

Signal

After Radio Silence



Spring

2023



Dear Readers,

Welcome to Issue No. 1 of Signal Magazine, After Radio Silence. We are just a few of the people supporting WHPK Chicago 88.5fm radio (best in Chicago, probably in Illinois, maybe in the U.S.) and its community. What does our radio station mean to us?

Nowadays, radio, among other retro technologies, enchants many with its vintage allure. In this relaunch issue of Signal we will go beyond the contemporary obsession with the ‘old days’ to explore what radio—as a sonic space, a unique technology, and a complex organization—has to offer.

What sort of community does radio create inside and outside of the DJ booth? Will radio be an inspiration to contemporary multidisciplinary artists? Can we find a new radio sound and new way to write about it?

The people of WHPK, as well as other communities revolving around radio and music, have a story to tell. It is our mission to showcase and connect all of the different forms these stories take, from analog and digital audio media to visual arts and beyond, spanning past, present, and future. We hope you find that this issue speaks to both preservation and progress, through the voices of members of the radio community.

Dasha & Emma, editors-in-chief

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Emma Kamran • Kina Takahashi Dasha Aksenova • Eli Harrell • Emma Kamran

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PARIAH

#TEST
EXPERIMENTAL



WHPK History

by Anna Selden

Once upon a time, when high ponytails and perms reigned supreme, WHPK DJ Mario Smith declared, “WHPK is dead.”

So, this issue would not be the first time “Radio Silence” has been written about the station.

In 2016, South Side Weekly published an article, entitled “Radio Silence,” on the persistent problems that WHPK had been facing that year, including a bedbug infestation, limitations on its 24-hour broadcasting capabilities, and unethical background checks for community DJs. This array of setbacks forced WHPK to temporarily go off the air, producing a deafening radio silence after 70 years of continuous broadcasting.

However, in defense of its illustrious history, WHPK refused to stay silent. DJing live and loud on the quad, members of the station adamantly demanded the saving of the station and a return to 24-hour broadcasting. And they got it. And that’s the kind of spunk that WHPK has had from the beginning.

Founded in 1946 by veterans of the WWII Armed Forces Radio, WHPK was at first WUCB. WUCB originally aired with a limited range from beneath Burton-Judson Courts. In the late ‘50s, WUCB moved to its current location in Mitchell Tower in Reynolds, setting

the groundwork for the eventual expansion of its transmission range across the South Side. And since 1968, WUCB has been WHPK, its DJs and members loudly and proudly committed to providing the University and its surrounding community with tracks they wouldn’t normally hear on the radio: the underground, the fringes, and the up-and-coming of music.

Today your ears may be graced (or assaulted) by noise music, experimental techno, or folk punk. But WHPK’s alternative image of 2023 had different undertones back in the mid-1980s. DJ Ken Wissoker created both WHPK’s and the city of Chicago’s first rap radio show in 1984. Then after the start of his show in 1986, legendary WHPK DJ John Schauer, better known as JP Chill, had at one point the longest-running rap radio show in the country. Both of these accolades deemed WHPK as a pioneering radio station for the then-budding genre of rap music.

Veteran DJs like JP Chill and their engagement with the Chicago rap scene set the stage for a lesser-known freestyle battle in 1996 by some legends-to-be. You might have heard of them: Kanye West and Common. These infamous South Side rappers shook the airwaves on WHPK in 1996 with their lyrical duel, broadcasted right from Mitchell Tower, a mere two years after Common shouted out ‘HPK as the “only

station that would fuck with rap” on “Nuthin’ to Do.”

Common and Kanye aren’t the only local legends to have come out of WHPK. The now famed Chicago film critic Sergio Mims and Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Tyehimba Jess are former DJs, and the beloved Chicago record store, Dusty Groove, was founded by DJs JP Chill and Rick Wojcik. Who can know what burgeoning potential is waiting up the winding stairs nestled beside Hutch?

WHPK members of yore used to joke that one could go through all of college without knowing about the station. Yet, rising from the ashes of the “Save WHPK” movement, the pandemic, and other setbacks, WHPK has become more visible than ever but never forsaking its indie mission. In the wise

words of 2011 program director, Eric Hanss, “we’re a college radio station, we have to be edgy.” With Summer Breeze (a name coined by WHPK, but beloved by the Major Activities Board!), Pictures and Sounds, Clobb, and countless other live events, WHPK continues to make itself known on and off the air, rejecting silence as its retro medium simultaneously evades obscurity. ©



photography by Asa Muhammad





Streaming the Mean

by Theo Belci

Among the sea of algorithmically recommended musical artists, the genre reigns supreme. Bite-sized descriptions of artists allow streaming services to organize an endless playlist of thematically coherent music, ignorant to the content and context of each song. Awash in the vibe-ification of music, what will happen to the lyricist, the iconoclast, and the quirky underdog?

It has never been easier to find music recommendations. I'm inundated by them on Spotify. I click into one of my daily playlists, and see the same songs I've listened to regularly for months alongside thematically similar but generically bleak stand-ins. The playlists of most streaming platforms can detect theme, genre, and general aesthetics exceptionally well, but falter at the task of mimicking taste beyond basic "mood".

