

BILL FRITTSCH

The voice is full of fun again

Jim Mader: New WERU's old pro

At We Are You, he is us

Long before anyone knew he was leaving WIBA radio, many of Jim Mader's listeners figured there was some-

George Vukelich writes a regular outdoor column for Madison magazine and also writes on a variety of other subjects.

thing wrong with their favorite morning program.

The music was sounding different. He was sounding different.

The telephone calls weren't being put on the air anymore.

Jim Mader, who loves to talk to his friends on the air as much as he loves to listen to them, was hardly talking at all.

And when he did talk, that happy quality that has been the Mader trademark ever since his first broadcast back in Oshkosh, that quality was gone.

After a lifetime of listening, people get to know each other pretty well, and now, a lot of his people knew there was something wrong with JM in the AM.

"When you are angry," Lorne Greene

People

told us long ago in Toronto, "your voice is angry. When you are sad, your voice will be sad."

"It wasn't fun anymore," Mader admits. "I made every effort to accommodate them, but I was uncomfortable."

Them was the management team sent in by the *Des Moines Register* to run WIBA when the Iowa corporation bought the station from the *Capital Times*.

The new management wanted "younger demographics," a younger audience. They felt that audience wasn't particularly interested in what Jim Mader was saying. Or playing.

"I don't blame them," he says of the WIBA management team, "they're pretty corporate. They have a mandate from Des Moines and they have to follow that mandate."

With the splintering of the radio audience, Mader explains, a style of management has emerged that is based on tighter and tighter control over a station's sound. The control is not only over the music played, but over the words that are spoken: *when* they are spoken, *how* they are spoken, and oftentimes *exactly* what those words will be.

"You write the script for the audience you want," he says. "Or more accurately, the consultant writes the script and you follow it."

Does it make sense that a consultant who doesn't live in your community knows more than you know about how to reach your friends and neighbors with whom you've lived a lifetime?

"There was no input from staff," he says of the change in WIBA's sound, "no input from me. None was requested. . . ."

He says it without a trace of bitterness and you have to believe him when he observes that his move to WERU is "a move forward" because he's returning to radio that is again "fun and fulfilling."

In the WERU studio these mornings, it's the way it used to be at WIBA. The telephone keeps ringing off the console. The callers are talking more and more on the air. And Jim Mader, likewise.

The first morning I visited Jaimie in his new studio, he was on the air with Tedd O'Connell of Channel 3 who was calling in because the last song had closed a few synapses in his head and got him to remembering something, and someone, he hadn't remembered in years.

"You played a tune," Tedd said, "and I remember the place and the dance and the girl . . ."

He said he didn't remember what happened to the girl and Jaimie told him to keep listening.

"From the day WERU went on the air," he beams, "the phone calls have never stopped. There are some younger people. Many of them are the longtime listeners . . ."

After all those years at Radio Park and Fitchburg with the station that William T. Evjue built, Mader confesses that he experienced "a little apprehension" at climbing into the cockpit of a brand-new air machine that had never flown before.

The Old Pilots used to say that when you crashed in one plane you should go right back up in another so you didn't lose your nerve.

When WERU made its very first flight in January, Jim Mader was at the controls and he had a bunch of passengers riding along. Otto Festge checked in by phone. The governor sent along a postcard. And the media dropped in because *JM in the AM* is still a media event.

He says he was "just changing jobs," but in the Greater Madison area, a change like that is news.

- Mark Koehn came out from Channel 3.
- Dave Crawley from Channel 15.
- *PM Magazine* came out for a feature.
- *21's Wisconsin Magazine*, likewise.

All the fuss reminded you of Jan Stenrud coming to the Packers. Or Rollie Fingers coming to the Brewers. Or Albert Einstein coming to Princeton.

What does age matter if your leg is still a winner? Or your arm? Or your brain?

The Jim Mader voice, with its uniquely spontaneous "sales-speak," is still a winner, and many of his longtime sponsors have followed his longtime listeners over to WERU.

"W-E-R-U," he says into the open microphone. "We Are You."

The voice is full of fun again. Jolly and joshing, by turns. It sounds like the same old Mader. In a way it is. In a way it isn't.

"My vocal quality has changed," he confides. "I'm a little more mature, a little more husky. I don't smoke. There's a mellower quality."

