

Boston Tests New Music & Flunks Out

BY TIMOTHY CROUSE

BOSTON — The Boston radio war is over.

It was only a five-month battle, but it was a great show while it lasted. The war was started by John H. Garabedian, the program director of WMEX, a bottom-of-the-heap Top 40 station. With the tactical abandon of an underdog, John H. innovated right and left, doubled the station's ratings, and nearly outflanked the forces of WRKO. But WRKO, firmly entrenched as Boston's No. 1 Top 40 station, adopted some of John H.'s changes, geared up for a major offensive, and fought to stay on top.

Almost everyone enjoyed the radio war. The public liked it because the two stations started playing better music and became sensitive to popular tastes. Even the general manager of WRKO liked the radio war because "the competition kept my boys from getting stale."

The radio war promised to go on forever, but a fluke of fate cut it off in its prime. Maxwell Richmond, the 57-year-old owner and manager of WMEX, died suddenly. A new manager arrived, swept away most of John H.'s changes, and precipitously fired John H.

Now WMEX is somewhere on its way back to the cellar, but John H.'s innovations live on in an ironic fashion; they are being carried on by WRKO. Not only has WRKO become a better station thanks to the radio war; it has even passed on the improvements to the 11-station Drake chain, of which it is a member. Furthermore, just as things were beginning to look stalemated in Boston radio, a new challenge has appeared on the horizon in the form of FM rock stations. On the strength of spectacular gains made by FM stations in recent surveys, some observers are confidently predicting that Top 40 AM will make its Last Stand well before the end of the decade.

Radio trends have always showed up early in Boston, and it has always been a pretty decent town to be trapped in with a transistor. From 1958 to 1967, when WMEX was the No. 1 pop station, you could listen to Arnie "Woo Woo" Ginsburg, one of the legends of Pre-Sincere radio. "And Adventure Car Hop is serving the Ginsburger on a record which you get to keep for your very own if you say 'Woo Woo Ginsberg' with your order . . ." Arnie would barrel through the jive copy in an endearingly adenoidal voice and then play yet another great record. For nine years, no one could touch him in the ratings.

When Arnie left WMEX, he was succeeded by Dick Summer, a person so ostentatiously sensitive that Rod McKuen would have looked callous beside him. "Have you felt an orange today?" Dick would wonder out loud on his show, which was called "The Loving Touch." As WMEX's program director, Dick instituted a format called the "Human Thing," which consisted mainly of playing album cuts instead of singles. A good idea, but Dick played the wrong album cuts. The Human Thing bombed miserably and Summer left WMEX in 1970.

Meanwhile, back in 1967, WRKO had changed management and joined the Drake chain. A young program director named Mel Phillips came in and cleaned up the sound of the station according to Drake ideals—a minimum of ads, a minimum of DJ talk, a minimum of anything irritating (including wah-wah guitar) and a maximum of sales-certified singles played in rapid succession. The Drake sound proved to be the most successful sound of the late Sixties, and nowhere more so than in Boston. Within three months, WRKO had walked over WMEX and all other Top 40 competition, had grabbed a mammoth 25 percent of the radio audience, and had settled in for a four-year term as the leader in the field.

The next important phase of Boston pop radio history opened about a year ago with the arrival of John H. Garabedian as a WMEX disk jockey. John H. is 30, stands more than six feet tall, looks like a cross between Elvis Presley and Boris Karloff, and speaks in a pleasing basso. After 13 years in radio, which should have left him jaded about ten years ago, John's deep-socketed eyes still light up with *aficion* when he talks about radio, which is all he talks about. "Are

you really interested in this?" he asks in surprised tones, and then plunges on to tell you how *good* radio could be.

This same infectious enthusiasm came across on John's 3-to-7 PM radio show. While his fellow DJs at WMEX seldom rose above the ninth or tenth position in the ratings, John H. was almost invariably in the No. Two spot, or tied for No. One. John slowly began to rationalize his own success into a system, and after every show he would hound Mac Richmond, the station manager, with his theories. Finally Mac decided to let John H. try his hand as program director.