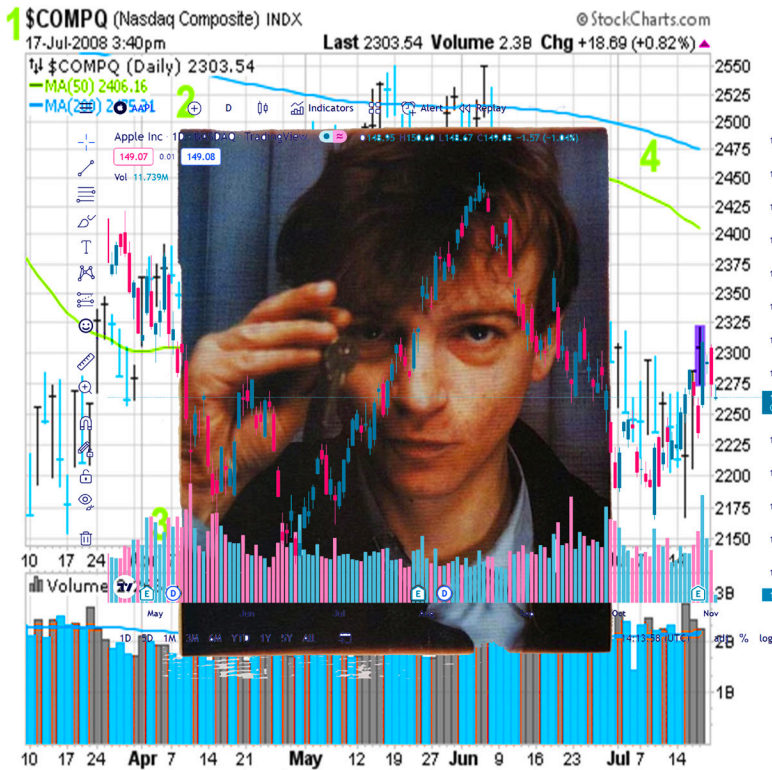
To begin with an example: on a recent Spotify "Daily" playlist, most of the songs recycled from my actual library were from The Fall. In "The NWRA", Mark E. Smith delivers this refrain:

"The North Will Rise Again / Look where you are / The future death of my father". Immediately following "The NWRA" in my playlist is "Systematic Fuck" by Total Control. The refrain is:

"You're the one to blame (X2) / Systematic Fuck".

Compared to The Fall, this song doesn't only seem like a lackluster recreation of 40 year old British post-punk, it gives the game away as well. It's an infinite loop of ham-fisted social critique, in which "the system" is to blame for "the system". It can't even give any qualities to its bogeyman, just that they are a "fuck" (bad). There is none of Mark E. Smith's sense of place and time, and none of his personal anxious charm. I could never guess anything about Total Control, other than who they listened to while making their album. While this is substituting a single comparison of bands for an endemic issue, there are hundreds of other boring, post-punk revival, late 2010s groups I could have also referenced (Yard Act, Fontaines DC, The Murder Capital, Bodega), Total Control will have to be accepted as a synecdoche.

If I asked an AI chatbot to write a song in the style of The Fall, I'd only be impressed by its product if I'd never actually read anything by the original songwriter. It would be written via rearrangement and reproduction, aggregating all the times the original



writer mentioned politics, or money, or other people, spitting back out an average. Recommendation operates in the same way, aggregating all the times the bands you like mention heartbreak, or play guitar with reverb, or say “the system”, and find other bands which fit the majority of your preferred thematic categories. As you fall into patterns listening to your favorite artists, you inadvertently create express lanes for

recommendation, signaling to streaming services that anything containing a speak-singing vocalist, or a breakbeat will be an automatic success.

This leads to my question: how, in this environment, can you get from one Mark E. Smith (someone visionary, who actually has something to say, and whose work was their own artistic vision rather than an approximation of another musician’s) to another Mark E.

Smith via a streaming platform. I think it's impossible, or at least impossible under the matrix of algorithmic governance, and that such a program cannot understand the necessary criteria to provide you with something truly iconoclastic or interesting. While platforms may have criteria for "lyricist" or "virtuoso guitarist" or "avant-garde" which point in the direction of content rather than form-based recommendations,

these too are simply empty aesthetic categories, divorced from any listener who could actually hear and understand the implicated musicians. You would end up with the reductive equation that a better guitarist would be able to correctly play the highest amount of notes, and the best punk lyricist would be able to mention words like "government" and "fuck" at a higher occurrence in their songs than anybody else.



Accepting that there is no path forward in aggregation, we are led back to the realm of actual people—of radio, of stores, of friends, and of live performance. The general isolation created by finding and listening to music exclusively on streaming platforms is something people actively choose to embrace. It allows the listener to approach an artist or song without the sense of a world in which the music was composed, or their relationship to the messages of the music, and any community which may exist around it. If you listen to black metal alone in your bedroom, you will never have to speak to another black metal fan who you find strange and uncomfortable, or pay a musician whose show you stumble across and want to check out. You also will be hard-pressed to find any other interesting bands beyond the canonized and often-recommended artists of the genre who populate every platform's genre-survey playlists.

