

RADIO: THE SOUND OF FREEDOM

Fear not the onslaught of corporate control or right-wing ranting, says **GARRISON KEILLOR**: The most unmanageable medium will continue to surprise and delight



I am old enough to be nostalgic about radio, having grown up when it was a stately medium and we listened to "Journeys in Musickland" with Professor E.B. "Pop" Gordon teaching us the musical scale, and the gospel station brought us "Cleanings From the Word," with the whispery Reverend Riley trudging patiently through the second chapter of Leviticus, and at night there were Fibber and Molly and Amos and Andy and the Sunset Valley Barn Dance with Pop Wiggins ("Says here that radio's gonna take the place of newspapers. I doubt it. Y'can't swat a fly with a radio."), but I don't feel a hankering to hear any of it ever again.

I am rather fond of radio as it is today, full of oddities and exceptions. It is an unmanageable medium. Management is at work trying to format things, but reality keeps breaking through the bars.

You twiddle the dial, and in the midst of the clamor and blare and rackety commercials you find a human being speaking to you in a way that intrigues you and lifts your spirits, such as a few weeks ago when a man spoke about his mother, in Houston, who as she was dying of lung cancer made a video for her severely retarded daughter to watch in years to come, which the daughter does not watch, being too retarded to comprehend death, which in itself is a mercy. It was very graceful, a fellow American telling a story unlike all the other stories. Pretty amazing. And all the more so for showing up on a dial full of blathering idiots and jackhammer music.

My taste is catholic. I don't go looking for people like me (earnest liberal English majors). I am a fan of the preachers on little AM stations in early morning and late at night who sit in a tiny studio in Alabama or Tennessee and patiently explain the imminence of the Second Coming. And gospel music is glorious beyond words. I love the mavericks and freethinkers and obsessives who inhabit the low-power FM stations — the feminist bluegrass show, the all-Sinatra show, the Yiddish vaudeville show. Once, on the Merritt Parkway heading for New York, I came upon "The American Atheist Hour," the sheer tedium of which was wildly entertaining — there's nobody so humorless as a devout atheist.

I love the great artists of public radio who simulate spontaneity so beautifully they almost fool me — Terry Gross, Ira Glass, the "Car Talk" brothers — all carefully edited and shaped, but big as life on the radio, smarter than hell, cooler than cucumbers. I love the good-neighbor small-town radio of bake sales and Rotary meetings and livestock reports and Barb calling in to report that Pookie was found and thanks to everybody who was on the lookout for her.

Good-neighbor radio used to be everywhere and was especially big in big cities — WGN in Chicago, WCCO in Minneapolis-St. Paul, WOR in New York, KOA in Denver,

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Daniel Marsula/Post-Gazette



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The news from Garrison Keillor.

Radio: the sound of freedom

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KMOX in St. Louis — where avuncular men chatted about fishing and home repair and other everyday things and Library Week was observed and there was live coverage of a tornado or a plane crash and on summer nights you heard the ball game.

The deregulation of radio was tough on good-neighbor radio because Clear Channel and other conglomerates were anxious to vacuum up every station in sight for fabulous sums of cash and turn them into robot repeaters. I dropped in to a broadcasting school last fall and saw kids being trained for radio careers as if radio were a branch of computer processing. They had no conception of the possibility of talking into a microphone to an audience that wants to hear what you have to say. I tried to suggest what a cheat this was, but the instructor was standing next to me.

Clear Channel's brand of robotics is not the future of broadcasting. With a whole generation turning to iPod and another generation discovering satellite radio and Internet radio, the robotic formatted-music station looks like a very marginal operation indeed. Training kids to do that is like teaching typewriter repair.

After the iPod takes half the radio audience and satellite radio subtracts half of the remainder and Internet radio gets a third of the rest and Clear Channel has to start cutting its losses and selling off frequencies, good-neighbor radio will come back. People do enjoy being spoken to by other people who are alive and who live within a few miles of you.

