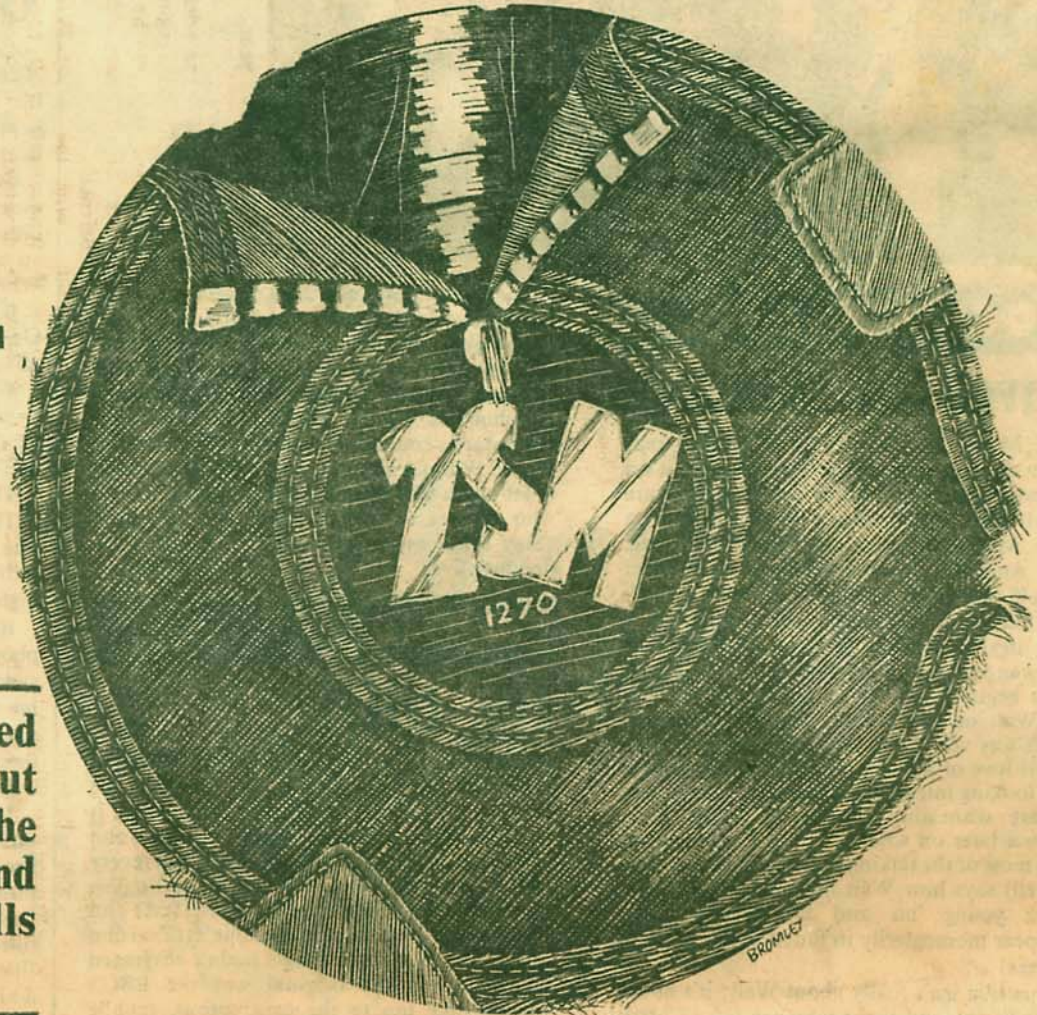


# THE GUIDE

MAY 10 - MAY 16 TELEVISION · RADIO · AUDIO · VIDEO · RECORDS

## How 2SM disobeyed the commandments - and fell from grace



For years 2SM was the undisputed king of Sydney's airwaves. But then the ratings plunged. Here the HON NICK JONES, a first-hand witness of the 2SM slide, tells what went wrong . . .





THE first thing to understand about popular radio is that there is something to understand. It is easy for those who find its output offensive, crass, or just plain noisy to write it off as an aberration of weak juvenile minds, a racket to amuse the feeble of brain or, as it was once quaintly described to me by a genuinely concerned lecturer, a plot by multi-national companies to brainwash the citizenry.

The thing which has to be understood is that beneath the cacophony Top 40 radio has basic operating principles. Principles which are remarkably inflexible. Those who choose to depart from them embark surely on the path to broadcasting oblivion. The 2SM story of recent years provides an interesting insight into how to do just this. They have gone to a position of unparalleled strength, peaking at around 30 per cent of the available audience and plunging to a low of between 6 and 7 per cent with a slight recovery in the last ratings.

