

FROM FREED TO PEEL: Vintage Radio Airchecks

By Mike Stax



Old radio airchecks have been taking up a lot of my listening time in the past few months. Drop one of these audio time capsules and you're transported to the everyday world of another era, the DJ patter, newsbreaks and commercial spots allowing you to hear and experience the music in a completely different way. Along the way you'll rediscover some old faves and occasionally stumble upon an overlooked jewel or three.

My radio time trips took me as far back as 1954 and a couple of broadcasts by the old King of the Moonoggers himself, Alan Freed, one from WJW in Cleveland circa April 1954 and another from a year later, by which time he'd moved on to WINS in NYC. Everyone knows about Freed and his pivotal role in the early days of rock'n'roll, but hearing the man in his swingin' element—live on the air—really brings home just what a force he was in popularizing rhythm'n'blues—black music—to young white America. He really whips up the excitement as he spins his “blues and rhythm” platters, talking a mile a minute, shouting and wailing along with the records or banging out the beat on a phonebook. His enthusiasm is clearly genuine and, yes, infectious.

Another way hip, though less well-known, '50s era DJ was Pete “Mad Daddy” Myers, and several hours of his shows are around, most from 1958-59 when he was on Cleveland's WJW and WHK, but also an October '64 comeback show on WINS New York. The Mad Daddy's zany rhyming patter, enhanced by various echo effects, is a marvel to hear. His playlist mixed rock'n'roll and R&B with a fair amount of novelty discs—some cool, some corny—but it's between the music that most of the real action took place. Norton Records released a fantastic

Mad Daddy disc, *Wavy Gravy*, a few years back, which condenses some of his best raps onto one CD (see review in UT#21). If you want more there are two three-disc sets available.

Let's jump ahead to the '60s where I've been delving mainly into Southern California radio ('cause that's where I'm at geographically) from 1965-67 ('cause that's where I'm at musically). AM Radio back then was, of course, Top 40 radio, and the Top 40—especially in 1965-66—was loaded with terrific records from the invading English groups as well as prime time American garage, folk-rock and soul music. One of the hippest stations was LA's 93/KHJ with their roster of “Boss Jocks” like Roger Christian and “The Real” Don Steele. On April 29, 1965 Christian opened with “The Last Time,” followed by the Miracles' “Baby, Baby,” Them's “Baby Please Don't Go,” and the Byrds' rising hit “Mr Tambourine Man”—an unbeatable quartet; the music scene, clearly, was exploding.

The Top 40 format also allowed for some wildly clashing contrasts. For example, on August 10, 1966 Boss Jock Gary Mack spun the Yardbirds' “Over Under Sideways Down” followed by a commercial spot for the group's Catalina island concert later that week; the disc he chose to follow that piece of futuristic rock magic: the Sandpipers' “Guantanamera.” Later you'll hear both Bobby Hebb's “Sunny” and the Who's “My Generation.” These unpredictable stylistic jolts may seem strange in today's increasingly compartmentalized world, but back then it was perfectly normal programming for AM pop radio stations.

How great was the popular music in 1966 though? Well, just check out Dick Biondi's New Year's Eve show on KHJ's rival KRLA, counting down the Top Ten most requested songs of the year. Among the picks: “96 Tears,” “Hey Joe,” “Little Red Riding Hood “California Dreamin',” “Fortune Teller” (a three year-old Stones recording at the time) and “Paperback Writer.” It's only when we arrive at the Top 2 that things start to go slightly awry. Number 2: “Cherish” by the Association. Zzzzzzz. And the Number 1 most requested song of that most shining year of 1966? The Monkees' frickin' “I Want to Be Free.” Obviously 13 year-old girls were making most of the requests.

San Diego's KGB and KCBQ followed the same basic format as KRLA and KHJ, with more of a small town feel. It's a gas to hear commercials for a fashion show, complete with bands and go-go girls, at College Grove Shopping Center (maybe this was the same event the Spectacles played? See UT#5). I also enjoyed 1966-67 airchecks from San Bernardino's KFXM and KMEN, although, disappointingly, no local bands were featured. Also great is a July '67 set by

Ernest Henry on KIST Santa Barbara, which includes tracks by the Music Machine, Count Five (“Merry Go Round”), the Yardbirds, the Merry Go Round, the Yellow Balloon and hometown boys the Strawberry Alarm Clock.

By 1967 the times and the sounds were a-changin'. A softer pop sound was taking over the Top 40 while the more innovative groups were going underground and focusing on albums rather than singles. The news breaks also change in tone as the Vietnam War escalates and protests erupt around the country. A July 3, 1967 aircheck by “The Real” Don Steele on KHJ gives an interesting snapshot of the times. Lightweight commercial fodder dominates the playlist: “Up, Up and Away,” “Silence is Golden,” “Here Comes My Baby,” “Come On Down to My Boat,” “Can't Take My Eyes Off You,” “Ding Dong, the Witch is Dead,” et al. The show is saved from terminal boredom by a few choice songs from the new *Sgt Pepper* LP, including “A Day in the Life,” and just a handful of street level Sunset Strip surprises, like the Seeds' “A Thousand Shadows” and Buffalo Springfield's “Bluebird.” The Springfield seems to have been strongly favored by KHJ. An August 3 broadcast by Steele features two Springfield tracks plus a promotional campaign inviting listeners to submit lyrics for a song on the band's next album. (Micki Callen of Reseda was the eventual winner, and still receives publishing royalties for “The Hour of Not Quite Rain” on *Last Time Around*.)

