

Jeff Kapugi

Eyes On The (Enter)prise

Sure he was already an accomplished Top 40 programmer and media executive, but when Jeff Kapugi was tapped in 2011 as PD for WUSN/Chicago and VP/Country for CBS Radio, the industry wasn't alone in its surprise. "I almost felt like I was being punked by Ashton Kutcher," Kapugi says. Now overseeing the company's 11 iconic Country brands and programming in his hometown, Kapugi is a fixture in the genre and format.

CA: Four years ago we asked why you jumped into Country after such a long career in Pop and AC. You said, "I love a challenge ... I can certainly learn the ropes of Country, but I can also offer some new insights." Looking back, has it been more or less challenging than you anticipated?

JK: That's a hard one. Every day is a challenge and you have to set new goals. One of the reasons I was brought in was to instill a little more aggressive attitude into CBS Radio's Country stations. Obviously, I entered that with two eyes, two ears and one mouth [because] to do that effectively,

you first have to understand. Nobody knows it all, so I was learning what was going on and why. It was about surveying the competi-

tive landscape, whether that be head-to-head competition or working to create more shares in a market. WUSN was obviously my primary responsibility, but that applied in our other Country markets, as well.

Within my first 30 days we launched KMNB/Minneapolis, so evaluation was certainly a part of it. Jeff Garrison had evolved to VP/Artist Relations, which was kind of a precursor to our Amplify program. We launched Buz'n with the help of Mick Anselmo and Kevin Metheny. I spent that first 60-90 days evaluating the great things going on at WUSN, trying to make them even better and evolving the mentality from – to use Pop analogies – an AC station toward Hot AC. It was a little more aggressive in rotation turns, promotional thrusts, overall brand awareness and putting yourself out there as a radio station.

Between industry awards and boards, you were accepted and involved in the industry pretty quickly. What's your view of the small town that is the Country music business and your place in it?

My place is to be the ears and voice for CBS Radio and our Country format. At the time, WUSN was the biggest Country station in America – we're regularly top two or three in cume. I'm also the format captain so my position allowed me to integrate into boards and have a voice within the community rather quickly. I'd like to think my 20-year broadcast tenure and reputation in other formats and mediums also helped provide that short runway.

Is the country community what you expected, or were there surprises?

It's close-knit, very friendly and competitive. There are a lot of artists and labels rooting for each other while still being competitive. You don't see that as much on the Pop side.

What are some of the ways you've seen that close-knit nature?

In Pop, you'll know a national, your regional and you'll meet new artists along the way. In Country, you know the CEO, the national, all the regionals, the artists, writers, publishers and the road managers. You meet so many people – it really is an amazing small town, as you put it. In some respects, Pop could learn from Country, but Country could learn from Pop, too. We can all learn from each other.

I can't speak beyond my four-year tenure, but I'm watching guys like Tyler Farr and Brett Eldredge grow up. While they may have started prior to my time at 'USN, I was there when they started hitting air and the wheels were folding up into the plane. Now they're soaring and I still have the same great relationship with those guys, their labels and managers.

What are the challenges that go with that closeness? Where do you see inefficiencies?

There's probably more music in this format than any other in which I've worked. Radio stations can only realistically expose so much music, which varies based on what type of a programmer you are. There could be 70-75 records out, maybe more, at any particular time – and a lot of them are really good, so that's the great part. A lot of really good stuff is being left on the table, plus it can take a while to develop.

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CBS Country stations have a hot AC mentality with 60-75 spins a week. Pop stations have evolved from that to 110-125 times a week. Pop songs get through the cycle, research comes back and the litmus test just happens faster. I wish there was a way to figure that out with Country.

What do you see as Country radio's place within CBS Radio? And has that changed from when you first came on?

Country's place is strong. We're big on Pop, we've got some really amazing spoken word radio stations – News and Sports – and Country's right up there. We've definitely tried to wrap our arms around the Country community as an enterprise of 11 rather than individual stations. That may be one of the things

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we've done a little bit better over the last few years in creating programs under the Amplify umbrella – Impact and Launch. We've got some iconic brands – 'USN, WYCD/Detroit, WXTU/Philadelphia, KMPS/Seattle, KILT/Houston – but no one of them is stronger than all of them together.

