

## FM Radio: Ups and Downs in the Ozone

The ABC FM story — Brother John out and Big Brother in

By **BEN FONG-TORRES** JULY 6, 1972



**Brown Retro Toned Wood Radio**  
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Why is it, Allen Shaw, that after the several millions of dollars you're said to have lost on ABC's FM stations—through the automated, taped Brother John "Love" format, the half-live, half-taped, big-name format, the all-out revolutionary loose non-format, and, now, the reactionary Top 40-tight format...why do you still have your job?

Allen B. Shaw, Jr., 29-year-old head of ABC-FM, punches the "hold" button again. In half a minute, he is ready: "It's a tribute," he says from his suite in the 40-story ABC building in Manhattan, "to the kind of company this is. ABC is one of the most sensibly-operated, willing-to-take-a-chance, to-innovate companies. From Hal Neal, my boss, up to the Chairman, they're realistic, sensible, nice people."

The American Broadcasting Company's chain of FM stations links seven transmitters, from KSFY and KLOS in San Francisco and Los Angeles, through KAUM in Houston. WDAI in

Chicago and WRIF in Detroit, to WDVE and WPLJ in Pittsburgh and New York. All seven stations follow the lead of Shaw, who sold himself—with Love—to ABC's Special Projects Division three years ago.

And whatever Shaw feeds the guinea pig he has closest at hand (WPLJ) is what the rest of the ABC pack get.

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In April, 1969, Love **Radio** began, and all seven ABC-owned and -operated stations, plus any other stations that bought the package, got 25 repeatable hours of taped programming each week, airmailed from New York: Reverend John Rydgren as the poetry-spouting Brother, plus the wisdom of Howard Smith, who was also tied up with the *Village Voice*, *Eye Magazine*, and Youth Concepts, Inc.

In April, 1970, “the slickly-produced Love thing,” as Shaw calls it now, gave way to partially-live programming. Again, it began in New York, with Dave Herman hired away from Philadelphia. Shaw then got Tony Pigg from San Francisco and Jimmy Rabbitt from Los Angeles. Each ABC station received tapes of Herman, Pigg and Rabbitt, each man also did live shows at their local stations, and the stations hired anchormen to fill in the hours between tapes.

In April, 1971, Shaw decided to dump tapes and go all-live, free-form. Previously, the announcers had to fill out music lists before each show and carefully time hourly segments for tape-production purposes. Now, the staffs could do as they pleased, limited only by the required union engineer, abridged record libraries, and news from the ABC network.

In October, WPLJ introduced a tight playlist and clamped down on talk. The other stations followed. Hal Neal, at age 48, a 30-year veteran at ABC and head of the radio division, denies a one-city control of all seven stations—“We pool our thinking...we have a type of a family thing,” he said.

Yet he can't deny that in Los Angeles, John and his brothers were doing well when their plug was pulled; that half-live was working when call letters and format were suddenly changed

again; that the L.A. station, doing free-form, survived the shock and kept solid ratings when New York sprang its latest surprise.

“I might characterize the format changes another way,” Neal says. “We have not really changed the concept of the music we play; we’ve been through refinements, or an evolutionary process of developing.” And Allen Shaw adds: “If they all sound the same, it’s because the best sound is the same. Then that’s fine.”

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“The best sound” is a top-of-the-pops album-cut Top 40 format. A playlist breaks down pre-selected songs into categories—hit singles, cuts from hit albums, oldie singles, old LP cuts, new cuts.

Another AM tool, the pie-chart, dictates exactly when in the course of each hour a jock may play any category of music, when he may cue the engineer to run the news, when he may break in to talk. To talk. “It’s even tighter than AM,” says an announcer at KSFY. “At least on Top 40 you can say what you want, be funny if you like, whatever you feel like being. Here, now, there’s a :52 break coming. I have to start with a back-announce of the songs, and I’m told how: the artist, then the name of the song, last song first, and I can only ad lib about one or two of the songs. Then I have to say the time, *then* the weather.”