At the other end of the dial, at the smaller KBLA in Burbank, they seemed to be taking a few more chances with their playlist. On June 16, 1967, Roger Christian doles out the expected “Ding Dong,” “Can't Take My Eyes Off Of You,” “Ooogum Boogum” chart hits, but spices things up with classy tracks by the Animals, the Doors, the Airplane and Sagittarius, plus some cool, lesser-known surprises: the Boston Tea Party's “Words,” the Knack's “Pretty Daisy” and a couple of terrific garage-psych records I'd never heard before, “Flashing Sun Things” (I think) by the Beggars Opera Co., and the incredible “Children Ask” by the Power, a fuzz-laden doomsday piece pitched somewhere between the Seeds and Clear Light. Christian even dares to diss the Beatles, commenting that “When I'm 64” is “sort or a square old song”—which it is.

Maybe Christian felt free to speak, as June 16 was KBLA's last day on the air as a rock station. Dave Diamond took the final shift from 9:00pm to midnight and the surviving three-hour aircheck of his *Diamond Mine* show is one of the best '60s radio broadcasts you'll ever hear. Diamond's delivery is sharp, hip and humorous, punctuated by flights of abstract psychedelic



poetry (“Wade now with me knee deep in the splendor of the peach fuzz forest in the gentle radiation of the one-eyed cufflink...”), as heard on the wild single he made with the Higher Elevation (“The Diamond Mine,” comped on *Pebbles Volume 3*). His final journey down the Diamond Mine includes multiple songs by Love, the Animals, the Rolling Stones (including “Goin' Home” in its entirety) and the Rainy Daze, culminating in the show's finale: “The End.” *The Diamond Mine* was the early stirrings of what would become Underground Radio.

Sadly Diamond dropped his trippy Diamond Mine persona for his stint at KFRC in San Francisco. A December 30, 1968 aircheck, during which he plays the top hits of '68, is a rather staid affair, while musically it doesn't hold a candle to Dick Biondi's aforementioned New Year's show of two years earlier.

Several “Underground Radio” sets are available, and they're rather a mixed bag overall. The 2CD set of WLS-FM Chicago's “The Spoke” is perhaps the best of the bunch, with shows from December '68 and February/March '69, including plenty of obscure psychedelic, folk, blues and acid rock presented by a somewhat disembodied DJ, adrift in an ocean of echo. Brother Love on Pittsburgh's WAMO-FM is also worth hearing, full of warped hippy humor, such as his list of “charter members of the Plastic Straight Museum.” The 3-CD set includes broadcasts from March '68 and December '69.

Underground FM Radio Sampler 1968-71 is also a 3-CD set, and includes an interesting disc of WOL-FM's “Subterranean Sound Experiment” out of Washington, DC. However the 1970-71 shows with Rosko Mercer (WNEW-FM, New York) contain little of interest musically, although Mercer does have a pleasingly laidback delivery well-suited to the era.

Ending on a high note, there are also several airchecks available featuring one of the greatest DJs of them all, John Peel, and it's a real pleasure to kick-back and enjoy his dry, laconic wit again. His November 8, 1968 *Top Gear*

Top left: Alan Freed,
Top right: John Peel.

show included sessions by Pink Floyd, Leonard Cohen, Tim Rose and the John Dummer Blues Band, and he plays music by Duncan Browne, the Doors, Traffic, and others. He also spins what he describes as "to my mind, the best popular record that's ever been recorded," the Misunderstood's then two-year-old "I Can Take You to the Sun." Afterwards he comments that "that guitar solo in the middle by Glenn Ross Campbell really does sound like you're flying into the sun" and despairs that Campbell is wasting his life working in a restaurant in Riverside, California. "Can you imagine what would happen if he joined the Pink Floyd or something?" he continues. "Heads would fly off in several directions." These comments would set the wheels in motion for Campbell's return to the UK a few months later (see UT#22).

On May 7, 1969, *Top Gear* had sessions by Leonard Cohen and the inimitable Ivor Cutler, who is also interviewed by Peel during the show. Peel previews The Who's new album, *Tommy*, and demonstrates his eclecticism by dipping into the BBC's archives for a number of fascinating folkloric selections from Finland, Sweden, Ceylon and elsewhere.

The two-hour set from December 27, 1969 sees a Christmas party going on in the studio with people like Sandy Denny, Robert Wyatt and Dick Heckstall-Smith having a few words. Peel plays music by Beefheart, the In-

credible String Band and the Rolling Stones, among others, as well as selections from several *Top Gear* sessions, including numbers by Juicy Lucy (with the aforementioned Campbell), the Bonzo Dog Band, Soft Machine and Colosseum. One can only hope more John Peel airchecks will see the light of day—perhaps even something from his days at KMEN in San Bernardino.

Real Rock & Roll Radio has been undergoing something of a revival in recent years, a reaction to the stale and narrow formats that have paralyzed commercial radio for the last two decades. Little Steven's Underground Garage is leading the way with its growing popularity on stations across the country, while a plethora of garage and psych-friendly college and Internet shows continue to thrive (see the "Rock & Roll Radio" links on the Ugly Things website: www.ugly-things.com). A new frontier has been opened with the emergence of satellite radio, like the Sirius network, where you can hear such unlikely new era "boss jocks" as Kim Fowley (whose weekly Underground Garage format show is a must hear), Andrew Loog Oldham and even Bob Dylan. Perhaps another golden age of radio is upon us?

Meanwhile, the vintage airchecks reviewed in this story, from Freed to Peel, are easily available, along with hundreds more from Open Mynd Collectibles, see their ad below. •

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