

“You’re tuned to 89.3, WCAL”: Memories of a College Radio Announcer

By Mark Hollabaugh

In September 1967 after my arrival at St. Olaf and unloading the car, I said goodbye to my dad, met my roommate Mike Varner, unpacked, and headed for the radio building clutching my Third Class Radiotelephone Operator License with Broadcast Endorsement. I chose St. Olaf partly because of WCAL. In high school I was a part of a small group of students who hosted a program every Saturday morning on our local radio station. I not only enjoyed radio work, but I also knew it could provide me with a much-needed job on campus. I was greeted at WCAL by Jim Larson ('69) who signed me up for an audition. By the time classes began, I was in training to be an announcer and engineer. Student engineer Rich McClear ('68) trained many of us that year.

In the fall of 1967, WCAL broadcast only a few hours each day as an AM station at 770 kHz. It shared the frequency with KUOM at the University of Minnesota. As a newbie, I had the joy of getting the station on the air at 6:00 a.m., usually two mornings a week. Fortunately, I had tolerant roommates who understood why I tried to get to sleep by 11 p.m. Thanks guys! Early rising habits would come in handy later in life when I frequently left on my morning commute between 6:15 and 6:30 a.m.

I'd wake up at 5:00 a.m. and usually managed to get to the radio station by 5:30 a.m. to warm up the transmitter. I had 30 minutes to get a couple records cued and sort through the overnight news and weather that came across on the AP teletype, selecting what I thought was the most important items to include in the news I read at the 6:00 a.m. sign on. After news and weather, while music was playing, I sorted the news more thoroughly for program director Paul Peterson ('56) who came in around 6:45 to prepare for the *Sunrise News* at 7:15.

At 8:00 another announcer took over for *Top of the Day* and I would be off to the caf for some breakfast and then to classes. Frequently my relief was John Bachman ('70) or Rick Hordern ('70). I would end my shift by starting the tape with the *Top of the Day* theme music, the *andante cantabile*, 18th variation, from Rachmaninoff's *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*. By our junior and senior years, I was often the announcer for *Top of the Day*. Rachmaninoff's music became forever etched in the mind and to this day whenever I hear it, I'm transported back to the announcer's chair ready to say, "Good morning and welcome to *Top of the Day*." At 10:00 a.m., we joined the St. Olaf daily chapel service and at 10:30 signed off, passing the frequency to KUOM. It is thought that the daily chapel service was one of the longest running radio programs in the United States.

WCAL was not only a radio station for the college, but also produced music recordings. Our freshman year at St. Olaf was Olaf Christianson's last year as conductor of the St. Olaf Choir. Someone decided his final year of rehearsals should be recorded. I got the job. Every weekday, I went to Steensland Hall at the time of the choir rehearsal and started a tape recorder. I'd label the tape and take it back to WCAL for transcription. At first, I took homework along, figuring it would be a good time to get my next math assignment done. But soon, I stopped solving calculus problems and just listened to Dr. Christianson coaching the students on the sound he wanted. "Think of the words, think of the words," he'd tell them. It was a remarkable experience.

WCAL also recorded the annual Christmas Festival—all the concerts and the dress rehearsal. The Monday morning after the festival, Ken Jennings and other members of the music department

crowded into a studio to listen to each recording of the numbers they wanted to include in the hour-long program that was sent to radio stations nationwide. In December 1967 I took a recording home with me and gave it to the manager of our local station saying, "Harvey, here's a recording of my college's Christmas festival." The next summer when he saw me, he asked, "Are you going to bring us another recording of that wonderful Christmas program?"

