KSAN struggled on as a corporate giant for a couple of years before turning into a country-and-western station. Richard Gossett got various shifts in one or two other places, but wound up getting a job at the Anchor Steam Brewery. And instead of sticking to the stiff new formats that were emanating from the corporate ogre, I, like so many other people in those fateful years, turned to the left of the dial.

College radio stations had, of course, always existed in some form or another—as a training ground for electrical engineers and as an extracurricular activity for campus-bound newsies, sportifs, and queers. By the mid-seventies, following the trend of the post-hippie music world, many such stations boasted late-night radio shows hosted by collegiate music fiends who delighted in playing the longest tracks off albums by obscure British art bands: Pink Floyd, Gentle Giant, Caravan. But when mainstream radio lost its grip on music, then the long-dormant airwaves of the college radio stations (reserved for years for *um*-ridden play-by-plays of intercollegiate football games) at schools ranging from the University of Texas and the University of Kansas to Upsala College in Orange, New Jersey, and to the University of San Francisco and U.C. Berkeley, where I was, began simultaneously to create new music programs that dealt more competently with the rest of radio's insufficiencies.

And suddenly—not gradually at all, but quite suddenly—those stations became an invaluable American network, linking the nascent punk rockers of each city to one another, and providing all the bands within a community with a way in which to prosper. Years later, while dining at an industry conclave with R.E.M. and a bunch of record company VIPs, Peter Buck asked the collected party how many had worked in college radio. Every single person present at the table—twenty-five or so, ranging from journalists and mainstream deejays to industry execs, record store clerks, and musicians, including a couple of Buck's own friends—raised a hand.

In some ways, the story of college radio has been like a fairy tale come true—or, at the very least, a made-for-TV movie: the geekiest, most unpopular nerds at the college decide to barricade themselves into a closet and start a gonzo radio station, alienating their more popular peers and professors by blaring out noisome, underproduced garage rock featuring the F word and worse. But the radio station struggles on, the geeks grow up and prosper, and *voilà!*, the records they've been playing—by U2, the Cure, R.E.M.—go platinum! The deejays get hired to positions of influence by major record companies! The airwaves have been won back by the righteous, and rock 'n' roll will rule again.

Oddly enough, that's almost exactly how it happened. For a while there in the early eighties, college radio really was our sound salvation. It, after all, still played free-form radio, nipping expertly from James Brown to James Chance, from Fairport Convention to the Slits, soundtracking not just the hits of the moment but the

history of rock, giving it some context, teaching its listeners its secrets, creating an interior world of newfound glamour and romance and escape. And they provided an outlet for all the record nerds and frustrated musicians to meet each other, enabling them to form a community of misfits, maybe twenty people per town, generally just enough people to tempt bands to the area, to play whichever VFW hall or old-man bar was willing to allow them on the premises. And lastly, the stations, such as they were, became the inevitable conduit for all the independently released records to be given their due. They played the unheard music.

The college radio effect happened at the same time in obscure tiny towns all over America—at Oberlin in Ohio, at Florida State, at Evergreen in Olympia, Washington . . . anyplace where there was a bunch of bored and frustrated white kids with large record collections, and one kid in particular with the will to make things happen. But Boston was the city where this all happened in the most concentrated manner, and where the significance of college radio began to take on a larger meaning. Thanks to a predominance of colleges—some, like Harvard and MIT, containing far more than their share of record geeks and electrical whizzes—plus a proximity to New York City, it became a hotbed of punk rock early on. As early as 1976, WTBS (later called WMBR) at MIT had begun running the first punk rock show in America. And then, not surprisingly, since Boston is a city overrun with hypercompetitive overachieving white kids, Harvard's college station, WHRB, followed suit. Pretty soon, every significant college station in Boston—Harvard, MIT, Emerson, and Boston College—had its own resident punk rock show.

