By
Aimee Lee
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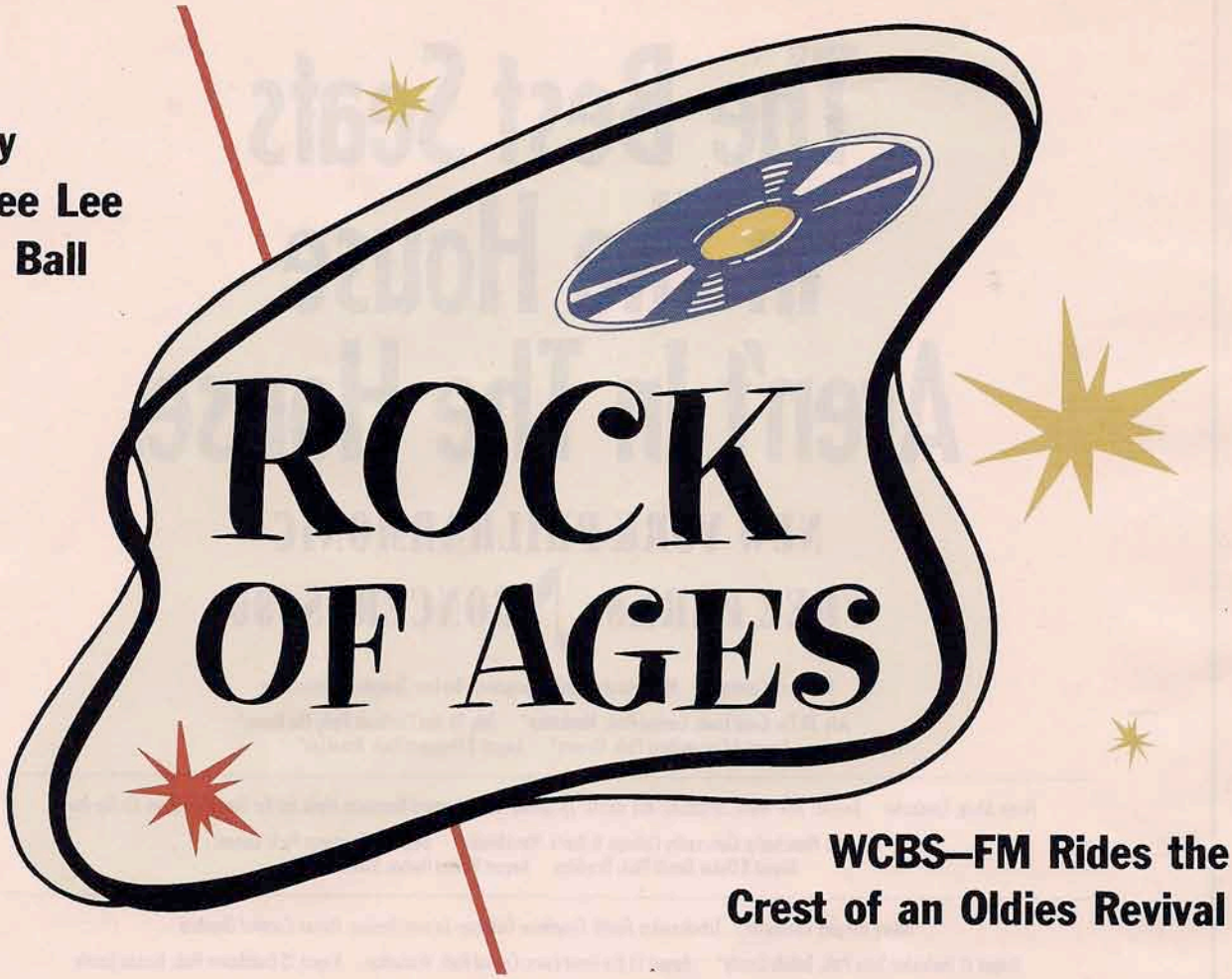

ROCK OF AGES

WCBS–FM Rides the Crest of an Oldies Revival

PEOPLE CALLING CAMERA World on Park Avenue South for help with their ailing 40-megabyte hard drive these days may be put on hold to the sound of the Penguins singing "Earth Angel" on WCBS–FM. Shoppers at Pintchik's in Gramercy Park or Citi Cosmetics on Lexington Avenue are likely to hear Dion and the Belmonts singing "I Wonder Why" on the same station. Picking up a Black Forest ham–and–Brie sandwich at Mangia for a midtown office lunch or having dinner at Paesano on Mulberry Street, you may be serenaded by the Temptations' "My Girl"—on New York's oldies-all-the-time station. "It's the only music I can play for customers in their thirties and forties," says Joey Ianniello, the owner of Paesano. "It's what they want to hear when times are good, when times are bad. What else goes with the veal?"

