



Aussie Radio Flag flies in the US

By Dave Rogerson

After featuring an article in a recent issue of The Music Network on Tracey Austin, whose radio journey finds her winging her way from Dallas, Texas to NOVA's Brisbane HQ, David Rogerson caught up with veteran Australian radio programmer, Lee Cornell, for his take on the evolving radio broadcast landscape in the US. Lee has spent most of the last decade overseas in broadcast in the UK, and more recently the US. He briefly returned to Australia in 2004 to launch WorldAudio's Radio 2 at Olympic Park in Sydney. Now this global hopping PD is a resident in California as OM/Brand & Marketing with MEC Networks Inc, based at their San Diego Blazin' 98.9 FM/ESPN 800-AM combo. It's a world away from Australia, now running an FM young adult hip-hop format and an AM all sports station, as we find out can white men really dance and cover baseball at the same time?

What have you been up to since you departed Radio 2?

"I came back from the UK to help Andrew Thompson develop the Radio 2 project. We gathered some great talent together and created the foundations for a new and interesting broadcast proposition in an excellent state of the art studio facility at Olympic Park. Had that Australia-wide metropolitan/regional broadcast footprint migrated to either DAB or DRM, it would have been the only national commercial digital Australian radio license. That would have been a very serious prospect for any operator wanting to get into the Australian radio business; and there were several major players who recognised that. It would, of course, also have had serious implications for the incumbent commercial radio network structure. Essentially it could have broken the mould and delivered a new national alternative regionally too, which might have been timely, given the current mood of Australian country radio.

"I had options with the new radio license schedule back in the UK but my wife and I have US residency and we had already put everything in place for a move stateside. We left Radio 2 on April 8, 2006 and were in San Francisco a week later."

And then?

"Mike McVay, President of McVay Media, knew I was coming and got me involved with his client station project for MEC Networks in San Diego, although I was also in conversation with some key US radio people there as well before I left. I got very involved with the MEC consultancy from

early July last year and the CEO/President, Mario Mayans, made me an offer to join the network in October. McVay Media consult the group, which is great, as Mike and I have known each other for many years, and he is a superb radio guy."

Tell us a bit about your stations and responsibilities...

"MEC Networks is the biggest owner operator of TV and radio stations across Mexico. and they've

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moved into the US with broadcast licenses in the last five years or so. As Operations Manager, I work closely with McVay Media and department managers in developing and implementing brand strategy, with a focus on programming, marketing and promotions. Getting the group into those non-traditional revenue areas of SMS, online initiatives and other broadcast platform technologies is right up there. I was a little surprised that US radio wasn't further along with digital and things like mobile

phone interactivity, online and podcasting, but it's becoming a real focus across the US industry now and will be a hot topic at the NAB."

So where are you based?

"At the San Diego Blazin' 98.9 FM/ESPN 800-AM combo headquarters and my key focus right now is re-launching the Blazin' 98.9 brand. It was a baptism of fire I hadn't anticipated after just flying in from Sydney but you do what you have to. As you see in the press from time to time, hip-hop in the US can have a dark side that is very attached to the street and gang elements, and that can put some things on the table you would never have to contemplate with other radio formats."

And the formats?

"Blazin' is one of two youth-targeted Hip-hop Rhythmic brands in the market, alongside a couple of other Old School and Hispanic Latino brands working variations of the format genre. We have an exciting strategy in place for Blazin' 98.9 into this year. The website has been totally redesigned, there's great talent being brought in on-air and behind the scenes, and I expect the station to be a major 18 – 34 year force and in the top echelon of that demo by this time next year. The ESPN brand is a powerful sport trademark here in the US, and there is also a MEC focus to develop this locally and further afield through our radio platforms."

How has it been for a guy from Australia adapting to both the American way of doing business and a format we rarely get to hear down under?

"I think I've been fairly good at adapting wherever

broadcast has taken me. The big thing is to listen and get involved in the culture and with the people where you are. The Hip-hop Rhythmic format is a world and a lifestyle away for an Aussie suddenly surrounded by all that goes with this music. Having said that, being a 'clean-skin' to the format has distinct advantages. There's a lot of passion and layers in hip-hop. It permeates a level of society and community, and reaches into mainstream consumption. I surround myself with good, talented people who know and genuinely feel the music. I work on bringing best radio practice and strategy to their energy, knowledge and commitment."

Are there many differences in radio rules and regulations?

"Broadcast here is exploring and developing into new technologies too. The broadcast rules and regulations differ, and the way of doing business has a degree of political correctness – and at times conservatism or schmooze – that is a contrast to the famous Aussie directness and habit of calling 'a spade a shovel'. Radio here has traditionally lived inside a '60 second spot' business metric with a sizable layer of value-adding that is a very different scenario to Australia or the UK's '30 second' world, 'less is more' and in the UK's case; S&P (Sponsorship and Promotion) as a profit centre not a cost centre."

And in programming, how do radio and the labels get along?

"Well, there are more checks and balances here than Australia. Payola and plugola are still on the radar of the US Attorney General's office, and for radio that means quarterly verification letters with all major record companies setting out relationships; value and disclaimer letters for every CD, concert ticket and product giveaway ensuring no additional 'spins', placement or gratuities; and the existence of an 8 point 'Rules of Engagement' that basically sets out how radio can function with artists, managements, independents and labels."

