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Switched-On Radio: WBAI

Here's the one station that refuses to have its tubes tied

BY FRED POWLEDGE

It's seven o'clock in the morning, your transistor is set at 99.5 on the FM band, and with no irritating commercials, a source of nothing happens. You twist the knob a little to the left of 99.5, and then to the right, but still nothing happens. Announcers from other stations are there, on the left and the right, alert, modulated, and totally unexciting, telling you that it is two minutes past seven, and the temperature is 53° in Central Park, and the traffic is –

A mild panic sets in. Maybe 99.5 isn't right. *Maybe and this fear is not entirely without foundation* -WBAI-FM doesn't have enough money to broadcast this morning. Then, when you're about to give up hope, you catch the beginning of the "William Tell Overture," interrupted by the voice of Larry Josephson, who opened the station late because he slept late, telling you that "This is WBAI, the world's worst, most sardonic, and least pious radio station, noncommercial, listener-sponsored radio. New York City," and that "Our transmitter is located on the Empire State Building, King Kong, chief engineer."

Then Josephson hacks and wheezes for a few seconds, and WBAI, the radio station where cough buttons are irrelevant, is on the air for another day - a day in which it will be expected to serve as anything but a radio station. To some of its listeners, it is a sort of airborne ACLU. To others, it's a combination switchboard bulletin board for things hippie, Yippie, New Leftian, and SNCCian. To some, it's a treasury of black humor and good music with no irritating commercials, a source of news that can't be got elsewhere, and of announcements that wouldn't make sense elsewhere. To the housewife prisoners of Scarsdale, it's a trip into the world outside. To the long-haired Free People of the East Village and their weekend compatriots in Queens, it's the news of the latest big bust and directions on how to get to the next one; the McLuhanesque equivalent of the *Village Voice*, the *East Village Other*, and *The Realist*, all rolled into one, if such a thing can be imagined. To the war-angry, it is a source of news that can be believed. Whatever WBAI really is, and it is likely that no two listeners could ever agree on that, it is undeniably a listener-sponsored *force*, the place in New York where an awful lot of people of diverse backgrounds get fuel for their ideals.

Take, for instance, the people who worship Bob Fass, who at 35 is the senior agitator at WBAI. Fass has a nightly show, from midnight until three, four, five, or six in the morning, in which he welds together people who never even thought about each other. He has a 50-year-old lady who admires and believes in him, and he has a 12-year-old listener who sneaks his transistor radio into bed at night, the way some of us used to take a flashlight under the covers so we could read comic books.

A little more than a year ago, Fass organized a "fly-in" at Kennedy Airport. The idea was to go to the airport at midnight and just let the stark beauty of the empty corridors and concourses turn you on. The event was advertised only on WBAI, and only after midnight. The night of the fly-in turned out bitterly cold, and Kennedy Airport is difficult and expensive to get to. But 3000 people turned up and on. At least two of them got married later. Fass was pleased, proud, and amazed. "This was the first inkling that I had that there were so many people, and that they wanted so much to get together," he said later.

He went on to promote a "be-in" on the Lower East Side, in which folks from radioland

(Fass calls them his "cabal"; he opens the show with the words, "Good morning, cabal") cleaned up a slum street in a way that the New York City Department of Sanitation had not been able or willing to do in its entire history. Then last March Fass helped promote a "Yip-in," or gathering of Yippies, who are politically-active hippies, at Grand Central Station at midnight on a Friday.

Another 3000 turned up. The meeting went along fine for a while, until some cherry bombs exploded and the New York City Police Department suddenly decided the station was private property (remember the Freedom Rides and the early sit-ins?), and went through the crowd cracking heads brutally and throwing people through glass doors.

The first reaction of many of the spectators and participants was to rush to telephone booths to call the station and tell Bob Fass, who was on the air that night instead of at the rally, all about it. They gave Fass eyewitness accounts that differed vastly from those given by the police and by the rest of the press, which had not covered the Yip-in, and Fass broadcasted the play-by-play as it came in. It was unprofessional; the reporters and commentators did not have well-modulated voices, and some of them actually seemed scared. But then it sounded like the truth. You can't have everything.

