

Real To Reel

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'Merry' Back As KTXB's Prankster

A FELLOW using the moniker "Merry Prankster" has earned increasing respect for his once-a-month experimental program called "Theatre Of The Airwaves" on KTXB-FM for quite some time now, obviously preferring to throw his on-air partner C.H.I.P. (Computer-Holographic-Integrated-Program) the spotlight and keep his own identity a secret.

Screen a newsletter and one is offered only the following facts about the Prankster: *Birthplace: unknown. Birthdate: unknown. Height: unknown. Weight: unknown. Hair color: unknown. Eye color: verdant green. Extraordinarily elusive.*

Even realizing in advance that the Prankster was not going to immediately agree to an interview — a demand to use his real name was met with initial and later repeated resistance — one couldn't help but be stunned by the stipulations insisted upon by the innovative radio wizard.

Oh, he finally agreed to talk, all right. But only at the International House Of Pancakes. And only at 7 in the morning. And, it would appear later, only if there was an ample supply of boysenberry syrup available at the table.

Fine. Anything to get the Prankster to go public. After all, his "Theatre Of The Airwaves" now airing from 10 p.m. to 1 a.m. on the last Wednesday of every month on Texas Tech University's non-profit station, is probably still the best gift anyone could tape for a pair of headphones with a penchant for modern rock, British comedy and high-tech references to cream of asparagus.

Hey, nobody said this guy was ordinary, OK?

JUST WHAT is "Theatre Of the Airwaves?" Well, even Prankster agrees a logical response might be to call it a high-tech audio adventure.

For that matter, he's copyrighted the



program as a music and comedy showcase. Ask for a definition, however, and both he and engineer Scott McMullan look at each other and, confusing the waitress by attempting stereo over pancakes and coffee, reply in unison. "Maximum radio."

It's an interesting definition, if only because the sheer nature of commercial radio — that is, selling while entertaining — rarely if ever leaves room for experimentation, improvisation or innovation. Indeed, if "Theatre Of The Airwaves" has any sort of predecessor at all, it's the BBC in England. Prankster resided there in the late '70s as an exchange student, and he recalled, "That's where I got the idea for Theatre, after listening to John Peele's program on the BBC. It was a great year for punk, you may remember. Hey, I even got to see the Boomtown Rats as a garage band."

"Anyway, the BBC itself is highly

regimented, and Peele's was the only really progressive show on the air. The music he played was new. His show had a radical air about it: the new music was getting angry and he'd play this really up-tempo classical music between the songs. It was very different, and of course they aired it only late at night."

Prankster's own introduction to radio came while splicing together news feeds for a station in Houston. Upon arrival at Tech, he opted to major in architecture, which he now credits as "the major cause of my brain damage. Too much coffee. Too many late nights."

His introduction to KTXB in Lubbock came before he'd changed his major to broadcasting, but still found him bored with the ordinary. His very first shift was hardly glamorous, the hours being 1 to 3 a.m. on Sunday mornings, but he smiled. "At that hour, I just did what I damn well pleased. The program director was asleep. And I was happy."

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THEN, IN the summer of 1982, the Wednesday night shift opened up and Prankster jumped at it. "Theatre Of The Airwaves" officially debuted as a weekly program and its creator said. "It was to be, if not Lubbock's first, KTXT's first new music program. We were strictly new music: we played nothing that already had commercial air play...I guess at the beginning, we used a lot more Monty Python comedy bits as bridges between the songs. Nothing longer than 30 seconds. And the comedy drops led to the more bizarre stuff, like sound effects speeded up, slowed down, technically enhanced — basically what we call 'effects clusters.'"

"That's where you just take anything and everything - like a dog barking, a plane crash, a burp, a Python character saying 'You don't say,' a girl sighing, an excerpt from a Hanna-Barbara cartoon - and just mix them all together. American comedy is so slow and predictable, and I wanted this program to be more like British comedy, where there would be so much to hear that you'd still be thinking about it after it was over."

Oddly enough, his is a modern show with roots in the past, as he explained. "I just wanted an opportunity to see what I could do creatively. I wanted it to be like the best days of radio, back in the 20s through the 30s, when your imagination was the only limit on what you got out of a show. My intention was for the show to be very different, entertaining and highly produced."

Things changed in the summer of 1984. Prankster decided it was time to pay the rent and a few bills and, as KTXT has never paid the Prankster for his contributions, the radio innovator decided to give commercial radio a try. He worked as a nighttime deejay for KEND-AM, giving up Talking Heads in favor of Loretta Lynn, but he recalled, "I wanted to go full-time into radio. That was important to me. But I still missed Theatre. It was a wonderful catharsis for me, just to be able to do Theatre and just go ape once a week."

WHEN PRANKSTER was promoted to program director at KEND this year, his nights were suddenly free and he immediately did two things.

"On the first weeknight I was off. I just wanted to go out and watch people and see what they were doing. It had been so long since I'd seen anything at night except cars whizzing by my (control room) window."

The next thing he wanted to do was resurrect "Theatre Of The Airwaves." KTXT's program director said OK, the students currently holding the Wednesday time slot agreed to give up the last Wednesday each month, and everything was go.

Having already decided to make use of McMullan's many skills with audio equipment — the engineer has handled sound in the past for bands like No Compromise — the show also took a turn toward the future, more specifically toward computers, phasers, overdrives and an overall high-tech feeling.

"In a way, it's easier now. College radio," Prankster says, "is being serviced with records more efficiently by the companies distributing new music." They also have used compatible music by local bands. (Rockers Asparagus Nightmare will be featured this Wednesday, for example.) On the other hand, while producing Theatre may be a catharsis, it's also highly demanding work.

More than 20 man-hours are put in before each show airs. A lot of the work involves splicing. The voiceovers are handled at McMullan's place of employment. Lubbock Audio-Visual. The assembling of the breaks — all of the hilarious, curious, bizarre, amusing and downright strange things heard between the songs — are produced over at KLLL-KEND's joint studio. All of the breaks are timed and logged.

THEN, FOR the three hours that "Theatre Of The Airwaves" is actually on the air, the time spent playing each song finds Prankster and McMullan scurrying to find a break compatible in terms of time, music and tone, something that will maintain the flow of the program. "Every night we leave sweating, and very, very tired," Prankster admits.

"That's why we usually can't even pick up the telephone and we ask people to write in their requests instead of calling."

Why make such an effort at all, one might wonder. McMullan explains that the work is "an artistic release, for, lack of a better word. If you had a hobby — and I'm not calling Theatre a hobby — you'd probably put in just as many hours, right?" Prankster is even more direct. "I can give you three reasons why I do this. One: It's never been done before. Two: I want to provide KTXT's listeners with a really different, entertaining program. Three: It's fun. We do have an awful lot of fun."

SO DO a good many listeners, a group difficult to categorize as Prankster has heard from high school students, college students and even a surgeon listening to the program in an operating room. "You'd be surprised how many people listen to the campus station," McMullan noted. If syndication becomes a viable possibility, both men agree that the primary problem would be finding adequate production facilities "I'm very happy with my job," Prankster says, "and it would take a lot of money to get me to do Theatre full time. If we were syndicated, we'd be doing this either once a week or five times a week. Not once a month, like we are now."

And until then?

"We'll just keep doing it as long as they let us," he said, then added, "and by then, hopefully, we'll have become the first broadcasters to transmit from a space station."

Long-time fans of "Theatre Of The Airwaves," however, may be surprised to learn they're not transmitting from there right now — with a receiver right here in Lubbock near their favorite restaurant.

Pass the boysenberry, Prankster...

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