

Radio Rant  
by Steve Piccolo

It's amazing how many songs there are that talk (or sing) about radio.

Apart from the aspect of tautological product placement (hey Mr DJ), it's kind of obvious that musicians might want to write and sing about radio, at least from a couple of generations, because radio was often the way you found out about music, and finding out about music was how you became a musician... and artists always work on their own life experiences...

Sometimes I wonder about all the talk about audiophile sound quality, nowadays, precisely because I cut my musical teeth on the sound of a very crummy little transistor radio heard through my pillow at night when I was supposed to be sleeping, according to my parents, like in high school, and I can assure you it was not an experience that humiliated the music in any way.

It was not even FM, though FM was the real breakthrough in those days, mainly because they would play tracks longer than three minutes. The DJ I listened to was called Jeff Starr, the program was "Starr Power"... he was once voted the most handsome DJ in the world by the readers of Teen Life magazine – like who cares? Nobody can see you anyway, on the radio - though I can't recall ever seeing a picture of Jeff Starr back then. I might have been disappointed if I did. He looked like a Fifties playboy, whereas I imagined him as a cool guy with long hair, smoking joints as he picked out tracks by Spirit and Jefferson Airplane, the Crazy World of Arthur Brown, Dr. John (the Night Tripper, perfect for late-night radio)...

Daytime radio was full of phone calls, with requests and dedications (ex. Donna Summer: On the Radio)... as a kid I tried calling and was amazed when I actually got through and could request a song... I think it might've been Workin' in a Coal Mine by Lee Dorsey, or maybe Poke Salad Annie by Tony Joe White. I don't think I dedicated it to anyone. Maybe my sister.

Nighttime radio sounded like cigarette smoke and booze, uncannily intimate.

Actually when radio was first becoming a widespread presence in people's lives, there were many different ideas about how to make it a less passive medium.

Bertoldt Brecht and Walter Benjamin both talked about how to make radio into an interactive, participatory medium, though part of their idea was that programming would be somehow made by the community of listeners themselves, as part of the creation of a new social order.

Brecht's Der Ozeanflug, a radio play about the flight of Lindbergh across the ocean, was recorded without the lines of the main part, which were supplied to listeners in their homes by way of newspapers. To hear the full text, they had to recite the lines of the main part themselves, out loud, sitting around the kitchen table.

The idea of requests as the driving force of musical popularity (never mind payola) did partially give consumers a voice in the production process, though it was far from transparent. I mean, if I called up and requested a song that wasn't already on the playlist, a song that didn't fit into the style of music being broadcast on that station at that time, it definitely would not get played.

The jukebox was perhaps the only truly democratic situation in which people actually piloted musical choices during time spent listening, drinking and dancing... Jukeboxes could contain records appealing to a very wide range of tastes, including old favorites, and records played often would stay in the machine until they literally wore out. Dropping your quarter was like clicking on "like" today. Word got around.

Some of the best songs about radio are the ones that talk about listeners taking back control of what gets put on the air, and the manipulation of the medium as a tool of propaganda or dissent.

Elvis Costello has a very ambiguous text for his RADIO RADIO

It includes lines like

I wanna bite the hand that feeds me –

it's a subversive idea... radio will play it because he says "you better listen to the radio", but at the same time he's saying that the radio boils your brain into passive submission...

You either shut up or get cut up, they don't wanna hear about it

It's only inches on the reel-to-reel

And the radio is in the hands of such a lot of fools

Tryin' to anesthetize the way that you feel

Inches on the reel-to-reel? Like editing things out from speeches, or even songs?

Radio is a sound salvation

Radio is cleaning up the nation

They say you better listen to the voice of reason

But they don't give you any choice 'cause they think that it's treason

So you had better do as you are told

You better listen to the radio

A more positive take on taking back control of the airwaves is found in a little-known song by Ned Sublette (the name of the group, tellingly enough, is Clandestine), called Radio Rhythm (Signal Smart).

It starts with early-tech radio and telegraph sounds (like Douglas Kahn) and shifts into an Arthur Russell advent-of-pancultural-hiphop track, with percussion by David Van Tieghem... guy rapping with a Texas accent, a rapper from a western, words about pirate broadcasting out of the trunk of a car, moving around so they don't catch you, the subversive power of the airwaves, subversive precisely because the official airwaves are, well, official! "You have a right to listen!"

In my song Green City the radio is like a lifeline of communication, and when it gets blacked out it means something has happened... a revolution, maybe... since the Green City itself is a dystopia (the famous city of slumber hypothesized by Mel'nikov for workers, outside Moscow, during the early period of the Soviet Union). When the parades stop passing by the window and the radio falls silent it might just be a hopeful sign of change...

## PLAYLIST

Clandestine feat. Ned Sublette: Radio Rhythm (Signal Smart)

Elvis Costello: Radio Radio

Lee Dorsey: Workin' in a Coal Mine

Tony Joe White: Poke Salad Annie

Dr. John: Merry Christmas Baby (got some good music on my radio)

Crazy World of Arthur Brown: Fire (so bad it's good)

Jefferson Airplane/Starship: We Built This City ("Marconi plays the mamba, listen to the radio")  
(whatever that means)

or – A Song for all Seasons – "i'll be heard on top 40 radio"

Spirit: Gramophone Man

Gak Sato: Green City

Curiosity:

Dreadful song with funny lyrics:

Rush: Spirit of the Radio

"For the words of the profits were written on the studio wall

Concert hall

And echoes with the sound of salesmen...of salesmen...of salesmen."

Simon and Garfunkel joke!