

TURNED-ON RADIO: THE NEW WAVE

A place on the dial—a state of mind—new sounds to tickle the ear from San Francisco to, uh, East Orange, New Jersey. East Orange, leafy home of Upsala College and birthplace of Free-Form Radio.

by Robert Greenfield

Upsala College in East Orange, New Jersey, is a healthy place to go to school. The sun shines through colonial windows in the library onto stacks of dusty volumes and large color pictures of His Majesty Gustaf Adolph of Sweden at a trade fair, at an iron mine, reviewing the troops.

The Augustana Lutheran Church supports the school and the Scandinavian tradition is evident. There were eight Johnsons and a Johanson in the class of '68 and the student body of 1,476 is clean, good-looking, willing to go all out in building floats for homecoming weekends. Sweaters and tan raincoats, plaid skirts and Peter Pan collars, tortoiseshell glasses and a Mustang in the parking lot are very big, and the ivy on the library wall comes from Princeton and Rutgers, "a gift from New Jersey's two colonial colleges."

In this unlikely setting, the most exciting, far-out thing in East Coast radio is happening.

WFMU, the campus FM radio station, was founded in 1957. For the next eleven years it remained a dull, ignored (which is to say, typical) college radio station that featured Bach, Beethoven, the Georgetown University Forum and taped Soc. 101 lectures that nobody had listened to the first time in class.

Suddenly, sounds of Big Pink from the band, the Velvet Underground, the Steve Miller Blues Band, and bootleg Bob Dylan tapes are coming from the quiet East Orange campus twenty hours a day.

All kinds of raps are going out about how come Yoko Ono and Marianne Faithfull both had miscarriages at the same time and aren't John Lennon and Mick Jagger really the same cat and aren't they both really Bob Dylan?

What goes on?

First of all, what goes on at WFMU now is a variation of what is going on at KSAN-FM in San Francisco, at KRLA-AM in Los Angeles, at WHFS-FM in Bethesda, Md., at WBCN-FM in Boston, and to varying degrees at college radio stations all over the country.

WFMU is a radical example, an archetype, of the new radio movement that has been gathering momentum in recent years and is now raising bumps in the linoleum. They call what they do at FMU "free-form radio"; others have called it progressive, underground and, at times, subversive. Whatever it's called, the result is an invigorating new ripple on the airwaves.

It started for East Orange in June of 1968. Rather than take the usual three-month summer holiday, some of the station's staff decided to try to keep FMU on the air during the vacation period. They ran a "marathon," broadcasting twenty-four hours a day, asking for pledges and playing requests for money. At the end of five days, the staff had received twenty-five hundred dollars in pledges. Free-form radio was born.

Initially, free-form radio was an operational necessity. Air time had to be filled and the best way to do it was to play album-length cuts and sometimes entire albums. The albums usually belonged to Vin Scelsa, an Upsala student who had had an all-night Saturday show, *The Closet*, on the old FMU. His taste ran to Judy Collins and Dylan, heavy blues and quality rock.

As the summer began, FMU was programming this kind of music fifteen and twenty hours a day. The station holds an educational, noncommercial license which forbids the airing of commercials or sponsored programming, so the music was interrupted only for the necessary station identification, some light rapping and phone calls. A listener could request a song and hear it played ten minutes later.

East Orange is fifteen miles from New York City. Word started to get around that, "Wow, there's this freaky station from Jersey playin' music all the time. . ."

Scelsa began doing *The Closet* six nights a week, instead of Saturdays only. The station was occupying all his time and he pulled F's and Incompletes in all his courses. He dropped out of school. Ransom Bullard, station manager, had done the same thing two years earlier.

George Black was taking some courses at Upsala, got hooked on FMU, and became the program manager with his own daily show, *The Little Black Thing*. Scelsa and Black are the only on-the-air people being paid by the station. They started being paid because they were there all the time, literally twenty-four hours a day, going without sleep for two or three days at a time, fighting a losing battle to keep something interesting going out over the air, losing because twenty hours had to be filled every day and there were only two men around to fill them.

Help began to arrive. Bob Rudnick and Dennis Frawley, columnists for the *East Village Other*,

had wanted to get into a nonprint thing and they went out to East Orange to do a nightly show. Dave Myers, a computer programmer working nights for Time-Life, Inc., had no experience in radio, but he listened to FMU and liked it so much he visited the station. He quit his job for something more valuable to him, the six-to-nine slot every evening.

