



Alan Rutledge and Tony Amos, Stereo FM.

Media

FM Radio in this country, in our lifetime? Another one of those grey areas it wouldn't pay to hold your breath on.

However, our first taste of that famed sound might not be too far away. On the 15th of this month an Appeal Court hearing starts in Auckland that may clear the last legal obstacle to two-earred radio. The Broadcasting Tribunal is being taken to court over its ruling to grant the country's first FM licences to two independent groups, Stereo FM Ltd and Metropolitan FM Ltd. The appellants are Radio New Zealand, on behalf of 1251ZM and FM Enterprises Ltd.

If the appeals fail, FM could be with us in the first half of next year. Stereo FM Programme Director Tony Amos says they'll aim to be on air the first week in May.

Stereo FM promises a totally new programme for the Auckland radio market, but one that will strive to become clearly identifiable as belonging to the city. Amos says the station will be wanting to reflect what he terms "the unique Auckland lifestyle."

"Our audience will be made up of those people who live that Auckland lifestyle - typified most by those in the 18 to 39 age group. Those people are moving forward, developing and living their lives in the city. We want to add the music to that movement."

Amos says extensive research has shown a majority of those people are unhappy with current

Auckland radio (surprise, surprise). He says Stereo FM can fill a huge gap, especially as far as music goes.

"We're going to programme from albums. Albums make up 80 percent of the total record sales in the country, yet almost all existing stations programme from singles. It's only logical to look to strong, contemporary album music, as well as classic album tracks, to make up the bulk of the programme."

Amos vows Stereo FM will be the pacesetter.

"If we're not the station that breaks new music, then we will have failed. It's our business to broadcast and expose music. If the music is unobtainable in this country, that's all the more reason to play it."

However the station won't be airing specialty music shows. The programme director says he feels it's important listeners can tune in anytime and not feel alienated by block programming of music they may not like. However, Stereo FM's application for a warrant does include an undertaking to present feature programmes once a day. Tony Amos says they'll be looking towards live-to-air concerts and simulcasting with TV.

Amos also won't be drawn to comment on what percentage of local music Stereo FM will be playing, but confidently expects there will be a lot more kiwi music on the air. As well as the commitment to play more local talent, the station is setting up the Stereo Artists Development Trust. This body will act independently from the station but will receive one percent of yearly station gross income. Amos says that could be up to \$15,000 in the first year,

money that will be available to help local artists get their acts together.

Stereo FM is licensed for 50 kilowatts, a fact most people have yet to fully appreciate (no present Auckland commercial station is over 10 kw and even the big Sydney commercial FM stations don't make it over 35 kw). By its very technical nature, the best FM does need a bigger power behind the signal, but if all goes well and the two new FM stations mount their transmitters on the TVNZ mast in the Waitakeres, they'll be able to beam their programme clearly for about 100 kilometres in all directions. That's the entire Auckland region, although in some areas where hills will interfere with the signal, inexpensive aerials will be needed for perfect reception.

More research has shown 76 percent of Stereo FM's target audience have FM receivers in their homes. That's a lot more than was expected. The percentage who have FM gear in their cars is much lower and Tony Amos admits that's a problem at the

moment.

Tony expects the station to glean its listeners from people who'd otherwise use records and tapes, or listen to AM stations, or watch TV. He says AM radio has been a bit shy in accepting its place (in the States now almost exclusively talk and information stations). He says AM is not secondary to FM but must work in a different place and he predicts trouble for existing Auckland stations if they don't adapt.

Stereo FM's Managing Director Alan Rutledge says they'll aim for a staff around 25 in number. He says the station philosophy will be "broadcasters in control." He'd like to see 30 to 40 percent of the station's shares held by people actively involved. Rutledge says a collective feel is desirable and he'll want to see the station working as a total unit.

Tony Amos says another key word is *fun*. He says it's important for everyone to have a good time, because that's another cornerstone of the unique Auckland lifestyle the radio station wants to reflect. "Stereo FM's image will be

created through the sound of the station. It doesn't bother me that we'll probably be starting the station in the winter. In winter Aucklanders get ready for summer."

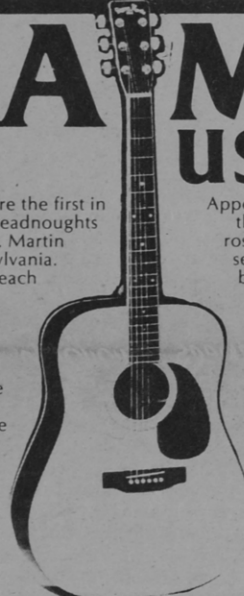
Enough to get you craning your ears for the first sound of the new? You can't fault the dedication and hard work that's gone into getting FM in Auckland to this stage.

The only good thing about the long wait is that all the mistakes, technically especially, have already been made overseas and we should benefit from that experience.

What will happen? The Sydney FM stations which came on touting their bold ideas soon backtracked to the tried and true and terminally boring after the first survey didn't win them instant acceptance. However, the Broadcasting Tribunal has made it perfectly clear we haven't been kept waiting for FM all this time to receive a stereo version of the kind of radio we already don't listen to.

Let's settle back and keep our ears open. Both of them.
Robert Douglas

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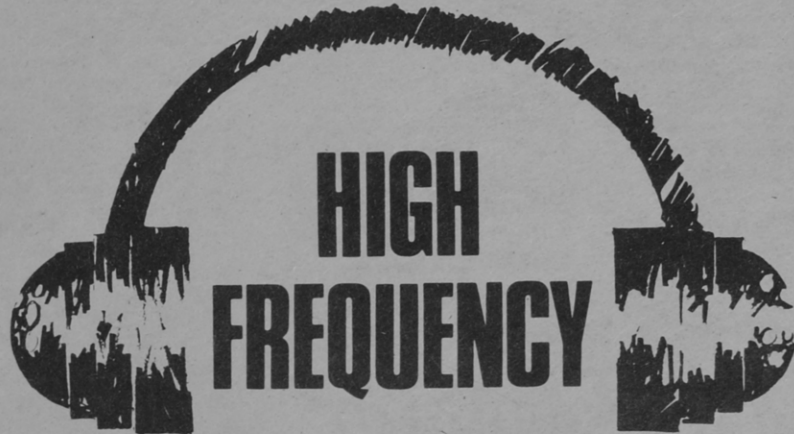
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