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"YOU BETTER GET THAT S.O.B. OFF THE AIR OR ELSE..."

Why they burned down independent radio station WRKL...

BY STEVE SINGER

Anybody out there know of a radio station that operates out of a trailer and a shack and sits on a swamp littered with, among other things, old shoes, empty cans of root beer, and a Captain Marvel comic book? Anyone ever hear of a radio station with a duplex bathroom? The sink is on the first floor; the more crucial piece of equipment is on the second. On the door is a sign in glittering silver letters proclaiming it the "Stairway to the Stars." The day the septic tank was installed, thereby elevating its status from "chemical type" to "subsurface sewage disposal" in the eyes of the Board of Health, the management staged a ribbon cutting and got a member of the County Board of Supervisors to cut the ribbon.

About 90 miles north of New York City, on Route 202 in New York State's Rockland County, the twin 1000-watt transmitters of WRKL (910 on your AM dial) tower above the weeds. It is on this site that the unofficial county attendance record was set for a single event. On Independence Day 1966, approximately 12,000 souls descended upon the swamp (referred to on the air as "The Heart of Downtown Mount Ivy") to wish the station, which was throwing a party for itself, a happy second birthday. Rockland County has clasped WRKL to its collective bosom—92 per cent of those who listen to local radio hear at least some of its sunrise-to-sunset broadcasts. The rival station, WRRC, gets the other eight per cent. "Obviously, we have dominated WRRC," says baldish 46-year-old Albert Spiro, owner and founder of

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WRKL. Spiro is also, by his own admission, "technical director, consulting engineer, program director, ad salesman, and pooh-bah."

WRKL gets fan mail from Brooklyn. WRKL disc jockeys get socks knitted for them and mailed to them by listeners—one sock at a time. WRKL is also listened to and loved by aggressive PTA mothers in treader pants and breathy stenographers with false eyelashes; by schoolteachers and automobile mechanics; by Negro laborers and pink-cheeked account execs; by hawks and doves; by traffic cops and existential phenomenologists; by the saved and the damned. All say, with understandable variations in elocution and syntax, "It makes you feel that it's your station." But there are also some people who do not feel this way. There are those, for example, who burned it down last July 22nd.

A little less than four years ago Albert Spiro resigned as radio engineer from WNEW—a job he had held for 20 years—set up two house trailers and a wooden shack, and began to broadcast. He had \$200 in his pocket, a truly impressive list of creditors, and a lot of rubber bands and paper clips to hold the station together and keep it from collapsing on top of him. He had two objectives: a profit for himself and a voice on vital issues.

The aims have proved to be eminently compatible. "Everyone thought I was a nut," Spiro has said, "and maybe I am. But I felt that there was no reason a small station couldn't do a superb news job and involve itself in the community. The function of a station is to let the people speak."

So Spiro hired some full-time newsmen, paid local housewives \$5 per show, and gave extensive coverage to community affairs. He laced his news and music shows with frequent editorial comment and six days a week presided over his *Hot Line* program—which allows listeners to call the station and say almost anything on their minds.

"Anything goes," he says quickly and crisply, "except libel and dirty words." So far, Spiro has managed to keep the airways as pure as West Virginia snow. He has not been quite so successful in preventing libel suits—they are after him for \$400,000—but he has not yet been required to pay off on any.

One Saturday night in July 1967, shortly after the racial riots in Newark, New Jersey and some local racial disturbances in nearby Spring Valley and Nyack, New York, the *Hot Line*, according to a writer on *Newsweek* magazine, overheated. Spiro had invited Negro civil rights leaders on the program, which usually runs from noon till 1:30 P.M., "to come down and let the listeners know what kind of life the Negro really lives." Charles Young of the NAACP went



on the air and called for massive economic aid to the Negro community but went on to deplore the actions of the rioters. A white man then called to say that "they should be shot down in the streets like dogs." Another said that "welfare makes Negroes fat and lazy."

At 1:45, William Scott, head of the Rockland County Congress of Racial Equality, walked into the station and demanded to be put on the air. The program had ended a quarter of an hour earlier.

Within a few minutes Spiro had set up a special program with Scott and news director George Dacre. ("We often do that if we have an unusually controversial issue," Spiro says. Other shows that have run well over the normally allotted time include one with a dope addict, one with a member of the John Birch Society, one with a homosexual and a Catholic priest, and a press conference with Santa Claus.)

Scott went on the air and called Young a "house nigger" and the national Negro civil rights leadership "a bunch of Uncle Toms." Spiro then began to screen calls before putting callers on the air.

Some of them made thinly veiled threats. One said, "You better get that S.O.B. off the air or else..." "We'd been threatened many times before," Spiro says. "We didn't give them much thought."

At about 11:20 that night someone called Spiro at home to tell him that his station was in flames, and though that did surprise him, he did not act very surprised.