Chris Dangerfield, an Upsala student, convinced her husband to visit the station. Roger Dangerfield, a twenty-six-year-old television repairman from New Jersey interested in short-wave radio and antennas, had acquired a taste for rock 'n' roll from the kids who hung around his repair shop playing the radio all day. In a week, he was working twelve hours a day engineering and announcing at FMU. He came to be known as the "Beatle Freak" because of his obsessive love for the Fab Four.

The music attracted more people. Larry Yuridin came to the East from KMPX-FM in San Francisco, with about six hundred albums and a philosophy of radio. At KMPX he had been part of a successful experiment to make a commercial rock station intelligent and listenable. "Big Daddy" Tom Donahue, the reigning West Coast music genius, programmed music at KMPX integrating the commercials into whatever was being played. KMPX became the top station in the Bay area.

Donahue left KMPX a year ago. He moved, with most of his people, to KSAN, a Metromedia station, where he is now playing the music that you can't hear on what he calls "the top-40 stations that haven't changed since 1956."

"My own theory about radio," says Donahue over the phone in a voice so radio it sounds as if he's standing in an echo chamber, "is that the whole post-war generation grew up next to their television sets and radios. Radio disc jockeys and the music they played taught these kids how to dance, how to date, how to comb their hair—it gave them a life-style."

As the World War II generation grew older, however, top-40 radio remained the same, appealing to younger kids, continuing the process of educating ten- and eleven-year-olds. It was that post-war generation, now twenty-one and twenty-two, says Donahue, which had been abandoned by radio.

"Top-40 stations play Red Cross

announcements and call it community service," continues Donahue. "We're into a different kind of service. Awhile ago a kid got busted down in Sacramento. The cops gave him his one phone call. He called us. We were the only friend he had."

Many of the things Donahue and stations like WFMU are doing now were first done by WBAI-FM, a nonprofit, listener-sponsored radio station in New York City owned and partially supported by the Pacifica Foundation.

For nine years, WBAI was the freaky, underground station, playing monologues by Lenny Bruce that no other station would touch, broadcasting partisan, "movement" newscasts, scheduling regular programs for homosexuals, playing music by Richie Havens and the Incredible String Band years before these artists had broken into mass consciousness.

Bob Fass, who still does the all-night show five nights a week on BAI, is one of the true originators of on-the-air personal rapping. Along with Paul Krassner and Abbie Hoffman, Fass founded the Youth International Party, otherwise known as the YIPPIES.

Presently there is an uneasy entente between FMU and BAI. WBAI is deeply involved in the "movement" and features hours of rapping about the politics and ideas coming out of the lower East Side. WFMU plays more music, is considerably looser, more spontaneous, less professional.

Steve Post, WBAI's chief announcer and all-night person Saturdays and Sundays, says, "There is a generation gap between our audience and WFMU's, but there's some overlapping too. We at BAI feel like immigrant parents who fight and struggle and then have a kid who has a silver spoon in his mouth. But look, they'll have their struggles too. They're a little naive, a little immature, but they're sincere."

They're also honest, spontaneous, weird and irresistible. You have to (continued on page 69)

Robert Greenfield has been doing free-lance writing since he received his M.S. from the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism in 1968. He now writes for a New Jersey paper, which he calls "unconsciously the greatest underground paper in the country." Mr. Greenfield says he does not sleep at night. Instead he listens to the radio.

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listen all the time. By mid-summer, '68, WFMU was a habit for thousands of people—all kinds of people.

One night Vin Scelsa was talking, on the air, to a young lady who phoned to say she had just had a spinal operation but that she dug the station very much and Scelsa in particular.

"What's your name?" asked Scelsa, always alert to a new conquest.

"Jessica," she said.

"Oh wow," said Scelsa, "when I was a kid, I had this tremendous crush on one of my mother's friends . . . and her name was Jessica, she was a French teacher. You're not that Jessica, are you? Do you teach French?"

"No," she replied. "But I use my tongue a lot."

End of interview.

Leonard Bernstein called the station one day to tell them he liked what was going on. Another time, listeners were asked, just in case the administration wasn't sure that enough people really liked what was going on, to send telegrams to the college expressing support for WFMU. Two hundred wires were received in four hours.