Those people thought first of WBAI because, to them, WBAI is something more than just a radio station. Fass puts it this way:

"Part of the trouble with this society is that there are some very tightly, almost overorganized segments of the society, and there are other segments that aren't organized at all vast segments that have no voice, no connection, and they don't even know how vast they are. And part of what I did was to connect up a lot of people who were there, and who didn't know about each other.

"And something about the feedback of this electronic thing, this radio station, makes it possible for them to listen to other people like themselves, and they get the idea that they aren't alone. You do it by creating an artificial *we*. The cabal's an artificial *we*. It's completely open; everybody who listens automatically becomes a member of the cabal."

WBAI has been in operation for eight years now, and the cabal has been growing steadily all that time. Although there's no money in the budget for audience surveys, it appears that a good many people listen to WBAI, and nothing else, all the time. And people actually do support the station. Listeners are frequently urged to purchase annual "subscriptions" of \$15 (\$10 for students), in return for which they get a handsome and witty monthly program guide, freedom from guilt, and no commercials. In April of **1966**, the station counted 8021 subscribers. By the beginning of March of this year, the total had risen to 14,976, and Frank A. Millspaugh, Jr., the 31-year-old general manager, said he had every reason to believe the number of subscribers would keep climbing toward the theoretical ceiling of half a million, which is one estimate of the station's listening audience.

The audience not only is growing, it is manifestly loyal. Although some ultramilitants, such as Students for a Democratic Society, think that WBAI is part of the "establishment media," others in the liberal-radical communities look on it as an institution that needs frequent defending. When the station got some flak from the telephone company over installing remote wires to a peace demonstration so it could be covered live, Millspaugh went on the air and told his listeners about it. Dozens called the telephone company and complained, and the wires were installed.

The reasons for WBAI's growth (which, although it might be called phenomenal, is not yet enough to pull the station above the poverty line) are probably as numerous as the listeners. A few factors can be identified.

WBAI is the only station in New York, and one of the few in the country, that honestly can be called "free" in its choice of which events to cover, what music to play, and, above all, what to say. Its freedom, which at one extreme may take the form of an announcer's saying "shit" on the air or Fass's decision to broadcast a play whose lead actress is in the nude (which is not risky in itself, since WBAI is not a television station, but which does establish sort of a new Nielsen index of listener hominess), is mixed with a brand of responsibility that makes some listeners fire off angry letters to the FCC, others take out gift subscriptions for J. Edgar Hoover and President Johnson, and many others set their dials at 99.5 and nothing else. The more fanatical of that last group have been known to tape-record whole days of WBAI programs so they can play them over and over again, while some listeners are content to record only those programs they might miss while asleep or at work.

Freedom is a family thing for WBAI, since it is a member of the Pacifica Foundation network, which started out in 1949 with KPFA in Berkeley, and then added KPFK in Los Angeles in 1959. The essence of Pacifica's policy is stated in one of its documents: "Our approach to broadcasting is permissive, bold, and naive, because we feel that these attributes hold the secrets of growth and wisdom Sacred cows find no sanctuary in our studios."

Being permissive, bold, and naive means that the station is sometimes about as professional as a good college newspaper, which means not very professional at all, according to the usual definition of the term. Announcers will routinely announce unapologetically, at the end of a program, that the station is running six or seven minutes behind, or four or five minutes ahead of schedule, or that a particular tape hasn't arrived yet from KPFA. They then will fill the extra air time with things like "Capsule Culture Concerts," which consist of the most famous, and trite, moments from music, like the "Skater's Waltz" or "The Lord's Prayer." People cough all the time on the air. The huge self-correcting clock over Master Control corrects itself every once in a while with a raspy noise that is clearly audible everywhere in the New York metropolitan area that WBAI's 50,000 watts penetrate. The Reuters Teletype stands where the tub should be in one of the bathrooms of the station's offices on East 39th Street in New York City, and Paul Schaffer, the news producer, has an office smaller than most closets, with no windows, so that he has to walk out into the hall every once in a while to breathe.

For a station that does not play just music all the time, WBAI has a terrible paucity of equipment; at the moment there are only four tape recorders on hand, and until recently approximately half of them were in Vietnam.

