

WAR OF THE WORLDS

PART ONE

BIG WORLD

How Clear Channel programs America

By Jeff Sharlet

On July 17, 2002, as a band called The Boils was preparing to play, seven men with badges, police officers and agents of Philadelphia's Department of Licenses and Inspections, walked into the basement of the First Unitarian Church at Chestnut and Van Pelt. Nobody knows who tipped them off, but it was clear that someone wanted the Church, as the club in the basement was called, shut down. The show's promoter, Sean Agnew, had been booking acts there for six years, but before the night when the inspectors appeared his shows had not warranted a single official complaint. A tall, lean twenty-four-year-old with a stubbled undertaker's jaw and long, dark eyelashes, Agnew almost always wore a black mesh cap, with DORM SLUT scrawled on it graffiti-style in silver Sharpie, crammed over thick black hair. He was known locally, and in little music magazines around the country, as "DJR500." Agnew's shows were "straight-edge," which meant that drugs and alcohol were not welcome. A local paper had recently named him a man of the year, alongside 76ers guard Allen Iverson.

The Department of Licenses and Inspections does not keep records of complaints. All the deputy commissioner could tell Agnew was that someone had gone down to City Hall, pulled the Church's permit, and discovered that the Church was not zoned to hold gatherings for entertainment purposes. No bingo, no swing dancing, and definitely no Boils. The inspectors gave Agnew a red-and-white-striped "Cease Work/Operations" sticker to affix to the Church's door and declared the concert over.

Agnew got on stage and told everyone to go home; his friends circulated through the crowd, whispering that the show was moving to West Philadelphia, to a theater called The Rotunda. Soon Agnew cut a deal to produce all his concerts there, but he was able to put on only one more show before the Department of Licenses and Inspections shut that operation down as well. Someone had gone down to City Hall, pulled the theater's permit, and discovered that it was zoned for drama only. Then inspectors visited the record shop where Agnew sold his tickets, with the news that someone had gone down to City Hall, pulled the shop's permit, and found out that it wasn't zoned for selling tickets. A few days later the inspectors were back at the shop, looking for a box under the counter in which the store kept Agnew's mail—another violation, reported by yet another concerned citizen.

Although he had no evidence, Agnew's suspicions fell on Clear Channel Communications. Clear Channel controls almost every concert venue in and around Philadelphia—from the Theater of the Living Arts on South Street to the Tweeter Center in Camden—as well as six radio stations and nearly 700 billboards. The company's local viceroy, a man named Larry Magid, once ran the city's live-music scene as a private fiefdom. Now, since Clear Channel bought him out in 2000, he manages it as a corporate franchise. Clear Channel maintains a similar chokehold on live music in almost every major city in America, as well as in most of the small ones. Agnew, who had managed to book bands that could have made

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far more money playing Clear Channel theaters, suspected that he was grit in the machine.

"Four or five years ago," Agnew told me one day in the record shop, where he also works as a clerk, "there were a lot more people aware of corporate power." Now, he said, money so dominated the music scene that a lot of younger kids didn't even

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know what "selling out" meant. When I asked him what had kept him in business, he corrected me: "I don't consider what I got into a 'business.'" Many Philadelphia music fans had rallied to his defense, he explained. After the closures, Agnew sent out word to his email list, 8,000 people who had attended at least one of his shows, and within days 1,000 of them had written to City Hall. He rented a paid mailbox. He persuaded a lawyer to represent the Church pro bono, and soon the Church had a dance-hall permit, the record shop had a ticket-selling permit, and Agnew had more events scheduled than before he was shut down.

Whoever was behind the attempt to close the Church, nearly every concertgoer I talked to blamed Clear Channel. They adored Agnew for "standing up to the evil empire," as one musician put it. Agnew, a vegetarian who lives with a cat and thousands of obsessively organized records, is now the most authentic rock and roller in the city. When he walks down the street, people nod and smile and pat him on the back. DJR500 is huge, and one day soon Clear Channel might make him an offer.

Some people complain about Clear Channel because they miss their old, independent stations, some because Clear Channel stations shrink playlists and recycle an ever smaller number of songs. Musicians say touring has become a cross-country hopscotch from one Clear Channel venue to another, each more sterile than the last; their agents and managers say that if artists don't play when and where Clear Channel says, they will suffer less airplay or none. As journalists point out, Clear Channel has made commercial radio nearly reporting-free, believing that its syndication of Rush Limbaugh to as many stations as possible fulfills its mandate to provide news and political diversity. Evangelical Christians are distressed about radio firsts pioneered by Clear Channel DJs, such as torturing and killing live animals on the air (a chicken in Denver, a pig in Florida), but this can happen

only where there's a DJ: Clear Channel has put hundreds of radio veterans out of work, replacing them with canned broadcasts tailored to sound local and live. Consumer advocates argue that such robot radio is the only efficiency Clear Channel has passed along to the public. In the last several years, they point out, the cost of "free" radio—in terms of time spent enduring ads—has spiked. Concert tickets have jumped from an average of \$25 to more than \$40, and radio advertising rates have risen by two thirds, pricing small businesses off the airwaves.

