

The Digital Breakthrough

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From The Emerald Isle

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Have Created Rock & Roll
Radio But He Had Help...

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WAX

MAY 4, 1979

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*"I long to
Belong to
Adonis
But some other Venus
Is standin' between us"*

*-Teri Dean
"Adonis"*

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WHOOOPS. Regretably, last issue's art essay "Need An Album Cover?" carried the byline "David Seay," a real injustice to a fine writer and great bowler—David Seay—who wrote the article.

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these kinds of songs with their thinly disguised leer-ies that riled far tamer, more mainstream groups than the Klan. Once the hounds of decency were unleashed (in the form of civic groups, organized parents and the Catholic Church), both record producers and dee jays were told to quite literally "clean up their act."

White Smoke From A Chicken Leg

Not all the wild DJs capitulated overnight. Some of the white jocks had begun to pick up the jive patter and breathless delivery of their black confreres.

At a jazz and R&B concert in Detroit in the late '50s, my date and I were about the only whites in the place. All of the city's really 'happening' black society was there, including the top-rated soul DJ Prophet Jones. The Prophet was dressed all in green (allegedly because it was the color of money). He entered, prancing gay, and flanked by two bodyguards. Black women shivered. He was heavy business. *Ebony* reported how he had foretold the coming of the atom bomb when he saw a puff of white smoke escaping from a chicken leg he had placed on his plate during a church social. He swept into his seat, the lights went down, the spot went up and the MC, Frantic Ernie, came out. And he was white!

Frantic Ernie was an exception; he had developed a credible R&B-based style that endeared him to both blacks and whites. The majority of "boss jocks" came on like second-rate hucksters, playing down the teen audience with every trick gimmick known. Some, however, were actually clever.

One of St. Louis' WIL's main men was Jack Carney who had a personality like a games director at a summer camp. He created the mythical Pookie Snackenber and a fan club with buttons to go along with him. Among other accomplishments, he once conducted a contest whose winner was personally driven to school for a week by Carney in a rented limousine.

Surefire gimmick

Another was the stay-awake marathon. New York's "Curly-Haired Boy In The Third Row," Peter Tripp, staged one in an empty recruiting office on Times Square. For five days and nights he stared back sleepless at the freaks who made faces at him through the plate glass. Finally his rap began to disintegrate. His face turned white, his lips went blue and he set his sportjacket on fire.

Perhaps the best of the hip teen jocks was another Philadelphia resident, Joe Niagra of WIBG ("Wibbage-land"). An early rhymers ("Hear the word from this rockin' bird!"), Niagra never let his speech patterns become predictable drone or babble. He had a knack for the odd pause or peculiar but just right emphasis that gave one the impression he was not only excited about a record's success but downright proud to serve his audience: "I predicted this would make it big and you proved me right!"

Besides being the sincerest of supersalesmen, Niagra may also have invented payola. Philly was the largest center for indies who, having less influence than the major labels, had to constantly grease the wheels. The story, as told to former Philly jock Oaky Miller by indie record producer Harry Finffer, is as follows: One day in the early fifties when Niagra was still

only playing pop, he has lunch with Finffer. Harry asks Joe to play a new record and Joe agrees. Harry picks up the lunch tab—which is somewhere around three dollars—and they leave the restaurant. Outside, Joe, who makes then maybe \$60.00 a week, sees a \$100 dollar suit in a store window and flips over it. Next day at the station the suit arrives, addressed to Joe with a note from Finffer asking him to please play more of his records. Joe is like a kid at Xmas and plays the hell out of any product Finffer brings in. Payola is born.

Kovacs & Paar

"The indies tried to get the DJs boozed, fed and laid," claims Oaky Miller. He maintains, as do many others, that he accepted gifts but only played records if he thought they had merit (reminiscent of Melina Mercouri in *Never On Sunday* who'd only

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Freed drums up support.



play for pay with men who turned her on). Miller, now a comic and actor, follows in the tradition of Steve Allen, Jack Paar, Ernie Kovacs, Garry Moore, Bob & Ray, Jonathan Winters and Soupy Sales (formerly Heinz), all of whom worked as mad-hatter DJs before scaling the heights of stardom. Miller's success story is pure Horatio Alger.