Whether through expertise, or good will, or simple luck, venturing out into a community greater than oneself only benefits the isolated streamer. Algorithms are mirrors which feed back into already established, generally acclaimed patterns—the promise of hearing something altogether unforeseen or novel, or something similar yet overlooked lies entirely with other fans who can show you the music which they actually care about. Traditional radio, or blind purchases from record stores, or recommendations from friends may

produce the occasional horrible record, but such mistakes are infinitely preferable to the monotony of a safe, average suggestion—in the end, they help you develop taste. ©

A Song In Its Place

by Aidan Cessor

Each one of these locations is paired with a song that is best suited to listening while in it. A general theme of these pairings is reflection.

Abandoned City Methodist Church in Gary, Indiana
“Fish and Whistle” by John Prine

Left to rot in 1971, this church was funded by US Steel and crumbled when they left. Thick brambles obscure the entrance. The doorway is wide open thanks to an unknown adventurer. Inside, the grand room is in utter disrepair. A natural sunroof takes form as the roof withered away after 50-odd years. Hallowed be the final dusting of snow to these ruins. Onto the song, this folk classic takes all troubles and turns them into a wave of optimism. Describing a man with a life with little satisfaction, it progresses into a celebration of seeing everything with a glint of optimism. The chorus is a direct plea to God where he sings “Father forgive us for what we must do / you forgive us and we’ll forgive you / We’ll forgive each other till we both turn blue” The last few panes of stained glass shine hope while the song plays.



by Aidan Cessor

Cobb Cafe Office

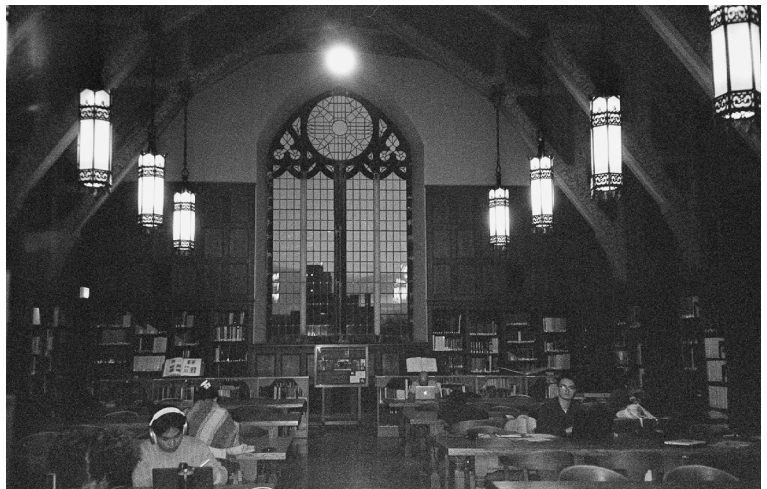
“Oldest Story in the World” by The Plimsouls

The secret manager’s room has its allure to some, but really it’s quite plain. Used as a nap room or interview room or glorified coat room, the beige sanctuary is one of my favorite places. The dingy, probably-grabbed-from-the-street-corner plush chair makes for a great listening experience. Seemingly peaceful, yet the murmurs of the Cobbverse seep in one way or another. The song is a hidden ‘80s New Wave gem featured in the rom-com, *Valley Girl*, starring Nick Cage as a teen punk hunk alongside their other more prominently featured hit “A Million Miles Away.” While being about a failed relationship, the song evokes a feeling of a missed opportunity due to someone’s mistakes. While old flicks play in the background, a time of respite is offered to reflect on how to move on.



Oriental Institute Reading Room
“Just to be Needed” by Death’s Dynamic Shroud

Hungover on a Sunday morning, I carry myself up the switchback stairs, through the manesque doors, into the vast room. Beaming with a silent, heavenly glow, every object is lifted up toward some superior force, coaxing my peers into a studious fury. Softly, the call for connection with another person is transmitted by DDS. Six minutes of pure emotional ecstasy warms a wary soul. Sampling from Ariana Grande’s “Needy” and “Lay It All On Me” by Carole and Tuesday, the ballad begins peacefully with the bombastic, melodic drums keeping me in a trance. As the song progresses, it breaks into an angelic crescendo that pleads for a connection. The world doesn’t feel as empty as it used to be.





