

SCENE

NASHVILLE

Left of the Dial

Finding a place for community radio in Nashville

By Jim Ridley

The revolution will not be televised, as Gil Scott-Heron once sang. But if the members of Radio Free Nashville can defy the many obstacles in their path, it may very well be broadcast. Every first and third Monday of the month, in the offices of the Peace & Justice Center near Music Row, approximately 20 people meet to plan something Nashvillians have talked about for years but never quite organized: a listener-supported, community-access radio station.

The lack of a first-rate community radio station here has long been a sore spot with local music boosters--not to mention listeners fed up with canned zoo crews and restrictive playlists. They longingly cock an ear toward the Mississippi, where Memphis' legendary volunteer-run station, WEVL-FM 90, plays a bracingly eclectic mix of jazz, blues, rockabilly, gospel, and public-affairs programming. Deejays are free to program their own slots; as a result, each block of airtime is stamped with the Bluff City's indelible personality.

In Memphis; in Austin; in Madison, Wis.; in Newark, N.J.; in Bloomington, Ind.; and in San Marcos, Tex., community stations are restoring radio's power to form a bond between listeners. They're also playing some damn fine music. A similar station here, the thinking goes, would provide an antidote to the oppressive mediocrity of all but a few local stations. It would also create a powerful new forum for community activism.

After a year of grass-roots organizing, the Radio Free Nashville group is still nowhere near the public airwaves. And yet each meeting draws a larger, more capable, and more enthusiastic circle of supporters. The last meeting attracted a former staffer at a Connecticut station, a veteran music programmer, college-radio DJs, and a club booker, as well as a certified public accountant, a utility worker, and a labor activist.

The next meeting will take place this coming Monday, the same day renegade radio broadcasters converge on Washington, D.C., to protest the Federal Communications Commission, which has gone to troubling lengths to shut down "micro" stations--frequencies illegally broadcasting at low power below 100 watts. As the community-radio movement gathers steam across the country, the timing may be right for Nashville to jump on board.

The chief appeals of community-access radio are there in the phrase: community and access. Pending review by a programming board, anyone can host or produce a radio show. The result is a patchwork of individual formats, programmed in most cases by hosts who genuinely know and love the genre they play. At WEVL, those hosts include Dan Phillips, whose "New Orleans: Under the Influence" offers a weekly treasure trove of Crescent City nuggets, and Cap'n Pete, whose "Cap'n Pete's Blues Cruise" is a local institution. The station's a blast, but the WEVL deejays also provide the kind of background knowledge and appreciation that educates as well as entertains--a big deal in a city whose currency is its musical heritage.

Equally strong is the thread of social concern that links the country's community radio stations--an encouraging sign at a low ebb for civic activism. At Austin's KOOP-FM, a cooperative station that shares a signal with the University of Texas, the remarkable public-affairs programming includes daily news segments, interview hours, a parenthood show, a traffic forum, and broadcasts analyzing local news from

every conceivable angle of gender and ethnicity. The emphasis on alternative news programming is key to the community-radio vision: that the airwaves belong to average working citizens, not to media barons and pundits.

The community-radio movement has its roots in the freewheeling FM radio of the early '70s, when frequencies were relatively easy to obtain and formatting depended on the bleary-eyed dude manning the turntable. After years of mass-media consolidation and narrow formatting, community-radio activists want to bring back the looseness, spontaneity, and relevance radio once enjoyed.

Radio Free Nashville cofounder Beau Hunter remembers those days well. He was living in San Francisco in 1967, and he recalls tuning in to the community station KMPX with friends for entertainment. "Nobody had a television," says Hunter, who looks and sounds like a much healthier David Crosby, "[but] everyone listened to KMPX. The station not only informed the community, it played a vital role in *forming* the community." In starting plans for a community radio station, Hunter says he was also influenced by the legendary WLAC broadcasts he heard growing up in Tennessee, as well as the Belgrade underground station B92, whose government-induced shutdown led to mass demonstrations.

Needless to say, the headaches of starting a community station are enormous. Sorting through the complexities of ownership and decision-making is tedious, and many stations have gotten bogged down in petty infighting. Equally daunting are the operating costs, which, for an FM station, can run hundreds of thousands of dollars. Madison's WORT-FM operates on \$280,000 a year; KOOP describes its own \$75,000 annual budget as "a shoestring."

However, these goals are not unreachable. WORT manages to raise 60 percent of its annual budget from listener donations, and **WEVL station manager Judy Dorsey has been quoted as saying nearly four-fifths of her budget comes from direct public support. Indeed, WEVL's "Blues on the Bluff" fundraisers have become popular local events.** Radio Free Nashville has yet to host its first fundraiser, assuming wisely that it needs to have its goals and infrastructure in place before it tries to raise much cash.

Finding a frequency, however, remains the biggest challenge. At a recent RFN meeting, several members suggested possibilities. One was replacing CATV Channel 19's overnight BBC broadcast with Radio Free Nashville--an intriguing idea that was ultimately nixed. (Nevertheless, Radio Free Nashville members are currently taking classes at the studio so they can produce a 30-minute infomercial on RFN.) Another involved distributing a sample broadcast on the Internet.

Chris Lugo, host of CATV's *Left of Center* show and a core RFN member, advocates that Radio Free Nashville set up a microbroadcasting station at a fraction of the cost--and the listenership. This method has its dangers. Just last week, the Memphis micro station Radio Free Memphis had its equipment seized by an FCC agent. But microbroadcasters around the country, led by Stephen Dunifer's Free Radio Berkeley, are asserting low-power access to the public airwaves as a First Amendment right. If the FCC buckles under pressure, it might create a special new bandwidth for micros.

At this point, Radio Free Nashville has pretty much reached the same point WORT and WEVL did in their infancy--a bunch of people sitting in a room trying to figure out a way to make a shared vision come to life. The inflammatory rhetoric has toned down some since the early meetings; in its place is a new emphasis on achievable goals and practical solutions.

But none of this would be worth the trouble if the dream weren't so potent. At the last RFN meeting, the room was filled with people who, at some point in their lives, felt a kinship with a disembodied voice in the night, a voice that made them feel connected to a world beyond their bedrooms or their cars. One man spoke for everyone who missed that sense of connection, and for everyone who wanted it back. "I don't listen to the radio," he said, "and that's why I'm here."

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