



# LEGENDS™

## Les Garland, Part Two: The Dream Job Becomes A Reality

KFRC/San Francisco finally comes through, after a detour through Boston

By Ron Rodrigues

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Les Garland had coveted the KFRC/San Francisco PD position ever since he had mastered programming Top 40 radio, but there was one person who stood between him and the job, and his name was Michael Spears. In 1975 Spears had been at the programming helm of KFRC for several years, and the station was humming.

RKO had a prime PD position open, however, and Paul Drew got on the phone to once again summon Garland, who was at CKLW/Detroit. "Paul pulled me out and wanted me to go to WRKO/Boston," Garland says. "Frankly, when he did it, I told him my dream was to head south to Chicago and make a right turn to KFRC, not in the other direction."

But Drew told him the KFRC job wasn't open and probably wouldn't be for years, so Garland followed Drew's advice and headed for Beantown. This led to one of Garland's and the station's biggest promotions and started a trend that is still big in radio today.

### A DAY IN THE PARK

Garland wanted to celebrate the arrival of spring in Boston with a huge concert, but, back in the '70s, radio stations didn't do big shows. Garland had to convince city authorities that it was not going to be a rock concert, but, rather, "a day in the park" for maybe 30,000 listeners.

It happened that the event went off on the most beautiful day of that year in Boston. Nearly 175,000 people jammed the Esplanade to hear the likes of Heart, Boston, J. Geils Band and others. Traffic was jammed. The nearby Red Sox game was disrupted. The promotion earned front-page coverage in the next morning's papers.

OK, are we ready for San Francisco yet? Michael Spears was summoned to Los Angeles to rescue KHJ. That meant the KFRC job Garland had coveted for years was finally open — but he had 18 months left on his WRKO contract. Garland whispered to himself, "Oh my God, I can't even put my hat in the ring."

The first call he took about the KFRC job was not from his pal Paul Drew, but from KFRC GM Pat Norman. "Pat tells me, 'I've spoken to Jack [Hobbs, WRKO GM], and Jack has given me permission to

quietly talk with you,'" Garland says.

When Drew found out about the conversation a few days later, he got on the phone to Garland and asked, "Why would you want to go to KFRC? You're forgetting that KFRC is the No. 1 radio station in San Francisco."

Garland corrected Drew: "I said, 'KFRC might be the No. 1 music station, but it is the No. 3 station overall, and that's the reason I want to go there — to prove that I can get it to No. 1.'"



Les Garland

### OUT-OF-THIS-WORLD PROMOS

KFRC sounded great before Garland's arrival, but it stepped up to a new level after he got there. Certainly, none of KFRC's programming elements — music selection, on-air talent or well-crafted promos — sounded cookie-cutter.

On one occasion, in the *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* era, Garland and his girlfriend "got this idea for a crazy thing we could do on the radio," he says. They collaborated on an announcement that contained neither a contest promo nor paid advertising. In it, late, legendary voiceover artist Paul Fries declared that KFRC's 5,000-watts at 610 on the dial could be used as a channel for communication with extraterrestrials.

The eerie promo made noisy offices and stores go quiet. Garland and KFRC won a Clio award for the piece. To hear it, go to [www.reelradio.com](http://www.reelradio.com) and enter "Close Encounters" in the search box.

And let's not forget the Skylab contest. In 1979 everyone was talking about the American space station that was slowly making its way back to Earth. When the craft finally crashed, Garland received a message from friends in Australia who had recovered a 2,000-pound, picnic table-sized oxygen tank from the wreckage. While other stations were giving away Skylab survival kits, Garland wanted to give away pieces of craft itself.

The U.S. government had no interest in the tank, so Garland chopped off a piece and told KFRC listeners that a section of Skylab was hidden somewhere in San Francisco. The first person to find it got to keep it. More theater of the mind.

Garland became partners with his Australian friends and sold the rest of the tank to other radio stations for \$1,000 a square inch. The remaining piece of the tank is on display in a space museum in Jackson, MS.

### MILLION-DOLLAR MADNESS

The promotion that took KFRC to No. 1 sounds old hat now but was revolutionary in 1978. As much as he disliked Arbitron methodology, Garland knew that the best way to win in the ratings was to play the ratings game. So, he devised a direct-mail promotion that targeted Arbitron diarykeepers.

Garland found the vendor that provided Arbitron with its list of potential diarykeepers and offered to buy the list, but the company refused. He then asked the company what it would cost to buy its entire database. He walked down to GM Pat Norman's office and said, "If we do this promotion for a million dollars, I promise you this station will be No. 1. I'll put my desk on the line."

Norman agreed, and mail pieces advertising the "610 KFRC Sweepstakes" began arriving at listeners' homes on Thursdays. They came with tear-off cards with matching numbers and additional cards so that friends could also listen in.

The contest helped get KFRC its first No. 1 12+ showing in an Arbitron book. This is noteworthy, because KGO reassumed first place in the following book and has held onto that spot for the 24 years since.

Garland will be the first to tell you that it was a great staff and not just great ideas that earned him his successes over the years. Drew said it best when he declared, "Every PD should have that 'Les Garland' quality, the art of delegation." Garland is quick to thank the likes of then-KFRC MD Dave Sholin, morning man Dr. Don Rose and the other staff who were at the station in its glory days.

He also harkens back to a day when programming ruled the roost. "I'm a born programmer," he says. "You cannot put something in front of the consumer when your primary interest is money; you do it because it's right, and money's a byproduct of that."

When KFRC hit No. 1 back in 1978, Garland promised himself that would be his last stop in radio. So far, promise kept. He moved on to Atlantic Records, then to MTV, where he helped start another revolution. More on that later. But if you ever get Garland on the phone, he won't hesitate to say, "You're talking to the happiest guy in the world. I've been in the right places at the right times."

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