

#### Vox Populi of Omaha: Todd Storz and the Top 40 Radio Format in American Culture

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Article Summary: Omaha radio station owner Todd Storz played a key role in pioneering the Top 40 format in the 1950s. He was a figure of national significance, permanently changing radio programming with an approach that was "vibrantly populist, crassly commercial, and undeniably young."

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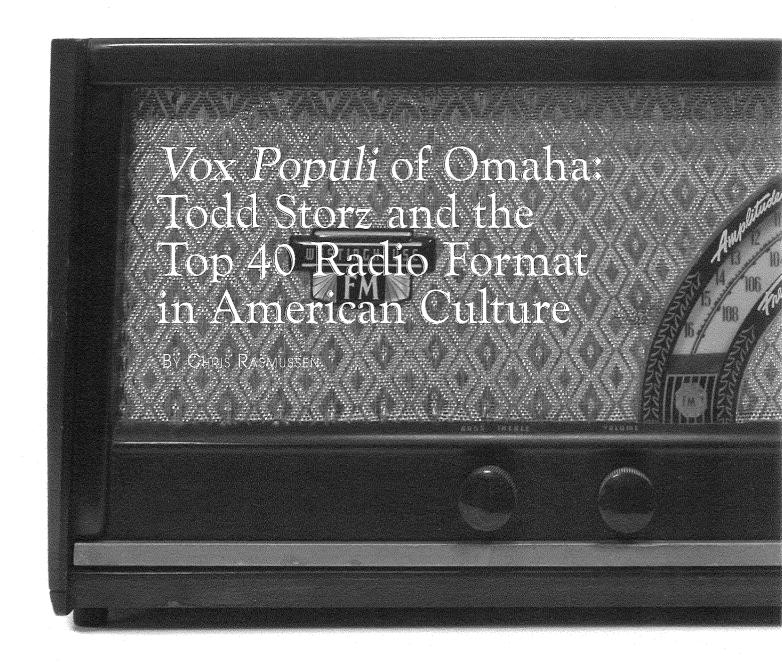
Names: Robert Todd Storz, David Sarnoff, Gaylord Avery, George "Bud" Armstrong, Sandy Jackson, Deane Johnson, Bob Sticht, James O'Neil, Chubby Checker

Nebraska Place Names: Omaha

Mid-Continent Broadcasting Company Stations: KOWH and KOAD (Omaha), WTIX (New Orleans), WHB (Kansas City), WDGY (Minnneapolis), KOMA (Oklahoma City), KXOK) St Louis, WQAM (Miami)

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Photographs / Images: a Westinghouse FM radio from the 1940s-1950s; a Mid-Continent Broadcasting Company ad for a Kansas City station, *Broadcasting/Telecasting*, July 9, 1956; Robert Storz; Todd Storz (2 views); a Mid-Continent add celebrating KOWH's dominance in the Omaha market, *Broadcasting/Telecasting*, July 30, 1956; "An Open Letter from KOWH," *Omaha World-Herald*, April 13, 1956; a record player from the 1940s-1950s; a Mid-Continent ad responding to a *Time* article that accused KOWH of vulgarizing and corrupting young audiences, *Broadcasting/Telecasting*, July 2, 1956; open back of the Westinghouse radio with vacuum tubes; a "radioathon at KOWH for drought-stricken countries in West Africa, *Omaha Star*, October 31, 1973







n the morning of June 25, 1956, disc jockeys at the most-listened-to Omaha radio station, KOWH, broadcast that station employees had hidden six, ten-dollar checks inside books in the Omaha Public Library. When the librarians opened the doors at nine o'clock, they found a long line of adolescents—it was summer vacation—to greet them. This "mob," as the Omaha World-Herald put it, rushed in and set to grabbing and swinging books, hoping to jar loose a prize. They destroyed ninety volumes while inciting "chaos" in the stacks. Station owner Robert Todd Storz later offered the tongue-in-cheek defense that the giveaway had actually been intended to encourage library patronage. Unconvinced, the library demanded and received compensation. During the confusion, a few treasure hunters had wandered over to a different bastion of respectable Omaha culture, the Joslyn Art Museum. There the director disarmed his enthusiastic guests by explaining that there were no checks behind the pictures or furniture before adding, "But I'm glad to see you . . . We have some wonderful exhibits. Wouldn't you like to see them?" Deflated but still on the hunt, the seekers left and took to beating around the bushes outside Central High School.1

A Westinghouse FM Radio from the 1940s-1950s, the period during which Todd Storz of Omaha helped shape the format of radio broadcasting. NSHS 9379-37



Mid-Continent sought to assure advertisers that they appealed to markets other than the teen set. Here a housewife finds herself under the gaze of four men, apparently employees of ratings agencies. Mid-Continent acquired Kansas City's WHB in 1956. Broadcasting/Telecasting, July 9, 1956.

Storz's KOWH rose to prominence in Omaha using an innovative radio format that he, along with others, helped create: Top 40. Giveaways and treasure hunts represented just one aspect of Top 40 programming strategy. Vibrantly populist, crassly commercial, and undeniably young, the Top 40 radio format transformed the radio industry in the 1950s by broadcasting the best-selling records over and over again and delighting a new generation of listeners with memorably motor-mouthed disc jocks. Along with a group of like-minded independent

radio station owners, Storz recast radio for the television age and established a format that continues to influence American media.2 This article will look at how Storz developed the format and explain what Top 40 meant and means to American culture. The first section will examine Storz's innovations in station strategy and management, including the repetition of top-selling records, audience research, and his approach to young listeners that led to a recorded music-driven format that was particularly suited for the postwar radio audience. The second section will chart the rapid spread of Top 40, and show how the format combined efficiency with excitement while commercializing all aspects of the broadcast. The third section will interpret the role Top 40 format played in American youth culture by focusing on Storz station giveaways and promotions. Finally, this article will speculate on Top 40's legacy in the radio industry, American popular music, and society.

#### Omaha, Nebraska—Top 40 Test Site

The radio formula that Storz developed in Omaha during the 1950s appears simple. Broadcast records rather than live performances. Pare down the weekly allotment of hit songs to no more than the forty best-selling songs nationwide. Never let disc jockeys choose the records—their taste is too refined. Finally, maintain listener interest and bring the audience together through station promotions and giveaways that satirize contemporary society.<sup>3</sup> This apparent simplicity masks the extent to which Top 40 has influenced conventional wisdom concerning commercial media. The format encouraged listeners to accept the record, rather than the performance, as the standard musical experience.4 In claiming to have transformed the disc jockey from a musical guide into a mirror of listener desire, Top 40 exalted the audience over the authorities and placed sales over established taste. It accelerated the ongoing commoditization of popular song and contributed to a dramatic increase in sales of 45 rpm singles.<sup>5</sup> The format's market populism, most evident in the weekly countdowns of the top songs, resonated in an era of expanding prosperity and consumer choice. Storz's programming decisions also showed that he understood that the musical experience in postwar America was moving from bandstand and ballroom to the bedroom and the automobile. Postwar listeners exercised significant and increasing control over how, when, and where they could experience music, and Top 40 succeeded by making radio more responsive to these listeners.

