

## The History Of Rock Radio, Part Two

Do you still believe in the magic of radio?

The young, hit-playing gladiators of WNBC/New York sketched "The Genealogy of Contemporary Rock Radio" on a piece of butcher paper. According to the story, they gathered around a restaurant table in the fall of 1977 and, fueled by beer and crab, began to commit our history to paper.

They started with the founding fathers: Alan Freed, Todd Storz and Gordon McLendon.

Next, they added some of the disciples: Ruth Meyer and Chuck Blore. Then, they penciled in the next generation of players: Bill Drake, Rick Sklar, Tom Donahue, Paul Drew and Buzz Bennett.

To the right of these names, they drew a timeline that transitioned from "The Era of the Disc Jockey" ("Jocks select the music and are in control of the station") to "The Era of Responsiveness" ("Give the audience what it wants").

And then, in the middle of the chart, they drew a box labeled KYA/San Francisco. Here's where it gets interesting. You see, at KYA there were two men determined to change the face of American radio.

One would lead the evolution of Top 40, and the other would revolt against it.

### THE ERA OF THE INNOVATORS

Bill Drake left WAKE/Atlanta to become PD of KYA. It was pre-Beatle America, and the air was full of girl groups, Beach Boys and car songs. AM was king, and Drake nicknamed KYA "The Boss of the Bay."

Tom "Big Daddy" Donahue was a star jock at KYA ("400 pounds of sounds"), but he had his fingers in lots of pies. Besides radio, Donahue was involved up to his ears in the local music scene — not a bad place to be, considering that it was San Francisco.

Drake left KYA to begin consulting, and, after he and Gene Chenault signed and succeeded with KYNO/Fresno and KGB/San Diego, he landed in Los Angeles. It was there, in 1965, that Drake and Ron Jacobs invented Boss Radio.

Donahue, meanwhile, stayed put in San Francisco and took another path. On the Genealogy of Contemporary Rock chart, the KYA box is connected to one that's labeled "KMPX/San Francisco." Underneath the call letters are these words: "Tom Donahue, PD, creates commercially successful Progressive Rock radio."

For the record, the date was April 6, 1967.

### SOMETHING NEW

In the movie *All The President's Men*, Dustin Hoffman, playing *Washington Post* reporter Carl Bernstein, turns

to Robert Redford, who played Bob Woodward, and asked, "Hypothetically, if there's music playing in a car for 10 minutes, and there's no commercials, what can you deduce from that? Is it AM or FM?"

"C'mon, Bernstein!" exclaimed Redford.

The question was a fair one, and the answer — at least to anyone with access to an FM receiver — was obvious.

Underground progressive radio was the antithesis of AM: no screaming jocks, no jingles and no hype. Commercials were limited and subject to scrutiny — no time buys from the Army, for example. Music was played in sets, and jocks didn't talk between the songs or

over the intros. And, FM sounded better.

It was revolutionary, but it wasn't mass-appeal, and the simple truth is, not a lot of people noticed. Not at first. "Ownership didn't take FM very seriously," says KMXZ/Tucson PD Bobby Rich.

Neither did Detroit or the Japanese automakers. "When we started KFMB (B100)/San Diego in 1975, they weren't putting FM radios in cars," says Rich. "You had to go down to a stereo store and pay \$19.95 for an FM converter."

### THE ERA OF RESEARCH

In the early '70s, according to the chart, requests were tabulated for the first time: "Programming to the book [begins] for longer 1/4 hours. Actives and passives are defined. Charts and record sales become less important."

Follow the line from KGB/San Diego to crosstown KCBQ, and Buzz Bennett's name pops up for the first time. "Buzz Bennett comes from KGB and creates the 'Q' format. Research-oriented radio born. Beats Drake [KGB] for the first time." Bennett then headed to WKTQ (13Q)/Pittsburgh ("Money, music and magic. No jingles. Big cash giveaways. First time frequency is used in calls.")

From 13Q the line moves to the left to a box marked "The Bartell Stations": KSLQ/St. Louis, WDRQ-FM/Detroit (where Bob Pittman was Research Director) and WMYQ/Miami. "George Wilson, National PD, creates FM Top 40 group using Buzz Bennett's 'Q' approach."

Top 40 was coming to FM, and free-form underground Progressive was about to be tamed.

### TEACH THE FREAKS TO FORMAT

They put WCBS-FM/New York in a box and wrote "Creates first structured album format."

From WCBS, there's a line drawn to the ABC FM stations: WRIF/Detroit (Lee Abrams is PD), WDAI-FM/Chicago, WPLJ/New York, KAUM/Houston, KLOS/Los Angeles and KSFY/San Francisco. Under these

stations are the words "Automated 'Love' format fails. Alan Shaw and Bob Henabery refine 'Rock 'n' Stereo' concept and, after several false starts, begin a very successful, tight-list Progressive Rock radio group. Well-received and well-engineered."

The chart states that Abrams left ABC to consult WQDR-FM/Raleigh. Now he gets his own box. "Lee Abrams begins 'Super Stars' format," they wrote. "AOR. Teams with Kent Burkhart for consulting."

We can't forget Metromedia. They added WNEW/New York, KMET/Los Angeles and WMMR/Philadelphia. All of these stations reflected Donahue's vision in their early years, but by the end of the '70s each had evolved from free-form into a more structured, hit-oriented format.

The new big thing was AOR, and, as you'd expect, its success had an impact on how AM Top 40 programmers thought. Before long, so-called FM sensibilities began to rear their head on some of the nation's biggest AMs. Take Bob Pittman's WNBC, for example. "No jingles, fewer commercials, no hype. Straightforward disc jockey approach. Long versions of the songs."

Eventually, the inevitable happened. AM programmers were lured to FM for all the obvious reasons, and FM purists, with no patience for or interest in "AM programming," felt betrayed. "That crap is not what FM's about," they complained. But they couldn't stop the train from coming.

"To our ears," says Bobby Rich, who, by 1978, was programming WXLO (99X)/New York, "AOR jocks were still these weird, acidhead, hippy freaks — not mass-appeal at all. What's interesting, though, is that we were trying to get some of their hipness to rub off on us."

### ANOTHER CHART?

If we were to try to put together another chart today, one that picks up where *The Genealogy of Contemporary Rock Radio* stops, where would we start? Disco? Hot Hits? "Rock of the '80s"? How about AC, New AC/Smooth Jazz and Alternative? Don't forget Triple A, Urban, Urban AC, CHR/Pop, CHR/Rhythmic, Rock and Active Rock. And what about Country?

How would we document the fall and rise of AM? Would jotting down "Rush" and "Laura" do it? And what about the resurgence of Top 40?

And if we were to try to chart out the next 25 years, what would we say? Can we anticipate the technology? Who will be our new heroes?

I don't know. Do you?

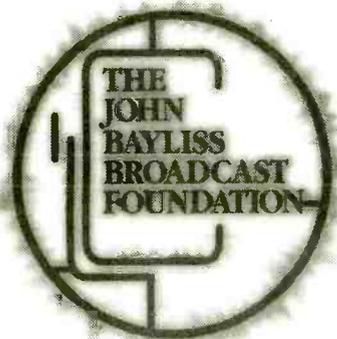
Let me tell you what I do know: Despite the bad rap our medium's been getting lately, I still believe in the magic of radio. Really. No kidding. Absolutely.

Do you?

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