

Bill Drake, born Philip Yarbrough, was an American radio programmer. He chose his last name from among his relatives' surnames because it rhymed with WAKE, the AM radio station in Atlanta, USA where he worked in the 1950s. He accepted radio work in San Francisco and it was at KYNO Fresno, California that he met Lester Eugene Chenault, who became his business partner. Together, the pair developed highly influential radio programming strategies and tactics as well as working with future "Boss Jocks" (their new name for on-air radio talent).

Drake & Chenault perfected the Top Forty radio format, which had been created by Todd Storz and other radio programmers in the late 1950s, which took a set list of popular songs and repeated them at various times during the day, ensuring the widest possible audience for the station's music. Jingles, news updates, traffic, and other features were designed to make Top 40 radio particularly attractive to car listeners. By early 1964, the era of the British Invasion, Top 40 radio had become the dominant radio format for North American listeners, and quickly swept much of the Western world.

Drake streamlined the Top 40 format, using modern methods such as market research and ratings demographics, to maximize the number of listeners. He believed in forward momentum, limiting the amount of disc jockey chatter, the number of commercials, and playing only the top hits, as opposed to less-organized programming methods of the past. Drake created concepts such as 20/20 News, and counter programming by playing music (aka "sweeping the top of the hour") while his competitors aired News headlines. Drake-Chenault had input into everything from the specific DJs that were hired, to radio contests, visual logos, and promotions. Drake essentially put radio back into the hands of programming instead of sales. Drake hired the Johnny Mann Singers to produce the Boss Radio jingles, ensuring a bright, high-energy sound that engaged the listener while providing a bridge from song to song, as well as a smooth transition from songs to commercials.

After turning around the fortunes of Fresno's KYNO-AM, Drake applied similar tactics to take KGB from 14th to 1st in San Diego. KGB's owner, Willett Brown suggested to his fellow RKO board members that Drake could turn KHJ around.

In the Spring of 1965, Drake and Chenault were hired to turn KHJ in Los Angeles from a financial and ratings loser into a success. With Ron Jacobs as program director, Robert W. Morgan in mornings, and The Real Don Steele in afternoons, KHJ quickly jumped from near-obscurity to the number one radio station in Los Angeles. "Boss Radio" moved faster and sounded more innovative than the competition, making it the #1 choice over competitors in Southern California.

Bill Drake also programmed KFRC in San Francisco, WOR-FM in New York, KAKC in Tulsa, WHBQ-AM in Memphis, WIBG in Philadelphia (the most famous "Boss Format" outside the RKO family), WRKO in Boston, and CKLW in Windsor, Ontario (across the Detroit River from the city of Detroit).

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Drake and Chenault developed a radio consulting business, Drake-Chenault, marketing the "Boss Radio" sound in the form of similar customized Johnny Mann jingle packages used on KHJ. These jingle packages were sold across the US and overseas. They also marketed "automated" radio format packages such as "Hit Parade", "Solid Gold", "Classic Gold" and "Great American Country". Disc Jockey voices heard on those formats included Billy Moore and the legendary Robert W. Morgan. Drake also produced the pioneering 48-hour radio special The History of Rock & Roll, first aired in February of 1969 on KHJ, and later syndicated nationally. Other radio specials followed, but none were arguably as successful with listeners or critics as much as the History show. Drake-Chenault was sold and eventually dissolved in the mid-1980s, but their radio specials are still available from a variety of sources.

Bill Drake was a member of the nominating committee of the Hit Parade Hall of Fame.

The History of Rock and Roll Demo was first distributed in 1969, when Drake-Chenault and American Independent Radio were successfully syndicating the magic of KHJ worldwide. Originally produced by Ron Jacobs for KHJ, it aired February 21-23, 1969.

Introduced as a KHJ Rockumentary, the credits for this most celebrated of all Top-40 radio specials are taken from this demo tape for the syndicated program:

"The History of the History of Rock and Roll begins with Bill Drake, who conceived it; Ron Jacobs produced it, generally after Pete Johnson wrote it. Ellen Pelissero directed it. Production Coordinator was Sandy Gibson, and Vicki Larson was Music Coordinator. Sound supervision and production techniques by Bill Mouzis."

Three different narrators appear on it: Mark Elliot does the intro, Robert W. Morgan narrates from "Tribute to the early blues" through "Alan Freed, 1952" and Harvey Miller (Humble Harve) narrates from "Broadway Musicals" through "Credits and Copyright Notice". Thanks to Ray Randolph and Ron Jacobs for providing additional background information. (Jacobs says the original KHJ version was much better than the syndicated version.)

The History of Rock and Roll was immensely successful and broadcast by stations all over the world. As late as 1981, the program (with an additional 2 hours added to the original 50) was still available. For all I know, it's available today, though I don't know who actually owns the rights other than The History of Rock and Roll, Incorporated.

The program itself was a massive undertaking, and included rare interviews and exhaustive retrospectives of the roots of rock 'n' roll. According to the demo, "the initial cost of the program exceeded \$75,000 and expended over 12,000 man-hours of research, writing and production." (Simple math reveals the cost of those man-hours at a little over \$6 an hour - which seems hard to believe, but it was nearly 40 years ago.)

Bill Drake died of lung cancer in Los Angeles on November 29, 2008.