

Jim Gabbert - 52 Years of Broadcasting



Silver Circle Profile
By: **Kevin Wing**

To emphasize how influential **James Gabbert** has been and continues to be in the world of broadcasting, one only need look back on his 52 years in television and radio.

In fact, at a recent major conference on radio broadcasting worldwide, the international division of the National Association of Broadcasters bestowed upon the Bay Area broadcasting legend a lifetime achievement award for his pioneering and innovative contributions to radio. Gabbert is the first broadcaster to receive this honor.

Gabbert's achievements have been known for decades in the Bay Area. The NATAS Silver Circle member (Class of 1990) turned a small Peninsula radio station into a San Francisco powerhouse and converted a little-watched UHF television station into one of the Bay Area's most well-known television brands.

Gabbert turned tiny KPEN radio into San Francisco's K-101 which today, as Star 101.3, continues to enjoy the dubious distinction of having the most powerful FM signal (at 125,000 watts) west of the Mississippi.

He also charted a new course for the Bay Area's Channel 20, a San Francisco station which was broadcasting a smattering of little-watched programs in 1980. That's when Gabbert purchased it and later rechristened it KOFY TV20, one of the most recognizable TV brands in the market.

Gabbert paid just under \$10 million for the station and sold it in 1998 for \$217 million in cash. KOFY TV20 went from being an independent to a WB affiliate in the nation's fifth largest market, subsequently changing its call letters to KBWB to reflect its new relationship with the network. This year, as a testament to Gabbert's success when he owned Channel 20, the station reached back to its local glory days, rechristening itself as KOFY.

Yes, the station has gone back to the dogs, too — literally.

"During my years owning the station, it became



a friendly, folksy station," Gabbert says. "It made people feel comfortable. It was part of our lives. Channel 20 wanted to recapture that all over again, so they went back to being known as KOFY."

During the 18 years that Channel 20 was owned by Gabbert, it was known for its variety of syndicated programs, its million-dollar giveaways — and a menagerie of viewers' dogs appearing on-screen during station ID breaks.

"People liked their dogs better than they liked their kids," Gabbert says. "There were long waiting lines outside the station. People lined up to get their dogs on TV. (**David Letterman**) used to talk about it. He'd refer to us as 'that dog station out in San Francisco.'"

The station was also known for its owner. Gabbert himself is a likable, genial man who is as folksy and friendly today as he was when he appeared regularly during station editorials. Gabbert was also the popular host of the station's long-running *Dance Party* show. He also introduced movies on Sunday nights in the guise of *Sunday Night with James Gabbert*. The show was shot in the studio and featured Gabbert, a *Cheers*-like bar and a regular cast of characters who planted themselves next to Gabbert at the Sleazy Arms Bar. Gabbert introduced movies, exchanged a few laughs and sipped from beer glasses. Was it real beer? Gabbert says it was.

Today, Gabbert is one of the popular features of the KGO Radio lineup, filling in occasionally as a guest host during the morning commute or afternoon drive.

He started in radio in Costa Rica when his father was working for the government head of the foreign aid program in Latin America. When Gabbert was a junior in high school there, a radio station moved into his neighborhood, and a lifelong passion and affiliation with broadcasting was born. It was the top station in his region. Gabbert got his own afternoon radio show, spinning records and selling advertising time to keep his show on the air while cutting his teeth in broadcasting while still in his teens.

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Gabbert eventually left Costa Rica and attended UC Santa Barbara. He ended up getting radio jobs in Ventura and Los Angeles as a Spanish disc jockey. Later, he changed his plans of going to Annapolis, and instead, moved to the Bay Area to study electrical engineering at Stanford.

By the mid-1950s, Gabbert was on the air in the Bay Area. He had his own Spanish-speaking radio shows on KCSU, KLOK and KEEN. Then, in 1957, Gabbert and a friend were looking to own their own radio station. There were no AM frequencies available anywhere in California at that time, but there were more than a dozen empty frequencies on the FM dial. Gabbert and his friend filled out the papers, and in October of that year, completed the building of the station and launched KPEN radio at 101.3 on the FM dial. For the next 11 years, KPEN slowly grew. In 1968, to coincide with the 101.3 FM dial position, Gabbert changed the call letters to KIOI and moved the station to San Francisco. K-101 and a "light rock" format were born. With his engineering background, Gabbert also installed K-101's antenna. At 125,000 watts, the station boasted the strongest signal in the West. The FCC later put a cap on how powerful a radio station's signal could be.

In 1980, Gabbert took advantage of an opportunity to jump into TV. He purchased bankrupt KEMO Channel 20. To do it, Gabbert had to sell off K-101 and a Hawaii radio station. He later purchased an AM and an FM station and together, along with Channel 20, all of them took on the KOFY call letters.

"When we went on the air with Channel 20 (first as KTZO), we ended up with an enormous amount of press," Gabbert recalls. "We ran it like a radio station. We were criticized all around town. This upset the traditionalists. But, we promoted the station all the time, and we had contests. At one time, we made over two million bumper stickers. If you were the lucky one and we spotted your car, we'd give you a million dollars. But, you had to watch TV20 to see if your license plate came on. That's how we got people to watch us."

KOFY-TV entered the TV news foray in the late

1980s, starting up a newscast with former KCBS Radio anchor **Robert McCormick** and ex-KTVU anchor **Barbara Simpson**. It aired at 10 p.m., going head-to-head with KTVU's powerhouse news team of **Dennis Richmond** and **Elaine Corral**. After several years on the air, KOFY discontinued its newscast.

By 1998, KOFY-TV was doing extremely well; advertising sales were increasing by 40 percent a month. "We were on top of the world," Gabbert says. "Finally, it was payoff time after 18 years on the air. I got a call from a broker who offered to buy the station. I told him it wasn't for sale. But then, he came up with a cash offer of \$217 million. I couldn't pass it up."

The sale of the station made Gabbert a very wealthy man. These days, he's as busy as ever, splitting time between filling in at KGO Radio, his home in Sausalito and his second home in Puerto Vallarta, a 23,000-square-foot residence. Gabbert also pilots his own Boeing 727 around the world to meet up with his 164-foot yacht, *Invader* — a beauty to behold.

"I have fond memories of all of my years in broadcasting," Gabbert says. "I never went to work, I went to play. I also recognized that we were here for the audience. If you don't have an audience, you're nothing. The audience should always be first priority, not the cash register. That's how I operated my stations. My first priority was always to the audience."



Bay Area television journalist Kevin Wing pens Off Camera's profiles on Silver Circle and Gold Circle members. He's a casual network field producer for ABC News, covering the Bay Area and northern California for "Good Morning America" and "ABC World News."

The Silver Circle
25 years

The Gold Circle
50 years

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