

TOM POLEMAN

PROGRAMMER WITH A BIG HEART

At the dawn of the COVID-19 pandemic, iHeartMedia identified a community in desperate need of help and recognition—the frontline workers in America’s healthcare systems.

Tom Poleman, the President of National Programming Group for iHeartMedia, and John Sykes, iHeart’s President of Entertainment Enterprises, quickly assembled an hourlong special for Fox TV, packing the ad-free collection of musicians performing in their homes to benefit Feeding America and First Responders Children’s foundation. Elton John was the host; Alicia Keys, Sam Smith, Backstreet Boys, Green Day’s Billie Joe Armstrong and Tim McGraw were among the performers.

As is so often the case in iHeart’s charitable efforts, Poleman is leading the way behind the scenes, executive-producing Procter & Gamble

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and iHeartMedia’s *Can’t Cancel Pride: A COVID-19 Relief Benefit for the LGBTQ+ Community* and backing First Responder Fridays during the early weeks of the pandemic.

“I get to interact indirectly with 245 million people per month, and with that power comes a certain level of responsibility,” Poleman told *Millennial* magazine in 2015. “We all have to remember to give back and do something good with the positions that we have.”

Poleman has been a leader of a generation that transformed radio. Inheriting a system in which relations between labels and stations were largely adversarial or transactional—and programmers were often inaccessible to promotion execs—he set a new standard of accessibility and accountability based on the idea of a shared goal: to break artists and bring great records to ever bigger audiences. In other words, Poleman was part of a new breed of programmers who, rather than seeing the radio business as wholly separate from the record business, identified as part of the larger *music* business.

“It’s interesting to see the evolution of the relationship between radio and records through the years,” he reflected in *HITS* in 2014. “We’ve gone through phases where we viewed ourselves as enemies. Then there are times where we’re one another’s greatest allies. We’re big believers that for our industry to continue to thrive, we have to view ourselves as allies.”

This identification meant developing initiatives (splashy premieres and hourly plays of new singles, for example) that turned new music, whether from established stars or breaking acts, into an event. In service to these and other programs—and this really can’t be overstated—Poleman has earned a reputation as a guy you can get on the phone, who’s excited to debut that new cut, to jump onstage and introduce a breakthrough act at an intimate showcase.

THAT ENTHUSIASM EXTENDS to his philanthropic endeavors. Poleman was a Co-Chair of **Musicians on Call**, an organization that brings musicians to hospitals to perform for the patients; he was on the Board of Directors for **MusiCares**; and he’s been active in the **Ugandan Water Project** as a tribute to his late father, a professor of International Agriculture and Economics at Cornell University, who moved the family to Uganda during a 1967 sabbatical.

In 2008, Poleman, his 15-year-old son, **Michael**, Z100 morning co-host **Carolina Bermudez** and 21 other people traveled to Nicaragua on a nine-day humanitarian trip during which they helped build homes and other structures.

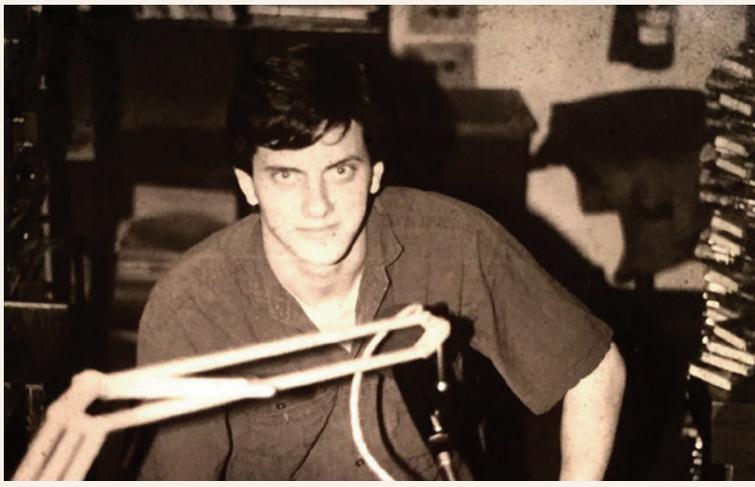
“One of the coolest things about the trip was how much we became intertwined with members of the local community,” he told *R&R*. “I really wanted to do something with Michael as a sort of life lesson. You don’t really get a sense of what the world is all about when you’re 15 years old and living in Westchester.”

The **UJA Federation**, **LIFEbeat**, **Musicians on Call** and the **T.J. Martell Foundation** are among the organizations that have honored Poleman for his charitable efforts.

AS A CHILD, POLEMAN ASPIRED to be a musician, studying piano and guitar. He fell in love with rock ‘n’ roll, especially **The Who**, and, not surprisingly, the radio, the subject he studied at Cornell. He still plays guitar and is keen to jam with industry folk whenever possible.

His first PD job was in Ithaca, N.Y., at **WVBR**, where he learned to program with the goal of increasing listenership. That led to a weekend on-air gig at **WALK FM**





Clockwise from top left: DJ Poleman at Cornell; with Meghan Trainor, Taylor Swift and John Sykes; with Bono; with Bob Pittman, Luke Bryan and Sykes

on Long Island, which was followed by an APD job at WKCI in New Haven, Conn. When he was promoted to MD, Poleman did double duty as the afternoon jock. He left the Northeast for Houston in 1991 to be Assistant Program Director at KRBE; he was upped to PD in 1993.

