

Radio

'70s Hits Do The Trick At Magic 102.9 Oldies Bring New Success To WMGK Philadelphia

JULIAN BREEN takes exception to the "O" word. As director of operations for Greater Media's WMGK (Magic 102.9) Philadelphia, he programs a format most in the industry would refer to as '70s-based oldies. Breen, however, says that "in public perception, the 'O' word belongs to traditional oldies formats. It doesn't belong to us."

He is equally prickly about labeling just what kind of '70s format the station programs, renouncing the industry's tendency to divide the format into two genres named after the radio groups that have had the most success with them: CBS' classic rock-based version and Cox's '70s pop variation.

"We define our own," Breen says. "I don't want to be tarred with the brush of what either of those folks do. I'll be responsible for what we do."

In fact, Breen says the station concentrates on all the music that was played on the top 40 stations of the era, specifically Philadelphia's WIBG and WFIL. "If the top 40 stations of the time played the songs, we consider them," says Breen, who takes no particular pains to avoid train-wreck segues between the two genres of '70s music. "Train wrecks are us," he says. "We will happily play Led Zeppelin into Donna Summer. It's fun."

Here is what the station played on a recent afternoon hour: Natalie Cole, "This Will Be"; Electric Light Orchestra, "Livin' Thing"; Redbone, "The Witch Queen Of New Orleans"; the Eagles, "Hotel California"; the Guess Who, "No Sugar Tonight/New Mother Nature"; Rose Royce, "Wishing On A Star"; Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young, "Woodstock"; the Beatles, "Got To Get You Into My Life"; Heart, "Dog and Butterfly"; Spinners, "I'll Be Around"; Edgar Winter Group, "Frankenstein"; Billy Joel, "You're My Home"; and the Steve Miller Band, "Swingtown."

The station flipped to the '70s format from mainstream AC on July 11, and in the summer Arbitron book, it immediately shot up 3.6-4.5 12-plus, cracking the market's top 10 for the first time in more than three years. Other demos showed even more remarkable growth. The station jumped 5.0-6.4 25-54 and 3.5-6.6 18-34. Morning man John Harvey, whose chatty act was toned down considerably with the new format's launch, rocketed from 12th to sixth place.

Breen says that success was not altogether surprising. "In the world of demographic specialties, our expectation was as a mature format, we could get into the top three [among] adults 25-54," he says. "I'm surprised that it all came together quite this quickly, but formats based on familiar hit music" are bound to do well, Breen says.

As Breen expected, WMGK's success came at the expense of the market's album rocker (WMMR), classic rocker (WYSP), and oldies station (WOGL-FM), which were off 6.6-5.6, 5.6-5.2, and 5.0-4.6 12-plus, respectively.

The station's evolution to the '70s format started slowly with a Saturday night '70s show hosted by Mike Bowe. Breen says the program became so popular that "in many respects it was the Saturday night show that ate the radio station."

He says there is a "broad historical logic" to support his belief that the '70s format will enjoy a long life. He notes that the first mainstream oldies station, KRTH, signed on in Los Angeles in 1972. Twenty-two years later, that station is "still chugging out the same songs" and remains successful. For that reason, Breen says, "I have high hopes for a 20-year run or better" for the '70s format.

Breen's radio career began in his home town of Atlantic City, N.J., where he worked at WMID in the late '50s. While attending college at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, N.J., he hooked up with what he calls "a very embryonic Greater Media," which owns local station WCTC. After a few years there, he joined WABC New York, where he was assistant program manager under his mentor, Rick Sklar.

After programming KYA-AM-FM San Francisco, Breen spent some time in the consulting business at Broadcasters Workshop. He rejoined Greater Media in 1975 and put WMGK and sister station WPEN on the air. After 15 years in Greater Media's corporate operation as VP/programming, he returned to

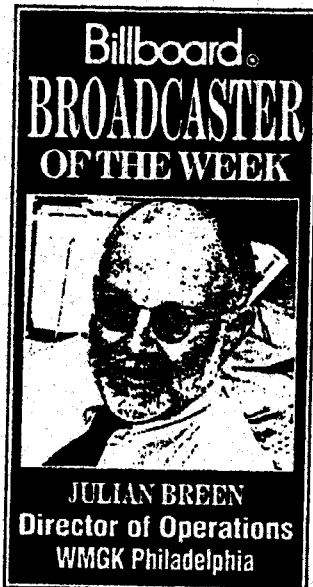
Philadelphia in the summer of 1993 as director of operations for WMGK and adult standards WPEN, while retaining his corporate VP stripes.

Looking toward WMGK's growth potential, Breen says that "being No. 1 is do-able. There is a lot of enthusiasm for what we're doing on the radio."

He is especially pleased that WMGK was able to pull off the format change without blowing up the entire station and taking its heritage along with it. "This is a very refreshing thing to happen for WMGK," he says. "We were able to make this change and get listeners to understand it without trashing the station."

Ironically, the station's format change means that next September, when WMGK celebrates its 25th anniversary, it will be playing the same music it was broadcasting when it first signed on in 1975.

PHYLLIS STARK



WHEN MARTINEZ NEEDS ADVICE, HER CONSULTANT MOTHER KNOWS BEST
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