command is history.

"The media is so niche-driven now, and what is lost is a cultural commonality," McCourt said.

Just to remind themselves how long ago it was, WHB alumni on Wednesday visited the station's former penthouse studios atop what is now the Pickwick Plaza Apartments at 933 McGee St. WHB vacated the building in 1969, and the current Pickwick management believes no one has leased the space since.

From its peeling acoustical tiles to its clouded control-room windows, the old studio didn't look much like the home of the World's Happiest Broadcasters.

"I feel like a ghost," said Oberholtz. "And you can quote me."

To reach Brian Burnes, history reporter, call **(816) 234-7804** or send e-mail to bburnes@kcstar.com.



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Omahan helped create top-40 radio format

BY BETSIE FREEMAN
WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER

When George W. Armstrong worked at Omaha's KOWH-AM in the early 1950s, each announcer had to play all the top 10 hits during his daily show.

In the era of network shows and soap operas, owner Todd Storz thought it would set the station apart.

He was right. By 1951, KOWH was the top-rated independent station in the nation, and Storz had launched a radio industry revolution.

When Storz Broadcasting bought WTIX-AM in 1953, the company sent Armstrong to New Orleans as the station's general manager. A competitor played the top 20 hits in between network programming.

With Storz, Armstrong figured that if 20 hits were good, then 40 continuous hits were better.

He was right. Ratings at WTIX "went right through the roof — a rocket ride," said Richard Fatherley, a Kansas City, Mo., broadcasting veteran who has researched Storz Broadcasting's history.

So the top-40 format was born. And Armstrong, a Chicago native who moved to Omaha as a child, was one of its fathers.

Armstrong, 76, died this week at an Omaha hospital of congestive heart failure.

George Armstrong's work with Storz Broadcasting in the 1950s got national attention.

Credit for creating the format goes to Todd Storz, but Armstrong "pulled it all together and put it on the air," Fatherley said. The format really took off when Armstrong installed it on another Storz station, WHB-AM in Kansas City.

When WHB lured nearly 50 percent of the audience, it gained national attention.

"They had radio operators from all over the country coming into town, holed up in hotel rooms and recording this station," said Fatherley, who was program director for WHB in the late 1960s.

Armstrong got his start in radio when he was 16 as a DJ at WOW-AM. He graduated from Creighton Prep and earned a bachelor's degree from Creighton University and a master's degree in broadcast journalism from Northwestern University in Evanston, Ill.

He spent his entire career with Storz, returning in 1967 to the home office in Omaha. He was named executive vice president of the company at age 27. In his mid-30s, he was the youngest chairman of the National Association of Broadcasters Radio board of directors.

It was a fulfilling career, said son Bill of Dallas, and not just for dad. Armstrong's kids met people their peers could only dream of — the Beatles, the Animals, the Monkees. Bill Armstrong said he still has a set of drumsticks he got from Dennis Wilson of the Beach

Boys.

"The Dave Clark Five — when I was growing up, we stayed in the same hotel and had a blast with those guys," Bill said.

George Armstrong knew Judy Garland and Julie London, and once brought his mother from Omaha to New Orleans expressly to meet Ginger Rogers, his son said.

He also forged a friendship with Harry Truman when the former president had offices in the same building as WHB. They met when Truman rear-ended Armstrong's car.

"Dad was furious" until he realized who it was, Bill said.

Besides his son, Armstrong is survived by his wife of 51 years, Katherine McDivitt Armstrong; sons Bob of Omaha, Jim of Overland Park, Kan., and Tim of Dallas; daughters Sharon Kammandel of Omaha, Kathy Dussault of Los Angeles, Susan Forde of Denver and Kay Kirkvold of Sioux Falls, S.D.; and six grandchildren.

A memorial service was Wednesday at St. Barnabas Episcopal Church in Omaha.


June 23, 2005 12:00AM

Top 40 and the Big Easy

By Anand Ramachandran

Utter the phrase "Top 40 Radio" and you might get the image of listening to banter on FM radio between songs as you drive with the top down through coastal California.

It may surprise you to learn that the Top 40 concept, which turns 52 this year, was born on AM Radio in New Orleans in 1953. It was pioneered by Todd Storz and his father, both Nebraska natives, at "the new AM 1450 WTIK" (later AM 690).

