

WWTC-AM weathers calls about two songs

In a stunt aimed at promoting a change in format, WWTC-AM radio is driving radio listeners to distraction by playing the same two songs over and over again.

The songs, "Raindrops Keep Falling on My Head" by B.J. Thomas and the Beatles' "Good Day, Sunshine," have been heard in constant repetition since Thursday. There's a message in their titles: Sunshine and rain, rain and sunshine. Get it?

The answer will be obvious Wednesday when WWTC unveils a new format called "Weather Radio 1280AM" which general manager Sam Sherwood says will make WWTC the first all-weather commercial radio station in the world. (Although the weather service operates a weather channel on the FM band, a special radio is required to receive it).

Since Thursday, hundreds of listeners have called WWTC and police to ask whether something is wrong with the equipment or the employees at the station which has its studios in the Wesley Temple building in downtown Minneapolis.

"The police have been inundated with calls about whether something's happened to a disc jockey at the station," Sherwood said. "They're in on it now, but they were up here

about 3 a.m. Thursday because they thought somebody must've had a heart attack or something." By Tuesday, Sherwood said, the station plans to go a bit easier on the two songs and will start explaining how the new format will work.

"The climate is right for a new kind of radio," Sherwood punned. "This will be almost a lifestyle thing for everybody who lives in our ever-changing climate. We'll have not only weather forecasts, but temperatures and travel information, too."

Sherwood said he isn't worried about listeners becoming bored with the all-weather format.

"If you go outside of your house, this is going to be of interest to you. Before you leave your house, before you golf or play tennis or ski this'll be the thing you'll tune in to before you do anything because it'll tell you what it (the weather) is and what it's going to be."

WWTC's move to a new format was prompted by a sharp decline in its ratings last spring. According to the Arbitron ratings survey, the station's "Metro Music" format, specializing in local rock bands, was listened to by just three-tenths of one percent of the Twin Cities radio audience.

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 18, 1985

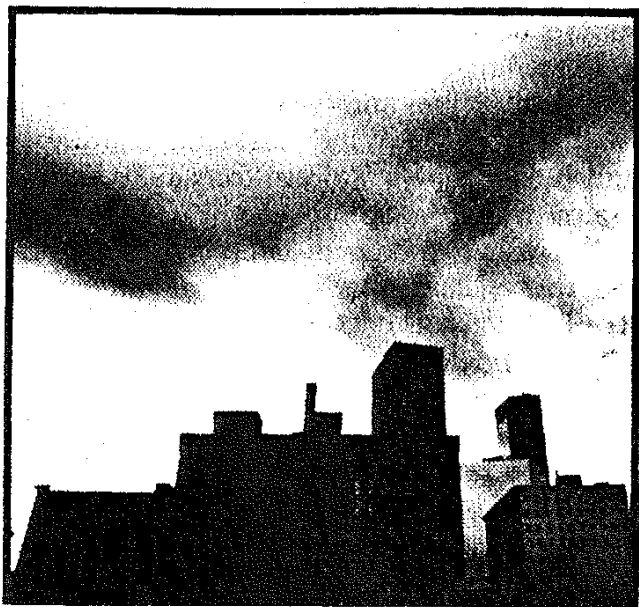
New forecast at WWTC

After various music formats left WWTC-AM a loser in the local ratings game, the station scrapped records in favor of rain buckets and radar screens. Starting today, Sept. 18, WWTC becomes the country's first commercial 24-hour, all-weather radio station.

"We want to be an exclusive, one-of-a-kind station," says WWTC station manager Sam Sherwood.

"Weather is important to everybody, from [ages] 5 to 95. We want to attract a lot of listeners for a short length of time rather than just a few who listen all day."

Since constant updates on the dew point and the barometric pressure run the risk of boring some listeners, the station also offers



GREG HELGESON

"weather-oriented information," including traffic reports, fashion tips, fall color reports, fishing tips and airline schedules. Such information fills 24 minutes of a typical hour on the new WWTC, in addition to 24 minutes of weather forecasts and 12 minutes set aside for advertising.

WWTC bottomed out in the local radio market with an "urban contemporary" music format. Deejays played a variety of records, from Appolonia 6 to Millie Jackson to local bands such as the Metros. The format attracted only a handful of devoted listeners. In the latest Arbitron survey, WWTC came in last.

"The station was treated like a college outlet when I got here," says program director Scott Kramer, who was hired by WWTC a month ago.

"It was run like a playground, and deejays had free choice of what to play . . . I couldn't stand the noise," he says.

According to Sherwood, part of the reason for the drastic format change was the realization that AM music stations can't compete with FM because listeners prefer to hear music in FM stereo.