Early last summer, not long after his promotion, I dropped in on John H. in the tiny, glassed-in studio where he could always be found. As usual he looked as if he had slept at the station; he had forgotten to shave. But his jaunty announcer's voice was strong as ever. "Hiya," he said, "You've got to listen to this!" And he slipped a cartridge into the cart machine. He jumped up and thrust out his arms as the speakers exploded with the theme from *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, and he made a long, solemn face as he parodied his own taped voice saying: "Changes! And you are listening to *The New Music!*"

"The New Music!" John H. exclaimed. "We got that phrase from a 250-watt station in Buffalo, New York. It's just what we need to change our image!" The hour ID that John had played sounded to me like just another in-one-ear-out-the-other radio hype, but I didn't realize that for John H. the New Music was not a gimmick but a mission.

"AM radio," he said earnestly, "substitutes the taste of the program directors of America for the tastes of the people. I'll get more listeners and better ratings if what I do is tuned into what people want. Nobody's got the balls to add new records. Everyone plays the 45s listed in the trades. But singles sales reflect only the tastes of singles buyers and I don't know of anybody over the age of 14 who buys a 45 record.

"People want to hear albums, the quality music. But you can't just play anything off the Top Ten albums. You have to pick the right cut. And I may think one cut is great, but you may think it stinks, so we have to get a consensus somehow. And that's where the request lines come in."

At John's urging, WMEX installed round-the-clock phone lines and hired three operators, who took 6000 requests a week. At a weekly programming meeting the chief operator—a young, husky-voiced albino lady—would try to tell John what kind of person tended to call up for each song. "We draw up our playlist 80 percent according to requests," said John H. "Our list isn't a sales list, it's a popularity list; we play what people want to hear and we *make* hits. Most stations wait for a reaction to come in from the record stores, but who can wait

ROLLING STONE/JANUARY 20, 1972

for all that crap? You wait for three weeks to see if a record's going to happen or not, and if it doesn't happen you've been playing a bomb for far too long."

Because the request lines gave John H. instant feedback, he could play hunches and then quickly pull a single off the air if it turned out to be a stiff. "One of the things we want to do," says John H., "is to establish that we're first with the hits and we make the hits." Early in the summer, John H. was weekending in New Hampshire when he heard a Lee Michaels B side, "You Know What I

Mean," on a Montreal FM station. Getting into his Ford van he drove straight to the station and programmed the song. Within a week it became No. Ten in requests; within a month it was a national hit.

After that, John was hooked. He needed to see the request lines go berserk the same way a one-armed-bandit addict needs to see the three little lemons plop into place. When John got the Rod Stewart album, he broke a song called "Maggie May" that no one else was playing. It became number one in a week and a Mercury executive flew in from Chicago. "He said they wanted to make 'Losing You' the single but I told him, 'No! No! Maggie May! Maggie May!'" John recalled, screaming and waving his hands.

So Mercury went with "Maggie May." That was the first time John H. forced a record company to release a particular album cut as a single. In the course of the summer, the request lines lit up for three more album cuts that John H. introduced to AM radio: the McCartneys' "Uncle Albert," J. Geil's "Looking for a Love," and Jonathan Edward's "Sunshine." All three became hit singles.

Suddenly, for the first time in years, WMEX and WRKO were airing very different playlists. Suddenly, AM radio showed signs of life and people ceased to take the music for granted—there was a real choice on the dial. WRKO didn't respond immediately to John H.'s New Music. WRKO had removed its request lines at the beginning of the summer and besides, the station had always determined its playlist 80 percent by record store reports. John H. liked to say that Mel Phillips was nothing more than a traffic cop executing Bill Drake's orders. While this was not true, the fact remained that WRKO could not play fast and loose with its playlist, as John H. could.

