

# JEFF GARRISON

## Keeping An Eye On CBS Country

**F**rom the day Jeff Garrison's broadcast career began in his hometown of Nacogdoches, TX more than 25 years ago, his dream was to program a Houston radio station. It took a stop in Houston (as an APD/MD), and PD gigs in Greenville, SC and Phoenix for him to traverse the 141 miles down US59 to realize his dream. In addition to programming KILT-FM/Houston, Garrison also serves as VP/Country for CBS Radio.

**CA:** What is your role as Vice President/Country for CBS Radio?

**JG:** To be a sounding board and a resource. CBS Radio has some of the greatest program directors in the business and I'm proud to work with every one of them. We come together on a conference call once a month to share information and ideas. We talk about what's going on in our local markets, share our website initiatives and talk about how to create better

**If I listened to all 13 of your Country stations....**

You'd hear 13 local radio stations that are connected to the Country lifegroup through their own heritage and current programming. We have some of the best brands in the country. And they are different; they are unique. You wouldn't hear the same things on all the stations; they're not cookie-cutter.

When I started, I had my vision and focused on what I thought. But I've come to understand it's much more beneficial to the station if everyone understands their job, the expectations and how to deliver within the PD's vision. They must stay focused, consistent and disciplined towards that target. And, I'm always looking for enthusiasm, passion and people who wake up every day wanting to be better at what they do.

**What is a local program director's role in today's environment?**

Today's PDs are brand managers. I'm not sure that the title of Program Director is really appropriate in 2008 because we're brand-managing on HD, on the Internet and on outside sources as each brand is extending. All of that is great for radio. The future for delivery of our brands across all platforms is excellent. What sometimes suffers is the ability to give each area the amount of time it deserves so you can be the most creative in each one.

**What are you trying to accomplish with KILT-FM's sound?**

To connect with the country life-group of Houston, Texas. To be the family station that connects to the communities in our market. We know that country music and the Country format is a family format that includes music, entertainment and events. I want KILT to be the most entertaining Country radio brand in Houston, Texas. I want it to be real and authentic. I want to make sure that we're doing everything we can to play the biggest

the rodeo and we're doing "Hannah Time" twice a day. You listen to KILT, you win tickets to see Hannah Montana. It's about being plugged into the country lifegroup.

**Are there any basic laws of programming that you just do not violate? Or, are there certain things that have to be done on your radio station, no matter what?**

Know your brand, know your audience's expectation of that brand and deliver it to them 120%. And, keep it simple and don't over-analyze or over-think the radio station.

**The fall 2007 ratings have been a little bit tough for a number of Country outlets, especially some of the perennial legendary stations of our format. Do you have a sense of Country radio fall ratings or what's going on with the music and the listeners?**

CBS Country had some great stories in the fall of 2007 and some more challenging ones. It was a perfect storm, in some ways. Some stations may not have been as aggressive as they have been in past fall campaigns, and that hurt the TSL in October and November. Christmas music seems to be starting earlier and earlier every year, and in the diary world that is affecting Country's cume and TSL, particularly at work. Christmas music starting in early November means it's digging into two monthlies, and that really affects the overall fall 25-54 numbers. It's ironic, though, in the PPM world in Philadelphia and Houston, Country

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interactive relationships with our listeners. We learn from each other by talking about what's working and the things that don't work.

I'm also a liaison between CBS Radio SVP/Programming Greg Strassel and VP/Regional Programming Chris Oliviero and the local PDs, working closely on any needs they may have.

**How do CBS Radio stations operate in terms of local vs. regional or national dictates, and how much freedom do local PDs have?**

All our stations operate independently; they're managed and programmed locally. I'm very proud of CBS Radio and being a part of that process because we can be creative and local in our markets. We have the best PDs in the business and I trust them with their brands. They are responsible and accountable for the ratings, and do a great job. They operate their stations locally and make decisions locally that are in the best interests of the listeners and advertisers.