Reg Steps
“Sama” by Via Talas

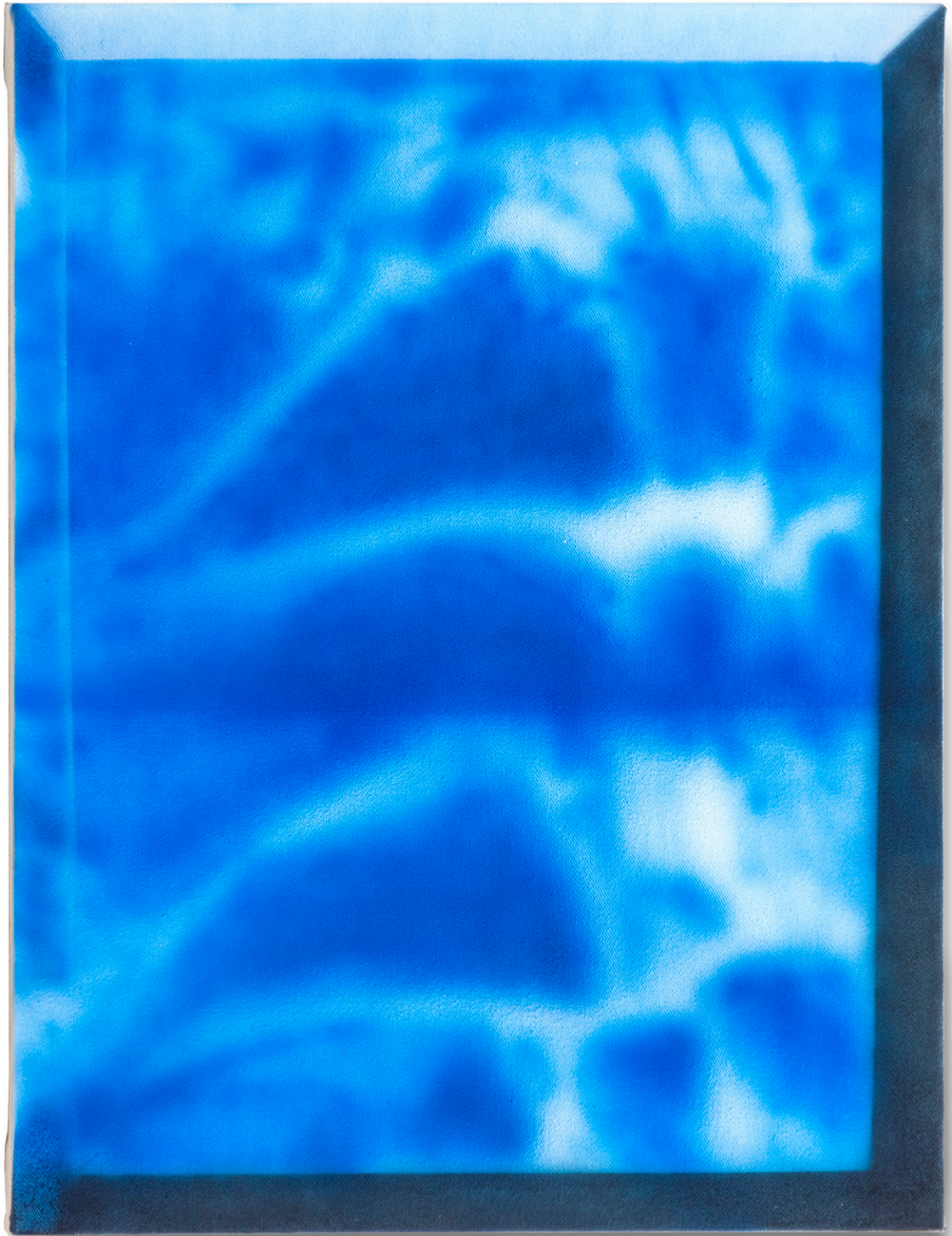
In honor of all the international students taking long drags from cheap cigarettes on the Reg steps, this is a Yugoslav song about loneliness. The title translates to “By Myself”. An upbeat love song of longing for another. The vocalist, Mira Mijatović, breaks my heart during the chorus while she laments heavenly how she isn’t able to handle being alone. The blend of an electrifying backing track of twangy synths and guitars with heartfelt lyrics makes for a great listening experience out on the cold steps outside our academic prison.



photography by Alex Leeman

The Midway
“Just Like Heaven” by The Cure

Half past midnight, I ford the Midway as the swift dragsters and ice-covered concrete posed a mortal threat to my existence. Some slight refuge is found during the middle section alongside the ice rink. Listening to this Cure hit with only one earpod in, hesitation to skip this song washes over me. For several years, a song that makes me lose hope for my dreams used to be my alarm clock. Maybe not my brightest choice; although, onward I listen. The guitar stings in my ears, and failed hopes, relationships, and opportunities swirl around. The quiet, snow-dusted field gives me all the time to think. I hope you reflect here as well. (S)



Simone Nicola Filippo
Change da world (2022)
30 x 40cm
aerographed oil on canvas

we love talking to our listeners, so please call us whenever you want, the station number is 7737028424, when you call us we are very happy, a little red phone rings in our radiostation's dj booth and it rings really loudly and it scares me, personally, but other djs are probably not as jumpy as I am. I've only ever received calls from listeners asking for other djs though. "Where's King George?", they ask. and I don't know, in fact I've never met him personally, so I get anxious and hang up. however its still nice to get a call in the radiostation, as each time I think maybe, this time, its not someone looking for King George. But it is. So if you're reading this please call me and don't ask for King George.

Dasha



Simone Nicola Filippo
Hey, It's lily. (2022)
40 x 30cm
airbrushed oil on canvas

Better Days

by Christian Bird

Technics turntables, vinyl records, hazy photos, and even hazier memories of “better days” have all come to define UK rave culture, especially during the 90’s. There is an ever-mounting pile of media on the topic explaining how the movement came to be, what jungle is, how cool the ravers looked in their outfits, and why any of this is important. The latest and greatest installment in this series is Jeremy Deller’s 2019 documentary *Everybody in the Place - An Incomplete History of Britain 1984 -1992*.

