



Mike Saffran

On the **Radio**TM

Family Owned and Operated: Passing on the Pride of the Craft

Andrew Langston no longer takes calls from would-be buyers of his radio station—but they persist, coming about once a day to the chief executive officer of Monroe County Broadcasting Co. Ltd. and owner of WDKX-FM (103.9).

The not-so-subtle message is “no sale”—the same since the station signed on the air in April 1974. And with successive generations poised to carry his legacy, it’s unlikely to change anytime soon.

WDKX and WJZR-FM (105.9) stand out as independent, locally operated radio stations, contrasting the media conglomerates that control multiple stations in local markets, including Rochester, and hundreds of stations nationally. The rise of media leviathans is attributable to relaxed ownership restrictions in the Telecommunications Act of 1996.

WDKX: ‘A Magnificent Obsession’

WDKX airs a unique blend of hip-hop, rhythm-and-blues, jazz, Gospel music, and more—a format Langston terms, ironically, a “conglomerate—a little of this, a little of that and some of the other.” The station is his self-described obsession.

“Without WDKX there would be a huge void in this market,” Langston says. He doesn’t mean only a format void. A larger gap would be from the loss of an independent voice in a market-place dominated by conglomerates. In Rochester, which is typical of many American cities, three media giants—Clear Channel Communications Inc., Entercom Communications Corp., and Infinity Broadcasting Corp. collectively control 15 radio stations.

“There’s no such thing as ‘Ma and Pa’ in radio,” Langston laments. Except at WDKX, where Langston’s wife, Gloria is Ma and is also the firm’s secretary and treasurer. Son, Andre Marcel, the station president; 12-year-old granddaughter, Andrea; and about 20 other staffers (one of them, controller Marietta Avery, has been with WDKX for 30 years, since before the station signed on the air) join her and Pa Langston.

Langston, who admits only to being 70+, delegates day-to-day responsibilities to his son but continues to consult. Andrea reads and writes commercials and assists in program production. “She has a lot of talent. She’s a natural at it,” Langston boasts.

Family ties aside, WDKX excels, he says, in community service and predominantly live programming, whereas many local stations have resorted to “voicetracking,” prerecorded programming, for at least part of the day. “That is a big difference,” he says. “Being accessible to the market is a very important thing.”

It helped propel WDKX into third place with a 6.7 share among all listeners in winter 2003, according to Arbitron. Its weekday morning show, the “WDKX Wake-Up Club,” hosted by Tariq Spence and Shiera Coleman, surged from ninth place to fifth place among 25-to-54-year-olds and is the fourth most popular show overall in its time slot—placing it ahead of a dozen of the big-corporation-owned stations.

WDKX also boasts the highest percentage of exclusive listeners among

Rochester radio stations. Country-music station WBEE-FM (92.5) has the most exclusive listeners but they represent a smaller percentage of its total audience.

“The best years we’ve ever had are since the big fellas came in,” Langston says of competition from conglomerates. “When you’re here you learn how to do it right.”

Langston, a member of the Rochester Radio Broadcasters Association Hall of Fame and founding member of the National Association of Black Owned Broadcasters in Washington, is steadfast in his independence. “I won’t sell the station,” he asserts, adding that he tells shunned suitors, “Either I’m a genius or a fool—you pick out which one you think I am.”

Recalling his launch of WDKX, the former classical-music announcer and commercial copywriter for CBS Radio in New York City, says: “Have you heard of the impossible dream? That’s what it was. But you don’t make it a strain, you make it an obsession, a magnificent obsession.”

WJZR: A North Coast Oasis

Lee Rust’s radio roots run deep across America’s north coast. Rust, owner of WJZR-FM (105.9), a 10-year-old jazz and rhythm-and-blues station known as North Coast Radio, is son of the late William Rust Jr., former president of Rust Communications Group, which owned WHAM-AM (1180) and WHFM-FM (98.9). Clear Channel now owns WHAM and Entercom runs WBZA, formerly WHFM.

Rust says competing against corporate-run stations with a niche-formatted station like WJZR isn’t easy. “It’s a struggle,” he concedes.

He compares radio ownership consolidation to the weather—people talk about it but there’s nothing anyone can do about it.

In winter 2003, WJZR landed in 14th place overall with a 1.7 share, according to Arbitron. Its weekday morning show was also in 14th place among all listeners and 25-to-54-year-olds.

Media Consolidation: Private Interests, Public Concerns

More media consolidation is likely, spurred by the recent lifting of cross-ownership restrictions by the Federal Communications Commission. It will mean increased control over a public resource—the airwaves—by fewer people and, thus, a less robust marketplace of ideas and weakened participatory democracy due to federal regulators’ seeming devaluation of both.

Meanwhile, Langston and Rust, carrying family legacies, represent bastions of autonomy as stalwart community servants.

Happy Independence Day, WDKX and WJZR. **BSM**

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