Getting a record on the air is the job of record promotion men such as Vernon Thomas, left. Deciding what deserves airplay is the job of a station music directors. such as WPGC's Harv Moore.

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Deciding What Goes In Your Ears

Someone has to choose what music you hear every day and if there were only 40 or 50 records around at one time, it would be easy

By Rudy Maxa

It is almost noon at WPGC, a Washington area Top 40 radio station and Harv Moore, known as the "Morning Mayor" on his daily morning radio show, has beckoned the slight, mustachioed man in the leather jacket and sun glasses into his office. The visitor is a record promoter named Bruce Sperling. And he wants Harv Moore, who doubles as the station's music director, to play a selection by the Raspberries called "Don't Want To Say Goodbye."

Moore's answer can determine the fate of a record on which a major production company has spent thousands of dollars. It can mean fame and cash to its producers and backers. It can also mean an easier day tomorrow for Bruce Sperling when he flies to Atlanta if he can tell his boss WPGC has entered "Don't Want To Say Goodbye" on its play list. And, finally, Moore's answer may determine whether you ever hear a group called the Raspberries on your radio.

Moore takes the 45 and puts it on his turntable.

"What have you got on this?" he asks. "What kind of reaction?"

"Good," says Sperling, not anxious to comment without first getting a cue from Moore.

"Well, it's kind of growing on me . . ."

"WINX (a Rockville Top 40 station) has started playing it, for what that's worth. Some kids came in and asked for it when I was at a record store yesterday."

"I don't know . . ." Moore says, "I think we'll just watch it."

It is an answer Moore will use several more times before the day is over. It is Thursday and WPGC's music director spends three or four hours every Thursday receiving record promoters. Afterwards he will consider the records they have pushed and perhaps add two or three to his station's play list for the coming week. As one of the handful of Washington Top 40 stations—as opposed to classical, country and western or rhythm & blues—WPGC is an important figure in the equation that is the record and radio business in Washington. Airplay on a Top 40 station (like WPGC or WEAM) or a prominent rhythm & blues station (like WOL or WOOK) can translate locally into strong record sales. Further, if a station breaks a record—that is, makes a record a hit before any other station in the country—it can start a domino reaction of nationwide play and sales. A lot of people care what a station's music director thinks when he listens to a record.

"Harv," Sperling says, leaving the Raspberries aside for another week, "you just have to go with the Godfather theme by Al Martino. The dealers are going to push it so I really need WPGC on this one."

"It's not quite our thing, Bruce. On this one we might be forced to play it but until people start calling me for it . . ."

Have you seen the movie?" asks Sperling. "I'll be getting some passes soon."

"I thought it was the Andy Williams version (on a rival label) that people were playing?"

"Yeah, but Capitol is really pushing the Martino album in the stores . . ."

It is a marriage held together by necessity, this relationship between radio stations and record stores. The record stores need the radio stations, for without them there would be no one to create a demand for a new record.(A record store rarely orders a popular record unless it receives air plays.)The radio stations need the record stores as indicators of what particular records are selling well and, therefore, deserving of play. No one has yet devised a formula that can tell radio stations how long they must play a record before sales can be used to measure its popularity. Nor are there any definitive indicators that can tell retail outlets whether a record is going to be a big seller or a flop. Both depend to a large extent on promotion men to keep them current.

"Labels are playing the odds. They release 20 records in a month and hope one makes it and write the rest off."

If there were only 40 or 50 records on the market at any one time there would be no need for promotion men to visit music directors. But as Bob Benson, music director for one of Washington's most popular radio stations (according to market surveys), WMAL-AM, puts it: "There's been a tremendous outpouring of product in the last four or five years and the quality is just terrible. Labels are just playing the odds—if they release 20 records in a month they hope one makes it and they write the rest off. There's a lot of write-off in the record industry."

The result of this plethora of product is that very few records receive airplay automatically. The few that might, usually bear the name of a proven heavyweight in the music business, perhaps a former Beatle, or the Rolling Stones or Marvin Gaye or David Cassidy. The rest must do battle with each other to gain a toehold in a particular market, or catch the ear of a radio station's music director, in order to avoid the instant obscurity that is the destiny of most records released in America.