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"It started as a 250-watt peanut-whistle radio station," according to Dick Fatherley, a former executive with Storz Broadcasting Company from 1964-1969. A peanut-whistle radio station is an industry term for a low power broadcast.

Fatherley served as program director at WHB in Kansas City, Kansas. He now is a radio historian and a voiceover narration entrepreneur with his own company, AdVoice.

Between 1953 and 1958, WTIK moved to AM 690 with a transmitter that could be heard from Pensacola, Fla. to Galveston, Texas.

It was here that Top 40 radio debuted and perfected its format before rolling it out nationally from WHB in Kansas City, Kansas, which Storz purchased in 1956. — 1954

"Playing the hits of the day was nothing new. Lucky Strike's 'Your Hit Parade' pre-dated Top 40," Fatherley said. "In fact, Storz's Top 40 was a response to the 'Top 20' which aired on NBC affiliate WDSU between the afternoon radio soap operas."

The Top 40 format and song selection were based on media research, sales, jukebox plays and the "Billboard" and "Cashbox" magazine charts.

"Here in Terrebonne and Lafourche parishes, the WTIK format was very popular with listeners" said Ray Saadi former owner of KHOM and KTIB. "It was copied all over and paved the way for broadcasters to try things that hadn't been tried."

Most importantly, it spurred competition among disc jockeys to

determine "who was the best, the funniest, and provided great entertainment."

Both Fatherley and Saadi recall artists such as Elvis, Berry Gordy and the Beatles and how radio and Top 40 helped those performers raise to prominence.

Storz did just about anything to help radio recover the audience it was losing to the budding television industry, Fatherley said.

His gimmicks included outrageous promotions such as treasure hunts. DJs would give clues online and listeners would seek out the hidden treasure. At his Omaha radio station, Storz once led listeners to the public library with his on-air clues and created a run on the institution.

"Despite the defense Storz offered," Fatherley recounting his argument that he was "encouraging people to use the library, he was still fined \$560 for the damages."

While Terrebonne and Lafourche stations were not as extreme, "the idea of remote broadcasts, promotions, quizzes and giveaways excited the local listener," Saadi said.

In 2005, VH1 and countless other imitators have adapted and spun-off the concept beyond its musical origins and into its own industry. Radio formats have come, gone and returned.

Gordon McClendon of KLIF in Dallas is more prominently credited with growing the Top 40 format than is Storz.

McClendon's claim to fame was the post-game dramatization baseball games he did from his studio using manufactured sound effects. Storz, also a disc jockey turned executive vice president of the Storz Broadcasting Company, stayed in the background and provided the ideas and guidance.

"Gordon McClendon was actually a contemporary of the Top 40 format and eventually launched niche radio formats like all-news and all-classical music," Fatherley said. "McClendon and Storz were contemporaries, competitors and friends."

Storz died in 1964 just shy of his 40th birthday. He never got to see the growth or spin-offs of the concept he invented.

Richard Fatherley has documented the life and times of Todd Storz in his audio program, "Radio's Revolution & The World's Happiest Broadcasters." He is also working on a book concerning the era.

You can get a free copy of "Radio's Revolution & The World's Happiest Broadcasters" by writing Richard Fatherley, P.O. Box 172114, Kansas City, KS 66117.

Fatherley also petitioned the U.S. Postal Service to issue a stamp

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Part 1 - Narrated by Richard W. Fatherley (About 15 minutes)

Begins with interview excerpts from former Storz department heads about Todd Storz, his personality, and the influence of daytime-only KOWH-Omaha and its impact on radio broadcasting in the United States.

Covers UPI dispatch about Todd's untimely death on April 13, 1964, and includes additional remarks from Storz memoranda.

Chronicles formation of the Mid-Continent Broadcasting Company (later known as the Storz Broadcasting Co.) in 1949, and its purchase of daytime-only KOWH-AM/660 and **KOAD-FM from the Omaha World Herald newspaper.

Discusses its phenomenal ratings growth beginning in 1950 and continuing through 1956.

**Note: Storz disposed of the FM property because of the limited number of FM sets in use, and because the FM frequencies for commercial operation had shifted from 43-50MHz. to 88-108MHz.

Part 2 - Narrated by Ray Otis (About 15 minutes)

Presents an overview of the early origins of Top-40 music programming beginning at ~~Todd's~~ WTIK-AM/1450 in New Orleans purchased in 1953 for \$25,000. Discusses Storz "counter-programming" strategies and the WTIK frequency change and power up-grade.