When the administration returned to the campus in September, they found free-form radio in full bloom and their quiet college station under the care of assorted dropouts, misfits and professionals.

"We left a typical college radio station," explains Charles Lundgren, director of the college placement service and the man in whose name WFMU is licensed. "We returned to find something else."

"There were complaints," says Lundgren, "but more importantly, there were questions. We had hoped to establish a department of communications around WFMU. Was the free-form format truly fulfilling our license as an educational station? Were we serving the college and the community? The radio board wanted to know where the classical music was; they wanted to know what happened to the use of air time for classroom work."

Then there were the questions of propriety. The station was programming albums by the Fugs, they played a song by Steppenwolf containing the line, "God-damn the pusher man." Scelsa played a cut he had never heard with the phrase, "Up against the wall, m" And an outraged lady from New Jersey wrote to the FCC.

FCC regulations are rather vague. On-the-air freedom of speech is guaranteed except to "whoever utters any obscene, indecent, or profane language by means of radio." A ten-thousand-dollar fine, or two years in jail or both are the penalty. But, according to Nicholas Johnson, a progressive member of the seven-man commission, on-the-air obscenity would be difficult to prosecute; freedom of speech must not be abridged. In actual practice, stations rarely lose

their licenses because of listener complaints.

"When we get a complaint," explains Commissioner Johnson, "we send a form to the station asking for an explanation. If they answer it, we consider the case closed. When their license comes up for renewal, we look at the file. Usually, we grant the license."

"The battle to push back the boundaries of public taste has been going on for a long time," he continues. "It's a slow process and a continuing one. Since the FCC itself rarely revokes licenses or takes sweeping actions, the battle goes on outside of it."

Was WFMU living up to the educational license, granted to a nonprofit organization "upon showing that the station will be used for the advancement of an educational program?" The issue was not decided. The radio board took no action. The student body, primarily nonpolitical, was not up in arms about the new format. The alumni were not aroused one way or the other. The community wasn't marching to demand the return of the old radio format. Contributions were still coming in to Upsala from all the Lutheran families in the New York and New England synods the college was built to serve.

As the leaves began to fall from the campus maples, the administration was content to let things go on as they were. Their station seemed to have acquired this powerful cabal of an audience in three months, and many people were conscious for the first time of the name Upsala and its location. The desire to see itself put on the map is real enough on the East Orange campus, and the hope is that free-form radio will be an intermediate stage to be replaced when certain grants are received and a "big-time department of communications" can be established.

There are still some reservations. Upsala's president, Dr. Carl Fjellman, sits in his office in Kenbrook Hall, a building that, like many others on the campus, was once someone's mansion.

He says, "We want to give WFMU the maximum degree of freedom. It is the only radio station in East Orange and it appeals to a varied audience. However," he continues, "free form must not become synonymous with unplanned, it must be varied, not exclusive, active without making undue noise. Our first reaction is to live with it and, if it's good, to keep it."

Right outside President Fjellman's picture window, Toni Stevens is turning the corner onto Prospect Avenue and going into the aging yellow clapboard house that is WFMU.

She runs up the two flights of stairs, past the cracked walls with fiber-glass insulation hanging out, avoiding bricks on the floor, and bursts into the studio.

"Wow," says Dave Myers into the microphone, "Miss Toni Stevens, the daybird, only two hours late."

Toni Stevens has chopped hair and two broken front teeth. There is a red Indian knot in her hair and a tattoo on her left forearm that

says "Andy." A leather totem bag hangs beneath the fringe of her suede vest. She leans into the mike.

"Far-out people. Toni was in court today but the old policeman didn't show. Just couldn't wait for him anymore," she says, switching off all the lights in the studio, sitting down at the control board cutting up a record.

"A disorderly conduct charge, sniff-sniff, wow, my cold is no better at all, anyway you can imagine where my head is at today. Next time I go to court, I'm going to have this. . . ."

"Murder in My Heart for the Judge" by Moby Grape comes on.

Toni Stevens comes on like a Hell's Angels mamma, just off a Harley. She was born in New York, went to a few high schools and was classified an incorrigible delinquent. One imagines her showing up for school, sharpened bobby pins in her hair, ready for a fight during lunch period or in the GIRLS; cutting out at one o'clock to hang around the pizza place, play the jukebox and smoke cigarettes.

She drifted out to the West Coast and got into the music, hanging around the Fillmore and Avalon Ballrooms, getting to know most of the musicians working today, becoming an adult groupie.

