

TO CODE AT HOME?

Forget the year. **Voltair** processor-induced questions about PPM encoding may be the biggest radio story of the last decade. Moving from diary ratings to meter technology in 2007 was intended to remove much of the ambiguity from radio's audience report card – at least in the top 50 markets. Programmers were confident in the technology and quickly adopted its lessons, one of the most dramatic being listeners' aversion to talk. Spoken word formats saw declines and music format morning shows began upping their song count. And then Voltair came along.

Introduced in mid-2014 by **Telos**, the \$15,000 processor was aimed at a previously unknown gap in PPM's audio watermarking encoding. In short, its developers claimed that programming that was quiet, marked by silence or weak in a certain frequency range did a poor job of carrying

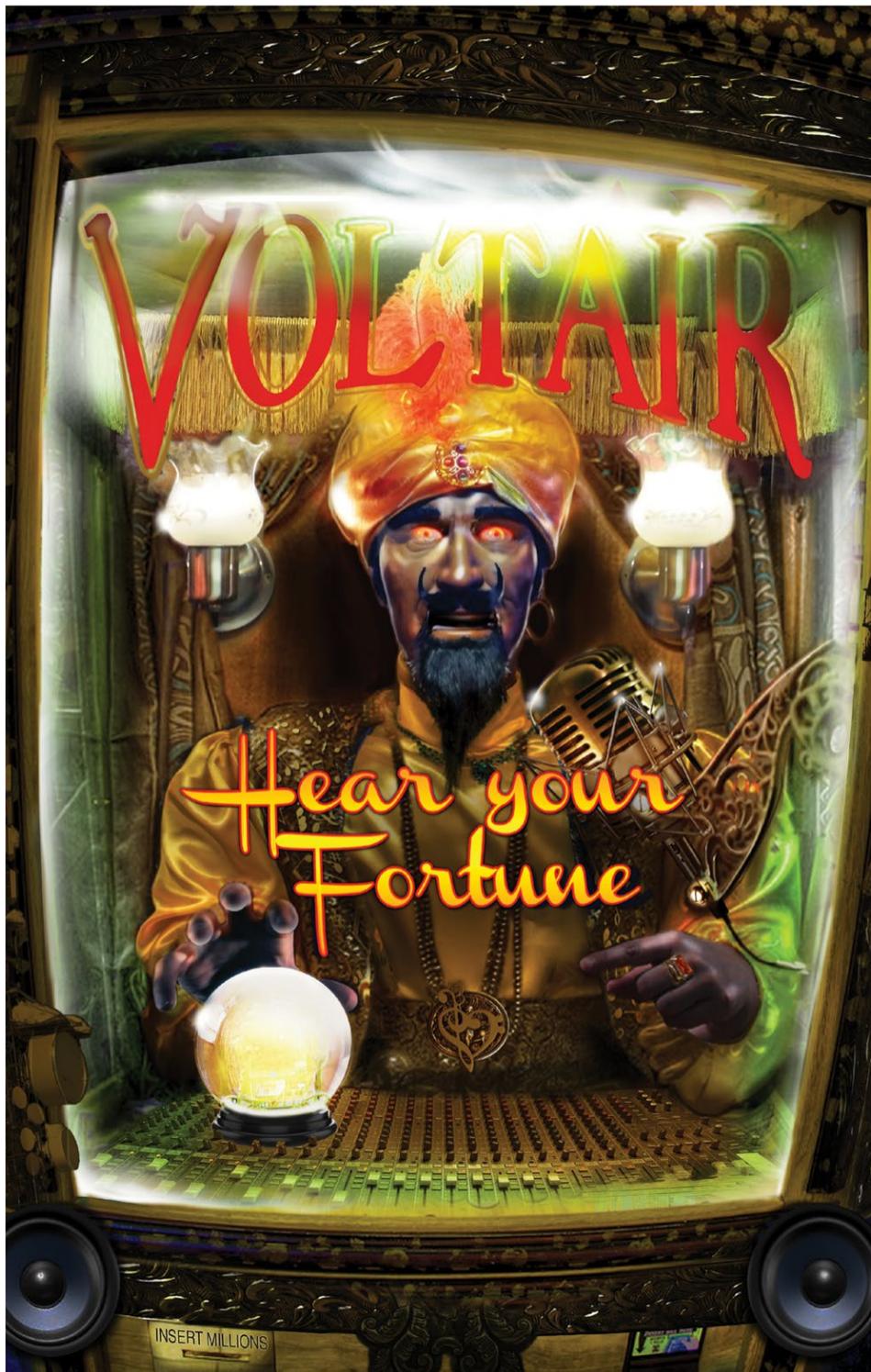
PPM code – and that their box “enhanced the detectability.” Better encoding, the thinking went, meant better ratings.

