

Witless Wireless

Talkback radio is Australia's number one opinion-maker. Rebecca Coyle looks behind the bluster.

Possibly the earliest example of talkback radio on the Australian airwaves was in the 20s on Sydney's ABC station 2BL. The station invited 'listeners-in' to debate issues with studio experts. The experiment was significant since it allowed a two-way exchange and challenged the model of authoritative broadcasting, derived from the BBC, that aimed to educate, inform and (lastly) entertain passive listeners.

This innovation was not lost on E R Voigt who set up Sydney's news-sport-talk station 2KY based on this notion of radio's social function. Other stations used early forms of talkback to assess their audience profiles. In some sense, 'youth' stations today use telephone request programs to do the same thing in their music or quiz shows.

We generally identify talkback with the shows hosted by the popular 'personalities', though there are many variations of talkback. Specialist shows tackle specific subjects from gardening or household tips to legal or health advice. Recently there has been a spate of AIDS counselling selling programs and, on public radio stations this year, the AIDS: Talk Positive series targetted various communities such as young people, gay men, carers and so on, for involvement in talkback counselling sessions. Then there are the heart-on-your-sleeve programs that often engage an 'expert' such as a therapist or psychologist to solve problems and resolve crises. On Sydney's 2GB, 'Midnight Matchmaker' links lonely hearts and maintains a huge 33% to 45% of the weekday late night audience.

In these shows, callers expose the most intimate details about themselves in sessions that would once have been the domain of the local priest, doctor or extended family network. Talkback hosts are quick to point out that their shows cannot offer full-blown counselling and that their role is to urge distressed callers to seek professional advice, though no figures on such follow-through are available. The anonymity of the talkback show clearly attracts many callers to it.

The shows that attract the highest ratings, however, are undoubtedly those fronted by the 'personality' hosts. These cover a diverse range of subjects - current affairs, government proposals, and new laws, local issues and personal experiences. The shows strongly reflect the views, attitudes and personal styles of the hosts. While ostensibly provoking discussion and offering advice, these hosts espouse a particular set of values and moral code.

The style of a talkback show is often dictated by how much time is given to each caller, the number of interruptions made to their comments, and the general approach to their opinion. Commercial radio hosts excuse all sorts of behaviour towards callers in the name of entertainment. On talkback, disagreement and contention is sold as the entertainment factor. Program trailers and promotional material refer to the amount of controversy the host can generate. On Sydney's taxis and billboards at present, the ad copy for Ron Casey refers directly to his domineering presentation style. There is no need for the name of the host to be mentioned. To Sydney listeners, Casey is synonymous with the station and with controversial (or perhaps scandalous) talkback. Whether they love or loathe him, the listeners continue to listen. As entertainment bears directly on ratings and ratings determine the

station income and the host's salary, it is understandable that this element is important.

The technical aspects of talkback allow the host to move the show along in the name of entertainment but also assist in maintaining control and authority in the talkback. All talkback on Australian radio is obliged to use a time delay system, ensuring that the words we hear broadcast arrive seven seconds after they were actually spoken. The host thus has time to cut off a caller who contravenes broadcasting laws and standards or to curtail abusive or annoying calls before they get to air. With the 'halfway' switch the host can put the caller on hold so that, while she or he may be objecting to the host's treatment of his or her opinion, these comments won't be broadcast. As well, there is the 'ducking' or 'over-ride' control which can automatically give priority to the host's microphone voice, thus cutting the caller's line.

Possibly the best-known talkback host Australia-wide is John Laws. In the 80s, promos for his show referred to him merely as The Voice (reminiscent in a few ways of that early radio character The Shadow). While, on one level, the term refers to his ratings on the airwaves and his reputation, it also reflects his use of a particular type of technique of microphone that ensures a clarity, deep resonance and warmth of voice tone. Almost every metropolitan centre around Australia has its own voice of the city. Barry Hill, who writes on radio for *The Age's* Green Guide, says that Derryn Hinch in his time at 3AW used to bill himself as "Mr Melbourne", a false claim since he didn't dominate Melbourne radio. Since Hinch's departure for television, no one has presumed to be the voice of Melbourne. There is no one in Melbourne radio who "exerts the power" or "asserts themselves so politically" as John Laws in Sydney. Hill also argues that the style of Melbourne talkback is entirely different to that of the "hustling city", Sydney, whose style he characterises as "the brash aggressiveness of advanced capitalism", a style well represented