He had that job for three years before returning to New York, this time with the daunting task of remaking the then-struggling Z100 at the age of 31. He was only the third PD in the station's history.

Then owned by AMFM but acquired by Clear Channel in 1999, Z100 was on its heels, a heritage station on the verge of a format change, attempting to maintain listener share with a rock-leaning playlist that lightly mimicked Alternative giant WXRK, which was then dominating the airwaves. Poleman—who credits the insight of radio veterans like Scott Shannon and Shadow Steele in devising his strategy—immediately grasped that the station needed to re-establish its CHR bona fides in order to win. Fortunately, by the mid-'90s, a new, highly rhythmic style of pop was gathering steam. This was essential to Poleman's plan to restore Z100 to its former glory.

"I had a hard time finding anyone that wanted to work there, and I'm pretty sure there was an industry

betting pool on how long I'd last," he told *Millennial*.

He assembled a team of twentysomethings who "loved radio and wanted to win" and within a year made Z100 the most-listened-to station in America.

"The riskiest, most challenging moves always have the biggest payoff," he told *Millennial*. "What I thought was my biggest mistake ultimately became my defining career moment."

As it seemed he had the Midas touch, Poleman was given the reins to Clear Channel's collection of New York stations, among them Lite FM, WKTU and Q104.3; he rebuilt WWPR from Jammin' 105.1, seeing it rise to fourth in the ratings from 14th. Under his guidance, all of Clear Channel's stations moved into the Top 15.

Within four months of his arrival, his moves to make the playlist more mainstream—think Tom Petty alongside Backstreet Boys—brought in more listeners, as did his DJs; the morning team included Elvis Duran and Christine Nagy.

"He's always rethinking everything and starting fresh," Duran told *Crain's*. "He's a pro at that."

Within two years, Z100's ratings had doubled.

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“I felt like a baby in the industry, moving to that station at that age,” Poleman told *Pollstar* in 2017. “When I went to Z100 in 1996, it was having some really hard times. It was ranked 18th in the market, and we had to reinvent it. We made some programming changes and became very Top 40-focused, but we also created events like **Jingle Ball at Madison Square Garden**. Doing it at an iconic building like MSG, it’s all part of the magic of an event in New York.”

No Doubt, Jewel and Sarah McLachlan headlined that first Jingle Ball, held in 1996. He would oversee it, growing it into an annual event in multiple cities at holiday time. Two decades later, he told *HITS*, “If you’re an artist who makes it to [what is now the **iHeartRadio Jingle Ball Tour**], it means you’re one of the most important artists in pop music this year.”

The AMFM brass made him SVP Programming, overseeing Pittsburgh, Atlanta, Boston, Long Island and Washington, D.C.

“It was a natural evolution for my career and an opportunity that was too big to pass up,” he told *R&R* in 2000. “Nevertheless, it’s tough to slowly let go of something [Z100] that you love so much.”

Nonetheless, when Clear Channel bought AMFM and gave him the role of programming the company’s New York stations, he told *R&R*, “As long as I’m focused on strategy, branding and creating new products, I’m a happy man. That’s why I love cluster programming so much. Deregulation and technology have forced us to look at programming on an entirely different level.”

In 2008, Poleman scored a rare ratings feat when five of his stations went to #1 in the 18-49 demo: Z100 was

With iHeart’s Rod Phillips



With Adele

No. 1, followed by WLTW (AC), WKTU (Rhythmic AC), WAXQ (Classic Rock) and WWPR (Urban).

Three years later, Poleman was named President of Clear Channel’s national programming platforms, overseeing 850 radio stations, music and event marketing, label and artist relations, on-air talent development and digital programming.

In 2011, his team also staged the first **iHeartRadio Music Festival**, headlined by Jay-Z, Alicia Keys and Coldplay in Las Vegas. (iHeartRadio had emerged in 2008; iHeartMedia would supplant Clear Channel in 2014.) Within two years, they’d opened the **iHeartRadio Theater** in Los Angeles, grown the iHeart Music Fest and expanded syndicated programming with shows like *The Bobby Bones Show* and *The Breakfast Club*.

In 2017, Poleman was promoted to Chief Programming Officer at iHeartMedia, overseeing all programming and music strategy, talent development and artist relations for the company’s radio stations and iHeartRadio.

“No one understands the intricate relationship between programming, on-air talent, artist relationships and live music events like Tom Poleman,” iHeartMedia CEO Bob Pittman said. “He has always been a key part of the team that has shaped iHeartMedia into a multi-platform company.”

Republic chief Monte Lipman applauded Poleman for entirely different reasons, noting that “Tom’s unwavering support of the artist community and respect for the creative process has always been his greatest characteristic. Everyone knows Tom for his incredible work ethic, leadership and attention to detail, but his passion for breaking new artists is what makes him the consummate music executive.” ■