

# Milwaukee startup blazes 'third path' to diversity

By J. Mikel Ellcessor

Imagine you have a solid signal in a Top-40 market, you have unprecedented funding commitments, and a wide range of influential community groups are supporting the relaunch of this underperforming station. The station will have to be broadly relevant and representative of the city's general population. You'd want it to serve the city's younger folks. It needs to be uniquely and passionately local. People have asked for something *truly* different, and they've been promised they'll get it.

What's the hitch?

It's a *public radio* station. It's in Milwaukee, a city with a majority African-American metro population and a racial divide that's very wide.

Public radio isn't where young, multiethnic communities in industrial cities go for radio. For these folks, public radio equals NPR, and public radio has a problem with diversity—it doesn't have much of it. Our target audience believes public radio isn't meant for them.

## Unlikely in every way

In 2003, an extraordinary opportunity emerged in Milwaukee. The public school system requested proposals for a non-profit to run its WYMS-FM—a perennial underperformer—under a local management agreement. A local group, Radio for Milwaukee, won the contract.

Because the school system would not provide the station any direct cash support, the service would have to become self-sufficient in a few years. But Radio for Milwaukee had another extraordinary component: Peter Buffett, Warren Buffett's son and a passionate philanthropist with a well-resourced foundation. The seed funding from the younger Buffett's NoVo Foundation amounted to one of the largest infusions of new venture funding in public radio history.

By summer 2004, with the operating

agreement in hand, Radio for Milwaukee was ready to start crafting the service. It's easy to imagine how exciting this time must have been—and how challenging it would be to fulfill the group's ambitions.

RFM proposed a hyper-local service that would mirror Milwaukee back to itself. The new service would attract a younger audience and support the city's desire to bridge communities by providing multi-ethnic appeal. The music would initially attract listeners who would then encounter their neighbors and friends talking about what was *really* going on in the city. Without a trace of irony and perhaps too little humility, Radio for Milwaukee's original team promised a service that would change public radio.

A station built using public radio's national programming wouldn't deliver the desired locally focused service. The classical/ jazz/Triple A music options don't reach a younger, urban-centric audience. Jazz and gospel would seem to be possible options; they successfully draw African-American audiences for stations owned by historically black colleges and universities. In Milwaukee, however, WYMS had carried syndicated JazzWorks programming without connecting with an audience. Developing another jazz format probably couldn't attract enough listeners to be sustainable.

On the first pass, it looked like public radio's existing offerings and commercial radio were not providing meaningful inspiration.

Early in the process, RFM retained Mike Henry of Paragon Media Strategies as its format consultant. He recommended a third path between commercial and noncommercial radio. Defining that path proved elusive, and the launch was pushed back several times.

This was Radio for Milwaukee's status when, in summer 2006, I left WNYC to become executive director of the most speculative venture I'd ever encountered in public radio.



A poster published by Milwaukee's newest public radio management plays up the two-way nature of its populist experiment. (Image: RadioMilwaukee.)

## Calling the shot

It's fashionable to document public radio's risk-averse behavior, but I've seen some bold moves, including the early '90s start of Triple A stations in public radio, WNYC's counterintuitive, successful relaunch of *On the Media* with Brooke Gladstone and Bob Garfield, and ways that KCRW and Knoxville's thrilling WDVX reflect and embrace their regions.

Milwaukee is a spectacular and contradictory city. It is working hard to recover economically from shifts in its industrial base and struggling with high violence, economic segregation and a troubled public infrastructure. The locals voice their frustration by quoting negative social and economic statistics, but life for many is as safe, affordable and humane as anywhere in the country.

Diving into launch planning a year ago, Mike Henry and all of us on the RFM team obsessed over one question: What does Milwaukee sound like? The answers don't fit conveniently into existing formats; most of them ran against radio's received wisdom.

On Feb. 26, RadioMilwaukee launched with a format that is 100 percent locally originated and is completely unduplicated

in either public or commercial radio. The program strategy is built on three legs:

■ **Music:** Embracing the blended nature of our culture, RadioMilwaukee bridges the rock and urban formats while creating our own “sweet spot” between commercial radio’s unerring familiarity and public radio’s overemphasis on under-recognized music.

Most of the songs are unequivocal hits, and most of the rest come from major artists. The music library is as broad and expansive as you would expect for a public radio station, but we use commercial radio techniques to give the listener a reliably and consistently diverse sound. We’ve taken a calculated risk of including global pop, while we also celebrate local artists, playing at least one per hour every day. RFM’s hosts are encouraged to remain as authentic as they were when they showed up.

■ **Community voices:** We break the traditional divide between the makers and consumers of radio. Listeners speak their minds in produced clips, 20 to 75 seconds long, on subjects including race, economic opportunity, the character of Milwaukee and their hopes for the city as well as fun, light topics such as favorite childhood musical memories. In presenting them, we’re unfettered by news-department considerations, so we allow them to be viewpoint-driven, raw and forceful. We don’t present ourselves as journalists; we don’t have a news department.

