

**DON'T ADJUST THAT DIAL...IT'S...**

# AMAZON RADIO

By Pamela Smith

After working on the North East Women's Musical Retreat as a planner for five years, I suffered burnout from political debates and site searches. Starting out as a NEWMR go-fer in 1980, over the years I gradually became more involved, joining the planning committee in 1985. By 1990, I decided it was time to move on.

I wanted to remain in touch with the women's music industry, but didn't want to work with a group. WPKN, one of my favorite stations, lost university funding and was appealing to listeners for financial support and volunteer workers. WPKN—89.5 on the FM dial—is a 10,000 watt station reaching most of Connecticut, Long Island, parts of south central Massachusetts, and upstate New York. The University of Bridgeport holds the license for WPKN, although it is a 100 percent listener-supported community station.

I decided to volunteer during my favorite programmer's shift, and started doing my telephone helper shifts in January, 1990. WPKN's station manager, Harry Minot, had the phone-answering volunteers sit in the production studio at the program board. From this spot, I could look through a large plate glass window and see the on-air programmer sitting in a similar position.

One day I asked Harry what all the buttons in front of me did, and we talked about my interest in doing a women's music program. He told me to come in the following Saturday and he'd teach me to become a programmer.

After about an hour with Harry in the little-used AM studio, he told me that practice would be the best teacher. Once a week I'd go into the studio and pretend to do a show, taping the practice session so I could listen to it afterward and improve my technique. After a couple of months, Harry encouraged me to submit a tape to our program director, Chris Teskey, for his critique of my efforts.

The idea of having a professional listen to my tape terrified me, but I soon realized there was no point if I didn't let



Elaine K. Osowski

**WPKN's "Amazon Radio!" programmer Pam Smith: a four-hour weekly dose of women's music.**

others hear me. Chris was kind in his comments, giving me helpful feedback. He noted, for example, that I continually used the same phrases, and suggested that I make a tape of my voice to help me identify repetitive phrases. At home, I edited my practice tape to remove the music, and I could hear what he was talking about. Chris believes that programmers should do this every so often to check themselves out. I learned that if you submit audition tapes to any station, you should do at least part of it minus your music.

The technical aspect of cueing up records of CDs—and even cassettes to some extent—is a manual dexterity skill that comes from doing. "Cueing up" is the process of preparing your CD, LP, or cassette so that you will hear the beginning of your cut instantly when you turn it on, thus avoiding dead air. Large commercial

radio stations provide engineers who do this, but smaller stations usually require programmers do their own engineering.

After listening to three or four more demo tapes, Chris finally cleared me for air. I was surprised to learn that getting a license was so easy. Unlike the old days when you studied and took the FCC test, today you merely send in \$35 with your application, and the application stub serves as your temporary license. You are then able to "do radio" in the United States. The FCC stopped requiring tests for licenses in the early '80s, probably as part of the deregulation policies in effect at that time, and because transmitter technology has become more reliable over time. Today anyone can get a Restricted Radio Telephone Permit, which allows you to become a broadcaster. [Contact the FCC, P.O. Box 1050, Gettysburg, PA 17325, (202) 632-7000 and ask for the FCC 753 form. You'll receive a three-part form, which is the actual license. Complete the form, return it with \$35, and within six weeks you'll receive the form back with the FCC stamp added. You are now licensed. This is the procedure for the entire country. Amazing, isn't it?]

It is your responsibility to know the laws, treaties, rules, and regulations which currently govern any station you operate. Finding a station willing to teach you this may be the hardest part of the process. The FCC assumes that you have been trained to read the meters, determine correct power, change power levels, and perform an Emergency Broadcast Service test. Since the FCC inspector may arrive at the station at any time to test the "operator on duty," you must learn these technical operations before going on air.

## ON THE AIR AT LAST

Ruth Eddy gave me my first on air opportunity in September of 1990. She let me do my first program during her slot, and stayed with me in case I needed help. Word went out to other programmers that I was available for fill-ins.

While I waited for opportunities to do radio, I did my personal inventory of the station's 36,000-plus record library. WPKN's library consists of demos sent to the station, and since we'd had a women's show in the '70s, we had a lot of the old stuff but only an occasional new release. Realizing that I couldn't afford to buy even the entire women's music/feminist section of Ladyslipper's catalog, I wrote to about eighty artists and/or record producers soliciting demo copies of their releases—or a discount on the price—and I began haunting my local used record store. The response rate was about fifty-six percent, and only two artists asked for money. Alix Dobkin, for example, sent her entire catalog. (And since WPKN's library shelves everything numerically in the order received, Alix may be found next to Guns 'n' Roses.)

I would like to have demos of artists' entire catalogues. WPKN does not purchase music, and while I'm constantly out buying, I do have limited resources. I make a point of listening to everything I get, until I feel familiar enough with the material to be able to recall selections later on.

