

The State of Binghamton Radio

By Ike Swift

With the advent of such industry game changers as the iPod, SiriusXM, Pandora, Spotify, and YouTube—and companies falling all over themselves trying to come up with the next generation of such things—old-fashioned terrestrial radio has found its once-invincible monopoly breached. There's no turning back. A rapidly advancing new world order is moving in and only those who roll with the changes will survive. So how has local radio decided to meet the challenge? By emphasizing radio's strengths and pushing for ever-higher quality? Or by taking the lazy way out and digging down to an even lower common denominator than the rock-bottom one it had already managed? Let's find out, shall we?

Everyone likes classic-rock radio. And the biggest classic-rock station in the Binghamton area is WAAL. Good start. Here's a format with automatic appeal. So how does The Whale counter the explosion of availability of music that's open to the average listener today? How about taking perhaps the largest potential playlist of any radio format and playing the same 20 songs over and over again in heavy rotation. If you like the same Led Zeppelin or AC/DC song just as much the 1,000th time you hear it as the first time, then good for you. You've found your radio station! Meanwhile, in between the 998th and 999th playing of AC/DC's "You Shook Me All Night Long," we have DJs whose banter seems targeted to those who've given up on life. If you make the assumption that the majority of your listeners are 50-year-old high-school dropouts, then don't blame Spotify or the iPod when your advertisers run for the hills. There's a reason why Howard Stern gained more and more listeners as his career progressed. It's because he was INTERESTING. But for the most part, corporate radio DJs seem to be in a competition to see who can come up with the most mind-numbingly irrelevant babble yet invented.

Seeing where WAAL was heading, WKGB—which bills itself as "Binghamton's only real rock radio"—decided the best course of action would be to exactly duplicate WAAL. One way for an area's "only" rock station to keep or gain young listeners might be to play more new music. But KGB is now copying WAAL to the point where both stations not only play much of the same music, at any given moment the exact same song can be playing at the exact same time! Want to hear that Jimmy Page lick from "Communication Breakdown" one more time? Switch from KGB to The Whale and you'll hear it again 15

seconds later. If you added up all the music on all the radio stations in the Binghamton listening area, you might find 1% of it that's less than two years old.

There are thousands of great bands making great music all the time in the English-speaking world. If all local radio stations played nothing but brand-new music, they'd barely scratch the surface of the quality work that's out there. But, every few years, when a local station wants to break from the routine and play something "new and edgy" what do they play? The Black Keys have recently made a breakthrough into local rock radio. The Black Keys are considered new, hip, smart, cool, edgy. Problem is they're also boring. If this were the mid 1960s, the Black Keys would be new, hip, smart, cool, and edgy. But after 50 years of other bands doing the exact same thing, it's called mimicry. Which wouldn't be so bad if there was some soul behind it. Lots of bands use old styles that they then infuse with new energy. Billy Gibbons said long ago "There's nothing new in rock-n-roll except attitude."



And it's not like local stations keep these formats because they're taking their cues from listeners. When KGB had a call-in request show, the listeners almost always requested better music than was being played normally. The hour would be enjoyable, but then they'd go right back to playing the usual Godsmack, Shinedown, Seether, Nickelback, Puddle of Mudd, Three Days Grace, Fuel, and similar garbage—though unfortunately not Garbage. (We don't worry about offending fans of those bands because if you like those bands then you can't read.) The one bright spot at KGB is Mike Benson, who runs an indie metal and unsigned-band show. But, of course, they've got him stuck at 10:00PM Sunday evenings. Might as well put him out on a street corner with a megaphone.

As an answer to this headlong rush away from the 18-to-29, college-educated demographic, you might have heard of 104.5 The Drive. At least they're making an effort. But that's all you could say.... An "A" for effort. In reality, though, 104.5 The Drive is only good if you like your playlist targeting smart 20-somethings to sound like a 60-year-old Neil Diamond fan's idea of what young people want. The

Drive describes itself as "indie and alternative," which is true if you also define Disney as indie and alternative. The amount of watered-down, inoffensive, uninspiring slop that sounds like a typical week 5 of *American Idol* that can be heard on The Drive is overwhelming. So they supplement these songs with, you guessed it, the same music you hear on WAAL. The Drive also describes itself as "Our generation's at-work station." If you've gotten to a point where you care about an "at-work station," then you've already given up on life.

Binghamton radio is not your at-work radio; it's your at-a-funeral radio. Ordinarily, the last, best hope in any market that has at least one large college is that college's radio station. There you have the exact demographic advertisers love best actually playing what they like and broadcasting it to the public. Perfect, right? Not always. It depends entirely on the station's philosophical approach to programming. Many college stations tend toward a consistency of style. WSOU, for example, out of Seton Hall University in New Jersey, bills itself as having "The Loudest Rock." And they claim to be "the number-one college radio station in the New York metro area." So they must be doing something right. Here in Binghamton we have WHRW out of Binghamton University. In the interest of full disclosure, I am a cleared DJ at WHRW. However, I'm also honest to a fault. WHRW has locked itself into a philosophy of programming that allows anybody to play anything at any time—within the legal restrictions of the FCC, of course. It's a noble, egalitarian approach that has lots to be said positively for it. Unfortunately, much of the time it also makes for lousy radio. Forty percent of what you'll hear on WHRW at any given time will be something you'll have absolutely zero interest in. Forty percent will be stuff you're okay with, but just okay. And 20% will be the best radio you will ever hear in your life. To grab and hold a listener and build an audience, consistency is important. But WHRW's focus on DJ freedom over audience building has made it the crap shoot of Binghamton radio. You roll the dice and take your chances.

So that sound you hear coming from between the towers on Ingraham Hill is everyone in life between the ages of 18 and 25 switching off their radios to download songs they heard about from their friends on Facebook. God knows they won't hear about any of them from regular radio.

Ike Swift and "Police Gazette Radio" can be heard during semester breaks on WHRW 90.5.