

15. Capital Radio closes . . . “no, no, no”

Kenny Maistry

As the South African political climate started to change in the late 1980s and early 1990s, with the unbanning of political movements like the African National Congress, Pan Africanist Congress, Azanian People's Organisation, the freeing of Govan Mbeki and others from Robben Island, and, finally, the release of Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela, changes were taking place at Capital Radio. Programme Manager Anthony Duke was on the lookout for new talent locally. The trend at Capital was to recruit British broadcasters like Tony Blewitt and Tony Murrell to replace presenters such as Kevin Savage, Brian Oxley and Martin Bailie who were lured by 5FM, a South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) station.



When Tony Blewitt left for 5FM, management at Capital decided to recruit campus radio presenters. There were no community and in-store radio stations at the time. Capital Radio's management had the foresight to realise that they needed to recruit young black (used in the broadest context of “previously disadvantaged”) talent. Purely ethnic-based commercial radio would soon be a dinosaur of the apartheid era. They came up with the idea of an early Saturday morning slot called *Give It a Go*. Campus radio jocks recorded their shows during the week, and they were played on-air at the weekend. This is the way I got my break on 25 July 1992 as a presenter on the station that played “all the hits and more”.

After the failed Afritude experiment of 1993, a contemporary hit radio, high rotation playlist of only 45 songs was adopted to win back listeners – this had limited success. In mid-1995, management agreed with senior presenters to implement an urban contemporary music format. Capital Radio appeared to

have been resurrected from the ashes with a new sound and direction embracing its longstanding, faithful black listeners. It was one of the first stations to play kwaito and hip-hop. This was uncharted territory for commercial radio because these genres embraced South African black township and American ghetto/urban cultures which may have been too “radical” for some listeners. The station was looking ahead to building the “New South Africa” through a medium that brought people together despite the divided past. Being a pioneer of non-racial radio was challenging because old mindsets and ways of radio broadcasting had to be disrupted to move forward. Within six months of Capital Radio implementing its urban contemporary music format, a drastic increase in listenership from 19 000 to 116 000 was recorded. This was achieved without a marketing budget and FM licence. Fresh off the success accomplished with our new format, a campaign commenced in 1996 for an FM licence in the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal (the traditional broadcast footprint of the station). Meetings with the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA) were held, and prospects were positive.

Concurrently, political changes saw the former black homeland states of Transkei, Bophuthatswana, Venda & Ciskei (TBVC) being reincorporated into South Africa. Consequently, radio stations based in the homelands had to either be incorporated into the SABC or sold off/closed down, depending on what was best for the state coffers. The proposal to the SABC and government was that Capital Radio should be given an FM licence. The SABC should “warehouse” the station in the interim whilst it became profitable through the increase in listeners and revenue generated with the FM frequency. The station could then be sold off at a higher price given its brand equity.

At the time, the station was owned by the Transkei government. With reincorporation of the TBVC states, the ‘owner’ didn't have a governmental budget which, in turn, meant that assets such as Capital Radio did not have money to operate. For a period of about three months, staff did not receive a salary. The commitment of the staff could not be faulted. I'd say we did some of our best shows during this time which reflected the character and spirit of the station. Despite the immense odds stacked against Capital, it delivered great radio to its listeners. The management and staff formed a committee to save the station from closure. Given our activist backgrounds and political savvy, Cassandra Moodley, Justice ‘Just-Ice’ Ramohlola, and I played a huge role in driving the process, along with other colleagues. The committee launched a *Save Capital Radio Campaign* that drew support from print media, campus radio stations and the listeners to sign a petition calling on the IBA to grant Capital an FM licence. Things appeared to

be moving in the right direction as the first democratically elected South African government granted the station an operational budget, and appointed Thembekile Ndlovu, station manager of Radio Ciskei, as the interim station manager of Capital Radio. He was tasked with overseeing the warehousing of the station, while the FM licence application was being processed. He was given the mandate to appoint an interim management team to the ailing station which had lost some key personnel. Mr T (as we used to call him) approached me to become the interim music manager. This position gave me oversight of the playlist and the station sound. There was also a line-up change and I was moved to the afternoon drive show - Steve Bishop was given the breakfast show. There was a renewed spirit at the station as listenership grew. The dream of Capital Radio being on the FM dial looked a distinct possibility.

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Sadly, the many years of hoping to one day be given an opportunity to compete on an equal footing on FM with the SABC stations was not to be. I am not aware of the politics behind the decision to deny Capital Radio an FM licence, but it was a devastating reality that we had to accept. Former Minister of Communications, Jay Naidoo will be able to explain the reasoning behind that decision. I remember finishing my afternoon drive show and was busy packing my material away when Mr T and the station's lawyer (appointed to apply for an FM licence) walked into the office looking dejected and defeated. They sat me down to explain that it was over. The ANC-led government decided to close the station on 29 November 1996 with my show ending transmission at 6 pm. The next day a staff meeting was called, and Mr T broke the humiliating news to everyone. By this time, morale was at an all-time low, and longstanding staff wanted to cash out their pensions and move on with their lives. The activist in me wanted to continue with the struggle for Capital's FM licence, but I yielded to the majority.

Day zero finally arrived. It was a sweltering Friday afternoon, and I was psyching myself up to be a consummate professional and do my show without breaking down or faltering on air. Shows throughout the day on the station were saturated with sadness, memories and tears. Our listeners were gutted, and could not believe that their bridge that saw them over the troubled waters of apartheid was being dismantled without due recognition and reward.

Alan Khan and I hosted the final show on Capital Radio. I have a vivid memory of a wheelchair-bound listener bidding a tearful farewell to the station which had become a constant

companion. His raw emotions on air summed up the way the staff felt as a radio family.



I felt that the final words to be heard on Capital should appropriately be that of Alan Mann (aka Alan Wolfson). He presented the first show on 26 December 1979 on Capital Radio. I played his recorded farewell message and followed it with Simon & Garfunkel's *Bridge over Troubled Water*, the first song played on the station. It was a full circle moment, and the end of an era in South African radio!

Well not quite... I could not just end the broadcast so simply and quietly. I had to demonstrate some defiance and NOT observe the 6pm shutoff. Our technical manager at the time, a former officer in the video unit of the apartheid police, was adamant in wanting us off air at the allocated time. As the song was approaching the end and with a few seconds before 6pm, with everyone in the studio shedding tears (including myself - I held it together up until that moment), I started to play the old 604 jingles back-to-back. Good backtiming is a mark of a professional broadcaster, and I was well trained in getting my timing right so that I could introduce the news at the top of the hour (or in this case go off air). However, I continued playing the jingles, fighting back the inevitable for three minutes and shouting "No, no, no..."

Despite the heightened emotions and the technical manager reaching for his firearm in a studio filled with over 20 people, I noted that 6:03 pm was approaching and faded in the signal tone as the last jingle ended. The station frequency on medium wave was 603 kilohertz (not 604 which rhymed with the payoff line, "all the hits and more"). I ended the last show on Capital Radio at 6:03 pm on 29 November 1996.



Kenny Maistry has worked at several stations in South Africa. He cut his teeth on campus radio before joining Capital Radio. Kenny has had two stints at both 94.7 Highveld Stereo and Metro FM. He currently works at Radio 702. Kenny had made several appearances and also hosted shows on television. His versatility and cross-over appeal as a broadcaster, communicator, voice-over artist, brand ambassador and master of ceremonies make him a huge asset in the world of media and entertainment. Kenny was a guest speaker to the journalism students at ML Sultan Technikon.