

About New York

The Sound of Silence on WFAT, Pirate Radio

By FRANCIS X. CLINES

For 16 months, WFAT was lucid and merry on the AM radio dial — "Fat is where it's at." "This is the nation's most listened to pirate station."

Then, last weekend, the station was raided by Federal agents as the signal was going out loud, clear and illegally from Perry Cavalieri's bedroom radio station high up in the Marborough public housing project overlooking Coney Island.

Perry, who is 21 and has been addicted to radio since childhood, had to wake up his parents, and they said: What, again? The Feds had come knocking the same way three years ago, when Perry and his friend and fellow dropout, John Calabro, were running another pirate radio station, WCPN, intruding on Perry's bedroom onto the same point on the AM dial, 1630 kilohertz, without benefit of Government license.

This time, the Federals were spotted down in the courtyard at 2 in the morning, working some sort of electronic tracking equipment. Right then, Perry and John were on the air as Larry McKee and Hal Hall, respectively, using their nom de mikes with the baritone glister that sounds rooted well west of Coney Island.

They were taking talk-show calls from as far away as New England, Ontario and West Virginia, an excellent range considering their Army surplus transmitter is rated as less than 100 watts. In fact, some of the New England pirates up there at WPRN had called to say the show sounded solid, even as the Feds were zeroing in.

One of the regular callers was on — Howie, a Brooklyn voice who always tells how much he detests disco music on other stations. He had a last chance to aver, "Rock 'n' Roll forever!" as Perry and John looked out and saw the agents come into the building. And so, from high atop Marborough houses, it was good night sweetheart.

"This is it," one of them announced.

"WFAT has to leave the air," the other added. They departed with Brooklyn-toned anxiety edging out the cool in their carefully groomed Larry and Hal voices.

The Federal agents knocked and knocked while the two performers were cutting the 125-foot wire antenna running across the courtyard to the next building and hiding some of the tubes from their transmitter under Perry's bed. The scene sounded like Ensign Pulver and Mr. Roberts.

When Perry opened the door, he found the agents very polite. "Good morning," one said. "You have a very nice sounding radio station," another said.

"And he called Perry a 'bright and ambitious young man,' something like that," John, who is 18, recalled proudly.

They were surprised when the agents asked them to go back on the air, apparently so an announcement could be made to Federal monitors and the addicteed audience that another pirate station had been nabbed. Perry and John declined to produce the missing parts, so the F.C.C. used the phone to tell their main office that WFAT was finished.

The F.C.C.'s current crackdown on pirates has been very effective, according to one addict listener who knows where to comb the AM and FM dials. This fan has logged two dozen pirates in recent years in the New York area, only to hear them disappear one by one. WFAT was the best lately, and the listening now is very thin, according to his log.

WGOR ("Gorilla radio") popped on for a total of 46 seconds recently just to wave the flag amid the F.C.C. campaign. WISY comes on occasionally on the FM dial with top-40 music from somewhere on Staten Island. And the three adenoidal amateurs at WPNJ (for Paul, Nick and Joe) come on unpredictably from what sounds like a Brooklyn garage to make pirate aficionados groan at their terrible sound. But FAT radio was the cream lately



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Perry Cavalieri in his bedroom radio station, WFAT-AM, in Brooklyn

because late-night, call-in talk had disappeared from the AM dial and Perry and John had concocted a relaxed and professional sounding show to fill the gap.

Their act of piracy — learning how to build a station, tape-mixing their own jingles from canalized sounds of legal radio, setting up a safe call-in "loop" on third-party test-phone lines used during the day by telephone installers — was no mere prang of rampant amateurism. It was as if a group of sandlot ballplayers broke into Yankee Stadium every night while the city

slept, turned on the lights and the organ, donned big league uniforms, and played a regular schedule for 16 months, including post-game interviews and raking the field before departing.

The F.C.C.'s responsibility to police the air waves seems quite defensible, and pirates like Perry and John are not aggressive when they're caught. Perry has now received his second warning of a possible \$10,000 fine and a year in prison if he keeps it up, and he says he will live up to his promise to the Government to stay off the air.

But he argues that pirates exist because commercial radio is so monotonous and rigged with canned formats and mass-market pandering. Standing in his bedroom with his equipment silent and cold, Perry says he was heartened by all the calls of good luck that kept coming in after the agents arrived last Sunday morning.

"We believe the Government should open the air waves for people like us," he says. "It's a matter of free speech."

Much as he might be tempted, Perry says FAT radio is dead for him. But John just smiles and notes that, technically, he himself has never had his own bedroom station or been officially warned.

"Let's just say I'll continue from where I left off," John says, with some of that Hal Hall confidence bolstering his timbre.

"Look for us in the future," Hall had said over the air as the Federals were knocking on the door. FAT was where