Gene Lees

Jazzletter

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Letters

Dear Mr. Lees:

I'm not familiar with you or your publication but your recent article on the music business precluded any possible plans to learn more about either.

Just who are you and what credentials do you possess to wrap up this industry with that kind of rhetoric?

The bad news is that an irresponsible know-nothing like yourself can publish that garbage. The good news is that your newsletter is insignificant.

And when lessons in honesty, ethics and principle are given, I wouldn't be looking to enroll in your class.

Yours truly,

Joe Smith
President and Chief Executive Officer
Capitol Records

cc: Mr. David Berman, president, Capitol Records Inc.
Mr. Bruce Lundvall, president, Blue Note Records and general manager, Capitol Records east coast.

Re: *The Music Business Is Not a Whore.*

No, it's not. It's a parcel of pimps, running a string of whores. That the business is a cesspool has never been at question. And I'm not referring to the graft or the routine daily illegal shenanigans -- the different sets of books, the kickbacks, the using of an artist's winnings to promote the records, etc. No, that is not the worst aspect of the problem. The worst aspect is in the people who have gotten caught in the shifting fortunes among the thieves, the ones whose careers have been ruined doing the things the money-men told them to do, and the money-men were wrong, as usual. If being a whore is defined by one's capacity, indeed desire to please, the pimps, then all artists are to some degree whores.

Like other businesses and professions, the trade of music draws as many deranged people as it does sane ones. But because it is using an art to further its wealth, there are more insidious forms of behavior and activities than in, say, the canned soup trade. It is tragic, too, dimensionally. For sensitive human beings are the ones who others, callous and evil, ride over rough-shod. What is the biggest gripe of a music-business executive? "Well, since that guy got a hit record, you can't talk to him any more." The trouble is, they weren't talking to him before anyway. Maybe talking at him, but not to him. Or through him. Is there anything worse on earth that musically gifted people have had to suffer than what comes from the brains and mouths of the ungifted in executive chairs? Perhaps their rationale is this: since most people are fools and fools buy recordings, let fools like us be the judges of what is made available to them.

I can remember when a composer of some stature was president of the largest record company in the business, and when a&r staffs were peopled with professionals who could write arrangements and conduct orchestras, and in a great many cases write the songs too. I can remember when two of our greatest song-writers, Buddy de Sylva and Johnny Mercer, founded Capitol Records and made it a roaring success on nothing but good taste. That era is past, and will never return. How come lawyers and accountants run and command music companies? And think they are above criticism?

It is the clownish nature of giving respect to such fools that is so terribly debilitating. Deigning to listen to their self-important claptrap and doing business with them just compounds the evil. The degeneration of our major record companies has reached a nadir. That is why RCA and CBS Records have been sold. They could not have been bought unless the administrators were bereft of sound ideas about where the music might be going, and of talent to shape the new age of it.

The business wasn't ever that far from Seventh Avenue that it could not pass for an arm of the rag trade. When I made my first records, I was baptized by Herman Lubinsky of Savoy Records in the dark waters of petty thievery. I took my contract with Savoy to the musicians' union lawyer, who smirked and told me, "It just passes for legal. But just, mind you." He told me there were no outs in the contract and that I'd have to live up to it as I'd signed it. Fortunately, I wasn't Erroll Garner or Bird. So when I had a few friends go up and talk firmly and unhesitatingly to Mr. Lubinsky, he saw the light and let me go. I wasn't worth the trouble he faced from my distinctly unforgiving friends.

I must say that Herman's ethics were not the norm for the industry in those days. He wasn't respected even by his colleagues in the trade. But he was an example of the breed of scoundrel the business seemed to make allowances for. We would never be rid of his ilk. I hear funny stories about him over lunch. Erroll Garner, were he here, would not be amused. And it was Erroll's *Laura* that returned the big dividends. Charlie Parker wanted to put a knife in Herman's chest, and with good reason. Those musicians never saw royalties, only the initial payment, and that was scale. Herman lived on a boat. This man was so dangerous that he had to keep water between himself and the rest of the human race.

There are tragic tales to fill volumes, of cheated talents and wrecked careers and all doors closed but the ones that lead away from, not to, the public. There is evidence that hit records are not come by except through certain mechanisms, all of which lead back to spending money to make them. If that is the case, and I am assured that it is, who needs first-class artistry to begin with? Run your pencil through the names of all the talents you know who truly are talents. You'll find that the most gifted people have the least to do with recorded output.

The real music has of necessity gone underground. The trash is so singularly unsubstantial -- with notable exceptions -- that its sheer shallowness defies even a descriptive view of it. It is indeed a question of trying to fathom that which has no depth, nor in most cases, any purpose or a *raison d'etre*. This should be a time when enterprising young people go about opening record companies and developing what is

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overlooked by the larger supermarket firms. The catch is: don't let the big fish buy you out the minute you've made a noise. And that's hard to do, I know. I believe it is a situation that will eventually end up in the higher courts. Buying out your competition has been monumentalized in our age. I should think that the chief reason for the plethora of garbage that passes for music is that the supposed artists are the most malleable. And buyable, from the exec's position. Yes, there were trash records in the 1940s, but everyone knew they were just that. No one passed them off as art, and there was also an inventory. I could order a Sinatra record, wait a week, and pick it up. All gone, all changed.

