

## **MICHIGAN FM HISTORY IN THE MAKING: LPFM AND IBOC**

In 1978, a movie called *FM* debuted that dealt with a fictional FM station. In a way, that movie heralded FM's final coming of age after years of struggle. In Detroit, WABX gave airplay to a unique extended mix of the theme from that movie performed by Steely Dan. I called the station to inquire about that mix and was told it was put together in house—that was classic 'ABX! Thinking back to that movie, and the TV show it spawned, *WKRP in Cincinnati*, (which as reported by Art Vuolo in the *Oakland Press* on August 1, 2003, had a character, Dr. Johnny Fever, who was inspired by the late "Skinny" Bobby Harper, a disc jockey at Detroit's WKNR-FM during its progressive rock days in the late 1960s) and the dysfunctional pathologies of out-of-touch programmers and absentee owners, some today would see an eerie similarity in the current state of FM radio, which is decidedly mixed. As discussed in a series of articles in the *Detroit News* published in November 2002, ownership consolidation, voice tracking, research based national play lists and other modern realities have largely driven out local artists and much of the excitement and caused a blandness and homogeneity in content and delivery. Ironically, where innovation does exist anywhere on the radio dial, with some very notable exceptions, it is more likely to be found on the AM side.

However, history continues to be made. Stand on the corner of First and Webster in downtown Muskegon and you will see an antenna atop the Raymond James Building that is part of Michigan's FM history in the making. It belongs to urban/hip-hop formatted WUVS-LP (103.7MHz, 53 w, "The Beat"), which in March 2002, debuted as Michigan's first Low Power FM station and which is originating local and provocative programming reminiscent of FM's glory days. And WMGC (105.1MHz) in Detroit in 2002 introduced test broadcasts of what was formerly called "In Band-On Channel" (IBOC, now called HD-Radio ®) digital broadcasts. In November 2002, WDMK Detroit started the first regular broadcasts. This system, developed by a consortium of broadcasters operating under the name "Ibiquity" operates on existing frequencies with the existing carrier. And where stations already have digital studios and STLs, in many cases with little more than a new exciter, stations can add the digital component. However, while there are some exceptions, the kind of excitement initially generated by the pre-war stations, W45D and W49D, and the experimentation and format-bending that occurred in the 1960s at stations like WDTM and WABX is rarely if ever seen today anywhere on the FM dial.