There has been a revolution in New York's radio market. WCBS–FM, which caters to the tastes of maturing baby-boomers, is running neck and neck with such Top 40 stations as WPLJ and WHTZ (which was on top for nearly six years), and this year it reached the No. 1 spot in the ratings for the first time. The hottest radio format around does not even acknowledge Paula Abdul or Bon Jovi but resurrects performers who haven't had a hit since the days of Democratic presidents.

The emergence of "solid gold" is hardly a New York phenomenon. It's the fastest-growing format in the country, up 166 percent from 1985 to 1989, more than 20 percent in the past year alone. "I've been following radio for about twenty years, and I've never seen anything like this," says James Duncan Jr., publisher of *American Radio,* a quarterly analysis of programming, marketing, and financial trends. According to Duncan, New York is the only major city where an oldies station has ever taken the lead in the huge demographic zone called "twelve-plus," which means listeners from junior high to the grave. (In the latest Arbitron ratings, WCBS is tied with WHTZ–FM for second place in this category, with WRKS–FM in the lead.) But the important number is a station's rating with listeners in the 25-to-54 age group—the ones with discretionary income—that advertisers covet.

Naturally, each station has a different explanation for what's happening. Those who program oldies cite the comfort and familiarity of fifties and sixties sounds, the carryover effect from recent movie soundtracks and Madison Avenue jingles, and the broad "retro" movement that has people eating meat loaf and wearing Pucci-print leggings and Landlubber bell-bottoms. Those who are sticking to Top 40 formats say this year's pop music just isn't very good and look to new hits from superstars as a cure for leaky ratings.

Some stations that are slip-sliding away in the ratings war challenge the methodology of the Arbitron ratings. The oldies format also displeases many record companies, which still depend on radio stations to expose new artists and sell product. Since the time-honored maxim in radio is "The morning makes your day," local stations are gearing up for a battle at sunrise that may rival that of Deborah Norville and the other smiling blondes. And the boom in oldies has meant the return of a familiar voice in the evening—a self-described dinosaur named Cousin Brucie, whose return to New York radio is truly a blast from the past.

THE IDEA FOR TOP 40 RADIO was born in a Nebraska bar in the late fifties, when the owner of a Midwest radio chain noticed that the same 40 songs were played over and over on the jukebox by the bar patrons. In New York, the format was adopted by

PHOTOGRAPHED BY ANDY LEVIN

"Cousin Brucie" Morrow: "If I wasn't on the radio Saturday night, New York City might disappear."

WMGM (part of the burgeoning empire of Laurence Tisch) and WMCA, whose all-night D.J., Murray Kaufman, jumped ship to WINS with "Murray the K and the Swingin' Soiree." The "oldies" played by Murray the K (dating back only a few years) were introduced with the sound effect of a fire extinguisher and the words "a blast from the past." Kaufman reigned at WINS until the station changed to all news, in 1965.

The winner (and still champion today) of Top 40 radio was WABC, which began as the flagship of a floundering network, and was housed in the former Central Park stables. It went on to unparalleled ratings: 6 million listeners a week, with the nearest competitor at half that number. "WABC was the most finely tuned station there ever was," says Rick Sklar, then the programming mastermind, now an industry consultant. "The word was attack: Attack the market; attack everyone else; be on the offensive all the time." The station was so successful that its weekly programming sessions were chronicled by Renata Adler for *The New Yorker*.

WABC was 770 on the AM dial, which provided an obvious structure: a playlist of 70 records, seven hit albums, seven soaring singles, and the Swinging Seven disc jockeys, beginning with the Morning Mayor of New York, Herb Oscar Anderson (who once took the station off the air when he pulled out an electrical cord in the studio to plug in his shaver). When they were hired, the D.J.'s were promised that the first to become No. 1 in his time slot would get $150 (a reasonable sum for 1961) and a new suit from Phil Kronfeld's store. One month later, they all collected, with trench coats thrown in as a bonus.

The Audience

"There is a mass audience," says Morrow. "There's never been any other music that was embraced by Mom and Dad, teens, and teeny-weenies."

A WCBS–FM commercial.

