



2101 SUPERIOR AVENUE  
CLEVELAND, OH 44114 USA  
PHONE: +216.241.7225/+216.241.3343  
FAX: +216-241-4103



## **Z-100: How A Flamethrower Ignited New York City Radio From Worst To First!**

*Frank Foti*

*Z-100's Original Chief Engineer (1983 – 1987)*

Wow...Hard to fathom that 20 years ago, in a small Secaucus, New Jersey 5 story building, a little *baby* radio station would rewrite broadcasting history, as Z-100 (WHTZ-FM) went from *Worst To First* in one ratings period! An achievement unequaled since! This August marks the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Z-100's birth, and there are plenty of wonderful memories.

It's not too often when the former chief engineer of a highly successful radio station is asked to share his memories of an exciting time. So this is an honor, and I promise it won't be laden with boring technobabble! While my background is technology based, my passion and desire is *radio based!*

Even though I was the chief engineer who built Z-100, that does need some clarification, as there are two other engineers who were part of the initial project...Joe Knapp and Gerry Westerberg. They were there in the early days, and we shared quite a few late nights trying to get things ready. In the end, I built the final studios, completed the Empire State Building transmitter project, installed the studio phone lines that covered five area codes, and created "*The Sound!*"

Aside from my current business designing Omnia audio processors, working at Z-100 was the best job I'd ever had! I was truly lucky to have worked with the *best of the best* in every aspect of a radio station! That management team of General Manager: Dean Thacker, Program Director: Scott Shannon, Operations Manager: Chuck Crain, Shadow Stevens, and then Steve Kingston, Sales Manager: Gary Fisher, Business Manager: Cynthia Jagodnik-Jones, Music Directors: Michael Ellis and then Frankie Blue, Promotion Directors: the late Linda Lerner, Kenny Lane, and then Marty Wall, were all stars at their respective craft. I've never been with a management team like that since!

That airstaff was like no other. Everyone of that group put their necks on the line. Sure, Scott drove them hard, but you could tell on the air. There was a passion that came through every time the mic was opened. You never knew what to expect next, even though we played the same 30 records again and again. The station was always exciting. Z-100 was your best friend, and it was a testament to the jocks, who carried that feeling to our listeners. I can honestly say that I was close to all of them. Jack Da' Wack, (Jack Barnes) even bought a house close to where I lived, and we've been dear friends ever since. Captain Kevin Smith and I played basketball every week, during the winter months in an old church in Maplewood, NJ. Scott, and "Studs" Kingston have not only been friends, but they helped me open numerous business opportunities, as my own company Cutting Edge/Omnia Audio went from *worst to first* in it's own marketplace!

As memory serves, the mindset and mission that lead Scott Shannon and troupe to success, actually began long before that memorable sign on in August, 1983. It was in those hallways at 333 Meadowland Parkway, among the drywall dust, partially built studios, and skeleton staff, that the soul of Z-100 was born. I specifically remember walking in those hallways, weeks before sign on, and there was a gut feeling

that something really cool was about to evolve. It was like a rocket sitting on the launching pad just waiting to blast off! I'd been chief engineer at WMMS-FM, in my hometown of Cleveland, during its AOR heyday in the late 1970's/early 1980's, and that experience didn't equal what was about to hit the NYC airwaves at 100.3MHz. I can recall Scott getting antsy because he'd been off the air since leaving Q-105 in Tampa, Florida. He couldn't wait to hit those airwaves.

Inside the station, you could just feel an energy that pervaded everyone. There was an excitement and cohesiveness that bonded together all who were there. Most of us were not from NYC, and that probably helped, as each of us looked at the opportunity to work in New York, as a dream come true. I believe it drove us harder, as we wanted to prove to ourselves that we could play in the bigtime. It's analogous to a baseball player being called up to *The Show!* I remember how the entire staff was there at 6am on Tuesday, August 2<sup>nd</sup> for that initial sign on. That was a lasting impression in my mind, and was another indicator that this group of people were really into what Z-100 was all about. (It became tradition that on every birthday of the station, we were all at the studio by 6am to start the celebration along with the Z-Morning Zoo!)

Trying to explain the *magic* that existed at Z-100, would be like trying to explain what made *The Beatles* so special. I always believed that this group of overachieving radio rats, was the added intangible that propelled it over the top. Sure, what Scott and the Z-Jays did on the air was nothing short of miraculous, but there was always something more, something that you couldn't explain, touch, or describe, that made Z-100 a living, breathing, real *being*. You just felt it, and it consumed you!! It was part of every person who worked there. It didn't matter if it was one of the jocks, or George Tripp, our beloved mailroom clerk. There was a special aura that existed among that group of people.