The announcer calls out a number, signifying a song, to his engineer. “And we’re specified to say, ‘Hi, this is—.’ And they tell you how to say it, and they’ll play airchecks of you at these meetings and tell you what you did wrong.”

Allen Shaw: “It’s just good radio principles: little DJ talk, careful spot placement, call-letter frequency, weather...The jingles are not a limitation.”

But...directing an announcer how to say “Hi?”

“It’s like an actor or artist being directed how to do a line. When you have a DJ who’s down, he can bring the entire audience down with him. So we say, ‘There’s a way to greet an audience.’ But you can get away with the more sophisticated aside. Tony Pigg, I would say, is capable of

saying things periodically that only someone in San Francisco can appreciate.”

Bob Simmons who, like Pigg, was hired away from KSAN, the strong Metromedia station in San Francisco, recalls the time Pigg fucked up. “He said the weather, then the time. And right after his show, he got a call from a Program Director. ‘Now, Pigg, you’re not supposed to *do* that.’ I mean, such a waste. They spent so much money to get one of the wittiest guys on radio, and then they cut his balls.”

The KSFY announcer punches his mike on, does the ID, sounding more laid-low than laid-back. “I don’t pay any attention to what I’m doing,” he says. Why does he stay there? “We’re all getting good bread. Plus it’s no hassle if you do what they say. The hardest thing is to go to these meetings and listen to guys who don’t know as much about radio as you do.”

When Shaw and national program director Bob Hannaberry show up in town, the DJ said, “It’s like Hitler and the troops. George Yahraes [general manager at KSFY, demoted from promotion and sales director of the FM chain] strikes me like a patrician who never had to do any work. He regards us totally as his underlings. He’s very into Bill Drake.”

He remembers one particular meeting. The airchecks were being played, and Pigg was heard talking about Fleetwood Mac. “Too long,” said a manager. “Well, I got excited about this song,” Pigg tried to explain, “and I wanted to mention the changes in the band.”

“It was a beautiful rap,” the staff member said, “but he was told he wasn’t *supposed* to get excited.”

“I doubt from the very beginning that they wanted to go underground,” says another announcer who has watched the ABC changes from the inside, but from a distance. “But Shaw knew that albums were the coming thing, and he sold ABC on that idea.”

From the Love sales brochure: “*The music we play is progressive rock, not underground.*”

“At the first glimpse of the format last fall,” a KSFY announcer recalls, “this guy, our general manager, his hair just now curled in a kind of Afro, he says to me in the hallway: ‘Frankly, I’m *fed up* with the CounterCulture!’”

(Current ABC-FM “underlings” are not named because they’re not supposed to talk. Or, as mid-underling/program director Rick Traylor remembered five minutes into our discussion, “An interview has not been approved. We’re supposed to clear with the Director of Promotion first.”)

It is a peculiar kind of management for a “progressive rock” network. And whatever President Neal says about the steadiness of the music concept, the music has changed. It is no longer in the hands of announcers who love music, but in the hands of “music directors” and “program directors.”

Like Rick Traylor, who was named PD after five months as music director. He had no previous radio experience. “I ran a recording studio for awhile, made commercials and stuff, and before that, I programmed music for a lot of discotheques, some topless joints in North Beach.”

General manager Yahraes was promotion director at a Top 40 station in Chicago when he joined Shaw, the assistant PD there, to take over ABC-FM. Yahraes replaced a black man who, according to Bob Simmons, was given the GM position as a reward for good work as a salesman for ABC television. And, today, much of the tightening is being directed by the program director at ABC’s powerhouse Top 40 AM station in New York, WABC.

“Some people on the inside have told me that Rick Sklar has been the most influential person in this changeover,” says Claude Hall, radio editor at *Billboard*, the trade magazine. Neal says Sklar, as part of the family, is “consulting.”

