

From Radio Central, You're On the Monitor Beacon

by Jim Cox

An inspired creative, Sylvester L. (Pat) Weaver, NBC president, figured it out in the mid 1950s.

No longer was the radio audience camped out in one place—historically in the nation's living rooms. Sets were cheaper, people had more discretionary income as well as time. Listening habits had shifted from traditional family gathering places to encompass kitchens, bedrooms, basements and garages. In postwar America, an economic boom elevated many, putting more dollars in their pockets. Quickening their pace, these denizens acquired unaccustomed mobility, running here to there to get more things done. Sometimes they were at home but not so endlessly. Often they were in transit; many were in workplaces; occasionally they spent a few leisure hours on recreation fields, gazing at mountain vistas and enjoying surfside escapes.

The phenomenon saw radio transferring from a simple domicile-dominated listening post to something broader as fans gravitated elsewhere. Pat Weaver was among the first bright ones to recognize the conventional change. If

radio was to survive, thought he, it needed a transfusion quickly to accommodate the flexible schedules of the people it was attempting to attract.

Television had become the one-eyed monster as it savagely invaded living rooms everywhere, pushing the “music box” that David Sarnoff envisioned in 1920 out of its foremost occupational zone. By early 1954 some 58 percent of U. S. households included a TV set. Before the year ended the number of vehicles in America equipped with radios equaled the number of sets still playing in the nation’s living rooms. The evidence was clear that the pattern for purely *listening* was transitioning dramatically. While there was still an audio-only audience, those addicts were clearly going places and doing things.

Born in 1908 in Los Angeles, Pat Weaver evolved from a local West Coast radio station background before becoming advertising manager of the American Tobacco Company at 30. A decade beyond, in 1949 he joined NBC-TV as vice president for programming and hit his stride. The creative innovator possessed a genuinely matchless imagination. The innovator developed “institutions” like *Today*, *Tonight*, a midday hour for the ladies titled *Home*, and *Wide, Wide World*, plus a distinctive myriad of “spectaculars” for his video chain. All were successful in TV’s infancy. *Today* and *Tonight* set the pattern for similar fare on competing webs and persist to the present age, now in their sixth decades.

Ascending to the NBC presidency in 1953, Weaver was smart enough to grasp that his radio network was in peril; without a major transformation, it was doomed to wither and die. Parenthetically, perhaps not enough credit has been

allocated to Steve White, then station manager at WRCA, New York City, NBC's flagship outlet. It was apparently White's brainchild that became the germ of Weaver's definitive audio inspiration. Some have proposed that it even saved a network from extinction.

At the behest of Charles Denny, vice president in charge of NBC's owned-and-operated stations – who instructed White and others to attempt to increase their revenue by conceiving of “something that was different, that you weren't doing before” – White instituted a ground-breaking program titled *Pulse*. For an hour-and-a-half on Saturday mornings in the early 1950s the show carried an anchor plus separate news and sports reporters. There were still other contributors who offered special features such as reviewing events of the previous week and highlighting some of the weekend at hand. The show's unstructured magazine style immediately caught Weaver's notice. He felt *Pulse* could likely be fine tuned and adapted to his coast-to-coast chain.

The fascinating details of how Weaver's concept turned into reality is recounted in a couple of texts by communications professor and ex-radio jock Dennis Hart – *Monitor: The Last Great Radio Show* (Writer's Club Press, 2002) and *Monitor (Take 2): The Revised, Expanded Inside Story of Network Radio's Greatest Program* (iUniverse, Inc., 2003). Thankfully, there is also a website that Hart maintains which allows current visitors to once again hear snippets of *Monitor* shows: www.monitorbeacon.com. The author depicts the format as consisting of “nuggets of information or entertainment long enough to grab the audience's

interest but short enough not to bore them.” He elaborates: “The program had to emphasize radio’s increasing strength as a portable medium – something TV was not.”

The montage of widely diversified programming elements under the *Monitor* umbrella took off on Sunday, June 12, 1955 with a one-hour simulcast over NBC Radio and Television followed by seven more hours of aural-only airing. The following weekend *Monitor* returned as a 40-hour continuous Saturday and Sunday tableau of appealing material picked up live or on tape from around the globe. It started at 8 a.m. Eastern Time on Saturday and ended at 12 midnight on Sunday. Segments were divided into three- and four-hour blocks. In 1956 the agenda was reduced to 32 broadcast hours per weekend, eliminating the Saturday overnight portion; by 1961, it was limited to 16 hours, including three-hour blocks on Saturday morning, afternoon and night and Sunday night, and a four-hour block Sunday afternoon. Finally, the program was curtailed to 12 hours per weekend in 1974, each repeated for another 12 hours. That allowed stations greater flexibility in programming but curtailed *Monitor’s* ability to air breaking news events.

