

Little Guys Get Airtime as Low-Power FM Debuts in Region

by Manuel Roig-Franzia

Washington Post Staff Writer

Tuesday, February 19, 2002; Page A01

The radio revolution sounded like it would be a blast. Real power-to-the-people stuff.

Thousands rushed to apply for licenses to run tiny, 100-watt community radio stations two years ago during a moment of federal government largess.

Everyone from religious fundamentalists to nature lovers to Cajun accordion aficionados hoped to take back pieces of the airwaves from corporate giants. They dreamed of preaching the Gospel or railing against pollution or spreading the magic of zydeco rhythms.

But something happened on the way to community-radio nirvana. Something like reality.

A radio tower crashed to the ground while being installed in Danville, Va. Would-be broadcasters lost their day jobs and couldn't afford equipment. Shifting federal

rules kept a music preservationist from sharing John Coltrane's hypnotic vibe with Northwest Washington.

"A lot of the people applying for these licenses will fail," said Richard Snyder, a retired Montgomery County Orphans' Court judge who has applied for a license to operate an educational station on Kent Island. "A lot of these people are altruistic -- they're a little more dreamers than schemers."

Of the 3,400 amateurs nationwide who have applied for low-power FM licenses in the last two years, only five are on the air. A sixth joined them yesterday when

WRYR (97.5 FM) made its inaugural broadcast, transmitting the banjo strumming of the Good Deale Bluegrass band from a 12-by-7-foot studio in microscopic Churchton in southern Anne Arundel County.

The station is run by an environmental group, South Arundel Citizens for Responsible Development, and its founder, Michael Shay. They are best known for fighting the construction of a Safeway grocery store in nearby Deale by



Jeremy Lausman finishes up some wiring for the debut of WRYR (97.5 FM), which will air in parts of the Chesapeake Bay region. (Andrea Bruce Woodall - The Washington Post)

building a giant puppet of County Executive Janet S. Owens (D) and taunting her with it at public events.

But Shay's radio goals reach beyond the confines of his small, waterfront community, where 100 supporters gathered yesterday to cheer and applaud the station's debut. The station's signal radiates across the Chesapeake Bay, reaching the western tip of the Eastern Shore, the southern fringes of Annapolis and parts of Calvert and St. Mary's counties.

Shay is being helped by a band of former radio pirates who once flouted the law by broadcasting from warehouses and back porches across the country. The pirates and the puppet maker attracted an eclectic mix of radio aspirants to Deale this weekend for a three-day gathering they dubbed a "Radio Barnraising."

The barn-raising's seminars -- "Using a mini-disc recorder," "The fine art of deejaying," "Introduction to radio engineering" -- hinted that it was not a gathering of seasoned masters.

Even Shay, buoyed by the technical assistance of a dot-com millionaire and tutored by a former pirate nicknamed "Petri Dish," admits to knowing little about the dials and knobs he will be manipulating. Yet he exudes a jaunty confidence and figures that all those pesky details -- maintenance, filling 24 hours of daily air time and training volunteers -- will take care of themselves.

"When I was in California, we used to say: "Once you've bought the board, you get to go surfing," he said.

Shay and others have an opportunity to broadcast on low-power FM signals because of a change in Federal Communications Commission policy. Essentially, the new rules banned low-power stations in urban areas, where the radio dial is crowded, and pushed the applicants into rural regions.

In January 2000, the FCC -- at the urging of activists and radio pirates -- said nonprofits could apply for licenses to run 100-watt stations, which would be dinky compared with the 50,000-watt giants that dominate the airwaves.

The change was inspired by the fundamental notion that the airwaves are public property.

Soon, there was a torrent of applications. That got the attention of corporate broadcasters and National Public Radio, which lobbied Congress to tighten restrictions. In December 2000, Congress complied, establishing



rules that laid a protective shield around existing stations. The rules blocked low-power applicants from building near existing stations and from broadcasting over frequencies that were similar to those already being used.

The shift ruined Antonio Puesan's hopes of broadcasting from Northwest Washington's Center for the Preservation of Jazz and Blues.

"Is this George Orwell with dyslexia?" Puesan said. "Big Brother doesn't want to hear you talking?"

Those who did qualify for licenses haven't had an easy time, either.

Charles McCraw's two-man group in Danville -- optimistically named the International Religion Society -- lost its 110-foot tower when the installation crew dropped it, leaving a tangled mass of useless metal.

"Ruined the whole cotton-pickin' thing," he said. "It's been more trouble to clear than it was to set up."

Three hours away, in Pulaski, Va., Fred Gilbert is struggling to get his station on the air, too. Gilbert dreams of spreading the teachings of Chinese spiritualist Witness Lee. But he can't afford the equipment because he just lost his job as a trucker.

In fact, Gilbert is a little baffled by the whole thing right now. "I'm really not that capable of a person, but I did get a license," he said. "That says something."

Hoping not to stumble down a similar path, more than 100 radio dreamers have streamed into the Deale barn-raising.

There's Mona Kennerson from Opelousas, in Louisiana Cajun country, who not only wants her station to ensure the survival of zydeco, but also hopes to promote something called "swamp pop."

And there's Bill Morancy, who hopes to broadcast the one-minute musings of laborers who build and maintain celebrity homes on Martha's Vineyard.

Petri Dish, otherwise known as Pete Tridish, is their guru. In his pirate-radio glory days, he ran Radio Mutiny in Philadelphia. The station broadcast shows such as "Incarceration Nation," about prison abuses, until the FCC shut him down in the late 1990s.

Tridish decided to go straight when the FCC created low-power radio. His Prometheus Radio project receives basic funding from the Ford and MacArthur foundations.

Tridish drove to Deale in a battered Toyota named Hedy Lamarr because the sultry movie star once patented a radio gizmo.

Tridish helped Shay unpack radio gadgets last week while debating methods of sending WRYYR's signal via the Internet to its tower on donated space at a marina in the Eastern Shore town of Sherwood.

While borrowed engineering experts untangled wires, Shay taped bluegrass ensembles, lined up feeds from environmental groups, contacted black watermen and visited with gospel groups. His station will celebrate the Chesapeake's diversity, he said hopefully.

But all that will have to wait. After WRYYR's first broadcast day, the station is going silent, except for periodic tests, for at least six weeks. Shay will be training volunteers and fine-tuning equipment. What happens next is anybody's guess.

© 2002 The Washington Post Company