

INSIDE RADIO®

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“Personalities *INSIDE RADIO*”

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by Mike Kinoshian, Personality Editor

An outstanding visual marketing campaign a number of years ago underscored how multiple bowls of other breakfast cereals would be required to match the contents of just one serving of the advertised product (Total).

Parallels can be drawn to Bob Hamilton, who in his illustrious career has been an on-air talent, PD, National PD, National Music Director, General Manager, consultant and station owner.

Happy Personality

Television was just coming into its own when the greater Philadelphia area native realized the entertainment business was a perfect fit for him. “I always wanted to do shows,” recounts the PD of Lincoln Financial Media Classic Hits WMXJ “Majic 102.7”/Miami. “I’d go to the family basement; hang a shower curtain on a clothesline; pretend the end of a vacuum cleaner cable was a microphone; and do [make-believe] shows. My mother would be shoving me out the door so I could play with other kids, but I’d tell her I had another [program to do] in five minutes.”

Reading community events as his high school’s public address person intensified Hamilton’s radio interest so he borrowed the Tom Thumb typewriter his brother received as a Christmas present and fired off a letter to the PD of local Levittown (PA) station WBUX. “I said I’d sweep floors, rip news copy and do anything else to learn about the radio business,” notes Hamilton who received a call from the station’s programmer two days later. “He needed a 15-minute public affairs show. When he asked if I wanted to do it, I almost jumped out of my skin. I’d hang out at the station every weekend and it just went from there.”

By the late-1960s Hamilton was running a station 20 miles from Harrisburg (WIOO/Carlisle) when renowned consultant Paul Drew contacted him. “He heard me as he was driving and asked that I send him a tape,” remembers Hamilton who parlayed that call into WIBG/Philadelphia weekend overnight duty. “They didn’t have money for another jingle so they [spliced something together] and I became John Roberts. As far as I was concerned, they could’ve called me Happy the Clown. I didn’t care what my [on-air] name was.”

The alter ego of John Roberts remained at WIBG for a year while continuing to program WIOO.

That’s when the late Jay Cook got in touch with Hamilton about joining WFIL. “The guy they hired lasted one shift. So [for about 18 months] I did overnights there as Bobby Mitchell.”

Niagara Rises

It was in the early-1970s when Hamilton scored his first industry job outside of Pennsylvania as WIFE/Indianapolis’ Assistant PD-Music Director-afternoon drive talent but he wanted to return to running a radio station. “I was contacted about being [a National PD overseeing stations in] San Diego, San Antonio, Grand Rapids, Toledo and Fort Wayne. I did that for [several] years and then went back to Philadelphia.”

The City of Brotherly Love’s only FM Top 40 at the time was WIFI and Hamilton’s main ambition when there was to beat alma mater WFIL, a goal he accomplished in the summer of the nation’s Bicentennial. “That was the beginning of the turn [from AM to FM] in Philadelphia,” he remarks. “I needed a morning man at WIFI and hired Joe Niagara, the guy I grew up listening to when I was a kid. It was a big thrill to hire him and he was a wonderful human being.”

When Paul Drew needed someone to program WXLO/New York in January 1977 Hamilton obliged to fly in for the interview, but his sights were actually set on the opposite coast.

Immediately after returning from Gotham, he received a call from KHJ-FM/Los Angeles (later KRTH “K-Earth 101”) VP/GM Alan Chlowitz. “The station was automated and used reel-to-reel tapes,” Hamilton points out. “They knew I had automation experience and I [was confident] I could make the station be something special.”

Automation however did pose some creative restrictions regarding the way Hamilton could play music. “I forced them to get rid of that routine and we went to an insta-cart system,” he explains. “Everything was put on cart and I made that thing sing with voice tracks.”

Competent Combo

All this of course predated music scheduling software systems like Selector so Hamilton hand-programmed the station’s music cut-by-cut but states he was fortunate to have Guy Zapoleon as his APD/Music Director. “We were a great combination and had a [terrific] time building and changing the station. Finally in 1979, we convinced [management] to build new studios; go live; and start what K-Earth should be.”

Some tremendous on-air personalities were involved at K-Earth and overtaking iconic sister Top 40 KHJ-AM was Hamilton's biggest internal aim. "I truly believe talent makes the difference on this – or any [other] – format," he stresses. "It makes a station come alive and is [what separates a facility from] being something special or [simply] being a jukebox."

Filling in for K-Earth's morning team represents the last time Hamilton was on-air. "I had fun doing it but my true love is making my people do great radio," the former RKO Radio National Music Director remarks. "[That job] was fun and I dealt with many great people. It was a great era for music and a great time in my career."

Albeit an indeed memorable KHJ-FM/K-Earth 101 tenure (1977–1986) Hamilton felt it was time to move on. "I don't think anyone can be really effective at any radio station longer than ten years," he opines. "To be perfectly honest, I was becoming bored and wanted to do [something else]. The pinnacle point was buying a [Johnstown, PA] radio station and running it [1983-1990]. That's something I always wanted to do."

Confronting A Challenge

Three years before departing K-Earth Hamilton established a part-time consulting business.

Client KSFO & KYA pitched him on the idea of basing his consultancy from that San Francisco combo.

A 13-year Bay Area run at several different outlets included consultant, programmer and GM permutations. "When I was with KSFO & KYA, KFRC came after us with Oldies and I beat them," he proudly notes. "A new owner [King Broadcasting] however came in and we all left the building. KFRC wooed me to run 'Magic 61' and KFRC-FM. It was fun when we beat KSFO & KYA which was doing Oldies. Then as a 'fiftysomething' guy, I did hip-hop at 'Wild 107' [KYLD] and KSOL."

