

Jake Einstein, 90; Took Area Radio From Pop to Rock

By Matt Schudel
Washington Post Staff Writer
Sunday, September 16, 2007

Jake Einstein, a colorful radio innovator who launched the Washington area's first alternative rock station, WHFS-FM, which left a lasting mark on the region's music scene in the 1970s and 1980s, died Sept. 12 at his home in Potomac from emphysema and complications from an aneurysm. He was 90.

Mr. Einstein had been a newspaper columnist, speechwriter and advertising salesman before becoming general manager and part-owner of the low-rated 2,300-watt Bethesda station in 1967. Within a year, he introduced rock-and-roll to a staid musical lineup, and the station's fortunes began to rise.

In 1971, WHFS -- then broadcasting at 102.3 FM -- became Washington's first 24-hour rock station and quickly blossomed into a cultural force. Mr. Einstein gave his young DJs freedom to broadcast whatever they wanted, and for the next 12 years WHFS was at the center of Washington's progressive music scene, attracting a loyal following of students, musicians and young urbanites.

It was the first local station to play such bands as REM, U2, Simple Minds, Depeche Mode and the Cure. It furthered the careers of then-undiscovered stars Bruce Springsteen, George Thorogood and Emmylou Harris, who sometimes showed up at the studio. WHFS played the records of many local groups as well, including Tru Fax & the Insaniacs, the Bad Brains and Root Boy Slim and the Sex Change Band.

"It seemed like an unlikely place to be the center of Washington's music culture, but Jake took a chance, and it paid off for him," said Mike Schreiber, president of the Washington Area Music Association and a part of the D.C. music scene since the 1960s. "He gave voice to a type of radio that, without him, wouldn't have happened. It was a real sense of community."

When Mr. Einstein became general manager of WHFS, the station had been on the air for six years and was lucky to draw 800 listeners a night with its format of pop, light classical and jazz.

"Then a guy named Frank Richards came in one day wearing cutoffs and a leather vest, played me a tape of rock music from Los Angeles," Mr. Einstein told *The Washington Post* in 1983. "We were losing so much money that another couple of dollars couldn't hurt, right? So we put him on. My God, the calls! I never knew we had an audience!"

In 1969, three would-be DJs -- Joshua Brooks, Sara Vass and Mark Gorbulew -- approached Mr. Einstein with an idea for a free-form rock-and-roll program. They went on under the name Spiritus Cheese (derived from a cheese company in New York), and a new era was born.

"It was Jake's vision that FM radio and rock-and-roll were about to collide," said Mr. Einstein's daughter, Rose, who briefly worked at WHFS. "He saw it as an all-night format that would sustain a station."

Within months, WHFS was drawing an average nightly audience of 32,700 listeners. Spiritus Cheese lasted just a year -- someone complained about a four-letter word in a Firesign Theatre skit broadcast on the air -- but by then the station had found its niche.

The station's rock-and-roll DJs -- who included Mr. Einstein's sons David and Damian as well as Tom Grooms, Adele Abrams and Josh, Cerphe and Weasel -- became known for their shrewd and esoteric musical selections drawn from the station's 20,000-volume record library. They explored the byways of rock, blues, jazz, reggae and even classical music but seldom included tunes from the Top 40.

"There were no restrictions," said Jonathan Gilbert, who began broadcasting as Weasel on WHFS in 1972. "We would play everything from [experimental composer Karlheinz] Stockhausen to bluegrass -- sometimes in the same set."

The station promoted local clubs and concerts and invited musicians to drop by for late-night interviews and impromptu performances.

"Jerry Jeff Walker took his whole band to the studio," recalled Joshua Brooks, who was part of the Spiritus Cheese trio and later broadcast as Josh. "We had to put the drummer down at the end of the hall. They were on from 12:30 till 6 o'clock in the morning."

The hard-rocking Thorogood played an after-hours acoustic set in the studio, and on another night, members of a San Francisco all-star band got into a fistfight on the air. Once, when Jamaican reggae star Peter Tosh was being interviewed, Mr. Einstein found the studio filled with billowing clouds of marijuana smoke. He walked away, and the interview continued.

"Jake got it," Brooks said. "He didn't know about the music, but he trusted the DJs."

"It wasn't just about spinning records," Rose Einstein added. "It was about the community of music."

Jacob Einstein Jr. was born in Baltimore on Aug. 5, 1917, and grew up in Catonsville, Md., as one of 13 children.

He found his first job in radio in 1939, selling advertising at WINX-AM in Rockville. He worked for a newspaper in Flint, Mich., before moving to Annapolis in 1942. He sold

advertising for a radio station, wrote speeches for a state senator and moved to Denton, Md., on the Eastern Shore, in 1953. For several years, he wrote a local newspaper column called "Einstein's Theory."

In 1964, he became an advertising salesman at WHFS, the area's first stereo FM station. (The call letters stood for Washington High Fidelity Stereo.)

Described in news accounts as "cantankerous and quarrelsome" and "crusty and ebullient," Mr. Einstein had a powerful personality.

"Jake had many different sides," his daughter said. "He'd tell you, 'If I want your opinion, I'll give it to you.' "

A sign on his door read, "If he ain't yellin', he ain't sellin.' "

A strong believer in local programming, Mr. Einstein never ran a syndicated show on WHFS. On Sundays, the lineup included a smorgasbord of ethnic programs in Greek, French, Italian, Spanish and Arabic, as well as Jewish and German music shows.

In 1983, despite a grass-roots campaign that elicited 17,000 letters of protest, Mr. Einstein sold WHFS for \$2.2 million. He took the call letters to a station he had bought in Annapolis (broadcasting at 99.1 FM) and rehired many of his old DJs. In 1987, he sold WHFS and WNAV-AM for \$8.2 million.

Mr. Einstein later owned a low-wattage alternative rock station (WRNR-FM) in Annapolis, as well as WYRE-AM, before selling them in 1998 to game-show host Pat Sajak and retiring.

He was married for 35 years to Rosamond Einstein before they were divorced in 1977.

His second wife was Rena Einstein.

Survivors include his wife since 2001, Teresa Tizon Einstein of Potomac; seven children from his first marriage, Timothy Einstein of Sterling, David Einstein of Cape St. Claire, Cass Collier of Baltimore, Jake Einstein III of Salisbury, Damian Einstein of Potomac, Rose Einstein of Los Angeles and Mimi Husser of Frederick; 23 grandchildren; and 13 great-grandchildren.

In 1997, seeking to explain his unexpected rock-and-roll radio success, Mr. Einstein said, "I've always been an alternative guy."

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