Includes interviews about Storz's music policy, its news treatment and controversial "Treasure Hunt" promotions.*Covers Governor Val Peterson's KOWH citation as the nation's top rated independent radio station.

Provides re-statement of Top-40 idea by William L. Armstrong, and discusses acquisition of WDGY-AM/1130.

Quotes excerpts from the June 4, 1956, edition of TIME magazine story on Todd Storz as "the fastest rising figure in U.S. radio."

*Governor of Nebraska

Part 3 - Narrated by Richard W. Fatherley (About 15 minutes)

Covers the controversial transfer of WQAM-AM/560 in Miami to Mid-Continent from the Miami Herald newspaper with a detailed study of how Storz "Treasure Hunt" promotions stood in the way of FCC approval, what Todd did to assure approval, and its impact on radio.

Discusses the 1957 sale of KOWH to William F. Buckley, Jr., and studies the impact of Omaha-based radio broadcaster Don Burden on Todd's decision to sell the station.

Features interview excerpts from former Storz department heads discussing acquisition of WHB-AM/710 in Kansas City, the many workbench gadgets created by Todd's V.P. of Engineering Dale Moudy, and cites the Adam Young, Inc., study; the 1957 triumph of independent radio over network radio affiliates.

Part 4 - Narrated by Ray Otis (About 15 minutes)

Reviews American Broadcasting Network's aggressive 1957 recruitment of Storz top management personalities into American Broadcasting Network by Robert Eastman; how Storz alumni influenced programming changes at ABC's owned and operated and affiliated stations by 1958. Discusses Storz acquisition of KOMA-AM/1520.

Covers the relationship between Todd Storz and Dallas broadcaster Gordon McLendon, and reviews the dual loyalties of Top-40 programmer Bill Stewart.

Reviews acquisition of KXOK, Todd's "Last Hurrah".

Epilogue - Narrated by Richard W. Fatherley (About 12 minutes)

Reviews home-office re-location from Omaha to Miami Beach, and return to Omaha. Profiles Robert H. Storz management style. Discusses Todd's failed marriage, health problems, and his entry into the jingle business. Examines WQAM's roll in failed Bay of Pigs invasion under the Kennedy Administration, the Congressional investigation(s) into the "Payola" scandal following the Storz-sponsored Disc Jockey Convention in Miami. Closes with excerpts from Storz' WQAM General Manager Jack Sandler's letter about Todd Storz to Broadcasting Magazine. Concludes with credits.

Errata - Jack Kennedy graduated from The Choate School in 1935, not ~~1938 as mentioned in the Epilogue.~~

The origins of WHB's format are the stuff of legend. The most common version has Todd Storz, scion of the Omaha brewing family and executive of KOWH, sitting in an Omaha bar or cafe in the early 1950s.

He and another station executive noticed how the customers, with perhaps 70 songs to choose from in the jukebox, still played the same 10 or 12. Why not a station that played music like that, the same popular songs again and again, instead of slipping in the occasional hit between the block programming that television was succeeding with?

The truth is simpler than that, says George Armstrong, former executive

See Radio, pg. 4C, col. 1

Page 4C The Kansas City Star, Monday, February 9, 1987

Radio

continued from pg. 1C

vice president of the Storz group and general manager of WHB, the Storz flagship station, from 1954 to 1967.

"Top 40 was not a blinding revelation in a bar," he says.

The format of playing popular hits, discerned through research with surveys and record store sales, was refined in Omaha over two years, Armstrong says. It was only after the Storz group acquired a second station, WTIK in New Orleans, that the format found a name.

Armstrong arrived in New Orleans and found another local station, a network affiliate, that filled the time between the end of soap operas and the start of network news with music. "The Top 20," the station called it.

"I had an independent station," Armstrong says, "and I simply thought that if 20 was good, 40 was better. We called it the Top 40 and when we bought WHB, we

stuck it in."

The Storz group acquired WHB from the Cook Paint and Varnish Co. on June 14, 1954, Armstrong remembers. It was a week or two later, he estimates, when Kansas City first heard an afternoon "Top 40" show that counted down the popular hits in reverse order.

The next month, Elvis Presley recorded "That's All Right" in Memphis, Tenn. And by 1958, when the nation's disc jockeys met in Kansas City and the term "Top 40" had taken on a life of its own, Top 40 meant a lot of Elvis.

