A SURVIVOR'S GUIDE TO
RADIO HELL

New York's Best Station
Broadcasts From a Jersey Basement

BY RJ SMITH (P. 21)

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New York’s Best Station Comes From an East Orange Basement

Lounging around the coke machine in the lobby of Froebel Hall, everybody looks frisky. I bet dollars to dog nuts most of these young adults at Upsala College—a Lutheran school of 1500-1400 nestled in the bosom of East Orange, New Jersey—I bet they don’t even know what’s going on downstairs. Fine. Tonight there’s a meeting at radio station WFMU, with 22 staffers and station manager Ken Freedman squeezed into a space that looks very much like, well, a basement in New Jersey. There’s a rusty red, tamped-down shag carpet, a fireplace with fake logs, and a bowling trophy and kids’ books on the mantle. Freedman points out the new leaks in the ceiling. Bart Plantenga, editor of Lowest Common Denominator, the station’s fanzine/jokebook/poetry journal that thinks it’s a program guide, talks about the next issue. “One comment about programming,” says Freedman. “There’s been so much television and video programming of late. It’s my opinion that there’s nothing inherently creative about 10 minutes of Bugs Bunny anymore. If you’re going to use it there’s nothing wrong with that, but try to make creative use of what you’re tapping off television.”

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BY RJ SMITH
be with a ridiculous way to tie it in, like saying ‘well, Lydia does have a father complex…’” WFMU sports specialty shows also, such as Pat Duncan’s hard-core taxonomy (Thursdays, 7 to 9:06 p.m.), and Richard’s “Synthetic Pleasure,” a stand of electronic music (Mondays, 6:30 to 9 p.m.). Speciality shows bring in the most money during the marathon, but the heart and future of the station is in the air, not on the airwaves. The Immigrant (Sundays, 9 to midnight), for example, does play music, but he’s firstly an elliptical rapper with a talent for drawing words that merit out of callers and guests.

The DJ does pasteup for Screw, another plays in Waterman Love Puddle. One delivers flowers to afford his voluminous collection of poetry and real estate information records. One is a bike messenger. If you spilled a barrel of gherkins into the Hudson on one stormy midnight, they’d cast it as far apart as the WFMU whathaveyou. But, from a roll-up of interviews, they’d y’all will understand what kind of person we’re dealing with.

The Vanilla Bean (Tuesdays, 9:31 to midnight) likes to talk. He plays great music, white and black, leaning away from pop and toward the funny and funky. But basically, he’s a mouthful. “I spent a lot of the time under the sink growing up,” he says, “just listening to conversations. My parents used to have marriage encounter groups over, and you would hear everything. And my uncle used to be the maître ‘d at the Copa-caba-na, I’d be shlepped off to his house at times and he’d take me to work. So I’d be running around before lunch, and that got me interested in show business.”

The Bean’s been at WFMU almost seven years. He broke in to college radio some ten years ago at WCSO, a radio station in South Orange, New Jersey, where he chafed at the format. “Here I am playing ‘Bodies’ by the Sex Pistols, on a station where you couldn’t even play, like, Billy Joel’s ‘Only The Good Die Young’.” So they threw me off the station, which was okay, because I was back when Reagan first got elected. So I called up and somebody answered the phone sounded really happy and said ‘Who’s giving a shit?’ and hung up. And I thought ‘Wow, they sound like a great bunch of people!’

There was a time when the Bean tried stand-up comedy, only to develop an ulcer. Now he’s committed to giving others dyspepsia, insulting callers, rooting out the more high-minded with the aid of his divining rod. The guy is hard to take. “I dive whole hog into things, it’s like unraveling a baseball when you get to that little core and find out it’s cord or cork or the like. I’m a high-brow super snob.” If the Bean copped to a little more modesty these days, to playing more music and offending fewer people than before, he’s still capable of bawling you with a high-volume monologue. And in the course of interviews he sometimes let it all hang out. “I was three-month suspension last summer. His troubles were based in moments like the on-air call to a phone sex service in Memphis, a session with an operator called Tanya. “Tanya: Hold it, I want you to talk about Elvis Presley while you’re doing it.”

Tabatha: You want to talk about Elvis Presley?

Bean: That’s right, I want to talk about his life, his music, his family, the Colonel, and his dog, and his daughter Priscilla, and her boyfriend, Sean Penn, everything.

Tabatha: Okay well, I go to his house all the time. I’ve been inside that mansion, it’s got that guitar-shaped pool and a pool shaped like the Hound. His daughter is always screwing around, you always read in the Enquirer something about Elvis Presley’s daughter, and I just thought it was really bad when he died. “Oh, what happened to the Hound?”

Bean: How are you baby—you jacking on that cock yet?” Bean had to grovel a lot to get back on the air.

An obscenity citation can put a station through the ropes, according to WFMU, a policy on playing or talking trash months ago, when they saw FCC revisions coming. According to Friedman, when the FCC investigates complaints of obscenity, it is stations that haven’t disciplined “offenders” or that haven’t notified the administration of offenses, that are penalized. WFMU skirts both possibilities.

But then, tighter regulations and just force that to do something, that does result in something extra half-gainer, as the Radio Hound, perhaps most of all, has exhibited. He’s dirty. The Radio Hound (Saturdays, 3 to 5 p.m.) is that rare WFMU jock who won’t waste a fan before he gets a show. He came to New York from Fort Lauderdale in 1977 a stone Iggy Pop fan, though you wouldn’t hear a lot of Iggy on his show. The Hound loves rock and roll, he’s unimpressed with the music of pop and orthodoxy— from the critics to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame—have defined a stay-prest, no-think collective taste. You won’t hear the Beatles: “I just think they’re really boring, basically. If something sounds like that brightly lit in the medi-a’s eye, it just loses all sense of mystery.”

