

KDIA: Power to the People

By David Ferrell Jackson



Oakland radio station KDIA – known as “Lucky 13 Boss Soul Radio”—was born in the 1920s and left the airwaves in the 1990s, and is the recipient of the Legendary Station Award from the Bay Area Radio Museum and Hall of Fame for 2018. This is a look back on its long and colorful history.

It may be hard to imagine, but radio in the San Francisco is well over a century old at this point.

If you can imagine yourself on this date one-hundred years ago, without your smartphone, without Wi-Fi but with the 1918 equivalent – that fanciful high-tech bit of magic called “the wireless” – then you may be considering a trip to downtown Oakland, to a small shop operated by the Warner brothers, where you can buy the parts required to build yourself a wireless receiver or, if you were truly adventurous, an actual, working spark transmitter.

These Warner brothers, Stafford W. and Eugene N., were unrelated to Harry, Albert, Sam, and Jack, their counterparts of later (and somewhat greater) Hollywood motion picture fame, but nonetheless had a significant and lasting impact on the history of entertainment and community involvement.

Some forty years after Stafford and Eugene launched their fledgling radio enterprise near Oakland’s Lake Merritt, their business had grown from selling parts to fellow hobbyists to operating a small continuous-wave amateur station which, in turn, grew into a commercial broadcasting station that spawned its own “Radio Village” and developed into a strong, substantial voice for the Eastbay’s emerging African-American community in the post-World War II era.



Stafford Warner circa 1940s

The station, which began as experimental 6XAM in 1920, and was licensed commercially as KLS in 1922 before becoming KWBR (for “Warner Brothers Radio”) in 1945, eventually attracted the attention of Egmont Sonderling, a German immigrant who had built a small but powerful regional network of stations at mid-century that programmed mostly rhythm-and-blues music – the genteel term for what was generally known in the industry as “race records” – directed toward a predominately black audience.

Sonderling bought KWBR in July 1959 for \$550,000 and re-christened it as KDIA in September of the same year to mirror its pioneering sister station, WDIA in Memphis, Tenn. With Walter Conroy installed as its general manager, KDIA rapidly refined its schedule and, by the middle of 1961, was broadcasting news, music and other programs throughout the day aimed specifically at African-American listeners.

The Golden Years: KWBR

Into the late 1940s, KWBR, operating at 1310 kilocycles on the AM dial as an independent station without network ties, relied on blocks of recorded music and local entertainers for its programming, much of it targeting transplanted listeners tuning in for a taste of home. A representative sample from the *Oakland Tribune*’s radio log from January 1948 finds KWBR’s schedule filled with “Corriere del Mattino,” “Mi Rancho,” “Voice of Portugal,” and “Echo of Italia,” along with standard fare such as “Musical Echoes,” “Luncheon Lounge” and “Demand Performance.”

Soon, however, programs entitled “Sepia Serenade” (featuring early R&B records) and “Negroes In The News” (hosted by Tarea Hall Pittman, West Coast regional director of the NAACP and a pioneering women’s and civil rights activist) began showing up on the station’s schedule among the Italian, Portuguese and Spanish-language shows, and began taking up larger and larger blocks of time. By 1957, the KWBR schedule was dominated by R&B disc jockeys “Big Daddy” Don Barksdale, Bouncin’ Bill Doubleday and Bob Parker.

The Oakland-born Barksdale was a considerable presence in the Eastbay throughout his life: not only as a radio and TV personality but as an entrepreneur who owned night clubs and a beer distributorship, promoted musical acts and records. He also happened to be the first African-American player to be named an all-star in the National Basketball Association in 1953, shortly after the league lifted its color barrier.

Barksdale also won a gold medal as a member of the U.S. men's basketball team at the 1948 Olympic Games in London, becoming the first black player to make the team and the first to win gold. Two years later, he made his television debut, presenting "Sepia Revue" on San Francisco's nascent KRON-TV (Channel 4) while hosting his own nightly radio show on Oakland's KROW (960 kc.).

Bouncin' Bill, who was born John William Doubleday, also played rhythm-and-blues records on KWBR – often covering lengthy daily shifts in the morning and afternoon, weekdays and weekends included – and promoted live shows at local clubs.

