



WEEKEND

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FRIDAY SEPTEMBER 11, 2009

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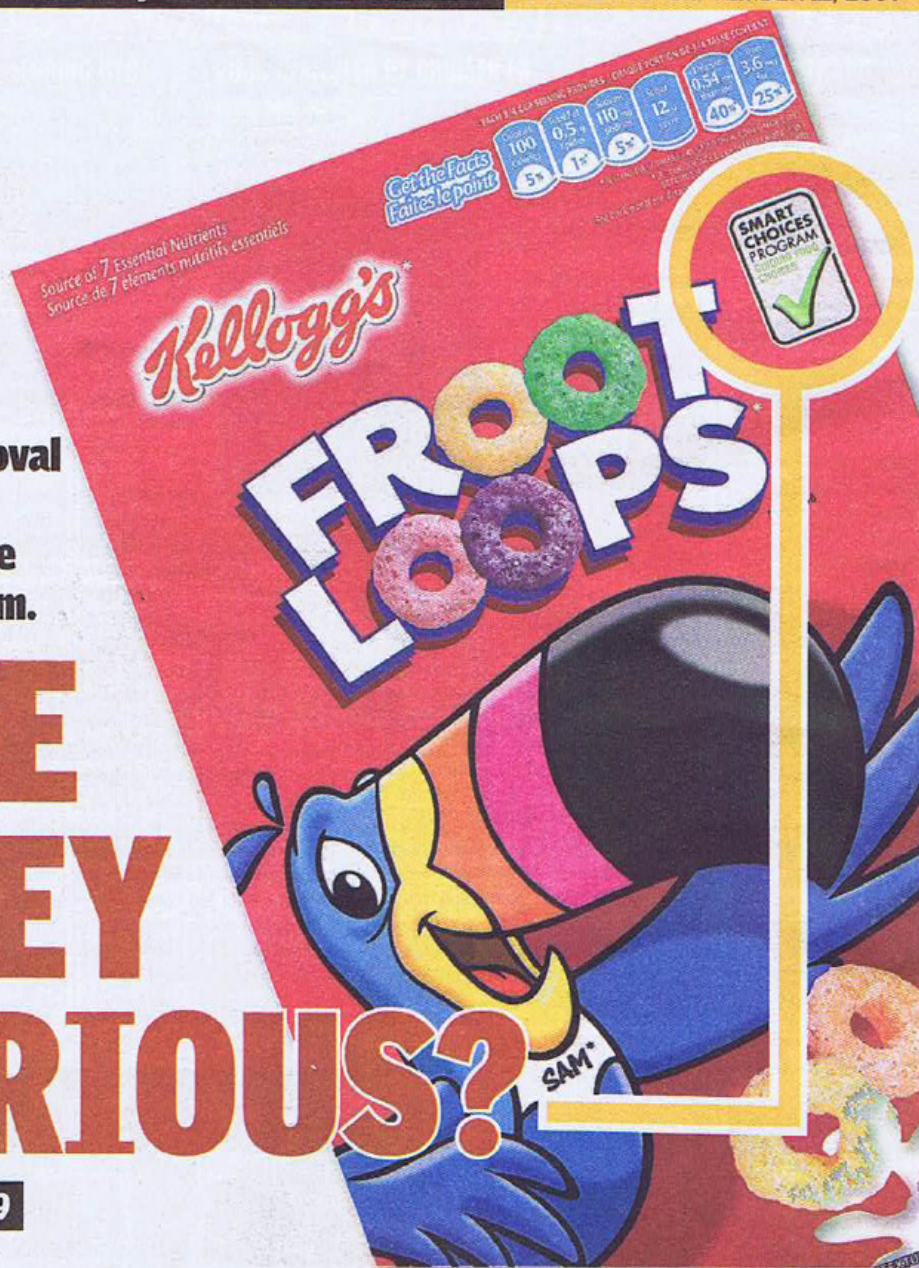
Check 'em out: Five WMNF shows that are different

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Sugar-laden
cereals get
seal of approval
from new
Smart Choice
label program.

ARE THEY SERIOUS?

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PLANNER

weekend
entertainment guide

FRIDAY SEPTEMBER 11, 2009



Hey, speaking of birthdays ...

