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Media by Roger Neville Williams

Wednesday the Judge Plays Jazz

Lynne Dimet, one of forty citizen-DJs at KOTO community radio in Telluride, opens her three-hour weekly show.

What do Seattle, Dallas, New York, and Telluride, Colorado, have that Denver doesn't? Community-access, listener-sponsored FM stereo radio stations. Right now, the only community owned and operated radio station in the state is KOTO in tiny Telluride. In fact, it is the only radio station of its kind between Dallas and Berkeley. But Denver may soon have the second.

Granfalloon Denver Educational Broadcasting, Inc., will seek a favorable FCC ruling on two conflicting license applications: Granfalloon's proposed public-access community radio for Denver and the University of Colorado Educational Media Center's proposed college station, which, if approved, would preempt Granfalloon's frequency.

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The folks at Granfalloon, including KOTO station manager, Jerry Greene, who founded Denver's community broadcasting group four years ago, expect a decision in their favor. It then would be possible to get on the air within six to ten months after receiving an FCC construction permit. And Denver, at last, could tune in to the radio wave of the future.

In an interview in Telluride, Greene explained that Granfalloon submitted its application to the FCC in September 1973, requesting one of the few frequencies available on the thin spectrum of FM band benevolently reserved by the Communications Act of 1934 for noncommercial radio. Eight months later, CU's media department in Boulder submitted an application for the very same frequency, even though another usable channel was available (it was subsequently assigned to the newly formed Boulder Community Broadcasting Group). "It's illegal to file an obstructionist application," says Greene, "but of course we can't prove that's what they did."

Frustrated by various bureaucratic hassles which seemed to block Granfalloon Broadcasting at every turn, Greene left Denver

in the spring of '75 for Telluride, the small mining town and ski resort high in the San Juan mountains. Jim Bedford, a Telluride resident who moved to the mountains from Washington, D.C., five years ago, decided isolated Telluride needed some kind of good local station. Bedford called Greene in Denver and drew on his recently acquired knowledge of how to apply for a radio station license.

Greene explained that FCC regulations stipulate that noncommercial broadcast licenses not held by churches or universities must be in the hands of nonprofit "educational" groups. Bedford set up the San Miguel Educational Fund, whose membership elects the governing board, submitted the FCC application, and offered Greene the job of station manager at a whopping $300 a month.

Telluride's young, progressive city council, voting unanimously for public radio for the valley, allocated $10,000 to build the station. Greene received the construction permit for KOTO June 30, 1975. "I went shopping for equipment and by October 3 we were on the air," says Greene, an intense, dedicated radio freak who wears both a cowboy hat and a pony tail. "The total cost was $5,000. With the rest of the money, we've since bought a stereo transmitter, a remote unit, and tape decks, and we outfitted a production studio." Greene, a *Wunderkind* of modern radio, became a master technician at one of the nation's pioneer community stations, KDNA in St. Louis, after learning the broadcast art at a number of smaller stations around the country. He moved to Denver in 1972 to set up Granfalloon and still keeps an eye on his stepchild from the mountain town 350 miles away.

Thanks to Jerry Greene and a handful of local visionaries, Telluride's 1200 residents have the luxury of listening from seven a.m. to midnight to one of America's finest radio stations. And never are their ears assaulted with commercials. The county commissioners recently voted $900 for half the cost of a translator that will enable KOTO's ten-watt signal to reach the small communities "down valley." Currently, KOTO's only radio competition is Grand Junction's supermarket stereo FM station, whose wall-to-wall FM muzak signal is bounced into the valley by way of the local TV booster tower.

At least five percent of the townspeople of Telluride are directly involved in running the station. Greene has trained 40 volunteer DJs, all licensed by the FCC, which sent an examiner to town to administer the operator's test. Each citizen-DJ has a three-hour show once a week. The format is varied, from jazz to rock to country and western, and classical.

City council meetings are broadcast live. Baptist minister Brother Al has a religious program Sunday afternoon. The school superintendent hosts a morning show, and his sixteen-year-old daughter has an evening one. The municipal judge plays classic jazz each Wednesday night. Telluride's bluegrass festival is broadcast from the site, and the chamber music concerts in the opera house in the summer are taped for airing later in the year.

KOTO also serves the community with a daily calendar, a ride board, and emergency announcements. If someone's cat is lost, or found, it's announced. When the United Parcel Service driver can't find someone to whom he must deliver a package, he goes to the radio station and asks over the air if anyone knows where the person is.

Station manager Greene, doubling as news director, produces a comprehensive news show aired at 6 p.m. each evening. He recently taped exclusive interviews with Governor Lamm on Western Slope water and with Senator Haskell on the Christmas snow drought, which deeply affected the ski business. KOTO features the Washington political commentary program "In the Public Interest" at noon and imports special music programs from National Public Radio, the CBC, Radio Nederland, and Deutsche Welle (West Germany).

KOTO is a member of the two-year-old National Federation of Community Broadcasters, with a three-person lobby in Washington to represent America's public radio stations (as opposed to merely "noncommercial" stations). Last June, the NFCB held its second annual conference in Telluride—with KOTO as the host station—which was attended by some 200 community broadcasters from across the nation, as well as officials from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and National Public Radio. Today, at least fifty alternative and community stations are transmitting good sounds to people previously accustomed to hearing radio only as that invisible used-car salesman in the sky.