What many listeners didn't know, however, was that Bouncin' Bill was actually a white man who, much like Jumpin' George Oxford, his southern-born (and also white) counterpart at San Francisco's KSAN (1450 kc.), simply loved R&B music.

Both Barksdale and Doubleday were inducted into the Bay Area Radio Hall of Fame: "Big Daddy," who passed away in 1993, was enshrined in 2007, while "Bouncin' Bill," who served as the station's general manager in the early 1970s, entered BARHOF in 2011. (In addition, Barksdale was inducted into the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame in 2012.)

During more than a quarter century as "Lucky 13" KDIA, the station's hip "Boss Soul" sound was guided by an exceptional roster of air talent that included Chuck "Bugs" Scruggs, Bob Jones, Johnny Morris, Sly Stone (before he became even more famous as leader of The Family Stone), John Hardy, Bill Hall, Bob White, Rosko

(William Roscoe Mercer), Roland Porter, Wally Ray, Brother Louis Freeman (who was the station's news director and hosted gospel music programs on KDIA), Sam Skinner, Marlon Scott (Alonzo Miller), Barry Pope, Alvin John Waples, Lady P.J. Ballard, Doug Cass and Al Moreland.

As former R&B competitor KSAN began to fade, even the stalwart Jumpin' George Oxford (BARHOF '06) eventually crossed the Bay to become KDIA's morning man.

But the most notable of KDIA's many stars was Belva Davis, who, after several years as a young print journalist for local black publications, began her radio career as the only female voice on the air at KSAN, then moved to KWBR as traffic manager in its advertising department – a role she quickly parlayed into her own one-hour "women's show" on weekdays, with a two-hour edition on Saturdays.

From that humble start, Miss Davis embarked on a legendary career that included anchoring the news on KPIX-TV (Channel 5) and KRON-TV, and hosting the weekly "This Week In Northern California" on KQED-TV (Channel 9). In addition to

being elected into the Bay Area Radio Hall of Fame in 2007, she was inducted into the National Academy of Television Arts and Science's Gold Circle in 2013 in recognition of her fifty years of distinguished work in local TV.

The Origin Story: 6XAM

The Oakland-based Warners didn't intend originally to become pioneers in the wireless business, nor did they intend to build a station to primarily serve black listeners; instead, they were quite content to run their family's grocery and mercantile store.



George Oxford circa 1958.



Belva Davis (KDIA).



Belva Davis with another on air personality, Jeannie Blevins.

However, as the fledgling and almost-entirely experimental radio “hobby” began to blossom as World War I ended, Staff and Eugene couldn’t help but becoming intrigued.

They began by building their own simple wireless receivers – “radios,” such as they were – then branched out to building small, primitive transmitting devices from plans shared in hobbyist magazines; those early works led them to setting up a few shelves in the family store with radio parts, which led, in turn, to their decision to build their own amateur radio station, which became licensed as 6XAM in 1920.

On September 21, 1921, the Warners made their first voice transmissions over 6XAM, which impelled them to take the next big step. By this time, the Radio Division of the Department of Commerce had already begun issuing its first handful of licenses for commercial broadcasting; by the end of 1921, a total of 25 of the licenses would be issued, with seven of them going to stations in the Bay Area.

As 1921 came to a close and 1922 began, the Warners began piecing together a new, more substantial station at the First Baptist Church at 2201 Telegraph Avenue in Oakland, near their family store. Satisfied that their facility was ready to take to the airwaves, they applied to the Radio Division and were granted a limited commercial broadcast license on Friday, March 10, 1922, along with being assigned KLS as their callsign.

The Warner brothers wasted no time, putting KLS on the air immediately with a brief and impromptu welcoming program sent out via their 250-watt scratch-built transmitter, operating at 360 meters – the single wavelength assigned to all commercial stations in the United States at that time.

