

KSFO: “The World’s Greatest Radio Station” Defined “The Sound Of The City”

by David Ferrell Jackson

In the San Francisco in the 1950s and '60s, the KSFO call letters both literally and figuratively embodied the sound of the city. Known far and wide during that era as “The World’s Greatest Radio Station,” KSFO boasted a lineup of on-air talent perhaps unparalleled in broadcasting history, and as a result attracted a vast and devoted audience that — nearly thirty years after the original station’s departure — fondly remembers the magical moments spent tuned to the station.

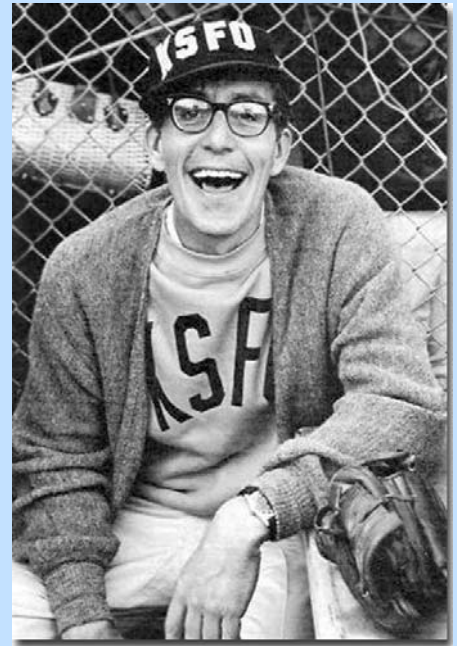
KSFO’s all-star lineup begins and ends with **Don Sherwood**, the San Francisco-born legend dubbed “The World’s Greatest Disc Jockey.” Born Daniel Sherwood Cohelan but known to his listeners as “Donnie Babe,” he broke into radio with brief mostly unmemorable stints at KFRC, KQW and KGO, then made a name for himself at Oakland’s KROW (960 AM) as part of the “Nick & Noodnick” morning team in the early 1950s.

With Sherwood as KSFO’s clean-up hitter, the station climbed from near-obscurity on the left-hand side of the dial to a spot on the dial that there were few reasons to tune away from, surrounded by *nonpareil* talent that included Al “Jazzbeaux” Collins, Del Courtney, Jim Lange, Herb Kennedy, Dave Niles, Wally King, Art Finley, Chet Casselman, Aaron Edwards, Bill Heyward, Lon Simmons and Russ Hodges.

And that lineup only takes us to about 1962!

Through the 1960s and into the 1970s, KSFO — from its ritzy digs atop Nob Hill in the Fairmont Hotel — built its dominance with an appealing mix of middle-of-the-road music and sports, including Giants baseball, 49ers football and, at various times, Cal and Stanford football and basketball, in addition to attracting even more talent, including Gene Nelson (formerly of KYA), Terry McGovern (from KDKA, Pittsburgh, Penn.), Dan Sorkin (a Chicago legend who stopped briefly at KFRC), Carter B. Smith (from KRE), Scott Beach, Norman Davis, Dick McGarvin, Rick Wagstaff, Bob Holmes and Russ “The Moose” Syracuse.

“Donnie Babe”



Don Sherwood in his KSFO No Stars uniform for a benefit softball game pitting the station's staff against local celebrities to raise funds for the Police Athletic League.



A generation of Bay Area sports fans grew up listening to the voices of Russ Hodges, Lon Simmons and Bill Thompson calling Giants baseball on KSFO in the 1960s

Born In A Church Basement

KSFO's rise to greatness began humbly in the basement of Oakland's Tenth Avenue Baptist Church in 1925, the dream of Rev. George W. Phillips. Using donations from his congregation, Rev. Phillips had the church's basement outfitted with two studios and placed a new 1000-watt Western Electric WE-106A transmitter on the upper floor, connected to a pair of 125-foot steel transmitting towers on the church's roof. The station received authority to operate from the Radio Division of the U.S. Department of Commerce and, at the request of Rev. Phillips, was assigned the very appropriate KTAB call letters.