Clear Channel says that its enemies snipe simply because it's big, and this is probably true. No one had imagined that a radio company could get so big. When Clear Channel was founded in 1972, with one station bought by a San Antonio investment banker named L. Lowry Mays, federal law forbade a company from owning more than seven FM stations and seven AMs. By the 1990s, that cap had crept up to forty stations nationwide, no more than two per market. Then, in 1996, Congress passed the Telecommunications Act. Up to eight stations per market would be allowed, and as many overall as a company could digest. Within less than a year more than 1,000 mergers occurred; by 2000 four behemoths dominated the business. Today, Clear Channel rules.

Z-100 in New York? Clear Channel. K-BIG in L.A.? Clear Channel. KISS in Chicago? Clear Channel. KISS, POWER, the FOX, and the ZONE are all Clear Channel brands, and the dozens of radio stations nationwide that bear one of those names take their orders from San Antonio, where Clear Channel's headquarters remain, in an unassuming limestone box next to a golf course. Rush Limbaugh is Clear Channel, and so are Dr. Laura, Casey Kasem, and Glenn Beck, the rising star of rant radio who organized the "Rally for America" prowar demonstrations.

Last June, when the FCC raised the caps on how much access to the American public any one media company could control—a move too crassly reminiscent of the days of robber barons for even the Republican-controlled House of Representatives, which voted 400–21 to roll it back—the one media company the commission hinted might actually be *too* big was Clear Channel. The recent debate in Congress over television ownership has focused on two numbers: 35 percent, which is the portion of American viewers to which a single TV-station owner can currently broadcast, and 45 percent, which strikes media giants as a more reasonable number. Clear Channel, meanwhile, reaches roughly 200 million people, or more than 70 percent of the American public. It owns 1,225 stations within the United States, or around 11 percent overall, and greater portions in major markets. It broadcasts from at least 200 more stations abroad, many clustered just

south of the border like radio maquiladoras, and it owns or controls more live-music venues than any other company. In the first six months of 2003, Clear Channel sold more tickets than the forty-nine next largest promoters combined; in 2001, it claimed 70 percent of the total live-music take. The billboards that ring the stadiums, line the highways, clutter the skyline? Clear Channel owns most of those too.

As a business enterprise, Clear Channel is an experiment. It is giant and potentially unstable, more reliant on muscle than on financial finesse, and to date only moderately profitable. A sort of Frankenstein's monster, it was built from the parts of once-dying industries and jolted into life by the 1996 Telecommunications Act. Supporters of the law say there was no choice; at the time, more than half the stations in the country were losing money. Opponents retort that Clear Channel is hardly a democratic solution. "I don't think there was anybody in Washington in 1996 who could have imagined that a few years later there'd be one company owning 1,200 stations," says Michael Copps, one of the two commissioners on the FCC's five-person board who opposed raising ownership caps. "We should never give anybody the ability to have that much power."

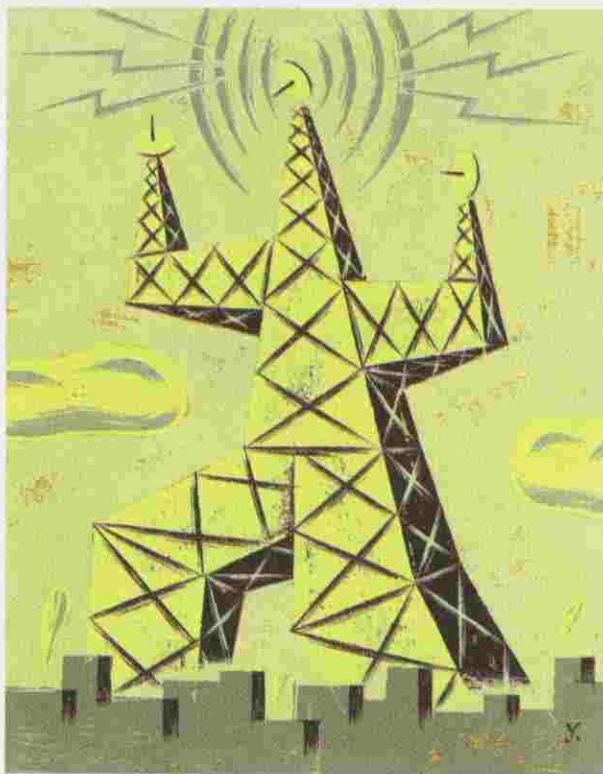
When I asked to interview Clear Channel's executives, a P.R. rep for the company told me that Clear Channel wouldn't talk to me, because it no longer needs the media: a Zen koan of consolidation. After the company learned that several underlings had talked nevertheless, radio CEO John Hogan agreed to speak with me on the phone. An amiable, forty-six-year-old former radio-ad salesman, he told me that "the key to radio is that it's a very personal, intimate medium." Hogan's first executive role was as the general manager of WPCH, a fully automated station in Atlanta known as "the Peach." Hogan made running the station sound like changing a diaper. "It was a 'beautiful music' station," he said. "You didn't have to make any decisions. All you did was put the tape on in the morning and you let it run for twenty-four hours and then you changed it the next day. There were no decisions to make, they were made for you. It was nice, you know, it was easy."

