Radio Programs Change

Jonathan Green is Retiring

by Rich Regent

Forty years ago Radio Broadcasting needed at least two people to put on a live program, a Broadcast Engineer and an Announcer. Nowadays it can be handled by an announcer, who is called a Radio Personality, and a computer. Times have changed.

When I first worked at the WTMJ stations in 1963 as a Broadcast Engineer there were still a few commercials on 78-rpm records that were played on-the-air. At that speed they would spin very fast on the turntables and they had a high pitched audio hiss besides the audio. Years later I noticed that a four-wheeled cart full of 78-rpm records was being pushed down the hallway. These old records were on their final journey to be donated to the Milwaukee Public Library. So the 45 rpm and 33 rpm long playing records were next the broadcast standard. A record playing list for a particular program would give the title, number, side and track for each tune and be written and attached to the top of a stack of records.

Reel-to-reel 1/4-inch tapes and commercials on records were being replaced with half-inch tape cassettes. Their time capacity was typically 40 seconds, 90 seconds, and so forth, handy for 30-second and one-minute commercials and jingles. When these cassettes were recorded they would automatically add a short tone to an unused part of the tape. After playing they would sense the tone and automatically stop at the beginning, ready for another playing. This device was called the Automatic Tape Cassette machine. There were eventually several hundred recorded cassettes stacked in organized wall shelves always ready for airing in the ATCs.

Radio shows would require team work, following a program log and assembling information to go on the air. However, the team, the announcer and broadcast engineer, worked isolated in separate rooms. The engineer would be in a noisy control room, cueing up records, previewing feeds, getting transmitter readings and typing up trouble reports. There were newscasters and weather reporters saying hello, asking questions or giving their agenda. Meanwhile, in the announce room it was dead quiet. Only the red light and on-the-air sign indicated being on the air. So most professionals never said anything in that room that they wouldn't mind accidentally going out over the air. Announcers could turn their microphone on or off, useful for not airing sudden sneezes, and wore headphones so they could hear overall program content. Between the two rooms was a large double glass window and both team members faced each other, maybe for their whole shift. There was an intercom, electrically locked out when the announce microphone was on-the-air, for discussing changes and revising plans. It was possible for the announcer to come into the control room during network news or a record, just for a friendly chat. While in our separate rooms and airing a program, we used plenty of hand signals, like: *cut, fade, spot, change volume, broken, OK, time*, and especially *cue*. The listeners never knew about this silent coordination. *Cue* would mean to start something like a record, tape, switch to the Green Bay Packer's feed, the

traffic helicopter report, or go to network news. For live programs obviously the announcer gave most of the cues.

In 1969 while working at WTMJ-AM I met newcomer announcer **Jonathan Green** who had plenty of red hair, wore a bright green jacket and was full of energy. Now 41 years later, I saw an article in the newspaper about Jonathan retiring this December and put the newspaper down after reading the story.

That same morning I decided to go to Wisconsin State Fair. As I came to the Journal building I saw Jon standing outside talking to his radio fans. He now had a shaved head and wore a comfortable black tee shirt with the Radio 620 WTMJ logo. There was a lady who thanked and hugged him. A man gave Jon retirement advice and highlighted visiting a few Wisconsin sites. Jon said, “I took off a few days this summer to get used to retirement.” Then Jon talked to, what I guessed, are two of his granddaughters and a friend of theirs to helpfully arrange with them for their car ride home.

It was my turn. I shook Jon’s hand, “Jonathan Green. I’m Richard Regent, a Broadcast Engineer at WTMJ in 1969. I was the first engineer to put you on the air after you gave me a cue.”

We talked about the changes at WTMJ. Jon claims, “Those turntables are now hard to find except in a museum.” He tells me about his collection of 300 sound effects originally put on cassettes. The station eventually bought a $3,000 system designed to hold all these sounds in a more convenient manner. With current technology Jon now easily stores them on a tiny flash drive that he can use at work or take home. “Everything is now on the computer,” Jon says. “One of the last regular engineers Gary Timm finally retired. I can’t recognize all the new people.”

Jon is scheduled to broadcast live from the Fair later and is concerned about the day’s electrical power outage problems, particularly about possible lack of air conditioning in the nearly airtight broadcast studio at the Fair. His concerns had insight, later that night we hear that the nearby Skyglider stalls for hours because of electrical problems.

Today I realized that times have changed. Alice in Dairyland is now called Fairest of the Fair to help promote all of Wisconsin’s diverse market products including dairy. More importantly to learn is that radio broadcast technology is computerized and Jonathan Green is retiring.

There were a few people behind me waiting to talk to Jon, so I said, “You did good.” Jon looked at me, lifted his right hand upward, and then quickly pointed toward me. He said, “For old time’s sake.” I recognized his *cue* and quickly started an imaginary record on a turntable. We both laughed together.