Z-100 like was another part of your family. Actually, my ex-wife used to say that she felt as if Z-100 was more to me than another woman!! I was as much a fan of it, as I was an employee. The station never ceased to amaze!

When our General Manager, Dean Thacker, introduced me to Scott Shannon, the first thing he said was "Hey Man, make me sound like the DJ's on KNEW!" I thought, "Wow, this guy's got an ear, and damn, I better have my "A" game with me!" I'd been chief at KNEW/KSAN (San Francisco) where my associate, George Craig, and I had created a mic processor we'd affectionately called "Gonad Max!" Now the challenge was to create a larger than life sound for Z-100, and in the Mecca of all radio markets...New York City.

This does leads to the one technical aspect of Z-100 that folks remember most: *The Sound*. We created a signature sound that was distinct, loud, yet clean. You knew when Z-100 was on your dial, as it stood out and was noticed! This was done by design, by using some unique ideas, and an audio chain that was a first of its kind, at that time. For those who've always wanted to know what was *in the rack*, here it is: Very early production TEXAR Audio Prisms installed by Glen Clark himself. (Glen brought them to NYC in a suitcase!) An EXR Exciter, which was a knock off of the Aphex Aural Exciter. An Optimod 8100, with a few inside modifications from yours truly. Finally, a composite clipper to gain those last few dB's of loudness. That was it!! I tuned that audio chain over a few months. Using feedback from Scott and Ops Manager Chuck Crain, we basically left it alone once we got it where we wanted it. I could literally walk around a shopping mall and tell you which stores had Z-100 on. It was that distinct! The sound of Z-100 was as important to me, as the format and music rotation was to Scott and the air staff. My assistant Steve Pepe and I took great pride in the technical plant. We treated the radio station as if it was *our own!*

While we never had "Gonad Max," the mic chain was actually a hodge-podge of gear: a UREI LA-4 set for 8:1 compression, parametric EQ, and a Fostex Reverb were on the two main mic channels. The other mic channels had dbx-165 compressors, EQ, and reverb. All of this was locked away in the studio, and rarely adjusted.

The other important technical aspect, were the phones. The Z-Morning Zoo used the phone a lot, and it was paramount that everyone on the morning show heard the caller, and the caller heard the air staff. Add to that, the need to serve all five of the area codes. Being that the station was located in New Jersey, and big-

bad MA-Bell hadn't been broken apart yet, we had a huge challenge to try and offer local phone access to the five Burroughs, and Connecticut.

We eventually did this by using an early wireless version of a T-1 communications network. To my recollection, it was the first of its kind, privately used in broadcasting. We actually brought all of the New York Bell phone lines into the Empire State Building transmitter room, and then used our own communications microwave to transport them back to New Jersey. This was leading edge stuff back then.

This took some real haggling to pull it off. I remember Scott getting upset after New York Bell kept giving us the run around about getting NYC phone service into New Jersey. So he sent Jack Da Wack to a phone booth on Wall Street and told listeners that if they were the 100<sup>th</sup> caller to this phone number that they gave out on the air, they would win \$100! Well, after we blew out the local Wall Street exchange and shut down phone service to numerous brokers, New York Bell helped us find an alternative method to get what we needed. Guess it helped to have a 50,000 watt microphone to use at your disposal!

### *Other memories...*

We were all basically *rooming* at the Meadowlands Hilton in Secaucus, and I spent many a night scanning the NYC airwaves just to get a feel for the *dial*, with respect to how the other FM stations processed their audio. Obviously our main target was going to be WPLJ, which was morphing itself from AOR to a Hits format. WRKS was also sounding good, and doing quite well in the ratings. Our work was cut out for us. The morning drive kingpin was "Imus In The Morning" on WNBC, and you could tell that's who Scott had his sights set on. New York City had been starved for a good hit radio station since WABC switched to its talk format a few years earlier. I like to think that what Z-100 achieved was a later day success that is right up there in the radio annals with WABC's success, years earlier.

Not long after Z-100 signed on, Rick Sklar's book "Rockin' America" was published and all of us consumed it. It's almost as if it became a mission statement for us. As I think back, there were numerous parallels to both WABC and WHTZ in their early days.

