

ZNB to sign off air

STATION STARTED 'BY ACCIDENT'

A RADIO station that started "by accident" a quarter of a century ago and became the most popular listening post in Southern Africa during the Second World War, is due soon to sign off the air for ever. The march of time, in the shape of a projected FM station operated by the S.A.B.C. and the "evacuation" of the Bechuanaland Protectorate administration to Gaberones, has caught up with ZNB, Radio Mafeking.

ZNB was never intended to be a public broadcasting station. It was built purely and simply to provide a means of communication for the Bechuanaland Protectorate government through the largely telephoneless territory.

The engineers who installed the equipment tested the transmissions with a few borrowed records. The records must have hit the right spot, for hundreds of requests from radio listeners as far away as Japan, Norway and the United States poured in by mail asking for a fixed series of programmes.

FIRST SNAG

A snag came in the form of performing rights for broadcast material and ZNB temporarily went off the air.

There was an immediate howl of protest from many parts of South Africa. Within a matter of weeks the S.A.B.C. offered to assume financial and administrative responsibility for providing programmes — and Radio Mafeking was back in business.

Officials of the Bechuanaland Protectorate administration cast around for a suitable announcer and tested, among others, a young Mafeking pharmacist, Wally Coombes.

Then came the war. The popularity of ZNB zoomed, and shy, self-effacing Wally Coombes became this coun-

try's first heart-throb disc-jockey.

"Wally's fan mail arrived by the sack every day," recalled Percy Crewes, an old school chum of mine who runs an hotel in Mafeking.

"There was something about Wally's voice that 'sent' the girls. Proposals of marriage poured in—and no one was more embarrassed than Wally. He didn't take any of the offers and finally married an attractive brunette by the name of Molly Heyneke, a Potchefstroom girl."

I called on Wally, now a bespectacled 57-year-old, the other day. He was busy in his office in the medical division of the British Protectorate secretariat, but he happily pushed aside a shoal of papers to chat about the salad days of Radio Mafeking.

50-METRE BAND

"Maybe it was my choice of music that made ZNB so popular," he hazarded. "I went in a big way for Glenn Miller, Tommy Dorsey, the Mills Brothers, the Ink Spots, Bing Crosby, Vera Lynn, Gracie Fields and the Street Singer.

The popularity of ZNB declined after the war. One reason was that its relatively weak signal strength was pretty well drowned by the big stations that came to dominate the shortwave bands.

"ZNB," said Wally ruefully,

is only a one-kilowatt station. You have to turn up the volume control pretty high to get us these days. But we're still there on the 50-metre band.

"The more hep teenagers may not go for us too much. They are so difficult to please anyway. We aim our programmes rather at the 'squares' — light classics, light operatic stuff. We have a library of about 8,000 recordings, mostly on 78 rpm discs, and they go down big with the older listeners."

HAD TO COME

"Here's a letter," he said, "from a woman who has just rediscovered ZNB after 15 years. Lots of people are finding us again on the air waves. It's too bad that our days are numbered."

How does Wally feel about the prospect of "signing off" the air for the last time?

"It had to come to an end sometime," he said with resignation. "After all, it has been a good innings for a radio station that was never intended to happen anyway."



WALLY COOMBES
... signing off

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MAFEKING

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TO PAUL KARY Esq.

P.O. BOX. 1.

KYRENIA . CYPRUS.

VERIFYING YOUR REPORT

17/18. DECEMBER. 1955

on 5900 kes



Nice report

Old Man Many Thanks.

It Clinks.

SIGNED

Wally Coombes

DATE

29/12/55

ANNOUNCER.

May 1948 E.H.H.

Put in out about 1100 watts, and your report is
pretty good.

Happy new year.

Wally Roobey