Now twenty-four, she is back on the East Coast for a while, living on welfare and working for nothing from three to six at WFMU. Her theme song is "Broken Wings" by John Mayall and her music is mostly blues: Mayall, Janis Joplin, Albert King, lots of Ten Years After, some Chambers Brothers, and the Moody Blues.

She gets into long blocks of records on a single theme. One day the subject was love—Albert King's "Please Love Me," Otis Redding's "I've Been Lovin' You So Long"; "Love Is a Hurtin' Thing" by Lou Rawls, "I Love You More Than You'll Ever Know" by Blood, Sweat and Tears, and "Ball and Chain" by Big Brother and the Holding Company.

When Toni Stevens finishes her show, she gets up and walks out, gets on a bus and is back in Manhattan in an hour.

Dave Myers, Vin Scelsa, George Black and Roger Dangerfield never get to Manhattan. They practically never get out of the studio.

WFMU is a terrible-looking place to spend your life. The walls of the small office, the two small studios and the small record library are plastered with Quicksilver Messenger Service posters, Avalon Ballroom advertisements, Beatle pictures and a certificate which proclaims Hubert Horatio Humphrey a member in good standing of the Intergalactic Country Joe and the Fish Fan Club.

There are holes in the ceiling, the lighting is bad, everything creaks. The place looks like high school kids playing radio in the basement.

Studio B, a soundproofed room with a four-hundred-pound door, is the only professional-looking area at the station. There, nightly, the *Kokaine Karma* show originates.

Bob Rudnick and Dennis Frawley, both twenty-six and known collectively as Kokaine Karma, are the station's gold dust twins. A fair indication of how they think is the way they arrived at their name. They needed a title for their weekly music, gossip and obscenity column in the *East Village Other* and so they free associated:

"Uh, cops, crayons . . . uh, cocaine," said Frawley.

"Uh, clams, crepes . . . uh, karma," said Rudnick.

"Cocaine Karma!!!" the two shouted in gleeful unison.

The *Other* misspelled "cocaine" as "kokaine" and it stayed that way.

Kokaine Karma features lots of heavy new jazz, especially Cotrone, guests dredged from the four corners of the earth and insane rapping.

"Hello, kokaine mothers here tonight . . ." says Frawley.

" . . . with the music to set your toes tapping," says Rudnick. "Had no trouble getting out to East Orange tonight, even though the car we bought for seventy-five dollars has been towed away—lovely lady drove us out . . ."

" . . . and will be driving us back. Just want to let all the junkies on the lower East Side know I'm not at home, they worked on my door for two hours the other night, I'd like to wish them continued good luck but no matter . . ."

" . . . indeed two guests here tonight, Arlene Shubow, the famed goddess from Coral Gables and Gilbert, uh, Barbarian, is it?"

"No, no, Bi-ber-ian, going to play a little classical guitar for us . . ."

" . . . not actually a little classical guitar, regular sized, if you know what I mean."

When Rudnick and Frawley do their show, there is turmoil in the station. Roger Dangerfield engineers and gesticulates, chicks from record companies smile sweetly and cross their legs. There is much pizza eating, money grubbing and soda guzzling. The two have their own brand of congenital madness. They are a life force.

It is quiet at WFMU after they leave. The old yellow house is still, save for the settling of the walls and the soft sounds of Vin Scelsa doing the all-night show.

It is altogether fitting and proper that the day should end with Scelsa. In the wee small hours when the lights are off, the house is dark, and the television has gone to sleep for the night, the all-night disc jockey is the last great despot. He has absolute power. People's lives are in his hands every night.

"Hold on, hold on, hold on," Scelsa is saying as he punches the lighted buttons on his phone. "Hold on. What? You won't hold on? You're depressed. What are you depressed about?"

Scelsa is to be trusted with people's lives. In his shaggy black sweater with the rolled collar, baggy blue jeans that are constantly slipping beneath his fat stomach, and sagging brown moustache, he looks like the still point of the universe.

Free-form radio is practically his
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invention. Even now, he has the best feel for music on the station and was the first to get into and play records by Salloom, Sinclair and the Mother Bear, The Pentangle, Duncan Browne. He also plays things you're not likely to hear anywhere else, like the theme from Spin and Marty of the Mickey Mouse Club (entitled "Yippie-a, Yippie-o"), folk singers Buzz Linhart and Billy Mitchell singing their own songs on tapes made at the station, and a "living room" tape made in someone's home in East Orange of Bob Dylan singing songs that haven't been recorded, including "Gypsy Davy," and "Pastures of Plenty."