Each block was hosted by a well-known personality. In the early days they were labeled “communicators” and there were two of them co-hosting each segment. Among the well recognized names were Mel Allen, Morgan Beatty, Frank Blair, Ted Brown, Bill Cullen, Hugh Downs, Art Ford, Frank Gallop, Joe Garagiola, Dave Garroway, Ben Grauer, Monty Hall, Walter Kiernan, Jim Lowe,

Frank McGee, Ed McMahon, Henry Morgan, Barry Nelson, Gene Rayburn, Don Russell, Ted Steele, John Bartholomew Tucker and Big Wilson.

Then there was a “second tier” of personalities on *Monitor* with recurring duties – familiar names that spoke on a now-and-then basis in the roles of continuing contributors, including specialists in gardening and home maintenance, investments and purchasing decisions, health and psychological care, concerns about teens and tots, amusements and sports, culinary arts, national and international relations and many other topics of curiosity to the common man and woman. On a regular basis, *Monitor* audiences were fêted with words of wisdom from the likes of psychologist Dr. Joyce Brothers, Al Capp (“with an opinion about everything”), “On the Line with ...” correspondent Bob Considine, homemaking consultants Arlene Francis and Betty Furness, sports commentator Joe Garagiola, Graham Kerr (“The Galloping Gourmet”), advice consultant Ann Landers, movie critic Gene Shalit and many more.

There were lots of funny people, too – quipsters who made audiences snicker. In addition to infrequent guests like Steve Allen, Jack Benny, Milton Berle, Bill Cosby, Bob Hope and lots more, there was a continent of recurring comics who showed up repeatedly on *Monitor's* airwaves, among them: Bob (Elliott) and Ray (Goulding), Ernie Kovacs, Fibber McGee & Molly, Mike Nichols and Elaine May, Phyllis Diller and Jonathan Winters.

Beyond the hosts, news readers and writers, engineers and others who got *Monitor* onto and off the airwaves on time, there was a producer, writer and

production assistant assigned to each segment of those three- and four-hour blocks. In 1961 the program settled into five separate units comprised of three-member teams, each one acting fairly independently of the others, yet never totally oblivious to what was happening elsewhere under the *Monitor* aegis.

Coordinating all of this effort, riding herd on everything and everybody, there was an executive producer. NBC newsman Jim Fleming was picked by Pat Weaver to kick it off. While Fleming was the first to deliver the news weekday mornings on NBC-TV's *Today* show beginning in 1952, he was drilled in radio. The ex-CBS Radio newsman's credits included narrating 1940s dishpan dramas like *The Goldbergs*, *John's Other Wife*, *The Light of the World* and *Vic and Sade* as well as *Mr. Keen*, *Tracer of Lost Persons*. (His sibling, Ed Fleming, was also a daytime announcer in the 1940s and 1950s, incidentally, introducing milady to a couple of long-term soapy sagas, CBS's *Our Gal Sunday* and NBC's *Front Page Farrell*.) Jim Fleming, meanwhile, was by Pat Weaver's side when the innovator's *Monitor* hypothesis became reality. "The future of NBC Radio depended on how well Fleming and Weaver succeeded," a pundit intimated. Other executive producers successively ran the mammoth project after Fleming departed to produce *The Morning Show* on CBS-TV (1956-57). But he was the first and set the stage for what was to follow.

All the headquarters workforce of about 50 people at the launch of *Monitor* was housed on the fifth floor of the RCA Building in midtown Manhattan, New York, in what NBC grandly referred to as *Radio Central*. (One

wag branded it “a playpen for adults.”) There in a vast expanse of open space with unobstructed views sat desks of staffers and banks of communications equipment reflecting contemporary technology. From Radio Central, *Monitor's* “ring around the world” could reach virtually anywhere and anybody. And over the course of its long haul it did just that. During its first decade *Monitor* aired an incredible 60,000 remote pick-ups, proffered more than 75,000 interviews and featured more than 150,000 musical selections, many of those live and others recorded.

