

Ben Hoberman, 91, Pioneer of All-Talk Radio, Is Dead



Ben Hoberman, radio executive, in an undated photo.

By Bruce Weber

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Ben Hoberman, a radio executive who in 1960 helped start an influential and enduring trend when he transformed the middle-of-the-road music station he was managing, KABC in Los Angeles, into what is generally considered the first 24-hour all-talk station in the country, died on May 3 in Los Angeles. He was 91.

The cause was lung cancer, his son Tom said.

Talk radio is now a staple of the airwaves; more than 2,000 stations worldwide use the format, which has unleashed a small army of commentators and entertainers and provided a high-volume platform for the airing of grievances by voters and sports fans.

Individual talk shows existed for decades before Mr. Hoberman came along, but through the 1950s radio was still largely an entertainment rather than an information medium. When he arrived in Los Angeles after working at WABC in New York, the congressional payola hearings of 1959 had cast a pall over much of music radio, and the business was ripe for a change.

On Feb. 29, 1960, the general manager of KMOX in St. Louis, Robert Hyland, changed the format of his station to nearly all talk — a few postmidnight hours remained devoted to music — and later that year KABC made its change, eschewing its music format altogether.

Variety reported that the station's ratings rose 12 percent in six months.

"I remember my reaction," George Green, who was an ad salesman at KABC when Mr. Hoberman took over, said in an interview on Thursday. "It was, 'What's this all about? How are you going to run a radio station without music?'"

Mr. Green, who succeeded Mr. Hoberman as station manager, added: "You know, there's a difference between hearing and listening. What talk added was the attention factor. We found out that people paid attention to talk in a way they didn't to music."

A forthright, unflappable man with a businesslike manner — he came across like a college dean from the 1950s, one newspaper columnist wrote — Mr. Hoberman arrived in Los Angeles having worked in radio both on the air and on the business side since before World War II. Almost immediately, he recognized an available niche in the local market: community service.

"It is not that KABC is against music, but rather that we know there are discriminating audiences to whom we can cater with an all-conversation format," Mr. Hoberman explained in an interview with *Billboard* magazine.

The all-talk schedule included drive-time blocks of news reports, public affairs shows featuring on-location reports and personality profiles, audience call-in shows sprinkled throughout the day and left-leaning editorials delivered by Mr. Hoberman himself.

Over the years he hired hosts with memorable personalities, including Michael Jackson, whom the comedian Mort Sahl (and *Time* magazine) called "the all-night psychiatrist," and the acerbic Joe Pyne, an early shock jock, who, unwilling to play audience-coddler, defied polite convention by suggesting, for example, that a caller go gargle with razor blades.

"He didn't invent this in a vacuum," Michael Harrison, the editor and publisher of *Talkers*, a publication that covers talk radio, said about Mr. Hoberman in an interview. "KMOX also has a history in the field. And it's possible that somewhere sometime there was another station that had 24-hour talk.

"But Hoberman instituted the first 24-hour format that radio historians can trace. It was the first one that stuck. And he did it in a way that stands for how the 24-hour platform is done when it's done right."

Bernard Gilbert Hoberman, a son of Jewish immigrants from Lithuania, was born on July 21, 1922, in Chisholm, Minn., where his father worked in retail stores and sold appliances. He was still a teenager when he got his first job in radio, at a small station in Hibbing, Minn.

He planned to attend Northwestern University, but World War II intervened; he joined the Army, serving in Europe and working for the newly created Armed Forces Radio Service. After the war, he worked at a New Haven radio station and a Detroit television station before moving to WABC in New York.

As general manager of WABC, Mr. Hoberman made news when he fired the well-known disc jockey Alan Freed, who had refused to sign an affidavit saying he had never taken money to play particular records. Freed denied ever taking such bribes, known as payola, but declined to sign the pledge, he said, on principle. Mr. Hoberman said that all the other disc jockeys and program directors at the station had signed the pledge and that he had done so as well.

In 1979, Mr. Hoberman was named president of ABC Radio, a post he held until 1986, after ABC merged with Capital Cities Communications.

He was married to the former Jacklyn Kanter for 64 years before her death in 2013. In addition to his son Tom, he is survived by a second son, David; a daughter, Joan; and five grandchildren.

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