

# Big Brother on the Band(wagon)

## Fables of Broadcasting Reconstruction

**Broadcasting Minister Jonathan Hunt has announced a new plan for the restructuring of Radio New Zealand — in particular, the ZM stations. As it involves the conversion of the ZM network to FM and its extension outside the three main centres, it might seem a good thing for contemporary music listeners. But is it? Three broadcasters look at the implications of a government radio move into the commercial marketplace:**

Everybody knows mass appeal radio deals in valium not benzedrine. Lulled by the bland on the band, listeners don't bother to tune out and so become the popular audience radio proudly claims want its service. As popularity guarantees profitability radio stations attain success if they go up in the ratings. This becomes the measure of how good they are.

Ratings show most people like radio just the way it is, they may not feel too much about it but then strong feelings aren't popular. Some people feel strongly radio is crap. These people are in a minority. The only way they can be catered for is through minority radio which is not profitable and so non-commercial. Overseas this is called "public broadcasting". In this country the concept is followed by student radio but the real responsibility rests with the Broadcasting Corporation through Radio New Zealand (RNZ). It's their job because we pay them licence fees to do it.

### What Do We Get?

Non-commercial RNZ stations aim at older people. The National Programme (YAs) rates well but by seeking to become more popular inevitably becomes more bland. The Concert Programme (YCs) attracts an audience not necessarily any bigger than any other minority but certainly one with a bigger

voice. We get bugger all else because we're told the services cost money and the licence fees haven't gone up in 10 years.

Lack of dollars has caused problems at YA and YC and increasingly they've become dependent on finance from RNZ's commercial arm. Now RNZ has come up with a 'masterplan' which reinforces that dependence and promises to give us more non-commercial services without the need for a politically unpopular licence fee increase.

### Masterplan

This masterplan depends on income generated from a new commercial ZM FM network. It's planned to make enough money to extend not only the Concert Programme to national FM coverage, but also to provide Maori, Polynesian and access radio stations right round the country. The ZM FM network will "fight back for young New Zealanders" from its base in Wellington. Most of the time the programme will be relayed (and may not even be live) but regional participants will be able to "break out" for their own commercials, news and possibly breakfast shows.

Any guesses at the format? It's a fair bet it won't be far from Z2M. The need to rate, be popular and earn the commercial dollar will dictate the tone of the programme. More tranquilisers anyone?

As we've tried to imply, no one can really stop commercial broadcasters from using the most profitable formats. In Auckland the two commercial FMs are now identical despite being granted warrants to do completely otherwise. They've sold out to popular appeal but what do you expect? And why shouldn't RNZ do the same?

### Man The Stomach Pump, Here Comes The Overdose

What ZM FM will give RNZ is another commercial claw in radio markets round the country. Some areas not served by commercial, "youth-orientated" FM radio will now be served by Z2M. That may be appreciated. However the real danger lies in how an efficient network could attack its competition, both existing and potential.

Private radio is commercial radio. There is no licence fee subsidy, it depends on the commercial audience to survive. Under the masterplan the privates will face a new competitor offering a service identical to theirs, but one substantially cheaper to run. The money RNZ saves by networking basically one station will allow it to offer low advertising rates and to "buy" an audience through competitions, etc. ZM FM will add to the already strong commercial presence RNZ has through its ZBs and community stations. Former Z2M manger Doug Gould (now Radio Windy) has publicly detailed the RNZ policy of "pinching" out the opposition. About 5 years ago the combined weight of Z2B and Z2M almost drove Windy to the wall. This time the empire-building RNZ is planning to make no mistake.

The masterplan threatens a massive leap backwards for New Zealand broadcasting. For the

Broadcasting Corporation it offers the opportunity to regain the monolithic stranglehold it had here before Hauraki put to sea in the Tiri 20 years ago. For the besieged privates the fight is on again, the bleak future holding the prospect of staff and service cutbacks, automation and even tighter formats.

### Who Could Stop The Rot

Since its establishment in 1977 the Broadcasting Tribunal has been the balance in our broadcasting system. It's an independent body which issues warrants for radio stations (and soon private TV) and can also rule on complaints from listeners and viewers. Under section 68 of the Broadcasting Act, the Tribunal has to have "regard for the general policy of the Government of the day" but so far it's kept a remarkably open mind.

In August 1981 the Tribunal issued its report on the development of FM broadcasting in New Zealand. The report was compiled, at great expense, from public hearings and submissions from all interested parties. It was (and still is) a far-reaching document that set out to encourage diverse and complementary radio stations to take full advantage of the new medium. Its most radical suggestion was that the ZMs become non-commercial and therefore minority interest stations upon the introduction of FM in the main centres. The report said RNZ shouldn't be "consigned to a cultural ghetto" but didn't need to compete against the new FMs when it really couldn't offer anything better.