All CDs and LPs are donated to the station's library. We don't currently have a place in our station's library for cassettes, so I add them to my library, but this is something our new librarian hopes to correct in the near future. Using the library works out well for all concerned, since I don't have to carry the material up the two flights of stairs and the music is available to other programmers.

Station IDs done by artists are always very much appreciated ("Hi, this is Suede, and you are listening to WPKN..."). A legal station ID, required by law at the top of each hour, must include the uninterrupted phrase "WPKN, Bridgeport." The best and most frequently played IDs give a sense of the artist's personality, humor, and/or music. Performers who are interested in doing station IDs for my show can contact me directly to discuss technical specifications.

Meanwhile, back to my saga of getting on the air. I continued doing fill-ins until a slot opened up. "Amazon Radio!" went on the air once a month, and I was still averaging about two fill-ins a month. I began waiting for a weekly slot to become available—which finally happened last September. "Amazon Radio!" is now scheduled every Thursday from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m.

I spend hours preparing for my

four-hour show. I spend about an hour listening to cassettes and cueing them up. The rest of the preparation time is spent listening to music. I want to go into the studio with a list of up to twenty-five songs (about two thirds of the show). I usually use this list as a guideline. On the air, I generally play songs as the mood strikes me, and I also take listener requests.

The two-sided stereo soundsheets in each issue of *HOT WIRE* have been helpful to me. Each recording features four to six different songs; soundsheets have been an excellent way for me to meet new artists, and in turn to introduce my audience to those artists.

At WPKN the on-air programmer reigns, and we can play anything we want. Our only limitations are the FCC regulations, which generally concern foul language (the eight deadly words: fuck, piss, shit, cunt, cocksucker, motherfucker, tits, and prick—when used as a noun—plus some variations of same). Music that contains these words must be edited before going on air. I make a clean tape of the song, bleeping out the word. Or, more daringly, play the song and turn down the volume at the appropriate moment. I prefer the first method, because the on-air editing is very anxiety ridden for me.

I have found talking to be the hardest aspect of being a programmer. You are in a soundproof room talking into a microphone and getting almost no feedback on anything you say. After I run down the play list of what the audience just heard, I wonder where to go from there. Sometimes it's right into another set, sometimes it's comments on the artist or the music, and sometimes it's just my thoughts. After a year as a programmer, turning on my mic is still one of the hardest aspects of being a programmer, though it's become easier—and I've become more confident—with time.

Once I got my "Amazon Radio!" show established, I included interviews as well as music. I've done interviews with representatives from the Connecticut Lesbian and Gay Coalition For Civil Rights, Dignity, and the National Lesbian Conference, among others. I usually talk to guests beforehand to give them a general idea about what we'll talk about on air.

I define "Amazon Radio!" as a women's music program from a lesbian-feminist perspective. Although I do include some music by gay men, I choose not to call her a "lesbian and gay" show. There's really not enough men's music at this

time, and although I had originally considered getting a gay male partner, it didn't end up that way—so when it came time to write the bio for the program guide, I didn't feel comfortable with the "lesbian and gay" description. But since "Amazon Radio!" is the only radio program in our area playing lesbian/gay-identified music, I decided that I would include men's music in my programming as well. This has been a challenge, since their music network is limited in comparison to the women's music industry.

I'm amazed at how relatively easy it is to do radio. Independent and college non-commercial radio stations offer the easiest access to newcomers. College stations are always looking for people who will just show up on a regular basis. Students may be enthusiastic at the beginning of the school year but have a change of focus by second semester—and school-year breaks can be desperate times. Often by just taking one course you can qualify for student access to the station and training.

Independent stations interested in offering the community unique types of programs can be another venue. Often the programmers on these stations are unpaid, and the stations are frequently looking for more volunteers. I suggest contacting station managers to find out their procedures for getting programming space and what training they might offer. Unfortunately, independent stations are a vanishing breed; what's traditionally called "public radio" is not necessarily accessible to community programmers, as the fine line between public and commercial becomes smaller and smaller.

You might look for somewhere you can be an apprentice to the programmer. Don't be put off if you can't see getting a program at that station in the immediate future. What you want right now is training, since after you have the skills you can do the work anywhere. Perhaps the station is not interested in a "women's music" program—but they may be interested in a folk or pop format which can include women's music.

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**ABOUT THE WRITER:** *Pamela Smith is a big black lesbian feminist who lives with her loves—Susan Marie and Chandra, their Sheltie. She has been involved with women's music since 1970, when some of her best friends were members of the New Haven Women's Liberation Rock Band.*

## MYRNA/SHELLEY from 13

enormously talented women with little national exposure—and even less financial success. Comparing them to some of the extremely untalented (and should be unknown) national acts, it's clear that fairness is still not the rule in the music business. It seems one of the challenges facing our community is not to succumb to the standard of mediocrity in the mainstream. Expecting serious talent and musicianship from the artists—and demanding this from producers—only dignifies and elevates our culture," she says. "Working within women's culture all these years has been inspiring, hilarious, frustrating, rewarding...We've become close friends with many talented women across the country. We all owe a great deal to the artists, whose work provides a focal point from which we can come together as a community. It is that sense of community that makes work in women's culture unique and special. We have all grown together. Technically, too, we've come a long way. We set high standards for our productions—the audience and the artists deserve the best. Our 'production family' encompasses many folks who don't always get the recognition they deserve.

