



PHOTO BY JACQUI PILE

Station Manager Randall Abrahams on youth, kwaito, local content and what South African music needs now.

Youth FM

a state of mind

BY LARRY STRELITZ

YFM has exploded onto the local radio scene. When it was launched in October 1988 the station expected an average daily listenership of 300 000 in the first year. After only two months YFM tripled this figure and now with its almost one million daily listeners, it is the largest regional station in South Africa. Ninety-four percent black-owned — by a consortium of trade union, youth, black business and media professionals — it is arguably the most significant black empowerment venture so far in the commercial media environment. While the station's target audience is youth aged between 16 and 30 the station defines "youth" as a "state of mind" rather than a sociological category.

The music played on YFM — at least 45% of it local in content — is central to the station's identity and underlies the station's claims that "youth from 15 to 50+ all enjoy and party to YFM's music and enjoy similar lifestyles".

All of this makes the station's head, Randall Abrahams, arguably the most successful radio station manager in the country. As someone with an intimate knowledge of the role that music has historically played in defining and shaping youth culture, Abrahams is sensitive to the interplay between music and identity. In practice what this means for YFM is that the on-air presenters and disc jockeys come from the station's target community. "This ensures an identification between the community and the personalities on air and ensures that the general radio language spoken is one that the listeners can understand and identify with," notes Abrahams.

"We are concerned with how we feature in people's lives rather than simply being a radio station," says Abrahams. "Radio is a background medium and if what's on air fits in with their lifestyle and what they're doing, it will be successful."

Much of the local music played on the station is kwaito, which, according to the station, "is essentially a local take on hip-hop — a music revolution that has taken the world by storm from Kingstown to New York, from London to Tokyo". Kwaito is more than just music, it lies at the centre of an emerging new youth culture, influencing dress, speech and attitude.

"It is a party-driven culture," says Abrahams, that reflects the feeling among many Gauteng youth "that there is no time like the present because there might just not be a tomorrow."

What this means is that, unlike adult contemporary radio stations, the music played on YFM has a relatively short lifespan, because the popularity of songs appealing to this "community" is ephemeral.

"Records that appeal to the youth are often not produced to last very long," says Abrahams. "They're produced to sound hip today and tomorrow we're on to something else."

This short musical life-span might, within the context of music-as-commodity, make economic sense, but it does have its downside for an aesthete like Abrahams.

"If we compare the contemporary music scene to that of the 1960s and 1970s what becomes apparent is that very few contemporary records will ever achieve 'classic' status. In 20 years time we'll still be talking about The Beatles but will anyone remember Celine Dion?"

If we marry this pre-occupation with the present to the concern for designer labels and generalised conspicuous consumption what does this tell us about the Gauteng youth?

"The youth that I come into contact with are not as politicised as the kids were in the 1980s. But that's to be expected after the transition that we've had in which people have rights which they have never had before. There are a lot more choices available to black youth today, and cars and dress are important because they are indicative of one's success in this new field of possibilities."

Staying with this theme of increased material consumption reflecting a new-found confidence, Abrahams feels that South African popular culture can provide models of black economic success for the youth.

"We have to build successful stars who kids want to be someday. White kids have always had economic role models and if we don't get black kids into business then we're going to suffer. This is one of the ways to do it."

Abrahams also feels that local music, especially kwaito, can play an important role in creating a shared identity among South African youth.

"There are a lot of white youth who don't feel good about the country at the moment and what kwaito could do is change these youths' minds about who they are and what they want to be."

However, in order to do this, the music has to shift its pre-occupation with the black experience.

"We need to maintain the rhythmic lexicon but talk a musical language that is understood in a context which is wider than that of the black youth to whom it currently appeals."

Abrahams feels that making this crossover will not be difficult.

"Since it is lyrically so sparse, we could simply put a few hip phrases into it which white youth could also identify with. Unfortunately, we also need to overcome the prejudice of certain radio stations who play only what they regard as 'white' music."

Like reggae, which transformed ska's localised Jamaican appeal into a world music, Abrahams believes that changing the lyrical content of kwaito could do the same for this music.

"We need to maintain the rhythmic lexicon but talk a musical language that is understood by international youth. The world is looking for something new in music and kwaito could certainly be that thing."

Despite the success of YFM, Abrahams is critical of decisions taken by the IBA in the granting of licenses to commercial radio stations.

"I think that the IBA has licensed radio stations which play music for which there will never be a substantial audience in this country — such as jazz and classical music. As such, they won't attract advertisers and will thus never be financially viable."

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"I think that the IBA has licensed radio stations which play music for which there will never be a substantial audience in this country — such as jazz and classical music. As such, they won't attract advertisers and will thus never be financially viable. They should have first licensed the successful format stations and then later, once these had proved viable, the niche stations. The failure of these niche stations may have a spillover effect on to the more successful stations in that advertisers won't differentiate and they'll simply say that 'radio is no good'. They will then put their advertising into other media."

The problem is further compounded, according to Abrahams, by the local content quotas imposed on radio stations by the IBA.

"YFM is in the fortunate position of being able to achieve a 40% local content. This is because the dominant local music that is exploding at the moment provides the staple of our play lists. However, if you take the other local major radio stations, they are all based on adult contemporary music and there just aren't enough local artists in this category for them to make the IBA quota. The only way around this problem is for these stations to get into partnership with record producers and retail outlets so that more local South African adult contemporary artists are recorded and promoted."

This leads Abrahams to discuss another issue of concern to him — the general lack, in South Africa, of co-operation between the record producers, radio stations and retail outlets. This is especially critical when it comes to the promotion of local music.