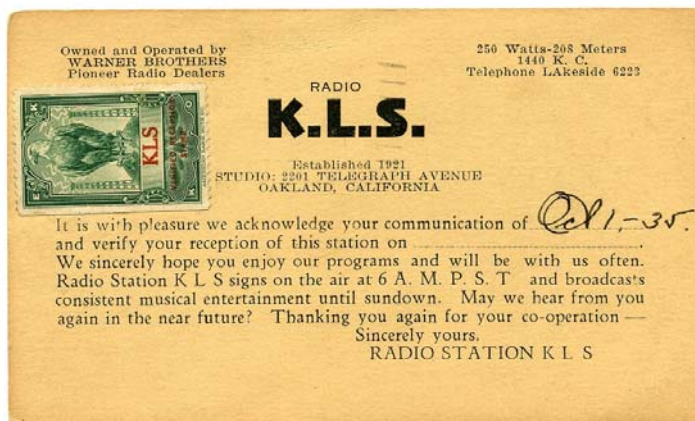
By July 1922, KLS had embarked on a regular schedule of programs and opened an auxiliary studio in the *San Francisco Daily News* building across the Bay, offering daily bulletins with the latest news. Still sharing the single broadcast channel with other local stations in January 1924 at 360 meters (about 833 kiloHertz on today’s AM radio dial), KLS operated from 11:30 a.m. until 1 p.m. on Sundays, and from 8 to 9 p.m. on Fridays.

Later in 1924, KLS was assigned to a “Class A” frequency at 1190 kilocycles, then was moved to 1200 kilocycles early in 1926. Owing to financial constraints, the station reduced its operating schedule in 1927 to one broadcast: the Sunday morning church services of the First Baptist Church – an easy enough program to put on the air, as it emanated from the same edifice that housed its transmitter.

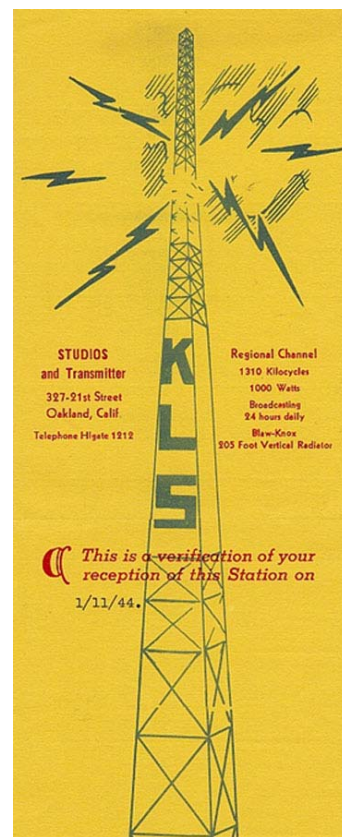
By June 1927, KLS was moved to 1220 kilocycles by the Federal Radio Commission – which had been spun off from the Department of Commerce – then was given the 1440 kc. spot in the FRC’s nationwide frequency reallocations in November 1928. As the year ended, Stafford Warner took on an expanded role in managing the station, returning it to an extended broadcasting schedule.

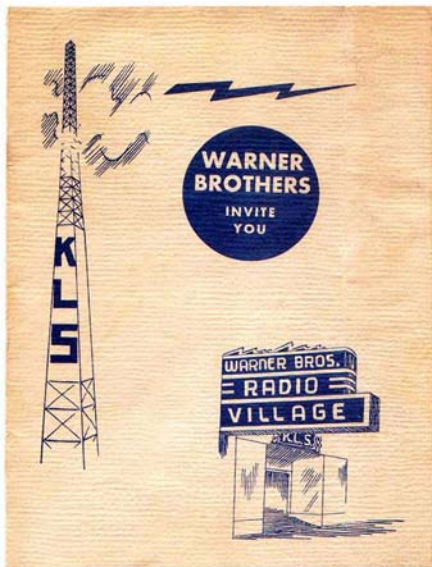
He would guide KLS through the Depression years, during which many other small hobbyist-built stations across the United States fell silent, and the station not only survived but became a sustainable enterprise; so much so that Staff had plans drawn up for a “Radio Village” at 327 21st Street in Oakland, just off Harrison Street – a \$30,000 enclave of eleven rustic “cottages” intended for retail businesses as well as the new, modern studios of KLS.