But this lack of professional standards has enhanced, rather than tarnished, WBAI's credibility. Listen to an announcer cough or slurp his coffee on the air; hear, during the middle of a talk show, taped in the station's poorly insulated studio, the footsteps of someone walking across the floor above. Listen to the tapes made by staffer Dale Minor on one of his trips to Vietnam—Minor's voice, an early-in-the-morning-and-I-haven't-gone-to-the-bathroom-yet-much-less-had-any-coffee voice, with the audible clicks of his tape recorder going on and off, and the swearing of Our Boys in the background. And you quickly see how bland, phony, and unexciting the rest of broadcasting is. You know that there are no bleeps on WBAI, no laugh-tracks, and that the people on it are real, they are human beings, instead of tape recorders, and they are likely to get upset and say "shit" occasionally. And that there are no sponsors besides yourself to get angry at.

Much of WBAI's programming is not what you might call surprising, although it sure is extraordinary when compared to the pap that jams most of the rest of the FM and AM bands. There is a morning concert of classical or contemporary music; educational programs about rock,

jazz, and other forms of music, along with records from the collection of Negro music owned by Charles Hobson, the station's production department director; the news, some of it phoned in by interested listeners, some from the station's pride and joy, its French Press Agency ticker, which brings dispatches from Hanoi; an excellent daily summary of information about the war in Vietnam that is better than most newspapers', and a good many taped speeches, seminars, and discussions on such topics as the future of mankind, religion, race relations, art, theater and literary criticism, the praying mantis, and white ants.

There is a program called "Community Bulletin Board," which may give some hint as to who listens to WBAI: On a typical morning there were announcements about a talk on films; a protest against the war in Vietnam; a discussion of Soviet writers at the Militant Writers' Forum; a Harold Lloyd festival at a church; an opera; news of Ethical Culture Society happenings; a concert of Latin rock; an organ recital at a Presbyterian church on Park Avenue; a Town Hall concert sponsored by the Legal Defense Fund for Artistic Freedom; events at the Brooklyn Public Library; and a karate tournament to "raise funds for mats and karate uniforms for neighborhood children." And, of course, there are the announcements of fly-ins and be-ins and Yip-ins.

The people who listen to all this, according to Frank Millspaugh, are probably mostly white, relatively well-educated, and likely to go to the sort of meetings, concerts, and protest marches that are advertised on the bulletin board. "We certainly have a very strong listenership, too, such as the college-educated housewife who's stuck in suburbia with her two kids and who doesn't have as much opportunity as at one time in her life she thought she would have for some sort of cultural activity or communication," he said. "Our listeners are generally people who are not passive in their intellectual ability, but who tend to want to translate their knowledge into some implementary action."

There are other WBAI listeners who, if any attempt were made to categorize them, would probably get angry, telephone the station, and threaten not to stop their subscriptions but to form a picket line outside on 39th Street. These are the people who listen to Larry Josephson and/or Bob Fass and/or Steve Post, the three "personalities" (there is no more appropriate job title, and if you called them "disc jockies" they would picket you) who dominate the station in the early morning and late at night.

Josephson is the one who sometimes oversleeps. He runs a program from approximately seven o'clock until nine o'clock in the morning. Fass is the one who has the show on weeknights from midnight until whenever he feels like quitting. (He used to sign off at 3:30, but people kept calling and saying things like "I'm studying for an exam, you can't desert me now.") Post does the late trick on Saturdays and Sundays. They like to talk bad about each other on the air and to categorize themselves and each other (Josephson calls himself the "left-wing Joe Pyne"; Fass is alleged by the others to be "your spokesman from the East Village"; and Post makes much of the fact that he is from, and irretrievably of, the Bronx, and that he is "the youngest old leftist in the world." Each of them is about as much like a "radio announcer" or "disc jockey" as General Hershey is like Monte Rock III, and each of them has a love-hate relationship with the radio station, which pays them about as much as a moderately competent office secretary makes.

Fass is from Brooklyn, a sometime actor (he was the stage manager of the Broadway production of *The Threepenny Opera*, and played just about every part but that of Polly Peachum), and was hired six years ago to take the place of an announcer who was fired. He later started the night-time show, "Radio Unnameable," was fired himself, and then returned to become the sort of personality that suburbanite listeners will hurry home from parties in order to

listen to, and that Yuppies *will* hurry home from demonstrations to hear descriptions of their heads getting cracked from.

