

FMQB Cover Story

Jan Jeffries

SVP/Programming, Cumulus Media

By Fred Deane

Radio runs deep and wide inside the person of Jan Jeffries. His storied career spans over four decades and includes working at some legendary radio stations along side of some of the biggest radio names of all time. He grew up listening to southern heritage Top 40 stations like WABB/Mobile, WSGN/Birmingham and KLIF/Dallas, and longed to work in the medium, something he would accomplish at the very young age of 15.

Jeffries crafted quite a career in programming and as an on-air personality with stops that included WLCY-Q105/Tampa, B104/Baltimore, G106/Chicago, WLS/Chicago and Star 94/Atlanta, working with legends like Bill Drake, George Williams, Brant Miller, John "Records" Landecker and Larry Lujack. An impressive old school upbringing taught Jeffries fundamentals about radio he would never forget. But it wasn't until he joined Stratford Research/Cumulus in 1997, upon the inception of that company, that he would earn his graduate degree under the collective tutelage of Lew and John Dickey, and begin a flourishing senior executive career.

In 2007, Jeffries was promoted from VP to his current position of SVP/Programming for Cumulus Media, where he is charged with the oversight of 350+ stations in all formats. As he continues to advise and consult his programmers and staffers in a broad sense, Jan still enjoys getting involved in day to day programming and contributing to critical local decisions as they present themselves. In addition, the syndication partnership between Cumulus and WWWW1 includes Jan as the Executive Director of the Billy Bush nightly CHR and Hot AC shows as well as the Billy Bush Weekly Countdown.

What were the circumstances that led you to Cumulus?

I had previously worked in just about all areas of radio programming and management, and also operated my own consulting firm. Just prior to joining **Stratford Research** I was EVP for three years at **Burkhart/Douglas & Associates**. I decided to leave because **Kent Burkhart** became less involved with the company, and he was the main

reason I went there. I was going to go back to Chicago and reopen the doors to my consulting company when **Lew** and **John Dickey** approached me about this new broadcast company they were starting. They wanted me to join the newly formed **Cumulus Broadcasting** in the programming and marketing research arm of Stratford Research, which was started by Lew Dickey in 1985. When Lew became President/CEO/Chairman of Cumulus in 1997, he stepped down as President of Stratford Research at which time I was promoted to President of Stratford Research.

You've been with Cumulus for thirteen years working with two of the most respected top executives in the business. What qualities have influenced you most about Lew and John Dickey?

Lew and John are absolutely two of the smartest broadcasters I've ever worked for. They are very focused philosophically, extremely dedicated, and operate with a high degree of integrity. There's a Cumulus gold standard around here established by Lew Dickey through John to me and throughout all of our radio stations and our people. The bar is set very high, and it all starts at the top. All of us at Cumulus are better broadcasters, and I believe better people, because of who we work for.

The partnership you have with them seems to be working well as evidenced by your tenure with the company.

When I came to Stratford/Cumulus it was a turning point in my career as a broadcaster thanks to the knowledge and expertise of Lew and John. They have created an environment of growth and education for all of us especially with respect to research, marketing and branding. You have to realize that research is the backbone of this company based on their expertise in this area. And I have to emphasize, it's the uniqueness of the research as it applies to all of our markets. Proper utilization of research has allowed us to learn, grow and know what will work in each market because it's the listeners telling us what they want, not just we as broadcasters doing what we think they want.



What do you find today as your guiding tenets about research that are rooted in the depth of experience you've gained running Stratford Research?

The sample is the critical component. You need a first-rate and valid sample that replicates the market, and to some degree replicates how the ratings companies have distributed their diaries or PPM's. We always make sure the samples are valid and reliable with respect to size, psychographics and demographics. We ensure a certain percentage of the sample is core to the station, while another portion represents the P2/P3 listeners. One thing we see in research is that commonalities do exist market to market. It was one of the first things I realized when I started to work at Stratford. Valid research is extremely valuable and well worth the cost especially with the details you discover, not only about the market and your station, but also about the strengths and weaknesses of your competition.

