



Air Power

The disc jockey known as El Pistolero has helped turn Spanish-language radio station WOJO into a certified ratings hit. But his remarks about gays have stirred criticism from activist groups

By Robert Reed

The morning show on Chicago radio station WOJO-FM sounds a lot like its rivals. At 105.1 on the dial, WOJO's sunrise broadcast features a lively and occasionally controversial host, a loyal band of listeners who call in to gab on-air, and a cacophony of promotions, chatter, sound effects, commercials, and even a little music.

In a couple of ways, though, the show stands out: For one, it's all in Spanish. For another, the program—El Pistolero y Memín—starring Rafael Pulido as El Pistolero, the Gunman, is an unabashed ratings hit, a first for a Spanish-language morning drive show in Chicago. "I not only want to win the market, but to dominate the market," says Pulido, who also speaks English.

On the trajectory of El Pistolero, WOJO's ratings climbed to a 4.1 share among listeners 12 and older in the summer Arbitron survey (the latest ratings period), compared with a 3.4 share the previous spring. (One share point equals about 52,100 listeners per quarter-hour.) WOJO still trails powerhouses like news-talker WGN-AM, Chicago news-talker WGCI-FM, and all-news WBBM-AM, but WOJO is fifth in the market, out of about 30 stations monitored by Arbitron, and tied with WLS-AM 890. Pulido's show is doing better than his station, posting a 4.5 share and making it the area's fourth most popular morning show, according to Arbitron.

Keeping it up in the fickle broadcasting universe could make WOJO a more powerful commercial force, while transforming Pulido, 36, into one of the city's most popular and influential broadcasting stars. He could even make a rare crossover leap into Anglo-dominated broadcasting—a jump Pulido and his boss are beginning to mull. No plans are yet in place, but if that move is to occur, Pulido has to avoid repeating some earlier on-air missteps—the most notable being a series of raunchy, disparaging comments in 2003 that angered the

local gay and lesbian community. Although potty talk and controversy work for Howard Stern, Pulido wants to cultivate the image of a guy who likes fun but also cares about his community. The offensive remarks can prompt image-sensitive advertisers to go elsewhere. "His show has appeal because of the numbers," says Paula Hambrick, a media buyer whose namesake company buys commercial time for a blue-chip roster of banks, consumer product companies, and others. "But I hope he's not offending his listeners."

Born in Mexico City, Pulido came to the United States when he was ten and grew up in Fresno, California. At 15, he got his first taste of radio when his older brother, who worked at a small nonprofit radio outlet, let him help around the station. After studying welding at California State University at Sacramento, Pulido and a buddy opened an auto body shop in Salem, Oregon. He started hanging out at Salem's first Spanish-language radio station and eventually got an on-air job. After a year, he returned to Fresno to do a morning radio show. "Ever since, I've been in radio," says Pulido. "I forgot all about auto body work."

Photos: Anna Knott



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Throughout the late 1990s and early 2000s, he toiled at a number of California stations and even did a short, unhappy stint at WOJO in Chicago. In 2002, new WOJO management lured him back to battle the rival Spanish-language station WLEY-FM 107.9. "This was a challenge to move to Chicago and turn things around," he says.

While Pulido was growing up, so was the Spanish-language radio business. Over the past 15 years, Spanish-language stations—which once were small, entrepreneurial venues where owners sold or "brokered" airtime to their announcers—have been acquired by a few large media enterprises.

WOJO's owner, Univision Radio, a unit of the Los Angeles-based Univision Communications, now owns or operates 67 stations in 16 of the top 25 U.S. Hispanic markets. (Univision Communications also runs two Chicago TV stations, WGBO-Channel 66 and WXFT-Channel 60.)

In Chicago radio, Univision has four Spanish-language FM stations and each features a different format aimed at distinct audiences. WOJO, for example, keys in on adults who connect with the music and information from rural Mexico, while its "La Kalle" format (simulcast on 103.1 FM and 93.5 FM) targets a younger group by playing "Reggaeton," a blend of Latin tropical sounds from Jamaican reggae to urban hip-hop.

"Right now, there are 687 Spanish-language radio stations in the U.S.," says George L. San Jose, founder of San Jose Group, a Chicago firm that specializes in Hispanic advertising and marketing. "When I got started in 1981, we had 78."

