Feature: The spirit of radio

THE GOLDEN AGE OF KTIM, WHEN MARIN FLEW HIGH ON THE FREE-FORM AIRWAVES...

by David Templeton | Posted: Thursday, July 4, 2013 9:00 am

"The thing about KTIM, that crazy little Marin County radio station," says legendary disc jockey Wild Bill Scott, "is that it wasn't just the best FM free-form radio station in the Bay Area—it might actually be the best radio station of all time!

"While it lasted, of course," Scott adds, "which, sadly, wasn't really very long."

Newcomers to Marin—say, anyone who arrived after 1984—might have no idea what Scott is talking about. Many old-timers though, those who lived in the area in the 1970s, remember KTIM 100.9 FM ("The North Bay Noise!") with the kind of fondness and dreamy nostalgia usually reserved for first kisses and lost loves. Its

signal was never strong, with a transmitter housed in a tiny shed at Silveira Ranch, within choking distance of the Las Gallinas Sewage Treatment plant, but its impact was immeasurable.

KTIM, spinning an eclectic mix of rock, punk, country, folk, classical, reggae, comedy and just about anything else, represents a time when the FM airwaves were electric with musical possibilities and DJs ruled their time slots, spinning the records they were most jacked up about, telling stories about the musicians whose tunes they were showcasing.

"Those were the days of real free-form radio," says former KTIM DJ Dusty Street, "before executives and people who hate music started telling DJs what to play."

A certified 1970s Marin County icon, Street (her real name) was a major force on KTIM from 1975 till she was fired in 1979 ("I have a big mouth," she laughs).

"I was on KTIM back in the Golden Age," Street recalls, "when they still let the disc jockeys pick the music we wanted to play. We had music meetings at KTIM, where we would all sit around and put in our two cents about whatever new albums had just come out. If there was a new band nobody had heard of, we could be the first to play those records. KTIM was the first radio station to play some of the greatest rock bands of all time.

"But, it's a different world now," she laments. "I doubt that any DJ who started in this business after the mid-1980s would have any idea what it was we were doing back then. I don't really think DJs are capable of it anymore. A disc jockey programming her own show? They wouldn't know how!"

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KTIM, which for a long time broadcast from a big old house near downtown San Rafael, first hit the airwaves in the late 1940s. Originally a news and information station, KTIM was then owned by the *Marin Independent Journal*, which held a contest amongst readers to name the station. Though some later disc jockeys tried to pass the story that the call letters secretly stood for all kinds of odd things ("Terrific Independent Music" and "This is Marijuana" were some of the tamer ones), the name readers actually chose was the conspicuously commercial "Trade in Marin." In those initial postwar years, the daily schedule included farm reports, local news, inspirational messages, and the occasional music program. Alex Bennett had one of his first radio jobs at KTIM, as did Ben Fong Torres and Michael Krasny (who in the '70s hosted a show titled *Beyond the Hot Tub)*.

As the decades progressed, however, the music of the day eventually took over the station. Despite its relatively puny signal, KTIM still managed to influence and energize the music-loving generations who embraced rock and roll, but wanted their options to remain wide open. By the early 1970s, with voices like Street and Scott, Tony Berardini, Candy Chamberlain and others on the air, KTIM and its merry band of DJs became the best friends to a huge number of residents,

including a wide array of local musicians from the Grateful Dead to Jefferson Airplane to Huey Lewis and the News.

"It was an incredible time," says Scott. "We never made any money at it, but we all did it for the music. We were high on the music all day, and some of the DJs were just high, period. But, hey, those were the times, right? At music meetings, there was always a joint burning and a line or two of coke on the mirror."

Both Street and Scott recall that, anytime one of them got the urge to "play radio," even if they weren't scheduled to be on the air, they would often drop by the station and take over the studio, hanging out with the on-air DJ, playing whatever music was on their minds for an hour or so.

"Another thing we did at KTIM," remembers Street, "and I think we were the only ones who did this, was playing a thing we called Radio Roulette. It was a kind of friendly competition between me, Wild Bill Scott, Tony Berardini—and occasionally Candy Chamberlain. One of us would put on a record, and the next person up would come on the air and make a clever segue from that record to the next one, picking a record that moved the music ahead, either lyrically or melody-wise of rhythm-wise—and of course it was a bonus if you could mess up the next person by choosing something really hard to segue from.

