



The

Broadcasters' Desktop Resource

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... edited by Barry Mishkind – the Eclectic Engineer

SOUND PROCESSING

A History of Audio Processing Part 5 – Processing's Place in the Station



**by Jim Somich
with Barry Mishkind**

[March 2011] The late Jim Somich was the source of much of the information in this article. Many of his observations have proven to be “spot on,” and as we take a slight “detour” from the march of processing history, Jim reaches for an important point about processing's part in a radio station.

The truth be told, audio processing is not the most important thing in broadcasting. That honor probably goes to “compelling content.”

Over the years, many horribly processed stations have become successful due to great programming and sales. On the other hand, mediocre stations never have made it to the top of the book just because they sounded great.

A REFLECTION OF OUR TIMES

Nevertheless, we know everything in life is intertwined and codependent. You cannot discuss the general state of processing without considering the general state of broadcasting – and broadcasting has been in better shape.

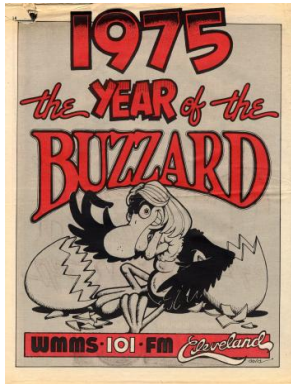
Many challengers have risen against broadcasting in recent years, from iPods to satellite radio to Internet Radio – and to that unknown new gadget or gizmo that is just over the horizon. Nevertheless, radio continues to be vital resource for millions of people. They listen for the latest news and weather, and as a companion while driving or working – or relaxing on the weekend.

Interestingly, many of them remember the “sound” of their youth with nostalgia, even to the point of calling and complaining when the “Hits of the 80s” are played without enough “pump and smash.”

A WINNING COMBINATION

In my opinion, although we have the finest processing tools in history, often we currently are doodling rather than painting Van Goghs!

With that in mind, the “magic” created by a #1 station is worth a quick analysis. Let me take you back to the 70s and 80s and my time at WMMS, “The Buzzard” in Cleveland. It was the #1 station in Cleveland with boxcar numbers and #2 was not even close. Arguably, it was the best rock station in the country.



We certainly had compelling content. Program director John Gorman and founding jock Denny Sanders lived and breathed The Buzzard, and you could certainly sense their passion on the air.

Promotion Director Dan Garfinkel had the magic touch when it came to getting the word out and promoting everything WMMS did. Walt Tiburski and a crack sales department were able to command spot rates previously unheard of in the Cleveland market.

The job of processing the station fell to me.

In those days, the programming department had virtually no input as to the sound of the station and I was given free rein to try anything that I felt would give the station an edge.

Great Sound can make an average station a little better and an above-average station outstanding. But, like most big events in life, I had no idea at the time how important my choices were to the success of the station. I was just doing my job to the best of my abilities.

CHOICES

At a major, market winning station, whether you are doing promotion, constructing studios, or building an audio processing system, cost is no object. But this also can be a trap: with so many choices, it is easy to lose sight of the goal and experiment a little too much. Then you make wrong choices and the station never settles into a solid sound.

We really did not talk about “sonic signatures” in those days, but that was what we really were trying to get. Raw loudness was important, of course, but also a signal that jumped off the dial with a consistency and big, full sound that made an emotional connection with the listener. These were all components of the MMS sound of the 70s and 80s.

Yet, the tools I had to work with were crude by today’s standards. At one point, I even designed my own FM processor because I could not find anything else that gave me the sound that I was seeking. Many engineers have been in a situation where no commercial product would work as well as their own box; some of these creations even have led to successful commercial products.

PASSION

Please permit me to side-track a bit for just a moment. I want to discuss something very important. Passion. The staff of a station must have it. Automated programming rarely has passion that can be heard, and usually will not win against a live, passionate operation.

