I SPEAK ARKANSAW

KABF's eclectic deejays don't mind admitting they're crazy—about music.

LOW TECH, BUT HIGH ENERGY: KABF FUZZES THE FORMAT LINES

Jerry Colburn remembers very well the day radio station KABF went on the air in Little Rock. "It was a living hell," he says. "I didn't know what I was supposed to do. I didn't know I was supposed to wear headphones so I could hear myself. I didn't know anything except the music I'd brought to play."

Colburn, who spends his days as a state disability-claims officer, was a volunteer disc jockey on August 31, 1984, when KABF's unsteady signal began emanating from a jerry-built tower atop Shinall Mountain, a few miles west of town. He's still spinning platters today.

Like all KABF's longtime deejays, Colburn is an avid record collector. "Back then you had to be," he says. "The station didn't own any."

It barely owned a transmitter. Equipment was mostly scrap or donated. Volunteers built the control room and helped put up the tower. "We used to go off the air a lot," Colburn recalls. "And during a thunderstorm, you could count on it."

Other deejays remember being at the turntable when every light in the studio went suddenly, totally off—but the station remained on the air.

At that point, even intermittent broadcasting was a victory. It had taken nearly seven years for the community organization ACORN to get an assigned frequency, a license, some rudimentary equipment, and an even more rudimentary volunteer staff in place. ACORN activists Joe Fox—just out of Harvard business school—and, later, Lia Lent led the initial drive. (They later married and went into the bakery business.) But it was Scott Holladay who finally saw the station onto the air. The entire process, including salaries and equipment, had cost less than $100,000.

In the four years since, equipment has been updated and a modicum of organization brought to the staff. It's reached the point that Doug Clifford, one of the five paid staff members, can boast, "I don't know if professional's quite the word, but I am convinced that we're listenable."

Steadily growing numbers of listeners seem to agree. Though penury remains a problem, the staff—all of whom start at less than $8,000 a year—and the volunteers remain enthusiastic. Most of them have themselves anted up, and leaned on friends, to get the station this far. And none relishes the prospect of doing as many as four "beg-a-thons" a year to get money for the $1,000-a-month electric bill.

Still, the shows go on. "We've hung in here long enough to have established a small beachhead," one longtime volunteer explains. "Every time we make a payroll or raise enough money to pay the light bill, we're still stable as far as I'm concerned."

The studio, on the second floor of a dilapidated house a couple of blocks south of Philander Smith College, is a busy, slightly grungy place where the Sixties seem no longer ago than this morning. Downstairs, ACORN staff members come and go. Upstairs, Lorri Johnson greeted a recent visitor to the station's offices with a tape recorder and microphone in hand. Johnson was in Little Rock temporarily, on loan from the ACORN station in Dallas to strengthen KABF's public-affairs programming. She was this day soliciting

Photo: Lloyd Litsey

opinions about the federal bail-out of bankrupt savings and loans.

"If tax money is used to save these institutions, what obligations do you think the thrifts should owe to the taxpayers?" Johnson asked. When the startled would-be interviewee muttered, "Um, uh, I don't know. I haven't really thought about it," Johnson clicked off the recorder and wandered away, saying urgently, "That's just it. We've got to get people thinking about these things."

While ACORN workers still think the station exists mainly to broadcast news and public-service announcements for people with low and moderate incomes, for many of the station's deejays—and listeners—it's music, not politics, that matters. The weekly cast of deejays includes ministers, rappers, banjo pickers, soul sisters, men with the Caribbean in their voices, Latins, and late-night gonzo rockers—as eclectic an assortment as you're likely to find on American radio.

Jack Hill, a reporter for the *Arkansas Democrat*, says he agreed to do a show after years of complaining about commercial stations "because it was time to put my music where my mouth is." Natalie Russell went on the air at seventeen; she, too, says, "It was the music that got me up here."

Many agree with Randy Wright, a lawyer, volunteer deejay, and self-proclaimed "music idiot." Wright says, "There's no reason, with all the music we have here, that Little Rock should just sit back and listen to stations that have to check with MTV to find out what music they should and should not be playing."

