AM still sends out a strong signal to rivals

By Martin Miller, Times Staff Writer

In a tech-driven world jammed with listening options, an AM radio station breaking out as a ratings powerhouse runs counter to commonly held perceptions about the medium. Rather than leading the pack, AM should be buried underneath a pile of iPods, TiVo machines, computer games and instant messages.

But it is not. In fact, in Los Angeles, KFI-AM (640) did something last week no other AM station in Southern California has done in two decades: finish first in the overall ratings.

KFI is hardly alone. In fact, it could be considered merely catching up to its AM brothers and sisters in Philadelphia, Chicago, San Diego and a host of other major-market cities where an AM station is either ranked No. 1 or in the top five. Then there is KGO-AM in San Francisco, which has been the undisputed No. 1 station in that market for years.

A far cry from its midcentury pop culture zenith, when youngsters would defy their parents by listening to transistor radios under the bedsheets, AM is nevertheless a vital, vibrant and profitable force in the universe of audio entertainment even as it battles its image of having too much talk and commercials.

"Think of the AM band as Route 1. For decades it was the most heavily trafficked main road," said Tom Taylor, editor of trade publication Inside Radio. "Then along came I-5 and the other big roads. But lots of people still travel Route 1, often to find specialty stores. And there are certainly still very large and successful stores along the way."

AM remains a major radio player because, after being pushed out of the music-playing business in most major national markets more than a decade ago, instead of dying it adapted. During the mid-1980s and early 1990s, AM gradually ejected the Top 40 tunes and inserted in its place a medium-saving mixture of local news, talk radio, sports or other niche programming.

So in a time when much of the media coverage about radio focuses on the battle between XM and Sirius satellite, last week's quarterly Arbitron ratings served as a reminder of the realities back on planet Earth.

KFI jumped from fifth place to a tie for first place on the backs of a beefed-up news-gathering operation and a stable of local talk talent, most notably morning drive-time host Bill Handel and the afternoon's "John and Ken Show." The Burbank-based 50,000-watt station dropped its music format in 1989.

"I don't think people really care about AM or FM," said Robin Bertolucci, KFI's program director for the last four years. "It's like network or cable on television. They just want to watch the show they want to watch. It's not the delivery, it's the program."

The Stern fallout

Ironically, KFI owes much of its top-spot boon to satellite radio — something critics have long predicted would be its eventual doom. When broadcaster Howard Stern leaped to satellite earlier this year, millions of his daily listeners on terrestrial radio did not jump with him.

Scores of AM — and FM — stations across the country have thus far reaped the ratings benefit. KFI's morning drive-time show, typically its most profitable time slot, has picked up nearly a full percentage point in audience share since Stern left terrestrial radio.

KFI drive-time host Handel admits that AM radio, because of its emphasis on news and talk, has gotten a "stodgy" image, but he does what he can to counter that perception. "We're very irreverent," said Handel, who has drawn protests about his off-color remarks about Arabs and ethnic minorities within the United States. "We have days where we look at each other and wonder how we were able to get away with what we just did."
But even without the Stern bump, which is still too early to bank on as permanent, AM still has retained a powerful position in the audio marketplace with its news and talk format. But even a big market can support only a handful of AM stations, given the intense competition with FM.

In Los Angeles, other than KFI, there is only one other AM station — KABC-AM (790), also a news/talk format — in the top 20. Typically, the further an AM station strays from the news/talk format, the lower its ratings. A notable exception is WSM-AM in Nashville, which still plays a classic country music format and usually finishes in the top 15 in its market.

Medium adapts

A trip today down the AM dial in virtually any big city in America reveals how dramatic the medium has changed over the decades. Where sports, ethnic and niche musical programming (such as polka and gospel) flourish today, decades ago AM, as practically the only show in town, was crammed with pop music and news stations.

But by the 1970s, FM not only offered a clearer signal better suited to broadcasting music, it also followed its audience's migration out of the cities. FM stations seemed to pop up everywhere, while AM merely held its ground. Today, about 65% of the nation's roughly 13,000 radio stations are FM.

"It comes down to whether your signal can cover the market," said Robert Unmacht, a Nashville-based radio and media consultant. "In the 1970s, FM stations moved into the suburbs and AM didn't."

Some media analysts predict AM may be in for another intense fight with FM in the news/talk sphere in the coming years. As satellite, iPods and a host of other music-playing technologies lure away FM's music audience, FM will be forced to turn to news/talk formats, which in some cases it already has, says Michael Harrison, editor and publisher of the talk radio magazine Talkers.

"FM is struggling right now, and it's got to find something that works, and talk radio is going to be it," Harrison said. "And there's an old saying in radio that good programming on FM will beat good programming on AM."

Still, other analysts think that AM radio can weather the storm.

"One of the most telling things about AM, for all its supposed demises, is that you can still make money with it," Unmacht said. "Very few AM stations have ever had to go away. There's always been a buyer."

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