We've been able to do some things as an 11-station enterprise including a great pre-Super Bowl show earlier this year with Jason Aldean, Florida Georgia Line and Dierks Bentley. That was our first foray into big events. Like I said, we enjoy getting behind the Amplify projects as a group – exposing new album releases or new artists. And we just had our first big Country spin-off of [the company-wide] *We Can Survive*, which Country had been a small part of for the last two years, with *Stars & Strings* here in Chicago.

From these two events to Amplify initiatives, where do you see the group's efforts going?

We're always learning and evolving. When we originally debuted Launch two-and-a-half years ago, the idea was to promote things we collectively thought the audience should know about. That's evolved to include spins and Radio.com. *Stars & Strings* is the first time we've done an enterprise-wide Country-specific show. The first year of *We Can Survive* was Katy Perry and Kacey Musgraves, so we had a good part in that. The next year was Pharrell and a bunch of artists including Lady Antebellum. As we were wrapping up 2014, I thought the format was strong enough that we could do our own thing. The company agreed with my recommendation, so we branched off of the breast cancer event [*Survive*] to wrap ourselves with something that is really the fabric of the format with veterans' causes on Veterans Day.

Have you felt much of a change in the CEO transition from Dan Mason to Andre Fernandez?

Dan Mason is a programmer at heart and was actually the guy that pushed the button to launch WUSN 34 years ago. He's an amazing guy and I owe a lot of where I am to him. I was in St. Louis programming our two FMs and my family was still living in Chicago as my son finished high school. It was Dan's recommendation that got me back to Chicago, programming in my hometown for the first time. I almost felt like I was being punked by Ashton Kutcher when they also asked me to be the format captain.

I've spent time with Andre on a few occasions since he's taken over and those have been amazing. He's just a great human being and a great leader. He attended *Stars & Strings* to show his support. He's a big fan of our Country radio stations and we'll continue to learn more from and about him in the months and years to come.

You referenced Minneapolis earlier. What are the markers that you looked at to launch KMNB, and would look at in making the decision to launch a new Country station?

KMNB was a great opportunity for us to go up against one of iHeart's strongest Country stations in KEEY. They were No. 1 pretty much across the board, so there was a lot of Country share to go after. We had AC W Lite ranking No. 19, I think. We almost couldn't fail. Even if we landed eleventh or twelfth, it was going to be an uptick from where we were, but we've done a little better a lot quicker than everyone expected. Mick Anselmo is very passionate about the format and is a great ambassador for CBS Radio and country music. To put him, Jeff Garrison, Rob Morris and myself together – it was a great launch team. We're very happy with the success of KMNB, which will celebrate its fourth birthday on Christmas Day this year.

Does radio have a relevancy problem in a world of Pandora, Spotify, YouTube and other channels for getting music?

I don't think so. People spend time with radio every day. I have sons who are in their early 20s and still spend time with radio, although they share their time with other ways to get music – Pandora, Spotify or even SiriusXM. We're always going to be a viable part of everyone's life, and that's where the best content can win. If 80-85% of it is basically the same music, it's about what you do between the songs that really counts. Being connected, doing the things that count to build your brand and integrating yourself into your community are the most important things. A lot of those other services can't do that.

When something like the Chris Stapleton moment on the CMA Awards happens, it gives people on the extremes the opportunity to push some hot buttons. On the radio side, you see a few reacting as if success without radio is a threat. On the other side, some see confirmation that radio isn't identifying what the public really wants. How do you think Country radio is doing in bringing Nashville's best to the audience?

I can only relate my experience with that. We exposed "What Are You Listening To" and "Traveller" on 'USN. We featured Chris as one of our new country artists of the year at the beginning of 2014. We also featured him around the release of the *Traveller* album this May. Our job as programmers is to expose things we think the audience will bite on and then hope they do. Give them enough spins that people can get a taste without opening their mouths and shoving it down. After that, it's up to the audience to decide. I'm really proud of our station as one of dozens that exposed Chris Stapleton's music. But 'USN also has listeners who are asking me why they had to hear about him on the CMA Awards and not the radio.