Radio's response was swift. By summer 2015, hundreds of the units were in use. Even PDs who didn't have Voltair were taking notice. “You see meter counts jump and think it's a fluky week, but the next week it goes even higher,” one programmer told **Country Aircheck**. “When 6+ numbers jump two shares, that's your first clue.”

With many convinced Voltair was doing exactly what it proposed, questions turned to years of decision making based not on programming content, but its audio characteristics. “Where it gets [hairy] is when we decide not to do artist interviews and stay away from any longer talk segment regardless of how compelling,” consultant **Becky Brenner** said in July. “That's an area that's very suspect. Maybe it really was fine, but the audio wasn't being picked up. There are some very widespread ramifications.” Max Media/Norfolk VP/GM **Dave Paulus** wondered if talent and airplay decisions were influenced. “The best music and announcers should be on the air and rewarded for their popularity,” he said. “But the measurement has to be based on true popularity. You see these Voltairs working and wonder, has that been the case?”

Nielsen Audio, which took PPM's reins with its 2013 acquisition of Arbitron, has been consistent in its “non-support” for Voltair. EVP/Local Media Client Solutions **Matt O'Grady** asserted during a July webinar that the unit can “credit unintelligible listening,” among other drawbacks. An enhancement to PPM was introduced late in the year that Chief Engineer **Arun Ramaswamy** said will “allow us to hide the watermark better – specifically useful in certain formats that may be difficult to encode that have a lot more silence.”

Researcher **Richard Harker** says the big story is that broadcasters were given reason to question PPM technology. “I don't know that we recognized how different the meter was,” he says. “With diaries, we could go to [Arbitron offices] in Maryland, look at them and verify the process from beginning to end. In PPM, we can't do any of that. This is the first time since 2007 broadcasters are starting to ask important questions about accuracy and reliability.”



CLOUDED OVER

It's been a rough year for America's second-largest radio broadcaster. “Our vision has been to build the radio company of the future and that is exactly what we are achieving,” CEO **Lew Dickey** said in August as Cumulus restructured its senior leadership to “enhance the company's strategic and operational focus and leverage its business platform.” At that point, CMLS was trading at \$1.32 a share, down almost 70% from where it started the year. A month later, Dickey was removed as CEO (he became Vice Chairman) and board member **Mary Berner** was appointed to the post. EVP/Content & Programming **John Dickey** exited during the shake-up, as did longtime lieutenant **Jan Jeffries**. Programming is now being led by SVP **Mike McVay**. Mean-

while, Cumulus stock has traded below 25 cents and speculation has turned to whether the company can avoid bankruptcy.



Mary Berner

Despite the challenges, 2015 was another busy year for Cumulus' **Nash** brand. A 24/7 version of the classic-leaning Nash Icon format became available via **Westwood One** in January and at least three of the company's small market stations picked it up thereafter. Cumulus launched the Nash Next artist development competition in May with plans to sign the winner to a proposed Nash Next record label and assemble a concert tour in 2016 featuring the finalists. Cumulus-owned **Country Weekly** magazine officially became **Nash Country Weekly** in June and the company partnered with streaming concert service Qello Concerts to make Nash-related video content

available under the Nash TV banner.

Westwood One, which Cumulus acquired in 2013, went through some changes of its own. The syndicator saw considerable layoffs as Cumulus shuffled support staff and on-air talent related to its 24/7 format offerings. Media sales vet **Pierre Bouvard** came aboard as CMO in March and Cumulus veteran **Aaron Roberts** was appointed in October to lead programming partnerships for Cumulus, Westwood One and Nash.

Expect Cumulus to focus on its core radio business for the immediate future. In Berner's recent Q3 earnings conference call, the new CEO announced plans to realign the company's programming structure, streamline burdensome sales processes and address employee turnover, which she quantified at a costly 48% over the previous 18 months. “In order to turn around the company, we need to focus on the areas that are mission critical and that will move the needle the fastest, with the highest impact and the lowest amount of risk and capital,” she noted. “This is a company that historically has overpromised and under delivered and I won't do that.”