According to Billboard's 1964 obituary, Storz thought up the Top 40 radio format while observing people in a bar picking songs at the jukebox. As the story goes, the light went on when Storz realized that despite a hundred options to choose from, bar patrons consistently chose the same song over and over again. As closing time approached, the long-suffering waitress searched out from among her tips a nickel, dutifully fed it into the machine, and punched in the record her customers had forced upon her all evening. Storz's associates have said the significance of this experience has been overstated, with some even claiming it never actually happened. Nonetheless it remains a compelling parable illustrating the essence of the Top 40 format and Storz's relationship to his audience. As a station owner Storz would not allow his musical preferences, or those of his subordinates, to interfere with what he believed was the audience's desire for repetition of popular records. In doing so, Storz created the essential Top 40 document—the limited playlist—that was essential to transforming radio to a music-driven medium for the television age.6

Storz was not a musician or even much of a music fan. He was an engineer, a businessman, and a bit of an aloof eccentric. Unlike the legendary Cleveland disc jockey Alan Freed-the fifties rock radio hero who represented an alternate, disc jockey-centric model of what postwar commercial radio could be-Storz was a child of privilege.7 The grandson of Nebraska beer baron Gottlieb Storz, Robert Todd Storz was born in 1925 and grew up in an Omaha Gold Coast mansion; as an adult Storz acquired his own Farnam Street home. The family business weathered Prohibition by selling ice and near beer, and emerged in 1933 stronger than ever. The Storz men cultivated bravado along with a peculiar mixture of civic duty and local celebrity. Todd Storz's uncle, Arthur, flew bombers, treated Omaha residents to fantastic Independence Day firework displays, and hosted movie stars and military leaders such as Curtis LeMay at his "Ducklore" retreat on the North Platte River. Storz stations' later promotions and giveaways, which directly involved the Omaha public, can be seen as a continuation of family traditions.8

Family connections may have impressed the young Storz, but he cared little for film or martial glory. He loved the mechanical mysteries and the communities of the wireless. Storz constructed his first crystal set at age eight, perhaps from parts manufactured by a Kearney, Nebraska, kit-maker. By sixteen he had received his first broadcasting





Robert Storz, left, and his son Todd, right. The twenty-six-year-old Todd and his father formed the Mid-Continent Broadcasting Company and purchased KOWH from the *Omaha World-Herald* in 1949. Omaha World-Herald, July 15, 1949.

license, as the ham operator of W9DYG. As a broadcast radio owner, Storz's stations would be distinguished by consistently employing modern sound technology. Friend and business associate Harold Soderlund described Storz as "an engineer at heart." 9

Though there is truth to the observation, Storz was not a typical radio geek, and he consciously cultivated a reputation for taking risks. As an adolescent his parents sent him to the prestigious Choate School in Connecticut. Storz found his niche when he returned to his home state for college and began working at the University of Nebraska radio station in the basement of the Beta. House. As a college radio jock, Storz showed early on that he cared little for Federal Communications Commission regulations. According to friend Bill Palmer, Storz extended the college station's operating range far beyond the federally mandated one-and-a-half-mile radius. "Eventually, FCC agents came around to investigate. It seems the 'little' University of Nebraska station was knocking off a commercial station in Ohio." Difficulties with the FCC would become a recurring feature of Storz's subsequent career.10

After one year in Lincoln, Storz joined the Army Signal Corps and served in World War II. He would never complete his university degree. Following his discharge, Storz was determined to make a career in radio. Broadcasting, however, was on the brink of major changes. In 1947 radio ad sales reached record highs, the number of AM licenses was about to explode, and RCA president David Sarnoff was

## No matter who asks the question in OMAHA the answer is KOWH



46.8%! -- that's the average share of audience Hooper (June-July) gives KOWH. Latest Trendex for Omaha-Council Bluffs gives KOWH top snot in every time period. Latest Pulse gives KOWH top spot in 204 out of 240 daytime quarter-hours. KOWH has placed first in audience year after year consistently increasing its first-place dominance, until now KOWH is first in every time period of every survey in the Omaha market.

Mid-Continent ideas, programming and excitement plus broad (660 KC) coverage are doing a fine job for national and local advertisers. So no matter which rating service you rate most telling, you can feel secure when you tell your story via KOWH—because all three see eye-to-eye-to-eye. Chat with the H-R man, or KOWH General Manager Virgil Sharpe.

### KOWH

"The STORZ Stations" Todd Storz, President

WDGY, Minneapolis-St. Paul

KOWH, Omeha

WHB, Kansas City Represented by John Blair & Co.

WIIX, New Orleans WOAM \* Migmi

Transfer subject to FCC approval.

Page 6 º July 30, 1936

BROADCASTING . TELECA

Mid-Continent celebrates the KOWH's dominance in the Omaha market, showing off its eye-popping ratings in the mid-1950s. Broadcasting/Telecasting, July 30, 1956.

> advising his NBC affiliates to apply for television licenses, which would impact the programming model for radio operators. Sarnoff made clear that television would replace radio as the destination for national advertising, and the networks spent much of the late forties and early fifties following his advice and transferring their talent, capital, and attention to the new medium. In 1945 the Federal Communications Commission decided to double

the number of AM licenses, from 1,000 to 2,391, over the next ten years. Radio was to be more competitive than ever at the same time that television would be reaping the lion's share of national advertising. The business environment had become a jungle for radio operators, but the new environment also opened up opportunities that Storz seized upon. With television siphoning off the live talent, radio truly became a music medium.11

Storz remained uninterested in television and began his career at a small radio station in Hutchinson, Kansas. In 1946 he returned home, taking a position at Omaha's KBON. As a disc jockey Storz refused to play bop or swing, opting for genres that had wider appeal. He explained that if listeners did not like his selections, they could switch the dial. Moving up to KFAB with its more powerful signal and larger audience, Storz exchanged disc jockey duties for a position in the Omaha station's sales department. Storz's later radio innovations would integrate advertising into an overall broadcast vision—one based on repetition of the popular records he had insisted on spinning in Kansas.<sup>12</sup>

Along with ability and vision, family money provided the critical element in Storz's rapid ascent in the radio industry. While still selling radio time at KFAB, the Omaha World-Herald society pages covered his 1947 marriage, South American honeymoon and, two years later, his home renovations. Such coverage marks how Storz's life was different in kind from that of the typical radio station employee. In 1949, at age 26, Todd Storz convinced his father, Robert Storz, to invest \$30,000 in his radio ambitions. Todd had already mortgaged a farm in Iowa for \$20,000 and had secured an additional \$25,000 bank loan that when combined with his father's contribution, allowed him to purchase a daytime-only Omaha radio station with old facilities and a poor signal. The two men created the Mid-Continent Broadcasting Company when they purchased KOWH along with its FM partner KOAD from the Omaha World-Herald. Recalling his days at the University of Nebraska, Storz set about improving KOWH's technical capabilities and expanding the signal's reach. This time, however, he filed for an FCC permit for 1,000 watts. With KOWH and his hometown Todd Storz had a laboratory and subjects for what would be a remarkably successful broadcasting experiment.13

Before the sale, KOWH was a consistent alsoran in the local radio ratings. 14 The station earned respect and scant profit for its music, community service, and high-minded political discussions. In 1944 it won a prestigious George Foster Peabody

award for *Town Meeting of the Air*, a program the station claimed, "presents distinguished authorities upon important topics." The new owner, however, would display limited desire for Peabody awards to say nothing of the opinions of distinguished authorities. "Storz radio was interested in one thing and one thing only," according to Richard Fatherly, who managed a Mid-Continent station in the 1960s: "Audience, audience, and more audience." 16

In its first year under Mid-Continent, Storz searched for potential broadcasting models. He was already convinced of the superiority of a records-only format. Shortly after purchasing the station, he sent his associate, Gaylord Avery, to New York to study WNEW's music and news operation. The music and news format relied exclusively on records and disc jockey shows. WNEW pioneered the all-record format in the thirties and forties, when the networks dominated the airwaves by broadcasting a mixture of miked ballrooms and studio-produced live shows. WNEW countered with Make Believe Ballroom, which simulated network live shows but used records. The New York innovator had proved that an independent, records-only operation could compete with the networks and even win sometimes. Music and news-formatted stations put extensive programming power in the hands of disc jockeys. WNEW, for example, featured a wide variety of recorded tunes, ranging from three hundred to four hundred a week, played in long blocks interspersed with regularly scheduled newscasts delivered by strong radio personalities who exhibited an awareness of public service.17

Avery advised Storz to remove all network and transcribed programming. The "new" KOWH also followed the lead of WNEW and broadcast hourlong block-programs of recorded classical music and popular music, followed by still a different genre. Featuring a wide range of recorded music reflected Storz's desire to appeal to every listening group. The approach yielded a first year profit of \$84.18

Along with his chief lieutenant, George "Bud" Armstrong, Storz spent the next two years developing a standardized, almost mechanical, format. They took the jukebox as their model. Lee Baron worked at KOWH in the 1950s and remembers Storz and engineers "dickering around with [a jukebox] so it would play records continuously." Storz eventually abandoned the goal of a fully automated station as impractical, but he continued to work to refine the KOWH brand identity by whittling away

# An Open Letter From KOWH, 13 1956 P.M.

to the people of Omaha-Council Bluffs and the KOWH listening area!