Who are some of the really big artists that are hot on your station at present?

"Everyone in Rhythmic is on MIMS, Pretty Ricky, Omarion and DJ Unk right now. Their songs are massive and the remixes are keeping cuts like Unk's Walk It Out alive and fresh. You're always going to be on the latest Jay-Z, Ludacris and P.Diddy releases because they are basically the princes and drivers of the format, and they are also hot at Urban and mainstream CHR."

"You have to be aware of what's going on inside the genre in areas like reggaeton, Latino, R&B, West Coast and so forth, and also locally what is going on at an independent level. There are also regional areas that influence and I watch what's happening in San Francisco, around LA and places like Bakersfield. Here in San Diego I keep in touch with artists like Lil' Uno, as well as the East Coast, New York and the folk at Def Jam, Koch, Sony Music, Atlantic Records and Universal Music."

"The south around Atlanta is interesting as artists like Lloyd have brought a lot of melody back

into hip-hop in the last six months or so. His Get It Shawty is a major add right now. Other major adds are Yung Berg's Sexy Lady, the T-Pain/Young Joc cut, Buy U A Drank and Ciara's Like A Boy. There are songs bubbling under such as DJ Khaled's We're Takin' Over and the Amy Winehouse/Ghostface Killah mix of her You Know I'm No Good track."

Do you get promotionally involved with artists and labels?

"We've just finished doing the major Spring Break Concert Series down at Club Maya Rosarito Beach in Mexico with key artists like Paul Wall, and we're the official station for the Street Dream Tour in San Diego, which is headlining high profile acts Young Jeezy, Lil' Wayne, Fat Joe, Jim Jones, Baby and Rich Boy at the end of April. Hip-hop has been through a rough ride in the last twelve to eighteen months musically and as a format in the US. Several stations flipped to urban or other formats but the genre has now emerged even stronger and is delivering hits to the mainstream."

Tell us about any differences in programming this format to what you've seen in Australia?

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"There's always a lot of record company contact and requests for playlist adds, and a huge focus on your station's weekly reporting to Radio & Records, Mediabase and so forth. Increased spins on songs and chart position are a label imperative. Of course at radio, as much as we recognise the importance of new music, especially at hip-hop, we run tight lists and aren't in a hurry to take great songs away from our listeners. For labels that can mean a high charting artist with diminishing CD sales unless they can get exposure on new cuts. Station imaging is a priority and the energy level is more intense. I outsource to some really inventive and fast producers and mixers, and there is constant refreshing of IDs, promos, reinforcers and the like."

"We have a high Hispanic listening percentage. The kids are in an English-speaking environment but Spanish may still be spoken in the home, so we do things like mix Spanish/English into the drops which makes it unique around the music. DJ Mixers and specialty shows feature, and the artists get heavily plugged into the branding of the station too."

"I would suggest there is less pressure and urgency in the Australian scenario, and across formats there generally. I know Charlie Fox put some solid pro-

gramming strategy into ARN's The Edge 96.1 in Sydney's West with great success, and I guess that is one of the few hip-hop radio brands down under."

Who are the big personalities in the format across the US – what's makes them so hot?

"I know I'm biased but I think we've just signed one of the absolute best in The Baka Boyz to do Morning Drive on Blazin' 98.9. The Boyz – brothers Eric V. and Nick V – have huge respect and credibility inside hip-hop, are legends on the West Coast and simply great radio talents and people. They get the idea that best radio practice doesn't battle a hip-hop music stance and they've proven it with a previous #1 performance at Power 106 and K-Day in LA, and until we signed them, The Beat 103.5 in Miami. Their weekly Hip-hop Master Mix will still be syndicated nationally; it's on around ninety stations at present and generates about 2.5 million listeners a week."

"Clear Channel's Steve Harvey is another Morning Drive leader, syndicated in major markets across the US. At a major market level, I think Angie Martinez on Hot 97 in New York is impressive. The key is always that innate ability to connect with the listener and their community, and in this format to represent the music."

I always get asked about opportunities for Australians to work in US radio, so let me ask you – how do you go about getting a radio job in the US? Are Australians considered good radio people?

"You've got to be really good at what you're doing. You're under constant observation. Working anywhere overseas is something I think every young radio person should endeavour to do. With the way broadcast is evolving, developing and cultivating a 'world view' is going to serve you and the industry you work in well in the future. Whether it's the UK, Europe or the US, doing a lot of research on the networks and people you need to get in front of is essential, before you even get aboard a jet. God bless the internet. Work out exactly what you want to do, what you can offer and who seems the best fit to approach; then begin consistently networking and establishing contact. Don't expect a lot of responses, or in many cases any interest at all. Persist with those that respond and be willing to 'go the extra mile' to achieve what you want."

"Australians are considered hardworkers and straight-talkers, and Australian radio, although serving a smaller population and markets by comparison, is considered an innovative and successful model."

Regardless of format – any new US artists we should be keeping an eye out for play down under?

"I guess the short answer is see to who wins American Idol! Melody is coming back into hip-hop and that means artists like Akon can find their way into the mainstream. John Legend has been strong for a long time in the US but I don't know that he's ever actually broken on Australian radio, and acts like Bowling For Soup, The Fray, Death Cab For Cutie and Anna Nalick keep popping up. They're all making interesting music."