"You have to have record companies spending money to drive the process to bring out good product regularly, you have to have radio stations that support the music and you've got to have retail support so that when a kid hears the record on the radio he can go into a store and get it.

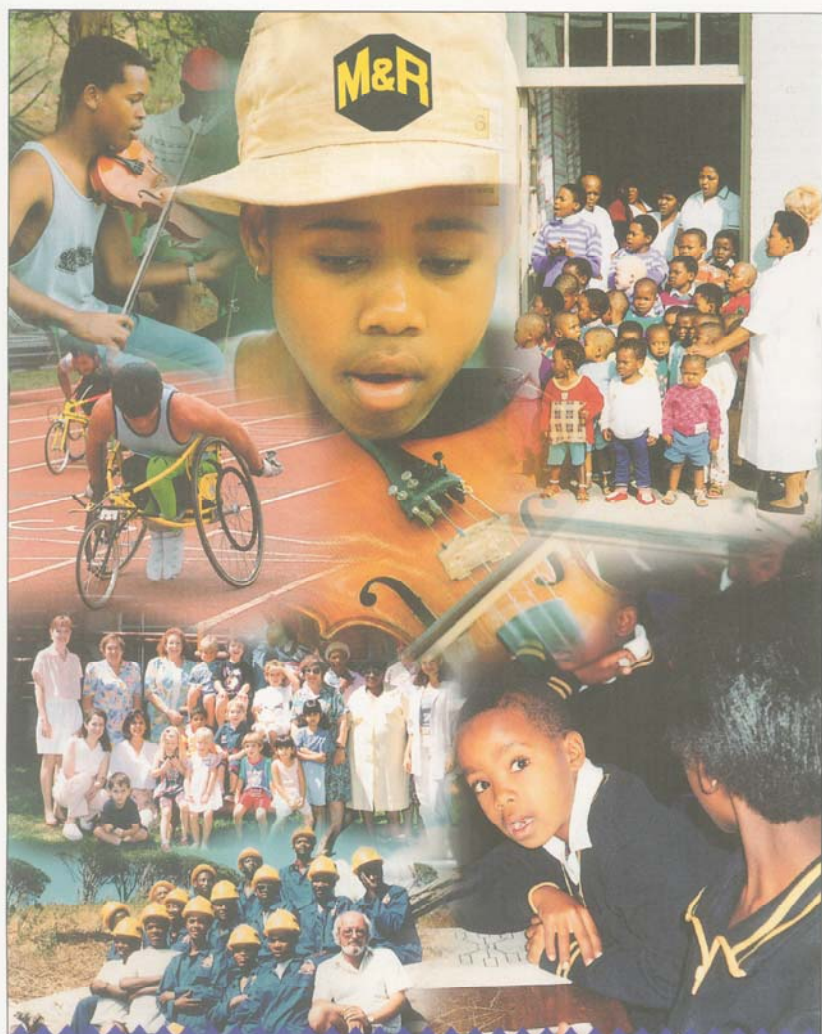
In SA you're lost before you begin. Sometimes radio picks up on good records but to get retail to stock them and to push them it only happens in the case of the big stars. Because the stores are doing OK they don't feel they have to try any harder."

Abrahams is also critical of the lack of professionalism of popular music production in South Africa, especially the lack of what are known in the music industry of artist and repertoire (A&R) people.

"The A&R people are concerned with the relationship between artists, songwriters, producers, image-makers, video producers. For example, you may have a great band but they have a terrible singer or bass player. It's up to the A&R person to recognise this and see what can be done. Alternatively, you may have a great band, but they can't write great songs. It's then up to the A&R person to find a songwriter. If one is only dealing with a singer, you need to decide what musicians you'll use to back him/her. The A&R person needs to have a good knowledge of the market and where their particular acts fit into this market. This strategic thinking and knowledge of relationships in popular music is crucial to the success of artists. Unfortunately artists seldom have all of this knowledge — that's why the role of the A&R person is so crucial.

"Jerry Wexler, for example, recognised that Aretha Franklin had been incorrectly promoted by Columbia Records. They didn't recognise her potential as a soul singer. Wexler surrounded her with great soul musicians, got in good soul music writers and in the process turned Franklin into the major female soul singer in America and transformed the face of American popular music. If we don't develop this area of expertise South African music will never move forward."

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months time. The authority will be tasked, among others, with "creating and promoting conditions conducive to the holding of free and fair elections; eliminating any impediments to legitimate political activity; [and] ensuring equal treatment of all political parties and candidates by all governmental institutions and in particular by all government-owned media, prior to and during the elections".

Government media representatives interviewed by MISA welcomed the introduction of the Bill, saying it would free them of the ruling-party stranglehold on their media allowing them to give greater coverage to all the political players in the country. They were also confident that they would live up to the expectation of providing fair and equitable coverage on political matters in the run up to the election.

The independent journalists interviewed by MISA, however, were not so confident about this. "Similar laws as those contained in the current Bill requiring fair and equitable treatment of political parties was contained in the previous Electoral Act, yet this was not carried out. Opposition parties and candidates were given minimal space in the government media," said Ramainoane.

The current political situation in Lesotho and the sudden predicament of a "pre-election" period begs for urgent intervention and support for the independent media in Lesotho. The government continues to enjoy a monopoly over the airwaves and despite several radio licences having been issued by the Ministry of Information in 1998, none of these stations is on air. If the harsh economic environment facing independent publications in Lesotho persists, and in the absence of any outside support, some of these publications may face closure, thus striking a blow to the information needs of the Lesotho people, while also reducing the chances of more vigorous reporting on political matters and parties in the run-up to the elections.