

Stations flex muscles in airwave battle

By Peg Sheldrick

After years of playing "elevator music," an FM radio station abandoned its old format and even its call letters to play rock music for a whole new audience.

That may sound like the pilot for *WKRP in Cincinnati*, but it also describes recent history for KFOR-FM in Lincoln, KEZO in Omaha, and for that matter, stations all across the country. The area stations have switched from playing music of the forties to music of the top forty. The trend has been noticeable in many large cities within recent years, but it is relatively new to the airways of eastern Nebraska.

KFMQ and Omaha's KGOR have been providing FM rock since the early 70s but with two new converts within two months,

and-see attitude about all this competition. KFMQ has "good" ratings according to Wheeler, and Polson feels the feedback on X103 has been favorable, but both expect the competition to affect where they stand in the ratings when they come out.

Polson said he feels the competition he needs to worry about is here in Lincoln. His station isn't after the Omaha market and he doesn't think the Omaha stations are after the Lincoln market, so he doesn't concern himself much with Z-92. His philosophy is that it's "okay" if listeners in other cities tune them in, but his primary interest is local. Even so, "You always worry about the competition," he said.

Competing for attention

What they're all competing for is the attention of the 18 to 34-year-old crowd. Marketing studies have shown this age

FM stations sound a lot like the old AM stations. "They're playing top forty stuff all the time," she said. "If you listen to the radio, once an hour you hear 'Baker Street.' There's a lot of good people you never get to hear."

Polson admits they do play the familiar tunes rather than the less well-known material.

"But all stations play top forty. All stations play 'em and why shouldn't they? They're the top hits of today," he said. "We're not a top forty station, but we do play top forty. People are uncomfortable with unfamiliar music—that's a fact."

He said that if a person likes James Taylor, he or she will buy the album and play it, and that the station should concern itself with appealing to as broad an audience as possible. A station can play jazz and unfamiliar cuts, but "they (the listeners) won't know what they're listening to" and will be likely to switch stations. Eddens of Z-92 concurs that to hold the market they're after, they have to play the hits.

At KFMQ, the orientation is a little different, perhaps because in the process of evolving into a rock station it went through a phase of playing entire albums (as opposed to just singles). Program director Wheeler said he doesn't hesitate to play unfamiliar tracks. "We hope to play the best cuts from the best popular albums," he said. "This is a pretty good period for radio. People are moving away from the lowest common denominator kind of programming to the highest common denominator . . . (looking for) the best cuts, the most palatable commercials, the best announcers. It forces everybody to be better."

'Positive force'

Wheeler also points out that the music is not the only thing a station has to distinguish itself in to be successful. KFMQ tries to be a "positive force here in Lincoln" by supporting non-profit groups and making consumer information public. They also sponsor midnight movies that are popular and relatively inexpensive. "Those are the kinds of things that surround the music, that make one station different from another," said Wheeler.

Polson feels X103 will succeed by offering something between the "extremes" of KLMS and KFMQ. In addition to the wide appeal of its music, the station prides itself on good news and sports coverage. They chose a unique name ("nobody has an X") and are using ads in other media to give the station more of an identity in the listeners' mind. Signal strength is another of X103's attractions. Polson indicates they don't think they'll put KFMQ out of business, but they hope to get people who formerly listened to KFMQ four hours out of the day to give two of those hours to X103.