His idea of what radio is and can be does not seem to have changed since his days at the Peach. "People use radio 'cause it works," he told me. "If it stops working for 'em, they stop it." The "they" he was referring to were the advertisers. "For the first time ever, we can talk to advertisers about a true national radio footprint," he told me. "If you have a younger, female-skewing advertiser who wants access to that audience, we can give them stations in, you know, Boston and New York and Miami and Chicago, literally across the country.

Los Angeles, San Francisco... We can take outdoor [ads] and radio, and *drive* people to live events and concerts and capture the excitement, the real visceral experience." The goal? "A different *kind* of advertising opportunity."

Hogan was promoted to radio CEO just over a year ago. He has tried to soften the company's image after several years of brutal acquisitions under the leadership of Randy Michaels, the former disc jockey who now manages the company's new-technologies division. Clear Channel wouldn't let me talk with Michaels, but not long after he left the radio division he gave a trade publication called *Radio Ink* an even blunter rationale for the company's push to dominate live music as it does radio. "People attending a concert are experiencing something with tremendous emotion," he said. "They're...vulnerable."

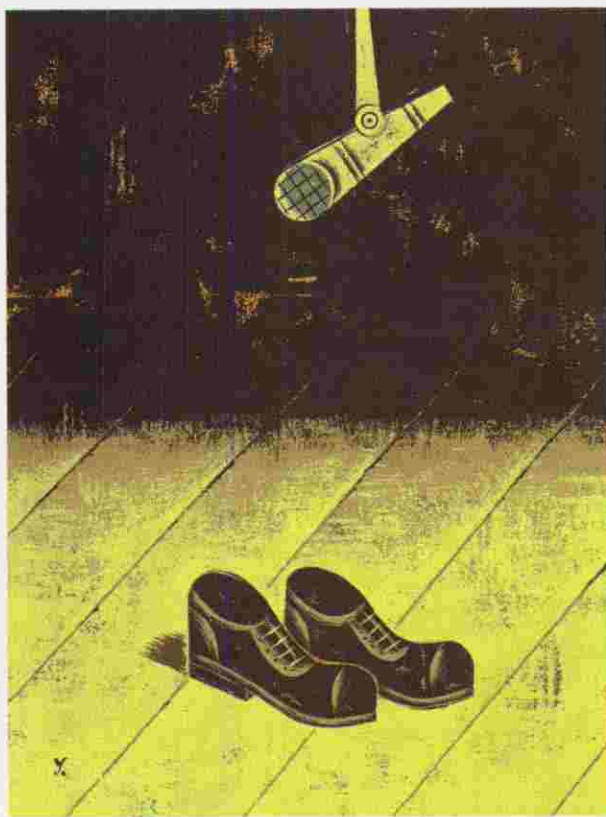
Across town from the Church, in a little club called the Khyber Pass, I went to see a show booked by Clear Channel's man in Philadelphia. The headliner was a band called The Dragons, best known for their album *Rock Like Fuck*, but the night belonged to the opening act, the Riverboat Gamblers, or, rather, to their singer,



Teko. Tall, skinny, gruesomely pretty, he vibrated across the two-foot-high stage, shouting loud and hard. No one was there to see the bands; the crowd, maybe a hundred strong, was there to

get drunk, or to take someone home. But everyone in the room—a cigar box painted matte black from top to bottom, beer on the floor and loose wiring dangling from the ceiling—pressed forward, chins bobbing, drunken eyes widening. Near the end of a song called “Hey, Hey, Hey,” Teko jumped and landed on the two-step riser at the front of the stage. It slid away, sent him crashing onto his spine. His left hand clutched the mike, into which he continued to scream; his right hand, flailing to its beat even faster, had begun to bleed at the palm. Then he jolted off the floor, bit the mike, and launched into another song: “I get the feelin’ you’re gonna need a feed-in’! Let’s eat! Let’s eat! Let’s eat!”

A few minutes later, Clear Channel’s man jammed himself into the edge of the crowd,



grinning and rocking his head as the singer leaped from the stage and drove into the audience, swinging his bloody hand like a wrecking ball. Clear Channel’s man loved it. Bryan Dilworth was a big man with small eyes and a head of thinning red hair that brought to mind Curly of the Three Stooges. He was in what he called “that moment.” He grinned and rocked his head; he stopped scanning the room and actually watched the band. He elbowed me, nodding toward the Riverboat Gamblers, as if to say, “See? See?”

When the song ended, Dilworth stepped back

from the crowd, returned to the bar in the next room, and ordered another Jameson’s.

“Dude,” he said. “That is what I’m fucking talking about.”