Deller’s documentary questions and contextualizes modern British cultural history in a way that many of the others don’t. He develops a nuanced understanding of the social and political contexts which allowed for the creation and proliferation of acid house and techno music in 80’s and 90’s Chicago, Detroit, and Britain. Developing this sort of contextual understanding is necessary to reject the equation of counter-cultural expression with criminality, and the assignment of house music’s success to a few London-based DJ’s who once went to Ibiza. What makes *Everybody in the Place* different from other music documentaries is its setting in an educational context: the high school politics class. It is here Deller’s presentation of history, and the students’ reactions to it, are documented and an intergenerational understanding

of electronic music history is spurred.

Creating contexts in which past musical cultures can be appreciated by outsiders is especially difficult to do—the era’s sociopolitical contexts are often overshadowed by the “genius” of the artists, leading to a misrepresentation of a movement’s fundamentals. Documentaries and writing which did this always left me feeling alienated, unsure of how such a celebrated movement could have existed anywhere near where I grew up. As a teenager I remember looking at old rave flyers on online databases, recognizing the motorway junctions where punters would meet to drive on to the raves. The documentaries and photo exhibitions I had seen hitherto led me to believe that those days of free dancing and sound systems were buried in history. In such exhibitions, the music and parties exist outside of a relatable space/time continuum, levitating in a frustratingly untouchable, perfect haze of memory. Presenting viewers with only the final works of artists is futile in developing an understanding of the culture that birthed the works.

Deller explores the context of UK rave in a way that is directly relatable for the politics students; he explains what the dance spaces meant socially and politically to those in them. Pieces of public consciousness like the AIDS epidemic, the Miners’ Strike, the Thatcher government and The Criminal



Justice and Public Order Act 1994 are related from the punter's perspective. The socioeconomic changes taking place in twentieth century Britain are neatly summarized in a set of reversals. Instead of being paid to work in warehouses on the rural/urban fringe, young people would pay to dance and socialize in them. Instead of nightlife spaces prioritizing exclusivity and performance, young people preferred those which democratized pleasure. The politics

students are made aware of their 90's counterparts' choices about what they had to do on a Saturday night, which is telling of any generation.

While Deller's point that Chicago house producers' use of drum machines and synthesizers being akin to Marxists "seizing the means of production" is a stretch, I appreciate him encouraging the students to get their hands on the drum machines and synthesizers he brought in. (The "means of materi-

al production” as understood by Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology* did not include the Roland TB-303, and a producer’s purchase/use of a synthesizer is not quite the same as the proletariat’s overthrow of the capitalist system.) This encouragement diminishes the ideological distance between the students and the early producers of the genre. Students probably left the class feeling more empowered to create than they otherwise might have been and were now aware of a celebrated music culture populated by teenagers just like them.

Despite the huge extent of mainstream media coverage about UK rave, not much of it is nearly as empowering or politically aware as *Everybody in the Place* is. UK rave culture is typically presented as a bygone movement which needs to be celebrated for fear of its forever disappearance. The analog nature of the music and its production processes is overromanticized; retired punters declare the music and the parties will never be the same. This used to confuse me, but I now understand that it’s the ravers of days past who recently started getting their photography represented in tidy, white-walled galleries. History is typically told by those not making it. And anyone with a half-developed interest in electronic music could tell you that analog drum machines and Technics turntables are still used widely to resounding effect. The story of UK rave has above all taught me that too many exhibitions of musical culture which position themselves as earnest celebrations are disillusioned excuses to brag for those in positions of cultural power.

It was the pieces and exhibitions

like *Everybody in the Place* which told cultural histories in an aware, direct way that empowered me to find my own musical community and place within it. I hope that Signal Magazine publishes this sort of writing and photography and fosters exchange between the University of Chicago and broader Chicago music communities. ©

photography by Zolt Brown-Dunn



It's Oh So Quiet

by Kina Takahashi

It's Oh So Quiet
Shhh, Shhh
It's, oh, so quiet
Shhh Shhh

– Björk

What does Radio Silence mean anymore in this digital age? Radio silence from a friend, relative, coworker—you name it—has the power to stifle one's orbit. The idea that there is someone on the other end, exuding an absence in sound speaks more volumes than Merzbow's noise. A gulf exists between two pulses with a dire need to create a sonic landscape. One pulse reaches toward the radio and rotates the axis of the soundscape entirely: Deborah Harry's vocals flood color into the room. In every cliché scene of boombox serenades, confessions, and proposals, the radio patiently sits to fill the void between two pulses. If not Deborah Harry's classic hits then maybe a Beethoven serenade enters into the conversation. A well-appreciated musical intervention between two awkward pulses almost always does the trick. The singular soundscape is something we all unconsciously seek...

In this digital age, the root of impatience stems from the infinite pool of sonic possibilities. A tap of the finger no longer pushes one button leading to one track, but rather one app with access to your choice of genre, artist, or playlist. Moments of bondage can exist out of spontaneity but rather struggles to exist

within a contrived choice of song, in an attempt to set the synergy between two poles. If there is anything retro revival tells us is how at the end of the day, we cannot handle having yet another element to control over. The revival of retro technology in the commercial sphere ironically plays on everyone's contempt with the contradicting aesthetic of a music app and a yearning for simplicity. Impatience against silence takes form..