The Tribunal saw the conversion of the Concert Programme to national FM coverage as a top priority. But while the new RNZ masterplan says only an increase in commercial operations can lead to non-commercial expansion, the report said such services should exist in their own right. It said they should be properly and independently funded and further that "the Broadcasting Corporation should have

regard to whether the commercial radio operations should operate as a separate division of RNZ." \*1

The concept is public money should be kept for public broadcasting. This clear distinction allows programming on the basis of inherent quality rather than mass acceptability. The Tribunal went to great lengths to consider who might want something other than commercial radio. "We recognise also an increasing awareness of some music forms such as punk rock which may not be aurally attractive or socially acceptable to many older people, but which are themselves legitimate art forms as much as those to be found broadcast from a YC station." \*2

### Political Interference?

While the Tribunal's FM report was accepted and partly acted upon (1ZM made non-commercial) by the previous Minister of Broadcasting, the new broom, Jonathan Hunt, has embraced the RNZ masterplan with lightning speed. While there's no obligation on Mr Hunt to use the FM report is it proper for him to actively support another option, or for that matter any option? Adoption of the masterplan will dramatically increase the power of the Broadcasting Corporation. Mr Hunt has directed the Broadcasting Tribunal to hear the masterplan applications and told it they fall within government policy. By endorsing the masterplan the minister short-circuits the role of the Tribunal to make impartial judgements on broadcasting issues.

The Corporation will still have to defend its masterplan before the Tribunal, but it seems the war is won before the battle is fought.

### Who Says The Ends Justify The Means?

The great promise in the RNZ masterplan is that it eventually will provide many more non-commercial services throughout

the country. But will it? The Broadcasting Corporation is a multi-million dollar enterprise. Why hasn't it extended Maori, Polynesian, access and "alternative" music services before now? Surely the need has always been there. Future development is tied to commercial muscle, but what if ZM FM isn't the big moneyspinner intended? Will the non-commercial services remain in the dole drums while RNZ dreams up new ways to squeeze the market?

The Corporation is barely accountable for the way it divides its resources between commercial and non-commercial radio. Whilst complaining it's always short of a dollar it nevertheless has managed to find \$60 million to support the third TV channel bid by the Aotearoa Broadcasting Society. It's pretty obvious the Corporation could set up more minority interest services if it wanted to but instead is using the cover of the masterplan to justify grabbing a much bigger slice of the radio market. The desire to make money is the sole rationale of the masterplan. It will eliminate competition. It will re-establish state control. IS THIS HEALTHY FOR BROADCASTING? WILL IT ENCOURAGE QUALITY PROGRAMMING? IS THIS WHAT YOU WANT?

We need broadcasting alternatives now. We need a firm commitment to the needs of an audience, not the destructive in-fighting of commercial competitors all seeking the same lowest common denominator. We're supposed to have a public broadcasting system in this country but its obsession with mass-appeal formulas cuts out all its other options. If you can see that the future of New Zealand radio, as the Broadcasting Corporation plans it, will give you even less to listen to, then DO SOMETHING.

**Mark Everton, Barry Jenkin, Andrew Congdon.**


Concerned broadcasters not currently working in the industry.

\*1 and \*2: Broadcasting Tribunal FM Report, 1981, \$4.90 from the Government Printer.

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# JONATHAN RICHMAN

## AND THE MODERN LOVERS



Hello everyone. I was born in Boston in May of 1961. I grew up in the suburbs in Massachusetts.

When I was eleven I had a crush on Debbie Sahvin. This was 1962. She and Janet Walsh listened to WMEX — the teenage station of that time. Well, when I went over to Janet's to poster Debbie I'd hear "Johnny Angel", "Torture", "Summertime Lover" and songs by Camille Stevens and Tommy Sands. So pretty soon I was there with the transistor radio hearing "The Locomotion", "The Watusi", "He's a Rebel" and everything else. That music is in my heart now as it always will be.

I heard live bands in junior high but didn't start singing or playing till I was 16 and had heard The Velvet Underground, out of New York City. They made an atmosphere and I knew then that I could make one too!

I started singing in public in Boston in 1968. I knew I couldn't sing or play like other guys but I didn't want to. I figured I had feeling and that was enough. I knew I was honest.

I don't know what I'm going to do before I do it on stage. I don't use a "set list". I don't know if I'll smile, I might be sad that night. Lots of times I think I'm hilarious. But I don't do "parody" or "satire" or "tongue-in-cheek" stuff. I read these words about myself occasionally.

I want to sing all over the world and have my records be in the "International Section" of your record store, not far from Charles Amour and Maurice Chevalier, and guys like that.

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