

OLDIE-ORIENTED STATION RECALLS A SIMPLER TIME

# WWTC CREW AND FANS HAVE FUN, FUN, FUN

BY DEBORAH MILLER

**I**T'S JUST AFTER five in the morning and Brad Piras is walking up Lake Street to the bus stop. It's quiet, cold, and his brain hasn't begun to shift through the gears that will make his mouth drive at a reckless speed for the next four hours. When he gets to the office, he'll begin a day of endless cups of coffee and cigarettes; but for now, he'll sleepwalk to the corner. Then suddenly, an old car squeals around a nearby corner and the maniac driver is heading the car right at him. The car bounces off the curb, the driver falls out and rushes toward Piras.

"Are you Brad Piras?" Piras is waking up fast. Finally the first driver nabs him and pushes him onto the front seat of the car.

"Where are we going?" Piras mumbles, sure he's to be chopped into little pieces and spread over a farm in Anoka. "Oh," says the driver, cheerily wheeling his car downtown, "I get a digital watch for giving you a ride to work."

The watch was just one of the many gifts that are given away every week, with love from the management of Piras's company. You would think he'd have to be crazy to keep working there. And he may be. Piras works for WWTC, where everybody seems, well, just a little bit nuts.

And it's their utter lack of adult decorum — all the goofy jokes and silly voices and strange contests and dumb phonecalls and hepped-up beat — that has made WWTC the area's best rock radio station. It can be so stupid it makes you groan, but it never fails to be entertaining. And in that, it pulls off a modern radio coup: WWTC never bores people.

What happened to Piras the morning of the deejay-nabbing was that Steve "Boogie" Bowman, the deejay who mans the station from midnight to morning, announced on the air that he'd give away a watch to the person who brought Piras in to work. This is not an isolated case of a bizarre contest at the station (or of the great, great trust the station has in its audience). B. J. Crocker, the deejay on the air in the afternoon, will have listeners call in until he comes up with a winner of the Person Who Received the Most Phone Calls contest or the Person Who Got the Weirdest Piece of Mail; or Crocker will give away one of his Doctor of Discs diplomas to somebody who comes up with Lulu's real name or the name of a singer with a mole on her cheek. Piras has had hog-calling, yodeling and coffee-sipping contests — all over the phone.

Once the station gave away the Poor Man's Trip to Hawaii to the first person to come into the studio in a swimsuit, the winner walking away with a plastic pineapple and a grass skirt. They have also given away albums to anybody who would come to the studio and hug a freezing disc jockey, more albums to people who brought in contenders for the city's best toast, and still more albums for the 21 people who brought in doughnuts one morning.

Why would a radio station want to have people traipsing in and out all day? "To have fun," says Piras, who is the station's programming director, "and to get people involved."

It's amazing just how involved the listeners get. The people at WWTC throw big parties, which they call their Class Reunions, and quickly sell or give away all 2000 or more tickets. They'll ask listeners to call and say good morning and their phone lines will be jammed with calls for the next half hour. They'll work out of a booth at a Dairy Queen and get 50 men to come out for a chili dog-eating contest. And one Sunday, when deejay Del Roberts got it into his head to have the summer's first day of cruising, over 300 classic car owners followed Roberts in his convertible down the length of Lake Street and up Hennepin Avenue.

And all this fervor is from a recently established audience. WWTC, at 1280 on the AM band,

has been "The Golden Rock" for only a year, after sinking to incredibly low ratings as an all-news station and little better playing the "Splendid Blend." But last year, station-owner Robert Short snatched Charlie Loufek from WAYL to be "TC's general manager. Loufek got veteran disc jockey Dick Driscoll (the voice of the helicopter cop, Flying Officer Nelson, who gives completely incorrect traffic reports) to come along and be the station's operations manager. And they put Piras, lured from KTWN, in charge of programming. Piras revised the system for playing the oldies and set the line-up of deejays — after his morning drive shift, he's followed by Driscoll, then B. J. Crocker, then Nancy Rosen for the evening shift, then Bowman for the rest of the night.