Outside my window
They gather
Again—

Real Agony
don't die
Igniting us

what vector of
Pure feel;ng
can save us

My hourly pentecost
rocks out
My Malaise

Each vector of

Descending catharsis



Inside Issue No. 1

A Conversation with our Editors, Emma Kamran & Dasha Aksenova

interview and photography by Asa Muhammad

AM: So, firstly, who are you and what do you do here at WPK?

EK: I'm Emma. I am co-editor of Signal and also a DJ for the electronic format at WHPK. Pretty new here, I just joined September-ish last fall [2022].

DA: I'm Dasha. I'm co-editor of Signal and also a DJ. I play Russian/Eastern European music every week, and I've been a big fan of WHPK since my first year, like, four years ago. But I was really intimidated a bit—

EK: —Just a groupie.

DA: I was a big groupie. Like, the coolest kids were here, and they were so mysterious about what they're doing here and kind of exclusive. You had to really know your genres and the music you were going to play if you wanted to be a DJ. Now it's a bit easier. So I joined.

AM: All right. And with Signal being a previously defunct magazine. What does it mean for you guys to be spearheading the revival?

EK: Yeah, I think it's very exciting. We don't have anything really that we're going off of other than WHPK's history



and the station's vibe itself. So it's pretty exciting to be able to determine the direction of the magazine.

DA: I'm also excited because I enjoy finding intersections of different art forms, and I think that's what Signal is going to be about. Visual art that somehow depicts sound and sound that is talking about other arts and cultural mediums. So yeah, I'm really excited.

AM: How do you think the analog obsession that's the theme for this issue really captures that synesthesia of different art forms colliding?

DA: Um, I think that the future for a lot of art forms, including radio, could be, as you said, synesthesia, working on pieces that really border off not only just arts, but other disciplines and sciences. I think that's one direction that I'm seeing for the future of any cultural enterprise. And I really want to see what people on our team are going to come up with.

EK: Yeah. I think everything is happening naturally with time. Like with analog [formats], they're now becoming joint matters with everything in the modern world and it's making up the future, creating something entirely new. There are so many directions it could go in.

AM: And would you say that newness is part of the reason why so many young people have sort of entered this analog obsession?

EK: I think it has a little bit to do with that, but also with just the natural like cycling of things, you know, like the comeback of Y2K fashion, everything just kind of comes back again. But I think we've both noticed that things aren't the same as they were when radio was first popular.

DA: I agree.

AM: All right. And what would be your favorite analog medium that's seeing a

revival?

DA: Um, I really like taking photos, so I like analog photography. But what's the most exciting for me is seeing how each different camera has its own impact on the picture. And I love finding different photographers that work not with just one camera, but try out different analog formats. And especially when they aren't just going back in time into this nostalgic feel that comes from film or other analog photography. But they're trying to do something new with it, like. I'll think of an example a bit later, but that's my favorite form of analog.

EK: Mine is (not to be predictable) but analog audio media in general, but especially radio, because I think I've noticed it's nothing new to combine old music with new, but it's really exciting to see how its revival kind of contributes to the democratization of music, especially WHPK with its community and student DJs, and seeing what that brings. And there's a lot more opportunities for exploring music and the popularization of genres that I personally want to learn more about.

AM: Then you guys kind of touched on this, but last question: So where do you hope to see this medium—for [Dasha] photography, and for [Emma] radio—go? And how will looking to the past bring it to that future.

DA: I think since a lot of our future is somehow associated with like digitization and going more into Web3 formats and stuff like that, rethinking some aspects of analog sound systems, analog



photography, some really hands on materials, rethinking ways of using them and making them work with this new digital technology is going to be something that will keep us grounded in the real world. And I think it will just create a lot of different new mediums for artists and musicians. So I found one that I really like—a photographer, I mean. She's experimenting a lot with printing and it's not just old still printing, but like finding new colors and stuff like that.

[Dasha shows us the photographer. It's Alyona Kuzmina. I don't have the technical vocabulary to accurately praise her work. It's beautiful, though. Hence:]

AM: Oh, wow. Cool.

AM: Kind of reminds me of this movie *Micro Moth*.

DA: *Micro*?

AM: Yeah. It's like it's just a seven minute clip of a moth under a microscope at different angles and focuses. It's not very good. Very pretty, though.

DA: Interesting.

AM: Yeah. And what are your [Emma's] thoughts?

EK: I think with the combination of mediums that we've been talking about, the revival of radio will manifest in the sounds and even visual interpretations of our generation, in live performances, like with looping for example, and in any other medium. But again, to me it's about the accessibility of music for everyone. I think with the development of new software that's more accessible

to people, the radio could have a role a lot different from what we conceive it to be according to its past.