The time leading up to sign on, were extremely hectic. Malrite Broadcasting, which owned Z-100, had basically bought an FCC construction permit that would allow us to move the transmitter from West Orange, N.J. to the Empire State Building. This would give Z-100 a signal that would parallel that of the other NYC stations, even though WHTZ-FM is legally licensed to Newark, N.J. The work of adding Z-100 to the Master FM Antenna System, at Empire, was moving slowly, and we would spend late nights testing the new transmitter before the actual sign on date of August 2<sup>nd</sup>. What most folks probably never knew was that someone had to be at the studio and identify the radio station so that the FCC's testing criteria was met. Thus, I was actually the first person ever to be "on the air" on Z-100. Every hour or so, this very monotone midwestern voice would open the mic and identify "WHTZ, Newark." I'd play various carts that were in the studio and basically play *Baby-DJ* in the middle of the night.

The goal was to have the new transmitter running for our initial sign on, but we'd had a component failure at the last minute and had to actually broadcast from the old West Orange location for the first two days. I was literally twisting wires together no less than 15 minutes before that historic 6am kick off on August 2<sup>nd</sup>. We had to do this in order to get the old West Orange, N.J. location up and running, as the Empire site had failed only an hour earlier. Scott would refer to this transmitter as the "pea shooter."

Once the repairs were made, it was on Thursday, August 4<sup>th</sup> we got the Empire site working. Scott referred to the new transmitter as "The Flamethrower" and that's how the moniker came to be. Later, we actually named the station softball team "The Z-100 Flamethrowers!"

I can still recall, to this very day, a brief chat Scott and I had while building the main air studio. Scott walked in and said "Frank-o, mark my words, we're gonna make radio history right here in this room!" As we all know, only too well, WE DID!! Scott asked only one thing of engineering. His desire was that we give him, and his Z-Jays, the tools to kick ass on the radio. That was our technical goal. He comments always were, just give me the tools, and leave it to us. So we did!!

Another memory that happened a few days after the initial sign on was a trip to see Mr. Milton Maltz, the owner of Malrite Broadcasting. Apparently Mr. Maltz had promised Mrs. Maltz a vacation that summer abroad, and they were traveling when we signed on. Well, one afternoon Dean Thacker, Kenny Lane, Joe Knapp, Gerry Westerberg, and myself drove out to JFK airport in hopes that we could, as a surprise, catch Mr. Maltz as he changed planes on his way back to Cleveland. We were lucky enough to find him and his wife as they cleared US Customs. We were waiting there with a radio playing, and a Z-100 T-Shirt. He was so excited to hear his NYC station that he changed into the T-Shirt right there on the spot. It was like watching a young child receive a cool new toy on Christmas morning. Z-100 touched people in that way all the time!

My wife, at the time, was from the San Francisco Bay area. So, for the 1983 Christmas Holidays I promised her that we'd head west to visit her folks. One morning, quite early, like around 5am west coast time, the phone rang. It was Dean Thacker and Scott. I thought, "Oh no we've got some huge technical problem. I better be ready to head back east ASAP!" But that's not why they were calling. I can still hear Dean saying: "FoeTie (my adopted nickname) we got the ratings in, and guess what? We're number #1!" There were literally tears in my eyes, and a shiver up my spine as the reality began to set in. While I almost couldn't believe my ears, I always knew we'd be number #1! I'm not trying to sound arrogant, but from the moment we signed Z-100 on, I felt it in my bones that it would be the best! I know that everyone else, at the station, felt the same way too! Boy if ever the story of the "Little Engine That Could" were to apply... This was it!

No one, outside of our staff, ever gave it a chance. After we won that first book, everyone else in NYC said it was a fluke, that it couldn't and wouldn't last. Hey, as an underdog from Cleveland, I knew better! We lived, as a credo, what the top of the hour liner would say: "Z-100, lock it in and rip the knob off."

Of all my memories, the best one is of the entire staff. They were, and still are family to me. Every major Holiday, someone would host dinner for those who were not able to head to their real hometowns, or share with their own families. There were never any *clicks* among the crew. We worked together, we hung out together, and we stuck together. I witnessed marriages, births, and sadly a few passings of that group. I'm still in contact with some, and the occasional small reunions have been a blessing. As I look at the radio industry, that original crew at Z-100, have gone on to do some amazing things!! Bless them all!!! We succeeded because of ability, dedication, passion, but also a lot of love! I'm proud to say that, and have always tried to carry the Z-100 experience in everything I do.

It's a testament to all who've ever worked there, that the station has been so dominant for so long. As this 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary approaches, it's a salute to the current gang that they are upholding a legend.

Thank You Z-100!