In '57 Miller was in Atlantic City, New Jersey looking for a summer job in between college semesters. One evening on the boardwalk he noticed a dance emporium. A DJ in the window was playing records, but there were only about six people in the place. Oaky, with no broadcasting experience at all, had a showman's confidence; he walked in, buttonholed the owner and asked the jock's salary. When he heard "25 bills a week," he was shook. He knew he could do better than the lame kid in the window and to prove it he asked the owner to walk with him down the crowded boardwalk. "If a hundred people don't stop me to say hello," he boasted, "forget I asked you for the job!"

Oaky had been a BMOC athlete at a big Philly high school. Atlantic City was where all the city's teens came for summer fun. When the owner saw his popularity he asked him to start work that very night. Oaky agreed, but for 50 dollars a night. He was in.

Oaky didn't know an A from a B side, but he learned fast. A couple of stations later he was at WEEZ outside of Philly in Chester, hosting a dance party on TV out of Scranton, hauling in \$1000 a week on an average. And this isn't counting the record hops where the real money was.

How'd he score so big? Well, the major problem—that of establishing an on-air identity—was already taken care of. His delivery was typically good-natured jive: "The big bad O is back on the go. Hi everybody! This is Oaky Miller. I come on like a herd of turtles in the month of May and for the next solid three I've got goodies for thee, etc." Basically his appeal came from the way he involved his youthful audience; he might thank a high school's Number One tough for protecting him at a dance or complain how he was in love with Miss Canada but she was too far away. He started a fake feud with a woman who broadcast a cooking program on the station. He leaked out the police's phone number, telling the kids "That's where Elvis is staying!" and he urged them to cut school and attend his birthday party in a city park. To cool out the authorities he invented "Homework Corner"—a 20 minute show segment where students could exchange schoolwork questions and answers.

Recognizing the potential of another DJ—Jerry Blavat—Miller hired him under a one year contract, to host record hops. Blavat went on, over WCAM and WHAT, to perfect an incredibly sappy, near mindless crooning style—the forerunner of late '60s thornazine delivery. In his "hictionary" ladies were "foxes" or "amazons" while guys were "studs" or "coyotes." Over a lush string backing he would breath: "...The coyote needs someone...and that someone...that's the fox...and the fox needs someone...and that someone...that's the coyote...like the bee need the honey...like the flower need the

rain...like the farmer need the crop...like the ocean need the salt...that's how the amazon needs the stud...and teenage love...wow...it had no beginning...had no end...it will never end as long as there are teenagers...there will be amazons and foxes falling in love with coyotes...that's good, y'know?"

Blavat's style for introducing up-tempo numbers was more traditional though no less irritating: "...Unh!...Unh!...Unh!...Up into the sky for thee! Yuh! Teenpopulationofthisherfabulousnation...once again hello and a hi! and a huh! Big boss with the hot sauce. YourstrulyJerry-Blavat. The geator with the heater. So—withoutfurtherado, let's try and appease huh?, your musical appetite huh? Let's try and appease you the yon teenage population. I along with you will rock the big tick tock..."

"More Moves Than OJ"

Meanwhile, down in Pittsburgh on WAMO, Porky Chedwick billed himself the "Daddio of the raddio, a porkulatin' platter-pushin' poppa" who had "more jams than Smuckers." This "head snapper and dapper rapper" admitted he was "not Cary Grant" but could "do what he can't," declared he got his "PhD in insanity at the University of Spinner Sanctum" and confessed to always having a grape in his ear "to make my head ferment."

Accompanying the jive rappers, yet another style was quietly sliding out of the broadcast lab: weird sound effects. Traces of this go back to the early '50s when Al "Jazzbo" Collins did his "Purple Grotto" show on WNEW, New York. The strange noises coupled with the jock's bizarro rap probably bagged more listeners than the good jazz he consistently played.

Squawks & Ginsburgers

Sometime later, Bob (Hogan's Heroes) Crane at WICC, Bridgeport, pioneered the super-production format with effects and way out voice tracks. Eventually moving to KNF in New York he was built a special console on which he could have staged the Battle of Little Big Horn.

Such new audience-nabbing devices weren't lost on the rock rappers. Arnie "Woo Woo" Ginsberg ("Woo woo to you you") backed up his youthful, eager to please voice on Boston's WMEX with pops, squawks, whistles, clangs, beeps and aroogahs. His *Night Train* show became an institution in the New England area for years. He was the first (and possibly

"Porkulatin' platter-pushin'" Porky Chedwick.



only) jock to have a hamburger named after him. The name? The Ginsburger, natch.