During the summer, John H. also showed a partiality to tabloid-like 45s. These included "Je T'Aime" (a pair of orchestrated orgasms) and "What the World Needs Now is Love" (a Grand Guignol sound collage of the three assassinations). Both songs became huge local hits after John played them, but WRKO refused to touch them. Instead,

WRKO had the grace to play Marvin Gaye's "Inner City" and Aretha's "Rock Steady." John H. religiously avoided both songs because Boston is notoriously hostile to R&B.

But, questions of quality aside, what people responded to was the fact that these two stations were vying for popular favor by offering different playlists. John H. made many minor changes in WMEX's format and its advertising, but what mattered was the New Music. The first time that John realized the potency of the New Music was when Rod Stewart broke into "Maggie May" at a concert on Boston Common. "The whole place jumped up, just blew up," John H. recalls. "I almost fainted when I saw that. 'Cause they knew the song, and they didn't know it from WBCN [a progressive FM station], they didn't know it from WRKO, they knew it from WMEX. We had no measure before that. That was the first measure of how much we were reaching people."

Still, nobody knew quite how seriously to take John H. until the results of the July-August American Research Bureau survey sanctioned his success. The ARB survey, which is based on three-day diaries kept by thousands of pollees, is the most detailed and respected in the business. Earlier ARB surveys had revealed that WRKO had an average of 70,000 listeners per quarter hour while WMEX had 30,000. Now, WRKO had only 64,000 while WMEX had shot up to 51,000.

"For all intents and purposes, we tied WRKO in total audience in the summer ARB," says John. "And we beat them in teens. And that's incredible, because WRKO has a signal that covers four times the area of the WMEX signal." (Both stations have 50,000-watt transmitters, but WMEX has to switch to 5000 watts at night; it is also located at the right side of the dial, where the frequencies are less powerful). "That means that in some sections we were getting 90 percent of the audience and in other areas they weren't even getting any competition from us."

According to Perry Ury, the dapper, mustachioed, affable general manager of WRKO, John H. exaggerated WMEX's handicap. "Let's say with our signal we've got them maybe two to one," he says, "and that's being very generous. John is a smart radio man but don't get talked into thinking he's a white knight. OK, in the summer ARB, they equalled our teens. They matched us teen for teen and came out a hundred ahead of us. But we beat them two and a half to one in adults. We beat them in women and children. But the teens was the whole furor—as the story got told by John H. to his friends in the music business it got better and better and better each time."

The week the ARB came out, WRKO made some sudden changes. They started playing four or five of the hits John H. had broken. They re-installed their request lines.

Were they forced to start playing more album cuts?

"We took one look at what was happening and you betcha we were forced on it," says Ury. "But it would have had to happen soon anyway. Singles are going like that in Boston. In some parts of the country singles are still gangbusters but in this city they're dead, don't ask me why. John got us with wider, broader album presentation and his selection of cuts. John would love to think that the ARB book came out and everyone ran though these halls screaming and waving the book. Didn't happen. Went into Mel Phillips, our program director and said, 'Hey—there's a little softness here in our late teens and young males.' He said, 'You're right, Garabedian's on the right track.' That was it."

Mel Phillips, who is as quiet and methodical as John H. is flamboyant, says that he would have "made changes even if there were no WMEX." But it seems more than coincidental that the changes should follow so closely on the heels of the ARB results. In fact, WRKO's system is a modification of John H.'s—a streamlined one. WRKO had been playing a few Top Ten album cuts before, but now it started breaking cuts like "Family Affair" and "American Pie," forcing WMEX to play them. Mel began to take chances on Bonnie Raitt and Boz Scaggs cuts that the station would never have played a few months before. The station currently has 65 songs on the playlist, and 30 are album cuts; an extraordinary figure for an AM station. In November, Bill Drake him-

self made his first appearance in two years to inspect the situation; within a few weeks, other members of the Drake chain were playing lots of album cuts.

The beginning of the end of the radio war came with the death of Mac Richmond, late in November. Mac, who owned both WMEX and WPGC in Washington, was the soul of enlightened management, the man who gave John H. the green light for all the changes, right down to the waterbed contest John dreamed up. "Mac was getting into it," says John H. "He was the hippest guy you ever saw—a Sagittarius, so he was a nut, you know. He was old enough to be my father, but as we got to know each other, he became more like a brother."