Ron Casey

by John Laws. For Hill, Ramona Koval, who presents a magazine program on the ABC's 3LO, is Melbourne radio at its best. She uses talkback in "the most intelligent way" - "non-authoritarian and democratic in its ethos". This contrasts strongly with the style of the voice of authority, the accepted role of media presenters today. Perhaps this helps to explain the dearth of women talkback hosts in a culture in which authority is traditionally associated with Anglo-Celtic men.

The authoritative stance taken by Margaret Throsby on Sydney's 2BL is a more subtle one. Her responses to callers' comments reiterate, summarise and reinforce the views expressed rather than project her particular line. The most she will say is that an issue "just comes down to personal opinion". Yet her opinion is made clear in her strongly modulated voice indicating her approval or otherwise in a particular tone of "hmmm" or her perfunctory or enthusiastic thanks at the end of the call.

Contrast this with the powerfully opinionated arguments put across by hosts like John Laws. Here he is on one of his favoured topics - politicians, this time over the issue of the Parliament House cafeteria:

JL: But what about their attitude to it generally saying it wasn't clublike enough. I mean they didn't join a bloody club. They're there to run the country. They're supposed to run the country.

Caller: Yeah, that's right.

JL: I mean if they want to join a club, go join a club...But what about this: "the bistro area was poorly conceived and the food presentation and style unsatisfactory." I mean most of them probably knocked around a house where their old lady threw bacon and eggs at them on a table that had a laminex top to it. And here, all of a sudden, they've jumped up in the world because they're parliamentarians. Half of them are whackers anyway.

Caller: Yeah. They're moral bankrupts, honest they are...

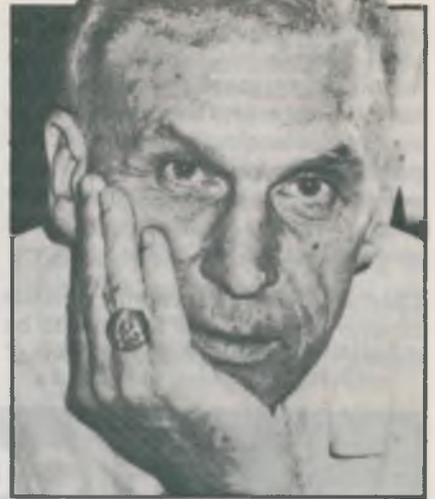
JL: Yeah, I mean, these - as I said yesterday, these delusions of grandeur are better described as delusions of adequacy - and the poor little darlings have got to have their privacy. If they want privacy, eat in the office.

Caller: Yeah, that's right...

JL: All very simple. Pity you and I aren't running the country, darling; we'd fix 'em up.

Here the potential interchange was used as an excuse for the host to take on the familiar role of ordinary people's friend and enemy of politicians, bureaucrats and public servants. And certainly, talkshows do have an impact, as we saw recently with the outraged response to the government's budget decision to charge pensioners prescription fees and Social Security Minister Graham Richardson's subsequent back-down. The host as vanquishing hero; the host mounting another soapbox. At the same time, while the caller agrees, the host does not want too clever an interjection. That may challenge the host's superior position, and then the host will pick on a tiny point and swing the emphasis back to himself. Frequently with women callers, the interchange will take on sexist undertones, be reduced to a joke at the caller's expense or be made to seem like the situation is a result of the caller's own personal problems.

Many callers' contributions are reduced to phatic language, regardless of whether they agree or mildly disagree with the host. As lecturer and critic Norie Neumark points out: "Talkback hosts are not wedded to the one opinion necessarily. They don't just want people to ring up and agree



John Laws

with them. In fact, they will often goad callers into another opinion. Hosts want a contest because it's good radio but they also want some agreement. So long as the other point of view fits into a similar rightwing libertarian position, it can be acceptable. It is the way that callers are treated, from the superior position, as much as the issue itself that makes the shows rightwing overall."