Not too long ago, I lectured to a few thousand youngsters who were all players in their school stage bands. They were interested in hearing what the bands sounded like, those from the 1930s and '40s. I told them they'd never hear those recordings unless they wrote letters to the labels that hold hostage their cultural birthright, and force them to reissue the precious heritage of big-band music and the jazz of that era. But I told them they pushed farther off into the future the possibility of that happening with every purchase they made of a Michael Jackson album.

I'm afraid there will have to be some sort of governmental action at some point. Not to inventory Louis Armstrong, Bix Beiderbecke, the Benny Goodman band recordings, Woody Herman, Duke Ellington, Prez, Bird, is tantamount to no longer printing copies of Twain, Hemingway, Steinbeck, and Cather. Where the music store of the past was a citadel of culture, the stores of today are akin to branches of MacDonald's.

There may very well be more money to make in the music business these days, but there is a desert too. And it isn't dry because of the business factors taking their toll. It's because there isn't an ounce of flair or flamboyance left on the higher executive levels of the business. There is in these people a vapidity that appalls the sensibilities. When you think it can't get any worse, here comes Punk Rock. And people wonder why radio is becoming talk radio!

Have they -- that unmarked, untalented, detached group of folks who run the music business, these faceless executives -- run it into the ground? Have they killed the golden goose? If the tone of the business today is a downer, and it is, that's precisely what they've done. Like television, the music business has been used and abused. It is as if, given Guttenberg's moveable type and teaching people to read, the people in charge at the moment decided to print only comic books.

Television and the record companies have done that, and left us lost among the yucca trees.

Bobby Scott, Forest Hills, New York

I have finished *Meet Me at Jim and Andy's* and found myself more deeply touched than by anything I've read in years -- and also, sitting in my living room, laughing alone, which isn't regular for me. I never knew Bill Evans, but now understand him much better through the writing of a friend. Thanks.

In the Oscar Peterson biography, you several times mentioned his memory. Probably in the 1960s, I brought Midge from Wenatchee to hear Oscar at Charlie Puzzo's Penthouse Club. Oscar came over to the table to meet Midge and asked if there was anything he could play for her. She said his recording of *The Maids of Cadiz* was one of her favorites. After an introduction and dedication to Midge, he gave us a treatment of the tune to be treasured.

About two years later, the trio was back at the Penthouse. Midge and I decided to once more drive the 150 miles over the mountains to hear them. Starting time was nine. About 9:20 they came running in after a late flight and shot upstairs to the dressing room. Midge and I had been placed in the last remaining seats at the rear of the club and behind a post. We couldn't see much, but were near the speakers and the sound was good. Around 9:30 they went on the stand. Oscar said, "How nice to be back in Seattle. I'd like to play a lovely tune for a lovely lady. This is for Midge." And he played *The Maids of Cadiz*.

How he spotted us in the corner on his dash through was almost beyond comprehension. But then to couple that with a memory of both her name and the tune after, I'm sure hundreds of names and requests -- it has remained an important moment in our listening over the years.

Don Lanphere, Kirkland, Washington

I just finished the chapter on Woody Herman in *Meet Me at Jim and Andy's* and was deeply moved. I adored each of the Herds and keep a cassette of the first one in my glove compartment as an antidote for the dreck that contaminates the airwaves these days. I recall a marvelous evening back in 1946, when I was singing with the Crew Chiefs in the post-war Glenn Miller band led by Tex Beneke. We were to follow Woody at Eastwood Gardens, an outdoor venue near Detroit. We arrived in town Sunday afternoon. That evening was to be the closing night for Woody. We all went, our whole band, to hear this Herd. To our chagrin it was pouring rain at the Gardens and there was absolutely no audience. No one could dance on that outdoors floor, obviously, and the Herman band didn't even set up. It was a washout.

We in the Miller band were very disappointed. There was an enclosed area with a bar that was sheltered from the rain. Woody had the band set up and proceeded to play an entire concert just for us! I'll never forget it. Our admiration was obvious, and they played their collective asses off.

I finished the Peterson biography in one fell swoop and loved it. I've always thought him to be without peer. I've never met him, and I felt I knew him well after reading the book, and also felt certain I'd like the man very much.

Artie Malvin, Beverly Hills, California

Realities of Radio: A Talk with Fred Hall

They go on constantly, these conferences. Well-meaning people gather in conclaves organized by this organization or that, this publication or that, and earnestly discuss what can be done for jazz. Panelists sit at microphones on long tables and talk about the educational system. They talk about jazz as America's great cultural heritage. Somebody usually says it is America's only original art form. People ask questions from the floor. The questions are earnestly answered. The same

questions come up at the next conference and get the same answers. Nothing is ever accomplished, nothing changed. An organization is established to try to get better money for jazz critics. Wow. Just what the world needs.

These conferences have begun to bore me, particularly those attended by the sulky and self-admiring breed of younger jazz critics now emerging -- and musicians who have complained about the older critics had better brace themselves for the new crowd -- because nobody ever addresses two central issues:

1. That the problems facing jazz are the problems facing all that is culturally valuable in America and the world. The "jazz community" -- those surrounding the art, the journalists and critics particularly -- is adamantly insular. Its failure to concern itself with the state of the culture as a whole leaves jazz isolated and alone, bereft of allies.