"Did you call the fire department?" Spiro asked right off. The answer was yes, and Spiro drove down to the station. After making sure that no one was hurt and estimating quickly the possible damage to the station, he went a quarter of a mile up the swamp to the Ivy Manor, a bar and restaurant where he frequently lunches with his business manager, Werden. From there, while the fire was still raging, he called radio station WJRZ in Hackensack, New Jersey, and obtained sets of consoles and turntables. Then he called Quincy, Illinois, and purchased an \$8000 transmitter. Later on, after the fire was declared under control, Spiro returned to the station and made a more careful inspection of the damage. Everything except for the



WRKL—probably the only radio station to operate in a swamp, out of a trailer and a shack. Spiro is planning a new building for the future.

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Al Spiro: A "nut" with integrity who feels radio should let listeners speak.

shack and a tiny section of one trailer was a scorched ruin. More than \$25,000 worth of records, tapes, typewriters, and technical equipment had been destroyed. A report was made to the Federal Communications Commission, which gave Spiro 90 days to get back on the air. Knowledgeable optimists predicted broadcast in two to three weeks. Spiro resumed in four and a half days. "We are back today," he told *Hot Line* listeners, "and if they burn us down again, we will come back immediately, as we did this time. No one can keep this station off the air." He and Werden and about 20 others had worked nearly night and day since the fire broke out.

"The people were just great," says Werden. "Literally thousands showed up and offered to help. Mechanics, electricians, everybody. People brought us sandwiches and [grin] booze. They tried to give us records from their personal collections, but we didn't want that. Al eventually got a large number of records from WNEW."

"Everyone cheered us on. One lady came over and said that she'd hoped we'd get back on quickly because she was listening to CBS and was suffering from withdrawal symptoms. And a little later a 'Friends of Al Spiro' committee was formed and raised five thousand dollars for the station."

Through it all, Spiro stayed calm—intense but calm. He could not afford to get excited, because six months before the fire he'd suffered a heart attack that had put him in the hospital for three months and had kept him away from the station for six weeks longer than that.

"One of the causes of the heart attack was Spiro's eighty-hour work week," says Werden. "It was really tough keeping him away from the station even when he was in the hospital. Naturally the first thing he asked for was a radio. I got one, but before I brought it to him, I took it to a TV repairman and had him remove three vital AM components so that Al could get only FM and not get involved with the station too soon. I had to make sure the guy was really thorough because Al is the kind of person who could reach under the hospital bed and pull out something to fix the radio with."

While WRKL was trying to get back on the air, the law was beginning its search for the arsonists. They have not yet been found. Spiro believes that the job was done by a lowbrow element not terribly fond of Negroes. It is believed that the police now agree with him, but they originally considered a wider range of suspects.

"There are a lot of people around here who are interested in

getting him off the air," Assistant State Attorney General John J. Reilly said shortly after the investigation began. "He's been airing all the problems and letting the chips fall where they may."

There are plenty of problems—as there are in all comparably fast-growing suburbs—and Spiro has been dumping the chips mainly on heads of local Democrats. Spiro, a registered Democrat, has been rapping it to his own kind. He has initiated legal action against one official for, among other things, allegedly tampering with a zoning map and allegedly putting a friend in charge of the local treasury without having him first pass the required civil service test. Spiro is responsible for the now defunct "Citizens League for Moral and Civic Improvement by Bribing Public Officials for Better Zoning."

Rockland County Democrats are not happy with Spiro. "They're dedicated to getting me off the air," he says.

"That station should have burned down long ago," one party official is reported to have said. Spiro has often quoted the statement on the air. The party official has not been heard from. A former county committee chairman, on the other hand, has been heard from; he is suing WRKL for a quarter of a million dollars. The station alleged that he was very big in sewers, maybe too big.

In an election year politicians ignore their own advice. All—even the official Spiro is suing over the zoning and treasury matters—buy time on WRKL. And one of the services the station performs is to write campaign copy free of charge

to any candidate, regardless of his party, who has bought time.

"Not too long ago," Werden was saying in the station recently, "a guy comes in here and puts one of his spots on my desk and asks me what I think of it. Now normally if someone writes a spot, we use it just as is, but this guy asked me to read it, so I did. I took one look and threw it out the door."

"Don't you know that your opponent said so and so about you?" I asked him.

"Well, yes," he said.

"Well, aren't you going to answer him?"

"Well, I was thinking about it."

"The campaign is almost over and he's thinking about it! You know, I was up till three in the morning writing the spot for him, and all the time I'm thinking, this clod could run my government."

Why do it then?

"It's part of the service and you get to see how politicians' minds work. And sometimes they can help someone you know who needs help. That right, Al?" Werden said, turning to Spiro. Spiro was talking on the phone with a possible contractor for the new building he plans for the station.

Spiro looked absently at Werden and then checked the time. "Damn, it's late and I still have to see a client." He was wearing a green sports shirt, with what appeared to be tar stains on the sleeves, and perma-press chino slacks.

"Should I go like this?" he asked, half aloud. "Aah, why not?"

And with that Albert Spiro put on his faded loden coat with the hood only half-zipped on and went off to sell advertising time. ■■

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