Vernon Thomas arrives at his Northeast Washington office around 10 in the morning to face a stack of records and publicity kits from several of the record labels he represents in the Washington, Baltimore and Richmond area. He is employed by the largest independent record distributing company on the East Coast, Schwartz Brothers. Only a handful of major record labels can afford their own promotion men to service the Washington-Baltimore area. The smaller labels, some 100 of them, turn to the Schwartz Brothers—Jim, Stu and Burt. Their eight promo men account for about one-third of such men who make local weekly rounds to talk to music directors like Harv Moore and Bob Benson.

Vernon Thomas is lucky. He has two good labels, Bell and Motown; the latter is to the rhythm & blues market what IBM is to the computer industry. And Washington, with its significant young, black community, is a natural home for R&B records. While Top 40 records rarely break in D.C., R&B labels look to Washington as a fertile breaking and market testing ground.

Thomas files through the new releases on his desk, tosses half of them in the corner and heads downstairs to the promo man's stock room. Grabbing a handful of several different 45s and albums, Thomas loads up for his day's route that will include three R&B stations and two middle-of-the-roads, all in Washington. He is starting to get excited, a state he believes a good promo man must be in to communicate enthusiasm for his product.

"I was the type of kid, like, when I bought a new record, you just *had* to come over to the house to hear it," 30-year-old Thomas says. "Now I do it for a living." You may have seen him a couple of years ago in his first job: selling records in a chain record store. He was the one dancing to the music and who wouldn't let you go until you heard the latest album he was pushing.

Now, driving his Karmann Ghia toward the popular R&B station, WOOK, Thomas is planning his approach to Tony Harris, the station's young music director. Thomas figures his Motown single is almost a sure hit, so he puts that on the bottom of his pile of ten or fifteen records he carries under his arm. A new Supremes album gets middle position and a Bell single called "Ruby Lee" goes on top. It will get pushed the hardest.

Harris, the music director, is wearing sunglasses and complaining about the broken air

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conditioning. His desk is piled high with records and publicity. He puts "Ruby Lee" on his turntable and leans back to listen. Thomas begins dancing with the first note.

"Gavin Report (a weekly wrap-up of record happenings) has it written up under R&B," offers Thomas.

"I don't know if people think this is a record launching pad, but I've got to slow down because the stores are behind."

"Nice music," concedes Harris.

"Well, that's my main push, man, because he's got an album coming out."

"I don't know . . . I've got so much backed up, you know, so many things that should go on a new list," says Harris.

Thomas reaches for the WOOK play list to see "if there's anything you might want to take off." Harris says it's nice of Thomas to offer to remove some record from *his* list.

"Hey," objects Thomas in a slightly hurt tone, "I wouldn't take any other cat's records off. But I don't see any of mine that are ready to come off yet, either."

So much for "Ruby Lee" for that week. But Thomas is off and dancing again, this time with the new Supremes' album.

"Man, Smokey (Robinson) wrote every cut on here, so I'm not going to even tell you how heavy it is," Thomas says, "just touch it."

Harris takes it skeptically. "You know I really don't like the Supremes..."

"I know," answered Thomas, "but the Supremes are the Supremes. What can you do?"

"Play it, I suppose," says Harris with resignation. "But I'm going to have to slow down, man. I don't know if people think this is a record launching pad, but I've got to slow down because the stores are behind. I call them up and they say 'oh, yeah, sales are just great' and then I know they just got a good supply in and they need us to give the record air."

Later Thomas will say: "The name of the game is making friends." And he does peddle his wares with a certain smoothness and hint of deference. "The promoter's job is to keep every promise he ever makes. Once you begin to lie about a record, you're in big trouble with every jock at a station," Thomas says. "If you don't believe in a doctor, how are you going to let him operate on you?"

"Out of all the record people I deal with," says Benson of WMAL-AM, "there are only a few that do their job professionally."

Benson interrupts his discussion of how he decides what Washingtonians are going to listen to each day to answer his phone. A national promotion director from Chicago is returning his call. Benson is angry, and he tells the national promotion man why. It seems he has not received a Ray Charles album as soon as several other local stations have, despite repeated assurances by the local promo man that he will get it to him promptly.