2. That these problems, the deprivation of young Americans of their *entire* cultural heritage, not just jazz, are the fault of one industry, broadcasting, particularly radio broadcasting. Radio gets help, of course, from the record industry, with which it has long been entwined in a morbid symbiosis.

I have yet to hear a panelist at one of the jazz conventions so much as mention the Federal Communications Commission and its regulations and deregulations and their effect on the culture, or discuss the ongoing deterioration of American radio.

How many musicians know the least thing about radio?

The artist wants to make records. If he gets to make the records, how is the public going to find out they exist? Through ads and reviews in magazines? No. Through radio. When I was editor of *Down Beat*, I had two record-company executives tell me bluntly that money was better spent on payola to disc jockeys and radio-station music directors than on ads. One of these men was himself a former editor of the magazine. The other told me he took ads in the magazine only to massage his contracted artists; he didn't think print ads accomplished a thing. *Stereo Review* and *High Fidelity* have always had trouble attracting record ads. That's why they depend on hardware ads, as *Down Beat* depends on ads from instrument manufacturers anxious to reach the country's student musicians, who buy far more instruments than professionals do and eventually leave most of them to tarnish in attics. It's radio that sells records.

My first job in journalism was that of editorial assistant at *The Canadian Broadcaster*, a trade journal owned and edited by a crusty Englishman named Richard G. Lewis. Dick required of me that I study the history of broadcasting, everything from the principles of physics involved, Marconi's pioneering experiments with broadcasting in Canada (where he found the atmosphere conducive to his work), through the international agreements assigning frequencies, the terms of the Havana Agreement, the formation of NBC, CBS, Mutual, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, the British Broadcasting Corporation, and all the systems of the world. While I was music and drama editor of the Louisville *Times*, I was awarded a Reid Fellowship, which gave me a year in Europe to study, among other things, the various state-owned broadcasting systems. In later years I became actively involved in broadcasting myself, writing and recording an enormous number of shows for CBC radio, writing and co-producing and recording a syndicated series on music for FM, doing a regular broadcast for WQXR in New York, and a number of programs for the Swedish broadcasting system. In Toronto in the early 1970s, I was actively involved in television, both as a writer and as a singer.

These experiences gave me, long before Marshall McLuhan began writing about the effects of electronic communications, not only a knowledge of broadcasting but an immense respect for its power. Adolph Hitler's rise could not have happened had the microphone never been invented; not only did he make great screaming speeches to crowds in huge stadia, he used broadcasting to unite Germans all over the world, including those in bunds in the United States and Canada. Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the first American president to understand radio's power, used it to pull a nation out of the Great Depression ("We have nothing to fear but fear itself."), then mobilize it against Hitler and the Japanese. With one broadcast, he implanted December 7 forever in the American consciousness as "a day that will live in infamy." Winston Churchill too used radio to unite his people and all those of the British Commonwealth. "We will fight them on the beaches . . . blood, sweat, toil and tears . . . " Like Roosevelt, he installed phrases, bits of slogans, in the mind. Later, a cunning former sportscaster returned to radio, after years in movies and television, to hoodwink a nation. He understood how effective it is. Ronald Reagan's Saturday radio "chats" were his most effective tool of deception.

The power of radio to change a nation's tastes was demonstrated in the 1930s with the rise of the great networks, the Red and Blue Networks of NBC, CBS, and the Mutual Broadcasting system. Broadcasts from the Cotton Club in New York established Duke Ellington as a major American musical figure before the 1930s began. One "remote" broadcast of the Benny Goodman band from California launched the swing era; other remotes established other bands, and soon there were dozens of them, excellent bands, traveling the U.S. and Canada, packing the young people in at ballrooms and pavilions and hockey arenas.

The networks also brought us the Metropolitan Opera and the NBC Symphony under Arturo Toscanini. On Sunday afternoons one could hear the CBS Symphony conducted by Bruno Walter. The networks aired a great many weekly programs devoted to "light classical" music, sponsored by Firestone, the Bell Telephone, Cities Service, and others. If you turned on a network station and left it on, you got an education in music. It was almost impossible not to know such names as John Charles Thomas, James Melton, Albert Spalding, Vivian Della Chiesa, Lily Pons, Andre Kostelanetz, Eugene Ormandy, Rise Stevens, Arturo Toscanini, Donald Voorhees, John Kirby, Woody Herman, Duke Ellington, Tommy Dorsey, Glenn Miller. Many of the evening comedy shows featured well-known bands. Regular headliners on the Bob Hope show, for example, included first the Skinnay Ennis band, then Stan Kenton, and later Les Brown, all first-rate bands. Most of the major bandleaders had regular network shows of their own. Radio was a potpourri that instilled Americans with astonishingly broad and eclectic tastes, and considerable sophistication. And then something went wrong. What was it?

It is unlikely that you'll ever meet anyone who knows as much about broadcasting in all its aspects as Fred Hall. Maybe

about separate aspects of it, but not about all of them. Fred is a broadcaster. His excellent syndicated broadcast, *Swing Thing*, is heard on fifty or more radio stations throughout the country. He is also a programmer, whose Great Times format is used by a number of stations. His format puts its emphasis on the good music of the big-band era, though he plays a lot of new material in that vein and of that quality. *Swing Thing* is in that area, but there is much more emphasis on jazz.

