

LOOK
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The Underground Radio Turn-On

LISTENING TO THE RADIO used to be a way to learn the "Top 40" songs, hear the headlines and find the best acne remedy. Not any more. Today, hundreds of thousands of radio fans are tuning in to stations with a far-out format. From East Orange, N.J., to Los Angeles, 60 licensed stations make up a sort of underground network combining free-form programming with sharp, iconoclastic comment.

Sometimes called "progressive rock" stations, sometimes called "renaissance radio," the new sound makers are drawing a sizable audience of college students and young professional types. Their sound is growing so fast that some think FM stereo, the main underground channel, will eventually replace AM as the nation's number one music medium.

"The new radio" allows disc jockeys to play all types of music on the same program. Classical sonatas are fed into the airwaves right along with hit records. There are no formal "play lists"—disc jockeys can air whatever grabs them. Sometimes five different interpretations of a single song are played. A surprising mix can be used to create a montage of mood and music. For example, Mississippi Harold Wilson of Boston's WBCN-FM did a half-hour Western segment of Gene Autry, two rock groups and satirist Tom Lehrer as a lead into a ballad by folk singer Buffy Sainte-Marie protesting the Government's maltreatment of Indians. This kind of presentation is impossible on overground radio, where frequent commercial interruptions limit the announcer to four-minute songs. "Progressive rock" keeps commercials to a maximum of eight an hour.

Disc jockeys are behind the new movement, most of them escapees from "Top 40" pop radio, like WNEW-FM's syrupy-voiced Rosko in New York and KSAN-FM's king-sized Tom Donahue in San Francisco. "I had all these great albums I played at home, but I couldn't put them on the air," says Donahue, now a recording executive. "Groups like Country Joe and the Fish could sell 100,000 albums by word of mouth but never get air play. They were too long to squeeze in between the commercials. A generation raised on overground radio graduated to albums no one would broadcast."

In April, 1967, Donahue convinced San Francisco's KMPX-FM to let him replace a four-hour broadcast of Chinese music, news and drama each evening with a Donahue original: "I played everything I wanted to hear—acid rock, protest, classical, jazz. There were mood segments, entire albums, all-Dylan nights and oldies." The show picked up good ratings. Donahue then brought in colleagues like announcer Tony Big, who changed his name to Tony Pig to break with his "Top 40" tag. But an edgy management banned a recording of *The Pusher* by the acid-rock group, Steppenwolf, and limited classical stuff to five-minute segments. The disc jockeys' long hair and bare feet in the control room became an issue. On March 13, 1968, they went on strike.

Donahue was soon shopping for a new outlet. First ABC: "They asked me, 'What are your disc jockeys' drug habits?' I told them, 'I don't know, man, what are yours?'" In May, Metromedia, Inc., the entertainment superpower, hired Donahue to convert its classical KSAN-FM into "ren-



The new radio: acid rock, acid barbs.

naissance radio." After two months, ratings shot skyward. Over 100,000 were tuning in.

The blend of rock and classics is a natural. George Duncan of WNEW-FM, one of the original revolutionary stations, says: "We might play a baroque piece to get into the Beatles, or Mozart to get into the Jefferson Airplane." Promoting a classic, KSAN-FM announcer Stefan Ponck regularly aired composer Antonio Soler's *Harpsichord Sonata in C Sharp Minor* with Rafael Puyana on the harpsichord. "Now, how come that music doesn't have the same popularity as the Beatles?" he asked. "It's cool, right? You dig it? Why don't we have Rafael Puyana at the Fillmore Auditorium?" A sudden run on the album developed.

In some areas, grass-roots support encourages the growth of new stations. At Upsala College in East Orange, N.J., fund drives have raised \$13,000 to keep their WFMU-FM, a college station gone underground, flourishing. Its loyal and enthusiastic audience has grown this year from 300 undergraduates to 60,000 fans, including many metropolitan New Yorkers.

Rating-conscious overground radio stations have begun to adopt some of the underground sound. In Los Angeles, KRLA scrapped its hourly five-minute newscasts for a format of satiric skits. A regular feature is *The Heartwarming Story of Just Plain Sam*, a soap-opera style prelude to Mayor Sam Yorty's regular news conference, complete with organ music.

In Cincinnati, WEBN-FM's young lawyer-turned-program director Frank E. Wood says that his station tries to offer what he calls an "alternative to the fascist media around here. The other newscasters take the AP, with its military-industrial bias, as gospel. We prefer to edit." For example, when broadcasting a story that says, "987 Vietcong were killed and two Americans wounded

in fighting at Danang today,' we'll add that 'these figures are released by the U.S. Military Command in Saigon, which may have distorted them for propaganda value.'"

Clever producers like KSAN-FM's Wes Nisker can use audio techniques to take public figures apart. When San Francisco State College's Acting President S. I. Hayakawa declared last December, "There are no innocent bystanders in this situation because a bystander serves to shield the demonstrators with his body," his recorded words "innocent bystanders" were broadcast with an echo effect to stress one of the sore points between him and the students. Another producer played havoc with a recording of Hubert Humphrey's acceptance speech at the Chicago convention by splicing in comments from victims of the police riots.

Perhaps the most surprising aspect of the new radio is the commercials—sponsored and unsponsored. One station ran this put-down of patent-medicine advertisements: "Feeling nervous, jittery, on edge for no reason at all? . . . There's a new old solution readily available, and it's called sex. It's better than chewing gum, better than smoking cigarettes, it's better than alcohol or tranquilizers or even illegal drugs. Try sex when you feel tension and watch the marked improvement. . . . And remember sex comes to you absolutely free except in states where prohibited by law."

At KMET-FM in Los Angeles, Peter Bergmann mimics the style of West Coast TV's leading auto salesman, Ralph Williams, in pitching bona fide ads for car dealer Jack Poet: "Hi, friends . . . looking for a used car? Well, I, Jack Poet, personally promise you that every car here is totally used . . . guaranteed to give you hours of driving enjoyment . . . every moving part guaranteed as long as it works . . . every one comes equipped with factory air—step inside and you'll breathe air from one of LA's largest factories. Thank you, and now back to our movie, *You Are Who You Think You Eat*."

How does all this sit with straight advertisers? WNEW-FM's George Duncan reports that the station has "46 national accounts including Gimbel's, Macy's and Bergdorf Goodman." Tony Pig suggests that "when the revolution comes, it's going to be the best-dressed revolution in history."

And aren't owners afraid of subsidizing an underground monster that is going to bite back? Not at all. "The new radio" has become good business—it attracts listeners and sells records. So profit-conscious giants like Metromedia are eager to own a piece of the revolutionary style of radio that takes on politics, religion, Madison Avenue and other sacred cows. There are rich men anxious to subsidize more of these radical stations. One disc jockey explains it this way: "They are so anxious to be cool, to be young, to be with it, that they'll even turn money over to the opposition. A few weeks ago, I was talking to a couple of wealthy middle-aged types interested in starting a chain of underground stations. They were sitting there being cool, smoking pot, their *mandalas* banging against their chests. Finally, I just asked them: 'Hey, what do you want to get into this for? We're out to destroy you.' They just nodded: 'That's OK, we know all about it.'" ROGER RAPOPORT