What hasn't changed is that *JM off-the-air* is the same as *JM on-the-air*. There is no put-on radio voice. There is no put-on radio personality. What you hear is what you get. What you're getting on WERU in addition to Mader's voice these days are the voices of Clark Hogan,

People

JD Bundy and Peter Mueller as they present the hit tunes of the 1940s, the 50s, the 60s and the 70s, re-recorded from original versions and sequenced onto tape. One could make the argument that the format is as controlled as the one Mader left at WIBA.

"We follow a formula through the playlist," he concedes. "It's thoughtful. Had I personally chosen the music from those years, I would have chosen this music."

This music, packaged and distributed nationally as *The Music of Your Life*, was the brainchild of former radio engineer-producer Al Ham, who felt that a sizeable segment of the radio audience was being ignored and abandoned as stations fought for the "younger demographics."

As Mader explains it, the music is presented in a set of five to seven tunes in what is called a "sweep." Each "sweep" is less than 15 minutes long and each con-

tains a commercial break or two.

Sequentially a "sweep" contains a pre-World War II tune; a post-war tune; a 50s tune; a 60s tune; and a 70s tune. Then the process starts over again with another set of tunes.

An actual "sweep" playlist, as broadcast, reads:

- *Frank Sinatra & Tommy Dorsey* — 1940
- *Eddy Howard*: "To Each His Own" — 1946
- *Perry Como*: "Round and Round" — 1950
- *The Kingston Trio*: "Tom Dooley" — 1960
- *The Carpenters*: "End of Set" — 1970

There was a time when people danced in those old-timey, palmy days and some of the tunes evoke some of those times.

"Usually, it's something back from the 40s," Mader says. "Margaret Fauerbach called in the other day and said she and Wally were dancing at the breakfast table."

Mader insists the format is not as confining or tightly controlled as it might appear.

"I drop in a tune or two an hour. Maybe a request. Maybe something I brought from home. It's really much less restrictive here than at the last place. *There* I played *nothing* on my own, or I had to seek permission to play anything of my own. It was hardly worth it."

Mader claims that WERU has given him a great deal of freedom in the area where it counts most: *Talking with his audience*.

"These are my peers," he says with affection. "Here, I can talk to them. And they can talk back. I don't have to edit myself. There are fewer and fewer places where you can say what you want to say these days . . ."

•

Watching Jim Mader do his thing with a dozen different demands on his attention is like watching the airlines captain running through the checklist in the cold, gray dawn with people waiting and dependent on his every move. He is the consummate Old Pro, silvered around the temples, crows-footed around the eyes, so experienced, so talented that he makes the whole complicated business of getting airborne seem so simple you'd swear anybody could do it, but truth is: Nobody around can do it the way he

People

does it. Like Wally Phillips, Jim Mader is the perfect morning person on radio. Yet, I remember when we were competitors on nighttime radio, he was on WIBA nightly with *The 1310 Club*. I was working for *Old Daddy Silver Bear* on WKOW with *The World of Hambone*. I used to listen to him while I was at work. His theme was "Lonely Wine" and he was smoother than silk. He was smooth as Garroway. I thought Jim Mader was the perfect nighttime person on radio. Thank God, he went to mornings.

•

"I do prefer the morning," he says. "It's more fun. The morning hours are more demanding. The listeners need the weather, the news. They need to know and you are the information source. You probably have them for a shorter time in the morning, many of them are in their commutes, so you have to work harder."

He insists that his energy reaches a peak in the morning and that he then "stumbles through the rest of the day."

It's a put-on.

Jim Mader stumbles the way Rollie Fingers stumbles. They just go out and do it and they make it look so easy, they make it look like so much fun that you figure: Hell, no machine can do what they're doing, and you take heart because there's still hope for all of us.

When you ask why his show has been so successful, so accepted for so long, he shrugs and says there's no secret, no formula.

"It's just a bunch of friends getting together," he says, "then they go on and do what they have to do and I go on and do what I have to do and then we meet again the next morning. It's a vocal audience. We have a daily connection."

It seems there should be more and with that boyish twinkle, he adds more.

"They're smarter than I am," he says. "They have answers. We can follow a subject throughout the whole morning. We've gone off in some pretty odd directions but we've never been lost yet."

Mader's respect for his audience is almost courtly, in an age of grossness. He puts down no one, including his former bosses.