Relying heavily upon 150 strategically located stringers for appealing stories and interviews in those early days, the show maintained that it was “going places and doing things.” Claimed one newspaper journalist: “The world is *Monitor's* oyster.” In its earliest years it must have seemed that if almost anything was provocative, it was available via *Monitor*. On one weekend in October 1955 *Monitor* took its fans to overhear the din and exchanges occurring at a planetarium’s observance of the autumnal equinox; to a headache clinic in New York City; a San Francisco arts festival; an on-site construction visit to the Nyack-Terrytown bridge; the commissioning at Portsmouth, Va., of the aircraft carrier *Forrestal*; a Claremore, Okla. vintage auto auction; a “building bee” at Binghamton, N. Y.; and on rides aboard a Madison Avenue bus in New York and a Los Angeles streetcar. Remotes were not only complicated to produce but incredibly expensive yet plentiful in those days. There was live musical entertainment that same weekend from Las Vegas, Chicago and New York as

well as an Iowa-Wisconsin football game and interviews with a dozen “name” guests ranging from Maurice Chevalier and Peggy Lee to Ted Lewis and John Wayne.

As the years rolled by and cost-cutting reductions were instituted, the reliance upon stringers for much of *Monitor's* material evaporated. Instead NBC staffers, entertainers, personalities and newsmen filled the void. Those formative years had been a radio listeners’ dream – and literally about everything that Pat Weaver had originally envisioned. In its heyday *Monitor* drew at least a sixth of the nation’s population (then 180,000,000) as listeners some time every weekend. No other radio series in the late 1950s and early 1960s could post similar acclaim.

In its earliest years the NBC “weekend radio service” (as *Monitor* liked to dub itself) maintained a couple of aces in the hole which it summoned forth at unexpected intervals. Both became legendary trademarks of the venerated broadcasts.

One featured ex-model Tedi Thurman as “Miss Monitor.” Capitalizing on a breathless delivery over soft music, she dispatched the current temperatures from Anchorage to Augusta and beau coups of added places large and small. Media reporter Jack Gould of *The New York Times* submitted that her reports could be “an irresistible invitation to an unforgettable evening.” *Printers’ Ink* volunteered that “Miss Monitor makes 41 degrees and cloudy in Moscow seem like sultry summer weather.” For sooth, no one had ever made Fahrenheit sound so beguilingly, shamelessly wanton as Miss Monitor did.

Bob Elliott and Ray Goulding (as *Bob and Ray*) were still more staples in *Monitor's* closet of tricks, plucked for those instances when their brand of comedy could lighten distracting and heavier moments. Beyond those, the pair was held in reserve for the full 40-hour weekend and pressed into service whenever a foul-up occurred – a remote pick-up failed, a tape machine broke or a live studio guest didn't materialize. At a producer's signal they could be on the air instantly, filling the void with their popular characterizations of Mary McGoon, Webley Webster, Wally Ballou, Charles the Poet, Steve Bosco, Dean Archer Armstead and scores of other voices that made the duo and their offbeat humor so widely popular. *Bob and Ray's* impromptu appearances were habitually some of the more memorable and better pickings from *Monitor's* cornucopia of treats.

Despite all of the foregoing, nevertheless, the single most striking element of the *Monitor* juggernaut indisputably was the infamous beacon. It remained the constant in the program's dual decades while all other ingredients and personalities came and went. Comprised of an amalgamation of high frequency beeps and boops, the beacon was a sound like no other; once most people heard it, they never forgot it. Proclaimed one scholar: "The beacon became the identifying sound for a generation of radio listeners."

There were actually dual sets of sounds contributing to the identifying mark. The first, repetitiously reverberating, might be – to anyone unaccustomed to it – signified similarly as an old-fashioned calliope. The second resonance, containing bass-sounding notes, climbed up and down the scale. Its origins were

in telephone “touch tone” technology that had been labeled by AT&T as *multifreq*.

