

When I announced I was leaving Billboard Magazine where I was radio editor, several readers implored me to keep writing. I'm pretty sure they were hoping for more of what I gave them in Vox Jox, but the tedium of trolling for gossip was never my idea of a good time. Besides, I wanted to do something that might last longer than yesterday's news. I enjoyed writing the few market profiles that I had time to do for Billboard. They worked on several levels including satisfying the inner radio-geek in many of us.

The mid '80s were a heady time for anyone with radio ownership aspirations. A confluence of events including the revision of the 7-7-7 ownership rule, the leveraged buyout boom, the ABC-Cap Cities merger, and Docket 80-90, to name a few, resulted in equity lines of credit available to almost anyone, including several notable programmers who couldn't read a balance sheet. Money flowed so freely that when I sent out 100 solicitations for the publication I planned to debut, 98 people wrote checks. (The other two, ironically, were friends who expected it for free.)

My goals initially were two-fold: to preserve some of the great early top 40 radio history that would soon be lost as more of us were becoming past-tense by the day, and to provide some needed background for those ready to take the ownership leap. The content evolved over time in response to reader interest. Eventually, the volumes were dedicated solely to market profiles. (In addition to the print publication, I offered the "telephone retrieval network", where I'd answer most anything a subscriber asked, for nothing more than the annual subscription price. Among my free advice, I gave Kirby Confer a lengthy historical perspective on why country would work in San Bernardino [he did well with K-Frog], convinced Jeff Smulyan to go urban in LA [the first time he didn't listen—but when he debuted Power, it made my point], and provided Gary Edens the inside track on a great station in San Diego that would soon be for sale [Gary Stevens got the commission], all proving I can write about business, but conducting it is more elusive to me.)

My deepest regret is that I didn't do more than 10 volumes. I never again solicited subscriptions, though I quickly doubled the subscriber count through word of mouth. Even so, the project necessarily became a part time one due to economics alone. I turned to talk radio to keep me solvent. Had I focused on the fleeting reality that it was 'now or never' in terms of talking with the early mavericks of top 40, I might have made it more of a priority. These were the folks who embodied creativity—from what was on the air, to how the signals got it there. (Engineering feats were underrated, as were some of the more unusual sales and marketing schemes.) Historians talk about these pioneers as risk takers, but to take a risk, you've got to have something to lose. Independent radio stations in the early 1950s were close to worthless. It was the perfect time to try something, anything— nothing was riding on it.

To that end, we've come full circle. Oh certainly, stick value, though diminished, remains obscene—the result of the feeding frenzy necessitated by the 1996 Telecom act which wiped out ownership caps without adding additional stations (any kid playing musical chairs can explain that outcome). But when you're talking AM or FM, or satellite, or even Internet, you're discussing the delivery truck. No one cares about the vehicle that shows up at the door—all we want to know is what's on it. Same for radio. What compelled each of us to get into this business (though it can be argued we did not get into radio, radio got into us) was probably not the transmitter.

Today, anyone can have a show, or a station, online. Until the loss of net neutrality makes it a drastically uneven playing field (the thought of which is appropriately alarming, but fortunately not imminent), capital or the lack of it is not the issue. It's that pesky law of supply and demand. With an almost unlimited supply, how do you create sufficient demand to make it worthwhile? Assuming you've got compelling programming, how do you let the world know its there? The answer will come from the kind of creativity that will be chronicled in decades to come. And no one will be taking a risk in uncovering it.

But I'm not suggesting anyone write radio off. Though today's ownership conglomerates are causing many of us to do just that, the listeners don't see it that way. As long as they can hear it, if it's what they want to hear, they will listen. Online, offline, FM, AM, it matters little. Doubt it? When you read the Houston profile, check out the story of KKBQ (which initially debuted top 40 on AM in 1982 to immediate success with teens).

Oh, one other thing. Yes, I am "the same Rollye". David Gleason was wondering when he asked if he could reprint my stuff. Really? How many people do you know named Rollye? But should you be confused: Rollye Dodd, Bornstein James Cornell—in that order (not including all the air names that stations hung on all of us back in the day)— is all me, grateful to all of you for your interest in, and love for, all things radio.