"We hold this whole community in high regard," he says. "There are a lot of knowledgeable folks to play to, and to play off, and to have fun with. The town is almost insidious. You live here and you acquire a taste for it. Peopole who live

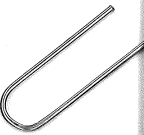
here relish the times that were as well as the times that are. The community is like an extended family."

As families do, Mader's audience keeps in constant touch. By the telephone. By the U.S. Mail. By little kindnesses many "natural" families have forgotten.

One listener keeps Mader supplied with Coleman's Mustard from England — "the hottest mustard in the world" —

and she's been doing it for years. She flies over there regularly with American peanut butter for her daughter who lives there. And she flies back with the mustard.

That devotion is not untypical of Mader's audience. I was in the studio a couple weeks back when Sam Fedele walked in with a cake for Mader on his birthday. Sam's been doing it for years. You don't have to be brilliant to figure out



People

that the folks who listen to Jim Mader love him.

"Here's an audience," he glows, "that I can spend the rest of my working days with. I was not sure that I could spend much more time in radio — and now I can."

It's "nice" to be able to pursue the audience, he observes, instead of apologizing for having them.

"You have to be in a happy environment," he tells all the well-wishers, "to be happy."

Some people feel that one reason for Mader's great success is that "he doesn't shift gears to do commercials." He sounds the same whether he's talking about tracking a cat in the snow or tracking a Buick.

He is "conversational" the way Arthur Godfrey used to be on radio: Talking to people and not *at* them. Mader notes that Dave Garroway with his 1160 Club on WMAQ radio in Chicago was more "stylized" than Godfrey, but Garroway was doing the same thing.

"I listened for the music, sure," Mader recalls, "but I listened to Garroway because he was talking to me."

I remember Garroway too and I don't know if Jaimie's right on this one. Bill Kellman, Rod MacDonald and I used to ride around Madison in Kellman's Dodge listening to Dave Garroway saying "Peace, Tiger" and we knew damn well he was talking to us.

Mader learned his lessons well. When he believes in a product, he talks about it the way Godfrey and Garroway used to do it. When he doesn't believe in a product, he won't advertise for it. He has formed longstanding friendships with his sponsors, and wherever he goes, they go.

He feels that he won't be playing to as large an audience at WERU because it doesn't have the power, but the prospect is that *Mader In The Morning* will soon be sold out, nonetheless. The demand for Mader ad-lib commercials is as great as ever.

"I don't read commercials anymore," he says. "I work off a fact-sheet and no readings are going to be the same."

After a lifetime of doing it, Mader has discovered you get so you can "sense" time passing. You can "sense" 60 seconds passing and you don't watch the clock.

"It's a game," he says, "a chess game to make it all listenable in a given time

frame.”

He read commercials when he does work for advertising other than his own.

“The only trick in reading,” he notes, “is making it sound like it isn’t read.”

Realistically, what’s the future for Jim Mader and his new station? What’s the future for a 1000-watt newcomer with an old-timey sound in 1982?

“The audience,” he admits, “may not be the largest in the market. But in the next book — the ratings — which run from February through June — I think WERU will be a factor.”

He’s counting on the audience that had felt itself disinherited, disenchanted before WERU.

“One of the delights in fielding the calls here,” he laughs, “is hearing from people who say: ‘I’m listening to radio again. I stopped listening a long time ago. And now I’m back!’”

Now, he declares, *they* have something to listen to.

When you question the staying power, the long-term appeal of the *Music of Your Life* format, he insists that the format is *flexible*.

“For instance,” he says, “this format has no Broadway show tunes in the mix and I think Madison audiences will listen to Broadway show tunes, so, on my own, I drop them in. I’ve already played Richard Burton in *Camelot* and selections from *South Pacific* and *My Fair Lady*. We’ve gotten no complaints.”

Which is not to say Al Ham likes it in his format.

“He doesn’t like it,” Mader acknowledges, “but he hasn’t been in the Madison market for 30 years.”



I am remembering the time Jim Mader was the morning person on WKOW and by then the World of Hambone was on WIBA and we were still on different stations and I was still listening to him. One day, his station brought in a new program director who changed the format all around and not too long after that, Jaimie quit. He told them: “I’m getting too old to be chipmunk.”

Fred Gage hired Jaimie for WIBA and the rest, as they say, is history.

The program director didn’t stay at WKOW too long, or in town. I think only a handful of people even remember his name. I think Jaimie does. Kindly. But Jaimie is one of the precious few. ■