



MARK CURRIE

the experiment

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At first it was just another dream that floated out of the sixties, a time of many dreams. There were dreams of peace, of social justice, of people working together and living together and sleeping together and getting high together and making music together. Our particular dream was to move to the country and produce radio. We would sell innovative programming to stations across the country. We would distribute righteous information and live and work together, in a pastoral paradise, toward one goal. Together.

It was the spring of 1970. Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin weren't dead yet, and radio was the pre-Internet network that kept everybody in touch with the music, the players, and the latest news of demonstrations and mass arrests. Communes were also very big. So we figured, *Why not a radio commune?*

There were, of course, many reasons why not, and they'd soon become painfully apparent.

In the meantime, twelve of us settled into a big old house way the hell out in the boonies and began work on our radio dream of selling independently produced interviews and programs to commercial FM stations.

Four years passed. Jimi and Janis were now quite dead. In our personal lives our focus shifted from heady sex and heavy drugs to organically grown food and committed relationships. A couple of marriages took place, a thirtieth birthday was celebrated, and two babies had been born. We woke up one morning and realized we liked it there.

But we had a problem: automated playlists were taking the place of inventive programming, progressive politics was pretty much out of the question on rock stations, and the radio business was beginning the process of consolidation (read: monopolization) that would eventually lead to today's radio conglomerates, like Clear Channel and Infinity Broadcasting.

As our radio business dwindled, my fellow dreamers and I took jobs driving school buses or doing construction. We started a truck farm and supplied organic produce to nearby restaurants and grocery stores. We painted signs saying, *LAST CHANCE FOR THE BEST TOMATOES YOU EVER TASTED*, with big arrows pointing the way to a little produce stand in front of the house. We had regular "family meetings" in which we kept track of our pooled resources and joked about how, a few short years earlier, our goal had been to make the A-list for John and Yoko's "bed-in," and now our biggest goal was to freeze enough corn and peas to get us through the winter.

The promotional materials we'd sent out in the first flush of entrepreneurial zeal had listed the names of our producer, our distribution manager, our sales manager, and our dog. By now pretty much everyone was working in the garden, and the dog refused to spend any more time in the office. There was only one person left doing all the radio work. When a potential client would call, he'd say, "Hold, please," and then come back on the line using a different voice, as if he were yet another zany employee of our thriving company. But we were trying to sell interviews with Abbie Hoffman and Frank Zappa to radio stations that wanted Donny and Marie. It wasn't working, and we knew it.

Enter the U.S. government and your tax dollars.

It all started when two of us were charged with the task of finding out what was going on in the outside world. This scouting patrol was made up of me and our technical guy, Baba Bean. (You had to be there.) One of our first trips was to visit some fellow hippies who had formed a video commune about the same time we'd set up shop in radio. They called themselves "The Video Freaks" and were situated in the Catskills, where they hoped to marry media, art, and nature. They, too, had come up against the hard fact that innovation requires a patron with deep pockets, or a sponsor blind to quantifiable results, or a lot of luck, or sheer, unadulterated bullheadedness, or a combination of all of the above.

The Freaks, however, had found a new resource. They turned us on to the Byzantine world of government funding for the arts.

We didn't know it then, but we were in the middle of a rare interlude, a kind of cease-fire in the otherwise difficult relationship between the arts and the state. For most of its history, the U.S. government has shown a spectacular indifference to the arts. During the Depression, the Works Progress Administration had employed more than forty thousand painters, musicians, actors, and writers, but the program ended with the Second World War. For the next twenty years, a political battle was waged over whether the government should be in the "arts business" at all. Then the Kennedy and Johnson administrations included the arts in the general expansion of government subsidies. The National Endowment for the Arts was signed into being in 1965. By the early seventies, we had entered into what can now be seen as the golden age of arts funding in America.

While Bean and I sat taking notes and drinking coffee in the Freaks' kitchen, the crew back at the farm called an emergency meeting. Our great experiment was down to its last package of frozen peas. Taking a textbook capitalist approach, they identified our assets, which were a sound-production studio and people who knew how to use it. Theoretically, we could rent our assets to make money, but we weren't set up to accommodate big-time commercial projects. Our studio was ideally suited for radio, multimedia production, and field recording. Although we knew a lot of interesting people doing such work, they were artists and didn't have any money.

When Bean and I came home, we all took a vote and unanimously decided to give government funding a try. We designed our own version of an artist-in-residence program and took it to the state arts council, whose new media department was looking for ways to support the surge in artistic experimentation. They funded our program. We were very excited.

Artists began coming to the farm, and we produced sound for video, film, performance, art installations, dance, theater, opera, radio, and recordings. Although some of the more experimental projects didn't always yield concrete results, everybody went away having learned something. The NEA lent its support. Things were going pretty well.

Then we received the Golden Fleece Award.

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