In the early '60s Russ "Weird Beard" Knight's rhyming patter reverberated through countless echoplexes, overlaid with flying saucer and rocket sounds right out of a sci-fi movie. KLIF's pick hits—the Knight Bullseyes—were introduced by an arrow in flight—"whhiirr!"—that hit a target—"thock!" The show, "Beamed from a space capsule," was so damned busy the records began to sound just like one more electronic surprise—and this was still only a precursor of the McLuhanesque folly that was to follow.

The Boy On The Psychiatrist's Couch

As radio moved into the mid-'60s it followed Bill Drake's lead of super-sock-it-to-'em top 29 programming. Drake came up with his form of totally commercial radio (in Fresno and San Francisco). The thoroughly successful format carried over to the decade's end. Overlap sound, no dead airtime ever, stinger jingles of a second or less, constant harping on the station's call letters and punch! punch! punch!

While the new style set definite limits on the free-ranging 'personality jock,' some survived and prospered. One of these was B. Mitchel Reed, who arrived at WMCA, New York preceded by his rep as "the fastest tongue in the west," "The Boy On The Psychiatrist's Couch," "The Mad Monk In The Monastery" or simply "BMR," he would prepare for the verbal spill chute by downing some drinks, a joint and a few amphis. "After that, I felt loose and ready." Below is a rap, the like of which beat out both Cousin

Brucie and Murray the K in popularity, and took him but 17 seconds to complete. Care to try your luck?

"Hey scooters, it's your leader BMR, WMCA jumpin' with my hat in my hand with the nuttiest show in the entire New York turf, read me back with the smashbacks or the Good Guy's survey or headed that way. This hour the name of the winner of the musical love letters contest—first portion to be presented from the lobby of the Nile Hilton Hotel. Hey, name, claim, style will go to Connecticut(?) second call city of Lalassitude(?) five thousand and like that there schmeer call right now."

(Reed, of course, successfully grew out of the hyperthyroid approach, and went on to pioneer a solid FM style, which he pursues today over Los Angeles' KMET.) For pure mid-'60s boss jock surrealism nobody topped the Real Don Steele. In 1966 the pyromaniacal Real fired this minibrushfire out over KHJ, Los Angeles, a city so used to glittery-eyed freaks it didn't even roll over. Sixteen seconds was all it took.

"Three o'clock in Boss Angeles! AndgehHEY! thitz me, The Real Don Steele, a billion dollar weekend there, and you're looking out of sidewalk call; I got nothing but those groovy golds—we're gonna fit Chuck out here on a fractious Friday, boy, got to get a set outside that (indcipherable word resembling blowing bubbles in water) jumbo city, take a trip. When you chase 'em, daylight."

Beautiful Drool

What more can you say? Only that after those strange mutants, some early FM rock jocks flirted briefly with an "Oh, wow man, like you know—beautiful" drool which often put you to sleep before the disc came on. New York's Rosko on WOR was the most famous exponent.

Some excitement was generated in L.A. in the late '60s by the Magnificent Montague whose popular exhortation to "Burn, baby, burn!" was belatedly exonerated from charges it helped ignite the Watts riots. In the '70s, sporadic outbursts of early broadcast mania have included such figures as the ubiquitous Dr. Demento and record producer Huey Meaux (whose infrequent Texas sorties as The Crazy Cajun feature scratchy old records, prisoners' dedications and a flamboyant shouting style reminiscent of the best asbestos-larynxed oldtimers). Los Angeles' 'under-



Dr. Hep Cat.

ground' KROQ FM recently had a weekly show by one Young Marquis; resembling a coked-out scion of the House of Usher, the Marquis mixed hard rock, heavy production and the styles of Zacherley and Don Steele. The results, if not always humorous, were at least 'different.'

Times, however, have changed. Nowadays fans of early rock radio probably spend their days holed up with the entire *Cruisin'* series. The medium's wild eccentrics seem to have disappeared from the airwaves about as completely as the fresh fowl, secret tonics and rebellious music they peddled. Perhaps a diligent few hold out hope that a generation of future Poppa Stoppas and Groover Boys is growing up somewhere out there right now and that one day, while nobody's listening, the real batwing madness will jump up and prowl the bands all over again. □

Magnificent Montague.



Gen Nobles.