When we arrived at St. Olaf in 1967, work was underway to add an FM transmitter. WCAL had an FM transmitter from 1949 to 1953, but FM was very experimental then and not many people had FM receivers. This changed by the late '60s, especially with advent of FM receivers in cars. By the time of the station's 50th anniversary in November 1968, WCAL was broadcasting at 89.3 MHz with 100,000 watts of power, the maximum allowed for FM transmission. The FM station stayed on the air until noon, then returned from 5:00 p.m. until midnight. Eventually, when additional programming resources and automated systems made unattended operation possible, the FM broadcasts were 24/7. Some students living on the upper floors of the north-facing sides of Mohn and Larson Halls had TVs and could pick up stations in the Twin Cities. The 89.3 MHz FM signal caused some interference and station manager Milford Jensen had the station engineers construct simple devices to improve reception of the TV audio by blocking the 89.3 MHz signal at their TV antennae.

WCAL-FM participated in a unique intersection between broadcast radio and physics. Normally FM signals are line of sight and thus of limited range. However, during a meteor shower the ionization trails left by meteors at an altitude of 80 to 120 km can reflect FM signals over a great distance. During the Perseid meteor shower in August (I think it was 1968), the peak of the shower occurred on a Sunday night. The FCC rules permitted WCAL, normally off the air from midnight to 6:00 a.m., to be on the air in the middle of a Sunday night (really the wee hours of Monday morning) for transmitter testing and adjustments. An amateur radio group contacted the station about running a test for "meteor burst communications." For a few hours, WCAL-FM broadcast a continuous message: "This is WCAL-FM, 89.3, Northfield, Minnesota, testing for meteor scatter." Reports came in from all over the US and Canada. When I returned to campus in September, I helped answer the numerous reception reports WCAL received.

Within a year I could pronounce Russian names like Gennady Rozhdestvensky and Kirill Kondrashin without hesitation and I was one of the "old timers." I worked with many new announcers and engineers including Rolf Enger ('72), Lars Hoel ('73) and Beth Gaede ('74). Three of our '71 classmates also worked at WCAL: Cathy Tinker, Trish Lewis, and Rich Moe.

Cathy has the distinction of being WCAL's first female announcer and engineer—on a late-night jazz program no less. She recalls, "Listeners didn't complain about a female voice, as I was told some had feared might happen. I moved to the evening classical music program and evening news, which was what I most wanted to do. I would take incoming news stories from the AP teletype machine in the studio to edit and read on air, the "rip and read" news! To be an on-air broadcaster, WCAL required us to have a third-class FCC engineer's license, so I took the test. Part of the job after my jazz show was to legally shut down the broadcast signal to take us off the air at midnight."

Several of our classmates participated in the totally student-run intra-campus radio service KSTO. The KSTO studio was located in a tiny corner of the WCAL building. Because their signal did not reach beyond the dorms, they were not constrained by FCC rules, but followed standard broadcast procedures none the less. Among those from the class of '71 who were on the KSTO crew included

Mary DesRosiers, Phil Docken, Craig Frethem, Bruce Hanson, Jim Hobbs, Doug Johnson, Curt Lenz, Rick McNeil, Tony Ricci, and David Peterson. (Information taken from the 1970 *Viking*.) KSTO is still in operation, although in much nicer quarters, affording broadcast experiences to current students.

Some of us who worked at WCAL found a great way to augment our income by working at WCAL during college breaks. Beginning in our sophomore year, I returned to campus on December 30 or 31 to work until Interim classes began. For me, this meant an excruciatingly early flight from Michigan back to MSP and getting to the St. Paul bus depot to catch the Jefferson Line bus to Northfield. Usually, only student athletes and musicians were on campus and one dorm was open. If Mohn Hall was closed, I found temporary lodging in the room of a fellow physics major or Alpha Phi Omega brother. The Lion's Cage was open for lunch and that was about it for food. If my host didn't have a refrigerator, I hung fresh food out the window. I could work 10 to 12 hours a day. Campus was quiet, but it was a good time to be there.

There were several historic events involving WCAL. During the turmoil around the killings at Kent State in May 1970, there was concern that the radio station might be taken over. Those of us who were licensed transmitter operators were told to "kill" the link that connected the station with the transmitter if that happened. It didn't, of course. I wasn't worried: one of our own, Rick Hordern, was among the students who occupied the administration building.