Scott Becker was a freshman at Tufts University in Boston when he tuned in to "Shakin' Street," the late-night proto-punk program on Harvard's WHRB, in 1977. "I remember I heard the New York Dolls, and then the Ramones, for the very first time on the radio, and it shocked the hell out of me. That guy got the Pistols' import 45's first of everybody. Shortly after that, Oedipus, who back then had pink hair and a 45 adaptor tattooed on his shoulder, started doing a punk rock show on MIT's station, and pretty soon, every college in Boston had a punk rock show on their station.

"Before that, when I was in high school in Connecticut in the mid-seventies, the AOR station seemed so hip," recalls Becker. "But then suddenly it started to dawn on me that it wasn't that hip at all. It was punk rock that did it. It was just clear that there was the whole new scene and all these new labels and exciting new records, and commercial radio just rejected it, totally."

Becker describes himself as a high school recluse. "I just loved radio, way more than TV. I don't know what other kids did after school, maybe played football or smoked pot, but I ran home and listened to the radio for hours and hours and hours." When he applied to Tufts, one of his main concerns was the on-campus

station, WMFO. But as a freshman, he found himself too shy to volunteer. "I went to a couple station meetings, but everybody knew each other and I was too out of it."

Happily, as a sophomore, his next-door neighbors were involved. By the end of the year, he was music director and, he recalls laughingly, part of an embattled cabal, immediately tied up in a serious intrigue. His first priority at the station was to emphasize and add records such as those from the nearby Rounder Records label—a specialty label featuring bluegrass, blues, and a new record by George Thorogood and the Destroyers—to the playlist. "We were ten watts, no guidance, no faculty advisor, no money, and no one got paid, and whenever we asked the student council for money, they'd go, 'Well, don't you get free records?' For us to just be on the air was really an accomplishment. We went from trying to imitate an AOR station to making our own."

Tufts's station wasn't as punked out as larger Boston college stations (though, Becker recalls, there was a gradual shift: " 'Less Dead—more Ultravox' was our rallying cry"). Instead, its main concern, Becker recalls, was remaining free-form. "That didn't mean a person could play anything they wanted," he notes, "it meant playing a broad mix of different kinds of music. That was the ongoing philosophical debate of the era. We'd get into these big arguments with the student body 'cause they thought the music we played was weird. There was always a lot of politicking and intrigue around the station management. Someone was always trying to boot the general manager and put someone else in his place. But our main point of argument was specialty programming. We had an all-Portuguese hour, which served a really large local Portuguese-speaking community, and the student body was always going, 'But no one here speaks Portuguese!' And we had an R & B show that was real alien to white middle-class kids, that played the worst kind of disco and 'quiet storm' stuff."

These kinds of debates are still going on at college stations around the country, though in these trying times, merely getting funding for something as anachronistic as radio is difficult enough without adding in the trials of keeping programming consistent.

And then there's the all-volunteer effect, whereby the unpaid deejays feel their labor gives them the right to do what they want. Some stations had to actively discourage putative deejays who wanted to play bad commercial stuff. "At 'MFO," says Becker, "that wasn't a problem: we had a totally completist attitude toward the record library. Playing indies was important while I was at WMFO, but it's important to remember there were a lot fewer indies in 1977, when I got there, than there were in 1981, when I left."

Though labels like Dangerhouse and Berserkley and Rounder were forerunners of the coming game, the American independent label network began establishing itself on

firmly punk rock grounds only around 1980. By the time Geoff Weiss got to Harvard's WHRB in 1981, the process was in full swing, and as music director of 'HRB, he was in a perfect position to help consolidate its gains.

Unlike most college radio stations, WHRB is a fifty-thousand-watt commercial station—95.5—that the university had purchased years before, when radio licenses were less valuable. In addition to rock shows, it has ambitious classical, country, and news programming. In 1981, Weiss recalls, "I felt like it was following more than leading. Musically, it was not as ambitious as it could be. There were quality deejays on it, but no real music fiends."