*Tbt** debuted as a daily newspaper in March 2006. But before it went daily, *tbt** was published once a week on Fridays, with the tagline, "Zippy news for time-challenged adults." (Catchy!) Our first issue published five years ago this week, included a Q&A with Ronde Barber, a review of some hot, new Ybor City club called Czar and — you guessed it — a story about the 25th anniversary of WMNF. Since then, our reporters have partied with por stars, gone dumpster-diving with freegans and chatted with everyone from Paris Hilton to Maya Angelou. We even had a couple get engaged on our cover (Nestor and Vanessa, who are still happily married, thanks). For five years, we hope you've had as much fun reading *tbt** as we've had producing it. Thanks, readers, for making our lives so zippy. — The editors, *tbt**

When their station debuted in 1979, the volunteers who built Tampa community radio institution WMNF-88.5 couldn't have imagined they'd someday be celebrating 30 years on the airwaves.

On Saturday night, that's exactly what they'll do.

PAGES 38-39



Clockwise, from top left: Bob Cannon and Marc Rose started the long-running radio serial *Dry Smoke and Whispers* on WMNF in 1981. Lia Lent, Janine Farver and program director Rob Lorei worked out of a dilapidated Hyde Park home during the station's first year. The late Kenny K, a founding member of Digital Underground, was one of the first local radio DJs to play hip-hop. And in 1995, station director Randy Wynne and music programmer Andrew Bryan did battle over airtime for alternative music. *tbt** files



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THEIR TIME

As WMNF-88.5 turns 30, the feisty station's loyal fans wonder: Will any young listeners take up their cause? — Eric Deggans degans@tampabay.com

Rob Lorei has a dream. It's a simple one, shared on a recent Saturday with about 250 of his closest friends, piled into the posh eatery Maestro's above the Tampa Bay Performing Arts Center for WMNF-FM 88.5's First Annual Peace Awards.

"In 1986, Oliver North helped sell arms to Iran," said Lorei, the smooth, radio-ready vocals he usually employs leading the station's midday talk shows rising to a more urgent pitch. "There ought to be an arrow that pops up, every time he goes on Fox News. Imagine if, every time he went on his show, an arrow popped up saying, 'This guy sold arms to Iran.'"

North should be very afraid. Because when Lorei chased a dream 30 years ago, he and a few friends walked the streets of Tampa for a year, begging strangers for donations to build something entirely new:

A community-supported radio station.

Three decades later, as WMNF's longtime news and public affairs director, Lorei stood before a crowd that paid \$75 a head to scarf down catered food, take in a concert by Steve Earle and fete a list of honorees ranging from novelist Connie May Fowler to the Coalition of Immokalee Workers farm laborers group.

"I felt so alone 30 years ago, suddenly WMNF comes along and I find I'm not such a freak anymore," said Fowler, an award-winning novelist who echoes a story you'll hear from many a WMNF fan. "Suddenly, I'm part of a community."

It's a community that officially convened on Sept. 14, 1979, when a small band of stalwarts first fired up WMNF's signal at 88.5 on the FM dial — beaming from a Hyde Park house so dilapidated, it eventually was featured in a local TV station's

expose of decaying buildings.

These days, the group has slightly better digs: a \$2 million-plus, 13,000-square-foot studio built in 2005 and funded mostly with listener donations. Drawing an audience of more than 100,000 people each week with a budget of about \$1.6 million, WMNF has earned status as one of the country's strongest community radio stations. And along the way, it has become an institution — perhaps the one outcome its founders didn't quite expect.

"Even we weren't sure we were going to pull it off," said Lorei, 54, who came to Tampa straight out of college in response to an ad in *Mother Jones* magazine, unaware he'd be soliciting donations door-to-door to pay his own \$62-a-week salary. "I thought I'd do this for 10 years and maybe go to law school."

But what happens if one of the station's biggest assets — its long list of graying, long-tenured volunteers — also clouds its future?

Loyal listeners, but for how long?

Lorei remembers WMNF connecting with its audience from the start, when their first fund drive netted \$23,000 — an amazing amount for a station with no air conditioning and windows kept wide open, occasionally forcing DJs to just stop talking when a truck roared by.

Randy Wynne, a 24-year WMNF veteran and longtime program director, cited the station's wide broadcast footprint; a 70,000-watt signal snapped

up before real competition began for FM frequencies.

