

WPGC Shifts to the Middle As Listeners Age

By Dennis John Lewis

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The battle of competing music radio stations like national politics, is most often determined by who can successfully stake out and hold the middle of the road. But a Middle-of-the-Road (MOR) banner has seldom been raised by so unlikely a contender as WPGC-AM/FM, Washington's rock 'n' roll kingpin for years.

Nevertheless, WPGC's program director Jim Collins keeps a straight face as he claims the status: "MOR has moved and we've moved, too. Stations are now after mass appeal — almost all ages and almost all tastes because of the tremendous variety of tastes."

Exuberant over the spring ratings indicating continued predominance in the music market for WPGC's hip and oldies sound, Collins admits "people still say we're the Top 40 station, but we call it 'Musicradio' — contemporary or mass-appeal radio since no station can play that many records. We play almost that many."

THERE CAN BE no argument with success, however, and WPGC has had the very best of times since WRC abandoned rock 'n' roll for the all news in June last year. Scoring a solid 10 share in the market, WPGC is ranked first with area young radio listeners in Arbitron's latest ratings and overall the station is second only to WMAL—AM. The latest rating showed them adding 9,000 listeners for a weekly audience average of 594,000.

Summer is generally doldrums time for area radio with few stations gearing up for a big audience before fall, but the bounce of rock stations during these months has usually produced the larger audiences, and none more than for WPGC. The station doesn't even seek rock stars for guest spots. Megastars like Paul McCartney, John Denver and Elton John have asked for air time and the answer was not always yes.

"More Fun" is the watchword at the Bladensburg station. Collins, 27, sees the continuing WPGC success story as a bubble that should last: "Its contests, bumper stickers and the bottom line — is sounding more interesting, more fun." He quickly adds "If one station gives away \$5,000 in cash, we give away \$10,000 worth of gold."



Jim Collins

Indeed, business-savvy is the critical factor behind the glittering array of listener contests. Collins believes "the tough part is coming up with new contests with competition toughest during the recent rating period." Disclaiming any effort to score big in one rating book, he says WPGC aims for a "good even sound that never lets down. We have just as many contests when there are no ratings.

"We play more oldies now. It's almost half and half." Collins acknowledges the oldies upsurge from one-in-four a few years ago as "basically because oldies were hits while current hits are in sales of hundreds, oldies deal in sales in thousands and it helps to make us different from other radio stations. They always bring back memories and feelings to people, whether it's last year or 10 years ago."

CONCERNED WITH the absolute currency of hits in this area, the station compiles surveys of record sales at local stores and distributors, as well as keeping tabs on phone requests to the station.

"Young people want to hear the hits and we'll always do that, and to win the prizes we have" said Collins. "We're always giving away albums and tickets to concerts and big events like Paul McCartney and Wings and the Muhammed Ali fight or whizzing off on a Concorde flight to London."

A recurring listener gripe is the inability to reach the station during contest periods. That's entirely understandable since the old exchange, with a standard prefix, would blow out portions of phone service when masses of young people called. This was remedied when WPGC and the phone company reached agreement on a special listener exchange.

COLLINS DOUBLES as the afternoon (2-to-6) disc jockey today. He was hired as Mark West, a name WPGC had promoted in a snappy jingle. Shedding the pseudonym gradually, he has served as program director for four years. Collins started his radio career at 15 in Lawrence, Kansas. "It was a small operation out in the middle of a cow pasture," he laughs and recalls, adding "I had to water the cows before signing on the station each morning."

The young station official exudes a solid satisfaction in WPGC's future.

"We're not thinking of changing the format further. Today it's a question of refining the product." Collins adds if the "disco mania develops strength we'll incorporate it. Sales and requests affect what we play. We're after a balance . . . Adults and kids are listening to the same music today. Kids used to listen to rock while adults listened to people like Steve and Eydie and Mel Torme. But now the 'kids' have grown up."