A brief history of radio in Australia from the 1920s to the 1950s

Make mine big!
Radio broadcasting began in Australia, as it did elsewhere in the world, in the early 1920s. It reached its peak during World War Two but continued to be important into the 1950s. Today’s giant television screen in the home theatre is comparable to the ‘big’ radio of the 1940s and 50s.

Give me radio for breakfast, lunch and tea!
Daily life in Australia in the 1940s and 50s was punctuated by listening to the radio. There were breakfast shows that the whole family listened to, shows for mothers to listen to as they did their housework, afternoon serials for children, and evening quiz shows for the whole family. School lessons even included radio programs such as folk dancing, Social Studies and English.

Radio was important to farmers who used it to find out about the weather and market prices and keeping up with the latest agricultural developments. Sporting fans could hear the races, wrestling, boxing or the cricket on the radio. In the evenings families gathered around the radio to listen to ‘feature’ programs such as quiz shows, variety shows, plays, talent quests, documentaries, news broadcasts, both classical and popular music.

The radio was the main source of entertainment, news and information for the whole population. By 1945 there were 129 medium wave (Australia wide transmissions only) radio stations - 100 commercial and 29 Australian Broadcasting Commission. Australia had 330,000 licensed broadcast sets in 1930 and these had grown to more than a million by 1938. At least seven in every ten households were buying an annual licence. (Source: Stamping the Nation: Australia Since Federation Australia Post 2001 p.36)

Is that how they got their call sign?
All Australian AM (Amplitude Modulation) radio stations have a call sign made up of a number and two letters. The number represents the state’s geographic location and originated from the defence districts set up by the Federal Government in 1901. NSW was the second military district. Radio stations in NSW therefore took the prefix 2 (NSW post codes begin with 2 as well). What prefix does WA use? When radio was introduced the wireless authorities (namely the Post Master General’s Department, now Australia Post) adopted the defence district numbers.

Letters in station call signs often refer to the initials of the station’s first licensee: 2FC in Sydney stands for Farmer and Company, 6WF in Perth stands for Wesfarmers. Some stations take their letters from their location like 7LA in Launceston while others like 2GB in NSW, which was set up by the Theosophical Society, takes its name from Giordano Bruno, a 16th century Christian martyr. Some stations have no logical reason for their choice of letters, especially those using x, y, z like 6KY in WA.