Scelsa's phones go all night. It may be Abbie Hoffman telling a fairy tale for children about spiked-Yo-Yo freaks or recruiting bodies for his latest demonstration. Or someone claiming to be a warlock, uttering incantations designed to turn Scelsa into a toad.

Scelsa has all the time in the world, six hours a night, and in between Son House and the Ramblin' Jack Elliott records, he lets his brain ramble. One night, out of desperation, and curiosity, he held a presidential election. Jim Morrison, Janis Joplin, and Harry Von Zell (the gentleman who introduced the thirty-first President of the United States on radio as "Hoobert Heever") received votes. "The Kid," no other identification, was the front-runner until someone called to say that the leading candidate had been kidnapped by Hieronymus Bosch. The election was won by Flik, the boyhood pal of radio personality Jean Shepard.

The station is as accessible to its listeners as the nearest telephone. The number, 201-675-5343, is announced with at least the regularity of the mandatory station break; on an average day, three hundred calls come in. Callers are greeted with varying degrees of sympathy and impertinence. A *New York Times* music critic and devoted FMU listener rang up to find out the name of an artist who had just given an electrifying classical guitar performance. (The station rarely tells you who's playing

what.) "Oh yeah," said the voice at FMU, "that was, let's see, it's spelled, S-E-G-O-V..."


One Sunday on his *Hour of the Duck*, Lou d'Antonio spent an hour playing with some tapes, mainly doctored public-service announcements: "The Cancer Crusade presents Lawrence Welk..." Mr. Welk played champagne music for a while, then a mellifluous voice challenged: "Name cancer's seven warning signals," and a familiar voice ticked them all off: "Spiro T. Agnew, Spiro T. Agnew, Spiro..."

In between a song about garbage and another one about sex and violence, the Navy Recruiting Service Band played rousing Sousa marches while The Duck led the studio audience in body exercises: "Bend and-a stretch and-a bend and-a stretch..." A new listener from South Jersey phoned to see if he could be of any help. "I just wondered if you knew you were on the air," he said.

Free-form radio has made demands on the budget. Before, FMU existed on three to four thousand dollars a year, a neat expenditure in the college budget.

Now, it costs a thousand dollars a month to run the station. Last November, FMU began a two-week desperation marathon. Twenty-two thousand dollars was pledged. If half of that comes in, the station will go on being free-form for another year. The money will be used to pay operating costs, make the studios livable, and boost the station's power from the present 1,500 watts to 5,000 watts. The signal is now persecuted by a Spanish-language station that overmodulates and Fordham University with 50,000 watts of power.

But every night it gets out, bounced back by some mid-Manhattan skyscrapers, to be sure, but managing to slip into basements and lofts on the lower East Side and filter into dark suburban bedrooms on Long Island and New Jersey. Out there, in the night, the sounds coming from WFMU are driving hip fifteen- and sixteen-year-olds crazy, turning on bearded schoolteachers, educating straights and making all the stoned people in New York happy.

For them, WFMU is the most beautiful thing in the world. 

WHAT UNDERGROUND IS, AND IS NOT:

Underground radio stations do not have to be on college campuses, hidden at the far reaches of the FM band or involved in radical politics. What they have to be is aware that the old way is changing and the only rule is: There are no more rules.

On-the-air people can say what they think and feel. They have the right to be brilliant, insufferable, dull, obnoxious, stoned, morose. In short, they have the right to be totally human, to be people rather than "disc jockeys."

Underground stations throughout the country make themselves known where they exist by word of mouth. Their audience finds them.

If your ears and your head are open, you'll know about them. That's all. Here are some we know about:

KSAN-FM (95), San Francisco
KRLA-AM (11.10), Los Angeles
KPFK-FM (90.7), Los Angeles
WEBN-FM (102.7), Cincinnati
WHFS-FM (102.3), Bethesda
WFMU-FM (91.1), East Orange, N.J.

WRLB-FM (107), Long Branch, N.J.

WBAI-FM (99.5), New York City

WRVR-FM (106.7), New York City

WBCN-FM (104), Boston