Meaning the scene, the variables, “the combustibles”: everything he claimed Clear Channel could never buy. That included himself. At various times, Dilworth told me he worked for Clear Channel, or didn’t work for Clear Channel, or Clear Channel simply didn’t matter. Sometimes he called Clear Channel “the evil empire”; sometimes he said it was the best thing that ever happened to his town. It was hard to know which Dilworth to believe: the one who took me up to the cluttered office of his private company, Curt Flood, two stories above the Khyber Pass, to play me tracks from one of his bands on a cheap boom box; or the one who took me on a tour of a Clear Channel hall and conceded that the paychecks that mattered came from Clear Channel, that he had a Clear Channel email address and a Clear Channel phone number, that he was in truth a Clear Channel “talent buyer” responsible for filling the calendars of a dozen Clear Channel venues around the city. At times Dilworth spoke of Clear Channel Philadelphia in the first person. “I am living proof,” he told me more than once, “that Clear Channel Philadelphia is going to rock.”

This flexibility was what made Dilworth such a valuable asset. Unlike Starbucks or Borders, Clear Channel does not build its empire from new franchises but rather goes from town to town and buys local operations. Clear Channel has Dilworths in every city with a scene, and what makes them so effective is precisely that their affiliation with the company is subject to doubt, even in their own minds. Dilworth develops “baby bands” in clubs like the Khyber on his own time and filters the most marketable of them to the more lucrative venues he books as his alter ego, a Clear Channel talent buyer. Such a double role appears to be part of the Clear Channel business plan, in which the independents who should be an alternative to Clear Channel instead become the company’s farm team. As a result, live music is following the route taken by radio. Songs that sound the same are performed in venues that look the same and even have the same name: identically branded venues, all controlled by Clear Channel, brick-and-mortar embodiments of KISS, the FOX, and the ZONE.

“Everything is so fucked,” said Dilworth, another shot of Jameson’s at his lips. “Music business my ass. Take the ‘music’ off and that’s what it is.” He drank the shot, and then he was talking about the Riverboat Gamblers again: Those dudes got it, they’re going places, and Dilworth would take them there, Clear Channel all the way. That’s not monopoly, said Dilworth, it’s business in America. “Deregulation set this table

a long time ago. I'm not taking a 'can't beat 'em then join 'em' attitude, but ..." He trailed off, because, of course, he was.

Dilworth's contradictory relationship with Clear Channel extended even into his home life. His wife, Kristin Thomson, worked for the Future of Music Coalition, the leading activist group against consolidation. FMC's head, Jenny Toomey, had been a prominent witness against raising ownership caps during last winter's Senate hearings, at which she laid out a specific and compelling case for how Clear Channel has become a near monopoly. Thomson and Toomey had once been minor rock stars together, as the indie group Tsunami, and Dilworth thought his marriage to Thomson was a simple instance of "rocker dude meets rocker chick." He said they didn't talk about politics. Dilworth himself had given lectures for FMC on the music business. ("Fuck the art," he had advised a conference of musicians. "Put the hit first.") Thomson, for her part, felt that her husband wasn't like the rest of Clear Channel.

One night, when Dilworth and I were in his office, he showed me his first gold record, awarded for a small role he had played in the success of the band Good Charlotte. A very small role, he said; gold records get passed around freely when a record company sees a future in a relationship.

"A down payment?" I said.

"Yeah, man, it's like, a favor for a favor."

"What's the difference between that and payola?"

Dilworth guffawed and looked at me like I was the dumbest kid in school. "It's *all* payola, dude."

Then his shoulders slumped and he stopped laughing.

What determines the course of music today is not a zeitgeist or a paradigm or anything that can be dismissed simply as fashion. It's not even greed. What matters now is the process. "Cross-selling." "Clustering." A confluence of car radios and concert halls, the drinks at the bar, the ticket that gets you in the door, the beat you dance to. "Anything you can do to be associated with the music, you try to do," a Clear Channel executive with forty years in radio told me. This is not entirely sinister, nor is it especially new. The music business, in its varied forms, has always depended on symbiosis. Clear Channel wants you to identify with the brand so fully that you don't recognize it as a brand at all but rather as yourself. The executive gave me an example. "Suppose you like Dave Matthews," he said. "We like Dave Matthews. We have Dave Matthews together."

To achieve this mind-meld, Clear Channel has designed itself as a self-contained, nationwide feedback loop, calibrating the tastes of its listeners and segmenting them into market-proven

"formats." Today, Clear Channel operates in thirteen major music formats, and although some of these formats are nearly indistinguishable, they are nevertheless finely tuned: for example, listeners can choose between "AC" (Adult Contemporary) and "Hot AC," or among "CHR" (Contemporary Hits Radio), "CHR Pop," and "CHR Rhythmic." John Hogan, the radio division's CEO, boasted that in 2003 the company would make more than 2 million phone calls to survey

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its listeners, a process that would produce "around 10,000 local-audience research reports." As these reports are generated, the company can respond rapidly. "If we have a CHR PD"—program director—"in, you know, Dayton, Ohio, who figures out a great way to package up a bit, or a great promotion, or comes up with something clever and innovative, we can almost *instantaneously* make it available to CHR radio stations across the country." (At the time of our interview, Clear Channel owned eighty-nine CHRs.) Then, for a given advertiser, the company can align all its CHRs to hit one "formatic target"—a demographic. Hogan suggested teenage girls. "A great advertiser would be the Crest Whitestrips. In the past, if Crest had wanted to use radio, they would have had to call a different owner in every market. There would have been no way to link together those stations with, you know, a common theme, or a common execution."