In addition, hosts clearly distinguish between their mates and those perceived to be listeners through their use of language. This is most clearly illustrated through references to various cultural/ethnic groups. Subtle uses of 'us and them' references make clear the host's allegiances. The recent confrontation over Kuwait has opened the door to overt comments about fundamentalist faiths and Iraqis in the Gulf and in Australia. But there is nothing new about this. During 1987 and 1988, complaints about Ron Casey's comments on Chinese and Japanese people provoked an Australian Broadcasting Tribunal inquiry and action. In 1987, John Laws' comments about the level of expenditure on Aboriginal welfare activities also led to a public inquiry. Yet the host does not need to attack openly to make his point. From his position of authority he can deem some of us more Australian than others, and bestow rewards.

Gifts may be distributed to preferred callers at the end of an exchange and link neatly into the commercial radio format of the station. The host's authority is also granted to certain products that are advertised in 'live

reads'. These endorsements duplicate other celebrity testimonials and often include a personal comment about how the host enjoys the product, relies on a particular service or trusts a company. The sorts of products, services and companies that are supported fit neatly with the lifestyle, values and morals sketched out by the host.

Listeners build up a complex profile of who they perceive the host to be through such glimpses of 'personal'

life. Talkback shows on radio attract strong listener loyalty. Callers to the programs quickly learn the rules of the game and how to play.

Listeners become voyeurs, fascinated with callers revealing intimate details of their lives or being publicly berated and satirised by all-powerful hosts. It may well be that the dramas are built on personas created by the callers who are adroitly using the anonymity of radio for their five minutes of fame.

Neumark argues that listeners are not "stupid dupes to talkback". Once listeners understand the current form and parameters "they use it for what they want". Talkback therefore becomes not about what people think but about listeners participating in a form of radio entertainment, a far cry from that early 2BL motion.

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Rock and Roles

Lawrence Grossberg is a distinguished American cultural critic. His new book We Gotta Get Outa This Place was published in August. He was interviewed before his upcoming Australian visit by Marcus Breen.

Os the current attack on rock music culture a highly orchestrated and well organised one, or is it more ad hoc than that?

I suppose that depends on how paranoid you are. It certainly is orchestrated at particular sites... but there's no overarching organisation and no singular attack on rock.

My new book starts off from the understanding that there are at least three different kinds of attack taking place on rock in the United States and they all involve the New Right in one way or another. So, on the one hand, there is the PMRC [Parents Music Resource Centre] and other groups like the PTA [Parent Teacher Association], and some of the more centrist Christian groups. Their argument is that they are not trying to censor rock or trying to attack all of rock and roll, but they are trying to bring rock and roll into the control of domestic relations; that is, their rhetoric is that they want parents to have enough information to allow parents to decide what their kids should listen to. So they tend to attack heavy metal and rap more than mainstream rock, soft rock and soul music, although they have also attacked these in specific instan-

ces. On the other hand, there is a variety of intellectual and Christian fundamentalist groups which want to attack all of rock and roll. Those are the people who recently instigated the attacks on the rap band 2 Live Crew. In fact, I read...that their next target is Bruce Springsteen. For them rock and roll is all evil, all the devil's work.

Then there's a third element that I think people haven't talked about sufficiently - the approach represented by Lee Attwater. He was Bush's campaign manager and he's now the national chairman of the Republican Party. He's also, apparently, a rock and roll star. He's played with some of the greatest rhythm and blues rock performers. This is a middle class, rich Republican taking on the attitude and style of the rock and roll star. He's appeared on the David Letterman Show, one of the hippest television shows, not as guest, but as a member of a band. Here's one of the three most powerful men in the country probably and David Letterman didn't bother interviewing him, he just played as a guest guitarist and that kind of credibility seems to me part of a redefinition and reappropriation of the way in which rock is allowed to exist in society. I assume that because the Republican Party is so image conscious, and has hired the best PR and

advertising companies in the country, they are not just going to allow Lee Attwater to go out and do this unless it fits some kind of PR strategy.