Four months seems like a long time for one of country's big label groups to navigate without a captain, but **Sony/Nashville** stayed on course after Chairman/CEO **Gary Overton** stepped down in March. With weekly visits and guidance from Sony Music EVP **Julie Swidler**, the company continued its work on behalf of established artists while setting up breakthroughs for newcomers **Old Dominion** and **Cam**.

Still, the uncertainty and speculation were gladly left behind in July when a long-rumored new leadership team stepped in: **Randy Goodman** as Chairman/CEO, **Ken Robold** as EVP/COO and **Steve Hodges** as EVP/Promotion & Artist Development. Goodman told **Country Aircheck** his plan was to “give them a new Sony storyline.”

Also adding to the year's record label narrative was **Thirty Tigers**, which created a mainstream country promotion staff in March to work artists including **Aaron Watson**, **Love And Theft** and **Clint Black** under the direction of **Pamela Newman**. **IRS Nashville** staffed up promotion under VP **Tom Moran** late in 2014 for its roster, which included **Striking Matches**, **Ashley Clark** and **Don Henley**.

One of radio's biggest executive moves (see next story) had **Clay Hunnicutt** departing iHeartMedia to help launch **Big Loud Records** and inaugural artist **Chris Lane** with **Craig Wiseman**, **Seth England**, **Joey Moi** and **Kevin “Chief” Zaruk**. **Reviver** brought promotion in-house, headed by SVP/Promotion **Gator Michaels**, and a roster that includes **LoCash**, **Blackjack Billy** and **Lucas Hoge**. **BBR Music Group** added a fourth imprint – **Wheelhouse** – in August, with **Trace Adkins** and **Granger Smith** on the roster and a veteran promotion team headed by VP **Teddi Bonadies**.



Randy Goodman



LETTUCE PLAY

When consultant **Keith Hill** compared women to tomatoes and men to lettuce in the May 26 issue of **Country Aircheck Weekly**, he had no idea he'd just launched "SaladGate." "If you want to make ratings in Country radio, take females out," advised Hill. "Trust me, I play great female records ... they're just not the lettuce in our salad. The lettuce is Luke Bryan and Blake Shelton, Keith Urban ... The tomatoes of our salad are the females."

Martina McBride was one of the first to respond via social media, posting a portion of Hill's interview. "Did you girls (core female listeners) know you were being 'assessed' in this way?" she asked. "Is this how you really feel?"

McBride's post rocketed the discussion to world-wide attention. A piece representative of the reaction ran in Britain's *The Guardian*, noting, "Hill's comments are indicative of a systemic issue within country music, which is that too many key leaders and influencers don't believe that women have a major role in the genre." Media outlets of all stripes flocked to the debate.

Six months later, we checked in with Hill to find out what's changed in his life. "Not much," he says, noting he responded to every media request and commented widely on blogs and social media, in spite of being called names and threatened. He stands by his original remarks. "The empirical measurable metrics support what I said."

"I don't know if we'll ever see eye to eye on it," says McBride. "He seems very adamant about his position. When I put it out there to 1.8 million people on Facebook and more on Twitter, that research came back pretty strongly. One of [us] is wrong. From speaking to people face to face, it seems pretty apparent that this isn't how people really feel."

Six months after SaladGate, how are women in Country radio doing? Well ... not much better. A look at the 2015



Country Top 100 [see page 23] reveals only 20 were by female artists (either solo, duo or group), with Kelsea Ballerini taking the top female spot at No. 13 with "Love Me Like You Mean It."

Hill's takeaway? "Country radio stations will program what gives them the highest ratings. I learned Twitter and Facebook are cesspools of anything and everything. Ultimately, I'm happy to have been involved with bringing about education and growth for everyone – listeners, music schedulers, label insiders and especially our quality female country artists."

McBride sees progress. "I don't think it's turned around overnight, but Kelsea is a good example of a new female artist who's had success and broken through at Country radio," she says. "[The debate] put a spotlight on this archaic, very narrow-minded opinion about women at Country radio. That's only a good thing. It's a conversation that needs to keep happening."