Despite a wildly eclectic weekly lineup of shows supervised by a horde of longtime volunteer programmers — is there another radio station within 100 miles featuring a polka show, a Celtic music show and a number of R&B shows on the same channel? — each program seems connected to its own enthusiastic constituency.

Happy Birthday, WMNF

The station's 30th anniversary concert begins at 6 p.m. in The Ritz, 1503 E. Seventh Ave. Tampa, with artists including Paul Thorn, Samantha Crain and Midnight Shivers, Barely Pink and Sarasota Slim. Get details on Page 29. Tickets are \$20. (813) 247-2555.

Stories of WMNF fan loyalty are the stuff of legend. In 1997, when state Sen. John Grant got a \$104,000 grant yanked from the station, listeners ponied up \$122,000 to replace it in less than two days.

When a consultant suggested station management find a few big donors to kickstart fundraising for the new studio, former station manager Vicki Santa developed an alternative; asking 1,000 supporters to donate \$1,000 each, Wynne said. Eventually, 1,700 people stepped up.

"People really stick around and give the station stability," said Wynne.

But Wynne knows the flip side of that coin. The station's median listener age is 50 and it can take a new volunteer two years to see a new show proposal reach the air. The army of devoted listeners who pay to support the eclectic programming make it tough for shows that might reach a casual listener to survive, as younger-skewing sounds such as electronica and hip hop are pushed to late hours.

Worse, younger listeners don't have the same bond with radio. Raised with iPods and streaming

audio, this generation didn't spend its adolescence waiting by a tiny transistor radio for their favorite song — and may not have much patience for a station dominated by fiftysomething boomers.

"There's too many different Web sites out there," Wynne said. "If that ever replaces radio ... The long-term future is kind of a question."

The spirit moves forward

Piled on station manager Jim Bennett's cluttered desk at WMNF, is a reminder of the huge shoes he's filling: a stack of battered, old 45 records with Santa's name stenciled on the side.

Santa, known as WMNF's "heart and soul," died in December. The next month, Bennett, 57, headed east after nearly 30 years at the country's first community radio station, KPFA-FM in Berkeley, Calif., to succeed her.

The problems were daunting: A tanking economy had hurt contributions enough last year to force \$90,000 in budget cuts.

But Bennett has cooked up an ambitious slate of new projects, including the Peace Awards, a new secondary HD radio channel that debuted Sept. 5, simulcasting USF's student-run Bulls Radio station and a third HD channel coming in January featuring public affairs programming.

Bennett expects to finish this fiscal year with a \$10,000 surplus. And he's hopeful technology will provide extra channels for new programming and a way to engage young volunteers.

"For us to have a future and be relevant, we have got to be in as many forums as possible," he said.

"When you have lots of choices, it's easy to take what you have for granted. Here, people don't take WMNF for granted."

Contributing: Carolyn Edds.

Left of the dial

Think WMNF is too "out there" for you? Meet five DJs whose

Franco Silva

Host, *Latino 54*, 9 to 10 a.m. Wednesdays

Silva started at the station in 1995 as one of a handful of hosts of the Latin music show *Oye Latino*. As his co-hosts gradually dropped out, Silva stayed on as the solo emcee until programming changes threatened cancellation of the show in 2002. Thanks to public outcry, the station decided to keep Silva, but with a new time slot and a new name for the show. "I said, 'What am I going to call a 54-minute Latino show?' *Latino 54*?" recalled Silva, 46, who works for the City of St. Petersburg Sanitation Department. "And then it stuck." Silva and co-host Yadira Caro say the show's purpose is to educate both gringos and English-speaking Hispanics about Latin American culture. "There's a lot of people who like Latin music," said Silva, a native Nuyorican (New York Puerto Rican) who now lives in St. Pete, "but then when the deejay comes out talking (in Spanish), they lose it."



Lizz Straight

Host, *Poetry Is...*, 11 p.m. to midnight Saturdays

Iambic pentameter goes down easily for fans of hip-hop and neo-soul on this program, which fuses music with academic and slam-style poetry. When Straight started the show in 2005, she deliberately kept its title open-ended. "I left it *Poetry Is...* on purpose because I feel poetry can be whatever we want it to be," said Straight, 29, of Tampa. Her favorite part of hosting the show is getting feedback from listeners. "They don't think that poetry can be the type of things that I play," said Straight, a professional poet and English major at the University of South Florida. "They think Shakespeare, Emily Dickinson-type stuff." A few years ago, Straight began receiving 30 to 50 letters a week from inmates at Hardee Correctional Institute in Bowling Green. She started dedicating each show to them, and they soon invited her to perform at the prison. One inmate's wife even brought \$300 to the studio to cover Straight's travel expenses. Now Straight and a few of her poet friends do an annual prison tour.