Consulting however evolved into the type job Hamilton no longer found appealing. "I was living on airplanes and in hotels," the model railroad enthusiast recalls. "I knew [airline employees]

better than my friends at home. I had never [programmed] in Miami before and thought it would be a challenge. I love challenges so [in August 1999] I said 'let's go.'"

Generally up at 5am Hamilton takes a 60-minute walk along the ocean before arriving at Lincoln Financial's "Majic" by 7:15am. "There's no one here to bother me and I get a lot of work done by 9am [when other staff members] begin rolling through the door. In order to survive [as a PD] today, you have to be involved in the sales and promotion departments and with the management team. There are more things a PD has to do than [he or she] has ever done. The old days of going out and having long lunches are over. You have to be a [one-person] show and the leader of the organization to make it succeed."

It's Too Late

It is often said formats such as Oldies, Classic Hits and Classic Rock do especially well in bad times. "Britney Spears records are being forced on [programmers] because there's no other product out there," Hamilton contends. "When there's nothing 'new,' 'fresh' or 'exciting,' [listeners] go back to what they know and what feels good. That's where we are again in that cycle of music."

Ongoing debates are fueled whenever someone questions whether those particular formats have an invisible curse so Hamilton suggests doubters examine CBS Radio's WOGL/Philadelphia. "It's a great example of a station in the same boat we're in [at WMXJ]. It was always ninth, tenth or eleventh 12+ [but] after PPM came in, it was suddenly #2. It was always good. They didn't change anything other than perhaps tighten up the music a little bit."

Play anything Adult Hits options clearly don't excite Hamilton. "All I can say is the best version of 'Jack' is in Los Angeles [on KCBS-FM] and that's because the guy running it [KCBS-FM & KROQ VP/Programming Kevin Weatherly] knows what he's doing. Sorry but being a jukebox music thing doesn't work."

As satcasters Sirius and XM add commercials for the first time on some channels or put more spots on various other ones, Hamilton

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comments, “We’re finding people who get [the subscription service] free with their car will try it out but not renew [it].”

No decision has been made thus far regarding Majic’s HD2 channel and a clearly skeptical Hamilton rhetorically asks, “Does AM Stereo ring a bell? I think we are too little too late with HD2. It is asking [quite a bit] of a listener [for them] to go out and buy a new radio. I fear that is the problem. I’m not saying the [HD2] idea or concept is [bad].”

Money Trail

Discussions industry executives have nowadays with those in their teens to upper-20s can usually prove to be discouraging. “They don’t use or need radio,” Hamilton comments of the under-30 crowd. “They didn’t grow up on radio [but] have iPods and [they] text message; that’s what I am afraid of. The only people [they know] who grew up on radio are their parents. We as broadcasters have to concentrate on those people who do use radio. That’s [generally] people 30+ and that’s where all the money is. [WMXJ morning man] Bruce Kelly [‘Bruce & Donna in the Morning’] has come up with a great concept for our YouTube feature. It is a background view of what the station is really like when we are not on the air. He’s done a great job developing that to make it an extension of the morning show.”

Personality is a major “Majic” driving force and longtime high-profile South Florida talent Rick Shaw serves as President of the station’s non-profit Children’s Fund. “Rick does public service stuff for us and goes out to various civic organizations,” Hamilton explains. “It is a big deal at Christmas time and we found kids [who] wouldn’t have [otherwise received presents]. It is a year-round organization that makes peoples’ lives more beneficial.”

Ethnic diversity makes programming in South Florida even more complex than when Hamilton was in Los Angeles. “There were less individual groups to deal with when I was at K-Earth,” he states. “Hispanic audiences in Los Angeles want to involve themselves [in the culture] and be Americans. [Conversely] in South Florida, Haitians, [as an example], bring and live their lifestyle here. They don’t embrace America and [our] traditions as much as [many Hispanics] do in Southern California.”

Among those for whom Hamilton has tremendous respect is aforementioned ex-RKO National PD Paul Drew. “He’s always one step ahead. You either liked Paul or you didn’t but he was very effective. That’s why I admire him very, very much.”

Other influences on Hamilton’s radio career have been Lincoln Financial Media Senior VP Dennis Collins and LF Radio Division President Don Benson. “I’ll never forget Stu Wayne for giving me my first on-air shot,” Hamilton declares. “I needed to get my foot in the front door and proved myself from that time forward. I also admire Kent Dennis, who runs Bicoastal Radio. We worked together in San Francisco. He’s doing a great job running about

40 stations in the Northwest.”

Rushing To Exit Pittsburgh

A well-known industry story involves a PD who continually implored early-1970s KQV/Pittsburgh on-air talent Jeff Christie to shut up and play the music.

The PD in question was Hamilton and you know your trivia if you identified Christie by his given name, Rush Limbaugh. “I haven’t spoken to him since I left Pittsburgh in 1971,” Hamilton points out. “I’m sure he’s laughing all the way to the bank today saying ‘look at me now.’ I also hired Bill Figenshu in Pittsburgh from Atlantic City. A ton of people I’ve worked with have done very well on their own and are great broadcasters.”

Consolidation has had more downs than ups as far as Hamilton is concerned. “Entrepreneurial companies offered [greater chances] to do more than bigger-type companies [which] are pretty regimented and routine,” he maintains. “I can’t work for someone I don’t respect [nor] can I do something [in which] I don’t believe. It’s all about the passion to do great radio and to take care of the listener. People who truly are passionate about our business have to take [things by the horn]. Wall Street shouldn’t be allowed to run our business. I’ve attained every goal I’ve set and would like to be involved in real ownership. I love my business; always will; and will strive to find [more exciting] things to do.”



WHO: Bob Hamilton

WHAT: Program Director

WHERE: Lincoln Financial Media Classic Hits WMXJ

“Majic 102.7”/Miami

WHEN: Since August 1999

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