**If you were dropped into an unknown city and could hear two Country stations, do you think you could tell which one was a CBS station?**

If it didn't sound local and in tune with the market, you'd know it wasn't a CBS Radio Country station. But you could really tell a difference if you were dropped inside the radio station instead of the market. Programmers like to express themselves and be creative and be in tune with the market. Creative people have a hard time not being able to express themselves and that can hurt their ability to perform at a high level. When you stifle creativity, you take programmers out of what they love to do. It's important to create an environment in local markets that lets people be creative and think of new ideas. It's your next idea that's going to move the needle.

**If people come up with ideas that are a little left of center, do you have to run it by Greg or Chris in New York, or do people have the freedom to implement ideas?**

They have the freedom to implement. It's their radio station. They are responsible for the radio station. And, they are accountable.

**What are the most important skills for today's programmers to have?**

Focus, prioritizing and putting the station and the relationship with the listener first. They need to have a vision of where the station is headed, know their audience's expectations and how they're going to meet those expectations. They also need to make sure everybody on staff is on the same page with that vision.

country stars and the biggest country music hits that people love. And to create fun and exciting promotions and contests that fit that filter. Most of our listeners have kids who want to see Hannah Montana. We've got Hannah Montana coming to

saw increases. In the PPM world of reality over recall, we did see cume deterioration for KILT-FM during the month of December and the Holiday book. But our PIs stayed with the station and gave us a lot of TSL, so we generated a higher share in the December and Holiday book in the PPM than we did in the diary. PPM put us top-five Women 25-54 in both of those books.

**You've been dealing with PPM for two years now. How do you think it's treated Country overall?**

Having only the opportunity to look at Philadelphia and Houston, and Houston being a little bit more Hispanic than Philadelphia,



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Once again, going back to PDs as brand managers, this is a big extension of our brand locally in our markets. It’s also an opportunity for advertisers to touch potential customers and an opportunity for us to create big stars in Country music.

CBS Radio has really stepped up our technology and the usage of our tools to make us one of the leading content providers in the United States. We’re equipping our stations with video equipment to tape artist visits, behind-the-scenes footage of events

like our 12-Man Jam, backstage interviews, etc., which they put on their own sites as well as distribute to other stations to use. Each PD can use the audio or video from other stations as they see fit. It provides great content to talk about when you play the Billy Ray Cyrus song on KILT-FM, and say, “Hey, go to our website to check out Studio KILT with Billy Ray Cyrus as he talks about Hannah Montana.”

**Are PDs accountable for website hits the same way that they are for ratings?**

Yes. Just like we have ratings goals for the stations, we have goals for our websites.

**So, you got married for the first time in June 2006 at age 41. And now you’re about to become a dad. How is Becky and how are you feeling?**

Becky is doing great. I feel like lightning has struck me. I never in my wildest dreams thought I would have a lovely person like Becky in my life, and I’m really grateful. God has blessed us with a baby boy due May 1. For a small-town, East Texas DJ who wanted more than anything to one day be a program director in Houston, I’m living the dream. As Dene Hallam used to tell me, “It’s a long ways from Nacogdoches to where you’re sittin’, pal!”

**CAC**

PPM has been very good to the Country format. That said, there’s been a lot of learning as we go with the sample size and PPM, and that’s been the biggest challenge: are we getting the consistent ratings that we were promised from Arbitron if we’re not getting the consistent sample number? So, even though we’ve been looking at PPM data for two years, we know that for the first nine months or more that not all the radio stations were in the sample, weren’t in the mix, so that was kind of shaded data. But in the year that PPM has been our currency, we’ve seen that come is a great story. TSL is obviously less so. But, overall, Country performs very well in PPM and outperforms the diary.

**Do you get the sense that enough programmers are paying attention right now to the coming changes with PPM? Are you getting calls from folks asking you what you’re seeing?**

It’s like trying to explain Windows Vista to someone who’s never used it and all you have is a couple of handouts. Until you use PPM on a daily basis, it’s hard to discuss and really comprehend its focus on what really matters.