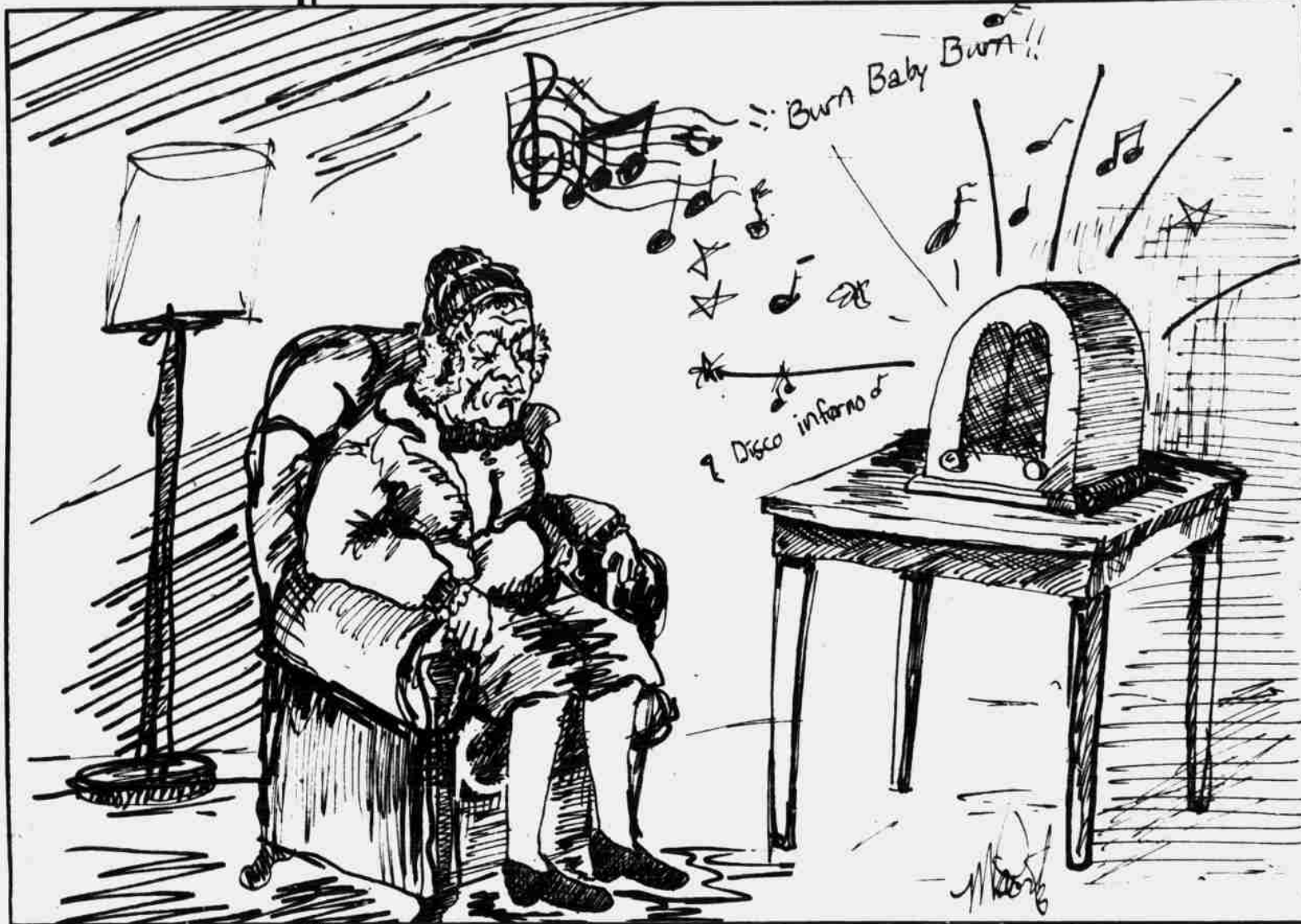
All this competition seems to be very good for radio on the whole, although the emphasis on diversified FM format could mean the death of AM. Some sources feel that AM's only hope for survival is to get FCC approval to broadcast in stereo.

Eddens said he felt that "the listener awareness of FM stations" is high and that radio in general is "stronger than ever before, far more competitive." Polson is also pleased with the state of the art. "It's never been better—the quality has never been better," he said. "That's a personal judgment."

The lines of demarcation between AM and FM, between types of music are getting hazier all the time. "Even country music has full orchestration," said Polson. But there's still quite a gap between Tony Bennett and Billy Joel. At KLIN, the feeling is that there will always be a market for what they play.