Slim and now white-haired, Fred was born May 22, 1923, in Asheville, South Carolina, which was also the home of Thomas Wolfe -- and the mountain vacation resort to which Johnny Mercer's family retreated in summer to escape the sultry heat of the Savannah lowlands. He has long since divested himself of his southern accent to meet the criteria of broadcasting back in days when, for example, the Texas tones of Bill Moyers just would not have been tolerated. But traces of the south remain, such as dentalized t's, as in *impordant*, a sort of echo of a gracious past.

Fred first worked in a store, repairing radios, meanwhile learning more about the technical end of broadcasting. When he was still in his teens he became an engineer. In 1941, he went into broadcasting full-time, working for the Mutual network, assigned to handle the technical end of the remote broadcasts of big bands. "From New York down to Virginia," he says. "The Meadowbrook, the Glen Island Casino, the Cafe Rouge, the Blue Room of the Hotel Lincoln, the Steel Pier in Atlantic City, which was a huge place. We did ice arenas and auditoriums. I engineered a remote with Benny Goodman when Peggy Lee was with the band at the Uline Ice Arena in Washington, D.C. I was working for sixteen dollars a week and all the free beer I could drink. Imagine, a seventeen-year-old kid going out and working on all that. I wasn't on the air. I was the operator, the remote control mixer. Doing all these bands up and down the east coast was the most thrilling thing that could have happened to me."

A few weeks after the day that would live in infamy, he joined the navy and was posted to the South Pacific with Armed Forces Radio Service, on the air as a disc jockey (although the term was not yet in use) to the troops.

After the war, Fred became a sort of Johnny Appleseed of radio stations, working with various partners and investors to open one after another in different parts of the country: "It started with KGAK in Gallup, New Mexico, which still had the same call letters last time I drove through. Then we built KOBE in Las Cruces, which cost us about $32,000 and just sold for 6.8 million dollars. I came out to Ventura County because two friends of mine were here, including Mort Werner, who later became vice president in charge of television for NBC, when such shows as *Today* and *Tonight* started. He was the exec in charge of all that. Mort and I and three others started KVEN in Ventura. We sold that in the late 1960s for a half a million bucks, and that station, AM and FM combined, is now worth twelve or thirteen million. Then with another partner I started KOVA in Ojai. We sold it about eight years ago for under half a million bucks and the current owner just turned down 1.6 million."

Let's consider first what went wrong with radio in earlier days; and then, against that background, what is going even further wrong with it now.

Until the late 1930s, the creative people had control of network programming. Then the advertisers took over. "The agencies," Fred said, "began to dominate. They began to package shows."

In the late 1940s, commercial television came to the fore. The power of its advertising to move merchandise surprised everyone, and the networks began to lose interest in radio, gradually abandoning it to local broadcasting. "The Jack Benny show ran on radio until almost the mid-1950s," Fred said. "The last real radio, radio show was the Stan Freberg show. That was in the early 1960s. It ran a full hour. They had marvelous comedy skits, and the Billy May Orchestra. Billy wrote elaborate scores for each program. It was a sensational show. But it didn't go.

"Now, when I got into radio, you just could not play records on the air. It was not allowed. There was a long argument about mechanical rights, and each record bore the inscription 'Not licensed for radio performance.' So they made radio transcriptions, big sixteen-inch discs produced especially for radio broadcast. They ran at 33 1/3 rpm's, and were therefore a predecessor of the LP. A few were lateral cut, but most of them were vertical cut, and as a result they had extraordinary sound fidelity. Some of them had a response up to eight or nine thousand cycles.

"The bandleaders used phony names. Larry Clinton, for example, made transcriptions as Lanny Carlyle. The Rhythm Makers included the Benny Goodman band, the Artie Shaw band, the Bunny Berigan band. There were sessions with members from all those bands mixed together, playing basic Fletcher Henderson type arrangements.

"Then the broadcasting industry just began to ignore the prohibition of records. The station I was on in Washington, D.C., WWDC, was one of the first to let us play any record we felt like. The program director would set the tenor of the station. The stations, remember, were playing hits, but many of the hits were quality things. And so the disc jockeys -- they weren't called disc jockeys yet, they were just called announcers -- had a lot of leeway. They would pick their records from what was available, and what was available was often excellent material. A handful who were really good, such as Martin Block, were terribly influential in launching a new record, a new band. There were no industry journals, such as *Billboard*, running elaborate lists of hits and governing the selection of music by the stations. There was the *Hit Parade*. It surveyed sheet-music sales in music stores. Sheet-music sales were still very important.

"Nobody was paying much attention to television after the war, or for that matter FM. In short order two or three thousand little radio stations went up all over the country, and many of them depended on the networks for news and drama, particularly the fifteen-minute daytime dramas. There were fewer remotes of the bands because, as you pointed out some time ago in the *Jazzletter*, there were fewer and fewer locations for them to play. These stations went right on playing hit records, and the hit records were for the most part still quality stuff. And gradually it began to go downhill. The networks withdrew, and withdrew, and withdrew, turning their attention to television, until all they were giving their affiliates was five minutes of news on the hour. And that left the stations to their own devices. But there were still many very innovative program directors who got deeply involved with local affairs,

local programming, local news, local sports, to supplement the records they were playing.