BRUCE MORROW (NÉ MEYEROWITZ) was the unlikeliest of disc jockeys—a childhood stutterer so shy that he couldn't speak in school. "We used to have hygiene plays at Madison High in Brooklyn," he says. "One day the hygiene teacher, Mrs. Freilicher, said she wanted me to try out for a dental assembly. I won the part of a cavity. I opened up. And I have not stopped talking ever since." Morrow joined the All City Radio Workshop, which allowed him to substitute radio classes at Brooklyn Tech for regular high-school English, and later became known as "The Hammer" because of his excitable, staccato delivery.

His first New York job was at WINS, where he spun the discs for commercials on what he describes as "a revolving pizza tray." "One day, a little black lady came up to sit in the studio. I didn't know this lady from Adam, and she said, 'Do you believe we're all related?' I knew this was going to cost me a few bucks, but I said, 'Yes, I do.' And she said, 'Well, cousin, lend me 50 cents to get home.' That night, I was on my way home, going through the Brooklyn-Battery Tunnel, and I heard a siren in my head: I knew I had my shtick. The next day, I told the program director I wanted to be called Cousin Brucie. He said, 'That is the stupidest thing I ever heard. Do you think this is Kansas or Parsippany, New Jersey? This is New York City. It's too corny.' I said, 'You've got to let me try it.' I cousined them so much that night. Tremendous response—phone calls and telegrams. I've been Cousin Brucie ever since."

Nobody could touch him. Cousin Brucie regularly got a 25 share of the market—that meant one out of every four radio listeners was tuned in. The other three listeners were shared by 26 other stations. Once he offered Beatles-concert tickets on the air, and the surge of calls knocked out the main telephone trunk line connecting Manhattan to Brooklyn, Queens, and Long Island. Cousin Brucie was heard in 40 states, in Liverpool, on Guantánamo Bay Naval Base. He became so popular in Peru that they gave him his own radio show: "El Primo Brucie."

"I was there from the beginning, when rock and roll was a babe, and I had the feeling," he says. "I looked like the music, and I sounded like the music—frenetic, fun, happy, sad, fast, slow. I'm a circus, I'm a show, I'm a friend. Radio was not yet everybody's hip-pocket friend, but we discovered this way of reaching people. We talked about our lives, and we became part of everyone's family." Morrow even went on the air live from Doctors Hospital to do a play-by-play of his son's birth. (The child was named Dana Jon to provide the initials D.J.)

"The S.O.B.'s—the sons of business—in management left us alone because they didn't understand what we were doing," he says. "We didn't know what we were doing, either—we were flying by the seat of our pants. That was the big secret. One day, they realized we were making a tremendous amount of money. And a very dirty word came into the business: *consultant.* You can spell it any way you want—to me, it's a four-letter word."

Until 1964, AM and FM stations could simulcast programming. But the FCC decided that that was a waste of the public airwaves—in cities where the same company owned both, AM and FM had to be separate and different at least half the time. FM radio, until then the almost exclusive domain of classical music, gave rise to specialized or "niche" programming. When radio became fragmented and there were twice as many stations as before, it was the beginning of the end for Cousin Brucie.

"I left WABC in a bad scene," he says. "After thirteen years of making them a lot of money, they tried to tie my contract into ratings: If the ratings went down, my salary went down. Suddenly something called FM came along, and they started to panic. This hurt me very badly, because I was one of the building blocks of the station. WNBC was romancing me, in subterranean bars, garages, and restaurants. So I told the WABC management, 'Rip up my contract and we'll talk.' They fell for it. I handed in my resignation, and they didn't know what hit them."

COUSIN BRUCIE WENT TO RIVAL WNBC, but it was an ill-conceived marriage. In about two years, Morrow went through five program directors and several format changes in search of ratings, which never came. "By now I was into the seventies," he says, "and I didn't like the music anymore, and I didn't like being a profit center. FM was coming around, and an FM jock had to be nineteen years old, talk gently, play a sentimental record, and smoke a banana. I couldn't do that. So I decided to get out."

In 1972, WOR–FM was the only New York station playing early rock and roll.

Photograph by Donal Holway.

"We decided, 'Let's be the oldies station,' " says program director Joe McCoy.

But an RKO-organization consultant came along with a concept that placed a moratorium on any pre-1964 songs. "It was no longer 'hip,' " says Joe McCoy, who was then a WOR disc jockey. "The phones rang off the hook with people asking, 'Why did you take our station away?' We didn't have any answers for them.

"At the time, WCBS–FM, an album-rock station that wasn't really going anywhere, saw a hole in the market for all those people who loved Chuck Berry and the Five Satins, and decided to switch to oldies," says McCoy, who went on to be the WCBS program director. The result was dramatic. "Six months later, the station 'cumed' 2 million—that means two million people sampled it."

