

AM Jumps on FM Translator With FM-55

Wheatstone value processor sounds as good as the expensive boxes to Birmingham broadcaster

COURTNEY FRENCH, OWNER, WATV(AM/FM) · APR 16, 2018

BIRMINGHAM, ALA. — WATV(AM) 900 has been an important part of the Birmingham market for nearly five decades, serving the African-American community since 1976, when it changed formats from talk to R&B music. Led by Joe Lackey at that time, WATV became the No. 1 station in Birmingham almost overnight.

In the years since, WATV's format has shifted. In the late 1980s it was a forerunner to the format we now call urban adult contemporary, and in the 1990s it shifted to urban oldies. But no matter the music played, we remained loyal to our listener base and stayed focused on serving the African-American community.

PIONEER

On the technical side, WATV has been a pioneer. The station was an early adopter of AM stereo, and management at that time heavily promoted the improved listening experience that came with the system. On-air processing has always been important and the best processing gear for the time was used.

But as the 21st century dawned, WATV found itself with the same problems that many other AM stations are facing. AM stereo radios were no longer being produced, and man-made noise made listening to AM 900 a struggle for many.

Fortunately, help arrived in the form of a change in the FCC rules that allowed AM stations to simulcast on FM translators. As the new owner and operator of WATV, I jumped on this opportunity, and we soon acquired a translator on 94.9 FM.

We installed brand-new studios (equipped with Wheatstone E-6 and IP-12 consoles) and were ready to launch our service on the FM dial, but one last piece of the puzzle was needed: good, clean, listenable audio.

We turned to Josh Bohn of Bohn Broadcast Services, who designed and constructed our new WheatNet-IP studios. He recommended the Wheatstone FM-55 audio processor.

Just before the launch of WATV's new translator in February, Mike Erickson from Wheatstone visited us with a new FM-55. The goal was simple: Have dial presence but refrain from the over-the-top-processing typically heard in competitive situations.

Setup was fairly straightforward; OLED screen menus walked us through it. Then, with our two sets of ears providing critical listening — Mike Erickson's and our Program Director Chris Coleman's — we started with a standard preset of settings that would get us close to our goal.

After some listening we then started dialing in our "signature" sound. We added a little more bottom to the bass and added in a bit more stereo enhancement — which was a sort of renaissance for us, having broadcast in mono for so long after the AM stereo movement died out some years ago.

DEPTH

We noticed right off that there was an increased depth and clarity of bass without it affecting mid and high-frequency material. Furthermore, our music library runs the gamut, and we noticed that the audio processor did a good job of evening out tonal balance across the board. We later learned that the FM-55 uses a five-band AGC technology — or iAGC — coupled to a five-band limiter and stereo generator, which gives real-time program density control for a consistent, spectrally-balanced sound regardless of density variations in incoming source material.

By the time launch day rolled around, we had already locked down the sound. We turned on the switch to V 94.9 and immediately, staff and friends commented on the "incredible" bass and how clean the signal was, even in areas where reception should have been a challenge. The FM-55 costs a third of some of the high-performing processors we considered, and more than one staff member has pulled me aside to comment they couldn't believe that a budget processor had this kind of horsepower.

A big thank you to Josh Bohn, Mike Erickson, Chris Coleman and the entire team that helped us launch the new V94.9! I am excited about bringing our programming and new sound to a new audience as we continue the rich legacy of WATV for the next generation.

For information, contact Jay Tyler at Wheatstone in North Carolina at 1-252-638-7000 or visit www.wheatstone.com.