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Relive 'The Spirit of Radio' at CFNY reunion

Meet the DJs and staff and enjoy live music from acts made famous on CFNY during the '70s and '80s

KATHARINE SEALEY

In 1976, on an extra turntable in the backroom of a ramshackle yellow house on Ellen Street, in between records at the 857-watt all-disco CHIC -FM, a group of visionaries began sending out a sound that would change the spirit of radio in Toronto.

"We only had about 12 people listening, and we had to convince the suits that people really did want to listen to music that wasn't being heard on other stations at that time," said then-program director David Marsden. "It was a struggle, but we won."

CHIC-FM soon changed its name to CFNY, adopted the slogan 'The Spirit of Radio' and became the world's first modern rock station. On Wednesday, Nov. 12, the staff and personalities who ruled the CFNY airwaves during Marsden's term, 1977 to 1989, will be getting back together for one-night only.

"In the early summer, my friend Don Berns and I were sitting around talking about the old times, and we said 'hey, we should have a reunion,'" said Marsden. "We didn't know if anyone else would be interested, so we went on the fan site spiritofradio.ca, and found there were dozens of other people saying 'hey, we should have a reunion'."

After sending out an e-mail, Marsden was inundated with responses and decided to make it a larger event.

"We started thinking, 'Should it just be a staff reunion, or a reunion of some of the acts?'," he said. "But at CFNY, it's always been about the listener, and getting them involved, so we knew it had to include them."

The Spirit of Radio reunion now features eight rooms of CFNY paraphernalia and photographs. At 8 p.m. at the Government in Toronto, there will also be a revival of the Road Show, featuring the DJs who played in the clubs and at the



CFNY Video Road Shows in the late '70s and '80s, including Berns, Craig Beesack, Alan Cross, Ivar Hamilton, Deadly Hedley Jones and Scot Turner. At 9:30 p.m. the action moves to the Kool Haus for a live show featuring acts made famous by CFNY, including The Pukka Orchestra, Nash the Slash, The Spoons, Images in Vogue, Martha and the Muffins and the Extras.

"More than 99 percent of the original staff will also be there," said Marsden. "It's your chance to talk to those people you've been listening to for all these years."

The list includes Mary Ellen Beninger, Jim Bird, Pamela Blair, Ron Bruchal, Lee Carter, Mary Curtis, Diana Degruijter, Alan Eagleson, Lindsay Gillespie, Peter Goodwin, Peter Griffin, Hal Harbour, David Haydu, David Hight, Emi Hudec, Pat Hurley, Liz Janik, Earl Jive, Tim Keele, Wolfgang Klein, Leslie Kross, Bob Lehman, Dave Mazmanian, Steve Macaulay, Kevin O'Leary, Maie Pauts, Fred Patterson, Skip Prokop, Jim Reid, Joan Rimmer, Geets Romo,, James Ufton and Chris Van Allan, as well as a number of surprise guests.

"Radio is like an iceberg," Marsden said. "You only really see the 10 per cent who are on the air, but there's a whole lot of people behind them, working hard, that you never hear about."

Marsden said he's looking forward to reminiscing about CFNY's early days at 2 Ellen St. where the control room was in one bedroom, the production studio in another, the closet was the record library and news was broadcast from the bathroom.

The soundproofing lowered the headspace to 6-feet, and the staff left notes for each other on a wooden desk until there was no more space to write on.

Among the many early obstacles was a transmitter that didn't work in bad weather, record needles that jumped when heavy traffic went by, and, on one occasion, a mouse that decided to go for a jog on the turntable live on the air.

Amidst it all, they played music, offering up a diverse playlist which included reggae, punk, blues, electronic, Quebecois, rock, jazz and even classical.

"The music that you play should be woven into a tapestry, all coming together in one big audio explosion," said Marsden. "It's not about playing tracks of music. It's a cosmic journey that you take together."

Marsden said, although it caused a stir at the time, modern audiences probably wouldn't even blink at the then-radical alternative selections.

"We were fighting to play bands like The Sex Pistols and Duran Duran," he said. "Now, you hear that stuff on every station."

In it's first ratings evaluation, the station came dead last, behind even the French and all-news stations.

They were kept alive by listeners, said Marsden, who, although a small group, proved to be mighty.

"It was amazing how much influence we had when it can time for people to buy records," he said.

"We were like a trusted editor, saying 'here's a great artist or track that you may not know about yet, but if you like it you might want to pick up this weekend'. That's the spirit behind The Spirit of Radio."

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Station grew

Eventually, the station grew, moving to 340 Main St., then 83 Kennedy Rd. S., adding a downtown studio on the observation deck of the CN Tower before permanently relocating to Toronto in 1996.

Marsden left the station in 1989, but said he is still proud to be a part of the CFNY family.

"Today, CFNY is a large powerhouse of a radio station," he said. "The people who work there have the one thing that you have to have to make good radio, and that's passion."

Marsden, who started out in radio as an on-air personality, recently returned to the airwaves with a live Thursday and Friday night timeslot on 94.9 ROCK-FM.

"They said what do you need to get back on the air and I said 'I need someone who trusts what I'm doing, and lets me do it'," he said.

"That's all I've ever wanted from this business because when you do that, it's not only the DJs that benefit, it's the listeners, because they aren't stuck listening to the same number of tracks again and again. It's something a little more unpredictable than that."

Hall of Fame

Marsden, who is part of a permanent display at Cleveland's Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, said he's enjoying being back on the radio, and the chance to reconnect with those who remember him from CFNY.

"I get lots of calls like this 'Hi Dave, I grew up listening to you and I met my wife one night at a CFNY Road Show and tonight we are celebrating our 19th anniversary'," said Marsden.

"I love that, it makes me feel good, I get really touched by that because the listener is number one to me and I like to know that he's happy. Without the listener, I am just a guy sitting in a room, playing records and talking to himself. If I wanted to do that, I could have stayed home."

Tickets for the reunion, \$65.50, are available through Ticketmaster. Call 416-870-8000 or visit www.ticketmaster.ca.

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