DA: I think also in their super globalized world agenda right now, places like WHPK are able to create local communities with shared interests. While we can listen to NTS [a global radio listening platform] anywhere in the world and really enjoy it. Or there's this one website that I really like—Oh, I forgot its name, but basically it's a map of the world and you can click on any location and they show you all the radios that are playing there at the moment. And you can listen to, I don't know, a radio station in Mongolia or China or wherever, but smaller analog radio stations, like WHPK are not at that level, of course, but with all the events that we do, I feel like I've met a lot of people that are just really good to be around and talk to about music and collaborate with.

EK: And I think it's so cool that with all the newness in the world, you know, part of what is so exciting about radio is this kind of way that it still preserves everything, this feeling of radio being something of the past, even when we're looking forward and trying to see how it's going to develop. There's this element of preservation of actual communities, I think where, like Dasha was talking about, people who are really interesting and really cool, people who share your interests, come together and from across media. So it just provides a space for that more than anything else. This kind of comeback of analog speaks to the permanence and progress of music all at once.

AM: All right. Thank you. Is there anything else you guys want to say? Any, like, spicy outquotes?

DA: Spicy outquotes? What does that mean?

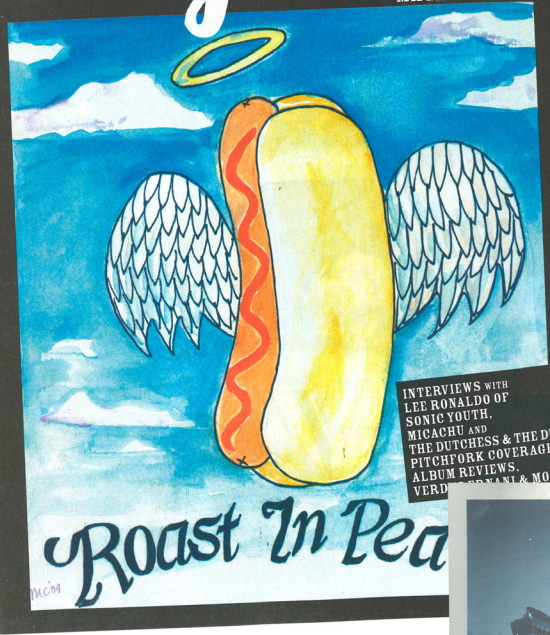
AM: Mean? Oh like, y'know, like a little quote you put at the beginning of the interview. Oh, but if there's nothing, that's fine, too.

DA: I'm not sure if I have any spicy outquotes.

EK: Yeah, I'm completely blank.

AM: There's a lot of good material in there. I'll find something. (S)

w h p k 88.5 fm
MAGAZINE



INTERVIEWS WITH
LEE RONALDO OF
SONIC YOUTH,
MICACHU AND
THE DUTCHESS & THE DUKE.
PITCHFORK COVERAGE,
ALBUM REVIEWS,
VERDICTS & MORE!

SAT, OCT 22, 2022 8:30 PM
AUTUMN BREEZE
MANDEL HALL, REYNOLDS CLUB
1313 E 57TH ST
PRICE: GENERAL \$10.00
SEAT: 126



- Complete the following sentences
1. I know that I'm right
In a chill
 2. Other people are
People a
 3. I need to prove that
T

Fuck Winter
fwinter.org
hip-to-hip!

DEAR WHPK-
THANKS FOR
PLAYING HAND
GLOPS AND JU
ST GENERALLY
BEING A RONK
NG ROOL INSTITE
TION! I HOPE YO
U DIG THIS NEW
CR TOO. KILLR!!
-PATRICK GLOPS

A-DUBB
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The Commin To Get It Project

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GREAT!

No More Buffalo: Nick Rommel on Folk and its Future

interview and photography by Asa Muhammad

AM: All right. So first question: who are you and what do you do here?

NR: My name is Nick Rommel. I'm the country and folk format chief. And I also have a show every other Monday from 5 to 6:30 p.m. But I alternate with my friend and lately we've been basically merging our shows.

AM: All right. And what kind of music do you play on your show?

NR: It varies a lot. The show's called Hyde Park Hootenanny. So it has a country-folk slant. Somedays. I'm basically just playing archival footage of American traditional music from decades ago. Some days, I'll play country rock, folk rock, even just indie rock that has a more acoustic bent, like Belle Sebastian, Big Thief, or Wilco, or I'll mix them so I'll play an alternative rock song with a banjo in it. And then I'll just transition to some ancient banjo recording that's all crackly and stuff and just weave my way through.

AM: So for you folk isn't just the contemporary folk revival stuff.

NR: No? Yeah, it's pretty much anything. Well, I mean, I guess all music is descended from all other music, but folk, to me, is any music that has some inspiration from old, old folk, I guess.

And actually, when I started this show in my freshman year, I was basically only playing country. So it's changed a little bit.

AM: So how did this evolution come about?

NR: Well, I had a country phase during my gap year after high school and my first year of college, I listened to tons of country music—not like country radio country—but like old country, alternative country, like punk-inclined country music, acoustic country.

So why do I listen to it? I don't know. I like the way that country is very transporative compared to a lot of genres. It really makes you feel like you're in the place that they're singing about. So it kind of feels like maybe because of COVID, I kind of want to listen to music that felt like traveling or going places. So country is pretty good for that.