"Even if we did come up with a dynamite music station, FM would copy it," Sherwood explains.

A weather forecast, on the other hand, sounds every bit as exciting in mono as it does in stereo.

You Don't Need a Weatherman . . .

After days of spinning nothing but "Raindrops Keep Falling on My Head" and "Good Day Sunshine," WWTC is about to unveil its new "revolutionary" format. Over the summer the station chucked the most progressive AM or FM music programming the Twin Cities have heard in years, promising to return with a real blockbuster. Local records were the meat and potatoes of the old regime, plus a healthy serving of discs usually found on the R&B charts.

The white bread and water of the new programming is little more than wind, sleet and snow. This week, WWTC is going to become an all-weather station. An all-weather station. You read it correctly. Just what the area needs, a broadcast frequency that will blare how awful it usually is in the great outdoors. Will 'TC play any music? Not likely, but if it does, the station might make "Blowin' in the Wind" its theme song. That is, until it can find a fat swan to sing in the rain. ■

WWTC jumps off bandwagon with format switch

BY TIM LYKE

Minneapolis Police Department officers paying a 3 a.m. visit to WWTC on a Thursday morning had a hint that something strange was brewing inside the AM radio station's offices in the Wesley Temple building, 123 E. Grant St.

The weather was brewing — "Weatheradio 1280 AM" — as the station prepared listeners for a format switcheroo. Those accustomed to tuning to 1280 for progressive rock sounds

were being prepared for Weatheradio in a cryptic fashion.

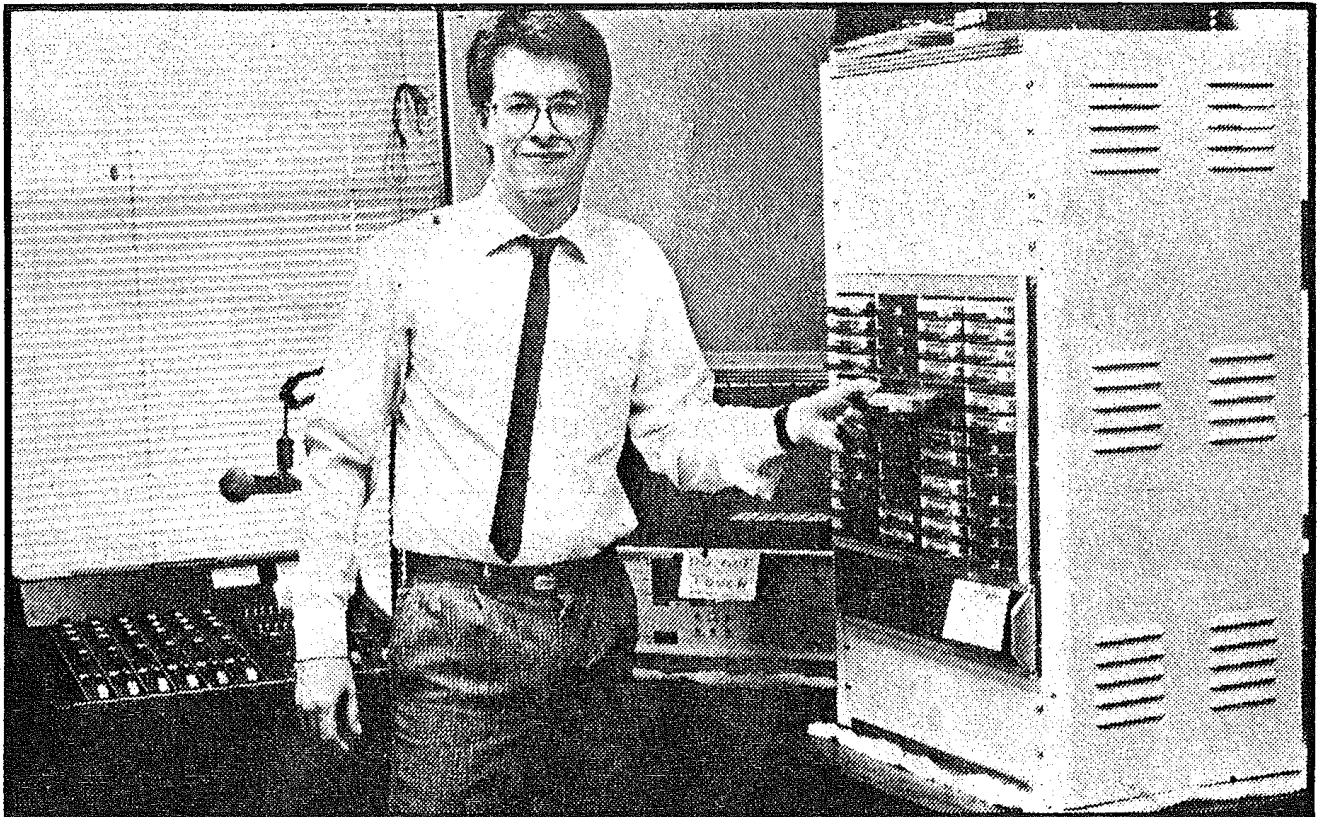
For one week the station aired a format that might best be called repetitive rock. It continuously played two songs, over and over: the Beatles' "Good Day Sunshine" and "Raindrops Keep Falling on My Head" by B.J. Thomas. The listening public noticed.