In the eighteen years since WCBS–FM switched to oldies, its success would, if plotted on a graph, look like stairs—a steady progression up, with one dead halt around 1980, when the pace of the programming slackened. McCoy arrived in 1981 and over time replaced most of the on-air talent, bringing back two fast-talking D.J.'s from the heyday of WABC: Ron Lundy and Cousin Brucie.

"The word 'oldies' was never used—we were afraid of it," says McCoy. "The term was always 'solid gold.' But we decided, the hell with it—let's be the oldies station. People have a smile on their faces when they say that. Let's feed it right back to them."

The strategy has worked. WCBS–FM is not only New York's top-rated station in the 25–54 age group; it is also the most profitable of all nineteen stations owned by CBS across the country, with $23.5-million in billings last year. A 60-second spot in the WCBS morning drive, which is radio's prime time, costs $2,500 (although the rate goes down to $1,000 for advertisers who buy a full day's schedule).

"Like any other product, you can research radio to death," says general manager Rod Calarco. "We still 'feel' our station. In my mind, I have a vision of who my core listener is: He's 42 years old, he's a professional, he has two cars, he takes his kids on vacation. He watches *Cheers*. He watches *Married With Children*, but he doesn't understand why. He'll tell you he reads the New York *Times*, but he really reads the *Post*. He likes the Mets; he doesn't like George Steinbrenner."

For Calarco, this composite is something like looking in the mirror. "It's pretty close," the 43-year-old admits. "The president of the CBS Broadcast Group, Howard Stringer, is British, and he does not understand why every time listeners vote the New York Top 500 songs, 'In the Still of the Night' is No. 1, far and away. But maybe he was never in the backseat of a car with a girl when he was sixteen with the Five Satins singing. There might be a lot to that. I have another pet theory: If I was sitting around the breakfast table when I was sixteen and I wanted to put on WABC, my father would get up and say, 'No goddamn way.' Today, if a family is at the breakfast table and the father puts on WCBS–FM, the kids can handle it because the music is upbeat."

THE MUSIC ITSELF, IF ANALYZED closely, would seem to have little to do with the lives of grown-ups. "My boyfriend's back and you're gonna be in trouble"? "Tears on my pillow, pain in my heart over you"? "Bells will ring, the sun will shine, I'll be his and he'll be mine"? And all those songs with girls' names: "Hey, Paula." "Love Grows (Where My Rosemary Goes)." "Oh! Carol" (written by a young composer named Neil Sedaka about a fledgling songwriter and rock-and-roll fanatic named Carol Klein, who became Carole King). Plus "Brandy," "Sherry," and "Tracy."

"Yes, it was dumb," admits Bruce Morrow. "Moon, spoon, June. But music is a balm. That's why this renaissance is happening. It reminds us of a happier day. It wasn't really happier—the fifties and sixties were violent, volatile, unsettled. It wasn't all malt shops and record hops. We've hidden the assassinations, the political situation with Russia, the racial tension—I'm still very ashamed that during my era, there was something called 'race music' that we weren't allowed to play. But we have a way of burying the bad times. I am a conduit to those times."

The sheer numbers of baby-boomers support the growth of oldies: They are the only portion of the local adult population that has increased, according to the latest statistics from the New York City Department of City Planning. But WCBS–FM is building a much broader constituency.

"Hollywood helped us," says Morrow. "After the Roaring Twenties and World War II, movies needed another era to romanticize, so they got a hold of the fabulous fifties and the sensational sixties. Look at *La Bamba, Dirty Dancing, The Big Chill, Peggy Sue Got Married.* Kids see those movies and think those times were so much fun. That's why Cousin Brucie is still here and why WCBS–FM has this rocket booster."

There's another reason. "Radio has become a big business," says Larry Julius, senior account manager of Interep, a firm that represents 1,600 radio stations around the country in selling time to advertisers. "A radio license is a commodity. A station has to guarantee certain ratings so it can pay the debt service on buying the station, so radio is becoming safer and safer in programming. Most of the advertisers we do business with ask for adults 25 to 54. Generally, that comes with a request for an upscale audience, the ones with purchasing power. Where WCBS is different is, it has the personalities that this market grew up with and that captured the fifteen and twenty shares years ago on WABC. The pitch could be made that a station with personalities is more 'foreground' in nature, a better environment for the commercials to be heard."