Marcie Finkelstein

Host, *Morning Show*, 6 to 9 a.m. Tuesdays

The Baltimore native began volunteering at WMNF in 1982, shortly after she moved to Tampa to take a job as a USF psychology professor, she still holds. After several years on the trative side, she got behind the mike in 1995. Finkelstein's eclectic program features sin in genres from rock, blues and Americana world music. The host introduces lesser-known names like Bruce Springsteen, Jack Johns on to new music, too. "I'm learning as much the radio," said Finkelstein, 55. "I always f street." Finkelstein's next special, an interv for Change world music project, will air S



tbtf files (1980)
Marc Rose, a man of many voices on the mystery drama *Dry Smoke* and *Whispers*, worked in a makeshift studio during WMNF's early days.



tbtf files (2005)
WMNF's current home opened in 2005, largely through listener donations.



Atolya Deans/tbtf*
Program director Randy Wynne, a 24-year veteran of WMNF, worries about losing younger listeners in the digital era.



tbtf files
Volunteers, like those who built this tower in 1988, are WMNF's lifeblood.



tbtf files (2005)
WMNF's longtime visionary, Rob Lorei, is also the news and public affairs director.

Five key moments in WMNF history

Sept. 14, 1979: The first broadcast from the station.



May 22, 1982: The first annual Tropical Heatwave concert, inspired by the Artists and Writers Ball in Ybor City. The event featured seven local bands and a Carmen Miranda look-alike contest, raising \$10,000.

May 1987: The station offered gavel-to-gavel coverage of the Iran Contra hearings before the age of 24-hour TV news channels, starting a trend which included confirmation hearings for Supreme Court nominees Robert Bork and Clarence Thomas.

April 30, 1997: The 28-hour fundraising marathon to replace a \$104,000 grant yanked by state Sen. John Grant after hearing an Iris DeMent song on WMNF. Fans gave more than \$120,000.

Feb. 1, 2005: WMNF moved into its current, 13,000-square-foot digs.

shows bridge the gap between mainstream and off-the-beaten-path. — Dalia Colón dcolon@tampabay.com

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Duncan Strauss

Host, *Talking Animals*, 11:30 a.m. to noon, first and second Wednesday of every month

When Strauss was a 10-year-old boy growing up in Orange County, Calif., he wanted a mynah bird so much that he took on a paper route to afford the \$2750 pet. Fast-forward to 2003, when the animal lover and former journalist combined his passions to found *Talking Animals*, a variety show blending animal-related news, music and comedy. He's used his Hollywood connections and persistence to nab guests like Pretenders lead singer Chrissie Hynde, actress Janeane Garofalo and techno musician Moby. A vegetarian and owner of cats Homer, Elwood and Curtis, Strauss knows not all his guests are hard-core animal rights activists, but listeners often tell him the program has led them to make small changes. "Even people who aren't ready to plunge into things that are talked about on the show still find it interesting and not shrill and proselytizing," said Strauss, who also emcees the WMNF music show *Sonic Detour* from 4 to 6 p.m. Wednesdays.



Jeff Stewart

Host, *Rhythm Vault*, 9 to 10 p.m. Mondays

In the mid-'80s, when Stewart was a student at Sarasota's New College, he'd listen to WMNF on his dorm room radio and make mix tapes for dance parties in the center of campus. Each semester when he moved, he'd lug his record player and enormous album collection to his new home, but it was worth it. With each new disc, Stewart discovered a gem by one of his favorite bands, like the Temptations' *Papa Was a Rolling Stone*. After graduation, Stewart emceed a classic R&B show on WMNF for two decades, until a change in his work schedule prevented him from keeping his radio time slot. Now an administrative clerk at the Tampa Museum of Art, the 45-year-old has been back on the air since January. He still mixes music by lesser-known artists with favorites like the Supremes and Al Green, with an emphasis on up-tempo B-sides. "I love getting calls from younger listeners that are into hip-hop," he said. "They'll hear the original song that I'm playing that some artist has sampled. They're like, 'What is that? Who is that?'"