"We've had literally thousands of calls from the general public and the police departments in Min-

neapolis and St. Paul precincts saying that they've had hundreds of calls," said Scott Kramer, the station's programming director.

Station general manager Sam Sherwood reported that two days after the station began its two-song run the Minneapolis Police Department was receiving calls at the rate of 250 per hour. The reason for the repetition, Sherwood explained, was "to get people curious."

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Weatheradio programming director Scott Kramer demonstrates how his AM station updates Twin Cities and regional weather,

traffic patterns and flight schedules, by sequencing bits of information through a computer. (Photo by Tim Lyke)

WWTC Weatheradio

(Continued from Page 1)

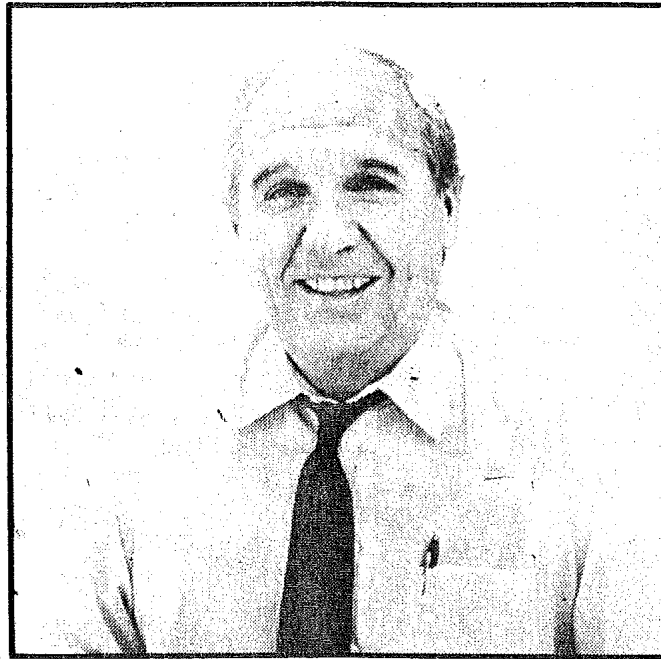
The fact that the police became curious — concerned that a studio engineer may have had a heart attack, perhaps — did not deter station personnel from continuing their gimmick to peak listeners' curiosity about what was afoot.

Sherwood had tried the same stunt at a station he used to own in Lincoln, Neb. But never before had he pioneered what was to come next: the world's first commercial all-weather radio station.

For two weeks now Weatheradio has been on the air. Listeners tuning to 1280 on the AM dial have heard a steady dose of local, regional and national weather reports, traffic updates, synchronized time tones and weather-related lifestyle tips.

The programming is repeated in 15 minute cycles, with periodic updates sequenced through a computer. Sherwood regards the format as a natural for an AM radio station. Twenty years ago he first considered adopting the all-weather sound for his Nebraska station.

"I got into conversations with old friends about how they were buying AM/FM combinations and shutting the AM off because it's such a financial drain," he said. "So then I started to really think seriously. How can we build a new product for the



Sam Sherwood, WWTC station general manager, recently repeated a stunt he performed at his old station in Lincoln, Neb. He continuously played two songs, over and over — "Good Day Sunshine" and "Raindrops Keep Falling on My Head" — to alert listeners to a format switch.

wheel rather than try to rebuild the wheel?"

Unless AM radio can adopt truly innovative formats rather than doing what FM stations technically can do better, it will go the way of the dinosaur, Sherwood believes. "The AM radio industry is trying to bring AM up to speed with FM using AM stereo," he said. "They're saying, 'let's make AM just like FM.' That's just wrong day, wrong pew.

"Why should we come with a new system of how to rotate music? Even if it

were successful, some FM station would pick it up and beat our brains out."

So rather than try to beat FM at its own game, Sherwood created his own. He shared his idea with several local station owners and approached WWTC owner Brian Short last April.