"Then, as the small operations were bought up by large-scale operators -- group owners, as they were called -- the owners felt they had too little control over the stations that were far from their headquarters. So they turned to programmers. It began in the late 1950s, and by the mid-1970s, it was paramount, and today it is completely dominant. Bill Drake set up Drake-Chenault, and his word meant a hell of a lot. And the taste of the guys who chose his library meant a hell of a lot."

"Drake had a country boy's taste," I said to Fred. "During the first flush of his big success, *True* magazine sent me out to California to make a study of Bill Drake and his operations. I liked Bill personally -- very much. But he showed me one of the automated stations, operating from tapes supplied by Drake-Chenault -- an almost deserted station, with tapes starting and stopping on command from a program tape, playing the golden oldies, playing the hits, playing the news breaks on command, even cuing in a back-announce now and then. It was absolutely chilling. It gave me the creeps."

"Oh yeah," Fred said. "Radio became very impersonal."

Fred Hall's very personal philosophy of broadcasting is probably the reason I live in Ojai. One weekend in 1980, my wife and I had driven the seventy-odd miles from Los Angeles to spend a weekend here. At something like seven o'clock that Saturday morning, the radio in our motel room went on automatically. I lay there in a fog, listening to some soft, swinging track by Count Basie. This was followed by something by Jack Jones, followed in turn by the Harry James band and a somewhat folksy male voice offering interesting information on all three. This pulled me fully awake with curiosity. You just didn't hear that kind of informative and very musical broadcasting any more. What in the world is this? I wondered. And then the man's voice said, "This is KOVA in Ojai, and I'm Fred Hall and this is . . . *Swing Thing*."

What? In Ojai, California, a dinky little town (Pop. 7,720 at last reading) in a valley of citrus? I got coffee and kept on listening. This was *live radio*, and there was a real live man sitting somewhere nearby in front of a microphone, talking with prodigious knowledge of the big bands. Yet, the delivery was very low key, even a little countrified. Later I learned that this was deliberate: to make the listener more comfortable, he would hesitate, seem a little halting or uncertain.

This canny combination of the bucolic-ingenuous and big-city hip fascinated me, and I phoned KOVA. It was still early morning, and I got Fred Hall on the line: on Saturday mornings there was no receptionist on duty, and he took his own calls. He invited me over to the station, and I learned he was not only its main on-air personality, he was its co-owner and general manager. I watched fascinated as he juggled his records, cuing them up on two turntables, slipping cartridges of ads into machines, making announcements between selections, answering telephone calls, doing the engineering, meanwhile taping the broadcast for syndication to other stations and carrying on a conversation with me, all casually and without effort. It was almost unnerving. What he was doing was normal practice in small radio stations, but nonetheless, this was Art Tatum chops in broadcasting. He stayed on the air until nine a.m., by which time we were fast friends, and my wife I decided to move to Ojai. At least we would be able to hear good radio. There are not many places in the country where you can.

And it wouldn't last long in Ojai, either. Fred was tired of the responsibility of running a radio station. He wanted to devote himself to broadcasting itself. He sold his share in the station, though he continued to do *Swing Thing* there. The new owner began to alter the format. There were letters of protest in the local paper. They did nothing. The station went more and more pop, Fred's show left its roster, and in common with people all over the Ojai Valley, I simply stopped listening to KOVA, becoming one more of the millions of persons alienated almost completely from radio, a vast potential audience of people who just don't listen to it, even in their cars. I installed a tape deck in mine.

Swing Thing stayed on the air -- in other parts of the country. Fred built a cement-block studio just off his car-port on a street that slopes up into the mountain, about six doors down the street from Maynard Ferguson. It was fireproof to protect his collection of thousands of records and an inestimable backlog of *Swing Thing* shows, along with hundreds and hundreds of hours of interviews with everyone you can think of in (non-rock) American music, Peggy Lee, Bob Crosby, Dick Haymes, Woody Herman, Benny Carter, Sweets Edison, George Shearing, Wild Bill Davison, Teddy Wilson. Jo Stafford told me that when Fred interviewed her and Paul Weston, he remembered more details about their careers than they did. (A collection of these interviews will be published in June as a book, *Dialogues in Swing*, by Pathfinder Publications.) *Swing Thing* was growing, and then Fred set up a good-music formatting service, titled Great Times. But I sometimes got the feeling that he had an itch to build yet another radio station. And, sure enough, an investor approached him about buying the license of a moribund station in Santa Barbara, which is thirty miles over the mountains from Ojai, and applying the Great Times format to it. Santa Barbara is perhaps the prettiest city in America, and it nurtures a lot of older people with long memories of American music and lots of that disposable income the thought of which sets advertisers to salivating. I was enthusiastic; so was Fred. I thought that he was going to get a chance to prove something important in broadcasting. I was wrong. It wasn't that he couldn't prove it. He just wasn't going to get the chance.

"With my format Great Times," Fred said, "what I proposed was *not* a nostalgia radio station in the sense of playing the hits from the past -- I start with a basic catalogue of thirty-six hundred selections, a lot of good singers and good songs, a lot of light jazz, mainstream jazz, the more communicative forms of jazz. Toe-tapping jazz. Everything is up, everything is swinging, with some contrast from the good ballad singers. If the hits were quality music, fine. They're there. But if they're of the ilk of *How Much Is That Doggy in the Window?* they aren't. The object is to start with quality, not go after the lowest common denominator. You might call it the highest common denominator of that era. And it was pretty high, an awful lot of quality stuff, from 1938 on.

