

Amazon Radio – Pamela Smith

Summary Overview

Former radio host Pamela Smith speaks on her involvement with Amazon Radio, a radio show focused on women's music, particularly Lesbian folk. The show aired from 1990-2015 at WPKN, a community-based radio station in Bridgeport, CT. Pam discusses the challenges of fundraising and the eventual decision to stop the show due to musical fatigue. Notable topics include the importance of community radio, the impact of music conferences, and the ongoing efforts to catalog and digitize the extensive music collection.

Summary

Pamela Smith, the former radio host of Amazon Radio, speaks about her origins and how she got involved with radio. Pam got involved after the University of Bridgeport lost funding for WPKN. She then decided to get involved by volunteering to answer the phones at the station. Eventually, she was propositioned to start learning to do an actual radio show. At first, Pam only played Lesbian folk music. She explains that over time her playlist expanded to include other women's voices (and even the occasional man, but that was very rare).

Pam's show initially aired once a week for 4 hours, later reduced to 3 hours. Pam recounts that this was no easy feat as she often didn't like talking, just letting the music do the talking for her. She played whatever she felt like listening to at the time, with occasional themed selections for events such as International Women's Day. However, the show was mostly unstructured, and the themes were often spontaneous. To prepare for the show, Pam would be listening to music all the time and making notes. She usually had to bring her own music from home because it was not guaranteed to be available at the station. There were some difficulties with songs that contained foul language, however she eventually got good at bleeping out the bad words.*

Pam recalls having interviewed Margie Adam and Catie Curtis. She tried to keep a neutral stance when discussing politics on the show. She aimed to introduce the audience to political views through music without taking a clear side. Pam disliked taking part in fundraising shows, often getting help from her partner, Sue, during these events. Overall, the show received a lot of

community support. People even recognized Pam's voice in public. In the industry, Pam made connections with other Lesbian or feminist DJs, usually meeting them at conferences like Folk Alliance and Northeast Regional Folk Alliance. This was one way in which Pam would make new music discoveries by discussing artists with her fellow DJs.

There were challenges and, after 25 years, Pam notes that the music started to sound the same, making it hard to program. She took a six-month leave of absence and ended up enjoying the break. People said that they missed the show and still would recognize her voice. Pam reflects on both the challenging and rewarding aspects of doing radio. She misses sharing new music with the audience. It is not likely that she will return to radio as it is a strenuous commitment. For Pam, the importance of cataloging and preserving her music collection is important. It is difficult to digitize an analog collection but having dedicated herself to music discovery during her radio days, it is an endeavor worthwhile. Pamela Smith ends her interview with possible plans to visit and continue collaborating to preserve the music collection.**

During the conversation, Pam also asks and compares experiences with the interviewer (Mev Miller) who had a radio show for 10 years in the Twin Cities. The radio show aired on KFAI 90.3 FM in Minneapolis/St. Paul, MN and was called "The Lesbian Power Authority." It aired from 1993-2002.

**Editor's note: According to FCC regulations, it is forbidden to broadcast these words on the radio as they are considered indecent and profane: Shit, piss, fuck, cunt, cocksucker, motherfucker, and tits. A DJ could lose her broadcast license for violating this rule.*

*** As of summer 2024, Pam's vast collection of albums and CDs are now under the care of Wanderground Lesbian Archive/Library.*

Audio Quotes from Interview

🔊 How music was selected (:45)

It was just what I felt like doing at the time. You know, so I'd take like 50 or 60 CDs with me. During the week, I would sort of say, oh, I want to play that. Oh, yeah, I want to play that because I'm listening to music all the time, making notes about what I wanted to play. Then I just gather up the CDs and go to the station and play them in any kind of order that I felt like at the time. So, mine was very undirected. Unprogrammed.



🔊 Finding new music (1:39)

Like I would go to Folk Alliance International where it was a scene. I mean it would be a scene. They start music at probably 12 or 1 o'clock. They would have blocks-- people would have... music in their hotel rooms. They would take over a hotel and people would have setups in their hotel rooms for you to go listen to music and it would go to around three or four in the morning. You know uh because there would be a main showcase with no private showcases were allowed, which went from like 7 to 10. And then after from 10 on it was private showcases in people's rooms. Yeah. And then, you know occasionally we'd stay up that late and then you know you go in the hallway, just the stairway there would be music there because people were hanging out on the stairwells playing. You go in the main lounge of the hotel on the first floor there would be music there. You know, there was just music everywhere all the time. And so I would go there and I would find artists who weren't well-known.



Interviewer: So there were a fair number of women at those things?

Pam: Yeah, yeah, yeah. There were a lot of yeah there were a lot of women at those things.

🔊 Misses doing radio (:29)

I miss doing radio. I understand that. I, you know whenever I'm listening to Spotify and I hear a new tune and I go, oh, I wish I could play that on air. You know, because it just strikes me as something that I should share with people. Yeah, so yeah, I miss it. Occasionally, I thought, I've thought about going back. But, nah.



Related Items in Wanderground Collection

- Awards/recognitions that Pam received
 - Jeanine C. Rae Award for Advancement of Women's Culture – from National Women's Music Festival, 2003
 - OutMusic Award – 2005 for Outstanding Support
- Cloth bag – Amazon Radio
- FCC License
- Hot Wire article (Jan 1992, p. 44)
- Photos
 - Exhibit case at PPL
 - Logo
 - Pam with Margie Adam
 - Pam with her crew at WPKN
 - Wanderground crew sorting CD collection donated by Pam
- T-Shirt – Amazon Radio
- Playlist Collection – Printed playlists from shows throughout the years (Thankfully downloaded before her website was no longer available)
- LP Albums and CDs - Pam's vast collection donated to Wanderground

Interview Details

- Interview with: Pamela Smith
- Topic(s): Amazon Radio, Lesbian music, radio hosting, music conferences, music collections
- Date & How Recorded: January 9, 2025 via Zoom
- Interviewed by: Mev Miller
- Transcript prepared by: Otter.ai edited by Jules Cuomo
- Summary prepared by: Jules Cuomo, Edited by Mev Miller & Juli Anna Herndon