IN MEMORIAM

- Lynn Anderson
- Debbie Ballentine
- Teddy Bart
- Scott "Steele" Beaty
- Ron Bee
- Billy Block
- Jerry Brightman
- Jim Ed Brown
- Al Bunetta
- Ron "Hoss" Cantwell
- Wayne Carson
- Chuck Collins
- Jeff "Crawdog" Crawford
- Ria Denver
- Michael Deputato
- Little Jimmy Dickens
- Sharon Eaves
- Buddy Emmons
- Kent Finlay
- George Lee "Swiftly" Gillock
- Doug Gilmore
- Johnny Gimble
- Steven Goldmann
- Holly "Kate Moss" Golembiewski
- Joe Guercio
- Helen J. "Toni Dae" Hamm
- Ted Harris
- Larry Henley
- Michael "Mike" Hyland
- Wade Jessen
- Bob Johnston
- Glenn Jones
- Wayne Kemp
- Ron Kerr
- Red Lane
- AJ Masters
- Doug Mayes
- Alan Mayor
- Bob McKinzie
- Xondra Merrill
- Dana Miller
- Claudia Mize
- Bob Montgomery
- Nancy Montgomery
- Daron Norwood
- Michelle Outlaw
- Tommy Overstreet
- Win Patton
- Bill Payne
- Angie Crabtree Reynolds
- Tandy Rice
- Alan Risener
- Dan Roberts
- Jimmy Roberts
- Don Robertson
- Billy Joe Royal
- Dawn Sears
- Gwyneth "Dandalion" Seese
- Ed Shane
- Billy Sherrill
- Pat Shields
- JC Simon
- Brett Spigelman
- Bob Stegall
- John "JT" Thomas
- Jeff Walker
- Elbert West
- Dave Wilson
- James "Spider" Wilson
- Hugh Wright
- Al Wyntor
- Dave Young

Ladies Room

Percentage of female voiced singles in the annual Top 100 songs of the year.



REACH & FREQUENCY

Losing **iHeartMedia** EVP & GM/ National Programming Platforms **Clay Hunnicutt** to the music business also meant the departure of country's biggest advocate at radio's biggest group. Happily, the ascension of Regional SVP/Programming **Rod Phillips** to the format captain post brought in an experienced executive who is bullish on the format, as well as rebranded emphasis in the form of **iHeartCountry**.



"This year will always be special to me and my family as it's brought us to one of America's coolest cities," says Phillips, whose 20-year programming background touched Country most directly when he spearheaded the Country launch of *The Bobby Bones Show* in early 2013. "iHeart has so many talented and passionate programmers, I'm certain we'll continue to innovate and actually expand partnership opportunities with artists."

Elsewhere, **CBS Radio** President/

CEO **Dan Mason** retired in April, ending his second run as President and 20 years with the company. He continues to contribute as a consultant and this fall joined CBS Sports Network as a college basketball play-by-play announcer. "I guess you never get rid of the disc jockey blood you're born with," he explained. CBS Corporation President/CEO Les Moonves went so far as to call Mason "a legendary leader in the radio business." Former Journal President/COO **Andre Fernandez** will try to fill those considerable shoes.

There was local change at CBS Radio as well, most notably the departure of Minneapolis SVP/MM **Mick Anselmo**. One of few in the industry who can say they've launched and led successful Country stations for competing companies in the same major market – KEEY and KMNB, Anselmo will wrap 30+ years in the business when he retires Dec. 18.

Country ground shifted in satellite radio when **SiriusXM** Sr. Dir./Country Programming **John Marks** resigned in September after five years. He turned up a short time

later as **Spotify's** Global Programming Head/Country, a uniquely different programming job from those in his past. "I'm only scratching the surface of what I'll be able to do with playlisting, utilizing data and working with artists and labels," he said.

One of the most remarkable careers in Country radio history was capped in April when Bristol WXBQ/Johnson City, TN OM/PD **Bill Hagy** retired 50 years to the day after his tenure began. The station boasted 81 No. 1 books in a row when he stepped down. "I've been fortunate, had a lot of success and it's just about time," he explained. "Time [becomes] a little higher priority as the years tick by. I still love the business and plan to be involved in it."

On the personality front, longtime CBS Radio WYCD/Detroit morning host and Country Radio Hall of Famer **Dr. Don Carpenter** left the show in August after 10 years in the daypart and 18 at the station. The storied personality remains involved with a handful of station events and charities, but for the most part is focusing on other projects. "As many people know, I have my own business and have been looking to write a couple books," he noted. "This is not goodbye; it's more like 'see you around.'" **CAC**

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