At WMMS, we mocked our competition on and off the air and they ate our exhaust fumes as we stayed in the #1 position book after book. John Gorman had pet names for all the competing PDs - and never lost an opportunity to rub their noses in our success. It was his mind game and it worked: WMMS became legendary.

People visited our studios just to see how it was done. Often they were disappointed as the equipment was nothing special.

But the spirit of the Buzzard was not about fancy studios or luxurious offices. It came right out of the gut and hit the listener right in the brain, making an emotional connection that was difficult for many outsiders to understand or duplicate.

On every level and in every department WMMS was a group of hippies with a passion to win, who were doing what they loved, and did it very well indeed. WMMS made a lot of money for the station's owner.



WMMS studio circa 1976

Why do I dwell on this? Maybe it is because I think this passion and spirit often is missing in today's corporate, highly-consolidated, focus-grouped, cookie-cutter, voice-tracked, satellite-networked broadcasting industry. However, we are here to discuss the state of and passion for the processing art today, not programming, sales, or promotion. So, let us return to that topic and leave the rest for others to analyze.

PASSIONLESS PROCESSING

With so many now stations owned by so few corporations, there is less need to trounce the competition (which is often a sister station) with great audio.

Worse, the sole engineer of a cluster of stations today does not have the time to experiment with the fine nuances of audio processing. He does not have the time to just listen and think creatively about the station's sound. Yet, it is this experimentation that produces breakthroughs in broadcast sound.

Sadly, I think we engineers - some of us - are actually losing the ability to listen creatively. We install and repair equipment and read technical magazines. And the digital processors of today are amazing machines that can perform exceptionally well using one of the supplied presets. There is a great temptation to punch up a pre-packaged preset and let it ride. After all, there are a thousand tasks on your to-do list. Right? Could that be a description of your situation?

Down and dirty competition is not polite, and it is not neat. Life in the trenches is never comfortable. What used to be war has become pleasantries and getting along. I believe something is lost when you let your guard down and think of your competition as anything but "the enemy."

As I said before; although we have the finest processing tools in history, often we currently are doodling rather than painting Van Goghs!

If radio is to make a big comeback - and I think it will - it will require improvements on every level: programming, promotion, sales, *and* engineering. And the station "sound" just cannot be ignored.

This lack of competitive spirit can even extend to processor manufacturers who, at one time, were at war with each other, publicly and privately, and the result was a better product. The attitude today seems much more laid back and comfortable. Good for the blood pressure, but maybe not so good for the state of the processing art.

A PRESCRIPTION FOR SUCCESS

At this point in our discussion, we should have a much better picture of our present situation: why and how we got to where we are now.

- In the 40s and 50s, stations basically scrambled to control audio.
- In the 60s, almost everyone used the Audimax/Volumax system.
- In the 70s, DAPs dominated.
- In the 80s, it was Optimods.
- In the 90s, Omnia brought real diversity to the marketplace
- In the 00s, newcomers like BW Broadcast and Wheatstone have revitalized and enhanced the choices available to broadcasters.

It is interesting to look from our current vantage point and see how attitudes and opinions about what we are doing and why have changed.

Back in 1992, Bob Orban declared processing was a “mature craft.” What he meant was that by 1992 processing was a mature *analog* craft, because we were on the verge of something totally new: the digital revolution in processing.

In many ways, revolution is the operative word. Digital processing brings in a tremendous flexibility in what can be accomplished, as well as new and odd ways to make audio sound bad. Furthermore, it is not well understood by everyone, as evidenced by the number of analog processors still on the air – like the Optimod 8100, still popular on the air and often being rebuilt by many stations.

Yet here is a key point Bob Orban makes: “While I don’t happen to agree with that point of view, that’s OK - processing comes down to preference, and not everyone’s preference is the same as mine.”

Preference. How each person hears and perceives audio. Until they can see and hear the benefits, it is hard for stations to see the superiority of the digital processors. This will lead us to the next part of our discussion.

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