**What have you learned about PPM?**

PPM likes music. Let me rephrase that: PPM loves music. However, it does come back to the question of audience expectations. If your radio station is perceived and expected to be a jukebox but you do things that are counter-intuitive to what is expected of your brand, listeners may have a proclivity to tune out. However, if you’re known as a personality station and you talk and interact with your audience a lot and you have interviews and more long-form programming, we’ve found that there’s less of a chance your audience will leave your station during those elements because that is what they have come to expect from your brand.

Overall it’s been interesting to see that most everything we as programmers have intuitively thought about audience behavior is true. The real surprise is there are no surprises. We’ve seen that Friday is indeed the biggest listening day, events do move the needle and people have a relationship with radio that you can very much get the pulse of through PPM.

**Anything that the PPM doesn’t love?**

PPM has a tendency to expose clutter and useless content. PPM will make programmers better and more accountable because it takes an instant pulse of the radio station. It’s “reality methodology” as opposed to “recall methodology.” So, the key is not to over-think PPM and not to get into analysis paralysis. PDs need to take it for what it is and get the widest view of the data. You can see what gets your listeners excited about your radio station and some patterns where they aren’t.

**Are there things you used to think were important that you’re finding aren’t so important in a PPM world?**

When you’re dealing in reality, not recall, you don’t have to over-deliver and over-pound your brand so much. “Listening reality” means you don’t have to over-hype your brand to get through as you have to do in a recall diary world.

**How well are you able to track likes and dislikes in music with the PPM?**

You can see some patterns and there is some new technology coming out that’s exciting. But the sample is small and I wouldn’t over analyze it. In my opinion, it’s not enough sample size on a minute-by-minute [basis] to gauge music testing.

**What’s the biggest challenge facing Country radio today?**

Everybody wants to ask, “What’s the problem?” I’m not sure we have a problem. Our biggest challenge is to be more proud of what we are and what we have. We have a great format that

is family-friendly, doesn’t have any baggage and presents a great opportunity to touch people through songs about real life. *American Idol* and other pop culture have brought a lot to the format and our biggest challenge is capitalizing on it. It makes no sense to take 40 weeks to create a hit record with artists breaking as fast as the Carrie Underwoods and the Taylor Swifts of the world. Why wait 40 weeks before capitalizing on making those type of artists big stars on our station? We simply have to embrace them much more quickly.

If Hannah Montana is the hottest thing going, blow out Hannah Montana. Or if Carrie is the biggest thing, play the Carrie Underwood records. I’m surprised when I look at the charts and see a new Carrie Underwood single get 13 adds out of 120 reporters. Perhaps, then, our biggest challenge is to have the radio station’s level of excitement match the audience’s level of excitement over these hot artists.

We need to program our radio stations with the most exciting music available. Everybody has to make their own decisions. The thing I’m most proud of is that CBS Radio Country PDs make decisions for their radio stations for their listeners; we don’t wait for it to get to No. 10 so someone can tell us it’s okay to play it. Country has always been a current-based format, but for some reason some programmers want to treat it like a very light AC.

**Is that part of Country’s problem with falling ratings?**

I can’t say that; I don’t know that to be true. But I do know that we build and grow a bigger brand by creating bigger stars.

**How do you decide for your station and market the proper mix of Current, Recurrent and Gold titles?**

It varies. Some weeks there may be three powers that are the hottest records in Houston and some weeks there may be six. We have different grids that change the current mix based on the strength of the current music at any given time. Your music scheduling system shouldn’t dictate what currents get played. It should be by the temperature or the excitement or what your research is telling you. Whatever research you’re using or info you’re getting that shows the hottest records – play them!

**What do you think of the state of Country music today?**

It’s alive and well. This new influx of independent labels, along with the established labels, has created some exciting new artists, as well as allowing some artists to come back with huge songs. It’s created a great environment for artists to be creative as they buy into a new way of doing business. The music coming out of Nashville now is better – and more consistently better – than I’ve heard in a long time.

**What do you think of the radio/record relationship today?**

It’s as good as it ever was. Nothing much has changed, it’s just the way that we do business. The only thing that’s changed is paperwork.