"Now, we went into a full-service situation in Santa Barbara. We went on the air as KKSB. We were fully staffed. We hired the top people in this area -- for example, the man who had been the anchorman at Channel 3, the ABC television

affiliate, for twenty-five years. We got the weather man from Channel 3. And both of them had been in radio before that. These are older guys who know the music and have wonderful voices and have a great following in that market. We started a local news department. We went all out to get involved in the community. I redesigned the studio facilities, and we built them. We put in a new transmitter. The bills for new equipment alone came to $250,000. AM stereo, everything top quality, state of the art.

"My partner, who financed the station, was not from the broadcasting world. And then he decided he wanted to learn more about the business for himself. So he took a course at UCLA, taught by a sales type from one of the big Los Angeles radio stations. And he had a friend in the industry, head of the Southern California Broadcasting Association, and he began listening to him.

"Then he began to meet some of the self-styled consultants. These people are the absolute bane of the broadcasting industry.

"There has been an almost total abrogation of responsibility for programming on the part of management in radio. First in broadcasting came the engineers, then came the programming people, and last came the sales people.

"Programming is all done somewhere else now. Almost none of it is originated in the local community. Some stations get their content right off a satellite. Others follow formats set up by formatting services. I'm a format service. The stations under contract follow the format I send them.

"Or they bring in consultants who tell them, 'You fire this one, your hire that one. You do this, you do that.' As often as not, these consultants, who are young people, anywhere from their early twenties to their mid-thirties, are people who didn't make it on their own but have been around long enough to be able to drop some credentials. And a lot of them come out of schools. They take communications courses in universities, but they have no real experience in broadcasting. And they perpetuate the popular perceptions, the myths, of what is good and what is bad, what will work and what will not, in radio.

"And the popular perception is that there are only three formats that matter in radio. There's rock, and the variations and shadings of rock, there's country, and there's talk. And they believe that in AM broadcasting, there are only two: talk, which predominates now in AM radio, and country.

"There are still hundreds of so-called nostalgia stations, but more and more of those are even run from satellites.

"These satellite broadcasts come from three principle cities, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Colorado Springs. How Colorado Springs got into the act, I don't know. The supplier uplinks to the satellite, and the station gets it on a twenty-four-hour-a-day feed, news, music, the whole thing. There is a subsonic code in the signal, which triggers the automation equipment in the station to insert local material, ads, news, weather. That's why it sounds like it is originating locally.

"In our Santa Barbara station, everything was heading in the right direction until about last June, when I should have fired the sales manager. I realized he wasn't working on all four cylinders for the format. I wasn't aware that he was privately lobbying my partner and others in the background for a change of format.

"We were losing a lot of money. This is my partner's money, and I have to respect that, as I respect and like him. By the end of the summer, he said to me, 'Look, I've been talking to the consultants, I've been talking with this one and that one, and I think we are not going to make it with this format. Everybody thinks the proper course to go is country.' I fought against that. But I didn't jump up and down and scream and tear my hair. And I should have."

"Well," I said, "I presume you didn't want another heart attack."

"I didn't want another heart attack. And, again, I have too much respect for my partner. It was a loss of faith in what we were doing brought on by this constant pressure from the outside. The other villains in the piece, besides the consultants and the broadcasting teacher at UCLA and people of that mentality, are time buyers.

"Santa Barbara has something like eighty-four little ad agencies. Once more, these are, with notable exceptions, people who have not done all that well in either newspaper or radio selling, but have had a few accounts they have cultivated and have opened agencies on the strength of them. They are, again, very young -- in their twenties, most of them. They don't know where the big bands came from. They have no historical background, no sense of this country's cultural heritage whatsoever.

"And if your station is not one, two, or three in the market, they are not going to buy time on it. They have absolutely no sense of that huge, affluent -- particularly in Santa Barbara! -- audience over fifty that does know where that music came from, and does want to hear it. The people they were buying for, on the other hand, listened to the station all the time. I belong to Rotary in Santa Barbara, I'm involved in the community, and I know who was listening. All the *owners* of businesses were listening. All the movie people in Santa Barbara and Montecito, and there are a lot of them. Robert Mitchum, Steve Martin, John Ireland, Judith Anderson listened. Jonathan Winters came around to the station a and they were all big supporters of it.

"We got to be number five and number four in the market, depending on the time of day and the age range of the audience. We had to move up another notch. We could have done it in another six months. But we pulled the plug, changed the call letters to KBBQ, and have gone country. Because of the financial involvement, and the emotional stake I have in the station, I hope this format makes it. I won't make any money out of it unless it becomes profitable, or unless it's sold for a good price. And I've put a lot of work into that station. It's not a station I even want to listen to, but for the sake of my own investment, I hope it does well.

"Now, we bought a station in Idaho Falls at the same time. Just happened to. It was dark, it was off the air. It was just a license and some facilities. It's KTEE. Same format exactly. My show seven days a week. This radio station is now Number One AM in the market and Number Two AM and FM combined in the thirty-five and over audience. That's out of about nineteen signals in the area. This station had a rough financial road too, but it started at zero. It was off the air. It has been going up at about twenty percent a month. It is now at the break-even point, and its prestige in the market is absolutely enormous."

