

# The WORT that was

by Richard Mabler

Yes, it's true. I was there when WORT was born. On a cold, gloomy December night, my girlfriend and I sat in a cramped attic apartment beneath the flight path of the Madison airport and tuned in the chaotic scene unfolding on Winnebago Street.

"Now we're gonna listen to part of The Fourth Tower of Inverness," my pal Mike O'Connor was telling his unseen audience. "This is a really neat show from an outfit called ZBS Media and I think you'll like it." Click. Buzz. Hum. Hiss. Sputter.

"Jeez, folks, looks like we're having a little bit of technical difficulty," Mike said, his anxious voice notching up an octave. In the background, we could hear a dozen nervous laughs. "Let's try that again." Click. Buzz. Hum. Hiss. Sputter.

"Hmm," mused Mike. "Guess we'll have to come back to that later, after Vinnie and Pat figure out what's wrong. In the meantime, let's have Jerry Dahlke tell us how we're gonna raise the money to keep this station on the air." More nervous laughter, before the development director—never at a loss for words—rescues the station manager from his plight.

Judy and I looked at each other and smiled. It was going to be a long night. We grabbed a bottle of cheap champagne from the refrigerator and drove to WORT, where ten minutes later a cork popped as the Fourth Tower of Inverness finally found its way through the overheated console. On the way home, our heads dizzy with champagne and excitement, Judy asked me what I thought of WORT's inauspicious beginning.

"I'm not sure who the hell is going to want to listen to such incompetence," I said. "But those of us playing radio will have an inordinate amount of fun." For the next three years, we lived up to that prediction and, amazingly, people actually tuned in.

On Saturday afternoons I did a three-hour show called "Sounds Like A Duck" (don't ask

me how such names were picked). On week-day evenings I hosted what may have been WORT's first call-in talk show (and was shocked at how hard it was to get people to participate). Early in the morning I did newscasts. I substituted for all kinds of shows—and was mortified when Jeff Hansen told me that I was absent from my own show more than any other programmer (what can I say, I loved to travel). I also helped train volunteers, smuggled bootleg programming from other community stations, contributed articles to *The Back Porch Pilot*, and wrote grant proposals for funding.

I was asked several times to serve on the WORT board but always declined. Partly because I hate meetings but mostly because I figured my friendship with Mike O'Connor, WORT's founder, gave me plenty of influence. Mike and I were—and remain—close friends. I moved into his choice \$200 apartment on Spaight Street when he went off to grad school at Cornell and we manage to see each other once a year. He is still a self-described "geek" with entrepreneurial impulses and has done well for himself as an Internet service provider. Mike told me last April that WORT was enough radio to last him for a lifetime and he doesn't even listen any more.

Mike and I got into community radio about the same time (1973 in my case) and for largely the same reasons (through Lorenzo Milan's landmark book, *Sex and Broadcasting*, and Milan's persuasive anti-establishment personality). Unlike Mike, I've dabbled in radio up to the present day. After WORT and WHA, I moved to Los Angeles in 1978 and became news director of Pacifica's KPFK. I later did a lot of reporting for National Public Radio and was the "Morning Edition" TV critic from 1985 until 1989. Since then I've done a wide variety of radio projects, mainly documentaries and features, plus teaching radio at the college level and being a so-called

expert consultant. I long ago realized that the kind of radio I liked to do best didn't pay a poet's salary so I've earned most of my living by writing books and magazine articles.

Looking back, it's obvious that WORT was a wonderfully eclectic playground for dozens of us. We could—and did—just about anything our heart's desired. Some of it was fantastic, much of it was mediocre, and a fair percentage was absolutely awful. A high point for me was programming a free-form Saturday show that included everything from Andean folk music of Peru to commentaries about the high price of coffee (the most expensive cup in Madison that year cost 50 cents). A low point was hearing my friend Geoff Simon, who later became a network TV reporter, going through a grueling evening when he put Nazis on the air—and all hell broke loose. The best thing about WORT in those days was its complete and utter unpredictability. I loved listening to it because one never knew what to expect—and usually learned something in the process.

I still believe that WORT's early programmers, though unpolished, were some of the very best I've ever heard. They brought knowledge, passion, and open-mindedness to the airwaves in a refreshing, naive style that seems almost totally absent from the radio shows I hear today. On WORT, radio was alive and spunky and fun. There are precious few stations you can say that about as this creaky old millennium draws to a close. Even public radio has become so targeted and formatted that it often sounds stale, if not dead. Don't get me started!

WORT came along at an important point in Madison's history—Paul Soglin was mayor, the Seventies were freewheeling, the nightmares of Watergate and Vietnam had ended—and in the evolution of radio as well. Pacifica had created a template for listener-supported

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stations that inspired the maverick philanthropist Lorenzo Milam, who had become a Johnny Appleseed of community-initiated broadcasting. NPR was hiring lots of Pacifica people and creating a new and exciting kind of radio journalism. The so-called "underground" commercial FM outlets were thriving. And millions of people were becoming disenchanted with what they heard on mainstream stations: the mind numbing WHAs and WERNs of that era, along with tightly formatted music stations of every stripe.

If WORT hadn't been born on that crazy December night, it would have emerged in some form or another within the next five years. The time was right and the community was demanding an alternative means of expression-for everything from a book review of the air to Rockin' John McDonald's oldies to lesbian folk music to the outlandish antics of Michaela and Michael at Dollie's. Sadly, I live in a town-Santa Fe, New Mexico-that could really use a WORT of its own. All of us have lived in or passed through such towns. WORT was born during a window of time when a geek like Mike O'Connor and a trust-funder like Lorenzo Milam could simply apply for a license and put such a station on the air. The miracle is not so much that their offspring came into this world, but that this oddball outlet is still around to enlighten, to entertain, to provoke, and-most importantly-to remind us each day of what an absurd, infuriating, delightful, baffling, and wondrous world we live in.