Weiss had become a punk rock aficionado at age fourteen. Living twenty miles from a town on the edge of a dirt road in the backcountry of Vermont, he used to go, he remembers, into town with his doctor father for the evening to pass the time while his dad made his medical rounds. He passed it by reading every word of every magazine on the newsrack outside the train station: *Guns and Ammo, Soldier of Fortune,* and his favorite of all, *Creem,* which at the time was raving about the Ramones, Blondie, and the Dictators.

Weiss, who seems to have had a natural collecting bent from birth, immediately went nuts. He started collecting everything punk he could get his hands on. "Some of it I could buy at Britt's Department Store. I got the Ramones' second single there, and some English stuff on major labels that hadn't gotten axed. And I'd get my grandma in New York City—who was eighty, mind you—to go to the Bleecker Bazaar and get me things. I'd give lists to people who were going to a city—any city—to get stuff for me. My parents went to London and brought me home box loads. I took the bus to Boston to see the Ramones and the Clash."

When Weiss began at Harvard in 1981, he, along with his friend Jim Barber, gradually managed to lasso the helm of the station for their own use. One of the things they worked at changing was the playlists' former emphasis on English music. Like characters in a Neil Diamond song, they began to look toward America. WZBC (at Boston College), he recalls, was interested in the newest, most radical English dance stuff, while he and Barber preferred to emphasize new American bands, as well as those of Swedish, Dutch, Australian origin—anything, as long as it was good and rare.

But there was a good reason, Weiss adds, why most stations before that time were fixated on English output: "The English made more records. There were labels like Stiff and Chiswick and Factory, all putting out great punk rock records. But all the great American punk rock bands—the Dils and the Avengers and the Heartbreakers—didn't even get to make records. The Heartbreakers you had to buy on import! It wasn't even until 1980—till Dead Kennedys and the Misfits came out—that American punk bands started to get stuff on vinyl, and by then a bunch

had already broken up. I remember that was the year I went to D.C. for the weekend and into Yesterday and Today Records and I found out about Dischord Records: the Bad Brains, Minor Threat, SOA—all these seven-inches were coming out, and suddenly you could get them at Newbury Comix! It became available to people who were willing to look."

After that, he remembers, in his capacity as music director, "Dischord and Black Flag were our priority records. And we sought out the newest, strangest, extremest American stuff. We were hardcore record collectors and we got tons of demo tapes from all over the world. We weren't just reading *New York Rocker*; we were going out and getting records no one else could get."

Weiss's practice gleaning records as a kid now came in handy. Once again he found himself giving record wish lists to people on their way to Europe. He worked weekend swap meets, buying punk records for a quarter each, and combing the racks of record stores in New England, upstate New York, D.C., and Florida, where his grandparents lived. Obsession with vinyl, with music, with noise: this was a unifying hallmark of the exhilaration of the times.

All this time—at least in part because of college radio's intensity of support—Boston was turning into one of the most exciting cities for local bands in America. There were all these great bands—Mission of Burma, the Young Snakes, the Del Fuegos, Human Sexual Response, the Neats—and they played all the time. 'HRB or 'MBR would announce some loft show in the morning, and in the evening it'd be packed. Those were the days.

Julie Farman Lovering was seventeen years old when she moved to Boston from a Massachusetts suburb. At that time her favorite band was Cheap Trick, and she remembers the cool "punk rock" outfit she wore to her first show: black spandex pants tucked into brown cowboy boots, a man's purple shirt with gray pinstriped tie and pink wraparound sunglasses: "I thought it was so bitchin', and the fact that everyone was staring at me weird just proved it!"

Luckily for Julie's nascent fashion sense, she found a place to live by means of the ad column in the *Boston Phoenix*, and her first two roommates were members of local art rock bands, the Girls and the CCCP-TV. "Of course I instantly realized I was totally uncool and adopted their lifestyle, their musical tastes, and their radio station," remembers Julie.

