

Ears a Little More Open

Why a growing audience adores CKUA Radio

BY GEO F. TAKACH

Can you imagine a 73-year-old prairie product that people receive free but happily pay \$1.3-million a year for simply because they like it so much? Something demanded by operating room surgeons at Edmonton's Royal Alexandra Hospital and requested by long-distance truckers phoning in from their rigs? Something so loved that 800 unpaid volunteers wait in line to help deliver it?

Imagination meets reality at CKUA Radio, the station not even a pulled plug could kill. Four years ago, it fell silent, financially drained by those appointed by the provincial government when it privatized the station (see "Privatization and the Radio Station," *AlbertaViews*, vol. 1, no. 1). Today, this unique Alberta outlet enjoys the cult-like devotion of somewhere between 100,000 and 350,000 listeners and 10,000 donors who keep it afloat with astounding financial, logistical and emotional support. Why are they so passionate about CKUA? The answers reveal as much about the soul of our province as they debunk popular myths.



One explanation involves the classic Albertan trait of pioneering married to that lesser known Albertan characteristic, a sense of community ownership.

The station served as a public asset for almost seven of the province's first nine decades. Working from a little shack built south of Athabasca Hall at the University of Alberta, CKUA became Canada's first public broadcaster on November 21, 1927, fulfilling the vision of H.P. Brown, the university's visual aids specialist, of bringing the institution to Albertans through the new medium. CKUA—the last two call letters recognize the U of A—launched western Canada's first live football broadcast in 1928, the nation's first school broadcast in 1929, a special wartime newscast for American soldiers stationed in the Yukon in 1944 and a pioneering stereo broadcast in 1959. The former Alberta Government Telephones ran it from 1945 until the provincially owned ACCESS Corporation took control in 1974. Today, CKUA reaches 85 per cent of Albertans and hosts the province's emergency broadcast system.

The station has faced threats, from being eclipsed by other frequencies in the late 1950s to a 1974 federal ruling prohibiting educational institutions from holding broadcasting licences. But its 1997 shutdown by government-appointed CEO Gail Hinchliffe, later revealed to have been bankrupt when taking office, galvanized popular support like never before. A new, volunteer team led by Edmonton lawyer Bud Steen and musician Tommy Banks ousted Hinchliffe and her cronies. (The CKUA Foundation's suit against Hinchliffe and former board members Gerry Luciani, Larry Clausen and Ric Baker is scheduled for trial this September.) The overnight crusaders raised \$1-million in 14 days, generating enough phone calls to pop CKUA's telephone circuits and ending five weeks of traumatic dead air.

"The irony is that when the station

went off the air for the first time, people finally understood what a treasure it represented," says station manager Ken Regan. This is echoed by the mass of volunteers who emerged to help save CKUA and by U of A social psy-

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chologist Robert Sinclair, who notes that people are more likely to have their passions raised when a freedom or something important to them is taken away.

Ironically, privatization has made CKUA more dependent on community largesse than ever. Donations accounted for 52 per cent of revenues in 1999/2000, while 34 per cent came from advertising, 7 per cent from renting technical services and space on its transmitter towers and 4 per cent from grants.

The station has staked its future on the novel notion of "subscription radio," a departure from pleading for funds just to stay alive. Management sees this as an appropriate relationship between CKUA and its audience, who are invited to pay as they would for newspapers, magazines or cable TV. "We have no mechanism to withhold the service," explains program director Brian Dunsmore, "so we depend on people taking personal responsibility. The honour system works."

The numbers bear this out. Annual ongoing subscriptions of \$1.1-million and total donations of \$1.3-million are remarkable, but the passion behind CKUA's support is even more amazing. Volunteers contribute to every facet of its operations, be it serving on the board, running the music information line, cataloguing and filing disks in the library, contact-



Station manager Ken Regan

ing donors, writing for the on-air *Arts and Culture Guide* or organizing and staffing fundraisers. WCB reports for 2000 show 12,222 volunteer hours, representing \$72,714 in donated time. This does not include the 10-day, biannual fundraisers, in which everyone from blue hair to blue rinse chips in another 2,300 hours.

Tales of near-fanatical loyalty abound. A cadre of devoted fans of the diverse *Alberta Morning* program, dubbed "Cam's Hams" in honour of host Cam Hayden, turn up for his 6 a.m. show to work the phones during pledge drives. The station has volunteer chapters in Lethbridge, Red Deer, Calgary, Grande Prairie, Peace River, Fort McMurray and Canmore. "We couldn't do it without them," beams volunteer coordinator Maureen Workman.

This brings us to the core of CKUA's popularity: quality. The station appeals to a segment of society united not by traditional geographic, social or economic strata, but by appreciation for CKUA itself.

"CKUA listeners are people with their minds awake and their ears a little more open, interested in music, art and culture and in control of their lives," says Dunsmore. "People feel a



Program director Brian Dunsmore

strong connection because our announcers offer something different from that great, white-bread blah that is pop culture, steamrolled by Hollywood and Madison Avenue. People are saying, "This is not enough. We need more."

"I hate to criticize, because the vast majority listen to *Oops! I Did It Again* or the Backstreet Boys," shrugs Tom Coxworth, who hosts *Folk Routes*. "They have their place, but only through mediocrity. The question is, are you going to find something that excites you and gives you a challenge, something you haven't heard before?"