Hall: “Sklar had knocked heads with FM in the old days; he couldn’t see a station *not* formatted.”

And it is all working. San Francisco has so far resisted ABC-FM, in all its forms. In Chicago, radio competition is stiff—that is, all three FM rock stations there are rigid—and ABC’s simply doesn’t stand out. But in Houston, Detroit, Pittsburgh, Los Angeles, and New York, ABC is either on top or getting close.

So today, except for a few operations—in Eugene, Oregon; Denver, Colorado; Boston; Detroit, and San Francisco, most notably—“progressive,” “free-form” stations—have been girdled by

management, ala Chicago, ala ABC-FM. Playtex Rock is on the air.

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Rock music now occupies about 400 of 2300 licensed FM stations. (Ten years ago there were 1,000 commercial FM stations.) In recent months some FM rock stations have dropped the “underground” format—in Denver, the story goes, KMYR management simply hated the hippies so much that one day the staff was canned; call letters changed, and slush-pop reinstated.

Financial reasons were claimed by owners of two Texas stations—KFAD in Arlington and KHFI in Austin. Stations have also dumped freaks in response to FCC frowns on dope lyrics and “obscene” language.

Still, as FM penetration—and advertising revenue—continues to increase, more owners are taking their FM properties more seriously. And where two or three years ago there were “collectives” and “radio communes” in charge of a station’s sound (they still exist today, but usually in non-commercial, non-profit situations), staffs now are mostly professionals—career people. And direct from Top 40 or straight off the street, FM rock jocks are not out to change the world.

The announcer at KSFX does a tag for a commercial, checks the pie chart and lets loose with the mandatory verbal jingle, “Rock ‘n Stereo,” and, in the same, resigned voice, is back on the phone. “I’ve done this now for six months,” he says. “I can do it indefinitely.”

Pat Dawson, melancholy, beady eyes, is in San Francisco looking for a job. His last one, as an announcer at WPLJ in New York, paid more than \$400 a week. So he is not a desperate man, and he has time to sit and relate the story of ABC’s estrangement from freedom.

In the spring of 1971, Shaw re-christened the New York station WPLJ, dropped the tapes, and hired a mixture of stars and streets. He had Herman, the pro from Philly, Mike Turner, a respected radical out of Detroit, and Mike Cuscuna, who’d done some record production work. Now, Shaw added Vin Skelsa from the New Jersey free-form pioneer station, WFMU. And, for weekends, Dawson and Detroit Annie, a 22-year-old veteran of the underground press who impressed Mike Turner, among others, at the Alternative Media Conference the previous summer in Vermont.

Turner was talking about radio as “an excellent means of establishing an electronic community, a community of consciousness in this country and in every other.” Detroit Annie, known in her hometown as “the first lady of the underground political movement,” would fit right in.

And behind them all was Larry Yurdin, another WFMU grad and the organizer of the Alternate Media Conference. “Larry sold Shaw on the idea of a totally alternative radio,” said Dawson, and Yurdin was hired in late 1970 as national production director. ABC was by then headed toward all-live.

“The thing was, they never gave WPLJ a chance,” said Dawson. “In New York City you don’t crack a market in two months. But we were never left alone; they were always fucking with us.” A month into WPLJ, Detroit Annie was fired. “She missed a couple of IDs and there was an Elephant’s Memory interview where they said ‘shit’ three or four times in an hour and a half.” Annie was fired without notice, said Dawson—she showed up one day and another announcer was in her place; when she called the general manager at his home, he fired her. Turner then stormed into Allen Shaw’s office, demanding that the manager be fired and that Annie get her job back, along with an apology. Shaw fired Turner. “He wouldn’t be happy here,” he explained to the stunned staff.

Flash forward: A half year later, in San Francisco, Bob Simmons is fired as the station follows WPLJ into the no-talk, play-listed format. An announcer there for almost a year and a half, Simmons is handed his last paycheck and told: “You wouldn’t be happy here.”