"All our stations had humongous ratings before anybody ever heard of Elvis," says Armstrong, now retired in Omaha. "We'd come to the conclusion that playing the popular hits was the best way to be successful."

MID-CONTINENT BROADCASTING COMPANY

General Memo -

June 18, 1956

One of the most difficult problems I face is that of filling top level positions as they become available. It is particularly difficult because, usually, we have a number of well qualified people in our organization to fill most of the positions. In the present situation, I have tried to keep in mind the many different things involved. One of the most important considerations is the fact that we don't want to hurt any of our existing stations by moving too many people within our own company. For example, I thought it was too early to make any change at Minneapolis at all. Notwithstanding that, however, you may be interested to know that each and every person was considered for the positions presently available. I went over the staff lists name by name.

The changes involving Miami and New Orleans, will not become effective, nor be publicly announced, until we have received FCC approval on our pending purchase of WQAM.

WQAM, Miami. Jack Sandler named General Manager.

WQAM, Miami. Dave Croninger named Program Director.

KOWH, Omaha. Ed Morgan named Sales Manager and Sports Director, replacing Jack Sandler (after Miami).

KOWH, Omaha. Bill Stewart named Program Director replacing Jim O'Neill who has resigned to become Program Director at KFBI, Wichita, Kansas, effective June 20, 1956.

WHB, Kansas City. Jack Sampson named Local Sales Manager.

WTIX, New Orleans. Eddie Clarke named Program Director replacing Dave Croninger.

I certainly want to congratulate all of these people who will undertake additional responsibilities, and offer my complete cooperation to help in any way I can.

Todd Storz

TS/rep

David Gleason - FYI

confirmation.

Bud

Many thanks for the remembrance. It's satisfying to know there are still a few folks around who appreciate the work to which I so devoted myself.

As I recall, Bill Stewart did not work for Storz prior to 1956. He did, however, work for WNOE before I arrived in N.O., and also before Gordon McLendon took control of WNOE's programming (The connection: James A. Noe, Sr. owned WNOE and his daughter married Gordon McLendon). WTIX went on the air, I believe in April, 1953. By the late fall of '53, Top 40 came into being—the term was from the mind of George W. (Bud) Armstrong, who was managing the station at the time. Their competition was WDSU, and in the afternoon WDSU had a show called the Top 20. Bud surmised that if the Top 20 was good, the Top 40 (countdown) would be great... and he was right. Shortly thereafter, the young Bill Stewart, went to work for WNOE and observed the new phenomenon of Top 40 taking hold. Even I was programming/playing it in Little Rock beginning in late '53. Bill wanted to go to work for Todd, but Todd had no interest at the time. Therefore, Bill fabricated a lawsuit against Todd presumably to get Todd's attention. It accused Todd of taking credit for a promotion that Stewart had run on WNOE and attendant libelous remarks. Todd did not take the bait, but he took note. Stunts like this also, however, got the attention of Gordon McLendon—and by early 1955, Stewart was in Dallas working for Gordon for his first trip around the McLendon track. I do not know why his deal with Gordon clouded and put him in the Storz orbit, but in mid-1956 Todd hired Bill Stewart for the first time.

I am referring back into my files for confirmation, and if I discover that any of these remembered facts and dates require "adjusting", I will email you.

I hope they'll be of some use.

Bud Connell

Bud Connell

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As promised, I checked the "past" and discovered that Bud Armstrong and WTIX actually began the suit process by announcing an "intention" to file an action for \$250,000 against WNOE and Bill Stewart in mid-to-late 1954. Bill Stewart got word of it, apparently through a leaked letter from Bud Armstrong to an official at AIMS, and Bill Stewart jumped the gun on Storz and filed a \$50,000 lawsuit against WTIX and Todd, et al, generally making the same charges as Bud Armstrong's forthcoming suit---all having to do with copying a promotion and alleged bad-mouthing of each other. It was shortly thereafter that Gordon hired Bill Stewart and moved him to KLIF in Dallas, maybe to get him out of the line of fire. I think he was in Dallas by early 1955. I had heard stories about this bit of bad blood in the mid-50s from Storz people and from my associates at WNOE. This info was confirmed by both parties in latter academic interviews, and details for the most part are in agreement.

That drains my knowledge of the subject. Perhaps Kent will have something to add.

Bud Connell

Bud Connell

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END