This letter is being published in answer to many unsigned letters received in the past few days at KOWH. It is the policy of the station to enswer all mail received and we should like to take this apportunity to clarify the issue.

Dear Listener:

Many thanks for your letter regarding the KOWH "Search for Yesterday," to be held at Central High School Auditorium, Saturday night, April 21 at 8:00 p.m. We certainly appreciate your taking the time to let us know your feelings.

May we point out that we at KC VH do not take any stand on the celebrated "Bridey Murphy" issue. W are merely attempting to pursue our long established policy of presenting programs and subjects in the public interest.

The "Bridey Murphy" story has caused such world-wide interest that newspapers in the major cities, from coast-to-coast, have serialized the book on a daily basis. Newsweek Magazine (this week) took notice of the Hypnosis craze with a feature article and Time. Life and numerous other nationally famous weeklies have had feature articles in recent weeks dealing with the matter. This would seem to indicate that the subject of Hypnosis is certainly of great concern to the American people at this moment.

We are bringing Dr. Ellen to Omaha for one, and only one reason—to conduct his highly entertaining show that has fascinated and intrigued thousands from coast-to-coat. He has hypnotized over 30,000 people, including such famous people as GENERAL BOLLING of the U.S. Army, GEORGE GOBEL, LIBERACE, MAYOR ELMER ROBINSON of San Francisco and many, many others. He has also been seen in recent weeks on the "TRUTH OR CONSEQUENCES" and the "\$100,000 QUESTION" television programs. His performances have never been considered offensive by any segment or denomination of people. His is primarily an entertaining show and not one designed to stir up any moral issues.

All radio stations are licensed by the Federal Communications Commission in Washington, D. C., and must operate in the Public Interest. It is the obligation of a radio station to present matters of great interest to the community, to encourage and stimulate community thinking. KOWH has gone to great expense to bring Dr. Ellen to Omaha so that the people of this area may investigate, first-hand, a subject of great national interest. While there are no moral issues involved in Dr. Ellen's appearance KOWH will grant free broadcast time to any recognized organization desiring to be heard.

Again, our thanks for your interest in KOWH. Be assured that we can understand your feelings on the matter which is why we hasten to assure you that this will be an entertainment show rather than a clinical study.

VIRGIL SHARPE GENERAL MANAGER—KOWH

From giveaway pranks to hypnotic regression, Storz stations were the class clowns of postwar media. *Time* noted that the hourly, five-minute Storz newscasts "ignore U.N. for other international broadcasts, e.g., (Swedish model and actress) Anita Ekberg." The "Bridey Murphy" case alluded to here involved an American woman who became convinced during hypnosis that she had lived previously as an Irish woman of that name. *Omaha World-Herald*, April 13, 1956.

at the number and variety of songs broadcast. 19

Storz looked to record sales to find the most popular songs. He avoided the national charts of top-selling records, such as the ones printed in the recording industry trade magazine, Billboard. Even if the rating method was free of fraud, Storz felt these charts addressed an abstract national recordbuying public, not the Omaha listeners he passed on the street.<sup>20</sup> Storz sought his own data sources, drawing critical information from local jukebox operators and record storeowners. Seven or eight local record stores agreed to report sales of new albums. The storeowners hoped that the additional airtime would send more record buyers into their stores. After some arm-twisting, Armstrong convinced jukebox distributors to provide lists of coin returns for the same reason. The receipts provided objective data on the Omaha popular recorded music market, and KOWH would use it not only to rank records but also to consistently outmaneuver competitors. According to Armstrong, Storz stations used national charts primarily as a reference to check whether Omaha's tastes tracked with the rest of the country.21

Storz added another key element to the format in 1951, when he hired popular disc jockey Sandy Jackson away from Omaha's KBON. The Jackson hire was the first of many in which Storz lured young, dynamic, on-air talent and technical personnel to join his new operation. Jackson transferred his popular call-in request show to his new radio home. Jackson was not a WNEW jock, guiding listeners through contemporary music, but instead one that played back listener requests. As a daytime only station, KOWH had to find audiences outside the youth market when children were at school, and the affable Jackson represented a way into one major daytime market segment. Former disc jockey Bob Sticht remembered, "He was the type that appealed to the housewives, you know, and he had a fifteen minute segment of his show at eleven o'clock called 'Sandy Jackson the Grocery Boy' and he did all the recipes, you know, and they had sponsors of grocery stores and food products." Storz would use evidence of big audiences during the day to convince advertisers that KOWH appealed to more than just the kids.<sup>22</sup>

Storz and Armstrong combined the records requested by Jackson's callers with their own data to create the playlist. The records on the playlist would become the foundation of the next week's broadcast. Storz and Armstrong then factored in the records Jackson spun with a second list of ten songs made from an analysis of record store

receipts and jukebox statistics. This gave them a base of about twenty songs from which the disc jockey would mix in occasional pop standards from the library. As Storz and Armstrong watched their improving position on Hooper ratings, the two moved to purge even the occasional pop standard from their station's broadcasts. The progressive winnowing of the playlist and the relentless repetition of the top-selling records paid off. By late 1951, the station had established itself as competitive in the Omaha market, even capturing first place in the ratings share some of the time. 23

Even at this stage in its development, the younger set, not housewives, proved the most influential segment of KOWH's audience. Mid-Continent national broadcast director Bill Stewart said that Storz believed that young people set the musical tastes for the wider listening audience. KOWH, he reasoned, could capture adults by retaining hit records on the weekly playlist past their peak popularity. The tactic allowed older listeners the extra time necessary to absorb popular records. As first adopters, the young pointed out the best-selling records, which KOWH broadcast, creating a mass audience and giving the station the broadest possible appeal.<sup>24</sup> Storz not only targeted the youth market, but the music programming, fast-talking disc jockeys, and station promotions and giveaways also sold the ideal of youth to a mass audience. He understood the value of the young and the hip, a realization that put Storz nearly a decade in advance of most Madison Avenue advertising firms.<sup>25</sup>

Storz also made use of a University of Omaha study of local listening habits, which reinforced his growing convictions that the postwar listener used radio as a personal companion that accompanied him or her at home, in the automobile, and eventually, in public. The study showed that listeners were more and more likely to experience popular music alone—in cars and in their bedrooms. Cars and their semi-attentive listeners offered an opening for the enterprising station owner looking for a viable radio audience to sell to advertisers, while records delivered the desired musical product to listeners. Television had taken radio's place at the center of the home and became the family medium while radio listening transformed into a music-driven and highly individualized experience. Over the course of the 1950s, KOWH would further refine the playlist and enhance its ability to determine popular records and to reposition itself vis-à-vis other radio stations.26

A review of KOWH's Friday program lineup from 1949 to 1955 reveals that full commitment to the

new format and a true limited playlist took time. In the fall of 1950 the religious staple *Back to the Bible*, a program wholly at odds with the Top 40 ethos, had a 10 to 10:30 slot—housewife time in the industry. By 1951 it had retreated to 6:30, and was finally dropped the next year. Storz did not replace the popular national subscription shows *Make Believe Ballroom* and *Your Hit Parade* with local disc jockey shows until 1955.<sup>27</sup> By 1953, despite its technical limitations, KOWH had entrenched itself as Omaha's number one station. In 1956, the year rock and roll broke nationally, 39 percent of Omaha sets were tuning in—a staggering figure for any station.<sup>28</sup>

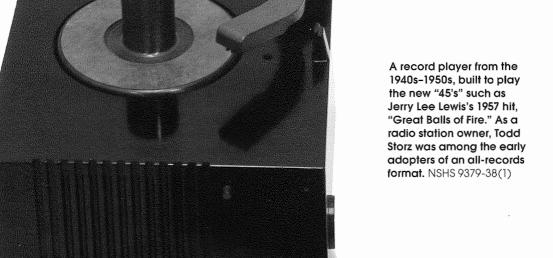
#### Countdowns and Modern Sounds: Top 40's Expansion and Refinement

