

INTRODUCTION

Radio was dead. Everyone who was anyone said so.

At the end of World War Two mid-century media executives chose pictures over sound and in the years that followed diverted their funds and energies to television. In New York, actors with faces made for radio filled unemployment lines while the Golden Age radio stars that could — big names like Jack Benny, George Burns, and Fibber McGee and Molly — jumped to television, and radio, once a giant, faced a bleak, if non-existent, future.

Then, from the ashes, it rose again.

“What happened next was *called* radio, but it wasn’t anything like the radio that had come before,” says Chuck Blore. “It just had the same name.”

Local radio station owners, faced with a pressing need to replace the programming the networks were taking away, discovered that disc jockeys playing records — men like Alan Freed, Dick Biondi and Murray the K — made good financial sense. That rock ‘n’ roll was inventing itself at the same time seemed simply a coincidence. In hindsight, however, it was both serendipitous and transformational.

By the mid 1950s AM Top 40, the invention of Todd Storz, Gordon McLendon and their disciples, was cutting through the ether with the power of a hundred teen idols and, by 1960, when Sony introduced the first transistor radio and Blore's KFWB/Color Radio-Channel 98 was the darling of Southern California, AM radio was the undisputed source of “music and news” for America's baby boomers, and even some of their elders.

But, change was in the air.

FM radio had been invented by Edwin H. Armstrong in 1934, but for more than a generation radio station owners and network executives had ignored it because it didn't fit into their business

plans or, more precisely, because David Sarnoff and RCA didn't want it to gain any traction. But, on July 1, 1965, when the #1 record in the country was a Bob Dylan song (*Mr. Tambourine Man* by The Byrds), the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) issued a ruling prohibiting FM stations from simulcasting more than fifty percent of their co-owned AM's programming.

The implications were immense. Broadcasters were told they had to create new programming for their FM stations with no guarantee new revenue streams would follow. Within a week Pacifica owned WBAI-FM/New York began to experiment with what they called "free-form progressive" programming and over the next 24 months other FMs, each with its own take on this "free-form" idea, began to appear in cities across the country; most notoriously KMPX-FM/San Francisco on April 7, 1967 and WBCN/Boston on March 15, 1968.

In 1971 Top 40 first surfaced on the FM dial on Bartell Broadcasting's WMYQ/Miami, but it wasn't until 1975 that an FM station, WXLO (nicknamed 99X) delivered winning ratings in New York City and grabbed the advertising community's attention. WXLO-FM was Top 40, but the music it played was "hipper" and less teen oriented than its main format competitor, AM station WABC. Adding insult to injury, 99X promised it was playing "more album cuts" and, whether it was or not, New York's audience believed it. Their ratings success was a game changer and, from that day forward, anyone programming or listening to music on the radio knew FM was the place to be.

(Sadly, inventor Edwin Armstrong wasn't around to celebrate the vindication. After years of legal battles with Sarnoff, who'd insisted the patent for FM belonged to RCA because Armstrong invented it while he was employed by the company, Armstrong killed himself. On January 31, 1954 he dressed warmly in an overcoat, hat, scarf and gloves, kissed his wife goodbye, and walked out the window of his thirteenth floor Manhattan apartment.)

By the 1980s, music radio had migrated to FM and AM was struggling. Some savvy broadcasters re-discovered the big bands of the '30s and '40s, but just as with (the barely surviving) '60s music formats still on the air in the '90s, it was widely understood that nostalgic programming had a limited shelf life and would eventually fade away, along with its aging audiences.

In 1985, deregulation of the radio industry began, starting with a relaxation of ownership rules which allowed an individual company to increase the number of stations it owned in any given market. The idea was that it would stimulate competition. It didn't. Two years later the FCC took another step to loosen things up and unwittingly, perhaps, rescued AM from extinction by eliminating an obscure FCC regulation called the Fairness Doctrine.

The doctrine, articulated in 1949, had been an attempt to ensure that all coverage of controversial issues by a broadcast station be balanced and fair. Long before Fox News inverted the phrase ("fair and balanced") the FCC took the view "that station licensees were public trustees and had an obligation to afford reasonable discussion of contrasting points of view of controversial issues." Granted, that's a mouthful, but it was effectively spit out in 1985, when an opinion appeared in "The Fairness Report" stating that "the doctrine was no longer having its intended effect and could, in fact, be in violation of the First Amendment." In reaction, FCC Chairman Mark Fowler quickly and publicly vowed to kill the doctrine and, by 1987, the courts (in *Meredith v. FCC*) declared the doctrine wasn't mandated by Congress and that the FCC didn't have to continue to enforce it. Congress, however, disagreed and both houses voted the doctrine back into law, a move which caught Ronald Reagan's attention. The president quickly responded with a veto and, with the stroke of a pen, the Fairness Doctrine was dead. Reagan's signature, along with the invention of the seven-second delay and the introduction of satellite distribution, set the stage for the emergence of new American voices, including Rush Limbaugh, who launched his nationally syndicated program in August of 1988 and single-handedly brought AM back from its coma.

The 1990s began with deregulation fever. By 1994, when Republican majorities were elected to both houses of Congress, media consolidation was a foregone conclusion and a little more than a year later, on January 3, 1996, the 104th Congress passed the Telecommunications Act of 1996 and sent it on to President Bill Clinton for signature.

Merger mania began with a bang. Medium size companies swallowed up smaller ones and big companies, with venture capital money, ate up the mediums. Eventually, only the big boys were left standing and since those at the top of these conglomerates were, more likely, accountants instead of broadcasters, radio rapidly became a real estate business. As a result, educating, informing and entertaining the public became a thing of the past.

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This book was written because radio people, more often than not, tell their history in bars, not on paper. The stories they tell aren't about industry wide initiatives, results and consequences, they're more personal: about places they worked, people they knew and things that happened along the way. Between the lines a picture appears of a time gone by, one that will never be repeated, when radio was an important part of American life, disc jockeys were stars, and their listeners cared about them.

Today, as the first decade of the 21st century is coming to a close, the definition of media is changing at a pace that's almost unrecognizable. It's an exciting time, with unlimited possibilities and opportunities for re-invention. But, it would be sad to forget, or worse yet, to never know what came before and how and why it set the stage for the future.

Believe it or not, once upon a time a young boy named Paul Harvey dreamed of running away to "join the radio." As it turns out, he wasn't the only one.

That's what this book is all about.