



Gordon McLendon: the legend lives on

No matter how radio programming has changed, "playing the hits" remains the formula that wins. Developed in the late 50's, the top 40 format ended a 10-year decline in radio revenues by replacing tired block programming with a rapid-fire medley of music, news, contests and creativity.

While the late Todd Storz is credited with first using the music formula of repeating the hits, it was Gordon McLendon who brought pizzazz to the hit parade, and to whom the current generation of broadcast operators acknowledges its debt. Known for extravagance in promotional campaigns, McLendon promotions included flag-pole sitters, \$50,000 treasure hunts and showering downtown crowds with money-weighted balloons. He is credited with the innovative use of news on the hour, jingles, produced news "intros," mnemonic call letters and mobile news units. He experimented early with beautiful music in San Francisco, with all-news in Chicago and put an all want-ads station in Los Angeles.

Born in 1921 in Paris, Tex., McLendon fell in love with radio listening to Ted Husling's play-by-play sports accounts. Years later, his on-air recreations of sports events led to a national sports network, "Liberty," that grew into one of the largest radio networks until its demise in 1952. At one time or another he owned KLIF(AM) Dallas, KABL-FM San Francisco, KABL(AM) Oakland, WNUS-AM-FM Chicago, WWW(FM) Detroit, WYSL-AM-FM Buffalo, KOST(FM) Los Angeles, WRIT(AM) Milwaukee, KILT(AM) Houston, K TSA(AM) San Antonio, K ELP(AM) El Paso, K EEL(AM)

Shreveport and WAKY(AM) Louisville.

The McLendon radio formula was to acquire good facilities that were failing in the ratings and to turn them around—often in a matter of weeks. Recalling what it was like to enter a market with a McLendon station, Don Keyes, once McLendon's national program director and now owner of WNYN(AM) Canton, Ohio, recalls: "Our biggest coup was at WAKY in Louisville. The only music station in town was WINN, a low power daytimer. They were playing 15-minute segments of one artist at a time, mixing Kay Starr with Nat King Cole and Mantovani. We came in there with the top 40 format and all flags flying, with jingles, promotions, contests, DJ's and mobile news units and in 60 days we had a 60% share of the audience."

McLendon was one of the first radio broadcasters to editorialize on the air after the FCC approved that practice in 1942. Known for his conservative views, McLendon opinionized about everything from politics to record lyrics. He ran unsuccessfully in an election primary against Senator Ralph Yarborough in 1964.

McLendon sold his last radio station in late 1978. He left broadcasting to manage his family's other interests in oil and real estate, and, he says, "because I had done all I could in the aural medium, and wanted to paint on a broader canvas."

Capital from the sale of his stations went into precious and strategic metals—gold was then \$40 an ounce—and McLendon in recent years has kept busy lecturing on finance and investments around the U.S. and overseas. He'll soon be commenting

on investments and finance four times daily on ch. 33 KNBN Dallas, an "all financial" station. Will he editorialize? "I'll have to," he says, "in talking about today's financial and economic situation."

McLendon is one of the larger stockholders in Columbia Pictures and is part owner of Subscription Television of America Inc., with franchises in several major markets. In addition to investing and authoring several books on the subject, he has recently returned to a past career—one involving his greatest ambition. "All my life I've wanted to produce a major motion picture," he says. He recently returned from Budapest, where United Artists filmed "Escape to Victory," an upcoming film starring Sylvester Stallone, Michael Caine and Max von Sydow. "It's the largest film ever mounted in Hungary," says McLendon, who is the executive producer.

McLendon the financier is as active as ever and, listening to him, one gets the impression he may get into a performing role again, if possible. "No one ever had more fun behind a mike than I did," he says. "Those were the halcyon days of my career and they might have continued behind a camera, but I had to make that esoteric decision between staying with what I loved and acquiring the time and money to achieve what I really wanted."

What did he learn from radio? "That it all begins with creativity and programming. You can have the greatest sales staff and signal in the world and it doesn't mean a thing if you don't have something great to put on the air."