WCAL was a charter member of National Public Radio when it was launched in 1971. NPR aired its first broadcast on April 20, 1971, covering United States Senate hearings on the then-ongoing Vietnam War. The testimony that day came from Senators George McGovern and Mark Hatfield. I was in the control room when Milford Jenson stood at the mixer board and flipped the switch that connected us to the network.

The afternoon drive-time newscast *All Things Considered* premiered few weeks later on May 3, 1971, and again I was in the control room that day when we heard the words over the monitor speakers, "From National Public Radio in Washington, I'm Robert Conley with *All Things Considered*."

Eventually, WCAL traded its share of the 770 kHz AM frequency for space on University of Minnesota land in Rosemount to build a new FM transmitter tower. This greatly improved reception in the Twin Cities. A low-power repeater transmitter was added in Rochester. Membership grew. Although students still were on the staff, there were more full-time professional announcers.

WCAL is said to have been the birthplace of listener-supported radio. By summer 2004 there were about 8,000 members. Their financial support, and creative programming by a talented staff, was not enough, however, to stop the sale of WCAL to Minnesota Public Radio in August 2004. Former listeners, supporters and staff formed SaveWCAL to stop the sale, but these efforts were in vain. St. Olaf's loss was MPR's gain. I feel MPR's programming and "sound" improved significantly with the addition of some of the former WCAL staff.

In 1972, WCAL's leadership help to start the Association of Minnesota Public Educational Radio Stations (AMPERS). In a sense, WCAL's legacy lives on in the stations, staff, and programming of the 18 AMPERS member stations. AMPERS stations are not a part of Minnesota Public Radio.

WCAL left its imprint all over world. Jim Larson went on to work with Voice of America and eventually became a university administrator in Korea. Rich McClear and his wife Suzi (Carleton,

'68) founded Raven Radio, WCAW, in Sitka, Alaska. John Bachman became a television news anchor in Mason City. Rick Hordern returned to his native Canada, went to seminary, and was president of Luther College, Regina, for many years. Rolf Enger, a fellow physics major, became an Air Force officer, rose to the rank of colonel, and when I was a Visiting Professor of Physics at the U.S. Air Force Academy, we were on the same teaching team. Many years ago, on a trip to Washington, D.C., I turned on the local NPR station and heard the familiar voice of Lars Hoel. Beth Gaede became an editor at Fortress Press, and we've remained in touch over the years.

When I was on the St. Olaf faculty from 1977 to 1980, I occasionally was on air to discuss a new discovery in astronomy or physics. I participated as an on-air guest host for the membership drives and continued this until 2004 when the station was sold. This was a rewarding experience, and it expanded my WCAL alum friends to include future program director Marty Pelikan ('80) and Jason DeRose ('97), now Western Bureau Chief & Senior Editor for NPR News.

Classmate Cathy Tinker took her radio voice to the courtroom and classroom, becoming a lawyer and law professor. Cathy lives in New York City. Trish Lewis returned to campus as a reference librarian and faculty member. She still lives in Northfield. Rich Moe, who sadly died in January 2021, went to Wartburg Seminary, and served many years as a Lutheran pastor and chaplain. As for me, I incorporated many examples from the radio world into my physics teaching over the years. I revive my on-air persona occasionally at our local AMPERS member station, WTIP in Grand Marais, Minnesota, helping to "pitch" during member drives and talking about new discoveries in astronomy. Believe it or not, I once was a paddler on WTIP's dragon boat race crew!

WCAL played a big part in my life and the lives of many others. We learned more than how to operate a control panel. What we learned about music and current events is immeasurable. I remain forever grateful for the opportunity to say the words, "You're tuned to WCAL, the radio voice of St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota."

Memory needs prompting after 50 years. Thanks to Cathy Tinker and Jason DeRose for their help. Some information came from St. Olaf News Bureau releases and the online archives of the *Manitou Messenger*.