The “graying of America” is a reality. Radio stations of all formats have been forced to widen their demographic targets in order to please national and local advertisers demanding a sizable chunk of adults over 25. But there is another demographic cell, the 45-64 year olds, whose ranks are increasing and whose buying power is considerable. According to the Wall Street Journal, in 1975 more than one-fourth of the families with the household head aged 45 to 64 earned $25,000 or more annually, compared with 19% of all U.S. families. Predictions are that by 1985 nearly 46% of middle-aged families will earn that much. By the year 2000, Americans aged 45-64 will make up 23% of the total U.S. population.

This older group of Americans has not been a prime target for radio or its advertisers, but that is changing. One radio format that has been specifically targeting for an older audience is Al Ham’s “Music Of Your Life.”

The format, which started as an experiment on WDIZ/Bridgeport in 1978, was first syndicated nationally in December 1978 on WMAS/Springfield, MA. Now “Music Of Your Life” is running in both its live and automated formats on over 60 radio stations from coast to coast. Some of the successes have been dramatic and some have been gradual, but one thing is clear: Al Ham’s format is tuning in adults.

More Than Big Bands

Pinning a convenient format label on “Music Of Your Life” isn’t easy, as Ham explained, “It’s not nostalgia. It’s a kind of music and the era from which a lot of the music comes makes people think of nostalgia, but it’s more than that.” A typical half-hour of the format might include songs by the Glen Miller Band, Artie Shaw, Patti Page, Johnny Mathis, Anne Murray, Rosemary Clooney, Ella Fitzgerald, and Barbra Streisand.

Explaining the format further, Ham said, “We’re playing a type of music that hasn’t been played on radio for a number of years. Except for an occasional spot on a TV special, this kind of music has been totally blacked-out since rock and roll took over. Those of us in the business really didn’t realize how total the blackout for this kind of music was. There hadn’t been a steady diet of non-rock hit music on the radio for years.”

“All of the stations that carry our format are tuned in to the needs of the ‘graying’ population,” Ham said. “Our format plays the kind of music that is going to be listened to by the 35-64 crowd, a group that feels they’ve been almost totally disenfranchised by music radio with the exception of Beautiful Music stations.”

Research Base

Not only are the “Music Of Your Life” listeners organized for marketing purposes, but their vocal support is used as a research tool as well. Ham feels that listener feedback has been instrumental in helping him to refine the format. “We now have over three years of research, direct feedback from our listeners, and we know what the people want to hear based on their ages. We are playing and adding newer music to the format based on a compilation of all the research done at the local station level. We started out with an idea of how the format was going to sound, but it has become more than our original idea because the listeners are so expressive about their likes and dislikes. They call the stations and they write letters. No other format that I’m aware of has that kind of listener response, and all we’ve really done is turn that input into a form of informal yet organized research.”

The Men Behind “Music Of Your Life”

Al Ham

The creator of the “Music Of Your Life” format. He has an active background in all phases of music production for all media. As a longtime producer for Columbia Records, Ham produced Johnny Mathis, Tony Bennett, Frankie Laine, Ray Conniff, Percy Faith and many others. He has created image theme packages for television stations that are still heard in markets all over the country. Ham has also scored major motion pictures and numerous TV specials. He began developing the “Music Of Your Life” radio format in early 1978.

Jim West

National Sales Director for syndication of the “Music Of Your Life” format. A musician and long-time creator of ad jingles for both PAMS and TM in Dallas, West is currently Vice President/General Manager of Fairwest Studios in Dallas, a full service production and syndication company.

The A-B-C’s

If the initial perception of the format is Big Band, that rapidly changes, as West explains. “The base library of music that a new client station receives has certain limits but it is quickly augmented. Eventually the station will play all the non-classics. Think of it as a station that plays only the non-rock hit tunes that you can’t hear on any other radio station. The whole format is really quite simple in its A-B-C’s. ‘A’ is – the audience always comes first. Every consideration goes to the audience. ‘B’ is – attention to the client, the advertisers who spend their money on the station. If ‘A’ and ‘B’ are properly executed, then ‘C’ will follow – the station will benefit.”

Stations that have benefited from Ham’s format include his first client WMAS/Springfield. The station had a 1.0 share of the total 12+ weekly audience before the “Music Of Your Life,” and in the recently released October/November Arbitron WMAS scored an impressive 9.3. Other success stories include: WHLW/Long Island, 1.2-4.0; KBEB/Athlone, 2.6-12.6; WXKS/AM/Boston, 0.5-4; WAVY/New Haven, 1.6-8.2; and many others.

Apparently the “Music Of Your Life” format has captured both the imaginations and the ears of an older audience, an audience with money to spend and a fierce loyalty. As the struggle for the 18-49 audience goes on between multiple CHR, AOR, P/A, Beautiful Music, News/Talk, and Country stations, Ham has designed a music format for the older adult that has a success story to tell in over 60 markets.