

circular

The Ups and Downs of a Top 40 Pioneer

BY HARVEY GELLER

New York City, the late 50s. While an importunate planet awaits confirmation of reports that Charles de Gaulle will momentarily emerge from retirement to assume command of a tottering French Republic, Bill Edmonds, an enterprising newsman at radio station WMGM, places a transatlantic call to the General's residence in Versailles.

Deejay Jerry Marshall, who has lavished his audience with news bulletins and "teasers" throughout his mid-morning disc show, interrupts a Newport commercial at 10:28 a.m., jubilantly announcing that De Gaulle has indeed been contacted and will soon reveal his decision "live" and "exclusively" on WMGM's 50,000-watt clear channel outlet. Edmonds mans the mike and 200,000-plus Easterners eavesdrop on an historic conversation...

EDMONDS: General, I would like to... [pause to the crackle of overseas static] Are you there, General?

VOICE: Oui... Oui?

EDMONDS: I would like to have you make a statement for our listeners about the crises in France.

VOICE: I am an old soldier... If and when I take over the government, it will not be by dictatorial means. The people of France deserve a good government.

EDMONDS: Can you say at this time when you will be taking over?

VOICE: It is too soon... Monsieur, could you tell me, please,



Mel Leeds



who I am speaking to?

EDMONDS: My name is Bill Edmonds, one of the "Minute Men" here at WMGM...

VOICE: MGM, the motion picture company?

EDMONDS: Yes, well—we have a radio station here in New York City, blanketing the entire Eastern Seaboard of the United States...

VOICE: Oh, I see. But, of course, everybody knows that the *best* station in New York is WINS! Vive la France! (click)

A stunned WMGM staff checks with the New York Telephone Company and is told that Edmonds' overseas call hasn't yet been completed. Slowly it dawns. It is a hoax... a colossal canard. Soon to be the most celebrated in the annals of radio broadcasting.

WMGM's general manager, Art
Continued on page 10

Summer Break

Since *Circular* hasn't had a summer vacation in 2½ years, this season she cashes in. Beginning with the next issue and extending through the rest of the summer, *Circular* will be published once every two weeks. The coming issue will be dated July 9. *Circular* deserves a breather, and this gives you the rare opportunity to go over all your old *Circulars* in the off weeks.

Top 40 Trend Setter

Continued from page 1

Tolchin, is furious. He phones WINS' general manager, Jock Fearnhead, curiously suggesting that Fearnhead's new program director, Mel Leeds, is the villainous jackal. He threatens, "The next time I see Melvin, I'm gonna punch him in the nose." Fearnhead advises, "If Leeds really is responsible, you should hire him." *Time* magazine and the international news services detail the hoax. *The New York World-Telegram's* front page waggishly headlines, "Who Had De Gaulle to Call De Gaulle?"

10 Long presumed but unconfirmed till now, the hoax was hatched by Leeds, with the aid of an audacious staff newscaster, Tom O'Brien. Performed to the backdrop hum of a "ham" tape, it starred O'Brien as De Gaulle and featured O'Brien's Scandinavian stewardess fiancée as an overseas operator. "The strange thing," Leeds now confesses, "is that none of us discovered till months after that De Gaulle never spoke a word of English."

Leeds, who projects the eurythmy and demeanor of a hebetate Fred Astaire, was a prime target of the payola investigations in the late 50s. He was also the man who brought deejays Alan Freed, "Roscoe," Humble Harve, Tom Clay and Peter Tripp to the West Coast, pioneered free-form "underground" radio in LA and, 10 years earlier, as an unglorified war-god of the rock revolt, introduced Top 40 radio to New York.

The primogenitor of Top 40's tight playlist format was, undoubtedly, Your Lucky Strike Hit Parade, a twice-weekly one-hour

barrage of the most bromidic songs of that age, first heard on CBS-radio in the mid-30s. Its promiscuous concubine was an anonymous juke box in a nameless bar on 15th Street in Omaha, Nebraska, in the mid 50s. Its probable patriarchs were Bill Stewart, formerly of the Todd Storz radio chain, and Storz himself. Stewart often reminisces on how the formula was born "around 1955" in that Omaha bar.

From Odd Mix to Top 40

"We were sitting there and the juke box was playing, coming up to the same song. I can't remember what the song was but it was rock & roll. We must have sat there for four or five hours . . . I guess it was midnight or whatever time they closed and everyone was gone and they were kinda giving us motions like we were supposed to leave. And the waitress went over and put a quarter in the juke box . . . Played the record three times in a row . . . The same record we'd heard all night long."

While Stewart's nostalgic narrative is engaging, it is not astonishing. The wonder is that Top 40 hadn't arrived earlier. Martin Block, who hosted *The Make Believe Ballroom* (a show that one critic described as "a careful selection of the most dreadful music ever put on records") for 25 years on WNEW, NY, had already discovered that his Hooper was highest on Saturday mornings, when he programmed the Top 24 juke box titles, culled from *Cash Box*, and lowest on Thursday nights, when he auditioned

new, unfamiliar sides. The Todd Storz format was nothing more nor less than Your Lucky Strike Hit Parade rockin' round the clock.

While Stewart was experimenting with his closed music list at KOWH in Omaha, Leeds, who had served his musical apprenticeship with several Brill Building publishers and at WNEW (assisting Al Trilling in the music library while helping produce the Art Ford and Rayburn and Finch shows) was a junior executive at General Artists Corp.