Such harmony extends to the company's concert business as well. "There's a lot of conference calling between cities," a booking agent named Tim Borrer told me, "these former independents talking to one another, letting each other know what's going on." Another independent booking agent and a Clear Channel talent buyer, neither of whom would allow themselves to be named, confirmed this practice, adding that such calls take place almost on a weekly basis. The calls can launch a band or flatten it. "At a certain point, there's only one place to go—Clear Channel—and it doesn't matter whether or not they make you a fair offer," Borrer said. "And pretty soon, they don't have to make you a fair offer. And they can decide what band is playing and what band isn't."

I asked John Hogan why I should believe that Clear Channel would never use its combined dominance of radio and live events to punish an artist—or a politician—who did not cooper-

ate with the company. "I can't imagine a scenario where it would make any business sense at all," he replied. To use the power, he said, "would be to damage it." David T. "Boche" Vicelli, another booking agent, told me: "The thing people fear—legitimately fear—is that they're going to implement the threats they've intimated with radio airplay. It's not explicit. More often it's insinuation and innuendo." Clear Channel doesn't have to actively be "the evil empire," because everyone knows that it could be. With so much of music and entertainment determined by, produced by, broadcast by, measured by, and defined by Clear Channel, the company need not exercise its control in order to wield it. Clear Channel is a system so pervasive that it relieves its participants—consumers, bands, employees, even executives—of the responsibility to object, and the ability to imagine why they would ever do so.

In Denver, Clear Channel owns half the rock stations on the dial, as well as the region's number-one station, the news/talk KOA. It owns the Fillmore, co-owns the Universal Lending Pavilion, controls the rights to the Pepsi Center, and in 2001 pried a sweetheart deal out of the city for booking shows at the legendary Red Rocks Amphitheatre, carved out of the stone of the Rocky Mountain foothills—as much of a temple as pop music can claim.

I went to Denver to meet Jesse Morreale, an independent promoter who is suing Clear Channel. Morreale is one of the biggest independents in the country, but he is also one of the last. He persuaded one of the so-called Big Four law firms in Denver to represent him, but even if they can

THE LEAD SINGER OF CRADLE OF FILTH, A DEATH-METAL BAND FROM ENGLAND, ASSURED ME THAT HE WOULD "NEVER" SAY ANYTHING AGAINST CLEAR CHANNEL

prove that Clear Channel Radio and Clear Channel Entertainment work together to shut out other promoters and threaten artists who work with them, there's a good chance his company, Nobody in Particular Presents, will be out of business by the time the case reaches any kind of conclusion. For now, Morreale has been silenced; Clear Channel won a protective order from the court, and although Morreale was happy to complain, he could not give me particulars.

Nor would the minor rock stars who came through town while I was there. The leather-clad lead singer of Cradle of Filth, a death-metal band from England, assured me that he would "never"

say anything against Clear Channel. A punk-pop threesome called the Raveonettes at first said they hadn't heard of Clear Channel, then admitted that they had, then offered me a beer and asked if we couldn't please instead talk about rock-and-roll music. A record-company agent clinked shots with me and said, "Rock 'n roll!" but when Morreale told him I was writing about Clear Channel, he asked for my notes. "I'm going to need those," he said, trying to sound official. I would have said no, but since all I had written down was "Fred Durst," and the guy looked like he might cry, I tore the page out and gave it to him.

The next morning, I was driving around Denver listening to the radio when I heard a pre-recorded spoof ad for "Butt Pirates of the Caribbean." It consisted mainly of the DJ reading, in a sneering lisp, a list of actors he considered "homo." Which is to say, it was nothing unusual. I had been listening to Clear Channel radio all over the country and had found that gay jokes ran second only to "camel jockey" or "towel head" humor. Such slurs, I began to think, were simply the comedic equivalent of the mannered rock "rebellion" in the musical rotation. Like the knee-jerk distortion of a Limp Bizkit song, the fag gags of the local morning crew are there to assure listeners that someone, somewhere, is being offended by what they are pretending to enjoy.

Back at my hotel, I called the local Clear Channel headquarters and asked for the man in charge. I was surprised to get a call back from Clear Channel's regional vice president, Lee Larsen, who invited me out to see him that very morning.