People like Tommy Mischke, a nighttime guy on a right-wing station in St. Paul and a free spirit who gets into wonderful stream-of-consciousness harangues and meditations that are a joy to listen to compared with the teeth-grinding that goes on around him. Not that teeth-grinders are to be disparaged: I enjoy, in small doses, the over-the-top right-wingers who have leaked into AM radio on all sides in the past 20 years. They are evil, lying, cynical bastards who are out to destroy the country I love and turn it into a banana republic, but hey, nobody's perfect.

And now that their man is re-elected and they have nice majorities in the House and Senate, they are hunters in search of diminishing prey. There just aren't many of us liberals worth banging away at, but God bless them, they keep on coming. Just the other day, I heard one

foaming and raging about the right to life and about liberals preying on the helpless — I realized he was talking about Terri Schiavo — and then he launched into the judiciary and how they had stood by and done nothing. He held their feet to the fire for a while and then he tore into George McGovern for about five minutes. George McGovern is a kindly, grandfatherly man who lives in Mitchell, S.D., and winters in Florida and every year attends his World War II bomber squadron reunion. He ran for president

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in 1972. When you go ballistic over 1972, you are truly desperate to fill time.

The reason you find an army of right-wingers ratcheting on the radio and so few liberals is simple: Republicans are in need of affirmation, they don't feel comfortable in America and they crave listening to people who think like them. Liberals actually enjoy living in a free society; tuning in to hear an echo is not our idea of a good time.

I go to church on Sunday morning to be among the like-minded, and we all say the Nicene Creed together and assume nobody has his fingers crossed, but when it comes to radio, I prefer oddity and crankiness. I don't need someone to tell me that George W. Bush is a deceitful, corrupt, clever and destructive man — that's pretty clear on the face of it. What I want is to be surprised and delighted and moved.

Here at the low end of the FM dial is a show in which three college boys are sitting in a studio, whooping and laughing, sneering at singer-songwriters they despise, playing Eminem and a

bunch of bands I've never heard of, and they're having so much fun they achieve weightlessness — utter unself-consciousness — and then one of them tosses out the word and suddenly they get scared, wondering if anybody heard.

It's not my world, and I like peering into it. The sports talk station gives you a succession of men whose absorption in a fantasy world is, to me, borderline insane. You're grateful not to be related to any of them, and yet 10 minutes of their ranting and wheezing is a real tonic that somehow makes this world, the world of trees and children and books and travel, positively tremble with vitality. And then you succumb to weakness and tune in to the geezer station and there's Roy Orbison singing "Dream Baby" and you join Roy on the chorus, one of the Roylettes.

I don't worry about the right-wingers on AM radio. They are talking to an audience that is stuck in rush-hour traffic, in whom road rage is mounting, and the talk shows divert their rage from the road to the liberal conspiracy against America. Instead of ramming your rear bumper, they get mad at Harry Reid. Yes, the wingers do harm, but the worst damage is done to their own followers, who are cheated of the sort of genuine experience that enables people to grow up.

The best of what you find on public radio is authentic experience. It has little to do with politics. The U.S. Marine just returned from Sudan with lots of firsthand impressions of the crisis there; the journalist just back from Fallujah, where he spent three months, a firsthand documentary about life aboard the aircraft carrier USS John C. Stennis in the Middle East — that's what Edward R. Murrow did from London in 1940, and it's still golden today.

It's the glorious past and it's the beautiful future. (Thanks to the Internet, the stuff doesn't vanish into thin air. You can go to www.thislife.org and get the story of the Houston woman or the aircraft carrier documentary. You can find the Sudan and Fallujah interviews at www.why.org/freshair. More and more people are doing this. The Internet has become an enormous extension of radio.)

That's why public radio is growing by leaps and bounds. It is hospitable to scholars of all stripes and to travelers who have returned from the vast, unimaginable world with stories to tell. Out here in the heartland, we live for visitors like those. We will make the demented uncle shut up so we can listen to somebody who actually knows something.