"In 1956," says Leeds, "I heard about an opening at KOWH . . . Bill Stewart interviewed me at the McAlpin Hotel in New York. Along with half a dozen other hopefuls I was shipped to Omaha and put through a 'crash' program." Out of that group Leeds was the only one selected for a position in the Todd Storz operations. He was dispatched to WHB (Kansas City, Mo.) where, for several months, he worked under Bud Armstrong. "But I was itching to get back to New York and I heard that WINS was looking for a program director.

Days of WINS and Roses

"Their format was neither fish nor fowl . . . no ratings to speak of. They had sports with Bill Stern and women's reports with Maggie McNellis. I was interviewed by Fearnhead and chosen in July, 1957, to revamp the operation. It emerged as a loose Top 40: about 60 titles including new sides and standards with meaning—a 'Pick Hit of the Week,' an 'Album of the Week,' Murry the K (Kaufman) joined us and, along with Alan Freed and Jack Lacy and a lot of wild ideas, we were #1 within six

months. And we stayed there.

"I wish I could say I was responsible for the success of Alan Freed. But he was the King, bar none—the guy who took 'race' music out of the ghetto and christened it rock & roll . . . his was the one show I couldn't control. He even refused to play the station's jingles.

"Our logo, 'You're listening to 10-10, WINS, New York,' was heard after every record. It got so that if we missed playing it, we got complaints from our listeners. I tried to pattern the station after the *Daily News*: sensationalism. If there wasn't any news, we'd invent it. We did things in those days that were unheard of. We kept our listener on the edge of his seat."

Promotion man Tony Richland recalls his early years with Famous Music, contacting people at WINS. "I was too young and green to ever get to see Leeds personally. But I was envious watching the 'heavies' walk into his office—Mo Shulman, Mel Turoff, Danny Winchell. Leeds got credit for a lot of Top 40 innovations in those days. But in recent pieces about radio in the 50s I never see his name mentioned. It could be that I thought he invented a lot of the stuff that he didn't because I was a kid and didn't know. But he was very powerful."

The Probe

When the payola scandal hit the front pages with Freed, Peter Tripp and Leeds as its major New York targets, WINS president Elroy McCaw came to Leeds' apartment and suggested he take an extended cruise to the Caribbean.



Greatest Payola Hits We Have Known—and Loved was the working title for this mock LP art, posed by Mel Leeds and rock rajah Alan Freed in 1962.

Mel told him, "I wouldn't take a trip across the Hudson—it would only prove my guilt." But McCaw finally prevailed upon him to accept a new position, as general manager of KDAY in Los Angeles.

The trial in Criminal Court was based on New York's antiquated commercial bribery law: the state would have to prove that the employee accepted gratuities without the knowledge of his employer. But when Leeds, his lawyer established, had asked management for a raise, he was told, "Go to your record company friends for the money." In September of 1962, the state prosecutor moved

for a dismissal and all charges against Leeds were dropped.

"The people I took money from," Leeds attests, "were those I made arrangements with . . . I was hired as a 'consultant' by a number of top labels. I had meetings with them in their offices, listening to masters, helping them select releases. And I paid taxes on that money—in fact the station's accountant handled my returns. It's laughable. People are under the impression that there were hundreds of thousands involved. The highest figure for any one year didn't exceed \$10,000. I never solicited. Men would come to me

"In the late 50s, program directors would come to New York and tape WINS for 24 to 48 hours straight. Our slogan, 'The Station That Other Stations Listen To,' may have been corny, but it was true."

and put records on my desk with \$500 bills attached. I never accepted these records and we didn't play them."

Probe Refugees

"Alan Freed was a 'consultant' also," says Leeds, "but he was involved with copyrights—not just cash . . . Alan was incensed when the investigations began. We tried joking but still it was all downhill after that.

"He abused his body. He didn't seem to care anymore. He started living in the past, never quite adjusting to the fact that he was no longer the Great Pied Piper."

Performer-music historian Ian Whitcomb in his newly published book, *After the Ball (Pop Music From Rag to Rock)*, affirms, "Freed lived for rock 'n' roll and he died for her too,—destroyed by the payola investigations of the late 50s."

At KDAY, a "daytime" station, Leeds enlisted an all-star cast of probe refugees—Freed, Tom Clay from Detroit, Jay Michaels from Pittsburgh, Peter Tripp from New York. "Even though we made a lot of noise in the short time we were on the air, we had two strikes against us. In the winter months we'd be off the air at 4:30 p.m. while the rest of the stations were raising hell."

Leeds' next assignment was KBLA, a "50-watt teapot station in the San Fernando Valley." Bill "Roscoe" Mercer and Humble Harve (Miller) were imported from the East. "But," Leeds maintains, "the station couldn't be heard beyond Magnolia Boulevard." Leeds quit KBLA in 1965, sold

commercial packages for a couple of years, then rejoined radio with KLAC as both assistant program director and program director for sister station KMET-FM.

Broken Bones

In October, 1970, while driving on the Ventura Freeway, Leeds swerved his car to avoid hitting a station wagon loaded with youngsters.

"I later discovered that I had shaved off 110 feet of fencing. Every bone on the left side of my body was broken. I had a brain concussion and suffered loss of memory." Doctors spent nine months piecing him together.

Recovered now, but no longer in broadcasting, Leeds expresses a desire to return to radio.

"It can be the most exciting medium in the world. But there are too many pirates borrowing other's formulas. In the late 50s, program directors would come to New York and tape WINS for 24 to 48 hours straight. Our slogan, 'The Station That Other Stations Listen To,' may have been corny, but it was true. There was something new happening there every day. We were willing to experiment: grabbing at ideas that were fresh, timely, exciting. Some, after 15 years, are still being aired."

Perhaps its most memorable ID was a solemn, stentorian-toned pronouncement—"We are the only station in the world that can make this statement . . . You are tuned to 10-10, WINS, New York."