In November 1936, the renamed Federal Communications Commission granted a construction permit allowing KLS to move its facilities to the proposed Radio Village,



KLS QSL cards. Above from 1935, on the right from 1944.

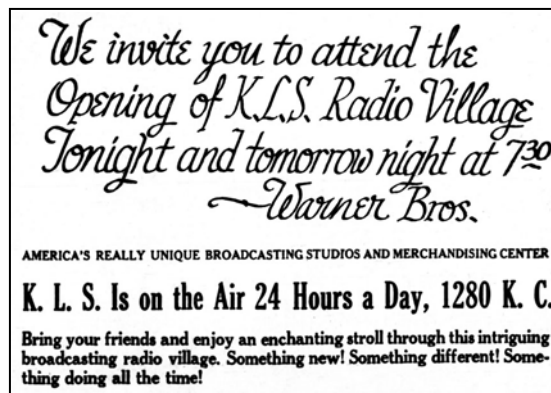




KLS Radio Brochure cover on left , interior on the right.

which would also house the station's new 179-foot Blaw-Knox transmitter tower, from which it would broadcast its 250-watt signal from yet another new frequency, 1280 kilocycles.

On March 15, 1937, KLS began transmitting from the new facility, then welcomed the public with a gala grand opening on Saturday, April 10, 1937, hosted by new KLS production manager Wellington Morse. Tributes were presented by other Bay Area radio stations, including the local NBC stations, KPO and KGO; the Columbia network's new affiliate, KSFO; plus KFRC, KLX, KGGC, KYA, KROW and KRE. Visitors were invited to tour the KLS studios and



KLS invitation (1937).

the retail shops, which included a beauty salon, furniture store, a dry cleaner, a tea room and, of course, a radio parts and supply store.

Wellington Morse was an old hand in the industry upon his arrival at KLS. Morse had immersed himself in radio since his youthful days with experimental 6XAK and commercial KFWH, which he built in Chico, Calif., his hometown, back in the 1920s. He would remain at the Warner brothers' station in Oakland through the early 1950s.

In the major NARBA Treaty frequency reallocations of March 1941, under which nearly every AM station shifted its dial position, KLS found its final resting place at 1310 kilocycles. By the end of the year, KLS added another 26 feet to its transmitter tower, capping it at 205 feet above Radio Village, while raising its power to 1,000 watts and instituting an around-the-clock schedule, becoming one of the first stations in Northern California to broadcast 24 hours a day.

On May 8, 1955, the station's co-founder and longtime guiding spirit, Stafford Warner, died at the age of 63. In the ensuing months following his brother's death, Eugene Warner assumed control of the station, then soon made plans to sell it; after fielding several offers, the station was placed in trust in 1958, pending its sale to the Sonderling stations group.

WDIA
 50,000 Watts
 welcomes another
SONDERLING INDEPENDENT NEGRO STATION
 SAN FRANCISCO—OAKLAND

AMERICA'S FOREMOST ALL NEGRO STATION
 Memphis
KDIA
 (formerly KWBR)
 The highest-powered, and ONLY Full-time Negro Program Station delivering a primary signal to each and every Negro Community in the 7 Bay Counties.
 stars the **"FABULOUS FIVE"**

DON BARKSDALE	All-American and Olympic Basketball Star, the Bay Area's most popular Negro personality.
BOUNCIN' BILL	Effervescent, lovable, Rhythm and Blues expert, who has an uncanny ability to pick the music listeners prefer most.
SWINGIN' DEACON	The Bay Area's Greatest Disc Jockey, returning after an absence of 3 years to delight his audience with the antics they like so well.
JEANIE	Adorable, and gorgeous Mistress of Ceremonies of "Jeanie's Women's World."
TED BYRD	Beloved throughout the Bay Area for his inimitable manner of presenting spiritual and gospel programs.

THE GREATEST ARRAY OF NEGRO TALENT EVER PRESENTED IN THE WEST. PROGRAM ENTERTAINMENT TO CONFORM WITH 1959 DYNAMIC RADIO.

