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A Spirit of Radio reunion

The Edge 102's alternative pioneers gather to cheer its tumultuous past
By Antoine Tedesco

Discussing the very idea of radio via email with David Marsden is equal parts history lesson, broadcasting lesson, but more importantly a lesson in passion for what radio (and music) was, is and can be.

Marsden is the former director of operations and programming at CFNY-FM (now known as 102.1 The Edge) from 1977 to 1989. With the help of deejay Don Berns and Steve Macaulay, CFNY's former sales manager, the trio organized The Spirit Reunion 2003, where fans of the past and present incarnations of Toronto's coolest mainstream radio station can experience its groundbreaking history. As Marsden put it, be satisfied "...that youth was not wasted. The ab to pass on to the next generation what it was about without sounding like gramps tell how he starved as a child. It's the acceptance that sometimes the memory is greater than the reality and to hang on to the memory."



For those who are not familiar with the early days of CFNY, it would be a good idea to visit the fan Web site at SpiritofRadio.ca. The site's history page is an extensive look ; the early days of not only the radio station, but the early days of alternative radio as well.

From its inception in the early 1960s as CHIC-AM/FM (pronounced "chick-fm"), a sma talk-oriented community station with an all-female staff, broadcasting from a modest yellow bricked house in the sleepy T.O. suburb of Brampton, CFNY has had an interes history: In the 1970s it was bought by two "kooky" brothers named Leslie and Harry Allen Jr. who decided to switch formats to play album rock in the evenings on the station's FM counterpart. By 1977, the Allen brothers gave their FM arm a new name: CFNY-FM. Dave Pritchard, CFNY's first program director, gave the station some struct and hosted specialty programs on reggae, blues, and a syndicated Beatles show. Conflicts between Pritchard and the Allens led to his firing, and the hiring of Marsden, then an announcer, as program director in 1978.

Already a legend thanks to his crazy Dave Mikey persona from CKEY in Toronto, Mars took the reigns and started what many consider a true radio revolution. "It didn't real feel any different than how I feel now. The time was different. The headspace was different. Radio was different. It was during a time when people had only one ear. The why we only had AM radio."

The radio doors where wide open when CFNY decided to take chances back in the late 70s/early 80s.





"As for the great things in the past I would have to list the incredible radio team work at the station in the 1977 to 1989 period. Without sounding patronizing, I would also have to include the listeners. They had the patience to let us find our way and to stick with the station," he said. "Of course CFNY was also wonderful because of the passion both sides of the mike. For me one of the great things we did was introduce so much new music into the stream . . . the on air team was one of the top teams in Canadian radio history. Not only did we love what we did we also joined the listening family when we went home."



David Marsden

Why a reunion? What does the past have to do with the present? Did anyone really care?

"We decided to first put out a single email ask what the interest level might be. One single email sent from my computer and then copied to others through Don and Steve's computers," he told *S&H.ca* via an email interview. "It was staggering. Within hours the replies were coming in. Then that single email began to slip out into the e-boxes of listeners and friends. Within a week we knew that now was the time."

The evening of Nov. 12 will see a list of radio groundbreakers rock at The Government/Kool Haus (132 Queen's Quay East). Canadian bands Martha and the Muffins, Nash the Slash, Carol Pope and Kevan Staples of Rough Trade, The Pukka Orchestra, The Spoons, and other top bands of that era will be there. Also the likes of classic CFNY DJs "Deadly" Hedley Jones, Don Berns, Alan Cross, Maie Pauts, Scot Turner, Earle Jive and many more. The night will be a true blast from the past for early CFNY listeners and a refreshing change, as well as much needed history lesson, for the current generation of The Edge's listening audience.

The listeners hold the cards, Marsden said.

"When a risk taking station is found the audience can secure their own future by supporting the new and letting the Programmers know what is expected. Believe it. There are still broadcasters who will listen to their listeners," he continued. "Consider quite obvious – the new guy on the block has to find a way to attract audiences from old stations they have listened to for years. That is a large task but certainly not impossible."

But CFNY has definitely changed. It no longer has deejays who individually choose which records to spin. Gone are the days of "Deadly" Hedley and Chris Sheppard, who according to Marsden "felt intimidated and obviously tense", when offered radio jobs.

"Certainly the radio colleges must endure some of the blame for too many homogenized deejays getting into the business," Marsden said. "They teach well but they stop one step away from the real goal. That goal is to inspire young people to look inside and realize they each have something special to give. All it takes is encouragement and most young and old people will find that something special. I am afraid school at all levels lacks the ability to inspire. That is wrong."


When asked about music, Marsden was straight to the point: "During the past decade there has been greater fragmentation in the music world than ever before. Even genres break down into multiple parts . . . this fragmentation came about when the record industry, music television and radio gave up their positions as leaders."

"As for the future, music always travels in evolutions. History will note there is usually from eight to 12 years for the evolution to be complete. My biggest fear is that music will not play an important role in the entertainment elements of future lives. To protect against this happening it will take a focus by everyone involved in the industry. Right now too many are pointing fingers in other directions. That is an exercise in futility. Yet some egos will have to be lowered for this to happen."

Although CFNY remains an alternative radio station, Marsden said The Edge's won't "carry the flag into the future. It is an established station with an audience to serve."

Listen to Marsden Thursday and Friday nights, 7 p.m. – midnight – on ROCK 94.9

Photo and reunion lettering courtesy David Marsden

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