

## **INTRODUCTION:**

Most broadcasting histories concentrate on AM radio or television; FM is rarely mentioned, except occasionally in the context of its coming of age in the 1960s and 1970s. This study however, while also covering the 1960s, concentrates primarily on the 1940s and 1950s. It delves deeply into the shadowy period from 1941 to 1945 when FM debuted and was at once cast into a state of suspended animation by World War II. It was during this time when the FM Band was at 40 MHz and Michigan had only two FM stations with odd alpha-numeric call signs. Detroit was adding over 1,000 new listeners a month until the War curtailed availability of radios, and FM stations programmed an average of 60-100% separate high fidelity content nationally—that figure being near 100% in Detroit. The study also explores the spurt of pent-up growth that FM enjoyed after the War, growth that came to a crashing end in the early 1950s. Unfortunately, many of us, myself included, have memories of FM that only extend back to the early-middle 1950s, a time characterized by “lo-fi” AM simulcasting occasionally punctuated by endless background music (often in the form of brokered “storecasts”) and by FM stations going dark left and right. Those years belie the fact that FM really led three strikingly different lives.

The 1940s, the decade when commercial FM broadcasting commenced, saw vibrant programming that harkened back to early pre-network AM radio. Broadcasters displayed such optimism that some even decided to forego the increasingly overcrowded AM band entirely and build only FM stations while AM operators scurried to add FM, in the expectation that it would soon surge ahead of AM as the preferred medium. Macomb County’s first radio station for example was WMLN, which operated from 1947-1954 on 106.3 MHz, while in Owosso the *Argus-Press* seriously considered building only an FM station in 1948- applying for their AM license as an afterthought. Propelled by their faith in FM, and other factors like Musicians’ Union rules that for a time restricted the ability to simulcast or to carry network fare, broadcasters in the 1940s produced exciting, live, programs—even creating the Michigan FM Network in 1947, billed as the first of its kind in the Midwest. These programs emanated from studios custom designed to showcase FM’s superior sound, like W45D’s expansive production facility that consumed the entire forty-fifth floor of Detroit’s Penobscot Building. Stations like W45D could pull in \$50-\$100 an hour in ad rates and national sponsors like Bulova jumped on the FM bandwagon as early as 1941.

Some of today’s well-known stations have a lesser-known “secret” past not reflected by the on-air dates listed in the *Broadcasting Yearbook*. Take WMUS-FM in Muskegon, for example. This has been a popular West Michigan station since it signed on as a “new start” in November 1962. However, virtually nobody recalls its pioneering role when it originally debuted as the West Michigan shoreline’s first FM station (at 100.5 MHz), signing on within weeks of its companion AM outlet in 1947 before going dark in 1950. I opened this study with a quote from an ad for WWJ-FM (aka W45D and WENA) that referred to the coming “Golden Age” of FM. The fact is, that era had already dawned and was nearing its end when those words were written in 1947 as the ‘40s were soon to give way to what I call “the floundering ‘50s”. And while the explanation that this was caused by “a profound disturbance... brought about by this thing called TV” (a quote from the General Manager of Wyandotte’s WJJW as he prepared to take the station dark) is accurate to a point, it is certainly nowhere near complete.

In this study, I use four Michigan case histories as well as accounts from Michigan and other locales to further examine the circumstances that made FM such a struggle for over a decade as many once-hopeful broadcasters threw in the towel—with some returning long-dark stations to the air decades later. Part three is FM's gains through the 1960s with niche programming, Multiplex Stereo (replacing the crude AM-Left, FM-Right Binaural system used by stations such as WSAM in Saginaw), circular polarization (which made FM car radios practical), and other innovations. Michigan FM programming saw some stations leading the way nationally, with eclectic, ground-breaking programs like "Promenade" on Detroit's WDTM (106.7 MHz) hosted by Larry Miller, a member of an acid rock band ("Southbound Freeway") and later one of the people who would bring progressive rock radio to the world years later on KMPX in San Francisco using parts of what he developed in Detroit.

So lock on the AFC and break out the Percy Faith and Enoch Light records as we explore Michigan FM's fascinating and impressive past from "Solos at Nine" on W45D to Dolby FM on WJZZ!