On one of his rare days off as director of Mid-Continent Broadcasting, Storz would daytrip from Omaha to nearby Offutt Air Force Base. At the headquarters of the Strategic Air Command, where the nation's nuclear strike force awaited orders to attack the Soviet Union, he found the most amazing sounds. His state-of-the-art portable tape recorder captured the shrieks and rumbles from above. Plane listening was no idle amusement, but an opportunity to study the raw power of modern sound.29 The goal was to translate the exhilaration captured on tape to his stations' signals, and program radio for the jet age. Former Storz Oklahoma City program manager Deane Johnson described the thrill of broadcasting at Storz's station, "KOMA had this big 50,000 watt transmitter. and our studios were there sitting at the transmitter and when you're playing a rock song that thing was pounding and the lights would go with the music, sort of like a strobe." The Mid-Continent men (and they were all men) were not much younger than Storz himself, and they shared Johnson's sense of

exhilaration. To Storz this was not a happy accident

but the result of a conscious strategy to capture distinctly modern sounds and broadcast them to an audience that intuitively understood the technological promise of postwar America. "Aliveness," "sharpness," "vitality," "pace," and "flow" were the buzzwords in every Storz operation.<sup>30</sup>

Storz's radio empire took its first steps outside Omaha when Mid-Continent purchased New Orleans's WTIX in 1953. The station, like KOWH, was a ratings loser with poor facilities—not the kind that could deliver that jet plane rush Storz sought. Nonetheless, he was excited to test his formula outside of its Midwestern context. "That city is at least 50 percent Negro and there are large French and Hillbilly populations," Storz said. "Yet the pattern is working there on our WTIX. We are operating successfully in the most diverse of markets." The move to New Orleans demonstrated the



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In an article that accused KOWH of vulgarizing and corrupting young audiences, Time repeatedly transposed the Omaha station's call letters as "KOHW." Mid-Continent responded with this trade journal ad. The *Time* article had real consequences for Mid-Continent. When the company purchased Miami's WQAM, it had to first promise the FCC to not run any promotions or giveaways. Broadcasting/ Telecasting, July 2, 1956.



#### That's okay, TIME Magazine . . .

. . . you transposed the call letters of Omaha's most-listened-to radio station 6 different times in the June 4th\* issue . . .

. . . but Hooper, Pulse and Trendex have it straight:

The call letters of the radio station with the biggest audience all day . . . are K-O-W-H.

Hooper says so to the tune of 44.2% of the audience.

Pulse agrees to the tune of 204 out of 240 first place quarter hours for K-O-W-H.

Trendex chimes in with firsts for K-O-W-H in every time period.

For some good TIME in the right spots, call KOWH General Manager Virgil Sharpe, or the H-R man.

\*. . . in a fulsome article featuring the Storz broadcasting formula-for building and keeping audiences.





CONTINENT BROADCASTING COMPANY

The Storz Stations"—Todd Storz, President

WDGY, Minepapolis St. Paul Represented by Avery Knodel, Inc.

KOWH, Omaha Represented by H.R. Reps. Inc.

WHB, Kansas City WTIX, New Orleans Represented by Representer by John Blair & Co.

Adam J. Young, Jr.

Represented by \* Transfer subject to FCC approval

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BROADCASTING . TELECASTIN

adaptability and commercial potential of Storz's broadcast. His radio empire would grow to six stations, one fewer than the maximum allowed under FCC regulations at the time. Imitators, however, would number in the hundreds. <sup>31</sup>

WTIX instituted some of the changes made in Omaha: calling itself the "new" WTIX, using promotions and giveaways, and cutting all network connections. WTIX ended the week with a countdown of the week's most popular forty records. Though the countdown gave the format a name, in itself it represented nothing revolutionary. The New Orleans ratings leader and WTIX rival, WDSU, broadcast a weekly top twenty-countdown show in between soap operas. WTIX Station manager Bud Armstrong recognized that the music got a much bigger audience than the soaps, and decided that his station should broadcast an uninterrupted countdown. Armstrong added twenty songs so that WTIX's countdown came on earlier and ended later than its rival's. Riding the countdown, the "new" WTIX climbed from the bottom to number one in the New Orleans market.32

Storz did not trust the power of his format alone and wasted little time in selling the station, keeping the call letters, and upgrading to one with modern facilities and equipment. When possible, Storz sought big signals and state-of-the art sound technology, but early in his career necessity had forced him to work with what was available. In 1954, Mid-Continent acquired 10,000-watt WHB in Kansas City with a signal that reached listeners across six states. The acquisition gave Storz the tools with which he would refine his format and standardize his sound.<sup>33</sup>

At WHB Storz engineers created Top 40's sound—one heavy with reverb that resembled the sound on popular rock and roll records. While the networks of the 1930s and 1940s went so far as to ban affiliates from broadcasting recorded music, Storz stations worked consciously to make the relatively brief live segments of their broadcasts sound like the records. Where the network conventional wisdom had been that listeners wanted to "be there," Storz knew that his listeners wanted radio to be with them. The shift in the musical experience was profound and paved the way for listening styles of subsequent decades.<sup>34</sup>

Storz and his Kansas City staff developed the WHB sound both through new equipment and by making in-house technical innovations. Many of the most popular rock and roll records of the middle 1950s made extensive use of echo chambers. The chief engineer at WHB, Dale Moody, used

components from the Hammond organ and created an apparatus that provided the studio with a sonic atmosphere heavy with reverberation. The Storz sound, "a dose of electronic reverberation that made dee-jays sound like God himself," was immediately identifiable. <sup>35</sup> By 1958 the station became an echo chamber to the latest musical phenomenon when it switched to an all-rock playlist. "WHB became the tuned up, revved up version of all they had learned in Omaha and in New Orleans," according to former WHB program manager Richard Fatherly. <sup>36</sup>

Other stations across the country adopted the format or developed it independently. Critics observed that Storz and his brethren succeeded because they targeted weak markets. "They were sitting like clay pigeons," one such critic noted of Omaha and New Orleans, "He'd get killed in New York." The distance from the coasts, however, had also been what allowed Top 40 to take shape. The lack of radio competition and relatively inexpensive entry cost proved crucial by giving station owners the room in which to experiment. Geography helped Top 40 take root in Middle America before moving out in all directions. 37

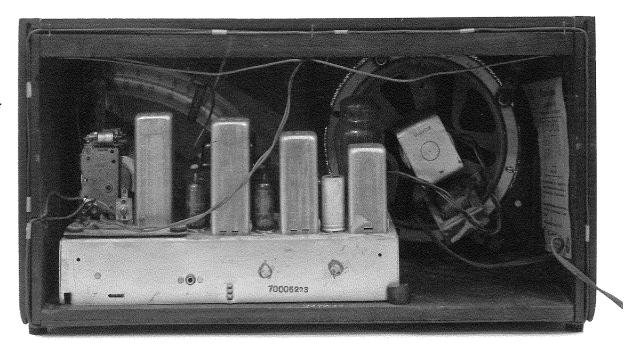
Storz's Mid-Continent purchased major stations in Minneapolis (WDGY), Oklahoma City (KOMA), St. Louis, (KXOK), and Miami (WQAM), while selling the group's weak sister, founding station KOWH. The conservative publisher of the *National Review*, William F. Buckley Jr., purchased KOWH for \$822,000—more than ten times Storz's investment. Despite the sale, Mid-Continent's headquarters remained in Omaha, except for a brief sojourn in Miami in the early 1960s when Storz moved operations.<sup>38</sup>

Storz was preeminent within the group of Top 40 station owners. He was the first, and his stations instructed the others, particularly the station group owned by Plough Pharmaceuticals. Similar to Storz in New Orleans, the Memphis market in which Plough operated WMPS possessed a wealth of musical talent both on record and in person. Station manager George Plumstead along with a group of Plough personnel made a pilgrimage to Storz's WHB in Kansas City. The Plumstead group admired the consistency of sound, and asked endless questions about playlists, charts, and other Top 40 essentials. Upon their return, the managers reprogrammed WMPS and within months did the same with Plough's four other stations.<sup>39</sup>

All group owners, despite various programming differences, shared the format's basic tenets. First and most important was the limited playlist.

The Westinghouse radio shown on p. 28 had an open back, revealing the vacuum tubes that would soon be replaced by transistors in portable radios. Transistors made for cheap, smaller portables, allowing listening to become even more of an individual experience.