There's research and then there's valid research. One thing's for sure, Stratford is based on validity. John and Lew both came out of the school of doing things right or not doing them at all. Being elevated to President of Stratford Research required me to learn the inner workings of research and the formulation of the studies.

You personally oversee forty-nine Cumulus radio stations. How do you operate given such a wide scope, and what are your areas of emphasis?

My job scope covers Top 40, Rhythmic Top 40, Hot AC, AC, Country, Triple A, Rock, Urban and News-Talk. On a daily basis I'm (hands-on) involved with CHR, Hot AC, AC, our three big Country stations (KPLX/Dallas, WSM-FM/Nashville, WFMS/Indy), and AAA KFOG in San Francisco. Our Cumulus Format Directors, VP **Val Garris** (Rock/Alternative), **Jim Mahanay** (News-Talk), **Maurice Devoe** (Urban), **Bill Jones** (Country) and **Emily Boldon** (AAA/Rock), are a great combination who along with me are continually in touch with our stations.

It all boils down to one thing...great radio is great radio regardless of format if you follow the strategy and execute con-

sistently. Case in point, last year I temporarily relocated my corporate office for a year to our Dallas cluster to personally program KPLX/The Wolf. During that period, The Wolf went from #13 to #1, 25-54. It remains among the top three in Dallas and became the most listened to Country station in America. It's amazing what happens when a station follows the strategy!

What are the industry misconceptions about Cumulus?

One of the misconceptions with some people in the industry is that everything comes out of Atlanta. Research and strategies do indeed come from Atlanta as we are a centralized company. This does not mean it has a one size fits all philosophy. Truth is, Cumulus has more individual uniqueness to each market than most other radio companies due to the research we execute that is unique to each market and to each brand in that market.

Do the local markets individually contribute (at all) to the music research, allowing for more of a "collective" concept?

It's a combination of the two. In our larger markets the research is unique to that market, and from the major markets we take that information and use it in compilation form per format. First thing we do is regionalize it and use it accordingly, especially in the regions where we also have large market research. We take that information combine it and try to make good decisions for our smaller markets.

Regarding new music that gets added weekly to your stations, is there input from your local programmers during the process, or are all adds chain-wide adds?

There are stipulations to that. When we do what is called a chain add, it's added after passing our criteria. Our local PD's have a direct line to me for input from their market standpoint regarding music additions to the list. There have been times when I have deferred to a PD's request for a different add due to the uniqueness of his market and competitive arena.

Is there any discussion with the local programmers prior to the add lists going out?

Anytime a PD backs up a statement with the uniqueness of his station in the market, I let him do what is best. If they send me a note, which happens often in all of our formats, wanting me to look at a particular song on a given week for a specific reason, I will respond by telling them to go ahead and put it in now, whether or not it goes on the master list to all stations for the coming week.

What comes out of Atlanta each week is the guideline of what we feel very sure about. If there needs to be any variation within the market, we make the change. Again, it's not one size fits all. If there's any company that realizes the validity of that statement, it's Cumulus, because of our research background. We have stations where Rhythmic product is king and straight Pop is the second preference, whereas some other market would be the polar opposite. We need to be acutely aware of those situations. There are stations where we send out adds that I will place dayparting on the add and recommend rotation changes. If this group of stations doesn't have local research, the decisions are based on our overall research. I'll also note the sound codes, texture, energy and mood, so every one of our stations has uniform coding.

So the decisions on the new songs across a format essentially emanate from Atlanta.

Yes, however during the course of the week, prior to the Monday or Tuesday that all of that goes on, we're wide open for our PD's and MD's to let us know their thoughts. We encourage it. But if you look at our ratings across the platform, they're very good. Most of our PD's truly believe in the process of how we do things. There is some discussion, but it's not a free for all each week. They've learned that being a little cautious and smart about how we play songs is the right way to go. They realize we're in the business of playing the hits and not nec-

essarily making the hits. Once we learn that and we learn to super-serve our audience and to deliver on the expectation of the listeners to that station, we're very much on target. I send out multiple CHR lists, there's not just one. There are three versions of CHR, two versions of AC, and two versions of Country.

What are the prerequisites you look for when deciding on adding new music?