When Loufek and his skeletal staff took over, the ratings started to creep upward; the most recent Media Trend statistics suggest that the station is reaching more listeners all the time. When the "dedication lines are open," as they say at the station, the callers are teenage boys sending out songs to their girlfriends, wives saying hello to their husbands, little kids wanting a song played for their sisters. According to the

Arbitrons, the average "TC listener is a male within the age range, 25 to 34; according to the phone calls, they just don't have an average listener. As Loufek says, "There is no way to categorize our listeners. They're all types, all vocations, all ages."

**T**HE APPEAL SEEMS to be the station's crazy, personal and personality-oriented approach. One personality is B. J. Crocker, who works with a stuffed bear named Goldy-rocks. Crocker's program fills the afternoon and picks up steam as it moves along. "Okay everybody, let's shimmy," he yells one day, "whoa, I've got to ask NSP if we can hook you up!" and then the drum beat of the Surfari's hit, "Wipe Out," pounds out of the radio. Then he plays "Last Train to Clarksville" for "old Monkees that never die," then "It's a Man's Man's Man's World" for Gloria Steinem, then Del Shannon's "Handy Man" for all waitresses and bartenders. A few commercials later, he's talking about Nancy who's been fillin' in for Shirley at the front desk.

It's like eavesdropping in on the most casual

office, an office that just happens to be playing records. The listener gets a package deal, music and somebody you sort of get to know to tie it together.

"For the KQRS generation," says weekend deejay Del Roberts, meaning the kids who were teenagers through radio's dull years in the '70s, "the deejay didn't say anything that had anything to do with their lives. I talk about cruising, parking, getting hiccups. We're the Walter Mitty of lots of people out there because we're having fun."

If Muzak is aural wallpaper, that drab grandmotherly stuff, WWTC is purple paint on the walls. It intrudes, it makes you pay attention, it yells at you to start dancing, it makes you reach for the phone, and it never lets up.

The station goes out of its way to get callers, and they become regular callers. Nancy Rosen had a young woman caller who stayed on the phone, crying, for an hour and a half one night.

"Maybe she felt better talking to someone she knows but doesn't really know," Rosen says, "so she could say anything. That's part of the job here, being a friend to everybody while you're on the air. People feel like they know us, personally."

People phone in trivia questions (like, what's the number on Bob and Emily's apartment door in the *Bob Newhart Show*?), dedications, song requests, even dinner invitations. The station also calls up listeners to wish them a happy birthday or to pass on messages. Del Roberts once got the numbers of the phones in the restrooms at the Embers and called the ladies' room. "This is a *bathtub*," said the woman who answered. "I know that," said Roberts, "would you like to dedicate the next song?" "You're crazy," she said.

Roberts does appear to be a little crazy, cracking bad jokes throughout his weekend night shifts: "That's Sandy Nelson with 'Teen Beat' from 1959," he says one night, "back then, a lot of teens were really beat." He dedicates the theme from *Staff* to all used-car salesmen, then sends out Gene Pitney's "I'm Gonna Be Strong" to everyone who forgot to wear deodorant.

"The format," says Dick Driscoll, "really called for the disc jockeys to be personalities. We had to go back to the same sound and same freedom as the deejays had in the early '60s." Most of the other local stations use what are called "flip cards," which means the disc jockeys do nothing more than read what is written on a card in front of him then flip to the next card. For those stations, it also means no deejay will gain an audience of his own, and therefore can't make any demands based on his own popularity or take his audience to another station in town. "Here the jocks say what they want," says Piras. Rosen sums up the result: "If you asked people to name the jocks at KQ, they just couldn't. Here, we're known, we're recognized. At KQ, they have to do a half an hour of music without talk in between the songs; we're talking all the time. Your personality just goes into the program naturally because you're not told what to say."

It may be risky for the station, but the format is working. "We're successful probably because the kids who only knew flip cards find this format exciting and different, and the older people like it because it harkens back to a time they remember fondly," says Driscoll.