"Of course, one essential way to value professional skills is through financial compensation. Many of us began our careers by volunteering, and we sometimes still choose to donate our services to events we believe in. At the same time, it's difficult, if not impossible, to pursue a career and advance in it without being paid for it. But," she says, "we love our work, and we'd love to see more women doing it."

*Myrna Johnston, Shelley Jennings, and their MJA sound company can be reached at 8 Spring Park Ave., Jamaica Plains, MA (617) 522-8442. •*

## HEROIC WOMEN from 17

with its overpriced drinks...." From outside of the jazz world Val makes a life and a career for herself. Loving the music and looking directly at the people who made it, Val does not cloak them or herself in romanticism. She uses her words to recall a mythical musical time and to explore the hard realities a woman at work faced.

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These are a few of the books I've read over the past few months. They kept me from being lonely. They opened up new worlds for me. (They discouraged men from approaching me as I traveled alone!) They reminded me why I need to sit down and record my own words. I feel extremely proud that my novel gets to sit on the same shelves as these. •

## AMAZON RADIO from 45

If you're seriously interested in pursuing this further, I suggest you go to your library reference section, and get the *Library Broadcasting Yearbook*. Look up stations in your area, especially college, non-commercial, and smaller commercial stations. Unfortunately, most stations have a more limited format than WPKN's, and your first on air experiences may

## AWMAC INSURANCE from 48

ment; pertinently, if 200 more women join, then the possibility of AWMAC-sponsored health insurance at group rates may become a reality.

In the interim, creative solutions have been submitted: one performer proposed the idea of "lesbian health insurance," which would cover members (presumably on an "association" basis) by self-identification of sexual orientation/preference. Since there are indisputably more than 400 lesbians in the U.S., this seems a viable alternative. In this day and age, lesbians are excellent health risks, because HIV infection/disease occurs with low frequency in our population, so this might be a fiscally competitive plan as well.

For the more immediately-minded who need health insurance now, Deb Cirksema counsels looking at other groups/associations you may belong to to see if they offer any reduced rate plans. The other option is to buy/maintain an individual policy. "In any event, a word of caution here," she says. "You should look at companies that carry no less than an A rating—an A+ would be preferable—or you may have difficulty in the areas of service, claims processing and payment."

*Inquiries about health insurance plans, the organization, and/or membership should be directed to: AWMAC, 2124 Kittredge St. #104, Berkeley, CA 94704. (You don't need to be a member of AWMAC to write to them and inquire.) •*

## NEWMR from 31

much-beloved former planner Betsy Gooch. She left a bequest earmarked to be used to purchase land for the festival to have a permanent site. In order to accept the bequest, NEWMR, Inc. was formed in December 1988 as a non-profit, tax-exempt organization. A parcel of land in the state of Vermont has been located, and festival planners are trying to secure permits to hold the festival there next year. A continuous slideshow of the land and its two acoustic glens, meadows, water falls, ponds, and streams ran all weekend in the dining hall. Site visits for the fall are open to all women, and a book beside the slideshow was filled with comments and suggestions.

With a permanent site to build on and learn from, NEWMR may well grow from a sometimes theoretical festival into a permanent celebration of Music in the Key of She. •

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not be like mine—but you will be learning no matter what music you play, and that experience will allow you to make choices later on.

"Amazon Radio!" has met most of my goals. I feel that I'm making a contribution to our community, I'm very much involved in women's music—and there's no group process!

*Recordings, press kits, and questions should be sent directly to Pam Smith, "Amazon Radio!," P.O. Box 217, New Haven, CT 06513. •*

## BARB BARTON from 49

who had stalked their every move. Claudia survived the attack, but Rebecca did not. The slayer's only reason for the killing was simply the fact that these two women were lesbians.

"It was a double shot for me," says Barb, who had done some five hundred miles of backpacking herself. "There was not one trip that I went on that I did not fear that kind of assault," she says. "And they were lesbians. I just broke down and cried. I knew it would only be in the paper for a couple of days, since they were just lesbian women. I was not going to let that happen."

Roused and justified in her rage at the injustice that had befallen Rebecca Wight, Barb wrote the song in a matter of hours, wanting the song to sound "angry, dissident, and powerful."

Today that song is still one of the most popular in her performances. The chords are still strummed with their original fervor, the lyrics still sung with passion. Barb remains true to her original inspiration when she sings, "Rebecca, I will sing your song/A way to keep the wimmin strong forever."

Barb's work is brimming with emotion. "When I write a song, I write about the connectedness between myself and whatever it is I'm writing about. Not just as an observer—I try to bring the feeling I have inside to the listener, so that they are not just hearing words." •

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