Back, in New York, Shaw replaced Annie with Zacherle, the ex-TV Bandstand showman who’d established himself on radio at WNEW-FM. The ABC station still sounded “free-form,” with a local news/talk show in the morning, live broadcasts every several weeks, and disc-jockeys free to delve into their own tastes: Cuscuna into jazz, Dawson into drunken folkies, the staff in general into “old esoteric blues.”

WPLJ captured New York. Every store in St. Marks Place was tuned in; White Port Lemon Juice Radio dominated beach transistors. And in July, management began talking about restrictions on music.

“Everybody blew up,” Dawson said. “At that point they weren’t ready for a walkout; it’d set them back another year. They said, ‘We’ll figure something out.’”

Lateral flash: The FCC, by now, had issued its “reminder” to licensees to watch what they were broadcasting (to wit, dope lyrics), and right-on FM stations had responded variously, some managers rifling through record libraries for poisonous Steppenwolf and Temptations songs, others simply dropping the format.

In June, the only FM rocker in Des Moines, Iowa, switched to a Top 40 format, part of the old staff resigned, and a two-month petition campaign resulted in management restoring some kind of a “progressive rock” format. But as part of the campaign, the FCC was asked to block the move to Top 40 by reversing its approval of the transfer of license from old owner to new.

On August 4th, the FCC denied the request and commented: *“A free form rock format, like a free form classical format or a free form anything format gives the announcer such control over the records to be played that it is inconsistent with the strict controls that the licensee must exercise to avoid questionable practices ...”*

“By some wizardry,” Pat Dawson is saying, “we had another meeting on the day this immortal ruling was released. The ABC guys had a meeting in Chicago a week previous, too, and we knew something was in the air.”

Management decided on a policy: a list of 30 albums and 25 chart singles, to be chosen with the help of the staff, to be at least 30 percent of each hour. “In theory it was shitty, but in practice it didn’t make that much of a difference. There was no Partridge Family or Grand Funk.”

But freedom had been taken away. You could still play jazz or blues, but now you had to work in a guaranteed commercial element. Vin Skelsa protested and was fired. “We were into the same thing as when Turner was fired,” said Dawson. “All of us didn’t feel this new system would hurt our programs. And I was given Vinny’s spot, and the staff knew and respected my work, and that made it easier to accept what happened to him.”

Plus, he admitted, it was difficult to walk out on \$400 a week for four hours a day. And with such a rapidly decreasing workload.

“From September on, when Vinny was fired, Dave Herman, Mike Cuscuna and myself—we knew it was over.” Five weeks later the last bits of freedom were snuffed out. Cuscuna left, but Dawson and Herman stayed on, hoping that a good rating in the September Pulse might reverse management direction. WPLJ showed up poorly again, and a new PD, transferred from a job programming religious shows on ABC-AM, stepped in.

At the first meeting, he put up the piechart and exacted the talk rules. “Herman was kind of talking to him about thinking, and this dude came back and said, ‘Well, I don’t want you to think,’ and it flashed on us.” They quit.

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Dawson, like some of the people still on ABC-FM’s gigantic payroll, talks wistfully about radicalizing radio, and what could have been. But he, too, understands commercial radio.

“Our getting paid so much—it’s the essence of New York City. It’s so totally different from Chicago or Detroit—it’s so overwhelming to have a market of 20 million people. When you have a radio station in a place like that, you either have a license to print money or you lose a bundle. This is in everybody’s mind. We’d have to make \$16,000 a week to break even.”

Why does Allen Shaw still have a job?

“Above everything else,” says Dawson, “he is a brilliant salesman. In three years the network has lost maybe \$5 million. Yet he’s still there. He’s always had a project that was close, and he kept selling ABC on why each thing wasn’t working.”

“In New York,” Claude Hall adds, from his *Billboard* office in L.A., “it’s not what you do, it’s what you can convince people you can do. It’s the image, not talent. Look at the rest of radio in New York and you know what I mean.”