■ **Community engagement:** We take station-city integration to a new level by weaving community input throughout the enterprise, both on- and off-air. Our grassroots hiring process brought a diverse cross-section of Milwaukee natives into their first radio jobs. Milwaukee residents appear on the air and share their wisdom and experience on topics such as gun violence, alternative education strategies, parenting and other subjects that resonate in the neighborhoods. This is done through original, locally focused short-form interviews that appear within the regular music format.

None of our choices was easy because

any of them could work against us—cleaving the audience and driving listeners away. We didn’t pick these legs of our strategy to make a point but because we felt that they would add up to a unique, compelling local service.

We designed the station to attract an audience that will be younger and more diverse than public radio’s traditional white, educated profile. In Milwaukee that means adding younger, less-educated people and strong representation from the African-American and Hispanic communities.

Our revenue model, I admit, is unproven and still developing. From the start, we’ve planned to avoid the marathon interruptions of on-air fundraising, and we want to try new approaches to raising funds from corporations, foundations and major donors as well as prospective listener-donors who have not been addressed by public radio before.

The significant support of Peter Buffett’s foundation gives us some leeway in building a revenue base, but it does not take the pressure off. Having strong support from a highly visible and well-regarded funder dramatically increased the wattage of the spotlight on our every move. It left us no room to fudge on our promise to hand-build a station for this city. The listeners’ effusive, generous reaction to RadioMilwaukee has been humbling. Nine months after launch, RadioMilwaukee’s cume is up 35 percent and the AQH is up 50 percent. Our broad audience target is 18-44 years old, with a special focus on 25-34. Three-quarters of our cume hits within the 18-44 target, and 42 percent of listeners are in their 20s. The core audience spends 14 hours a week listening to us.

For public radio in general, the number



**The new operator promised to hand-build a new WYMS for Milwaukee and hired a staff to do it. Pictured: midday host Marcus Doucette.**

of 18-44 year olds listening in Milwaukee increased by more than 12,500, or nearly one quarter, since RadioMilwaukee’s launch.

Minority listeners constitute 45 percent of our audience (19 percent African-American, 23 percent Hispanic). The African-American audience is up 17 percent since relaunch, and the Hispanic audience is up 23 percent.

Another sign of an involved audience is our being chosen as Milwaukee’s Favorite Radio Station by the readers of Shepherd-Express, one of the city’s arts newsweeklies. It’s an extraordinary piece of local validation that the audience has already been willing to step up and (as

our slogan suggests) Be Heard.

RadioMilwaukee is attracting a broadly multiethnic audience that cares about the city. They’re more interested in seeing how things can come together than how they can fall apart.

## Day after tomorrow

Getting to this point has been difficult. When you want to hire a strong, diverse local team, you run headfirst into the buzz-saw that is public radio’s lack of credibility in diverse communities, and attracting strong candidates has been a particular challenge. Fortunately, RadioMilwaukee’s vision is getting through, and we were able to repatriate Milwaukee native Kedar Coleman to be our program director. Kedar had been working on Chicago Public Radio’s Vocalo, a great new station with objectives similar to ours.

Those objectives are now widely shared in public radio—attracting a younger and more diverse audience, creating programs that speak in authentic voices, finding how to make it sustainable by involving the new

listeners in its support. RadioMilwaukee is an unfinished experiment aiming to meet those goals.

Some media and entertainment-industry people have been openly hostile to the idea of a station where people of different races gather. But who can be surprised? For most Americans, it has been a long time since radio tried to be a uniting cultural force. For decades, radio's usual drill has been to assemble programming for a given cohort of listeners and to train them to believe they belong in an audience with other folks who look like them, talk like them, earn the same amounts of money and hold the same beliefs. We slice the audience into thinner and thinner slices until they drift away, tired of that same old sliver.

RadioMilwaukee received some early critiques of the short Community Voices segments, including some very edgy, imperfect production in the launch package. The voices were raw and presented in an

intentionally energetic, spontaneous style; they said unusual things and made us look in the mirror.

One critique came from a leading public radio figure who liked the "real voices that celebrate the city." But the Community Voices segments sometimes went too far, the critique said. "When issues like segregation were brought up, it seemed to wrap with simple answers and a bit of a utopian vision that didn't ring true."

Perhaps the sound of authentic voices didn't seem real compared with the cool remove of most public radio journalism, but we learned that you do get bursts of extreme optimism from regular folks when they're allowed to speak, unmediated, about their hopes for their communities.

I still have a collection of listener e-mails that came in around launch, including one that I keep close at hand:

*"The people of metro Milwaukee have been waiting a very LONG time to have a good radio station. It has been said that if*

*you're not part of the solution, then you're part of the problem. You, fair-minded producers, are part of the solution! You are onto something big here. I'm putting this in lofty terms because I feel it's important – you are providing something for people to stand tall for. Don't mess this up!"*

As in most parts of life, there's no objectively correct way to get this right. Even though it's early to say we've found the answers, it feels safe to say RadioMilwaukee is going beyond asking interesting questions to working with an audience to create some new solutions. It's an approach I hope a wider swath of public radio pursues. ■

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