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WILLIAMS, WILLIAM B. (b. 6 August 1923 in Babylon, New York; d. 3 August 1986 in New York City), radio personality in New York for over forty years, voice-over announcer, and commercial spokesman.

William Breitbard, who eventually changed his surname to Williams, was born and raised in Babylon, Long Island, and studied political science and psychology at Syracuse University (1940-1942). The youngest child of Harry and Sadie (Cener) Breitbard, who owned and ran a dry goods store, Williams left college and served briefly in the army during the early part of World War II and hosted a nightly show on the camp's P.A. system. While visiting a friend at WAAT-AM in Newark, New Jersey after his discharge in 1943, he was informed that the evening disc jockey had just been fired for drinking on the job. Bill Williams (as he was known at the time) auditioned and was hired as a staff announcer, and six weeks later he was offered a position at WNEW in New York City, where he remained for most of the next forty-two years.

WNEW (AM 1130) was an independent New York City station, and had secured the legal right to play phonograph records on the air after litigation brought by RCA and bandleader Paul Whiteman. The station was home to many of New York's most popular radio personalities, including Gene Rayburn, Jack Lescoulie, Dee Finch, Gene Klavan, Art Ford ("The Milkman's Matinee"), and Martin Block, who had started the "Make Believe Ballroom" program in 1935. The twenty year old Bill Williams began his new show, called "The Magic of Music," with the

phrase, "Hello, world," which became his opening line for the rest of his radio career.

In 1947, however, Williams was fired by station manager Bernice Judis, after an incident that he later described thusly: "I hosted a combination music/talk show and one day I was doing the show in very new, very uncomfortable shoes. I took them off, revealing a pair of bright red socks. Well, as my luck would have it, Judis walked into the studio with several advertising clients. It was my last show."

Williams then worked for New York's WNBC, WOR, WOV, and WJZ, before being rehired by WNEW six years later (1953), hosting "Music in a Sentimental Mood" and then "The William B. Williams Show." When Martin Block left the station in 1954, Art Ford eventually took over his show. In early 1958, however, management fired Ford and replaced him with Williams. William B. Williams would host the "Make Believe Ballroom" until his death, except for a period when the station changed formats.

WNEW was known for playing "standards," the popular music of the 1930s, 40s, and 50s, which included the various Big Bands and vocalists such as Perry Como, Tony Bennett, Lena Horne, Ella Fitzgerald, and especially Frank Sinatra. Williams had met Sinatra when the singer was hosting a radio program on WNEW in the early days of his career, and dubbed him the "Chairman of the Board" in keeping with the (then) custom of giving titles to performers, such as Benny Goodman, "The King of Swing." Very loyal to this music and to these

performers, whom he also socialized with, William B. promised Nat “King” Cole’s widow that he would never let a day go by without playing one of Nat’s songs.

Williams remained a life long friend of Sinatra, who credited the disc jockey with resurrecting his career by continuing to play his music, even after it had gone out of fashion. When Williams passed away, Sinatra issued a statement saying, “He was the best friend I ever had. He was the best friend anybody could have had.”

William B. married Dorothy Macaluso on 14 February 1960. Macaluso, known professionally as Dottie Mack, had hosted a Cincinnati television show, and they had one child, Jeffrey. Although they eventually separated, they remained close friends.

In 1972, WNEW changed its format to what Williams once jokingly referred to as “A.O.R.”: “all over the road.” As he later recalled, “We were, back then, all over the place and played Donna Summer and Frank Sinatra,” alienating their core audience by playing disco and rock and roll, but playing rock which was too “soft” for the younger crowd, who stayed away from the station. Then, one day in 1979, Williams revived the “Make Believe Ballroom,” again playing the old standards, and the audience response was overwhelming. The format was back, and the station began using the slogan, “WNEW – Where The Melody Lingers On.”

Williams was a longtime member of the Friars Club, which he joined in 1958, becoming Prior in 1974 and Dean in 1981. Very active in charitable work,

Williams hosted scores of fundraising functions, and received the Applause Award in 1985 from the Friars Club Foundation, the organization's philanthropic arm. He was named the Friars' Man of the Year in 1984, with Frank Sinatra hosting the ceremony. Willie B.'s brother, Ric Roman, later eulogized him as "the single most charitable man that I know."

Williams died at age 62 from leukemia complicated by chronic anemia and a respiratory ailment, and was buried in Kensico Cemetery in Valhalla, New York. He had been ill for over a year, undergoing surgery for colon cancer and removal of his spleen, which had kept him off the radio for the final five months of his life. In his eulogy, Ric Roman said of his brother, "If a man's proximity to God is reflected in his compassion for his fellow man, my brother is standing next to God." A memorial service held at New's York's Palace Theater a month later was hosted by Sinatra, who asked for (and received) a standing ovation for his old friend.

William B. Williams was known for his smooth, deep voice (familiar to many on commercials), his low-key, relaxed humor and rapport with his audience, and his devotion to music's popular standards. Universally regarded as a gentleman in an industry that often promotes excess, Williams was famous for his modesty, style, and charm, and was referred to as the "dean of communicators" by his colleagues. WNEW-AM was sold in 1992, and its legendary call letters were changed (along with its format) to WBBR – Bloomberg Business Radio.

[William B. Williams looked back on his career in “A Great Place to Linger On: WNEW D.J. Remembers When,” *Variety*, volume 314 (1 February 1984), page 114. He had been briefly profiled in the early days of his career in “Ad Libbing’s His Stock-in-Trade: Disc Jockey Rides Airwaves on Records and Gift of Gab,” by William A. Bales, *Long Island Press*, 8 May 1949, p. Q21, and also in “William B. Williams: The Man Who Runs the Make Believe Ballroom,” *Look*, volume 27 (12 February 1963), pages 78a-78c. The station’s early history is covered in “Martin Block and WNEW: The Rise of the Recorded Music Radio Format 1934-1954,” by Robert G. White, Jr. (Ph.D. dissertation, Bowling Green State University, 1982), and *WNEW: Where the Melody Lingers On* (1984), which was published to celebrate the station’s fiftieth anniversary.

Obituaries appeared on 4 August 1986 in the *New York Times*, page B4; *Newsday*, page 4; and the *Daily News*, page 4; as well as in *Variety* on 6 August, page 93. Entertainment critic George Maksian wrote an informative tribute in the *Daily News* (5 August 1986), page 65, and there were follow-up stories on the funeral in the above-named New York City newspapers on 6 August.]

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