KDIA
 OAKLAND
 SAN FRANCISCO
 EGOMONT SONDERLING, President and General Manager—WALTER CONWAY, Manager
 National Representatives:
 Howard Howard & Co., New York • Chicago • Atlanta—S.R.R. Inc.—Time Sales, Los Angeles
 SONDERLING STATIONS—WDIA, Memphis—WOPA, Chicago/Disk Pubs—KDIA, San Francisco/Oakland

BROADCASTING, September 14, 1959

KDIA announcement (9/4/1959).

Sonderling embarked on numerous improvements to KDIA's physical plant, most notably abandoning the aging Radio Village studio and transmitter facility in downtown Oakland and moving to a new site adjacent to the Bay Bridge Toll Plaza. The move was accompanied by a five-fold increase in KDIA's power to 5,000 watts.

(The old Radio Village was soon razed and a parking garage for nearby Kaiser Center was erected on the site.)



KDIA studios at the Bay Bridge Toll Plaza (circa early 1970s).

SEVEN STRONG PERSONALITIES SELL THE SAN FRANCISCO BAY AREA NEGRO MARKET ON KDIA!

GEORGE OXFORD
6:30 - 9:00 am, 12:00 noon to 1:00 pm - Monday through Saturday
George has been the highest rated personality in the Negro radio for 14 years. Morning - Rhythm and Blues music, local Negro and wire news, time and temperature. Noon - Rhythm and Blues music, wire and local Negro news.

BROTHER LOUIS FREEMAN
9:00 am to 12:00 noon - Monday through Saturday
Only Negro Gospel personality on the air at these housewife listening times. Gospel music, biblical passages and prayers, church news. Includes 15 minutes of Mahalia Jackson.

DON BARKSDALE
1:00 to 3:00 pm - Monday through Saturday
"Big Don" is known nationally as a "Hull-Of-Fame" basketball star. Known locally as a radio personality for twelve years by almost every Negro listener. Rhythm and Blues. Includes segment of national Negro news. Top rated Negro program of this time period.

ROLAND PORTER
3:00 - 4:00 pm - Monday through Saturday
KDIA Program Director. Leads throughout Negro Pulse, strong general ratings, too. Rhythm and Blues format. A three minute segment of race results. Sports news every half hour, voiced by KDIA sportscaster is a separate feature within the program. 4:00 - 5:30 pm features highly popular "Blues" program.

ROSKO!
9:30 - 12:00 midnight - Monday through Saturday
Formerly a leading daytime personality on another local Negro station. Radio tells it all in record time, set the flow right into and from the music. Fast paced from start to finish. Follows KDIA's audience participation "Sound Off" program.

TIME FOR JEANIE
12:00 midnight - 1:00 am - Tuesday through Sunday
Ranked above competitive male personalities in independent agency survey. Begins the all night jazz program on KDIA. Features jazz music exclusively - frequent interviews with jazz artists.

WALLY RAY
1:00 - 3:00 am - Wednesday through Sunday
Nationally known as one of the outstanding radio personalities in the jazz field. The late, late show - Jazz music exclusively - frequent interviews with jazz artists.

THE AWARD **KDIA** WINNING STATION

KDIA promo sheet (circa 1960s).

1310 KDIA TOP 25 1310
327 - 22nd Street, Oakland 12, California
ADAM MUSIC PERS. 906 Cosmos Street, Napa, California, Phone 224-7907
LUCKY THIRTEEN