How do you finance community radio? Very simply. In Denver, Granfalloon, for example, will have perhaps five or ten thousand "subscribers" instead of 100 advertisers. In Telluride, an annual fund drive nets over half the $7,000 yearly budget; listeners are not constantly hounded for donations, except during officialy proclaimed "KOTO Month" each September, when they are encouraged to send $25 per household. Most do, and at that KOTO is a bargain, providing both a wholesome community institution that

Jerry Greene took the station manager's job for a whopping $300 a month.

draws people together and fine musical programming.

"Financially, we probably have fewer problems than any community station in the country," says Greene, adding that "The key to workable community radio is to be fiscally conservative. We have a loyal and dedicated audience that supports their station, and we supplement the fund drive with various benefits, such as operating a beer concession at the bluegrass festival. For music, all the major record companies (except Warner-Reprise) and dozens of minor ones service us free." Being poor, doing impossible things with minimal resources, running on community volunteers—these are the hallmarks of true community radio.

Although Telluride, with its $10,000 grant by the town board, took the most daring approach to public radio in this country since Wisconsin set up its statewide FM network and New York funded WNYC, tax revenues are not used for operating expenses. The original public funding was solely for capital equipment, which the town owns and leases to the San Miguel Educational Fund for $1 per year. KOTO, midway through its second year, is entirely "listener sponsored."

With luck, Denver soon will be listening to the state's second community station, that is, if the FCC decides in favor of a Denver-based public-access FM community station over CU's request for another "institutional" station, with studios in Boulder.

"But Denver community radio won't be like KOTO," says Tobi Kanter, Granfalloon's executive director, who has been fighting for two years to make Denver community radio a reality. "Our communities are different—we're a big city. We'll be providing individuals and groups with a voice to say what they want to say when they want to say it—from environmentalists to religious organizations. We're planning bilingual broadcasting, in Spanish 30 percent of the time, also programs for the aged and for young people. Of course, there will be every assortment of musical programming from blues to rock to classical." Granfalloon's nine-member board is composed of four women and five men, including Chicanos and Blacks and two Catholic nuns.

But Granfalloon Broadcasting still faces a fight. Apart from the conflicting FCC applications, there is the problem that channel six TV's frequency overlaps the FM noncommercial band, requiring Granfalloon to locate its broadcast antenna on the channel six tower to avoid interference. Channel six is KRMA, the public TV station owned by the Denver school board, and Greene addressed the board at a meeting three years ago requesting space on KRMA's Lookout Mountain tower. But he found himself blocked by board official Carle Stenmark, who urged the board to grant exclusive use of KRMA's tower to the University of Denver's FM station, KCFR, then being upgraded from 10 to 20,000 watts necessitating antenna relocation to the KRMA tower. Thanks to board member Kay Schomp, the resolution was ammended to give Granfalloon an opening, but the Denver University's Vice Chancellor Blackburn wrote Greene that "it would not be in the best interests of the university" for Granfalloon to share KRMA's tower with DU's KCFR. Blackburn's reasoning, explained at a DU faculty meeting: if a young person tuned into Granfalloon and heard a tape communique by the SLA, for example (which sent its messages regarding Patty Hearst to California's Pacifica stations), and then learned that Granfalloon's antenna *was on the same tower* as DU's FM station, he would never register at DU. Ho hum.

Currently KCFR provides Denver with the best noncommercial radio available, and aside from two church-owned stations, it is the *only* noncommercial radio station in Denver, offering interesting, alternative programming. But a university owned and operated radio station is simply not, by definition, community radio: it cannot be compared with the Pacifica station like Berkeley's KPFA or New York's WBAI or Seattle's KRAB. Nor can an "institutional" station be anything like innovative KCHU in Dallas, with its 100,000 watts of raw, alternative energy, or Houston's "Mighty 90" KPFT, broadcasting hard-hitting programs on prisons, the environment, and police crime, as well as progressive jazz, New Age esoterica, and "Houston as seen by children."

The rise of community FM radio coincides with the fall of FM rock, as the commercial free-form stations of the '60s turn into the whores of the '70s, parading now as Top Forty and highly profitable "progressive rock" stations. Virtually nothing is happening in commercial radio today, and very little is innovative on most noncommercial stations. It's all happening in listener-sponsored, community-access FM. Community radio is saying the airwaves should be for people, not only for profit—for human communication, sharing information, and fine music of all kinds, not merely to sell soap in order to line stock holders' pockets.

And Jerry Greene is saying, "A lot of people are finding they like real radio without advertising, which is more suitable to the print media. Broadcast advertising offends. It interrupts the flow; you can't have a continuous program with advertising. People don't like advertising on the radio; it turns people off. And they're beginning to realize that there is a kind of noncommercial radio very different from the institutional propaganda machines, such as most religious and university stations."

Greene believes Granfalloon can go on the air for the first year with $35,000. That is equal to the salary of one executive at an average AM commercial Top Forty station. So clean out your ears Denver, and get ready for the *real* sound of the seventies.

(Persons interested in Denver community radio should write Tobi Kanter, Granfalloon Denver Educational Broadcasting, Inc., Box 18470, Capitol Hill Station, Denver 80218, or call 458-7746.)

Roger Neville Williams, a resident of Telluride, has written for many publications including *New Times* and the *Village Voice*.