First and foremost we listen to the songs and use our ears rather than spin increases or who else has added it. If we can't trust our ears to be an important part of the equation, then we should be selling shoes. We take a lot of pride in our ability to hear songs we feel are going to be hits, songs that are usable, those that will probably mid-chart, and the one's we have serious questions about. Then we look at whether it's a core artist or not. Does the expectation align with most of our stations, and once again, we get into the three tier CHR lists that go out. Some songs go on some lists and not on others. Some are day-parted on some stations and not on others. It really depends on the market and the demo target of the station. We have some new Top 40's that skew younger than our more established ones, and it's reflected in our music decisions.

How would you classify your working relationship with the music industry?

Excellent! The successful promotion person will know the different types of stations we have within each format and will promote us having studied our playlists and rotations. There's no hiding anymore with *Mediabase* and *BDS*. It's all right there. People can study the heck out of you and pretty much know what you're doing and what your mindset is. The right approach is when they discuss a record they think is right for a group of our stations based on their knowledge of those stations. If they come in and do the inverse of that and think we're one size fits all, that's the wrong approach. That said, there are some songs that do work across the entire platform and are absolute smashes for all of our Top 40's regardless of market and uniqueness of each station.

Are there any areas in the promotion process where you find disagreement with the label reps?

Not really, everyone has their priorities laid out for them each week to get their job done. What they need to realize is the priorities for the record companies are not always the priorities for radio and conversely. But when the two line up, it's a beautiful thing. I feel on average things are generally fine between us and the labels.



Jan with Adam Corolla at the Broadcast Hall of Fame induction dinner in Chicago in the fall of 2009.

Who were some of your mentors in the early years of your career that had serious influence on your career?

No one person reached out and took me under his wing. However there were several people who had major influence on me who may have never known it. The first person was the late **Jim Tabor**, who I never knew on a personal level. It was back in the WABB/WSGN days of the sixties when I was in school. I did have a conversation with him on the phone in his later years to let him know what he meant to me. He was an afternoon drive personality in Mobile and Birmingham when I was growing up, and the magic he put on those stations from production to personality to community involvement, was just intriguing. Listening to those stations is what made me get into radio. I loved the music, but what really made me listen to radio was the personality and execution. There was a magic and a special feel. That mystery is what really pulled me into it.

How about individuals you worked with?

George Williams (head of Southern Broadcasting Company) was a mentor without really knowing it. I worked for George at WSGN in Birmingham, and then in 1978 he sent me to Tampa to work on Q105 and WLCY. I learned how to be a pretty good programmer there.

Scott Shannon had a great influence on me. I worked for Scott at KIX 106/Birmingham prior to going to WSGN as PD. Scott was amazing at knowing what the "next big thing" was going to be tomorrow, and having it on the air today. His ability to read a market and go "worst to first" was also amazing. I was a part of one of his "worst to first" air-staffs long ago! Scott gave me the nickname "Skinny Jan Jeffries" and frightened me into being a pretty good jock...and eventually a PD. His success and track record are incredible.

John Gehron was also a major influence. When he was programming WLS in Chicago I listened from afar and it was truly a marvel from a production standpoint, the bigness, the music. It was the kingpin of all Top 40 radio stations to many of us. "If LS did it, then we all should do it...hahaha." John was the reason for that and I had the pleasure and honor of working for him as PD at WLS in the mid-eighties.

Your old school passion is starting to radiate...

That was a golden era of radio. I used to listen to and study from afar great Top 40's of the time like WLS/Chicago, WABC/New York, WFIL/Philly, KLIF/Dallas, KHJ/Los Angeles and KFRC/San Francisco. I started following the mind set of programmers like **John Rook**, **Jay Cook**, **Rick Sklar**, **Michael Spears** and **Bill Drake**. I even worked at a Drake formatted station when I was 15 years-old. We learned to do things very quickly over music and not repeat ourselves in an hour's time. It was amazing what we learned!

When did your career really start to gain traction?