"Damn it," says Benson, "we're the major station in this market and we have the top jazz show around (in the evenings with host Felix Grant). I've talked to your man here about this kind of service and I don't know if he just doesn't understand or what . . ."

The director in Chicago promises to "special deliver" several albums immediately and to reprimand the local promo man.

Back at WPGC, Harv Moore is seeing his second promo man of the day, George Goodman from Atlantic records. He prefers to stand during his entire presentation.

"I'll tell you why I stopped, Harv," he says as he hands Moore an album. "This one is heavy . . . it's there. And it's climbing on WEAM."

"George, I haven't got the feedback on it I was expecting," Moore tells him. "I've been talking with Record City about it and it isn't selling all that well. But I'll probably be using it if it's as strong as you say."

"No doubt, man. I couldn't afford to put you on a wrong track," says Goodman. He gives Moore a Roberta Flack and Donny Hathaway album and asks him to play cut 2, a song called "Where Is The Love?"

Moore listens for 30 seconds and says, "I don't know, it might be a little too light for us . . ."

"Once you begin to lie about a record you're in big trouble with every jock at a station."

"O.K., man, but just as long as you know it's there so when it starts coming at you, you know, in case I forget to mention it to you. You may not be ready for it yet, but I just brought it to you so you can still watch it. But I'll tell you what is ready—" he touches the first selection he had shown Moore—"it's there, it's there." It turned out that Goodman was correct. Three weeks later, Bettye Swan's "Victim of a Foolish Heart" had a place on Harv Moore's play list.

The next promo man has a bit harder time of it convincing Moore his station should play a new Tom Jones single. "Now, Harv, I know your reaction to Tom Jones," Joe Cash, a promo man for several labels began, "but this is a better-than-usual Tom Jones. You might want to give it daytime play for the housewives."

"Aw, Joe, we're not aiming for the housewives anymore . . ."

"Yeah, but you're not going to lose any listeners if you slip in this Tom Jones and you'll please those little suburban housewives—they do listen to you, you know."

"Joe, the only thing that separates us from WASH (a middle-of-the-road station) is the Rolling Stones. I think Top 40 has lost its identity and it's because of Tom Jones, Andy Williams . . . The music that was offensive to middle-of-the-road listeners isn't offensive to them anymore," Moore says.

For all their power in determining what radio listeners will hear and their constant monitoring of audience preferences, music directors (and promo men) will not even hazard an answer to the largest question in their business: what makes a hit? There is no way to *make* a record become a hit, they swear. Yet for every Carole King or Fifth Dimension there is a Sir Joe Frankie or Masked Man and the Agents. One group can prompt young Americans to spend millions on records and concerts while the other, larger group can't get a date to play a high school prom.

There is something about a record's sound, Harv Moore at WPGC will tell you, something about the mood of the listeners at a particular point in time that makes them take a Don McLean to heart while leaving 20 other hopeful artists in the dust. The "hype," or promotion, music directors must listen to nearly every day is merely the stage set for records that can become hits only if there is an audience to applaud.

Moore and others in his business may not know what makes a record a hit, but they do have an idea of when a record is deserving of air play in Washington. About two-thirds of the decision to play a record is based on knowledge that the selection is doing well in other markets across the nation, based on trade magazine reports. The other one-third of the decision rests in the ear of the music director. Sometimes the music director's ear will overwhelm the more objective approach of looking at reports from other stations. When that happens, the music director will lay his reputation and a few valuable minutes of his station's air time on the line. Sometimes it pays off and he has the satisfaction of knowing he "created" a hit. "Day By Day," a selection from the musical "Godspell" became a nationwide hit that way when a Washington R&B station started playing it heavily and the Top 40s eventually picked up on it. So did a more unlikely sounding record called "Troglodyte" by the Jimmy Castor Bunch, a local group that was pushed hard by promo men in the area and that finally became a nationwide best seller.

"You won't lose any listeners if you slip this Tom Jones in and you'll please those little suburban housewives."

More likely, though, Washingtonians hear what they hear because audiences in Minneapolis, Seattle or Dallas—good breakout markets for Top 40 records—liked what their disk jockeys served them and Washington promotion men and music directors decided to follow the lead. ■