Mac was replaced by Bob Howard, who had served for years as the manager of WPGC. Except for his red-white-and-blue herringbone tweed jacket, his wine-red pants, his white vinyl belt and his muttonchop sideburns, Bob Howard looks exactly like Charles Laughton as Captain Bligh. Like the Captain of the *Bounty*, Howard runs a tight ship. He does not allow food or beverages—including coffee, the lifeblood of disk jockeys—on the station premises. Howard threatened to fire one DJ whom he caught eating a cookie in a studio.

Within a couple of weeks, he started issuing memos about programming as well as food. First the news was to be spiced up so that "Communists," for instance, would read "Commie Reds." Next, all the request lines were to be removed. Finally, all disk jockeys were to say "WMEX, No. One" before every record.

John H. was naturally bowled over by these announcements. "He didn't even know what the phone lines were for," John H. said later. "And the No. One thing would have killed everything we'd built up!" John H. tried to protest the changes, but Howard sent him a memo saying that there would be no discussion and cut his pay by \$50. "Do not show this to anyone or you will regret it," the memo concluded. When John H. refused to institute the "WMEX, No. One" policy, Howard called him at seven in the morning and fired him.

"I considered Mr. Garabedian in-subordinate," Howard says leaning forward in a swivel chair and weighing his words like a Supreme Court justice. "We differed on many policies and concepts." On ratings, for instance. "Frankly," says Howard, "I never did believe in ratings. They're certainly nothing to, run your station by. And to be candid, I've never heard WRKO. I don't even know where they are on the dial. Nor do I intend to listen to them. I'm not interested in so-called counter-programming."

As for request lines, Howard says that he has no faith in them because in Washington he found "that the same people called up again and again." (John H. claims that by keeping chronological records of calls and watching out for clusters, where one fan and all his friends and relatives phone in for the same song, he avoided just such "padding" of the charts).

But how could Howard let his announcers say "WMEX, No. One" when the station was still clearly behind WRKO and a couple of talk stations in the ratings? "This has no reference to the ratings," says Howard with some impatience. "We feel that WMEX tries to serve the public interest, convenience and necessity through the No. One presentation of news, public affairs, public service, information, discussion and entertainment. We feel we're No. One in *compassion* in dealing with public affairs organizations and charitable groups. And that's why we say WMEX is No. One."

That Howard has never listened to the competition, and therefore has no way of measuring how much compassion they have, does not seem to bother him. Nor does the fact that several stations have notified the Federal Trade Commission. "Good, fine!" he says. "We've gone through this thing in Washington and you just check and see if we're still saying 'WPGC, No. One' or not."

Thus, with a few brief memos, has Howard handed victory to the other side and turned the situation topsy-turvy. WRKO, once the backward station, has taken John H.'s changes, improved them with its own professionalism, and come out way ahead. WMEX has reverted to a chaotic sounding format and an uninspired playlist while Howard tries to condition the city into thinking his station is No. One.

Meanwhile, FM rock has been sneaking up on both stations. The latest ARB has provided the astounding statistic that 29 percent of the Boston audience listens constantly to FM. A full 70 percent of 18-to-24 year old males listen to FM from seven to 12 every night. With these nighttime teens, WBCN is the No. One station, followed by WROR, an automated, Drake-programmed FM rock station. WMEX and WRKO come in a poor fourth and fifth.

Five years ago in Boston there were nine radio stations. Today there are 25. The trend is toward specialization, and rock is drifting toward the FM dial

"Anyone who is into music is going to want to hear it on FM, where it sounds decent," says John H. He predicts that within ten years, AM radio will consist entirely of talk shows, supported by an adult or even geriatric audience.

These days John H. is considering several offers of consulting jobs, but he itches to get his hands on a Boston FM station. "At WMEX," he says, "we proved a lot of concepts but we had to make compromises because those fucking little 12-year-olds control a lot of transistors. But if you could put the New Music on FM, you'd cream the competition."