How did this reversal of fortunes come about? Before tracing this slide down the ratings scale, it is necessary to take a look at the rules of popular radio. Top 40 radio was invented by Tod Stores, who at the time was operating WKB in Kansas City. He observed on a visit to a diner that the kids' preferences for music on the jukebox were restricted to about 10 records. These were played to the exclusion of everything else for the brief period of their popularity, then discarded. Applying this to radio, he came up with the Top 40 format and its four commandments:

- Thou shalt play the hits,
- Thou shalt provide news,
- Thou shalt provide information (traffic, time, temperature, local events),
- Thou shalt provide entertainment (personality radio, people telling jokes, arguing, talking back, being bombastic, sympathetic, whatever).

Add to this the understanding that people don't listen to the radio as they did in the days of Dad and Dave immobile in a chair with ears glued to the speaker and you have a basic understanding of the format that saved radio from extinction in the early days of TV.

Modern radio places the performer in exactly the reverse position of any other in the history of theatre. The concert stage, the movie theatre, the amplifier magnify the performer — make him larger than life. The radio performer is diminished by modern technology. His dulcet tones which boom over the studio speakers emerge squeaking from a plastic box which is the modern transistor radio. Add all this together and you have an

appreciation of the reason for the frenetic pace of modern popular radio.

FM has done remarkably little to change this. Its greatest success so far in Sydney, Doug Murray's breakfast show on Triple M, has an aggressively AM format. The laid-back, cool-cat style anticipated for FM in its early days has so far failed to attract the mob.

With understanding, it is instructive to look at where 2SM was in the Sydney market and trace its progress to its present embattled position.

At its height, SM had a line-up of popular radio ingredients perhaps unparalleled in the history of the medium.

Starting with breakfast, which radio station wisdom dictates is vital in lining up the station for the day, those involved were:

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## Thou shalt play the hits Thou shalt provide news Thou shalt provide information Thou shalt provide entertainment

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● Ian McRae and yours truly as principal stirrers in a pot consisting of a new theme, including Steve Liebmann, Brian White, John Tingle and an impressive array of overseas correspondents such as John Raidler, Alan Wilkie with the weather, Shane Steadman with the surf, the list undoubtedly goes on.

● For breakfast to morning with Gibson and Moore, a mixture of journalistic and music skills which researchers predicted would not work but which in due course carried more than 20 per cent of the soap suds market. The show featured a personality parade of visiting glitteralia, possibly unparalleled in the world. Australia was and, for these doyens of the beautiful life, is a far away place. They were and are more prepared to speak to Sydney media than they would be to communicate with a radio station in their native Hollywood, London or New York.

● From mornings to the early afternoon shift, run by the warm, low-key, slightly-wacky Gordon O'Byrne, now going down in Perth like the first beer on a hot day in Cunamulla. Thence on to Ron E. Sparks, the ice-cold, super-disciplined jock who achieved the station's peak ratings of 30 per cent with his uncanny ability to fit and flow the music into a musical massage for listeners returning from work.

● From Sparks to Keith Williams, now

program director of Triple M, and so on into the night, a collection of radio talent with a stranglehold on the richest market in the country.

How did they make their way from this seemingly unassailable position to their present spot close to the bottom of the heap?

The first retreat from this perhaps over-fat position came with the opening of 2WS which took 10 per cent of the market, mainly from 2SM's ratings. At the time there were law suits over the question of how its frequency miraculously placed it between 2SM and 2CH — at the time the two top rating stations on the dial. Regardless of this, WS carried the Westies with the first dose of neighbourhood pride they had been offered in a millenium.

SM replied to this with perhaps the greatest radio promotion seen in this country — the Rocktober in '79, a month-long series of events culminating in the concert of the decade — a giant pop concert on the Opera House steps attended by some 180,000 people.

The biggest bands of the decade were reformed for the occasion, the station played elaborately produced flash backs of the big news events of the decade and replayed the old hits. The Rocktober of '79 was bigger than Ben Hur.

The people went to the pop concert, but tuned off 12.70 in droves. The audience dropped by a further six per cent. People didn't go for talk on a music station, no matter how well produced and historically relevant it was and they didn't want to hear the old hits en masse.

The golden rules of popular radio had been breached, the price had been paid.

From this position, there followed an erosion of the personality line-up on the station. Whether it was due to management policy or the unavailability of the new personalities is not possible to say. But as they left they were not replaced. Mike Gibson departed to 2GB and Ron E. Sparks to 2UW — at the time languishing with about 8 per cent of the market. He took with him Trevor Johnson, one of the foremost production

hands in the industry. Keith Williams became program director of sister station 2NX. Gordon O'Byrne departed to 2UW, initially over a row concerning music policy. It was music policy or experimenting with it that drove the next nail into the station's coffin.