If you bring all that together into the attack on rock and if you add to that the context that, oddly enough, capitalism, speaking in the abstract, hasn't really stood up in defence of rock, although it's a big money industry. Even the big record companies have been lukewarm about defending rock.

It strikes me as something of a contradiction that rock and roll is such an American creation, and something that has probably done more than anything else to create an image for America in the world and yet, presumably, the very thing that makes it attractive is under attack.

It's quite true that rock, and rock culture, has come to define the centre of American culture and American identity. Rock has become the defining centre of the United States, or an 'American culture' and that is under attack. Its centrist position in the social and public, and the world's, imagination is under attack.

In the worst of all possible worlds, what would America be like if the people who are taking this stand against rock culture were to succeed and to kill at birth the thing we know as rock culture?

Well, in the worst of all possible worlds, if one imagines the New Right and the Christian fundamentalists winning, it will look a lot like Margaret Atwood's *Handmaid's Tale*. It's a society in which culture would be

quite literally controlled, not necessarily by the state, but by an apparatus that existed on the margins of the state. But I don't think there's any possibility that's going to happen. It assumes that those of the New Right are the only players in the game. I don't mean that there's no opposition, there is. I'm more interested in the contradictions within the Right, and the New Right are not the only players on the Right. That's quite clearly illustrated in George Bush's presidency. There is a real tension between the New Right wing of the Republican Party and the dominant apparatuses of the Republican Party; and George Bush has tried to walk a thin line appeasing the New Right but basically appointing, with a few key exceptions, centrist Republican bureaucrats. Republican bureaucrats tend to associate with capitalism. So the question becomes: what is the relationship between the New Right and whatever the interests of capitalism are in contemporary America? I think the New Right tends to be quite suspicious of corporate capitalism. They are not going to win that battle.

One of the surprising things for someone from Australia is to recognise how active and how large the community of progressive intellectuals and progressive people generally is in the US. Is that inaccurate or is there a sense in which there is a resurgence and a redefining of how the Left fits in?

There is a very large and active progressive population in the United States, much more so than one would ever gather from watching the media, but I think the bulk of Americans are people who are ideologically liberal and emotionally conservative. These are people who will often support Reagan or Bush but they will oppose controlling abortion, favour higher taxes, support the homeless but, on the other hand, they don't seem to be able to organise any emotional investment in their politics. You can get a wide number of people supporting a position but you can't seem to get them to make any commitment based on that support.

The Left at the moment is caught in a number of dilemmas. First, it can't find a strategy. On the one hand it is constantly talking about respecting

everyone's difference so that you get an increasing fragmentation of groups on the Left and then having to find a way of creating an alliance and a coalition. The most successful example of that was, of course, the Rainbow Coalition. That was built on the notion of a common platform which, in recent years, the Left has been unable to agree. The other side of that, if we come back to rock and the attacks on rock, is the fact that the Left has not done a sufficient analysis of the New Right and what's going on. It's too easy simply to say that the attacks on rock are another example of censorship, another example of the attacks on pleasure and the 1960s counter culture. Both of those are, in a limited way, true, but neither of them capture the complexity of the struggles which you need to understand to be able to build real alliances.

The Left has inherited from somewhere, I suppose the 60s, notions of democratic institutions that resemble anarchy and notions of political purity which resemble irrelevance. The interesting thing about the Right is how well orchestrated and how well organised they are, and how willing they are to negotiate with, work within, and compromise with the existing economic and governmental institutions. The Left, of course, in all of its moral purity, refuses to get involved at the bureaucratic level, but that is precisely where the battles are being won or lost these days. The Left needs to rediscover governance as part of politics. We gave up in the 60s when we discovered ideology as common sense and when we discovered politics as the politics of everyday life.