Jim Wood, a telephone industry technician, explained: “Even we at the phone company referred to *multifreq* tones as ‘*Monitor* tones,’ showing that many of us were familiar with NBC’s weekend service.” OTR hobbyist Henry Brugsch further attested that those *multifreq* tones “had an interesting musical cadence when mixed and played together.” He affirmed: “Someone cleverly discovered the tonal relationships and made them work by juxtaposing recordings of them.” Another OTR fan, Ken Piletic, expounded on how it meshed together:

“Previously long distance calls were routed through manual switchboards. When pulse dial relays were involved several operators were required to route the calls. By the 1950s, however, advanced proficiency allowed tones to be coupled between circuits to perform switching operations. When the touch-tones were tested they could be heard on the phone lines as the routing was taking place. Someone at NBC heard the tones and decided to record them, slow them down, speed them up, overdub them and mix them to produce the *Monitor* beacon.”

That delightful cadence was a clarion call to listeners that something was about to happen on *Monitor*. It was applied at the start and finish of every half-hour; following *NBC Monitor News on the Hour*; included before and after remote pick-ups, interviews, musical segments, national advertising and a plethora of features; and it indicated that a local insertion might be coming up or ending. In

the latter case, at about the midpoint in every half-hour, the communicator/host announced over those fascinating, compelling callioscopic tones: “You’re on the *Monitor* beacon. Take one.” While recorded music spun for 70 seconds for the national audience, local stations cut away to insert one-minute commercials pitching goods and services available to listeners in their communities before returning to the web. Following those plugs the beacon reinstated them to the national fare. It was a neat way, only then in its infancy, of the chain sharing the advertising spots with local underwriters.

Monitor became NBC Radio’s primary revenue-generating phenomenon of all time, almost singly maintaining the aural chain for a couple of decades, sources validated. Until the early 1950s, radio commercials were purchased almost altogether in 5-, 15-, 30- and 60-minute “buys” generally by major firms. A shift in the model of purchasing (and controlling) programs in that era to “spot” advertising permitted many middle-sized and lesser organizations to plug their commodities on the air for the first time. This was also known as “dual,” “multiple” or “participating” advertising. Now sponsors were selective in buying air time here and there in various programs. *Monitor* was made for such a configuration: nobody would buy 40 continuous hours of network time, and spots could be included in each half-hour for network and affiliates’ commercial insertions.

Alas, all things eventually end and so did *Monitor*, bowing out on January 26, 1975, about four months shy of its 20th anniversary. There were several

contributing factors but two predominated: lack of station clearance and subsequent lack of advertising, the latter based upon so few (only about half) of NBC's roughly 200 affiliates continuing to air *Monitor*. The outlets rebelled against the network programming because the single commodity they had for sale — *time* — could be peddled at far greater profit to them individually. The stations of other webs pressed for the same outcome in the 1950s and won.

Jack Thayer, appointed NBC Radio president in July 1974 — in biblical parlance “a new king..., which knew not Joseph” (or Pat Weaver) — pulled the plug on the series with the greatest number of airtime hours in broadcast history. While it had suffered significant losses in advertising, number of affiliates carrying it and thereby audience hearing it, *Monitor* was a preferable alternate for legions to the news-features-sports syndrome that followed.

“Weaver’s Folly,” a term industry insiders applied, had still earned citations that no other series had even come remotely close to. Those nearly 20 years encompassed in excess of 1,000 weekends and 20,000 hours on the ether, far more than any other network program. *Monitor* earned George Foster Peabody awards for excellence in 1963 and 1972. After a decade of red ink in which NBC lost \$12 million in the 1950s, the net turned the corner in 1960 primarily because of *Monitor* which contributed \$5 million that year. There were several impressive surges in the net’s bottom line in the years immediately beyond, most of them directly attributable to *Monitor*. While an effort at the same time to add weeknight hours to the longstanding series failed, some

weekend segments of the marathon programming were virtually sold out, *Monitor* riding a wave of colossal market penetration throughout the 1950s and 1960s.

During *Monitor's* lengthy tenure a new generation of radio aficionados were born, people who never would have gotten a taste of "how it used to be" in addition to the exciting communications, information and entertainment *Monitor* brought them. The successor format to *Monitor*, programmed for 50 minutes of every hour beginning February 1975 and dubbed the *NBC News and Information Service*, was dead a little more than two years hence, aired by just 62 stations. It had been promoted as the fundamental answer to radio audiences' needs upon its inception.

Show biographer Dennis Hart maintains that *Monitor* was "the Last Great Radio Show." For many who heard it, it might be a tough sell to reach any other conclusion. *Monitor* was a massive venture of epic proportions. For most in its audience, its solitary failure ultimately was that it simply that it went away too soon.

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