POS	TITLE	ARTIST	LABEL
1.	It's All Right	Impressions	ABC Paramount
2.	Cry Baby	Garnett Mimms	United Artists
3.	Cry To Me	Betty Harrison	Jubilee
4.	Elephant Walk	Donald Jenkins	Cortland
5.	Strange Feeling	Billy Stewart	Chess
6.	Mickey's Monkey	Miracles	Tamla
7.	Cut You A-Loose	Ricky Allen	Faith
8.	It's Too Late	Wilson Pickett	Double L
9.	Walking The Dog	Rufus Thomas	Star
10.	Busted	Ray Charles	ABC Paramount
11.	I'll Take You Home	Drifters	Atlantic
12.	Part Time Love	Johnny Taylor	Galaxy
13.	He's Down On Me	Betty Green	Clara
14.	Chinese Checkers	Booker T & MG's	Stax
15.	Louie, Louie	Paul Revere	Columbia
16.	I Can't Be First	Dee & Tina Turner	Sonja
17.	Heat Wave	Martha & Vandellas	Gordy
18.	Two Tickets To Paradise	Brook Benton	Mercury
19.	Two Sides	Ella James	Arpa
20.	Misty	Lloyd Price	Double L
21.	Any Number Can Win	Jimmy Smith	Verve
22.	Pull The Covers	Tran Sisters	Imperial
23.	Just A Little Bit	Jerry Butler	Vee Jay
24.	Shake A Tail Feather	S. Dime	OneDerful
25.	Sometimes You Gotta Cry	Bobby Bland	Duke

"Diamond" Of The Week
Hey Little Girl - Major Lance - Ohw

"Diamonds"

You're No Good	Bobby Everett	Vee Jay
You're No Good	Dee Dee Warwick	Jubilee
Tobacco Road/Blues To A...	Lou Rawls	Capitol
Come Back	Johnny Mathis	Mercury
Crazy Bout My Baby	Marvin Gaye	Tamla
In Love With You	Johnny Taylor	Derby

SURVEY NO. 153 October 4, 1963

KDIA music survey (10/4/1963).

The Grand Finale: KDIA

Although the 1960s and 1970s found KDIA at its height, the onset of the 1980s found it moving past its prime. On March 25, 1980, KDIA, its Memphis sister station WDIA and the other Sonderling properties became part of the vast stable of outlets owned by Viacom International in a \$32-million merger.

Three years later, in December 1983, Viacom disposed of both KDIA and WDIA, selling them to the lawyer and media entrepreneur Ragan Henry in a deal valued at \$24.5-million; Henry, in turn, one year later transferred control of KDIA to Adam Clayton Powell III, son of the fabled New York congressman.

On Monday, December 10, 1984, at 9 p.m., after a long on-air farewell, KDIA and its popular R&B format left the airwaves, replaced by new KFYI call letters, from new studios at 100 Swan Way in Oakland, with a fresh all-news format that put it in direct competition with the two local powerhouse news outlets, KCBS and KGO.

It didn't last. On April 9, 1985, after only four months on the air and with ownership unable to make payroll and in default on a \$4-million loan from Aetna Insurance, KFYI fell silent. In July 1985, the FCC granted permission to Henry to revive the station as KDIA; it returned to air with an "Urban MOR" format in October of the same year.

For several years, KDIA clambered along, playing "Hits 'n' Oldies" aimed at the audience which had grown up with the station. Henry defaulted on his loan from Aetna in 1992, and the station was sold for \$1.6-million in November of that year to a group of investors led by California State Assembly speaker (and future San Francisco mayor) Willie Brown and then-Oakland mayor Elihu Harris.

Brown and Harris moved KDIA to new studios at 384 Embarcadero West in Oakland; it remained there after being sold yet again in June 1995 to James Gabbert, who had previously owned San Francisco's landmark K101 AM and FM and, at the time, owned KOFY (1050 kHz.) in San Mateo. Having paid \$3-million for KDIA, Gabbert instituted several improvements, switching the station to AM Stereo and boosting its power to 20,000 watts – all the better to hear its "Urban Oldies" music format.