"We would do that for hours!" she says. "I don't know of any other station that did that, because, it was not easy. I mean, you really had to know your shit—and we did. And our fans appreciated it."

Scott agrees that DJs, in those days, held a special kind of clout they no longer have.

"We walked the streets of San Rafael and people came up to us and told us how much they loved some band we'd just started playing," he says, "or they'd start yelling at us because they hated something we played. Everyone was so . . . I guess the word 'passionate' is kind of corny, but that's what it was. People really cared about the music."

And they cared deeply about the DJs.

When Street or Scott or Berardini—who mainly worked the graveyard shift—would confess to feeling under the weather, fans would stop by the station with chicken soup. According to Scott, when a DJ mentioned on the air that they were feeling hungry, local restaurants would send sandwiches to the crew. When doing live appearances, mobile remote shows where the DJs would set up at the county fair or other public place, Street and company would sometimes make thinly disguised requests for alcohol.

"Yes, if you act *now* you can win *absolutely nothing* just by bringing your local DJ a couple of cold beers!" laughs Street, reenacting the kind of only-joking pitch they'd make. "And then, like magic," she says, "people would bring us beer!

"I still get emails all the time from people who used to listen to me on KTIM," she continues. "We made very powerful connections with our listeners. I got an email

from a guy who said, 'Back in the '70s, I was listening to KTIM one night, and I was getting ready to get in my car and drive to L.A. and ask this girl to marry me!' He was going to quit his job. He was going to give up everything and go tell her he loved her. And then he wrote, 'Dusty, you played a set of music that changed my life.' I can't remember the exact songs he said I played, but, he said that by the time that set was over, he realized that what he was planning to do was probably not a good idea. He was in his car, heading out of town—and then he turned the car around and went back home.

"It turned out," Street laughs, "the woman in L.A. was in love with somebody else anyway, and his job—which he did *not* quit—ended up turning into a career he's had for 25 years.

"So yeah, we might not have been brain surgeons," Street adds, "but we affected people's lives."

"It's weird, how much that station meant to people," agrees Scott, who now lives in Auburn, where he DJs for local stations only occasionally, due largely to a back injury that makes it painful to sit for long hours in front of a microphone. "I know there are people who say that it was still doing some good stuff in the '80s, for a few years, but to me, after the '70s, it just blew. It went down the toilet. The vibe was never the same."

The problem with radio today, he says, is that now the music is programmed through research, with programmers only playing the tunes that score highest by companies formed to test a tune's potential popularity.

"You know how they do this 'research'?" he asks. "They take a bunch of people and they play maybe 10 seconds of a tune, and ask 'em if they want to hear more. That's it. Ten seconds! Think of all the great rock and roll tunes that take two or three minutes just to get warmed up! You can't program radio that way. In the KTIM days, the DJs picked records using experience, gut instinct, and a love of the music. That's why it worked. That's why people loved it. And that's why, today, radio pretty much just sucks."

Street, still in the DJ business four decades after KTIM's heyday, is now holding down her own free-form style show on Sirius, broadcasting from the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland, Ohio.

After leaving KTIM in 1979 following a dispute over how much latitude the on-air personalities should have in adding commentary to the radio commercials—"I compared Adolph Coors to Hitler!" she admits—Street ended up at KROQ in Los Angeles, where she quickly rebuilt herself as the Queen of Punk.

"I often say I'm one of the few DJs who hung out with Janis Joplin *and* Johnny Rotten," she says, and those stories form a major part of her appeal on Sirius and her online podcast show, Fly Low Radio, on the Flying Eye Radio Network (www.flyingeyeradionetwork.com). "I started in the early '60s, as a technician on KSAN," she notes, "and when they put me on the air, I was pretty much the only female on the air in San Francisco. Since then, I've worked for a lot of stations,

and been fired from a lot of stations, and times have most certainly changed. It's been hard, but radio has given me a 48-year-long career.

"So I'm not complaining," she laughs. "But KTIM—that was a special experience, a stand out. For a few years there, everything came together at that lone little place! On that little radio station in Marin, we created something that was just awesome!"

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