(During the 1990s, the Latino population in metropolitan Chicago grew by 68 percent to 1.4 million people, with immigrant and middle-class Mexicans making up most of that growth, according to the 2004 report by the Institute for Latino Studies at the University of Notre Dame.)

Even with the market fragmentation, Pulido generates a lot of listener response; his 6-to-11 a.m. show gets swamped with audience calls. Some dial in to chat with Memín, the ten-year-old boy whom Pulido plays on air. Memín is a rascal who makes funny, at times outrageous, remarks to callers, guests, or Pulido. When he goes too far, El Pistolero steps in and chastises him in a fatherly way.

Pulido eagerly points out that while getting laughs is one of the show's priorities, he also spotlights tough issues affecting the area's Mexican American community. "My show is focused on entertainment," Pulido says. "But it's not just jokes. We provide help for people by touching on immigration, domestic violence, or alcohol/drug abuse issues." Recently, El Pistolero y Memín hit the road, doing fundraising broadcasts from restaurants and other venues within Chicago's Hispanic neighborhoods for the Red Cross and hurricane relief.

Local politicians are noticing Pulido's popularity and cozying up. This past September, the Chicago City Council saluted him in a resolution sponsored by Alderman Manny Flores (1st Ward), who cheered Pulido for using his program's clout to assist the city's Hispanic immigrants.

"He's really become a legend and leader in Hispanic radio in Chicago," says George San Jose, the media expert.

Not everyone is applauding, however. The Los Angeles-based activist group Gay & Lesbian Alliance against Defamation (GLAAD) began monitoring El Pistolero y Memín in mid-2003 after hearing complaints from the Chicago-area gay community. The group claimed that Pulido and staff people were making derogatory, homophobic comments over the air. "It took them some time to understand that what they were doing was not right," says Mónica Taher, a spokesperson for GLAAD. She contends that WOJO's quest for higher ratings was based on "appealing to the macho culture" of many Hispanic males, and that that fostered an environment for gay-bashing.

To blunt such criticism, Univision is presenting a series of company-wide "sensitivity" training sessions offered by GLAAD. What's more, the company is proposing to showcase gay and lesbian public service information on its radio stations and dedicating space to the community on its stations' Web sites (WOJO has a "club de gay y lesbianas" chat room on its Web site). "Univision is making a tremendous effort to do the things they are supposed to be doing," says Taher, who adds that WOJO's morning show has stopped making anti-gay comments.

El Pistolero points out that there are those "who believe the show is controversial and vulgar, at times, but that's just an opinion." He adds, "Nothing is oriented to minimize or diminish anybody's beliefs. Far as my personal feelings, I don't have anything against the gay/lesbian community."

In local radio circles, some managers gripe that the Federal Communications Commission doesn't monitor Spanish-language shows like El Pistolero y Memín closely, and hence it can get away with making remarks that could lead to a fine if made on an English-language station. The FCC and Univision deny it. "We're not waiting for the FCC; we have our own filters," adds César Canales, operations manager for Univision Radio Illinois. He says that no companies have pulled ads because of the content of the morning show,

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which in recent weeks has showcased commercials for Jewel-Osco, Menards, Fifth Third Bank, and Fox Television.

Some of the commercials occasionally even break out into English, and there are times when callers on Pulido's show will bounce back and forth between English and Spanish. That may signify the future: in Los Angeles, there already are a couple of Spanish-English stations, and in Chicago Univision's homegrown "La Kalle" flirts with that format as a way of competing against established hip-hop and urban-oriented FM stations. "It's going to come here," says Hambrick, the media buyer.

Pulido might go even further. Canales says WOJO is open to the possibility of testing Pulido's wider appeal by someday having him add an English-speaking or blended Spanish-English show to his current duties. For his part, El Pistolero isn't ruling out anything in either language, even claiming he'd like to work at a country music station, or in television. "I was raised in the States. I appreciate the culture," he explains.

For now, however, he intends to keep getting up with the dawn patrol and doing his job. "I want to prove the show is not a fluke," he says. "And we're getting there."

Robert Reed is host of the Evening Business Wrap-up, heard weekdays at 6:30 p.m. on Newsradio 780 WBBM.

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