

## Gordon McLendon: He Brought Promotion To The Party

'Gordon came up with the promotions and marketing ideas that made Top 40 fly'

The bar wasn't much to speak of, but if you believe the story that's been passed down to us, it's where they figured it all out.

Todd Storz, the owner of KOWH/Omaha, and Bill Stewart, his PD, were having a few pops when they noticed a young girl feeding the jukebox. Each time she slipped in a coin, the box burped back the same song — over and over and over. According to the story, they started to think that if a radio station did the same thing — that is, play people's favorite songs over and over — it might win.

It had never been done before. And it worked.

Within a short time KOWH shot to No. 1. Bill Stewart took the idea to New Orleans, and it worked there, too. The format didn't have a name yet, but it was generating street talk. "Todd had the music part, which was half of it," says Ken Dowe, former Exec. VP of McLendon Broadcasting. "But Gordon came up with the promotions and marketing ideas that made the format fly."

McLendon understood that part of the equation at least five years before Storz and Stewart ever raised their glasses to toast their new idea, Top 40.

### PLAY BALL

Differentiation.

McLendon got it before many of today's heavy-hitter PDs were born. In 1946 — after Yale, the war, the Navy and a year at Harvard Law — he bought his first radio station, in Palestine, TX, but the economy killed it. The next year he bought a 1,000-watt daytimer in Dallas at 1190 KHz and named it KLIF.

Create attention.

He trained a parrot to chirp the call letters. Really. He had jingles when Dallas didn't know from jingles. But the real play, the one that was going to make the difference for KLIF, was play-by-play sports.

Broadcast rights weren't cheap, but McLendon didn't care. He wasn't going to do the games live; he was going to re-create them using wire copy and sound effects. He began in the spring of 1948.

He used his imagination and figured his listeners would too. Sure, some of it *was* fantasy, but that worked in his favor because if the real games got boring, he could call a foul that never happened or talk about a pretty girl



Gordon McLendon

who never was.

"What harm is there in making 100,000 people happy on a hot summer afternoon?" he asked, but by 1952 the team owners had had enough. It didn't matter that there were sponsors and fans. They didn't care that McLendon's standalone station, early in syndication, had become the second-largest radio network in the nation. They just said, "You're out," and on May 15, 1952, the Liberty Broadcasting System died.

In four years McLendon had become one of the most respected play-by-play guys in the country, and at least he still had KLIF. He focused his energies on the station and

never pursued sportscasting again.

### 'KEEP YOUR EYES ON THE PROGRAMMING'

Top 40 was only a baby, just like rock 'n' roll. In 1953 it was about Patti Page — there wasn't a whole lot of hipness going on.

Necessity collided with opportunity. McLendon heard about the format, took a good look at it and committed. At the time KLIF still had some block programming on the air, shows like *Lullaby in Rhythm* and *Hillbilly Roundup*, but McLendon was ready to rock the boat.

In early 1954, a few months before Elvis walked into the Memphis Recording Service, Bill Stewart — who'd been with Storz from the start — walked into KLIF as the new PD, and the tightening began. Within 90 days KLIF went from No. 10 to No. 1, and radio would never be the same.

"Keep your eyes on the programming," McLendon said, "and the sales will follow." The product was everything, and despite history's tendency to give McLendon all the credit, it took a team of the best and the brightest to keep KLIF and the other stations in the group on top.

According to some accounts, the unsung hero responsible for KLIF's launch was PD Bill Stewart. Don Keyes, who would become McLendon's National PD in 1957, acknowledges that Stewart "put the station on the map."

### THE KING OF CONCEPTS

KLIF became *the* story. Executives flocked to Dallas to listen to and tape it, even though tape recorders were hardly portable in those days. They found a station that never stopped promoting, perhaps because ideas came

easily to McLendon. "God, he'd come up with some of the most bizarre concepts and events," Keyes says. "Gordon was a showman, the P.T. Barnum of radio."

KLIF threw hundred-dollar bills from buildings and came close to causing riots. The School Spirit Campaign (the school with the most signatures got a record hop hosted by the station) paralyzed Dallas schools, and the superintendent begged the station to stop.

And then McLendon bought an insurance policy from Lloyds of London to cover most of the \$50,000 check he stuck in a bottle that he hid in Dallas. With only the bottle cap protruding from the ground, KLIF launched "The Great Treasure Hunt." Clues were given out twice a day, but they were purposely bad, and McLendon didn't expect anyone to win. Surprise!

At the time it was the most money a radio station had ever given away. Some Dallas lawns and gardens were the worse for it, and concerned citizens complained to the FCC, but McLendon didn't mind. After all, that's what lawyers were for.

In 1957 McLendon sent Don Keyes to Houston to flip KILT, and they ran the Treasure Hunt contest again. "One of the treasure hunters fell off an I-beam and was killed," Keyes recalls with regret. The next day the story was plastered all over the Houston papers, and reps from Blair, in town to acquaint themselves with KILT, thought it was just another McLendon gimmick. Sadly, it wasn't.

Ken Dowe says that McLendon's contesting led to the FCC's writing more specific rules about promotions and contesting. But it *was* very compelling radio.

### THE GREAT INNOVATOR

McLendon invented formats. He created Easy Listening for KABL/San Francisco when he found there were already five Top 40s in the market. In L.A. he and Keyes put the first-ever News station on XETRA. He launched a 24-hour FM station in Los Angeles that only played commercials. When it failed, he changed its call letters to KOST. And, believe it or not, McLendon even offered the government \$1 million for Armed Forces Radio, but it never returned his call.

In 1971 McLendon sold KLIF to the Fairchild Corporation for \$10 million. At the time it was the most money ever paid for a radio station. At the last minute, over coffee, McLendon offered to throw in KNUS-FM for \$150,000, but Fairchild declined. By the way, the contract called for a noncompete, but it only addressed AM stations. Fifteen months later KNUS-FM was the No. 1 station in Dallas.

McLendon died at home on Sept. 14, 1986. His life's work, however, can be heard every day, all day long, on every contemporary radio station in the world.

In fact, if it wasn't for Gordon McLendon, you might not have a job today.

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