

Remembering the First Years, 1975-78

by David Chandler

Sally Orth and I came to WORT at almost exactly the same time, at the end of July, 1975. Sally started helping with graphics work and I joined the embryonic Music Committee. This was just as we were starting our own relationship, and we didn't realize for a couple of weeks we were both involved with WORT, which was very scattered then.

Our primary effort was the station's monthly program guide. I was in charge of the editorial content and Sally handled design and production. Despite some disgruntled opposition, we were eventually allowed to assume the titles of editor and art director, respectively. We were among the station's first paid staff from the spring of 1976. We were also members of the board from that time, so we were fully consumed in WORT's never-ending tangle of policy and operating debates.

I was DJ for two of the initial on-air slots. Behind the Sun ran midnight Friday to whenever, and was "freeform." Before This Time Another Year was an hour of African-American gospel music on Sunday nights. I dropped the Friday night show when we left the staff, but kept the gospel show until 1979. Sally became WORT's primary graphic designer after we went on the air. She overhauled Spread the WORT and designed, and later redesigned *The Pilot*, and designed the station's first three official tee-shirts and the first two bumper stickers, among other items.

My own most vivid memories are highly emotional. I can still feel the bite of the mid-winter air as I walked home across the snowy park at 3:30 or 4:00 on a Saturday morning after shutting down the transmitter. My carrying case of records was usually under my arm so I could keep my hands in my pockets. I can still see the stars and the rising chimney smoke in the utter stillness. The "starvation year" of 1976 is still burned into me. We had

blown the transmitter within days and the engineers just couldn't fix it, and then came the devastating March ice storm that shut down most of Madison, including WORT, for four days. Through the summer the station could only really be heard on the near eastside, and the listener-sponsorships barely trickled in. Brian Strassburg's infectious sarcasm that kept us going through the all-nighters of laying out *The Pilot* is still fresh, and the eagerness with which we waited for Lorraine to open the Nibble Nook across the street, so we could recharge with breakfast at 4:00 in the morning. I can still feel how it was to sit at the console with the turntables and the lights and the dials and the mic, in simple conversation with the music. Other times I just soared into the sound.

One night I played the Mitchells Christian Singers and a man called who said he hadn't heard that gospel music since his childhood. He drove up after the show in a dark-gold Cadillac with his girlfriend and took me to dinner at Randall's. Years later I found out he owned one of the largest manufacturers of office accessories in the entire country.

I got migraine headaches after many interminable Board meetings. I celebrated our triumphs and our comradeship at Chris's Bar on Winnebago Street — where Hamms was the premium beer. I was told I was "invalid" because of my gender. I tried hard to be patient with people who still thought there was going to be a revolution somewhere in America and WORT had to be "vanguard" (a term of the times).

Nineteen-seventy-eight was the year of shadows. Jerry Dahlke was driven from the station after years of vilification for the original sin of raising money (and, I am still convinced, for being gay). We all agreed on a successor as development director, but he quit after a month, declaring his emotional health would never survive WORT. When Mark Fuerst then became development director I was con-

vinced *The Pilot* would inevitably lose its long tight-rope act with the board. The publication we had dreamed and on which we had worked so hard was living on borrowed time — the wide operating latitude essential to its excellence would soon be gone. We quit after putting out the October issue. Chief engineer Pat Ryan, who'd kept the transmitter going with chewing gum and rubber bands for three years, quit soon after, sad collateral damage from the warring egos around him.

I came to understand years ago that scuttling *The Pilot* was among the worst mistakes of my life, and that if I had been a better and wiser man I would have agreed with the remaining board members on a way to keep the paper in active association with WORT. We eventually did publish *The Pilot* in 1982-83 under contract as part of City Lights, which Sally and I owned, but by then it was a sad shadow. WORT and *The Pilot* did need each other, but this backhanded vindication never erased the bitter loss or the guilty feeling that we had all failed the WORT dream.

WORT was a bubbling cauldron of relationships. People fell in love and out of love; people became close friends and determined opponents (in some cases both). These relationships — positive and negative — were intimately intertwined with both what happened and how it felt to be at WORT, especially for those of us who were there every day.

WORT succeeded, most of all, because the audience was there. "Papa Hambone" (George Vukelich) had been on the air at WIBA-AM, playing mainstream jazz, swing and other "roots" music. Michael Hanson was at WHA, playing contemporary jazz. People had listened in the late 1960s and early 1970s to radio entrepreneurs like Ron Carbon (Earthwood Radio) and Steve Mertz (Two for the Blues). They bought airtime nobody

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wanted late at night on FM radio stations and played whatever moved their fancies, eclectic jazz in Carbon's case and raucous urban blues in the hands of Mertz. They used their own record collections and sold their own advertising to support their shows.

Almost simultaneously came Radio Free Madison, late night WIBA-FM that included people like Rick Murphy and later, Chris Morris. This defined "progressive" radio. The DJs did their own shows, choosing and playing all kinds of music in long thematic sets. It was eclectic and highly individual and when it worked, it was magic. When it didn't — well, people smoked a lot of dope in those days.

