The Burnt Dog Origin Story – as shared by Duane Mieliwocki to Kristy Duncan | 4 Sept 2018

The station was in the midst of a format change, going from regularly playing the Carpenters and Pat Boone alongside ELO and Yes to a more college-y type of radio station. The idea of the station, always, had been to serve the journalism department as a place for students to practice reading the news live, on air. So music was almost secondary. The format was more or less left up to the DJs... but there wasn't much in the stacks that would be varied much from an Album Rock type of station. In fact, in the Spring before this big change, the Program Director, whose name escapes me, allowed the Psychedelic Furs into the stacks. He later said that adding the P-furs was the beginning of the death of KCPR. I think this was 1982. So 1982-83 would have been the first year the station started to look like a college station.

A very popular ad at the time was the Maxell Tape "Chair Man" ad, with the speakers up so loud that it was blowing the man's hair and tipping over his martini glass. Also in my head was the old RCA Victrola dog. I don't remember the seed of the idea, whether it was totally mine, whether it came from a broader discussion, whether it was a bunch of joking around, but in any event I decided to try to draw something up.

I can draw to get an idea across, but I am not gifted in that way. But I had my drafting pens and just went at it. I don't remember how we first used it... how it got from me showing it to someone to it becoming a piece of art we used. But Ric Turner, who was very enthusiastic about the newer format and was either Program Director or Music Director at the time started using the phrase "Burnt Dog Radio" in reference to the drawing.

Honestly, I didn't like it because I didn't think it tied to anything. We didn't have a huge following and I didn't think anyone would know what we were talking about. The idea of an ad blitz was not in our vocabulary. I'm remembering it didn't really catch on. But Ric was enthusiastic in its use and it was a little bit "bad". And that was the image the station was going for. KROQ, but crazier. So it stuck. And I still see that badly drawn burnt dog. I feel sorry for it and wished there was someone who had maybe made him look less like a defeathered turkey with a match stuck in his head. But alas.

I'm now a little unclear as to the sequence of who was in charge of what at the time. I remember Steve Theroux was my Program Director (and I was the General Manager). Ric may have been the first Program Director to "allow" college music into the stacks. Steve may have been responsible for cleansing the stacks and fully committing to the format the next year, of all of that Pat Boone/Carpenter stuff (there was much hue and cry). John Thawley was the GM the next year, and his team went even further trying to play stuff that was even less mainstream. I think we bounced back a little bit toward the center after that administration.

All of this format change was Very Controversial at the time. But the station got on the college radio map, so that was very exciting too.

The New Format, Another View …

Ok. My memory is that when I showed the Burnt Dog logo to Ric, that he was in charge. So it was sometime during his year as PD. I also remember hanging out at the station a lot that summer, so I'm pretty sure it was very early on... even before students got back to school. I'm pretty sure we started using it the same summer that they changed the format.

Also, Dawn characterized Steve as not being present but that is neither true or fair. What is difficult to believe now is that the format change was quite controversial. Many people were angered by it. Cal Poly was a very conservative school back then and when Ric made the change, one of the ways he softened the blow was to keep the old stuff in the stacks. Whether he did this on purpose or whether he just didn't have time to clean out the old stuff, I don't remember. But it was there. Not all the staff were on board with the changes either. Some of the folks who were in favor of going back to the old format still had shows. So they would play the old records.

When Steve started his year, he wanted to purge all of the old records. This meant going not only through the stacks, but also going through all the storage in the newsroom because records that had already been pulled kept showing up in the stacks after DJs snuck them back in. I remember having at least one meeting with Zuke about complaints re: the new format. He was supportive but wanted to keep the noise to a dull roar. So what Steve was contending with in his year were folks who wanted the old format back, folks like Ric Turner (and frankly, Steve) who liked the new format and wanted to watch it evolve, and folks like Toi Phillips and Chris Johnson, who were looking to push the edge of college radio. They were all about having KCPR make a mark as leaders in this area. So Steve was caught in the middle. Of course the people who felt he wasn't doing enough were also the loudest squeaky wheels, so of course they felt he was not involved and jumped at the chance to make an even bigger change. But Steve was definitely present. He just didn't agree with Dawn, Toi, et al.

There was a second undercurrent that was not as big but still had impact and that was that there were a number of KCPR DJs who had on air jobs at other radio stations. I'm sure I can't remember everyone, but they included Dawn, Me, Steve, among others. Because we were doing professional radio, we tended to sound a bit too polished. Some people were irked about us having on air jobs. I remember stopping for a time, but not too long. Some people dumbed themselves down for the format. But the problem was that, in general, the station was sounding too polished for many. At that time, KROQ was emerging as a force with disc jockeys playing what they called "drop ins" which were generally non-sequitur recordings of a line or two of dialogue between songs... kind of like audio GIFs. And you'd use them in the same way that a GIF is used... to punctuate a point or make a joke. Ric used these a lot. I had a few. But both of us were from LA and were very familiar with KROQ. However, even though the point of these were to make the shows sound spontaneous and "crazy" the effect they had was one of polish. So now you had a college radio station with polished DJs, polished productions, and music that was alternative but also polished. The DJs as a group wanted something a bit more raw. So the station went in that direction after Steve. Steve pulled out all of the old records, then moved them out of the building. There might have been a sale or giveaway. But when we were done, there was no going back.

I enjoyed sounding slick and eventually got back on the air. I didn't care who complained. But I got that way after being GM. I'm sure I had detractors. I also liked the more mainstream alternative music. Mostly I liked being on the air.

Fantasy Festival (Image Uploaded Separately)

The original fantasy festival art. Oh, I would have loved to have a computer back then instead of hand drawing each of those letters in the circle.