Wright and Mark Oswald, a reporter for the *Arkansas Gazette*, host a show on Saturday nights called "Nothin' But a House Party." They don't check with MTV. "We know what's good and what's pap," Wright says. "We play anything you can dance to, anything that's fun." An all-star lineup on their show might include classic rock by the Wild Seeds, zydeco by Boozoo Chavis, souped-up surf from the Forgotten Rebels, country-reggae by Sister Rose, psychedelia by Passion Fodder, soul by Barrence Whitefield and the Savages, punk from Patti Smith, and the blistering rhythms of Magic Sam and His Blues Band.

In an era when commercial stations work hard at pigeonholing their listeners—soul, rock, adult contemporary, country, or easy-listening—the house-party pair, and KABF as a whole, delight in fuzzing the lines. Here, if nowhere else in radio programming, "crossover" isn't a dirty word.

Of all the personalities who have grown up with the station, the afternoon bluesman of the "Traffic Jam" show who calls himself Mr. Lee is probably the most popular. He's got that "It's-Mr.-Lee's-comin'-through-to-*you*" sort of style. But equally loyal audiences tune in for the morning gospel show. And when it comes to support for KABF, gospel listeners respond with the greenest amen during the station's fund drives. (The afternoon rap show gets big pledges, but the pay-up doesn't match the promises.)

KABF's strength is its musical variety. "Oh, yes, ma'am," one volunteer deejay says. "We have blacks and whites and Spanish—we have everything down there."

The other base of support comes from bluegrass fans. Vi Baker, a customer-relations manager for Jones Toyota-Volvo, and her husband, Jim, who works in the body shop at Bale Chevrolet, host a Sunday afternoon bluegrass show. "It's been Vi and Jim for four years," says Vi. She credits the station with being the first to regularly broadcast a form of music basic to Arkansas, with the result that other stations around the state have lately begun adding a few hours of bluegrass to their schedules.

Vi likes the demographic potluck that occurs at the station. "Oh, yes, ma'am," she says. "We have blacks and whites and Spanish—we have everything down there." But that doesn't mean that she understands them all. She recalls chatting with the fellow who does the Caribbean show. "He kept saying this word, 'mon.' I kept asking him to repeat it, but for the life of me, I couldn't understand what he was saying. Finally, I asked him to write it down, and it was m-a-n! All that time he was saying 'man' !"

Vi also likes the guys who do the Spanish show that comes on right before hers on Sundays. "But, boy," she says, "I'm here to tell you, if you're going to talk to them, you'd better speak Spanish. I mean he rattles that stuff off."

Actually, Lucho Reyes, who does the "Si Se Puede" show with partner Willie Cosmos, speaks fluent English. But the show is for those who don't, or who just yearn to hear Spanish spoken, along with music from other parts of the Americas. "I can show the people of Arkansas we have many types of music," says Reyes, a welder who left his native Chile when Pinochet came to power. "We have Andean, and Bolivian, and Cuban music, for example. Too many people here, they think if you speak Spanish, all you listen to is mariachi music."

Without a doubt, KABF has broadened the variety of radio in its signal area, which stretches, on the east and west, from Helena to Russellville. Organizers acknowledge that they had no intention of creating what the trade calls a dual-audience, multiformat station at the outset. But as it's evolved, the station has taken on the character of its volunteer deejays. They represent a range of musical tastes, and because of them, KABF now has listeners who are young and old, poor and professional, black, white, and Hispanic. The station has grown so quickly, in fact, that according to recent ratings of the region's top twenty broadcasters, KABF now ranks eleventh.

That pleases organizers, even if it's not exactly what they'd planned. Scott Holladay laughs as he admits, "Yes, the station has developed its own flavor. You sure couldn't say we have any one particular sound—unless it would be amateur."

Even that condition seems to be improving as the station matures—at least most of the time. Even alternative radio has its bounds, though determining them has taken some time. Randy Wright remembers that one of the deejays "was this guy who was on at 3 a.m. I just happened to tune in. He was basically sitting up there with a friend of his making sounds into the mike. He probably thought nobody was listening."