Sherwood's pitch to Short was simple. "I asked him if he was happy with what (the station) was doing. 'Whether what you're doing is right or wrong is not for me to say,' I told him. 'If you're happy, then keep doing it. But if you're not, I've got something that is remarkably new and innovative.'"

WWTC's market share at the time was "disappointing," Sherwood said. It had little to lose; Short consented.

Like farmers in spring, Sherwood and Short are gambling on the weather.

Major marketing surveys suggest their bet is a safe one, Sherwood said. He cited a study conducted by the Frank Magid organization revealing that weather forecasts are peoples' primary reason for listening to radio.

Sherwood predicts that what the station loses in prolonged listenership ("We're not going to be the kind of radio station where one person tunes in for a long time," he said) it will gain in market breadth.

"(People ask) what's your target demographic? It's everybody. We're going to have everybody tuning in one, two or three times a day from seven to 10 minutes, because they can get the weather very quickly," he said.

Sherwood describes Weatheradio as an "audiochronometer." "This is the station you tune to before you go to work, before you golf, before you shop, before you do anything. It gets you coming and going," he said.

Future plans call for the station to broadcast airline schedules and transmit computer software. But Sherwood's immediate goal is to have a significant section of the Twin Cities market find Weatheradio listening habit forming.

Predicting Weatheradio's long-term outlook for success may be too difficult for even the keenest of media forecasters, but the revolutionary nature of its format leaves little doubt that it will either flop or succeed in a big way.

Then it will be Sam Sherwood either singing "Good Day, Sunshine" or finding a few raindrops on his head.



OCT 23 1985

New outlook reformats WWTC radio

KSTP-FM CLAIMS it is "Always 95 and Sunny." But whether WWTC-AM's new all-weather format has the same optimistic forecast is not quite as clear.

The station has spent four years experimenting with formats aimed at improving poor ratings and revenues. With the latest switch, it becomes the only commercial radio station in the nation to broadcast weather exclusively.

WWTC had switched from all news to Golden Oldies and, finally, to Urban Contemporary (local funk) a year ago. But the bottom line in radio is ratings, and the station reached a record low last spring. According to Arbitron (the barometer of radio listenership), audience share measured only three-tenths of 1 percent, the lowest of any Twin Cities station.

Audience numbers translate into station revenues. As the ratings fell, so did advertising rates and sales. And since WWTC-AM is not just the flagship but the only station owned by Metro Radio, a change had to be made.

So in July, Sam Sherwood, a veteran of format changes at KDWB and WAYL, arrived from Nebraska as station manager to put an end to WWTC's precipitous decline. The station shifted to middle-of-the-road programming in August.

And then for one week in mid-September, the station continually played only two songs: the Beatles' "Good Day Sunshine" and "Rain-

drops Keep Falling on My Head" by B.J. Thomas. Listeners were both confused and concerned (police received hundreds of calls as to whether the disc jockeys were being held hostage).

On Sept. 18, the cloud of mystery disappeared: WWTC became Weatheradio 1280. For those left cold by just weather, the station also offers traffic reports and flight information.

"It was time that AM radio moved into the 1980s," says Sherwood. "What appeals to a wider range of people than the weather?"

Research supports the change, Sherwood continues. He cites a study conducted by the Associated Press that shows weather is the primary reason people turn on the radio.

Other station managers doubt Weatheradio will take the market by storm.

"People want more from a station than just the weather," says Clayton Kaufman, general manager of WCCO-AM. "The format seems more competitive with a 'Dial the Weather' telephone service than with our station."

Chuck Knapp, station manager at KSTP-FM, is even more blunt. "They've been known as the 'format of the month club.' This is a last-ditch effort by a dying station." Knapp contends that music and personalities are more important to listenership than weather reporting.

Sherwood realizes Weatheradio 1280's listeners will be fair weather friends. "We're hoping for people to tune in three times a day for seven to 10 minutes."

So far, advertisers have not exactly flooded the station. Even though rates were dropped from \$40 to \$25 per 30-second ad, agencies have been reluctant to recommend the untested format to their clients. As a result, sponsors who are guaranteed 21 spots a week have received up to four times that

number at no additional cost because air time was available.

WWTC owner Brian Short believes that in time the format will be a success with both listeners and advertisers. "We are providing a community service with instant weather analysis. The advertisers get people who are really listening to the station, not just using it as background." He indicates he will stay with the format at least through the spring sweeps.

As the lowest rated station in the market, any audience increase before then will be a breath of fresh air for Weatheradio WWTC. And for that to happen, the fall ratings only have to be fair.

—Andrew Rich