Also like I had this—being from this East Coast urban area—I kind of had this fascination with the parts of America that I hadn't really been to, like the rural South or the rural Midwest. So I guess I kind of accessed that through country music. And now I've traveled around the country a bit more since coming out here. But yeah, that was also part of it.



AM: So does the rural Midwest live up to country music?

NR: Well I'll say this: there's a song I like called No More Buffalo that's about driving across the Great Plains, and there's these two guys in a car, and one of them keeps claiming that the harvesting combine machines kicking up dust in the distance are buffalo herds. And then the other guy's like "No, there are no more buffalo". And then I had an internship in North Dakota this summer for an NPR station, and I had to do five hour drives across North Dakota to do different radio stories and interviews. And I listened to that song and it was perfect.

AM: So in folk revival, we see a resurgence of old sound. But beyond folk music, there's a resurgence in old medi-

ums, like vinyls, cassettes, and CD's. So why do you think we've begun to re-embrace these old mediums of listening?

NR: I feel vinyl is just like an aesthetic thing, honestly. But yeah, I guess the question is why? I don't really know. I mean, I have some vinyls, so I guess I should be able to answer that. I guess there's something appealing about holding a work of music the way you hold a book or something. Because with streaming, you can listen to one song from an album, but not the rest of the album. And I guess you could always do that. But now you can make playlists where you'll listen to one song from an album a million times, but you'll never have heard the rest of the album. And most artists, I think even if some artists now are gravitating towards making songs for playlists, basically, I think

most artists still present their works as albums and that's the intended listening method. So it's kind of cool to just have that self-contained package.

And I think there's also a desire to have a more authentic listening experience. Because when you listen to vinyl, you kind of have to go through the motions of putting it on the record player, sitting down. It's more of a ritual, and it centers you more. You can't really do it in passing the way you listen to Spotify on your phone. So that's the aspiration. I think with our attention spans these days, maybe a lot of people, including myself, who have vinyls, don't necessarily always do that. Like I still mostly listen to streaming, but I guess that's the idea.

AM: And back to folk: What sort of themes, innovations, or blunders separate modern folk from classic folk?

NR: Okay. So I'll also reference the fact that I'm the co president of the Chicago Folklore Society. We hosted the Folk Festival-

AM: -Oh, that sounds awesome.

[Editor's note: The folk festival is awesome. You should go! Barn dancing is taken very seriously though, so you might get ragdolled on the dance floor if you don't come prepared.]

NR: -Which is happening in like three weeks. And so this is a festival, which is kind of a starting point to talk about the fact that the festival, the kind of music we hire is the most traditional

folk—meaning whatever kinds of music existed before recording technology came about, basically in the twenties and the thirties. And then also because some people from that era lived into the sixties, into the sixties. So that's like acoustic blues from Mississippi, Appalachian, old time fiddle music and stuff like that. So that's the kind of stuff that existed before recording technology and radio came around. It's basically a distillation of hundreds of years worth of musical development that was all done face to face, which is very different from how we're influenced by music. Now we listen to something and we often don't have that community context for it. So there's that stuff.

And then by the sixties, radio and recording technology had been around for 30 or 40 years and the younger generation was already kind of detached from that face to face musical transmission. And they're listening to radio and to records more, but the radio artists adapted that older stuff. Bob Dylan is the number one example of this: he adapted those kinds of older songs that go back before technology and re-recorded them and then started writing his own songs in a similar style.

That kind of evolved into the genre we know as folk where, y'know, I don't know... Fleetwood Mac has folk songs, but they're just descended from that kind of sound that people like Bob Dylan pioneered by adapting these really old traditional songs that were played in communities all across the country. And it sort of became this aesthetic or this sound that referenced that tradition

but wasn't really part of it anymore because, you know, they were writing their own songs, they were playing them on guitar and acoustic instruments. But it was a little different. So there's that. And now what we think of folk today is like, I don't know, Fleet Foxes or something? It's like folk that's still, I think, descended from that really traditional folk stuff, which has sort of has chugged along, but is smaller because if you're into traditional folk, it means you're into playing the music that was played like 80-100 years ago with minimal interference from what came after. I guess the two [modern and classic] still cross-pollinate, but they're kind of separate. So what are the blunders? There's nothing wrong with writing your own songs in folk. I mean, I've played—I've written those songs. I've played those songs on my show. But your question was like "What are the blunders?"

AM: It doesn't have to be blunders, just what individualized each era of folk.

NR: So yeah, then I guess that's some of what separates it. I don't know that much. I honestly don't think that much separates what is known as folk today from what was folk in the seventies and beyond. It's kind of the same idea. It's just acoustic instruments, usually singer-songwriter. So writing your own songs and maybe some vague references to older, traditional music. But it's kind of funny because, if we're getting into more conceptual territory—if you think about it, rap music is kind of like folk music because it really came out of like communities that got together to create it. And it wasn't really influenced by the

broadcast industry or by the music industry until later. And now it continues to be—as opposed to pop—these genres, like rap and punk are very community focused. There are local scenes with local sounds and they're very accessible to people in a way that actually shares a lot with folk music from decades ago because it's created within a community face to face. It's accessible. So I don't know, maybe there's something there...

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Ian Donegan
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