But even in Madison progressive radio was being eclipsed by the album-oriented rock. FM radio's commercial potential had exploded, and businesspeople and advertisers moved in quickly, along with playlists and program directors to enforce predictability. Okay for many people, but by 1975 there were a lot of radio orphans primed to become loyal WORT listeners. WORT also bet heavily on uncovering an adequate pool of at least trainable programmers, for both music and public affairs. We won big in the end, but it wasn't easy. A few skilled hands had to do a lot of broadcasting. This cued the station's first major doctrinal debate: did we have the right to demand that people qualify for airtime, or was that a betrayal of WORT as "the people's radio station?" Mike O'Connor trumped

that wobble by playing the FCC card: incompetence on-air could cost us our license in those days. After we'd been on the air a month or two it was evident there were people in front of mics who were competent, but incapable of interesting, or sometimes even listenable, programming. The disagreement was heated, and the ideological poles were set. "Quality" and a system for identifying and protecting it, through program, music and news directors and a board to hold them accountable, on one side; and a deeply felt revolutionary ideal of egalitarianism, empowerment and "non-hierarchical/patriarchal" process on the other. Quality and organization won out, but a wound opened that refused to heal. A staff and board were created, yet the authority of the staff was vague, and only the board held real power. The board decided to address the process problem by making all decisions through strict consensus.

This attempt at a grand compromise was the source of much of the anxiety and occasional misery of working at WORT. To at least some degree we all wanted both dreams, but those responsible for operating the station — the staff — ended up never sure what we could initiate or continue without board approval. "Board approval" could suddenly be invoked for the most seemingly trivial item, and since board consensus was defined as "every single one of us has to agree no matter how long we have to sit in this room," we all got migraines on a frequent basis. Still, by 1977-78, the schedule was full and the programming was uniformly

good to excellent. This was due in no small part to the unrelenting labor of Jeff Lange, Jerry Zeiger (and Danny Kahn, who succeeded him as MD), and Don Alan, but it also happened because the initial intuitive leap of faith in our potential programmers proved out. "If you build it, they will come," was not invented in a movie; it was invented at WORT.

The builders themselves were the third crucial factor. These were "the founders" — the 12 or 15 people who really made the station go. Some helped in critical ways for short periods of time and some had real jobs and did important things for WORT only in their spare time. Others, due to a ridiculously low standard of living, a deep-seated loyalty to the grand idea, and the long-gone generosity of the Federal Government (Thank you, CETA, may you rest in peace) made WORT a full-time mania for years. They became the station staff and the heart of the board, and there was an incredible amount of talent and determination among them.

When I met the nascent "music committee," for example, I had been involved with music as a promoter, critic, record company rep, club operator and manager for five years. I knew there was an audience for the programming concept, and I wanted to help make it happen, but I was wary. This looked all too much like a group of enthusiastic amateurs pumping another classic Madison pipedream. \ But the license to broadcast was real. I was convinced by Jerry Dahlke one afternoon at the Good Karma Coffeehouse that there were tested

ways to raise enough money to actually get on the air and keep going. I was truly converted by the "scroungers," people like Pat Ryan, Vinnie Curran, Joanie Rubel, Mike O'Connor, Julie Preis, David Devereaux Weber, and most of all, Jeff Lange, who were fanatically willing to tackle any bit of scavenging, soldering or sawing necessary to make WORT happen.

To this day I believe Jeff was the indispensable person at WORT. He could do almost anything and he did — wiring, carpentry, paste-up, painting, carpet-laying, writing, artwork, "requisitioning." He launched ideas and provided inspiration of all kinds, and eventually he carried a ten-ton load of recruitment, training and production work. Despite his deeply guarded personality, Jeff was a leader because he was a doer.

Which was the final and decisive element in WORT not only surviving, but prevailing. We had our fuddy-duddy theorist in John Ohliger (blood brother to Ivan Illich), and our charismatic talker in Mike O'Connor, but the founders were to an extraordinary degree people who wanted to get busy doing things. Politics, philosophies and personalities did clash, but there was an overriding pragmatic intensity to get on with the job. This was the true revolution WORT embodied — not an ideological and political revolution, but the revolution of people determined to remake the world with their own hands and believing we could do so best by building our own institutions, not protesting the institutions of others. This is why Madison's hard

becoming a regional one.

In fellowship,
John Ohliger

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left always hated WORT, and finally used the Nazi incident as an excuse to physically attack the station after years of verbal sniping.

We were wrong in a way: the world is not so easily remade on a shoestring. But indeed it is remade every day we live our lives. Anyone who ever participated in WORT was a builder of a fresh reality, and many are clearly carrying on this dedication in diverse ways. Sally and I are happy WORT continues, and glad to have been a part of it.

David Chandler and Sally Orth now live in Lionville, Pennsylvania with their son, Ben, and daughter, Kate.