FM was coming on the scene. Triple M, captained by Rod Muir — the original architect of the SM format who had left in a flurry of corporate disagreement — returned like McArthur. 2SM, although surprisingly perhaps not at top management level, decided on a bold experiment — album music. The album had replaced the single as the principal retail vehicle for popular music. Along with the hits came the album tracks, songs that went beyond the catchy hook line and guitar riff. ELO, David Bowie, Jethro Tull, a whole spectrum of artistry with depth far beyond the hit single. AM broadcasters expected the FMers to be equipped to play album music so they decided to blow them off the dial with quality music such as had never been heard from top AM stations.

The strategy was also seen as positioning the station for a move up the age demographic to capture the older, financially-secure adults of our aging population. Album music was launched with the famous commercial of the albums falling domino style to the catch phrase "2SM lays down more albums". Whether it would have worked, whether the listeners comprehended the significance of the industry terms, "laying down an album" (it means playing a track of it), history does not recall. Barry Chapman and Ros Wilson left after a boardroom upheaval two weeks after the launch.

John Torv, a long-standing employee of the network, was press ganged into the position of program director. The play list was shortened and the album tracks left on the air. Unfamiliar music on the radio was a breach of the first commandment of popular radio: play the hits. The station retreated further in the ratings and John Torv departed. This sacrificial-lamb approach to station management did little for morale. David White, who had been assistant program director, found himself in the hot seat. Unfamiliar music was pulled off the air.

Then, just when things looked bad, in came 2UW to make it worse. With the very format they had used 10 years before, they stormed back into the market place as the new 2UW. The old hands scoffed. It had all been done before, 10 years before. But the kids who

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# 'Divine intervention has been remarkably absent'

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tuned across to the new 2UW in droves didn't remember. Up to 53 per cent of listeners between 10 to 17 took the bait. 2SM, by this time deep in the slough of radio despond, took a chance on history repeating itself once again. Exactly as they did ten years before, they became more music 2SM. In short: music, music, music and very little else. The strategy: to attract the young, especially female, listeners. These volatile people have a limited taste in music but they tune the radio and they show on the ratings cards.

The "more music" effect on the breakfast session was principally in removing the character voices and entertainment ingredients from the show.

Control of the music was taken over by the music director and a regime was imposed on the on-air team which all but muzzled them.

This achieved a further drop in ratings so that breakfast now lined up with the rest of the station at about 6.5 per cent.

Management decided to stay on course with more music and attracting the teenagers.

John Tingle left to join 2GB. The services of Alan Wilkie were dispensed with. The overseas correspondents were snapped up by other stations. The news staff was reduced to three.

The station picked up a few young listeners in the last survey.

McRae and I jumped ship which brings us to the present. The only remaining question is where to from here.

The teenyboppers they are after, and who they seemed to be getting, are a volatile lot. They come on a whim and leave just as quickly.

Strategy in the past has been to do as 2UW is doing now to widen the appeal for the station an attempt to please the older listeners. Soften the music, strengthen the ingredients of news, personality and entertainment.

When it fights its way back to this position,

the widening-out process will be difficult for 2SM, especially in the news area, after their recent decision to downgrade news. Journalists may be wary of committing themselves to the station in the future. Personalities can be bought but to do this, a station is like any other branch of show business, it needs a Barnum, a Great Gatsby and impresario who can carry the money men and the listeners with him. I'm not aware at present of any person with that spark presently aboard the good ship 2SM.

It is held by some that there is room for only one AM rock station on the Sydney market. With Triple M firmly in charge on the FM band and UW widening its appeal on the AM band to include personalities such as Ian McRae, SM has to put in an impressive rails run if the mantle of AM rocker is to fall to it. If not, where will it go? A change of format to chase the soft rock market of the 30-plus listeners perhaps? WS is doing that very nicely at the moment. Go for a slice of the good

music format? The community and religious broadcasting "God squad" is now one of the largest departments of 2SM due to attrition in other departments such as news. Perhaps this ingredient, with a good music format? Nobody knows except Him and despite His alleged links with the station, divine intervention has so far been remarkably absent as a programming element in popular radio. One thing which could change the picture for radio stations as whole could be a continuing downturn in economic conditions. Radio advertising gives a frequency undreamed of in television and at a fraction of the cost.

Whatever happens, one thing is certain: as long as human history continues, the radio war will continue. Battles will be lost and won, stations will sink and come back firing, metaphorically at least, blood will be shed at a rate outstripping the present unpleasantries in the Falklands providing an interesting side-show for the radiophiles of the Parish of Sydney.