

A Radio Station Fights To Keep Its Watts Up

By Anthony Depalma, Special To the New York Times

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For the first three hours of his morning show, Ken Freedman roamed through the music world's frontier, segueing from "Cafe Thorax" by Zut Un Feu Rouge, an experimental pop band from Sweden, to Liberace's version of "Tico Tico" to "Rondevouz" by Real Fish, a group whose signature sound is a chorus of women yelping in Japanese.

At noon he brought the show closer to home, to the future of his radio station, WFMU. In his "Hour of Chaos" update, the 31-year-old station manager discussed WFMU's struggle with the Federal Communications Commission and three other noncommercial stations that want to reduce its broadcast range, saying it interferes with their signals.

"The other stations are trying to say this is a technical issue," said Mr. Freedman, who is one of the station's three paid employees. "It's a human issue. To lower FMU's power the way the others are proposing would take away something that people have supported and come to rely on."

Crowded together on the low end of the FM-radio band, WFMU and the other stations are engaged in a bitter fight over broadcast range and listener base. The dispute has generated attention beyond what might be expected from a spat among small FM outlets because it threatens the highly regarded WFMU, 91.1 FM, which The Village Voice has called New York's best radio station.

Rambling Musical Tastes

The other stations are WFUV, 90.7 FM, in the Bronx; WSHU, 91.1 FM, in Fairfield, Conn., and WKTW, 91.1 FM, in Dover Township, N.J.

If WFMU were a painting it would have been done by Salvador Dali. It is a strange collection of musical tastes as rambling as some of the volunteer disk jockeys. Jewish music, spy movie themes, grinding underground rock and cassettes recovered from somebody's garbage can all find their way into the 24-hour-a-day broadcasts.

This is how the station's program guide describes Mr. Freedman's morning show: "music that is strange or stupid, bombastic or borderline, hyphenated or hyperactive, chosen from many eras and genres."

It may be easier to define what WFMU is not. It is not slick. It is not commercial. Though it broadcasts from a house on the Upsala campus, it is not a college station in the normal sense. After its power was increased from 10 watts to 1,440 watts in 1965, WFMU became an

increasingly independent counterculture cult station with exceptionally loyal listeners throughout northern New Jersey and New York City.

Listeners Mean Money

The other three nonprofit stations are more in the traditional mold of public broadcasting, focusing on classical music and special programming, like WFUV's Sunday afternoons of Irish music and news. For all four stations, the number of potential listeners is just as important as in commercial broadcasting, because every radio that receives their signal represents a potential contribution.

In their case before the F.C.C., the three challenging stations, which share the same consultant - Communications Technologies Inc., of Marlton, N.J. - say they only want WFMU to correct a 28-year-old error that results in its signal traveling much farther than regulators intended.

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Executives at WFUV and WSHU, licensed to Sacred Heart University in Fairfield, say WFMU's signal overlaps theirs in places. But it was WKTW, a year-old station owned and operated by the Performing Arts Network of New Jersey, that filed the original complaint with the F.C.C., arguing that WFMU's signal overpowers its own.

Station executives said people in Lakewood, which is eight miles northwest of Dover, cannot receive WKTW but they can get WFMU, more than 60 miles away.

Had it not been for WKTW's poor reception, it is unlikely anyone would have discovered the error in WFMU's broadcast range.

Antenna on a Mountain

The Upsala station's 100-foot antenna stands 716 feet above sea level atop First Mountain in West Orange. In WFMU's 1962 application to increase power to 1,440 watts, its technical consultant estimated the average height of the surrounding terrain at 348 feet. Engineers now say it is only 218 feet.

That figure is important because, along with the power of the signal, height above average terrain is a critical factor in determining the reach of a radio station's signal. The three stations contend that the miscalculation, which they say may have been deliberate, allowed

WFMU's antenna to be 100 feet too high, sending its signal over more than 1,400 square miles, instead of the authorized 830 square miles.

To reduce WFMU's coverage area to roughly what Federal regulators originally intended, the other stations want its power cut to 650 watts. They estimate the station would lose about 40 percent of its coverage area, roughly 2.2 million potential listeners.

Federal regulators have moved slowly. Last year the commission instructed WFMU to apply to correct the mistake on paper without necessarily changing the height of the antenna or the level of power. The other stations oppose that application.

Mr. Freedman argues that even if the correct figure had been used in 1962, the station's antenna height and signal power would have been the same as now, or close to it. He thinks a signal reduction would hurt even more than estimated because two of the stations are applying for permission to increase their power, and the third wants to raise the height of its antenna.

All four of the stations involved rely on donations, but only WFMU is supported solely by listeners. Last year all of its \$130,000 budget came from contributions.