Post, the one from the Bronx, just turned 24, worked with Synanon before he came to WBAI as a bookkeeper (he was hired over the telephone), and never paid any attention to rock music before he started playing it on the air. He feels that the people who listen to his weekend show, "The Outside," are probably younger than Fass's, and they are, "like me, people who haven't made up their minds yet about a lot of things and don't have fixed, rigid opinions. They're the younger people, the high school kids; the kids who're beginning to become concerned, who're going to have to make decisions about what positions they're going to take and about what drugs they're going to take (he is against the latter, partly because of his experience with Synanon), and what attitudes they're going to take."

Josephson, a 29-year-old native of Los Angeles, came East to work as a computer programmer. He still programs computers, part-time, and he expresses confusion about which he moonlights as, a programmer or a radio personality. He does the morning show, called "In the Beginning," with something less than total aplomb. Often he is irritable and tells the audience he is, at least until a mythical-sounding, but real, creature named Larry the Bagelman arrives in the studio with Josephson's coffee and bagels, of which he is a connoisseur. Josephson thinks his audience is "a mixture of high school and college kids, some hippies and hip people, and an awful lot of people who work in what they call the communications industry, and artists and artisans, and that sort of thing. And a lot of housewives, and some whole families who consider themselves liberal and educated, but due to the exigencies of earning a living and keeping up in Upper Montclair, New Jersey, are sort of cut off from what's going on.

"They're not part of the New York literary cocktail scene, of which I'm not part either. But WBAI and things like it are their only real source of what's happening." As for himself, he said, "WBAI is like one of those plastic East Side bars for airline stewardesses. I mean, it's not to say that it's only a place to get laid, but it's an activity, a place to focus your life."

All three of WBAI's personalities do their work within pretty much the same format. They deliver themselves of opinions on what's happening in the world today (Fass tends to sound the most idealistic, or perhaps it's just that he is extremely compassionate; Josephson comes close to espousing liberal and radical causes, then veers away at the last moment into cynicism; and Post is easily moved to sarcasm about anything.

They play records, some of them outlandish self-help recordings that Josephson, Post, or Fass have discovered. Josephson's favorite is an instructional record that promises to increase the size of your breasts by *will* power alone. It's based on the old erection principle: you think more blood into them. Most of the recordings, though, are contemporary folk and rock, social protest and social comment, including such interesting combinations as Tom Paxton singing his composition, "Mister Blue," back to back with the Clear Light version of the same song. A lot of the music that is heard on WBAI is heard there first. Arlo Guthrie first taped "Alice's Restaurant" at the station, and WBAI was the first station to play Bob Dylan's "Blow in' in the Wind"; Country Joe and the Fish have taped songs in the studio, and WBAI recognized, long before anybody else, the immortality of Tiny Tim.

Partly because WBAI's big three have such excellent credentials in the groovy community *because* they recognized Dylan and Guthrie and Tiny Tim first—each of them has had offers from other stations and agencies in the little world of New York broadcasting. What used to be called Madison Avenue is constantly lusting after people like Post, Fass, and Josephson, and the money it offers makes working at WBAI look like involuntary servitude. So far, each of

the three has turned the offers down, the reason always boiling down to the fact that they wouldn't be free anywhere else. "They told me, 'You just can't *say* "son-of-a-bitch" on the air," said Josephson of one station that was wooing him. The money would be nice, but no other station in New York can promise the one thing that makes WBAI unique - its utter freedom.

The three personalities exercise that freedom in different ways, and that is the reason why they all have different and loyal followings. Bob Fass enters Master Control a moment or so before midnight each weekday, and with him go the hopes of hundreds of people, political and social outcasts, some of them, knowing that Fass will give them sympathetic hearings. Fass is a gentle man, and he is willing to listen to folks.

"I could probably make a list of the things that are important to me, things that excite me," he said not long ago in an interview, "and I can trace almost every single one of them to some program, some idea that I first exposed to in the six or seven years I've been listening to WBAI. It's been probably the most important educational influence in my life.

"I'm interested, myself, in enlarging people who care about people, and who want to get together to make things a little more comfortable for more people. The way things are now, the government doesn't really care about people, and *people* don't really care about people. And that's pretty much why we're as hung up as we are.

"I'm just the guy who happens to be at the switchboard," he said, speaking both literally and figuratively, "and all these people are plugged into the switchboard, and what I do really is just open it up and let people know it's there."