NSHS 9379-37



Storz stations developed the true limited playlist in 1956.<sup>40</sup> Forty records was an approximation, but generally stations did not exceed this number and tended to stay below it. The program manager made all playlist selections, determining the audience's desires based on available charts and surveys. This could be a hard bargain for some disc jockeys to accept, as Armstrong recognized when he related a favorite dictum, "About the time you don't like a record, mama's just beginning to hum it. About the time you can't stand it, mama's beginning to learn the words. About the time you're ready to shoot yourself if you hear it one more time, it's hitting the Top Ten." Though not active in programming, the disc jockey was to exhibit a distinctive "personality," revealed in short bursts of chatter in the delivery of news headlines and weather updates or in listener call-ins and station promotions. Most of all he provided the bridge between the songs and the commercials, which consumed eighteen minutes of every hour.<sup>41</sup>

KOWH disc jockey Bob Sticht remembered spinning altered records, called "shorty tunes." Station engineers created a shorty tune by deliberately shaving precious seconds, sometimes over a minute, from a record. Shorty tunes allowed the station to sell more advertising, while tricking listeners into thinking they were hearing more records. Sticht said that when Top 40 stations received a record over three minutes in length, it went to the

production room for choice edits. Everything on the Top 40 station was a commercial: the songs advertised for the recording industry, jingles did the same for local businesses, and giveaways for the station itself.<sup>42</sup>

Top 40's dominance of the radio market did not last into the 1970s. Other formats, including rock and "freeform" emerged on the FM dial at the end of the 1960s to shake up the Top 40 status quo. Stations adhering to the new formats did not, however, challenge Top 40 dogma. Though FM rock stations' more colorful proponents may have believed Top 40 had become a "rotting corpse stinking up the airwayes," those same stations hewed to a recordsonly approach. They simply preferred cuts from long-playing, twelve-inch records, which were selling in ever-greater numbers, over the single-oriented, seven-inch 45s. FM rock stations, whatever the vague political leanings of their late-1960s jocks, retained a Storz-like commitment to market populism. "Where once Top-40 radio reflected the taste of its audience," freeform disc jockey and counterculture figure Tom Donahue explained to Rolling Stone in 1967, "today it attempts to dictate it, and in the process has alienated its once loyal army of listeners." To its hard rock critics, Top 40 was not too commercial; rather, it had failed to respond appropriately to the growing popularity of rock and roll long-playing records. Top 40 station owners were lame not because they made money,

but because they were bad businessmen.<sup>43</sup>

Rock FM stations realized that the Top 40 had successfully "filled a void" in the late 1950s by targeting young and mobile listeners, and rock stations were responding to altered market conditions. In the Top 40 format, Frank Sinatra's "Strangers in the Night" could follow Jefferson Airplane's "White Rabbit." This juxtaposition might have been exciting, but for the generation that had gained ever greater control over their musical experiences, such eclecticism was just somebody else's music. As the record industry boomed and listening rooms popped up in dens, basements, and bedrooms across the United States, popular music became a form of self-expression. Listeners expected customized sonic environments, and on the radio this led to the dozens of niche radio formats by the late 1980s. All of these, however, shared a common ancestor-Top 40.44

#### "They Brought the People in on Everything": Promotions, Giveaways and Top 40's Place in American Culture

Todd Storz was one of postwar radio's most attentive listeners. When traveling to the markets where Mid-Continent owned stations, such as Minneapolis or Oklahoma City, he would check into a hotel room and spend the day comparing the sound of his station to all competitors. Sitting alone in a nondescript room with a great variety of sonic options, Storz searched for the sound that would jump off the dial and demand his attention. If he did not find it, or worse found it on a competitor's frequency, he would demand programming change. Minneapolis program director Steve Lubunski remembered how Storz often surprised WDGY employees with unexpected visits to the station while out on one of his listening tours.

If he came to town, he would usually come a day or two ahead of when you thought he was coming and he would do listening, careful listening, and then you would say, "Oh Todd, I didn't know you were here." "Yeah," he said, "I've been listening. What's the matter with you guys? You don't have any promotions going and you're playing all the wrong music. . . ." He was interested in the product.<sup>45</sup>

Storz listened to his product alone, and it is not a stretch to imagine this is how he imagined his audience listened. At least for young listeners, he was right. A 1960 study showed that most teenagers listened to music on the radio, and that most of this listening was done at home. Knowing that

television occupied the center of the home, Storz and others must have assumed that home meant the bedroom or basement. Companionate radio forged an intimate connection with its audience, but Storz was aware that a simple turn of the dial could spell ruin for his station. With more and more Top 40 outfits going on the air, Storz's obsession to distinguish his stations should not be surprising. That sympathetic listening was so central to doing this is revealing. The Top 40 audience as imagined by Storz consisted of lone listeners searching for the most desirable sonic commodities and human connections. 46

In addition to private space, listening alone in public had increased in the late 1950s. Transistors made for cheap portable radios (which had existed long before the transistor, but Bell Labs' innovation made them more convenient). Behavioral archeologist Michael Schiffer has argued that the prewar listener would have been more likely to share information—or in the case of music listening, dance with fellow listeners—rather than to shield them off with headphones. Top 40 promotions and giveaways would take advantage of the privatized postwar listening style.<sup>47</sup>

The simultaneity of the radio broadcast, however, connected isolated listeners around the sounds of hit records; if a national youth culture existed, Top 40 was located somewhere near its center. Top 40 station promotions and giveaways present the dual collective and private aspects of the Top 40 listening style. These on-air rituals brought the abstract youth culture into being. Giveaways called on listeners to hunt for treasure, bail out jailed disc jockeys, ransack libraries, or even prepare for fake floods. They were often anarchic and impish and drew the scorn of authorities and the attention of advertisers.<sup>48</sup>

Prior to the hysteria that swirled around rock and roll and payola in the second half of the 1950s, promotions and giveaways were the most remarked-upon aspects of the Top 40 stations. By the 1950s, increasing rates of delinquency had become one of the central anxieties of the decade. Time could not decide whether the disaffected youth of mid-decade were "rebels or psychopaths." Given these two options, it should not be surprising that during the 1950s the artifacts central to the emerging youth culture—including comic books, radio disc jockeys, and rock and roll-all came under Congressional investigations. When a KOWH disc jockey called for listeners to storm Omaha's public library, he tapped directly into fears about postwar youth culture.49

Storz was, according to *Time*, "the King of Giveaways." Accusing his stations of vulgarizing and corrupting young audiences, the magazine scolded, "When his listeners are not being told about a new giveaway they get a steady serenade from the disk jockeys, broken only by stunts and five-minute news broadcasts. Storz permits no cultural note; he allows his stations only 60 records at a time, lets them play only the top 40 tunes of the week, well larded with commercials." Time had transposed the KOWH call letters as "KOHW," a slip Storz lampooned in a trade publication, but which also revealed how little *Time* understood Top 40. The format had not conquered the young; rather, they had sought it out and made it theirs.50

Outside of radio and some independent record companies, commercial interests pursued the elusive youth market clumsily but doggedly as the fifties gave way to the sixties. Confused by what according to studies was a cautious and conservative "faceless mob," Edward L. Bond Jr., president of the marketing agency Y&R, advised his advertising brethren to "treat youth with authority; protect them; control them; tell them what to do. Basically they're insecure and afraid to take risks. Reassure them in advertising copy." Storz, however, was busy keeping his ear to the ground, and his stations avoided the assumptions that misled bigger firms.<sup>51</sup> Station promotions and giveaways revealed and exploited the ambivalence that young people-and not a few adults-felt about authority. The stations put teenagers in on a collective joke that mocked a rigid and out-of-touch society by pointing to its inherent absurdity.