"How does your partner explain this?" I asked.

"He said, 'Well, Santa Barbara is a different market. They're more sophisticated over here.' I said, 'If they're more sophisticated, why are they going to be interested in country?'

"We don't even know yet whether the country format will work. Meantime, my own show *Swing Thing* continues for six hours on Sunday. Every station that it's on, from Florida to New York State to northern California, the time period that it's on is inevitably the highest-rated of the week. It's heavy, everywhere it's on. In Tampa, Florida, WLFF, they run it from ten to eleven every day. Highest rated period of the day. Same thing in the Idaho Falls station. Same thing with WMLX in Cincinnati. They run it ten to eleven daily, and it's the highest rated period of the day. KORK in Las Vegas, where *Swing Thing* is on from ten to eleven p.m., increased its rating from 4.1 to 8.8 at that time. KEWE, the station in Oroville, California, which is about ninety miles north of Sacramento, is Number One in the market for the thirty-five and older audience. It runs my format all day, day in and day out, and my show once a week. It has been doing this for eight years, moving up about a point in each rating period.

"A quality format will not take the world by storm, it will not find its audience overnight. First of all, so many people have left radio completely. They don't listen to it *at all*. It no longer has a place in their lives. They do not listen to AM especially. They have deserted the medium, and are playing records at home or tapes or CDs in their cars. You have to convince these people that your station is there, and they will discover you accidentally over a period of time. And then they will stay with you. We didn't wait long enough in Santa Barbara. In Idaho Falls, we did. In Oroville, they did.

"Radio is no longer a cottage industry. The stations are rarely owned by people who live in the community. They are owned by groups."

"How many stations can one company own?" I asked. "It used to be six AM and six FM."

"You can now own twelve AM and twelve FM stations. The restrictions remain more severe, but they're going to open that up. The prospects are that in the next three years or so, there will be no limitations. A handful of companies could own most of broadcasting."

"So your views of the future of radio are not particularly upbeat," I said.

"I'm afraid not. The opportunities for creativity in the medium have grown less and less. There's some hope in the National Public Radio stations, such as KLON in Long Beach, which is a very good station, doing creative things. Classical music has found a niche. On the other hand, the classical station in Los Angeles, KFAC, has just been sold, and the rumor is that they're going to switch away from classical.

"You see, Santa Barbara supports a classical station. And it would support a good music big-band radio station too. There's no question about it.

"Some of the best radio is coming from NPR."

I should explain for overseas readers that NPR stands for National Public Radio. These are stations supported by various institutions, such as universities, and supposedly free of commercial pressures and therefore able to devote themselves to what we might call the higher culture. They are not to be compared to the big public-owned government-funded networks found in every civilized country except the United States. They are underfunded, and perpetually making appeals for money from the public. They do not pay their employes well, and they do not pay royalties for the music they use on the air.

But -- and I pointed this out to Fred -- they are not, by the very nature of their poverty, free of commercial pressures, though the pressures come in a disguised form. Precisely because they must appeal to the public for donations, they are always trying to prove their reason for being, and to do that they must show sizeable audience numbers, to establish the "need" for the station. This hunger for numbers, even in NPR, was emphasized at one recent jazz conference by Oscar Treadwell, the informed and informative jazz broadcaster of WGUC (whose last two letters stand for University of Cincinnati). "Everything else," Oscar said, "is blowing smoke."

Various people within NPR inform me that many of the stations are slowly sliding toward commercial formats, losing those very virtues that made them stand apart from commercial radio. Only recently there has been a considerable dust-up at WFYI-FM in Indianapolis, Indiana, because of the efforts of a retired Marine Corps colonel named John Murphy, who is now the station's manager, to slick it up in accord with commercial formulae. The first victim was Dick Dickinson's *Just Jazz* show. Murphy told him to cut down on the informative comment. Then he changed the format. He ordered a lot of so-called New Age music into the time period. Some of the public complained bitterly. Dickinson's show is still on the air, but it's been truncated from three and a half hours to one hour a day. Listeners in the area say he sounds as if he's broadcasting in handcuffs.

Murphy's comments in defense of his moves have implicit irony. Of the stations' 1988 operating deficit, $18,000, he said, "Any good businessman would look at that figure and tell you that situation can't go on forever."

Backing his position, Frank Meek, manager of WFYI, the TV part of the operation (and a retired Air Force colonel) said, "The station has to face the facts. The pledging (of funds) for jazz programs is very, very low. If no one's going to listen, why put the stuff on the air?"

Well, to educate the American public, for one thing. That was what NPR was supposed to do. NPR was never supposed to be a business; it had a broad cultural mandate that it was supposedly going to fulfill. Meanwhile, if you've been watching public television (PBS), you've probably noticed a creeping commercialism. The stations are now running histories of rock music, for example, though one does not see a show on the history of, say, baroque music. (There is, fortunately, a fairly healthy proportion of jazz programming.) In the past, corporate donors were permitted credits on the shows, such things as, "This program is made possible in part by a grant from Exxon." Then the corporations were allowed to show company logos. And now one sees the logo and hears a one or two-line plug for the company. These inserts are beginning to look suspiciously like commercials, and no doubt they will be slyly and slowly expanded as the unadmitted commercialization of public broadcasting in America continues.