"Beautiful music" is here to stay," said Tom Range, "and I wouldn't be surprised if some of the Omaha stations switched back." Bruce Wheeler is optimistic about the station. "I think what the community needs will determine what kind of music it will have. I think there's room for everybody."

Time will tell just how many of the new stations will survive. Of course, it should be remembered that some of what is considered easy listening today was the degenerate pop of another generation, the rock of ages past. As Simmons points out, "When we get older, we'll dance to rock and maybe disco, and the kids will laugh." So maybe in the year 2000, KLIN-FM will be playing "Baker Street" to an appreciative audience.



it seems FM rock is taking the area by storm. The recent rush isn't all that surprising to some.

"I guess when it rains, it pours," said Bruce Wheeler, program director for KFMQ. "I've kind of been expecting other people to get into FM rock for awhile . . . just not so many at once. It is kind of an interesting change."

Dave Polson, station manager at X103 (formerly known as KFOR-FM) said, "The market was ready for it and the product was here." Some displeasure was expressed during the first week or so of the new format, but the "appetite" for FM rock is whetted, according to Polson.

Jim Eddens, vice president and general manager of what was once KEZO in Omaha, has heard plenty of complaints about the shift to Z-92 rock. But he stands behind the decision to go from Montovani to Mangione.

"It's kind of a complicated marketing thing," he said. "For years we've known the share of audience was changing. We had to be able to grow. We had to be able to serve a larger audience and we will with FM rock."

What seems to be shaping up is a battle of the radio bands. Locally, X103 will be doing its best to cut into KFMQ's audience.

"I like to see it as a positive thing. I like to think it will bring out the best in everybody," said Wheeler. "I think it's good, really—not that it's not nice to virtually have things to yourself for awhile, either."

KFMQ had no FM competitors in the Lincoln area until recently, KLIN has moved into that kind of enviable position, since locally it is the last bastion of "beautiful music." Their following is increasing as disgruntled easy-listening fans turn to KLIN for what they can't find elsewhere. The station has had calls and letters from Omaha and even southwest Iowa that indicate there are still quite a few lovers of "beautiful music." Tom Range, station manager, said the new FM formats are intended by the stations involved to speak to a younger audience. "Some of them are doing a good job," he said, "but no, I don't see us changing."

It's too soon for ratings, so the rock stations are adopting an optimistic wait-

group to be the one stations should go after.

"Adult contemporary" is one name for the target market, and catering to its taste means abandoning the Ray Coniff Singers for the Bee Gees.

"The audience of a 'beautiful music' station is classical 35 and above," explained Polson. "Well, we've got people (that age) who grew up on rock. You don't find the younger people listening to 'beautiful music' by choice." He gives the example of a young person in business who would sit patiently through the Muzak at the office all day but turn on rock as soon as possible after work. "Beautiful music" may have its own merits, but it lacks what Polson calls "mass appeal."

KFMQ caught on a little more quickly than most stations to the possibilities of the rock approach. Ten years ago it was a classical station. With a new owner came a new format featuring rock at night. Rock has now taken over twenty-four hours a day. Wheeler said the headstart came because, "the owners just saw it as a coming thing and made a smart decision."

Eddens of Z-92 said the FM rock format has been around for years in larger markets, with 70 percent of the listening public tuned in to such stations on the coast. Polson, too, said FM has been more diversified in the big cities for some time now. "People categorize FM as just music . . . (but) you can run any format you want," he said.

In some cases in the larger markets, the FM stations have just as many commercials and just as much chatter as the AM stations. There are no intrinsic limits on the FM format. According to Polson, FM went to more music and fewer commercials in an attempt to grab AM listeners by offering something different. FM rock is another aspect of the same attempt.

Competition

Rock stations new and old, AM and FM, are more competitive than ever. "The contemporary music listener isn't faithful to one station. They're button-pushers," said Polson. Strategies for holding the interest of the fickle market differ from station to station.

Cheryl Simmons, one member of the listening public, said she thought the new