The Hound plays wild things you’ve never heard of that’ll make you laugh your ass off wondering how this shit was ever played, in the first place. Goddamn dammed and otherwise, like Homer Anderson’s “Lee Harvey Was a Friend of Mine.” Like king of music Hank Ballard’s hard-to-find “Broadway,” which struts hotter than “Honky Tonk” and is exactly like the “Coral” by the Coral. For the first time. Like the Saxons’ “Coral Walk,” and I heard the Hound say he’d personally shoot any band that covers this one. He believes in the inviolability
“I BELIEVE EVERY PARANOID THEORY I’VE EVER HEARD. I BELIEVE THEY SHOOT LASER BEAMS AT PEOPLE’S HEADS TO GET THEM TO COMMIT POINTLESS MURDERS.”

—THE HOUND

goes to hell, because for everyone within range of his voice he turns what a golden oldie station like WCBS makes go down like milk into something you can get drunk on. He doesn’t listen much to radio. “I dunno. Sometimes I’m hearing stuff I like.—WCKR can be playing some great music, old blues or gospel, and they put it across in this really dry context that just bores the shit out of me. Like listing all the players’ names and giving the session dates and shit… they take it and put it on a pedestal. You can’t get in a ’57 T-Bird and drive it around, you’ve gotta look at it behind a glass case.”

As much as tunes, the Hound’s thing is about a disposition, about what it would feel like to bust that T-Bird loose and whip on out to some lurid carnival outside of town, any cop or damned fool in your way reading “Uniroyal” on their backside. The Hound is a dog sniffing outside the tent (Inside: BIG HARUM GIRL SHOW), grunting and growling at the world. At the horseshoe bar on Avenue B, we drink. “It’s changed so much in the last two or three years,” the Hound grouses. “There’s so many things I used to take for granted that we could never do anymore. And they passed a law that you can’t smoke in cafes! There’s a fucking law against anything I want to do, just about. And now I have neighbors giving me noise complaints—I lived here for nine years without noise complaints, these people telling me they have to get up and go to work in the morning. I don’t fucking care. Hey, you’re living in the East Village, and you have to get up at eight o’clock to go to work. “I’m a firm believer in trilateralism and all that,” he says, and even hounds can smirk. “I believe every paranoid theory I’ve ever heard. I believe they shoot laser beams at people’s heads to get them to commit pointless murders. It’s too scary, there’s too many coincidences, too many weird things are happening. It would be nice to see a generation of young kids that just wanted to go out and murder all these people. That would be good.”

Uh, that might take a lot of bullets.

“Okay, I shake them up. I mean, the arrogance is what’s scary, the arrogance and the racism of it. These people are so upfront, they’re not even trying to act like they’re not, they are just blatantly creepy. The new Supreme Court thing, that’s-terrifying—have you read any of these guys’ words? You just look at them, and they are all such a bunch of hateful people.”

FMU’s DJs can’t believe that what they get excited about has not been censored through the new local stations with bigger signals manned by Ignorami who don’t even overlook Madonna or Run-D.M.C. as much as they do, let alone Kitty Wells, Lui Hung, Loudon Wainwright III, the Mars Volta, and the Pontiac Brothers, all of which come from a recent WFUM heavy playlist. Staffers don’t condense to instruct their listeners; their lively, weak feelings speak for themselves. Really, the program director thought another DJ had slighted Abbott, and retaliated with a block of the Norse Gods, a half-hour of unexpected, Necco candy-colored pop thrashing happily. You can hear the DJs trying to make connections with the 200,000 listeners. And the letters, the 4000 people who pledge money each marathon (not to mention the yet-unaccoupled who pledged $20,000 in advance of this year’s fundraiser), the following that supports Low-Common Denominator, all bear out WFUM’s success. “The station is there to be used as a musical instrument,” says the Vanilla Bean, “and anybody that doesn’t is just wasting time, and not being busy. ‘Cause we have to start finding stations is a good place for people to be picking up all kinds of pieces of information.”

In the past seven or eight years, college radio has become extremely important to the music industry. Labels hire representatives to lobby the stations; student DJs introduced acts like REM or the Eurythmics, which went on to break pop. WFUM’s peers have their own conventions and tipsheets like Rockpool and the College Radio Directory. College jocks rely on these too heavily. Generally, stations decline an adversarial status, their connection to commercial radio move like the relationship the Toledo Mudhens enjoy with the Red Sox. Clotted with a preen- ing, self-importance that sometimes rac- ist, and frequently segregationist: what nonwhite programming the stations permit will be “formulated,” or slotted into all-blues, all-reggae, all-rap shows.

Besides record labels, college stations have a music director and a “priority” bin that DJs draw from. It’s the director’s job to procure promo records from the labels, and he or she has the most to say about what gets in the priority bin. The college side of it is to mean the major rock labels—and the established Indies—show up in the bins, since they are the only companies automatically servicing (and how) colleges. They call up stations every week and ask how their bands sound. “My God, how they breed!” And if WFUM feels a tight bond with its audience, fans also know that the demesne outside WFUM’s listening range, and wherever toes are appraining to Club Nouveau or Bruce Hornsby, that place where it’s all a little bit tired, and the college stations do. They’re getting these records, says Ken Freedman, “and they’re being told REM is fantastic,” and “Robyn Hitch- cock is God.” They’ve bought the whole myth of newness, they’ve got the rep for Elektra records calling up and saying, “Hey, this is what’s happening.”

The station at Upsala beats this check, for starters, because it’s WFUM’s policy to regularly move LPs through the new bin, and to keep the libraries it’s de facto policy, as well, to mostly ignore that bin, to let DJs raid the library—or, crucially, their own collections. The crew’s faith that they will never get anywhere in pow-