Larsen, who looked to be in his mid-fifties, was not a formal man. He put his loafers up on the coffee table between us and his arms behind his head and told me to fire away: he loved to talk about radio. Larsen wore his sandy hair in a modest pompadour, and although he had some girth on him, his tall frame and thick shoulders made him look like a linebacker. He started on the air forty years ago but made his career as a manager. On a pedestal near the center of his office sat an antique wooden radio, flanked by Broncos helmets facing inward. When I asked him what he listened to, he replied with a long and diverse list of stations—none of them Clear Channel—that marked him as a man of broad but refined tastes. Nevertheless, he was a staunch believer in Giving the People What They Want. "This whole society," he said, "is based on majority rules." There is no such thing, he said, as "lowest common denominator"; there is only democracy, and in the music world Clear Channel is its biggest purveyor. The best thing about democracy, which he likened to a pizza, is that there is so much of it. "If I take one slice of the audience, and it's the biggest slice, and it's the 'lowest common denominator' slice, whatever you want to call it, guess what?"

There's lots of slices for the other guy." As evidence of this bounty, he gestured over his shoulder. At first I thought he wanted me to look at the view of the Rockies behind him, but it turned out he was thinking of the franchise-lined highways I'd driven to get there. "Who'd have thought there could be so many different fast-food restaurants as there are?"

There were those among us, he said, who would complain nonetheless. People "at odds with the masses." People who believe that "the mass in our country are *stupid*." People who would tell you that you "should read *Atlantic Monthly*, not *Time*." But that was all right. "You can have anything you want," he said. "You just can't have what you want everywhere." He smiled. "Some people don't like that." He leaned forward and patted the coffee table, a little gesture to let me know that he knew that I knew what he was talking about, that I was, with him, part of "the mass."

I asked him about "Butt Pirates of the Caribbean." He reared back and looked at me like I was Tipper Gore. In a gentle, rumbling tone, he asked, "What are you saying? That it should not have been on?"

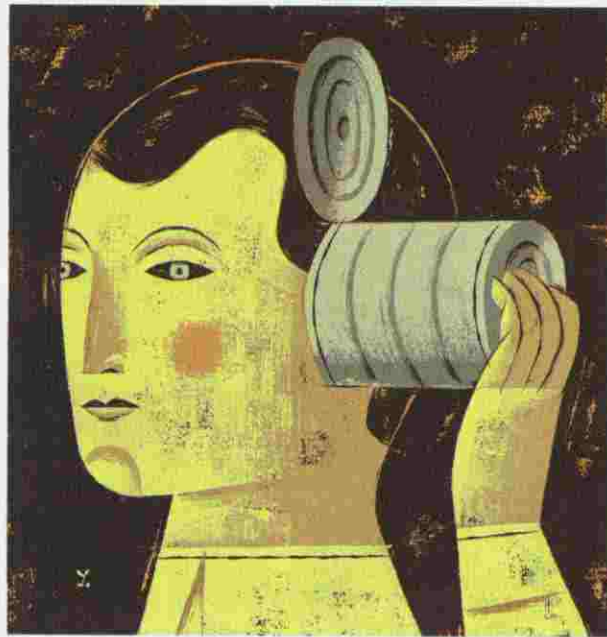
"Well . . ." I said, "switch 'Butt Pirates of the Caribbean' for something like, say, 'Jigaboos of Jamaica,' and I think you can see what I mean."

Larsen frowned. "I know clearly that you couldn't do a bit like that that's *ethnic*. I know that, okay? Maybe, in the area you're talking about, that might still be open. Society's still trying to figure out the line there. If you took that bit and put it on a classical-music radio station and played it, well the people would be outraged. It's out of context." But there was a time and place for such things. "If every radio station was doing 'Butt Pirates,' then you would be saying, 'Well, what is this?' But they are not." At the station I had heard it on, he explained, "the talent must have felt that was within the bounds they could work within, *and* was something that the audience that was listening to *their* radio station could relate to."

I must have looked unconvinced, because Larsen seemed worried. "On the radio," he said, "the red light's on and you're talking. And you say something. Just like you do in real life. And you go"—he shaped his lips into an O and let his eyes bulge as he covered his mouth—"I. Wish. I. Hadn't. Said. That." He shrugged his shoulders, held up his palms in a "what can you do?" gesture. "But it's too late."

From Denver, I went to Oklahoma City to meet with former congressman Julius Caesar "J. C." Watts, who had recently been named to Clear Channel's board of directors. During the hour and a half we spent driving around and listening to the radio in his shiny new black Cadillac Escalade, the congressman referred to Americans

as "dogs" five times. Not in the slang sense—Watts loathes what he calls that "hip-hop be-bop rap" stuff—but in the idiom of business. He was trying to get at what business is all about. He wasn't concerned about Clear Channel's over-



whelming control of live music, he said, because "the dogs are eating the dog food." He said that the reason talk radio is so conservative is that "the dogs ain't eating the dog food" offered by liberals: "You can't force bad dog food on people!"