The family is an extraordinarily resonant emotional element of American culture and now the image of the family is incredibly diverse. You can have gay couples, all sorts of non-traditional couples. You can have all sorts of families but the commitment to the family remains absolute and that is an extraordinarily powerful emotional commitment. It is around that commitment then that political loyalties get organised and once you find yourself talking about the importance of the family, at the bureaucratic level it is the Right that puts forth Family Protection Bills which are, of course, attacks on rock or attacks on sexual freedom. The Left doesn't enter

into those debates to talk about what a progressive governmental relationship to the family would be.

I wonder if what you've outlined is uniquely American or if there's a universality about it. Are there any conclusions or associations between what is happening in America, particularly to rock culture, and what is happening in Australia, given that Australia has a history of being a client state.

I decided early on in my academic career that I was never going to make utterances about other national contexts, because they are still quite foreign to me. Part of my argument, though, has to do with the particular way in which capitalism has commodified daily life in America. My analysis depends on an argument that says that the struggle in America, from the perspective of capitalism, is to keep people so fluid within the commodified everyday life that increasingly it becomes impossible for them to acknowledge anything that is outside that everyday life. What is outside it is politics and economics.

It's not just that the population becomes depoliticised - I think that's true. The question I want to ask is: what is the specific form of depoliticisation in the 1980s and 1990s. I want to argue that it depends on a particular kind of restructuring of everyday life in which the political and economic become simply something that is outside common sense. That kind of move is made easier by the appropriation of the postmodern irrelevance, where a kind of postmodern irony makes the government - politics and economics - seem kind of unreal, irrelevant. The Right, by the way, rearticulates that postmodern logic to its own end. In that process it makes a space for capitalism to, if you will, experiment. I want to argue that, given the changes in global capitalism and given the particular role that America played in the establishment of postwar capitalism in the 1950s and 60s, which then ran into a series of crises in the 70s and 80s, capitalism isn't sure what it is doing or how it can get out of that crisis. It is trying to give itself space whereby it can figure that out, and to do that it is crucial that the United States be a pliable entity in that process, and that it

has never been since the end of World War II. It's always been the leader.

That brings me back to rock and roll and a rereading of what rock and roll has been about in the United States, not only in the centre of America but also a particular relationship to everyday life. Rock and roll started out as a critique of the boredom of everyday life.

In the 1980s the attacks on heavy metal and rap were attacks on the very idea of everyday life. If you think of everyday life where commodification becomes so strong that everyday life becomes a series of mundane decisions, you don't worry about life and death in everyday life any more. Everyday life is a luxury in the world.

It's a luxury for that middle 50% of the population that we think of as middle class. It's a luxury that, to a large extent, blacks in America do not have. In a certain sense you can see rap as outside everyday life, attacking, desiring it perhaps, but also resenting it. I think it is partly that kind of tension and it is probably that tension which identifies the tension between the strategy of capitalism in the United States and its relationship to rock culture.

What do you think is particularly notable about musical trends if you can summarise what is happening in the 1990s?

In some ways, the musical trends of the United States in the past decade have been the musical trends of other cultures. For example, there is the in-

creasing appearance and the popularity of various world musics and world beat musics. Certainly, the most interesting thing going on in pop music and rock culture today is its ambiguous, undecided relationship with rap.

I tend now to include rap as part of rock culture but certainly there are real antagonisms between them.

It's a bit like the 60s when part of soul became part of rock culture but part of soul - the harder edge - was excluded from it. You simply never heard it. But now you hear all of it and some of it crosses over quite easily.

MARCUS BREEN is a Melbourne freelance journalist.

Bewdiful

Acropolis Now is Australia's first 'ethnic' TV sitcom. David Nichols spoke to co-writer and actor George Kapiniaris.

When Australian TV takes chances, execs hold their collective breath, critics go into paroxysms of congratulation and the nation generally sits back and falls asleep. What's wrong with that sentence? Well, of course, Australian TV never does take chances.

In fact, you'd be forgiven for thinking that there's really only one element that separates *Acropolis Now* from the rest of Australian 'ethnic humour' - it's not just about how funny wogs are, it's by and about them.