That station was WMBR, the MIT station. A lifetime later, caught by chance in the middle of a harried afternoon meeting about Stevie Ray Vaughan's new LP in her third-floor, ocean-view office in Santa Monica, Julie can still recite the lineup of 'MBR's Late Riser's Show, which aired Monday through Friday, ten to twelve. "Monday was Albert, Tuesday was Greg, Wednesday was Tammy, Thursday was David. Greg would say really obnoxious things about local personalities . . . and

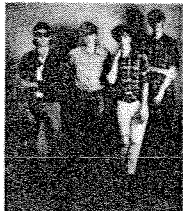
Albert did this thing, 'Jim Bob at the Movies,' and everybody would be talking about what they'd heard on 'MBR all day."

Julie got a job as a waitress at a bar called the Rat, a divey little club near Kenmore Square. The Del Fuegos were the dishwashers. "I loved it 'cause I could go to work at eight P.M. and dress as obnoxiously as I wanted." There she was subjected to the process of hearing four bands a night, six bands a week, honing her own ideas of what ruled and what sucked. ("They almost all sucked.") Presently, Julie became the Rat's talent booker, helping to host all the top independent bands: R.E.M., the Replacements, the Dream Syndicate. "All my inspiration for booking came from 'MBR's playlist," she recalls. "Because we didn't advertise anywhere except there. We'd do ticket giveaways with them, co-presents. They'd list it on their concert report at eleven-thirty every morning and that was enough. They'd jam the hell out of a band and that night the club would be packed. The student population was humongous, and everyone there listened to their own college station out of some weird sense of patrician duty or something. I mean, I highly doubt that people in L.A. listen to KXLU just because they happened to go to Loyola Marymount, but MIT and Harvard are like that."

Later on, in her role as manager for the bands the Neats and the Lyres, Julie saw the college radio system in action all over America. "But Boston radio was great, the people running it were so great; the music was always great. I remember hearing 'The Message' on 'MBR, the first rap song I ever heard sandwiched between all this indie rock. It ['MBR] was so totally adventurous, but it wasn't just that . . . it was that it was accessible, too. You could call up the deejay, or a band on tour would be doing an interview there. You could just call 'em up at the studio and invite them over to your house."

If Boston's scene had a drawback in those days, Julie says, it was that it was drug-driven. "For me, being into punk rock was all about freedom and doing what I wanted to do and having my own apartment and knowing the bands, but a lot of the time I think we were following the drugs, not the bands. Sadly, I think for a long time the really exciting part about the 'mats coming to town was more the scene than the show. . . . It was going into the bathrooms with the girls and the band and bonding and doing blow."

Julie adds that Boston's scene was monumentally clique-oriented, eventually becoming overly dependent on who knew who at what station and who managed the band. "The Pixies started to happen right before I left Boston," she comments, "and they did not have our blessing. They didn't come up through the appropriate ranks, didn't have the right friends or manager, didn't play the right clubs; they were on some farty English label. . . . We were all, like, 'How dare they *have* a label!' Before I left Boston, I had never heard one note of the Pixies and I just



hated them . . . *hated* them!" Ironically, Julie is now married to ex-founding Pixie David Covering.

Meanwhile, over at 'HRB, Weiss and his cronies—the Allston Art Rock Mafia, he refers to them now—also fostered strong relationships with local bands. Mission of Burma was their house band, while others—the Lyres, Dumptruck, Christmas, Volcano Suns, and later Big Dipper—were forging a community of bands that, like the communities to follow, actually started drawing would-be musicians and writers and radio deejays to the city. Boston was the home base for a number of crucial fanzines, including *Conflict,* the photocopied bully pulpit of the future label owner and tastemaker Gerard Cosloy, the Murray the K of Sonic Youth. Obscurity for obscurity's sake was almost a byword of their reign there. Weiss's copy of his favorite record of that era, an independently pressed 45 called "Communiqué" by a Cincinnati-based band called Lucky Pierre, which he played on his program every week, was the only copy in existence, making it literally unique: the perfect single, the rarest of all possible breeds.

