

So Long, New York

DJ Scott Shannon, who is credited with making Z-100 the hottest station around, is heading for the Coast

By Paul D. Colford

THE ZOOKEEPER is leaving the zoo. Scott Shannon, who started Top 40 station WHTZ 100.3 FM ("Z-100") six years ago and quickly made it the most popular in New York, told his listeners yesterday that he planned to try his luck again — in Los Angeles.

Speaking on his wacky "Morning Zoo" program, a high-energy showcase of hits and skits, Shannon said that he always thought he would sit back and enjoy his New York success. But, he added, he cannot resist a new challenge.

"The thing I like to do the most is start radio stations and build them and see what happens," he said. "I just want to try it again and do it one more time."

He leaves in place an operation that resurrected a relic of the '50s and '60s — the Top 40 format — and reintroduced it in a big way to a new generation of listeners, as well as to their parents.

Because Shannon has yet to sever contractual ties to WHTZ' owner, the Malrite Communications Group, he said that he was unable to give further details about his plans. However, it is widely believed within the radio industry that he's heading to KIQQ-FM, a quietly popular station in Los Angeles that now plays soft pop music.

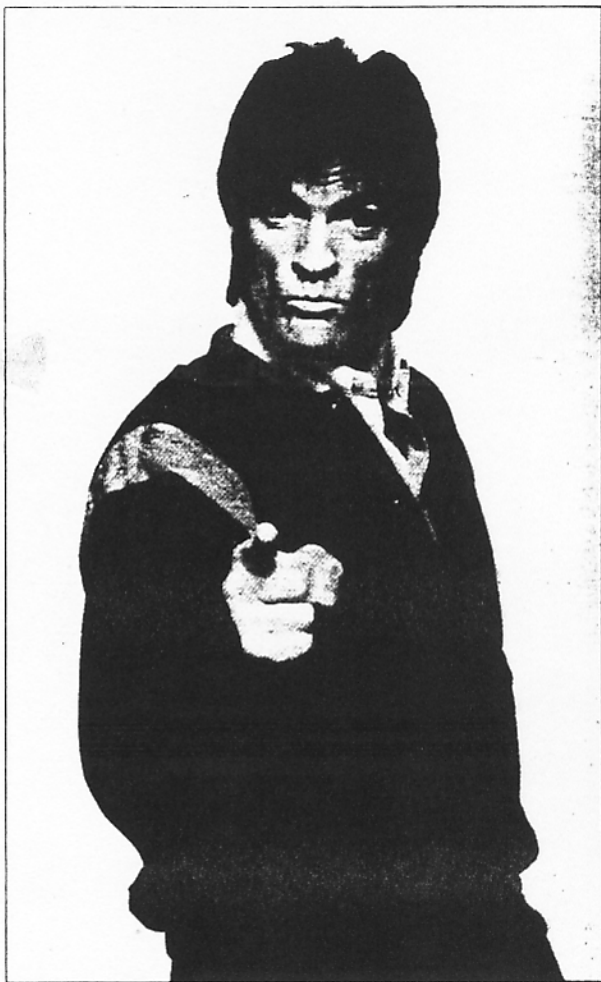
KIQQ recently was acquired for \$56 million by Westwood One, a major supplier of radio programming that has branched out into station ownership. It's expected that Shannon also will assume corporate duties within the newly formed Westwood One Radio Group. Although sources say that Shannon may be gone from WHTZ within two weeks, he cautioned yesterday that he had not yet signed a contract with his new employer.

Sitting in his office following yesterday morning's show, fiddling with an audiocassette, the shaggy-haired disc jockey said that he agonized for weeks over whether to go west. He said he decided to accept the job offer during a soul-searching Caribbean getaway with his wife.

"I felt that I had accomplished here just about everything I wanted to," he said. "After it's done, and been successful, it loses some of the appeal for me."

He added: "I thought about where I wanted to be five years from now. I realized I wanted to build one more radio station."

Shannon's divorce from Malrite Communications appears to be on ami-



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cable terms. He will continue as a consultant to "Z-100" and a syndicated program he has been hosting for Westwood One, "Rockin' America: Top 30 Countdown," will remain a part of WHTZ' weekend schedule.