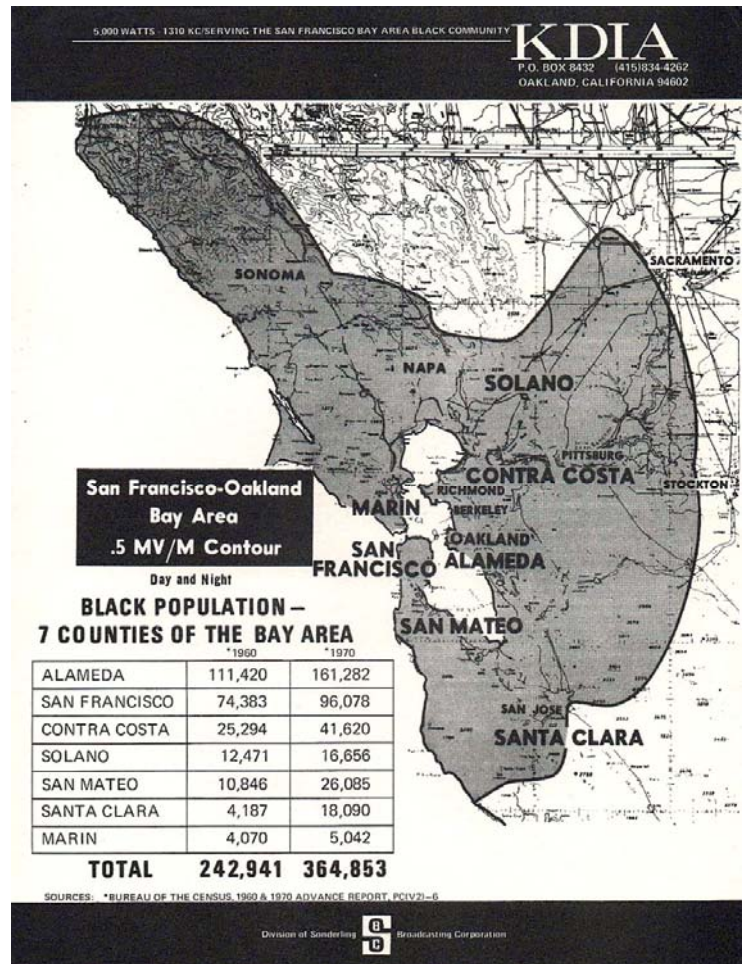
This, too, would not last. Gabbert agreed to sell KDIA to ABC for \$6.25-million in December 1997, with the station becoming KMKY – “K-Mickey” – to go with its new satellite-fed Radio Disney children’s format. (It is a widely-held belief that the personable Gabbert also had regular guest-hosting appearances on ABC’s powerhouse KGO [810 kHz.] written into the sale agreement.)

In the past few years, while still bearing the KMKY call letters, the former KDIA became the property of the affiliated Akal Broadcasting and Radio Punjab, which has operated the station since 2015 as “Radio Mirchi, The Spice of Life,” via its studios in Milpitas.

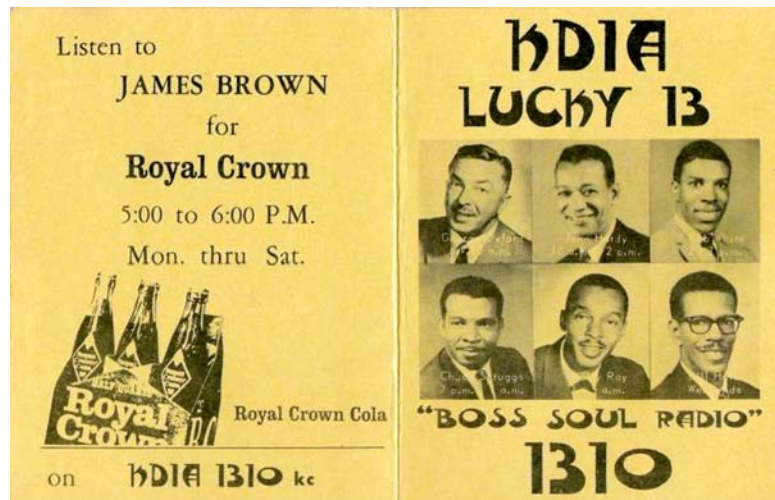
And what about the old KDIA call letters? Since 1998, when they were discarded from the 1310 spot on the AM dial, they have resided on 1640 kHz., on the Christian Talk station operated by Baybridge Communications in nearby Richmond, California.



KDIA music survey (Dec. 1973).



KDIA coverage map (circa 1970).



KDIA music survey (June 1966).

David Jackson is the founder and executive director emeritus of the Bay Area Radio Museum and Hall of Fame, and a member of the board of directors of the Broadcast Legends, based in San Francisco.