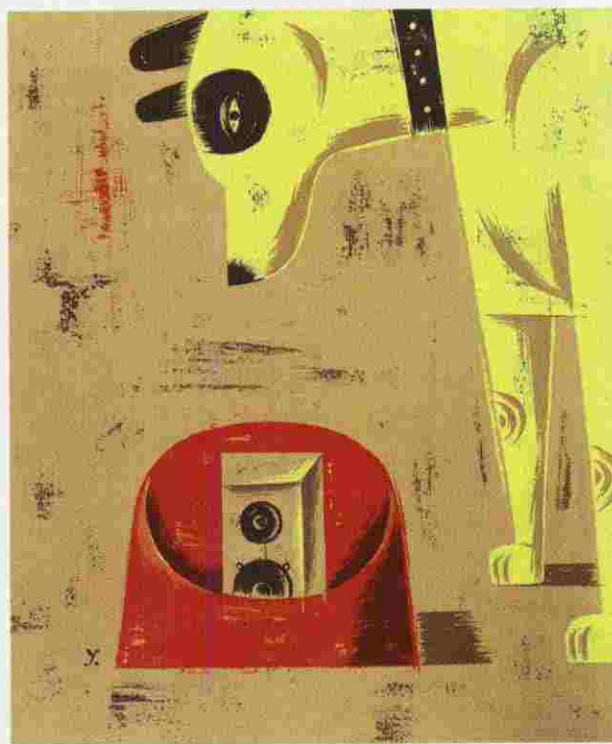
A former football star for the Sooners and a Southern Baptist preacher at a church called Sunnyside, Watts has an easy manner that can nevertheless be disconcerting, as when he took both hands off the wheel at 75 miles an hour, turned, and gripped my arm, saying, "I'm ready to go to the American people with my dog food." Then he found a song he seemed to like, "Get Busy," by Sean Paul, and turned it up. It was hip-hop, but it did have a spiritual message: "From the day we born Jah ignite me flame/Gal a call me name and it is me fame/It's all good girl turn me on/Till the early morn'/Let's get it on."

The former fourth-ranking Republican in the House, Watts may be out of office at the moment (he chose not to run last year), but at age forty-five he still wields considerable power as chair of GOPAC, an organization designed to develop Republican candidates at the state level, and as the G.O.P.'s great black hope. When President Bush made his recent tour of Africa, he tapped Watts as a traveling companion. When Democratic fixer Vernon Jordan retired from Clear Channel's board, he pushed Watts, a man who considers LBJ to have been a "wild-eyed radical," as his replacement.

But I don't think Watts's connections—or his politics—are why he “aligns nicely,” as Clear Channel CEO Lowry Mays put it, with the company. Rather, I suspect it has something to do with his mix of aggressive amiability and angry defensiveness. Watts often gets called an “Uncle Tom”; Clear Channel's radio and concert guys are sick of being called “sellouts.” Watts thinks it's unfair that as a black man he should have to defend himself for also being a Republican; Clear Channel can't understand why people seem shocked when it competes as fiercely as it does. Both Watts and Clear Channel look at what they're doing as revolutionary, unsentimental, *necessary*. Watts thinks Clear Channel simply needs to do a better job of telling the American people—the dogs—what the company is.

We pulled into the parking lot of a motel next to a Denny's. Watts said, “In politics or in business, you're either on the offense or you're on the defense. If you're on the defense, you're losing.” Clear Channel, he explained, had to hit back, and hard. “Jeff, I think today that people are concerned with”—he reached out and banged the dashboard speakers of his Escalade—“this. They don't care where it's coming from!” Then he turned the radio on again and tuned it to his daughter's favorite station and cranked it up. “Get Busy,” by Sean Paul.

“Same song!” Watts shouted. “Thirty minutes ago! I couldn't have planned that in a thousand years!” To Watts, this was a good thing.



He said Clear Channel needed a great slogan, like Fox's “Fair and Balanced.”

“You mean,” I said, “something like ‘Clear Channel: We Give You What You Want.’”

“Yeah!” Watts slapped my shoulder. “Yeah! Or maybe...” He paused to think, then held up his hands to frame his idea. “Clear Channel, Your Community, you know, Involvement, you know, Network, or, or Station, or Whatever...”

“An enemy says, ‘Jeff, I don't want you to have what you have. You know, I'm gonna be a self-righteous income distributor. And I'm gonna balance this thing out.’” (Watts believes in balance, so long as it isn't, as he put it, “Communist,” which, presumably, pre-1996 radio in America was.) “And I'm gonna take from all those who're producing and give to those that aren't producing.” He shook his head. “Uh-uh. When we get to the point where people are envious and we say, ‘We're not gonna allow [consolidation] to happen’”—Watts clapped a hand over mine and shuddered—“that is a *fiendish* business.”

Regulation of radio ownership—Watts's fiendish business—is rooted in the idea that the spectrum is a national resource, but as a reality the “public airwaves” are close to extinct. Even proponents of regulation now fight for it, perversely, in the language of business, touting ownership caps as a means to preserve the “marketplace of ideas.” This phrase, or even the “free market of ideas,” has become a rhetorical fixture of anti-consolidation activists, for whom it connotes a free and fair system by which ideas compete for the minds of the citizenry. Implicit in the phrase is that ideas compete in roughly the same manner as do brands of soap; that, given equal price and placement, the most effective ideas will win the day. By owning so many stations, the argument goes, Clear Channel reduces the number of songs, sounds, formats, and opinions from which American listeners can choose.