"Z-100" went on air Aug. 2, 1983, at 6:08 a.m., replacing the easy-listening WVNJ-FM on the 100.3 FM frequency. Shannon turned on the microphone and announced: "It's time to wake up, New York."

"There were probably twenty-two listeners out there at the time," Shannon recalled yesterday.

ALTHOUGH Malrite had moved the WVNJ transmitter from suburban Livingston, N.J., to the Empire State Building, a far more powerful site, "Z-100" was otherwise a low-budget operation at first. The original on-air studio at the station's Secaucus, N.J., headquarters had no air-conditioning. In the absence of paid advertisements, listeners were urged to hang banners out their windows bearing the "Z-100" war cry — "Worst to First." T-

shirts were given to those who sent in the names of 25 new listeners.

After eight days on the air, Shannon knew that something was happening when he walked into a 42nd Street electronics store and heard the station booming from the radios displayed for sale.

Working with one other production man at the outset, Shannon eventually assembled the "Morning Zoo" team that greets the dawn from a claustrophobic studio overlooking the New Jersey Turnpike. They include fellow funnyman Ross Brittain, Claire Stevens, John Bell and John Rio, a big man who does the mouse-like voice of the show's egomaniacal creation, "Mr. Leonard."

None of the others is leaving. Brittain will become the head zookeeper. A new performer will be added. Steve Kingston, now operations manager, will succeed Shannon as the station's program director.

Michael Scott Shannon, the 41-year-old son of a transient Army sergeant, grew up in St. Louis, Indianapolis, Detroit, as well as Japan. All that moving

around prepared him for the gypsy life of the radio broadcaster.

After serving in the Army himself, Shannon began his career in 1968 at WABB in Mobile, Ala., spinning the hits from 7 p.m. to midnight for \$112 a week. His next stops were stations in Memphis, Nashville and Atlanta.

"I got fired, unexpectedly, in Atlanta and I was real depressed about it, so I took a job with Casablanca Records out in Los Angeles," he said. "I was out there two years at the time, but I was living in the fast lane, doing all kinds of bad things to my body. I was trying to convince myself that I didn't need radio anymore. But it just didn't work."

IN 1977, he was hired as a program director in Washington and later popularized his "Zoo" antics on a Tampa, Fla., station before Malrite lured him to Secaucus in the summer of 1983. "I've always done this style of radio, but it was never really accepted in the business until it worked in New York," he said.

Shannon's style of radio weds America's top-selling records to a loud audio-scape of irreverent satire, song dedications, trivia quizzes, cash giveaways and other contests. As calculated as the formula is — "The Morning Zoo" has been cloned by stations around the country — it has always been rough at the edges. There are enough on-air flubs and nutty phone calls to make it all seem human — not the product of some think tank.

Shannon concentrated on the broadcasts and the audience. In a medium fat with ego and publicists, he rarely sought press attention and never hired anyone to handle public relations for himself or the station.

He leaves "Z-100" and "The Morning Zoo" while they are both in good form. In the fall survey of the Arbitron Ratings Co., "Z-100" was the most popular station in New York City, with a 5.6 share (percent) of the audience during an average quarter-hour. On Long Island, it was No. 2, behind pop-music station WALK/97.5 FM.

During the wakeup hours, Shannon and company commanded the second-largest audience in New York, behind all-news WINS/1010 AM, but well ahead of WXRK/92.3 FM's Howard Stern, who has mocked Shannon for years. In Nassau-Suffolk, the "Zoo" was third, behind WALK and all-news WCBS/880 AM.

Estimates are that WHTZ pulls in more than \$20 million a year in advertising revenue, compared with \$1 million when Malrite bought WVNJ-FM in 1983.

Shannon's departure comes as WHTZ' main competitor, Top 40 station WPLJ/95.5 FM, is aggressively trying to gain ground.

"Scott's audience will miss him, and I say that in all sincerity," said Dana Horner, WPLJ's president and general manager. "If anyone is going to take advantage of his leaving, it's us, and we can't wait around for them to roll over... I think this creates an opportunity for some of his listeners to come over here."

In the meantime: Look out, Los Angeles. / 11