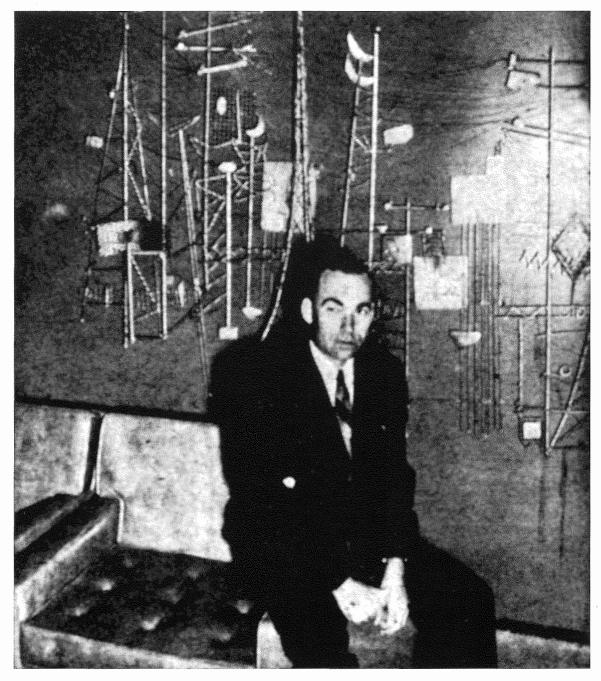
The scavenger hunt was the gold standard of Top 40 promotions. It first appeared in 1951 when KOWH personnel hid money at various locations throughout Omaha. In between songs and commercials, frantic disc jockeys broadcast hints as to the whereabouts of the cash prizes, and equally frantic listeners rushed across town in their cars. Near downtown a traffic jam snarled for blocks, stranding angry commuters and catching the attention of the police. Storz was there, comically directing traffic from his car. Noticing approaching police lights, the broadcaster deftly escaped onto a side street. There officers pulled him over and demanded, "Do you want to stay on Farnam [Street] or do you want to go to jail?" Playing hero to his listeners, Storz opted for the latter, where he was released on a minimal bond.52

Storz ad-man Ken Greenwood claimed the scavenger hunts were designed to generate negative publicity, and he remembers that Mid-Continent

employees at Kansas City's WHB brainstormed new ways to achieve notoriety. Their labors produced a giveaway in which listeners trashed a section of Luce Park. The listeners had been in pursuit of an unfortunate turtle on which a WHB employee had written the final clue to the cash prize. "There wasn't a cattail left in that pond, and it was just bedlam," Greenwood remembered. "The next day, the Kansas City Star came out with the headlines that said: 'Local Radio Station Closes ASPB Bridge,' or 'Raises Pandemonium in Kansas City,' or something—very, very tough story. We took that story, clipped it out and used it to sell with for at least the next year as perfect evidence of all the people who were listening to radio in their automobiles." The stunts not only created the impression that "something" was always happening on Top 40 stations, they sold ads.53

Less than a year after Storz landed in an Omaha jail, disc jockey James O'Neil climbed a tree in Omaha's Turner Park and began throwing money to the confused pedestrians below. Disc jockeys broadcast O'Neil's whereabouts and descriptions of his odd charity. A sizable and increasingly aggressive crowd materialized, and as before, so too did a traffic bottleneck. Weary police hauled O'Neil off and in response KOWH broadcast pleas to its listeners to bail him out. Cars swarmed the central police station and the streets became impassable. O'Neil refused to be bonded out, but he and KOWH had demonstrated the connection the station maintained with its audience. As with the Farnam Street treasure hunt, the money-throwing exhibition showed that automobile listeners were ready to join the fun whenever their favorite radio station invited them.54

Sometimes no cash prize was necessary for a promotion to be a success. A year to the day after the 1952 "Flood of the Century" struck Omaha, KOWH broadcast emergency orders sandwiched between field reports of a swiftly overflowing Missouri River. Switchboards jammed and earnest volunteers crowded City Hall. Representatives from the Nurses' Association demanded to know why the city had not called them to duty. Had they tuned in twenty-five minutes prior to or following the storm broadcasts, civic-minded health care professionals and anxious property owners would have heard disc jockey Sandy Jackson explain that the Missouri River was well within its banks. KOWH had simply re-broadcast the previous year's warnings.55 But why? Like the impudent class clown, the station defended its trickery as a necessary measure in the atomic age; "the program was



The founder of the Top 40 reflects on a decade of radio. Dundee & West Omaha Sun, January 29, 1959.

not designed to scare anyone, but to keep people awake to the ever-present threat of emergency." By lampooning radio's local authorities and the era's most serious issue—war with the Soviet Union—the station offered to its young listeners the thrill of vicarious rebellion. The pranks, absurd gestures, and publicity stunts of later rock musicians, record company marketers, and the Youth International Party bear a striking resemblance to Top 40 promotions. Unable to get the joke, the authorities responded with confusion and buffoonish anger,

while listeners could laugh and feel, for a moment, solidarity and superiority.<sup>56</sup>

There was a dark core to the vision of society inherent in these station promotions, and it can be seen clearly in the WTIX giveaway in New Orleans that landed disc jockey Bob Sticht in jail. Sticht climbed a building and threw dollar bills at the intersection of Canal and Carondelet streets, yelling "I hate money!" Down below, pedestrians hurriedly pocketed the bills, and the crowd grew. Nearby police had joined in and grabbed cash for themselves.



Reconciliation Inc., a black-majority investor group led by former Major League baseball player Bob Gibson, purchased KOWH from William F. Buckley's Starr group and pursued a more traditional understanding of public interest, as illustrated by this 1973 photo of a three-hour "radioathon" for drought-stricken countries in West Africa. Omaha Star, October 31, 1973

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The situation, however, spiraled out of control and fights broke out. The police arrested Sticht, though it remains unclear if they kept their dollars. WTIX broadcast that Bob Sticht was in need of bail money, which listeners promptly supplied. Sticht remembered the incident and Storz's strategy fondly, "They brought the people in on everything." <sup>57</sup>

Storz exploited free-floating anxiety about cars, youth, and rebellion, knowing that controversy was an effective way of selling the station. Defending his methods from critics, he observed that "radio stations are licensed by the FCC to serve 'in the public interest.' Isn't it logical that if we have over 40 percent of the available audience. . . that we must be succeeding in upholding our obligation and commission to the public?" Storz's public bore no responsibility to serve the community or collective good. Radio was "a purely voluntary listening habit," in which individuals chose to participate. This voluntary habit connected individuals as consumers of shared sonic commodities, not as citizens and not as neighbors. <sup>58</sup>

#### Top 40's Legacy

Storz died young. He was 39 in 1964 and at the height of his success when an apparent brain hemorrhage claimed his life. In the years preceding his death Storz had divorced his wife, changed Mid-Continent's name to the Storz Broadcasting Company, and relocated to Miami. Despite a ban on promotions at his Miami station—a ban the FCC had forced upon him as a condition of purchase— Storz's professional activities scandalized South Florida just as they had every other city into which he had ventured. "Booze, Broads, and Bribes," screamed a Miami headline following a Storz-organized 1959 disc jockey convention. Storz's ultimate legacy, however, lies not in Mad Men-esque rowdiness and certainly not in the pay-for-play payola scandal.<sup>59</sup> Payola, in which record companies paid disc jockeys to spin their artists' records, threatened not just the big record companies but the entire Top 40 strategy. It broke a central tenet of Storz's philosophy by allowing the disc jockey to choose (or in this case be persuaded by outside

forces to choose) the record, and thus increasing the possibility that unpopular songs would find their way onto the air, leading to a loss in market share. Mid-Continent managers enforced weekly playlists without input from disc jockeys and were closely monitored by Storz from Omaha. For Rather, Storz should be remembered for his role in remaking the American popular musical experience. The nature of this change can be glimpsed in the dance craze that swept the nation during the last years of Storz's life.

The Chubby Checker record "The Twist" proved a freakish phenomenon, hitting Billboard's number one in 1960 and again 1962, making it a Top 40 staple. The "twist" as a dance was even bigger. The smiling Checker happily twisted away many early 1960s afternoons with teenagers on the ABC television's American Bandstand. The dance required a few minutes to learn, a fair amount of space between the twister and anyone else, but not a partner. One could twist alone. By the mid-sixties the twist had become passé among teenagers, but continued to gain mainstream popularity. Adults, who had presumably learned to dance in the ballroom era when radio broadcast big bands live, were now moving to a recorded sound and performing a dance that required no one else but themselves. The dance grew out of the postwar listening style that Storz and other radio entrepreneurs had nurtured. Young people created the twist, the frug, and all the nameless, solitary derivations since, after first internalizing the values of the postwar musical experience they heard on stations like Omaha's KOWH.61

The radio industry, even as it further splintered listeners by genre and niche throughout the seventies and eighties, was and remains in the Top 40 mold. Variety shows and live performances have not returned to commercial radio. While political talk has come to dominate the AM dial, it bears noting that some of the most popular conservative talkers have roots in Top 40.62 Storz's creation and exportation of the Top 40 format demonstrates that the mass media-made national culture associated with the 1950s did not originate solely in Burbank television studios. It also shows how Top 40 market populism was supple enough to adapt to the culturally, socially, and politically fractured times that arrived in the second half of the sixties and beyond.

