

RUNNING RADIO

STATION SNAPSHOT

Live From the Spare Bedroom

Lee Harris

It's 5:30 in the morning and dawn is purpling the sky over the Sonora desert. It's time for Buck Burdette to begin his daily commute to the studios of KBUX(FM) in Quartzsite, Ariz. Buck throws back the covers, stops in the bathroom to brush his teeth and then walks into the spare bedroom of his house.

His commute is over.

In our continuing search for America's smallest commercially licensed radio station, we may have a winner in KBUX. While the story of this tiny station is amusing, it's also inspirational in what some might consider an age of impersonal megalopolis radio. Buck Burdette and his wife Maude are KBUX. The studio and transmitter are in their spare bedroom. The antenna site is in their backyard.

There are no employees, and the Burdettes are about as far as you can get from absentee owners, because at least one of them is always at the station. Buck chose every piece of music, and that's his voice you hear between selections, not a voice-over guy who sent in the tracks via ISDN. KBUX is about as personal as radio gets.

Great idea

The Burdettes were running a trailer park in Quartzsite when Buck became frustrated that he could barely pick up any radio stations in the desert.

"I figured, why not start my own station? So I looked at a few pamphlets and started on the paperwork," he said. What was Buck's previous broadcasting experience? "I used to be a locksmith, and I once changed the locks at a radio station in Rochester, N.Y." That's good enough for the FCC, so by 1988 Buck had his license. What he did not have was enough money to build his Class A FM station in what most of us would consider a conventional manner.

Lacking the funds for even a 1 kW transmitter, Buck popped for a 100 W mono AEG, which he has since replaced with an equally powerful but stereophon-

ic Harris transmitter. Antenna towers are also expensive, so Buck came up with a less costly alternative.

"I located an 80-foot wooden pole, stuck 8 feet of it in the ground and put a four-bay Comark antenna on that, giving me an effective radiated power of 200 watts." Buck knew he wasn't going to be able to afford an airstaff or a fancy automation system, so he came up with a solution that probably wouldn't have occurred to most experienced broadcasters.

"I'd heard about these Metrotech 500-logger tape machines that could run 14 hours non-stop on a single 10-inch reel, so I bought a couple of those, used, of course." Buck's entire on-air music library is on nine of these 14-hour tapes, which run on the air at 1-7/8 ips. "I had this engineer from Palm Springs stop by one day and he was amazed at how good the sound was, considering the speed of the tapes," said Buck, adding that the engineer said he never would have thought of doing such a thing. Probably not.

The rest of Buck's audio chain consists of a Ramko stereo console, an old double-slot Collins cart playback machine, an ITC record/play cart, a couple of Technics turntables and some consumer-grade CD players and cassette decks. Production is done on the audition side of the on-air board.

It all sits in the spare bedroom, along with the transmitter. Buck pops in once or twice an hour, stops the tape at the end of a song, drops in some spots, maybe does the weather, restarts the Metrotech and goes about his business. Just before bedtime, Buck makes sure he's got enough tape on the Metrotech to run overnight, and then he hits the hay in the next room, as KBUX keeps cranking out what may be the oddest mix of music on the radio anywhere.

What might you hear in the average KBUX quarter hour?

"You might hear a country and western, then a polka, and then a classical piece, a big band thing, some organ music, all in a row, anything except rock," said Buck, who assembled the

format from his personal collection of some 3,000 records. "People tell me that they've never heard a format like this and they really love it. We get lots of folks who come to Quartzsite every winter in their campers and they always say how glad they are that we're still on the air."

In addition to being glad, they should be amazed, considering Buck's sales figures. Buck is the station's only real sales person, and by his own admission, not a very good one. KBUX grossed \$17,000 in 1996. Did he turn a profit? "Not really. I used the money for my own living expenses. I don't have many costs that are specific to the radio station, just the music licensing fees."

Occasionally, Buck finds somebody willing to sell advertising on a straight commission basis, but usually he's on his own. Buck admits that he's a little disappointed by his revenue trend.

"I thought it would be a little bit better, that I'd make enough money where I could lease some equipment and put my transmitter up on one of the mountains, get national advertisers, and make it a little worthwhile. I never figured that I'd become a millionaire off this station."

Small bucks for KBUX

Now and then Buck gets an inadequate offer for KBUX ("they want it for nothing"), but despite his barely adequate billing, he has no plans to get out of the business. "I'll turn 65 next year, so I'll be retired, and this will be more of a hobby, really. If I get my license renewed I'll just keep running as long as I can, because the people out here tell me they just love what we do."

By the way, Buck says if you're ever in Quartzsite, please feel free to stop by and visit. He regrets that he can't put you up for the night, but you see, the spare bedroom is occupied.

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