Does this give one a hunger for a larger switchboard? "I would like to reach more people, certainly. But I don't think I could be as free any place else. There have been tentative little nibbles from networks, and from larger stations in the city, but what they always wanted to buy was a certain kind of thing that I was doing at the moment. And the great thing about WBAI, and maybe the thing that the other stations and networks *will* never be able to steal from us, is that they'll never allow someone to make a mistake - allow you to experiment and fail. And that's the fantastic thing about this station. Very often we make mistakes, and there's chaos and disorder. But this very chaos and disorder is exciting."

Larry Josephson is a totally different sort of person. He is essentially a night person who works at a day person's job, and that is what makes you want to listen to him instead of the professional day people on the other stations who are so good at sounding cheerful. "This is Radio Free Dirty Linen," he says, at seven o'clock, as you are waking up, and you know he *is*, too. Or "This *is* WBAI, the radio station of the sick, the lame, the halt, the blind"

He talks a good deal about politics. "I wonder," he said one morning, "if there's really any difference between Humphrey, Kennedy, and McCarthy; if they're not just *effecting* the difference over the war in order to create some interest in what would otherwise be a very dull election, in order to get more than six people out to vote.

"What really makes me confused *is* that I'm uncertain of the depths of Mr. Kennedy's passion. That is, it seems to me entirely possible that if he were elected on a modified peace platform - something like he wouldn't send American boys 10,000 miles to do what Asian boys should be doing, something like that that it seems to me that Mr. Kennedy would be capable, after a night of reassessing his position and musing and brooding introspectively to the accompaniment of the clicks of 10,000 photographers from *Life* magazine and other such places - that Mr. Kennedy would be capable of announcing reluctantly and after reassessing his position, that he's decided to bomb Brooklyn This is WBAI, paranoid radio in New York"

In real life, Josephson is not very different. He sits at his tiny desk in the crowded WBAI

office, tearing at bits of a piece of wrapping paper that once covered the entire desk top, wearing a full black beard and a grey suit with a poison green turtleneck sweater. On the wall behind him is a pair of earphones; the earpieces have halves of bagels cemented to them. He declines to explain what he is on the grounds that he doesn't know.

"I just sort of do my thing, which is a lazy way of saying I am whatever I am on the radio. I'm either hostile, or friendly, or sage, or pseudo-sage, or opinionated, or I just try to make beautiful things with records, or ugly things with records. I suppose the program is sort of a psychodrama for me, a drama between me and my audience, between me and my fantasies and my pretensions.

"I don't think I have a mission. I often make fun of people with missions, like Phil Ochs or Timothy Leary or Bobby Kennedy. That's a trap I hope to stay out of. But sometimes I fall into that trap - the trap of taking yourself seriously in a political context or a social reformation context. I'm just communicating, effecting a kind of therapy for myself. I'm getting things off my chest. What concerns me is not what Renata Adler had to say to Dwight McDonald in the latest letters column of *The New York Review of Books*, but what concerns me are paranoid fantasies of concentration camps and Bobby Kennedy and the ultimate dishonesty of politicians in our system and how we can have such shitty subways and things like that. So I try not to go along with the latest hippie political party or the sympathy for the latest bust, or whatever. I generally am against the police and for protesters and students, but not slavishly."

That last comment sounded a bit anti-Fass. Listeners especially loyal to one of the big three are all the time calling or writing in, claiming that Josephson is better than Fass and Post, or that Fass is the best, or that Post is the best. And each of the three frequently makes snotty comments about the others. Was there anything behind the alleged rivalry?

"Well, it exists," said Josephson, "but it's a true ambivalence, based initially on friendship. We were, and still are, great friends. Fass was sort of the great father of both Post and myself. He brought us up and recognized whatever latent talents we might have and encouraged us, and so forth. But one eventually grows up and rebels against one's father. There are conflicts, sometimes about petty things, sometimes about things that are said, differences in approach Bob tends to take his causes seriously, and I tend to make fun of all causes. If you see Fass as the father and Post and me as, in a sense, the siblings, and Pacifica as the Holy Ghost or something, you sort of get the model for the rivalry."

Steve Post, the 24-year-old from the Bronx, the one who was hired over the telephone as WBAI's bookkeeper and then became its chief announcer and then its weekend personality, had hardly been on the air for a minute one Saturday night before the phone rang and a listener asked if he were speaking to Bob Fass.