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> "Radio Library Stunt to 'Encourage Library Patronage' Backfires," "KOWH Going to Pay \$565," *Omaha World-Herald*, June 16, 1956.
- <sup>2</sup> Storz cannot claim sole credit for the invention of the Top 40 format. Four station group owners, operating independently of each other in the middle 1950s, developed similar programming strategies. The four group owners included Todd Storz, Gordon McClendon, Gerald Bartell, and Harold Krelstein of the Plough Broadcasting Company. The group owners were concentrated in the Midwest, South, and Great Plains. Storz began his career in Omaha, McClendon's first important acquisition was in Dallas, Bartell was centered in Milwaukee, and Plough in Chicago, Baltimore, and Memphis; see David MacFarland, *The Development of the Top 40 Radio Format* (New York: Arno, 1979), 158-59, 208-9, 238-40, 250-53.
- <sup>3</sup> Herman Land, "The Storz Bombshell," *Television Magazine* (May 1957): 86; MacFarland, *The Development of the Top 40 Radio Format*, 165.
- <sup>4</sup> For more on the commodification of music see Evan Eisenberg, *Recording Angel: Music, Records, and Culture from Aristotle to Zappa* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987, 2005), 61.
- <sup>5</sup> "[T]he phonograph industry has been revitalized by the 45 rpm recording system introduced by RCA five years ago ... [T]he older 78-rpm records are obsolete. In 1949, when RCA introduced the '45' system, record industry sales totaled \$160 million," "200 Million '45s' Sold in Five Years Folsom," Broadcasting/Telecasting, July 5, 1954, 36; see also, Marc Coleman, Playback: From the Victrola to MP3, 100 Years of Music, Machines, and Money (New York: Da Capo Press, 2005), 73-74.
- <sup>6</sup> "Todd Storz Dead at 39, Fathered Formula Radio," *Billboard*, Apr. 26, 1964, 14; Marc Fischer, *Something in the Air: Radio, Rock, and the Revolution that Shaped a Nation* (New York: Random House, 2007). Armstrong and fellow former Mid-Continent employee Harold Soderlund dispute the jukebox story, which also appears in MacFarland's *The Development of the Top 40 Format*, and has become a radio legend.
- <sup>7</sup> In the middle 1950s disc jockey Alan "Moondog" Freed, not rock recording star Elvis Presley, was known as the king of rock and roll. The son of a Jewish immigrant and a coal miner's daughter, Freed hustled his way through a dramatic radio career and life. Starting in 1951 at WJW in Cleveland Freed introduced, promoted, and broke rhythm and blues artists and records to white and black audiences on his broadcast show, in arena performances, and on tours to cities across the United States, and, most infamously, as part of pay-for-play deals with independent record companies. At the height of his fame and influence in the middle 1950s, Freed hosted his own television shows for CBS and ABC and jocked for WINS in New York. Freed also holds the writing credits for iconic rock songs such as Chuck Berry's "Maybellene." His complicity in the payola scandal (the flamboyant Freed made an inviting target for moralists. established Tin Pan Alley songwriters, and the owners of the big record companies that resented independents' growing presence) and alcoholism contributed to his professional and personal decline at the end of the 1950s. In 1962, shortly

before his death two years later, Freed worked for Todd Storz at Mid-Continent's WQAM. Freed's outsized personality and willingness to take programming risks, however, clashed directly with the Top 40 disc jockey model—one that had become even more tightly controlled in the wake of the payola scandal. WQAM fired Freed after less than a year on the job. See John A. Jackson, *Big Beat Heat: Alan Freed and the Early Years of Rock and Roll* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1991), 8-9, 312-37.

- <sup>8</sup> John Farrar, "Ducklore Lodge," *NEBRASKAland*, Nov. 1987, 34-37.
- <sup>9</sup> Marc Fischer, *Something in the Air*, 2007, 3; *Radio's Revolution and the World's Happiest Broadcasters*, audio recording, Richard Fatherly, producer. 1998. http://www.reelradio.com/storz/index.html
- $^{\rm 10}$  "Big Noise on Campus,"  $\it Omaha~World\mbox{-}Herald$  , Feb. 23, 1987.
- <sup>11</sup> Peter Fornatale and Joshua E. Mills, *Radio in the Television Age* (New York: The Overlook Press, 1980), 3, 7.
- <sup>12</sup> "From Crystal Set to 50,000 Watts, Sweet Sound of Success," *Dundee and West Omaha Sun*, Jan. 29, 1959.
- <sup>13</sup> "Storz-Trailer Rite Small," *Omaha World-Herald*, Nov. 2, 1947; "Old Dwelling Gets a Face Lift," *Omaha World-Herald*, May 1, 1949; "From Crystal Set to 50,000 Watts, Sweet Sound of Success," *Dundee and West Omaha Sun*, Jan. 29, 1959; "KOWH Seeks Permit to Double Its Power," *Omaha World-Herald*, July 20, 1949.
- <sup>14</sup> In October 1935 Henry Doorly, president and publisher of the *World-Herald*, secured purchase options to acquire four Nebraska stations. He agreed to pay the Omaha Grain Exchange \$150,000 for WAAW, the state's oldest station. "Omaha Publishers to Acquire WAAW," *Broadcasting*, Oct. 1, 1935, 26; "Radio Stations 40 or More Years Old in 1962," *Broadcasting* (Special Report), May 14, 1962, 130; The FCC approved a *World-Herald* application to reassign the WAAW license in 1936. The newspaper paid the grain exchange approximately \$60,000, less than half of the \$150,000 sale price in 1935, and changed the station's call letters to KOWH. "FCC Upholds WAAW Sale to Newspaper," *Broadcasting—Broadcast Advertising*, Mar. 1, 1939, 15.
- <sup>15</sup> Ratings of station market share in this paper will refer to the C. E. Hooper ratings service. Hooper used telephone interviews. Other services included Broadcast Measurement Bureau, Industrial Surveys, A. C. Neilson, and the Pulse; "Symphony Over Full Hour on KOWH," *Omaha World-Herald*, Apr. 15, 1945; "KOWH to Carry Town Meeting," *Omaha World-Herald*, Aug. 24, 1944.
- <sup>16</sup> Author phone interview with Richard Fatherly, June 14, 2006.
  - <sup>17</sup> "Radio in Transition," Sponsor, Sept. 7, 1957, 6.
- $^{\rm 18}$  MacFarland, The Development of the Top 40 Radio Format, 164-65.
- <sup>19</sup> "Another Big Idea," *Omaha World-Herald,* Feb. 23, 1987; Herman Land, "The Storz Bombshell," *Television Magazine*, May 1957, 86.
- <sup>20</sup> Record companies were known to buy up their own singles so as to chart them, and in at least one instance the trade magazine *Cash Box* sold the number nine position on their chart to a Paducah, Kentucky, disc jockey and another

man who had rights to the song "Tragedy." The song went on to become a hit. MacFarland, *The Development of the Top 40 Radio Format*, 357-58; in addition, the play-for-pay practices that led to the payola scandal made national charts suspicious gauges of actual popularity. For more on payola, see Jackson, *Big Beat Heat: Alan Freed and the Early Years of Rock & Roll*, 207-37.