Nevertheless, when the Seven Network made a deal last year with members of the Wogs Out of Work theatre ensemble for a half-hour comedy show about a Greek cafe, they did seem to think they were being remarkably brave. It was a progressive step; after all Mark Mitchell's *Con the Grocer* on Ten's *Comedy Company* was extremely safe because Mitchell is really Anglo-Saxon.

As it happens, despite its numerous faults, *Acropolis* does benefit from its authentic feel. Mary Coustas, who plays Effie in the show (and who may well be starring in an Effie spin-off next year), told me of the enthusiastic response that the Wogs audience, especially kids of Greek parents, used to give her if they saw her in the street or in the theatre foyer. And George Kapiniaris, who co-writes the show and plays the part of Memo, says that the Greek community in Australia "love it all". "They can really relate to what we're doing on TV and they feel special because we're doing something...well, we're telling our own stories. Our comedy comes from life experience. Talking from a Greek point of view, but...we've got Spanish characters, Italian characters, we've even got skip characters so everyone gets a bit of a go and everyone gets shit hung on them, too!"

Though the *Acropolis* cast first became known through their provocative wogs title, Kapiniaris now seems keen to downplay the ethnic angle. "We don't want to do issues," he says.

I think it's really cute when people find out where people come from and how they stuff up words, all that kind of thing. And how a Greek and, say, a Chinese person can communicate even though they can't speak English, they can only speak their own language, but they can communicate in some sort of way.

"We want to bring in an Asian character...it'd be good to have an Asian because they're more or less wogs. Wog means anyone who's not Anglo-Saxon."

Kapiniaris talks of a "Wog Pack" of young actors who are making a name for themselves in Australian theatre, film and TV. But, even now, the depiction of wogs (personally, I'll never feel neutral about that word) in Australian drama leaves a lot to be desired. Kapiniaris broke ground with his character DJ in *The Flying Doctors*. Even so, he had to fight initially to make his character Greek instead of Italian!

Last year *Neighbours* introduced the character of Poppy Skouros - a friend of Jason Donovan's character, Scott Robinson. Poppy - who, it was rumoured, was brought into the show to counter complaints of the utterly Anglo nature of Ramsay Street -



dropped the occasional whinge about her father's "old country" Greek ways and then went all out to seduce our Jase. She was, in fact, a device to help write him out of the show.

Poppy and DJ aside, the migrant content of Australian TV has been limited - with the notable exception of *Family and Friends*, the Nine Network's soapie based initially on Romeo and Juliet, and which featured an Italian family doing battle with an 'Aussie' clan (though a few of the Italians were played by non-Italians). Unfortunately, *Family and Friends* was a ratings failure - which has presumably put the networks off the idea of migrant-related stories.

But comedy is a different matter. Paul Hogan was the first I can remember to launch a successful 'funny wog' on TV though, of course, Nino Culotta and

the "Weird Mob" film preceded him by many years. Hogan was followed by the famous "Bloody Wog!" catchcry of Ross Higgins' character Ted Bullpitt in *Kingswood Country*. And, of course, the aforementioned Mark Mitchell has kept the spirit of the funny wog shopkeeper alive and well.

George Kapiniaris claims (and I don't doubt him) that parts of Mitchell's Con act are taken from his, Kapiniaris', own stand-up comedy routine.

It's certainly had enough of an air of authenticity to appeal to a large sector of the Greek community, including, of course, greengrocers everywhere. One of my local grocers has a Con sticker on his cash register. Another took to saying everything, everywhere was "bewdiful" - overnight!

It's hard to tell if *Acropolis Now* rode into prime-time on Con's apron-strings - I suspect not. Even if it did, it is definitely more well-rounded and interesting than Mitchell's character.

Unfortunately, that's still not enough. *Acropolis* has the elements of a compromise, despite its very talented participants, who have made themselves lowbrow for the mainstream. Like *Seven's* other home-grown comedy success, *Hey Dad!*, its rare flashes of brilliance are more to do with character humour and weirdness (and good acting) than funny gags or plots.

We can only hope that, as the team becomes more accustomed to TV - and a little braver - they will be able to give us something truly original in comedy.

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