"No!" replied Post patiently, but with a trace of indignation. "It's not Bob Fass. What a way to start off a day!" Then he played a record, followed by a magnificent on-the-air seizure, after which he announced, "I just concluded one of the longest coughing spells of my life. I just coughed up a *kidney*, and that's a long trip."

Then Post commented that the phones were lighting up all at one time, leading him to believe that his listeners were only paying half attention to him and half attention to *Psycho*, which was showing that night on television. "What's happening," he said, "is everybody is taking time out during the commercial in *Psycho* to call me and then if the phone doesn't get answered by the end of the commercial, they hang up."

A girl called Post and said she had not been watching *Psycho*, that rather she had been having a terrible fight with her boy friend, and should she call him and tell him that all is for-

given or just wait it out? Post advised her to write to *Playboy* magazine with her problem or, if it was urgent, to send *Playboy* a telegram. Or, at least, she could call another radio station. Post said he was not competent to answer.

Later, on a weekday afternoon while he was doing a trick as the chief announcer, Post sat nervously in the swivel chair in Master Control, nervous, he said, because he really is just a 24-year-old kid from the Bronx with no college education and he's afraid of interviews. What about the fierce listener-loyalty each of the three personalities commanded?

If the listeners act loyal, he said, "It's because they feel that they own a part of you, as they do. They pay fifteen bucks a year and they, in a sense, own part of us and everything else. It's a good thing, I think, because *we* feel closer to the listeners."

Like many others at the station, Post feels strongly about the freedom he's been allowed to exercise, and, like the others, he expresses paranoia about those who would like to limit that freedom. He recalls that during the McCarthy era, Pacifica was "investigated," and, like most other sensible people to the left of, say, Hubert Humphrey, he feels that an even more terrible rerun of that era is not at all unlikely.

Post chewed on a tunafish sandwich that an emissary from Larry the Bagelman's had brought up. The self-correcting clock corrected itself, and a tape ran out, and Post the announcer went on the air momentarily to identify the station. He fluffed the pronunciation of a composer's name, and realized that he'd fluffed it, but it didn't seem to bother him.

"Poverty, you know," he said, off the air again, "does keep us together, with a mutual cause and a goal, and there is this feeling of being a poverty-stricken group of people—you know, the martyr complex. So in that case it's helpful. I love to get on the air and bitch about how poor we are, and how badly things are going. But on the other hand, it's no fun coming in here before going on the air and trying to find a reel of tape so that I can use the tapedelay and take telephone calls on the air, and not finding one because, you know, our credit's no good with the tape company.

"But don't let me give you the impression that it's getting worse. On the contrary. Especially during the last six months or a year, I've seen it develop, the tremendously increased popularity of the station. One reason, I think, is that the times and the state of the world are so bad that people have been forced to become concerned and are finding 'BAI.

"It's taken us seven years to come into our infancy, and that's where we are now, and we've got an awfully long way to go, but I think we're already becoming a major force in New York City. We always have been a force, to a certain group of people, but there's something new happening. You see it at the 'BAI benefit parties. The people who come are either below 28 or over 55. There's nobody in between. So there's the old leftists who've been listening to 'BAI for years and years and years, and the new young radical revolutionary teenybopper-rockers, who also are involved and interested.

And there are always people tuning in who have never heard the station before. That's the amazing thing about the station. We can't take any surveys or polls to see who's listening. But there are always little indications like I don't go through a Saturday or a Sunday night program without a dozen phone calls from people saying, 'I've never heard this station before; this is fantastic,' or 'This is terrible,' either one. And so there is really an incredible number of people just finding out about WBAI, and the audience is either constantly changing or, more likely, constantly growing.

"This is not a radio station, to a lot of people. It's a *friend*. I've had so many calls over the years, people saying, 'Listen, can WBAI be picked up in Such-and-such, New Jersey?'

"And I'll say, 'I don't think so,' and they'll say, 'That's too bad, because I was going to move there; I guess I'll have to change my plans.'

"And I don't know for sure, but I would guess that this isn't true for any other radio station in the world, that it's so important to some people, and that they feel so much a part of it, that they would base a decision on where they're going to move on whether or not they can listen to it. And that is always the best compliment."

It's a compliment that most *people* don't get, let alone a radio station.