On the evening of Saturday, August 1, 1925, before a live audience at the church and countless listeners throughout the Bay region, Rev. Phillips led KTAB onto the airwaves, broadcasting on a wavelength of 215.7 meters — what we refer to as 1390 kilohertz these days.

Less than a year later, a group of church members incorporated as The Associated Broadcasters (TAB) and leased the station from Rev. Phillips, who had mostly operated KTAB on Sundays, broadcasting his sermons from the church. Under the lease, KTAB embarked on a more ambitious programming schedule, adding music and other entertainment during the week, while continuing with its Sunday sermons.

With a subsequent growth in popularity, in 1928 KTAB's licensee became the property of the Pickwick Broadcasting Company, and moved into new studios at the co-owned Pickwick Hotel at Fifth and Mission streets in San Francisco. In November 1929, after being shifted to a variety of spots around the dial during the first four years of its life, KTAB settled in at 560 kilocycles, where it has remained for more than eighty years.



Rev. George Phillips broadcasts a sermon on Oakland's KTAB, forerunner of KSFO.



The KSFO staff poses before the station's new transmitter plant near Pier 92, circa 1937.

In the Summer of 1935, KTAB became KSFO, and on January 1, 1937, it became the San Francisco affiliate of the Columbia Broadcasting System. Later in 1937, KSFO finally abandoned its old original towers atop the Tenth Avenue Baptist Church in Oakland and began transmitting its signal from a new facility near Pier 92 and Islais Creek in San Francisco, with an increase of its daytime power to 5,000 watts.

Growing In The Golden West

In the 1940s, under the guidance of Wesley I. Dumm, KSFO made a bold effort to improve its standing among local stations, drawing up plans to build a new 50,000-watt transmitter plant near Novato, along with a proposed move to the 740 spot on the dial, in an attempt to retain its affiliation with CBS.

After a lengthy struggle, Dumm relinquished the plan, in essence “trading” the proposed facility improvements to CBS in exchange for affiliating his new television station, KPIX (Channel 5), with the fledgling CBS television network. CBS, in turn, would purchase KQW and convert it to powerhouse KCBS, using the blueprint developed for KSFO.

In February 1955, KSFO moved to the Fairmont Hotel, taking over studios previously utilized by KYA (1260 AM). Oddly enough, KYA subsequently moved to a suite of studios once used by KSFO at One Nob Hill Circle, adjacent to the Mark Hopkins Hotel.

In August 1956, Wesley Dumm and his partners sold KSFO to Golden West Broadcasters — owned by singing cowboy and budding media mogul Gene Autry and his business partner, Robert O. Reynolds — at which time KSFO began its dramatic ascent into the Bay Area radio stratosphere.



KSFO co-owners Wesley Dumm and Philip Lasky examine an architect's model of the station's new transmitting facility.

The Golden West era at KSFO marked a period of intense competition in local radio, as other stations battled to attract ears away from Don Sherwood and the other KSFO stars. Among the contenders were Doug Pledger and Frank Dill (KNBR), Jim Dunbar (KGO), Dave McElhatton (KCBS) and Van Amburg (KFRC, in the pre-Big 610 era, before Van become news anchor at KGO-TV). For the most part, the efforts were in vain.

On October 19, 1983, the FCC approved Golden West's sale of KSFO to Seattle-based King Radio Broadcasting for \$6-million. In a peculiar twist of fate, the one and only Don Sherwood passed away just a few weeks later, on November 4, 1983, at only 58 years of age. A month later, on December 13, 1983, King Radio took over control of KSFO, relocating it from the Fairmont Hotel to new studios at 300 Broadway in San Francisco, along with now co-owned KYA-FM (93.3 FM).

The archives of the Bay Area Radio Museum & Hall of Fame contain numerous recordings and other ephemera from throughout the history of KSFO, including tributes in audio, words and pictures to Don Sherwood and Al “Jazzbeaux” Collins, which are available online for your listening pleasure.

The KSFO Golden West Collection: <http://www.BayAreaRadio.org/audio/ksfo>

KSFO's Famous "Sound Of The City": <http://bit.ly/SoundCity>

The Don Sherwood Collection: <http://www.DonnieBabe.com>

Jazzbeaux' Purple Grotto: <http://www.PurpleGrotto.com>

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