WTBS ends historic year and ups power

By Paul Schindler

WTBS, after months of work and not inconsiderable hassle with the Federal Communications Commission, celebrated its 10th anniversary this past April 10th with the largest potential audience that it has had in its 25 year history.

When its FM transmitter was permitted back on the air by the FCC at the beginning of March, the station's 75 watt signal (effective radiated power, vertical and horizontal) from a new tower on top of the Eastgate building gave it a potential audience equal to the Greater Boston population of nearly three million.

History

That's a far cry from the several hundred listeners available to WMIT when it began its first broadcast, via carrier current restricted radiation "now that the wartime radiation restrictions have been lifted." According to The Tech at that time, the first broadcast was delayed several weeks since "the volunteer engineers from course six have been busy with their assignments lately."

But after six weeks of getting their things together, the WMIT staff made it on the air at 7:59:52 on November 26, 1946, on a frequency of 840 KHz., where service is being provided to the MIT dorms today.

During the late 50's, as FM became widespread, the station decided to try to expand its services to the fraternities across the river by getting an FM license. The process lasted more than three years, and was complicated by the station's desire to be commercial on FM. In the end, the call was changed to WTBS (WMIT was OK on campus, but no two on-the-air stations may have the same call letters; there is a WMIT in North Carolina) and the current format (commercial on AM to the campus; non-commercial on FM to the Cambridge community) was settled.

More power to the FM

Ten watts and a tower high atop Walker Memorial were sufficient at first, but as the Green Building and other tall buildings went up in Cambridge, reception deteriorated. A new location and more power were called for.

Thanks to the determined work of MIT, Dane Hammernessness, the WTBS Technical department, and a lot of other people, plans were made for the Eastgate move. It was expected to be complete last spring; however, final moving work was done this last Christmas.

Due to an unexpected error in an application form, the expected two-week wait for permission to return to the air turned into eight weeks. WTBS's 10th year on FM (25th on AM) was marked by a series of programming innovations, only a few of which can be mentioned here.

This year saw the return of all-request Nite Owl to Saturday nights (the program has been on the station for 20 years), hosted by Don Murphy '64, one of the all-time WTBS greats. It nearly witnessed the demise of another WTBS perennial, the 7-9:30 am wake-up show known as WTBS "Rise and Shine"; the program was not aired for a time during the middle of the year.

Among the programs of an unusual nature introduced were "WTBS Presents..." and "The Potluck Coffeehouse Broadcasts." The former is one of the few attempts in recent memory at WTBS to present a continuing dramatic radio series. Although there have been scripting and staff problems, the series did turn out at least two universally acclaimed episodes, "Sam Patch, the Greatest Story Ever Told," so far... "and "Riders to the Sea." The Potluck Coffeehouse broadcasts originate Friday evenings at the coffeehouse when one is being held, or at the WTBS studios otherwise. They feature live folk music performed by local artists at the Potluck, which is held by the Student Center Committee each Friday and Saturday.

The station, as always, is in a state of flux, and has no "Master Plan" for the future. Stereo and higher power are on the horizon, but the short-run is being dominated by efforts to increase staff size and improve quality as well as quantity of programming offered.

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 compiled with Additional Film Notes by D. A. Pennebaker

Thought: "If it were done when 'tis done, then it were well it were done quickly."