- <sup>21</sup> George "Bud" Armstrong, an oral history interview conducted by Brien Williams completed under the auspices of the Library of American Broadcasting, University of Maryland Libraries, 1996, 4.
- <sup>22</sup> Bob Sticht, an oral history interview conducted by Bob Ogles completed under the auspices of the Library of American Broadcasting, University of Maryland Libraries, 1985, 4; David MacFarland, *The Development of the Top 40* Radio Format, 165.
- $^{\rm 23}$  Author phone interview with Richard Fatherly, June 14, 2006.
- <sup>24</sup> MacFarland, *The Development of the Top 40 Radio Format*, 338-39.
- <sup>25</sup> Storz compares well with advertising industry leaders of the 1960s, who saw the greatest consumer incentive in selling an ideal of unrestrained youth to a not-always-youthful market. See Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 124-30.
- <sup>26</sup> Haruko Ohara, "Comparative Preferences of Radio and Television Programs with Emphasis on Effects of Television of the Preferences of Radio Programs," MA Thesis, University of Omaha, 1952; Eric Rothlenburger and Tom McCourt, "Radio Redefines Itself, 1947-1962," in *Radio Reader: Essays on the Cultural History of Radio*, eds., Michele Hilmes and Jason Loviglio (New York: Routledge, 2002), 381.
- <sup>27</sup> Your Hit Parade is an example of an early countdown show that used a live band to render hit tunes. It ran from 1935 to 1955 on radio and continued on television until 1959. Make Believe Ballroom was a record show; "Radio and Television Programs for Friday," Omaha World-Herald, Sept. 22, 1955; Sept. 21, 1951; Sept. 19, 1952; Sept. 16, 1955.
- <sup>28</sup> MacFarland, *The Development of the Top 40 Radio Format*, 164-69. In 1956, KOIL, a rival Omaha station that operated day and night, successfully adopted the Top 40 format and emerged as a consistent challenger for the number one spot there, eventually overtaking KOWH in 1957.
- <sup>29</sup> Ken Greenwood, an oral history interview conducted by Brien Williams completed under the auspices of the Library of American Broadcasting University of Maryland Libraries, 2000, 30.
- <sup>30</sup> Author interview with Deane Johnson, June 24, 2006; Land, "The Storz Bombshell," 86.
- 31 Land, "The Storz Bombshell," 88.
- <sup>32</sup> By summer of 1954, WTIX secured the number one position in the New Orleans market, moving from a 2 percent market share to nearly 18 percent. Ibid., 89.
- $^{\rm 33}$  Author phone interview with Richard Fatherly, June 14, 2006.

- <sup>34</sup> David Morton, *Sound Recording: The Life Story of a Technology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 86.
  - 35 Fischer, Something in the Air, 21.
- <sup>36</sup> Author phone interview with Richard Fatherly, June 14, 2006; Rothlenburger and McCourt, "Radio Redefines Itself, 1947-1962." 382.
- <sup>37</sup> Rothlenburger and McCourt, "Radio Redefines Itself, 1947-1962," 382; Land, "The Storz Bombshell," 85.
- <sup>38</sup> "Storz Sells KOWH for \$822,500, Seven Other AM Stations Sold," *Broadcasting, Telecasting*, April 1, 1957; the history of KOWH took another radical turn when Buckley's Starr group sold the station to Reconciliation Inc., a group of primarily African-American investors headed by former Major Leaguer Bob Gibson. The first majority black-owned station in Omaha, for eight years KOWH provided community events including public education drives, high school athletics, and forums on current events that stood in stark contrast to the commercialism of the Storz and Buckley eras. "FCC Okays 2 Stations to Negroes," *Omaha World-Herald*, Jan. 11, 1970; Peter Citron, "KOWH, KEZO Tell Their Stories," *Omaha World-Herald*, Jan. 30, 1978.
  - <sup>39</sup> Bob Sticht, University of Maryland interview, 6.
- <sup>40</sup> The limited playlist's "two main points were consistency and repetition, consistency meaning that the station could be relied on to play the hits all the time, not just during a "Top 40 countdown" show at a certain hour, and repetition meaning that the most popular records were repeated more often than less popular ones. The concept of the true limited playlist has changed almost not at all since 1956, when Todd Storz and Bill Stewart instituted it on KOWH." MacFarland, *The Development of the Top 40 Radio Format*, 338-39.
  - <sup>41</sup> Land, "The Storz Bombshell," 88.
  - 42 Bob Sticht, University of Maryland interview, 27.
- <sup>43</sup> Tom Donahue, "A Rotting Corpse, Stinking up the Airwaves," *Rolling Stone*, Nov. 23, 1967, 14.
- <sup>44</sup> Ken Barnes, "A Fragment of the Imagination: Top 40 Radio," Simon Frith, ed., *Facing the Music* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988), 29-39.
- <sup>45</sup> Dick Lubunski, an oral history interview conducted by Phil Eberly completed under the auspices of the Library of American Broadcasting University of Maryland Libraries, 1996, 9-10.
- <sup>46</sup> Arthur Carlson, an oral history interview conducted by Phil Eberly completed under the auspices of the Library of American Broadcasting University of Maryland Libraries, 1996, 9; Victor Baumann, "Teen-age Music Preferences," Journal of Research in Music Education (Autumn 1960): 83.
- <sup>47</sup> Michael Schiffer, *The Portable Radio in American Life* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1991), 147-49, 154-56, 168.
- <sup>48</sup>WTIX asked New Orleans to bail out Bob Sticht, Bob Sticht, University of Maryland interview, 14-15; KOWH warned Omaha listeners to prepare for a previous year's flood, "River Low, KOWH Sends Flood Fears High," *Omaha World-Herald*, Apr. 10, 1953; William Graebner offers a compelling interpretation of radio promotions in *Coming of Age in Buffalo: Youth and Authority in the Postwar Era* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 7.

- <sup>49</sup> "Rebels or Psychopaths," *Time*, Dec. 6, 1954, 64-65. For the best study of the era's fears of youth and delinquency, see James Gilbert, *A Cycle of Outrage: America's Reaction to the Juvenile Delinquent in the 1950s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); for a close look at youth cultures, the high school experience, the importance of popular music, and racial anxieties see Graebner, *Coming of Age in Buffalo*.
  - 50 "King of the Giveaways," Time, June 4, 1956.
- <sup>51</sup> "Youth: The Frontier Market," *Media/Scope* (June 1964): 82.
- 52 "Treasure Hunt Jams Traffic," Omaha World-Herald, Oct. 29, 1951.
- $^{53}$  Ken Greenwood, University of Maryland interview, 2000. 16-17.
- 54 "Money Stunt Causes Riot," Omaha World-Herald, Feb. 24, 1952.
- <sup>55</sup> In 1966 the FCC issued prohibitions against crime and catastrophe hoaxes like KOWH's fake flood. The FCC reversed this policy course during the 1980s, when Reagan appointees eliminated the earlier regulations. Following a nuclear war hoax at KSHE in St. Louis in 1992, new regulations were established that again prohibited "scare tactics," Joe S. Foote and Phylis Johnson, "Pranks and Policy: Martians, Nuclear Bombs and the 1992 Ruling on Broadcast Hoaxes," *Journal of Radio Studies* 2 (1993-94): 69-70.
- <sup>56</sup> "River Low, KOWH Sends Flood Fears High," *Omaha World-Herald*, Apr. 10, 1953.
- <sup>57</sup> Bob Sticht, University of Maryland interview, 14-15.
- <sup>58</sup> "From Crystal Set to 50,000 Watts, Sweet Sound of Success," *Dundee and West Omaha Sun*, Jan. 29, 1959; "Our Respects to Todd Storz," *Broadcasting/Telecasting*, Sept. 19, 1955, 26.
- <sup>59</sup> MacFarland, *The Development of the Top 40 Radio Format;* Stan Cornyn, *Exploding: The Highs, Hits, Hype, Heroes, and Hustlers of the Warner Music Group* (New York: Rolling Stone Press, 2002), 30-31; the FCC approved the sale of WQAM in 1956 by a 4-3 vote only after Storz pledged not to conduct any giveaways. "Give-aways Hit by FCC in Sale," *Omaha World-Herald*, July 24, 1956.
- 60 KOWH manager Bill Stewart said Mid-Continent sent out playlists from Omaha to all its stations, a practice that made station managers more like instruction followers. MacFarland, *The Rise of the Top 40 Radio Format*, 285-86.
- <sup>61</sup> Jim Cogan and William Clark, *Temples of Sound: Inside the Great Recording Studios* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2003), 152; Lucille Hollander Blum, "The Discotheque and the Phenomenon of Alone-Togetherness: A Study of the Young Person's Response to the Frug and Comparable Current Dances," *Adolescence* (Winter 1966/67): 365.
- <sup>62</sup> Rush Limbaugh jocked at Mid-Continent's WHB in Kansas City as "Jeff Christie" in the seventies; Glenn Beck was morning drive time jock for a number of stations. Howard Kurtz, Hot Air; All Talk, All the Time (New York: Random House, 1996); Mark Leibovich, "Being Glenn Beck," New York Times Magazine, Sept. 29, 2010.