I asked Fred Hall, "If you could again get the backing, and a guarantee of no interference, would you set up a station

again?"

He said, "Not unless there was a long-term commitment, something like a five-year contractual arrangement to hold to the format. You have to be able to sustain the losses until the audience that is there discovers that you're there. Over the long run you'd be okay. It's become a get rich quick business.

"This is part of the legacy of Mr. Reagan. The regulation used to be that after buying a station, you had to hold onto the license for three years before you could sell it. Reagan put his own people in on the Federal Communications Commission, and they got rid of that restriction. You can buy a station this morning and sell it this afternoon. So investors get into radio to make a quick buck. Mind you, there were a lot of things that needed deregulation, mostly at the technical level. But Reagan's FCC turned it into a speculator's market. We're going to be paying for that administration for a long time to come.

"There's another thing, and this again has to do with popular perception. The popular perception in the industry is that AM radio is doomed, that it's an archaic medium and is going to be phased out. And so selling an AM radio station -- what they call a stand-alone, not an AM-FM combination -- is very difficult today. A lot of the big brokers won't take it on at all. This has happened only in the last couple of years. If you bought an AM radio station, as we did in December of 1987, it's very hard to sell right now.

"This perception is wrong. It isn't true. It's nonsense. In every major market, there's at least one AM in the top three stations. In Los Angeles, you have KABC, KNX, and KFWB. In some towns the number one station is AM -- as in Detroit, and WJR. WJR, which does exciting things, has been the number one station forever. WGN in Chicago, WNEW and WABC in New York. The ratings have held fine. But it is a perception. The industry doesn't look at the reality.

"And then you have the way the record industry looks at things. There is nothing, not even in the movie industry, to compare to the stupidity of its executives, not to mention their cupidity.

"Numbers control the industry more than anything. And who knows how accurate the surveys are? In Santa Barbara, the Arbitron sample is minute, fewer than four hundred persons. And it's weighted in all kinds of ways. So if your target is the audience that's thirty-five plus, upper-income people, you're lucky if you get a fair representation back. In other words, the bulk of the diaries are going to go to people between the ages of twelve and thirty-five. So who knows about these samples? I don't trust them."

I asked Fred, "What do you think of the national networks in other countries, supported by taxes, such as the BBC in England and the CBC in Canada?"

"Well, I drive through Canada sometimes, and all I hear is country and rock. In the little towns, sometimes about all you can get is the CBC. There used to be a great variety in their programming. I don't think there's as much now."

"Well," I said, "the problem is that even these publicly-owned corporations in other countries are hiring young people who have grown up a-historical, who do not know the history of the music or their own culture. I met a guy in the CBC record library in Toronto who had an amazing knowledge of jazz, which surprised and pleased me, because he's young. I remember what one British critic said of the BBC: he called it the best of the worst. The real problem is that the broadcasting industry, in the United States particularly, has failed to educate the next generation to take over and preserve the culture. The problem grows more serious every year."

"And we're not," Fred said, "just talking about a bunch of old fogies locked into the past. There is a definable difference between quality music and junk. This was always true. The big-band era was, as you have pointed out in the *Jazzletter*, a quirk of history. Never before, as far as I know, has popular musical taste come together with the highest levels of musicianship to create the remarkable music that we had in that era -- along with a certain amount of junk.

"And everybody forgets that those musicians were very young. Woody Herman said that he was the old man of the outfit when he took over the Isham Jones band. He was twenty-two.

"We are going to have to fight for quality in the arts. And if we're going to fight for it, we have to look at the realities of radio, because it is so pervasive and so powerful. There are, as of the most recent figure, 4,929 AM stations in the United States, 4,141 FM, plus 1,369 educational FM stations, meaning mostly the NPR stations.

"Radio has become completely impersonal, although by various ingenious means the owners try to disguise that fact now. My country station in Santa Barbara is formatted out of Sacramento. They do voice tracks. The announcements are on one tape and the music on other reels, and they combine the two by electronic devices. They even talk over intros. But there's no one there. They go a mile a minute, just like the rock jocks. They talk about local things, they talk about Santa Barbara and about the station and other people on it. They're fed all this information at the source in Sacramento.

"For twenty-four hours of programming, you're paying about $800 a month. You can have someone on the board who can't even talk at all. All he has to be able to do is operate switches. There are, however, totally automatic systems. The system we use is called operator-assist. Much of it is automatic, but the operators have to punch in commercials and taped news casts off the network. These people don't have to be very talented, and they can be paid as little as five or six dollars an hour. The salary cost is minimal. And the program director? What's he got to do?

"The program director was a very important figure in a radio station. He no longer is. In fact, he is often referred to now as the operations director. He coordinates the tapes in and the tapes out and the scheduling. He was very important until about twenty years and then his role started to decline.

"So the station is being run by a salesman, and all he's got to do is sell time, and all he's got to do to do that is sell one thing: country music. Or rock music. He's not selling programs, he's not selling personalities, he's not selling specific times. So he doesn't have to know anything about program except that they've got a country station or a rock station.

"There is hope in the fact that when we changed format in Santa Barbara, there was a public uproar -- jammed telephone switchboards, letters to the editor, and so on.

"There is a discriminating audience out there, a large one, that recognizes talent, quality, and individuality, and it is ready to support them with their ears and their pocketbooks. But they have to be given time to find you."