But to so frame the argument is already to have lost. Media corporations want nothing more than to create new, popular formats with which to segment their audiences on advertisers' behalf. As advocates of deregulation never tire of pointing out, the “diversity” of U.S. radio content—in terms of average number of different formats available in each market—has increased with consolidation since 1996, not decreased. In fact, nothing resembles a “free market of ideas” so much as Clear Channel itself, where infinitesimal changes in ratings are tracked, mapped, and responded to; where Boston's successful new format can appear in San Diego overnight. This is what Lee Larsen means when he speaks of giving the people what they want. It is what J. C. Watts was trying to express when he jabbed the tuner on his radio and

shouted, "This is democracy!" Clear Channel is a *supermarket* of ideas, which sells scores of different products all made in the same factory.

Activists fret that Clear Channel is foisting a right-wing agenda onto its listeners. To the contrary, the company seems to advance no ideology whatsoever; nor does it seem to advance any aesthetic that could be called good, bad, ugly, or beautiful. Perhaps the most instructive example here is the controversy over what has come to be called The List: the roster of songs that, immediately after September 11, were not supposed to be played on Clear Channel stations. The List's recommendations ranged from the obvious (AC/DC's "Shot Down in Flames") to the saccharine (Billy Joel's "Only the Good Die Young") to the grotesque (Van Halen's "Jump") to the unexpectedly poetic (Phil Collins's otherwise unremarkable "In the Air Tonight"). Antiwar activists pointed out that The List "banned" Cat Stevens's "Peace Train" and John Lennon's "Imagine," but ignored the fact that The List also proscribed Judas Priest's "Some Heads Are Gonna Roll" and the Clash's "Rock the Casbah," said to have been popular with U.S. pilots on bombing runs over Iraq during the first Gulf War.

Everyone seemed to see The List as the ultimate case of censorship by a corporate head office, but in fact The List came together just as might a great promotion by John Hogan's hypothetical program director in Dayton, Ohio. On his or her own initiative (nobody knows for certain where, or with whom, The List started), a Clear Channel PD drew up a list of songs; this PD emailed The List to a PD at another station, and he or she added more songs, and so on. When, eventually, The List was leaked to the press, Clear Channel pointed out that it was the work of independent program directors who were free to play—or not to play—whatever songs they liked.

Confusing The List for ideological censorship reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of the meaning of Clear Channel. It reflects the misguided notion that the company means anything at all. All the Clear Channel talent buyers, "on-air personalities," news directors, and executives I spoke with shared a basic disregard for both the content of the product and its quality. The market would take care of those. Clear Channel's functionaries seemed to view the company as some marvelous but unfathomable machine with whose upkeep they had been charged. They knew only that it accomplished a miraculous task—satisfying the musical tastes of most of the people—and did not care to trouble themselves with how.

Bryan Dilworth swore to me he had nothing to do with Sean Agnew's show at the

Church getting shut down. He said that any suggestion to the contrary was "Davy and Goliath bullshit." He claimed he walked into his boss's office and asked them if they had been involved. He told them he needed to know, because he would quit if they had. They swore innocence. I tried to confirm his story, but his bosses never returned my calls.

One Sunday I met Dilworth at his home in South Philly. His wife needed a nap, so we took his ten-month-old for a ride in his stroller. We walked through the Italian market, dead quiet at six on a Sunday evening, empty wooden stalls fronting pork shops and bakeries. We stopped to watch a group of boys on skateboards work a ramp they had set up in the street, performing for a video camera one of the kids was holding. Dilworth laughed. "The dudes who own those stores knew these kids were out here, skating on their stalls like that? They'd break their legs." This delighted him, all of it: the men who owned the stores who wouldn't give a damn for the law, the kids who took over the street who didn't give a damn for the owners. "This place is totally . . . this place," he said.

I asked him how that squared with his working for Clear Channel, which seemed dedicated to making every place the same. Dilworth didn't look at me but he smiled. His grin pushed his baby-fat cheeks up and made his eyes small.

"All of a sudden I'm supposed to be super-evil!" he said. "FUCK THAT."

"No, that's not what I meant," I said.

"FUCK THAT. I just wanted to make money doing something I liked. There are different opinions about how far down the road America is businesswise, but dude, whatever, it's too far gone for anything to change."

He bumped the stroller up over a curb, and the baby began to cry. We walked without talking for a few blocks, the clackety-clack of skateboard wheels fading behind us. But closer to home, both he and the baby mellowed. Dilworth stopped smiling, and his eyes stopped squinting.

"Then," he said, "there's that feeling in your spine, and it's all right." His voice went up in pitch and grew soft, as if he were embarrassed. He was talking about rock. "When the arc is just starting to arc? And you're saying this could be Van Halen, this could be Neil Young. It's like you're bearing witness. It's not, 'Ching-ching, here we go.' It's 'I saw it. It does exist.' There's something really there. It's not just a need for chaos. It's—yeah. That's what I want." His voice deepened again, and his pace evened out. The baby had nodded off. We stopped in front of Dilworth's stoop. "Clear Channel?" he said. "That's money. I need it to buy liquor and baby clothes." ■

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