Dawson has another theory: “In late summer, WOR-FM was making inroads on ABC’s AM station. By this jive, they thought they could pull in the audience for PLJ and away from OR-FM.” And so ABC-FM, which had a chance to be the vanguard of continually (if corporate—

carefully) progressive radio, has instead regressed, and now sounds even automated, while several sets of automation equipment, purchased at \$40,000 per, stand idle.

Which is ironic, since, as ABC radio president Neal recalled, the idea for taping Brother John was based half on economy—to bypass DJ salaries. The other half was musical control, by Allen Shaw.

“It’s quite simple,” says the tall, rug-headed young Shaw. “We operate on two premises: one, certain recording artists are more popular than others. Two, a station can choose to present the new, less popular music to a segment of an audience or present only the more popular—without reproducing Top 40. We’ve been accused of turning into an FM Top 40. What’s wrong with it? If that’s what people want, then there should be one station in town to do that.” The fact that “formatted” album-cut FM stations were operating—WCBS in New York, KIOI in San Francisco, and WBBM in Chicago—when ABC tightened up is beside the point; Shaw might well have used the same argument to explain the switch to the loose approach, despite the existence of established free-form outlets like WNEW in New York, KSAN and KMPX in San Francisco, KMET and KPPC in Los Angeles, WABX in Detroit, and WGLD in Chicago.”

He continues: “People listen to radio for music, so we’ve deemphasized the cultural, political rapping. You see, the audience voted against that, by and large. It was given three rating periods in all seven stations. We figured three times seven are 21 different rating books that could have shown an increase.”

Shaw dropped Brother John’s poetry for Larry Yurdin’s alternatives, he said, “when we’d made a philosophical decision that the counter-cultural group would go that route. There were several problems that happened at once.

First, no one seemed to be listening to it. Then there were the internal problems of dealing with free-form personnel. The dope-smoking in the studios, the inability to accept any direction at all—that kind of rationale we couldn’t deal with. But we were no more severe than any other independent free-form stations.

“And when free-form wasn’t working, we just changed decisively rather than try to cover it up. Now, financially we’ve made a large development in the stations as a group.”

We’re getting close to learning why Shaw’s still got his job.

“ABC has got a gold mine in WABC-AM,” says Claude Hall. “Their two talkers, in L.A. and San Francisco, are number one. KQV in Pittsburgh is making money. Not to mention TV. No VHF station loses money. You get a station, slap on an old *I Love Lucy*, and you got it made. Radio is so *trivial*; even a \$2 million profit is peanuts.”

Or a \$2 million loss, which is what Hall has heard ABC-FM has dropped since Shaw.

“After X number of years,” Shaw says, “the ABC-AM station group remains number one. It’s this kind of good management that back in ’68 made good album rock possible.”

Hal Neal, the president, calls any money spent—he won’t divulge any figures—“an investment”—and he recalls WABC-AM taking two years and “lots of money and patience” to develop. “In each market,” he said, “we’ve found a need and filled it.”

On AM, that is. On FM it’s find a bandwagon and jump on it. “How to do good album rock radio is still not done,” says Shaw. “But the fact I’m going from one to another is a tribute to management.”

Shaw said advertising, over the seven stations, has doubled, and in areas without transmitter handicaps, ratings have doubled since the girdling. Still, there’s a payroll now of more than 200 persons—many of them unionized and expensive—and, according to Claude Hall, ABC is still losing money. Shaw is talking about advertising. Larry Yurdin, who was hired to make the ads sound palatable to ABC’s “progressive” audience, is long gone.

“Our stations,” he said, “will not refuse any advertising.” No matter how offensive?

“We don’t refuse any advertising.” Why, Mr. Neal, is Allen Shaw still holding his job?

“We feel, in the overall, he has done a good job.” Allen B. Shaw, Jr., father of ABC’s FM formats: find a bandwagon.