
Posted on Sun, Apr. 24, 2005

Money drives the shift in FM's broadcast mix

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The Philadelphia FM dial has finally stopped spinning after months of upheaval.

The area now has its first FM gospel station (Praise), a new station playing urban adult-contemporary music (WRNB), and another pumping out a confounding assortment of hits from the last 30 years (Ben). Two Trenton stations swapped positions.

Tom Joyner, second only to Howard Stern in popularity among adult morning listeners, got a new home.

Philadelphia also lost Y100, its only modern-rock station, leaving an estimated 384,000 listeners without regular doses of Garbage.

The new stations have begun reaching out to the estimated audience of four million. And as those listeners become accustomed to this new, crowded FM landscape, fresh battles are shaping up.

What's at stake, besides eight million ears, is money. BIA Financial Network, which tracks the radio industry, estimated that advertisers spent \$238.2 million last year on Philadelphia FM stations, up about 5 percent from the year before.

Stations are working to solidify their mornings, considered the most important part of the broadcast day. Morning drive, as it is known, not only generates the most revenue, but also sets a station's overall image.

The multimillion-dollar question: What will active-rock WYSP (94.1) - and Philadelphia radio - be without its morning man, Stern?

For 10 years, he has been the undisputed ratings king, heard by more than 10 percent of the listeners, but he is scheduled to leave later this year for Sirius Satellite Radio.

WYSP owner Infinity Broadcasting, which syndicates Stern to more than 40 affiliates, has not disclosed its post-Stern plans.

Meanwhile, long-suffering rock rival WMMR (93.3) has hired Preston Elliot and Steve Morrison, late of Y100, as morning hosts. And John DeBella is up the dial at classic-rock WMGK (102.9), which, like WMMR, is owned by Greater Media.

A new competitor will join the fight this winter. Classic-rock WTHK (97.5), which already lays down a strong signal from Trenton, plans to move its 50,000-watt transmitter into Philadelphia to cover more territory. The move will boost the station's value, and allow it to grab for listeners and ad dollars.

"We're getting set up for a really good rock battle, especially with WYSP and WMMR," said Mike Boyle, vice president and executive director of Friday Morning Quarterback, the Cherry Hill trade publication.

The latest round of FM changes began Dec. 1, when Radio One introduced the city's first new commercial station in decades - WRNB (107.9), an urban adult-contemporary station along the lines of the powerful WDAS-FM (105.3).

WRNB quickly snagged syndicated morning host Joyner, who had been heard on WDAS for eight years. The move was a fait accompli after Radio One bought a share of Joyner's company.

On Feb. 14, Nassau Broadcasting-owned Trenton stations WTHK, the classic-rock outlet, and WPST, which plays hits, traded positions on the dial. WPST ended up at 94.5, WTHK on the stronger signal at 97.5.

Ten days later, Radio One killed Y100 - the city's only modern-rock station. Radio One in turn moved its hip-hop/R&B

station, WPHI (the Beat), into Y100's spot, 100.3, allowing the Beat to take advantage of the stronger signal. At 103.9, the Beat's former home, Radio One launched WPPZ, the city's first full-time FM gospel station.

A month ago, Greater Media changed its low-rated adult-contemporary station WMWX (Mix 95.7) to an outlet called Ben that plays a mishmash of rock hits.

Few hands were wrung over the demise of Mix 95.7. But modern-rock fans - who tend to be young - howled when Y100 was pulled. Former Y100 staffers established the Web site y100rocks.com, which has become a popular Internet radio station. They also plan to stage Y100's FEZtival, the annual multi-act concert.

After Y100 was silenced, the radio dial lost a musical genre. Hip-hop/R&B hits by such artists as 50 Cent, Usher and Missy Elliott already could be heard on WRDW (Wired 96.5), WUSL (Power 99), and WIOQ (Q102). So why would Radio One jettison one popular format in favor of more hip-hop and R&B?

Helen Little, operations manager of Radio One's Philadelphia stations, said: "The music that we play on the Beat is not limited to urban. Hip-hop has become mainstream culture. This is the music of choice today."

Philadelphia is only the latest town to lose a modern-rock outlet. "Everybody in the industry likes the music better, but ratings aren't reflecting it," said analyst [Sean Ross, vice president of music and programming for Edison Media Research](#) in Somerville, N.J.

For the same reason, such formats as classical and jazz are not popular with programmers who answer to shareholders and who hang on their consultants' every word.

Y100's audience was on the younger end of the 18- to 34-year-old demographic. "There's a fear of young demos," said Jim McGuinn, who was Y100's program director. "It's the 25-to-54 demo that drives radio... . In the industry, there's a lot of turmoil about ways to keep young listeners."

Killing off a modern-rock station, he added, will "send them to satellite and the Internet in droves."

Critics of the current state of radio complain that programmers are choosing cookie-cutter formats that leave listeners with little variety.

They also point to the Telecommunications Act of 1996, which loosened rules on how many stations one company could own in one city. Competition, they contend, would lead to more programming diversity.

Corporations say they have clustered stations to pool resources and operate more efficiently.

Arbitron will release the latest quarterly ratings, which stations use to set advertising rates, on Tuesday. (Those winter numbers will reflect only Joyner's move and the arrival of Praise; the other changes occurred during the spring ratings, which will be released in July.)

The top FM station again likely will be WBEB (101.1), known for light rock, cheery disc jockeys, and a heavy marketing budget.

B101 has one other distinction: It's independently owned, by Jerry Lee and Dave Kurtz, and run entirely out of an office building in Bala Cynwyd.

"Whenever someone says you need [at least two or three local stations] to make money in radio, I have two words: Jerry Lee," said Louis F. Mercatanti Jr., chairman of Nassau Broadcasting.

Radio-station owners - experiencing a 9.5 percent drop in listenership across the country in the last five years, according to Arbitron - are looking for more revenue opportunities. One is a new generation of high-definition digital radios that would allow AM and FM stations to offer programming on secondary channels attached to each regular signal.

"This is an exciting era, from a technological standpoint," said John Fullam, who oversees Greater Media's Philadelphia stations.

And it might be a boon for the listener. Said Fullam: "I'd say in the next few years, we'll have more choices."

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