Radio is still an underappreciated medium: It accounts for less than 7 percent of total advertising dollars spent, but it is a hotly contested 7 percent. In the past, ad agencies and their clients had selected radio stations on the basis of ratings information from Arbitron, which was virtually uncontested in the field. But in the past five years, this Goliath has acquired a David: Birch/Scarborough, which has lured away about 30 percent of the research customers, including McDonald's, the largest radio spender in America.

Arbitron asks its participants to keep a written diary of their radio-listening habits (and pays them a "premium" of 50 cents to $5 for doing so); Birch does telephone interviews and doesn't pay. Some stations claim that Birch reflects younger listeners, who are probably less reliable at filling out diaries. As in television, where some networks have rejected the Nielsens, radio ratings have provoked fierce debate.

"Radio doesn't get the press that television does, but the battles are actually more intense," says Bill Livek, president of Birch. "Every rating point means the difference between profit and loss for many stations."

ALL OF WHICH HAS LED TO high drama and musical chairs in the insular world of radio. WPLJ–FM and WHTZ–FM (known as Z-100) have both seen their Top 40 formats perform erratically and have experienced upheavals in their morning drive: The host of WPLJ's "Jim Kerr and the Morning Crew" was fired, and the host of WHTZ's "Morning Zoo," Scott Shannon, who is generally credited with making the station the most widely heard in New York for a half-dozen years, went to Los Angeles to be program director and morning-show host of KQLZ, a Westwood One station.

The Westwood group includes WYNY–FM, New York's only country station, where Jim Kerr now holds forth.

The program director of Z–100, Steve Kingston, calls the difference in ratings between his station and WCBS–FM "statistically insignificant" and denies that there is an oldies assault. "People have always liked Top 40 music, and I don't think they're going to stop," he says. "But what the record industry is producing for people to listen to has changed over the past year or two. There's a lot of music that we call 'disposable pop.' We need the superstar acts to release new music that everyone can identify with. We need more Madonna, more Phil Collins, something by Springsteen and Whitney Houston—what I call straight-ahead Top 40 music."

WPLJ has new management and by midsummer will announce a new morning lineup. "We want a team that's friendly and humorous but not derogatory or insulting," says the recently hired program director, Tom Cuddy. "Our research has shown that we were not giving people a lot of music, so our slogan now is 'At least 52 minutes of music every hour.' Our audience is leaning toward ballads—Gloria Estefan, Michael Bolton, Richard Marx—and dance music. We're going to be more of a pop-sounding rhythmic radio station. One of the problems WPLJ had in the past was trying to be too many things to too many people. Now, because of the fragmentation of the market, you have to figure out which piece of the pie you want and stay focused. Years ago, WABC could be a mass-appeal radio station and be successful. Those days are gone."

COUSIN BRUCIE, FOR ONE, IS not buying that. "I still believe there is a mass audience out there," he says. "Most radio stations specialize, departmentalize, compartmentalize. I'm amazed there isn't a station for people with halitosis. But there's never been any other music that was embraced by Mom and Dad, teens, preteens, and teeny-weenies. The boomers make up a large segment of our audience, but we have a huge number of what I call the 'normal folk' "—the kinds of listeners who sing off-key oldies in WCBS's wonderful series of New York–flavored TV commercials.

Morrow often vents his opinions and talks about his life on the air: His listeners hear that he is ardently pro-choice, that we do not have any political leadership worth a damn, that he disdains the in-your-face attitude of what he calls "schlock jocks" like Howard Stern ("I will stand for his right to broadcast, although it's obscene"), that he was National Father of the Year ("Yeah, me and Dan Quayle"), that his second wife is a human-resources consultant named Jodie, and that his youngest daughter, Meridith, wants to follow in his footsteps as Cousin Meri.

"Anybody can play ten songs in a row," he says. "Radio is personal. You have to know what's happening in your town. You have to know if there are potholes, if the local hospital needs blood, if the mayor deserves a pat on the back or a kick in the tush. I'm a responsible broadcaster, but I get involved with life. I've never been one to be quiet."

Cousin Brucie's rebirth is really a lyric from a Bob Dylan song he might play: "He not busy being born is busy dying." During his absence from New York radio, Morrow became a businessman and owned eight radio stations. "I was doing well financially, but I missed my New York microphone," he says. "I am 53 years old, and I was put here to be on the radio Saturday night. I know it sounds egotistical, but I feel that if I wasn't on the radio Saturday night, New York City might disappear."

Right now, nobody's giving him any argument. ■

Sold Gold

"I have a vision of who my core listener is," says Calarco. "He's 42, a professional. He watches *Married With Children*, but he doesn't understand why."

General manager Rod Calarco.