That's a tough question to answer. We played Chris in meaningful rotations and day parts. Obviously it didn't grab the listener at the time because neither of those singles were hits, but put him on a marquee event like the CMAs next to a marquee talent like Justin Timberlake and you certainly get some major exposure. I'm really happy for Chris, Universal and Country radio. We're playing "Nobody To Blame" in meaningful rotation when the sun shines on US 99.5, and we're hoping it shows what it needs to show in order to advance. Again, that's up to the audience to decide.

Does the audience understand that?

I recently had a great conversation with a listener about Chris Stapleton after she wrote me a note asking why she had to hear about him on the awards. So I called her up and, before identifying myself, asked about her favorite station. She said she loves listening to Lisa and Ray on US99 and, after they get off the air, she spends time with Spotify. I said, "Well, you're missing out on some great music by making that switch. You missed out on the exposure we gave Chris over the last two-and-a-half years." It was a good

Coming from Top 40 with its robust female artist base, what's your take on the male-heavy nature of Country?

Hits are hits. At the end of the day, the audience decides what they want to hear more often. We just kind of curate what we think they'll like, set it out there and they take it from there. This was a great year with Kelsea Ballerini and Cam emerging. Carrie Underwood put out a spectacular single and album. And there's hopefully more to come.

Turning to Chicago, you're a native but I wonder what, if anything, programming US99 has taught you about the city that you didn't know?

Well, I didn't know Joe's existed, but I wasn't really living in the city when it was birthed as a country venue. I spend a lot of time with our friends at Joe's – probably averaging about 40 or 45 shows a year and I enjoy that a lot.

Are there any unique challenges to programming Country in Chicago?

In the last eight of nine years of PPM, the station has had one of the bigger overall Country cumes in the nation. It hasn't been dominating its market like you've seen at times with KEEY/Minneapolis or WMIL/Milwaukee. So I still ride the fence on whether Chicago is a great country market. It's got the biggest audience, but a lot of people live here. Our challenge today is our direct competition and we just need to be better than them between the music because, song for song, we're pretty close to the same radio station.

How does having a competitor influence what you and your team do with US99?

For one, it makes us better. Competition always does that. In my first staff meeting four years ago I said, "This format's hot and one day, we're going to get competition. Preparing for that day starts now." I wasn't kidding. Even though the station hadn't had competition since '97 with WKXX, my thought process was to keep a competitor from coming in and to keep my station as solid as possible. That way, if competition does come, people may spend time with them, but they'll spend more time with me.

What are the highlights from the last few years?

My wife and I met in college and got married here before going on a 19-year gypsy tour of the nation. Both our families live here. To be here now and program-



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conversation and she sent me a note back thanking me for caring so much about the listeners. I do that often. And she has vowed to spend more time with the radio station.

Probably interesting for the radio naysayers to note that she didn't hear Stapleton on Spotify, either.

Yeah, and radio stations in general probably don't play as much music in mornings because we're trying to throw out a bit more personality. You don't generally get to expose a lot of new music in the meat of morning drive. It starts rolling at 9am or just after, and that's where we exposed Chris. Unfortunately, because she left the radio station, she missed that and thought we hadn't supported him when that was the furthest thing from the truth.

ming in Chicago is really a lot of fun. WUSN winning its first ACM award this past year is certainly one of those personal and professional highlights. Also, two-and-a-half years ago in Las Vegas, prior to the ACM Awards, Laurie and I renewed our vows for our 25th wedding anniversary. Chris Young officiated and Brett Eldredge, friends from the station, Joe's and Nashville were in attendance. People who have become lifelong friends in a very short period of time.

Another that stands out is our relationship with St. Jude Children's Research Hospital. The station is heading into its 25th year and we're about \$1.4 million from eclipsing \$25 million raised. That's just really, really special. It's fun to hang backstage and all that kind of stuff, but when you can make a difference in your community – that's why we do what we do.

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