

# MIRACLE MEN of RADIO are NEVER HEARD.

Condensed article from *The Queenslander* 3-11-1937 compiled by M.J. McDonald.

The key men of radio are not those who supply the words and music – the singers, musicians, actors, commentators, and announcers. Not one of them could be heard farther than he could shout, were it not for the engineers who hurl the sound to listeners through space. The engineers are the real miracle men. The master mind is the M.C. – master control operator – a fast thinking, quick acting chap whose day is just one crisis – or averted crisis – after another, and who holds the fate of the various programmes at his fingertips, despite rarely having the time to listen to any programme. The M.C. operators of big broadcasting networks are radio's "split-second" men, for it's their job to co-ordinate the activities of several stations, to prevent and correct operating mistakes with lightning decisions, and to dove-tail different groups of stations when the timing goes completely amiss.

If you get jittery when telephones jangle and typewriters rattle, you wouldn't make a good M.C. A man of iron nerves and cool head, the M.C. sits at the master control desk in a room about the average size of an office. In his ears blare different programmes at the one time. At his elbows, several telephones constantly bring messages from different broadcasting points. At his fingertips are buttons controlling P.M.G. lines feeding affiliated stations. Because some commercial broadcasters utilise only part of the stations of a network, fill-in programmes must be transmitted to the others.

An example was the Golden Casket draw broadcast by the *Courier Mail* stations 4BK and 4AK. A feature session prior to the drawing of the casket had to be transmitted to 4IP Ipswich, and immediately at the end of this session the M.C. had simultaneously to switch in 4WK Warwick, 4AY Ayr, 4MB Maryborough, 4TO Townsville, 4BU Bundaberg, and 4CA Cairns. At the conclusion of the draw, all these stations had to be cut off while at the same time sustaining the continuity of the programme to 4IP, to which the next session, "Dad and Dave", had to be relayed. It is not difficult to imagine the number of things that could go wrong in such a relay; especially as the timing is a matter of seconds.

The M.C. gets his real test when an unexpected broadcast comes to hand, such as important news. With one or two more relays in progress, and others scheduled to follow, the harried M.C. must juggle his time in frantic long-distance calls to other control points, expanding or condensing individual broadcasts to bring them all back into synchronised timing for the next period. Day and night the M.C. fights the clock. Each 15 minutes or so programmes are scheduled to begin, and a dozen things may happen to keep them from starting. A battery may go dead or a valve may burn out. Once a studio engineer dropped dead at the controls. Whatever the case, the M.C. has no warning until the actual failure occurs. Then things happen, with signal warnings flashing, buzzers activating, telephone bells clamouring, and producers raving. However, the M.C. coolly substitutes a standby programme, issues instructions to engineers, receives calls from those trying to locate the trouble, and jots down a few notes on his running log. And so it goes on, day after day and night after night, emergency after emergency; each handled in his stride by the master control man.

Working under such conditions, it is only natural that the M.C. should be resourceful. However, despite elaborate precautions, the M.C. does have embarrassing moments. Once a telephone man plugged in the wrong cable, and several minutes of a programme intended for one network went out to another before anyone noticed. The engineers were jolted into action when they heard a well-known cheese brand being broadcast on their headache powder programme.

While the M.C. is the "split-second" man, the remote operator is the "minute man of the air". The remote operators cover events taking them away from their studios. They often travel hundreds of miles for short broadcasts, and sometimes have many unusual or thrilling experiences. One was transmitting from a café when two men were shot, with the shots being heard by thousands of listeners. Few listeners knew what the sounds were, for the engineer quickly motioned to the orchestra leader and the latter laughingly announced that the drummer had fallen into the bass drum.

Unsung are the praises of the men who hold radio's drab job – maintenance. Each night they check every piece of equipment to forestall possible failure. Day after day they check microphones and controls, tap valves, look over signal lights, shake and rattle cables, polish plugs and sockets, and correct clocks. Most of these miracle men of wireless telegraphy are so steeped in radio that they are no longer able to leave it alone. Their days off are typical "busmen's holidays" – spent beside an experimental transmitter as they communicate with amateurs the world over.

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