

Wilson, vice president of Bartell Broadcasting, said of him: "Bill did a lot of things we all knew had to be done. We knew that audiences wanted more music, they wanted fewer commercials. Bill was the guy who had the guts to demand that those changes be made."

Mr. Drake's advice was sought by many stations, his syndicated programming did a booming business, his name at the top of a story in the trade press commanded attention. There have been reams of stories told and written about his famous "red phone"—the line that could put Mr. Drake in touch with any of the RKO stations he was consulting. The impression that Bill Drake actually had iron-fisted control over everything that went on at his consulted stations grew to the point that the FCC called him in four years ago to see if his consultancy violated the seven-station rule. The commission found nothing wrong.

It's 3,300 miles from the houseboat that Bill Drake lives on in a boat basin outside Los Angeles to Manhattan, where Rick Sklar, the man who programs WABC(AM) New York, works and lives. These two men are worlds apart, except for the success both have enjoyed as programmers. But Rick Sklar never has garnered the attention that Bill Drake has, probably because Mr. Sklar has been less accessible to both the radio industry as a whole and to the press.

Rick Sklar became a radio programmer through sheer audacity, he says. He was working at WINS(AM) New York as promotion manager in the late fifties when the payola scandal broke in New York. The station's program director slipped off discretely to California and the next morning Rick Sklar, the young promotion man, walked into the P.D.'s office, sat down at the desk, called the owner on the phone and informed him that he "would handle everything."

"Well," the owner said, "with all the trouble we're in now, we need to appoint a community leader as the program director—give us some respectability. But you can stay until we appoint someone," he told Rick Sklar. A "community leader" was never appointed and nine months later the station was sold.

"I suppose I was really naive," Mr. Sklar says today, "wanting to take over that job after what had gone on." That experience also began what has been an attitude of distrust toward record people that has made him either famous or infamous, depending on your point of view. "First thing I did at WINS," he said, "was ban all record pluggers from the building."

Even today, he sees very few promotion men and keeps close watch over WABC's record-store monitoring system to avoid "hypes" by the stores that record companies may have influenced with free records.

But talk of payola, etc. is secondary to any discussion about what WABC means as a radio station. What counts is that Rick Sklar has been wildly successful at programming a mass-appeal radio station. For the eight years he has been its program director, WABC has been the solid,

number-one radio station in the largest market in the country. And Mr. Sklar has achieved that stature by never varying from the basics.

WABC is the Green Bay Packers of radio. It has never strayed into what Mr. Sklar calls "fancy stuff" and has been meticulous about making sure that every record it plays is a hit—in the strongest sense of that over-used word. In most cases, a record will have had to have proved itself everywhere else in the country before it can make the WABC playlist. The station has been criticized because it waits so long to "go on" a record and will stay on for a much longer time.

In many ways, WABC is an old-fashioned radio station. It still uses an echo-chamber to filter both its voices and music. The echo is an old device that Mr. Sklar never saw any need to change when everyone else was discarding it. "It is a distortion, there's no doubt about it. But I think people like it because it makes it sound like radio."

The WABC echo is in direct opposition to the way Bill Drake would have the RKO stations sound. Mr. Drake adheres to the idea that the sound of a station should be as flat and as pure as possible.

And Rick Sklar never fell prey to the rush to put album cuts on top-40 playlists, as Bill Drake did. The trend toward album cuts was a means, most programmers thought, of keeping the 18-to-24 male audience that was beginning to tune to progressive-rock FM stations in the late sixties. "At the time," Mel Phillips, program director of Drake-consulted WXLO(FM) New York, shrugged, "it seemed like the right thing to do. Almost everybody got caught in the trap, though."

"I knew it was wrong," Bill Drake now says "because after we took the LP cuts off the station the numbers immediately went back up."

Maybe it was because there really were no FM's breathing down WABC's neck that Rick Sklar never had to resort to such experimentation. Or maybe it was his belief that WABC was so strong in all other demographic categories that the station could stand a little attrition in a small section of its audience.

Most likely, however, the main reason for Rick Sklar's success at WABC is his heavy involvement in an elemental practice of top-40 radio—record research.

Record research has been the foundation of top 40 since its infancy. Because of the very nature of the beast, popular-music programmers have faced every Monday the task of determining the best-liked records for the week. And the procedures of those determinations have, for the most part, not changed since the time of *Your Hit Parade*.

Store reports—a survey of record outlets that report the best-selling records in ranked order—has been the heart of the research process. And it promises to remain so for some time.

But changes in the record-buying habits of the public, changes in musical taste and even some changes in the ideas of top-40 radio are beginning to erode the basis of record research.

The biggest change is because singles

are no longer bought in the proportionate volume that they once were. Time was when an artist had a hit single, his company would rush him into a studio to cut another nine or ten songs (usually conversions of hit songs by other artists) to put on an album with the same title as the original hit single. Today, singles are usually culled from albums that are made with an LP concept in mind. Singles are used as marketing devices to sell albums that, according to the Recording Industry Association of America, make up more than 85% of the retail record volume.

There are about as many, if not more, singles bought today as there were 10 years ago. But single sales have not risen proportionately with the growth in population. And all this leads to the questions: Who is buying singles now? And, are these sales reports then a reliable indicator of the relative popularity of records?

As for "who buys singles any more," no nonempirical research data has come forward. Programmers who say sales figures for singles have lost their credibility are saying that singles are bought only by low-income groups, especially blacks, and therefore give a distorted picture when projected onto a broader audience. And others believe that singles, even though proportionate sales have dropped off, are still bought by a wide audience who may be young, but are still no different from the public that bought singles years ago.

Bill Stewart, a veteran of the Storz station group and now operations manager of WYOO(AM) Minneapolis: "To me, the single is a truer measure of popularity than an album. The kid who buys album is the kid who gets a \$20 allowance every week and can run down to buy an LP whenever he wants, which is usually when the peer-group pressure to have a certain album is strong enough. He may listen to it only once or twice; it doesn't matter because the album is really just a status symbol. But the kid who gets a dollar a week for her allowance, when she goes down to buy a single, she chooses it with great care." To Bill Stewart's mind, the audience for top 40 is the low-income groups, of whom "there are a lot," he has said.

But Chuck Dunaway, one of the few major-market programmers who still pulls an air-shift (at WIXY[AM] Cleveland), has begun to re-evaluate his methods of programming. "I don't think the sales reports that I get really can be taken in toto as a true reflection of what people want to hear. First of all, you must have an ear. I've been doing this too long not to trust my ear. We're not in business to educate people; we're here to reflect musical tastes. But I want to reflect a total picture."

So, WIXY has shifted the emphasis of its programming from pure research to a form of "concept" programming. It was all necessary, Mr. Dunaway says, when he saw WIXY's quarter-hour averages begin to slip. "What can you do when you see that you've got a monstrous cume average but your quarter-hours are bad? The problem has got to be repetition. Right?"

"I believe people listen to you for