The simpler time the station tries to bring to mind is the early '60s. Notonly is the freeform program style swiped from the sound of stations like WJGZ circa 1960, but the music is heavily concentrated on the first years of the '60s as well. An hour of music at WWTC roughly breaks down like this: three songs from the '50s, three from the '70s, a couple from the '80s and eight (or more) from the '60s. Right now, they

continued on next page



Steve Bowman, Nancy Rosen, B. J. Crocker, Brad Piras and Goldyrocks sip malts at Shirley's

from previous page

are working from a library of about 4000 songs. The songs from the early years are part of the permanent collection; the '80s songs — the current chart hits — get replaced all the time.

Every day, new racks of songs from each decade on tape cartridges are carried into the studio. The following day, those racks are replaced and put at the end of the stacks of cartridges in the library. They call it "resting the music" to prevent the songs from growing dull to the listeners (which they call "music burn").

"Every time we play 'Ba-ba-ba, ba-ba-bra Ann,' it becomes less effective. You want it so that the next time you hear it, it sound exciting," Piras explains. "The novelty songs are especially tricky. Take 'Splish Splash,' for example. The first time you hear it you say 'yea, I remember it, great.'

The next time, you're less excited about hearing it. By the fifth time, you're saying, 'I'll smash the radio if I hear it again.' "

Besides resting songs, another way the station avoids repetition is by continually expanding its collection. Some of the music has come from listeners who call to request something, find out the station doesn't have it, then bring in copies of their own records. Another source of music is Del Roberts, who's a record collector. Roberts will occasionally bring in something out of his collection and play it just once on his program, like a song by the Four Seasons when they were the Four Lovers or an obscure locally-recorded single. WWTC is proud of the fact that it plays early local rock groups, from the Ivymen to the Castaways to the Trash men. Of current acts, they

play songs by Lamont Cranston and oldies bands, The Whitesidewalls and the Rocking Hollywoods. But they do not play the Flamin's Oh's or Curtiss A., for example, a fact that brings up one of the station's shortcomings. It seems that every deejay at the station has a grudge against new wave. Even though Driscoll says, "I don't care if it's by Debbie Harry, if it fits the format, we'll play it," you simply don't hear anything that wouldn't fit nicely on what *Billboard* calls the "adult contemporary" chart. Piras is sympathetic to the fact that new wave has no outlet locally but says it would simply rattle the format and throw off listeners to play the rock 'n' roll of the '80s. But it does seem that Springsteen's "Sherry Darling" or Rockpile's "Now and Always" or even the Clash's "Train in Vain" or Rachel Sweet's cover of 'B-A-B-Y'

would better fit the format than the latest from Kenny Rogers or Pure Prairie League or the Little River band.

One problem is that WWTC doesn't get service from the record companies' local offices. They assume that 'TC plays nothing but oldies. I asked Piras, who ultimately makes the decision about whether a song is played or not, why they didn't play the new LP by Springsteen, whose music seems a logical extension of what they already play. "I haven't heard it," he said, "we never got a copy."

But another reason the station is slow to add the new rock is that it is, theoretically, playing the *bits* from every decade, which means Kenny Rogers by popular acclaim. "But if you don't like Kenny Rogers," says Del Roberts, "hang on just a few

minutes and we'll get right back to what you do like. On the other hand at the other stations, if you don't like Kenny Rogers, hang on and you'll just hear more Kenny Rogers."

Some weekends, however, we're spared the '80s MOR sound altogether, when the station has its special programming. They did a whole weekend about Buddy Holly on the last anniversary of his death; they've done a "local group" weekend when they played "copycats," or originals and cover versions of the same song; and recently, of course, 'TC aired their own special Lennon programming, to commemorate the Beatle's tragic passing.

B. J. Crocker believes these weekends are important for the station. "The weekend specials paint a picture with information as well as with the music. We need more music information of the era. The station will be giving people more 'meat' as time goes on. We'll be building showcases for segments of the audience, paying attention to Presley or Holly or rockabilly music."

So instead of looking at the limitations of the "Golden Rock" format, the station is looking forward to inventing new ways to relive the music of the last 25 years. They want it to be fresh. Someone once defined good rock 'n' roll as music that you hear for the first time, every time you hear it. WWTC seems to know that.