As I got into my 20's, I was sought out by George Williams (again of Southern Broadcasting). They owned some great Top 40's like WSGN, WKIX/Raleigh (home of **Rick Dees** and **John Tesh**), Q105/Tampa and WRVQ/Richmond. George gave me my first break and hired me to be PD of the legendary WSGN. The station was a little bit down on its luck. It had a 5.5 share when I joined. But just going in there and feeling the pride and history, and knowing there were ghosts in that City Federal building from radio legends. I felt it and the pride was overwhelming. We took that station from a 5.5 to an 11.4! That was my first huge PD job.

Given your decades of programming experience, what are the biggest differences between young programmers of today and the young programmers of your early days?

There are differences and commonalities, and thank goodness we have some of the latter working with Cumulus. As young broadcasters, we could not get enough of what we were doing. We would work from early in the morning until midnight doing everything we possibly could do for the station from working on rotations to carting up music to making sure all the carts were in phase to promotions. Programmers today are utilizing Twitter, the website, Facebook, and we're all about that at Cumulus. However getting out in the vans to the hot zip codes, like the industry has done for over four decades, is missing more often than not. If I can give any advice to young programmers today it is to learn *everything*. Learn it all from talent development, station strategy, to street promotion to all the digital platforms.

Are there any enrichment programs you do at Cumulus that are focused on the fundamentals?

I do morning show war colleges for all of our formats. These are sometimes two-day personality seminars with case histories and introductions to modern systems for show prep and planning. It's a comprehensive power point presentation and it

really helps our air talent and PD's learn the different ways of having staying power on the air, and also staying power as a radio station and not just being a music machine. One of the biggest flaws in the business today is taking a station, regardless of how many people you have on the air staff, and making it an iPod with a transmitter. That's a big mistake. Anyone can come into the market, duplicate your playlist and cut you at the knees. It's the personalities, promotions, production and overall stationality that make the difference. I don't know that it's going on much today in radio, but it's one of our strengths at Cumulus. As limited as the staffing may be at the moment we still thrive on those elements. Cumulus is still doing today, what we loved doing as a young broadcaster in 1978, I can promise you that.

What is the motivation behind the morning show war colleges?

The goal is to help develop the talent and continue the process on an ongoing basis. Sometimes it's important for the talent to let the content be the star, while other times he needs to step up. But through the process, it's how you communicate to your listeners. You must show the different sides of your personality and emotions. I try to teach our guys to be like that regardless of daypart.

The economics of operating a large radio group has changed drastically over the past two years producing more talent importation and homogenization across like formats. Where does Cumulus stand on this issue?

We do about 20% talent and content importation to local markets. We really try to stay as live and local as we can. If we have an air talent that is strictly on-air with no programming duties, and they have the time without getting out of focus with their local station, we will reward them with the option to voicetrack in some of our other markets. We also encourage our talent to jump on the website of the station they're voicetracking for, and also read the local newspapers each morning. If there's something that can be mentioned that's going on in that market, or a promotion on that station, you need to know about it. We encourage them to be as much a part of that station as they possibly can without living there.

Many of today's up and coming programmers are well schooled in the application of new tech practices. Is it prudent for programming execs to accept direction up the chain of command when formulating decisions about new tech initiatives?

Absolutely. One of the great things about this job is that I learn so much from our PDs, marketing people and web gurus...new things each week that are available to us. I might not always understand it day one, but it really gives me something to work on to grow as a broadcaster. It's one of the great things about this job, learning from our people about new technology. We have people in Atlanta, like **Bill Hanson** who's a VP and is an absolute expert with all of the new tech platforms from design to execution. He's one of the best in the country and he's right down the hall from me. He's a genius in breaking it down into radio layman terms which works well for someone like me.

2009 was a difficult year of transition in very tough economic times. What were the biggest adjustments made by Cumulus that affected the operation of your role with the company through this process?

It added several more hats. The upside is it allowed me to revisit areas I used to be involved with on a grassroots level. Things I loved doing that had previously been left to our people in the field. As we streamlined our staffs and responsibilities we were all given more things to do, but it also reminded us of why we got into the business to begin with, allowing us to enjoy our jobs even more. We have more to do in less time, but it makes the job more rewarding being more involved on a day to day basis in many more areas than we previously were. **QB**