In fact, Weiss and company may have carried their obsession with obscure records a bit too far: at least, that's how it seems in retrospect, especially now that the same stance, grown impracticable and anachronistic, still trickles weakly through the pages of *Spin* and on the airwaves of the leading college radio stations, which tout new bands as Godhead with little or no provocation, and which frantically mimic each other's monthly obsession—Ice T! Ice Cube! Foxcore! Seattle!—and steadfastly insult their readers and listeners by implying that they are stupid if they disagree. And yet there used to be some beauty in that stance, a private exhilaration of discovery, an innocence no longer applicable to a world that now cares passionately about alternative music. Back in the early part of the decade, college radio didn't advocate obscurity and anarchy and noise because it was trendy or elitist; it did so from a purity of intention almost impossible to recapture now: because it loved it and understood the music and—in the unselfish, sacrificial nature of true love—expected exactly nothing in return.

Weiss smiles. "Stupid empty elitism is dumb and pointless," he agrees. "But back in 1981 it wasn't like that. I mean, people are starting to press up records all over the country all by themselves again; I get boxes of indies from all over every week now. But the reason a rare record is rare is because it's ahead of its time and great, not just because it's obscure. And in 1977 it was just more likely that the point of view you were coming from would make you good. Now, when almost everybody's in a band, their reasons aren't necessarily as warped or as talent-driven.

"I think it's important for people not to build icons," he adds, "because

alternative music has become myth-driven instead of music-driven, and that's wrong. That's one reason I love to cut people down when they get big. I don't necessarily dislike bands because other people like them, I just dislike them because they've betrayed what they originally believed in."

Ten years ago, if you had told college radio disc jockeys around the country that come the nineties their playlists would be closely monitored by the music industry and that major financial decisions would then be based on their personal choice of songs, they would have stared at you in shocked disbelief. Moreover, once they stopped staring, they would have started laughing, because back then, the whole point of college radio was not to break bands or make money, but to provide an alternative to mainstream radio for the portions of society who had a burning desire to actually hear some of the more mannerless and obscure records, British, African, or American—independents, records they'd only heard of in English music weeklies and fine-print fanzines; records made in people's basements, records whose unfamiliar sound or speed had caught their makers in the grip of an industry that, for obscure reasons of its own, was willing to produce but not promote them. "Back then," says Weiss, "I wouldn't have taken a job in the record industry for any money. In fact, I was offered one and I laughed in their face."

These days college stations are seldom run by insane record fanatics combing their personal collections for their playlists; instead, it's a breeding ground for young record company executives. Weiss says kids walk into his office all the time with long résumés, pleading for an industry position. He should know; he's a young record company executive himself: product manager at Warner Brothers Records responsible for running the campaigns of bands like Babes in Toyland and Mudhoney, as well as those of Danzig and the Thompson Twins. Julie Farman Lovering is director of publicity at Epic Records in Los Angeles, where she works with Pearl Jam, the Screaming Trees, the Allman Brothers, and Motorhead, among others. Scott Becker runs *Option* magazine, which a friend from the old days once described as " 'MFO in print." Oedipus, the pink-haired deejay at MIT who ran the first punk rock show in America, is currently the music director of WBCN, Boston's largest commercial rock station, one of the most important radio taste-making positions in the country.

Weiss still listens obsessively to demos and rarities from all over the world of underground, but, he adds, somewhat wistfully, "I've stopped obsessing on whether a record came out this week or not."

In 1988 Weiss's parents' house in Vermont exploded, destroying much of his vinyl record collection. "And," he adds inconsequently, "I haven't listened to college radio since I left Boston in 1985."