But quality and proprietary feelings are not the only allure. CKUA has a long and strong record of contributing to arts, culture and education. For

a start, Albertans get a detailed look at arts events in 85 per cent of the province. *Summerfest* provides information on festivals, featuring interviews with artists and promoters, along with their music, excerpts from books or plays and even discussions of visual art. "We tell people there's something good happening in Alberta," says program host Chris Allen. "I doubt there's a single arts or cultural group we haven't supported through our coverage. Other stations won't talk to the Cow Patti Theatre from Clive, Alberta, unless the theatre pays for it. We do."

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Then come programs like *Travel Treasures*, promoting Alberta destinations; *Innovation Alberta*, profiling science, research and technology; *Ecofile*, an award-winning environmental entry; and *Heritage Trails*, a series of 500 historical vignettes about the province. The latter two are made freely available to Alberta schools and researchers. An ambitious trilogy of 48-part documentary series produced by Dunsmore and David Gregory of Athabasca University chronicles popular music of the 20th century. And CKUA's monumental 24-part series *The Folkways Collection* scooped the likes of PBS in documenting a vital slice of Americana, the amazing legacy of Folkways Records founder Moses Asch. The series profiled the 30,000 musical performances, narratives, rituals and sounds, including spoken word, from around the world captured on that historic label. CKUA launched this original binational project by making a personal connection with Asch's son, Michael, then a U of A professor and a fan of the sta-

tion, and the venerable Smithsonian Institution, which contributed funding and research assistance.

"We have a responsibility to the community and to the culture of the province in addition to the newsmakers," says Coxworth. "We're probably the most leading-edge in promoting local musicians who need to be heard. I love the Beatles, but each safe song inhibits a struggling new artist who meets the same standard and could really use the exposure. Many artists are respected and earning a living wage because we gave them their start."

Reflecting the station's popularity with artists themselves, on-air tributes are spoken, sung and played by everyone from Africa's Black Umfoloso, the Bulgarian Women's Choir and the Cuban Institute of Friendship to Boston jazz guitarist Pat Metheny, Scottish folksinger Dick Gaughan and Wavy Gravy, a San Francisco-based activist and clown. Pitching for CKUA in Canada are the likes of actor Tom Jackson, fiddler Natalie MacMaster, bluesman Long John Baldry, children's musical icon Raffi, talk show host Dini Petty and folksingers Kate and Anna McGarrigle. And these are from *outside* this province. Internationally lauded performers like Jann Arden, PJ Perry and k.d. lang have credited the station with helping to launch their careers.

"CKUA has been instrumental for me," says Perry, a Juno Award-winning saxophonist who has performed with philharmonic orchestras and jazz greats like Dizzy Gillespie. "It would have been impossible without it. The station sticks its neck out, playing longer tracks than would ordinarily be played on commercial radio."

Then there is the obvious reason for CKUA's following: programming that is ambitious, eclectic and highly personal to announcers and listeners alike. In any given week, you can hear music from classical, choral and jazz to new age, "wide cut" country—and a goulash of reggae,

dub, ska, roots, hip hop and dance hall called *One Drop Rhythms*. The global diversity of daily programs like *The Afternoon Edition* defies categorization as well as the hoary stereotype of Albertans as homogeneous rednecks.

"I'm not a traditional music director," comments David Ward on his job title. "Rather, I look after the sound resource, managing what's in the kitchen, while the announcers choose what's on the menu." Free from the dictates of preformatted, computer-generated playlists, CKUA announcers can choose from one of Canada's leading musical collections, boasting 55,000 LPs (and growing with steady donations), almost 30,000 CDs and a basement full of 15,000 vintage 78s which one volunteer spent eight months cataloguing. "We don't have everything," says Ward, "but we come pretty close."

"Why do so many Albertans own music by African kora players, Tuvan throat singers, Cuban congeros or Brazilian singers?" muses Monica Miller, host of *As I Hear It*. "As we listen to music from places we've never been—Finland, Madagascar, Jamaica, Nashville or Cape Breton—we come to understand that cultures don't fit into boxes. Music travels independent of lines on a map, and 'cultural fabric' becomes so rich and wonderful. Our listeners understand that in a very profound way."

Yet the station does not purport to be avant-garde. "We don't have something for everybody," Ward points out. "We have no speed metal, for example. We accept that our audience is interested in a broad range, but we don't push the envelope on hard, ultra-demanding music. We're a business now. But we still do things most others don't, though it's not as acceptable to provoke a bit as it was before society became more conservative."

"CKUA has always had an unshakable integrity," opines "old disc (pause) jockey" John Worthington, a fixture since 1949. "We treat the audience as intelligent beings."

"Radio is a very personal medium, providing the soundtrack to our lives," adds Regan. "Because of its eclectic breadth, a special bond forms. Listeners and volunteers say it makes a difference in their quality of life. People tell us when they move away they miss the station and there's nothing like it."

That passion radiates from the announcers, many of whom have been there since disco days.

"The whole thing is a joy," declares Andy Donnelly, a Brobdingnagian bon-vivant who wears his huge heart on his sleeve, just below his shoulder-length curls, and whose gentle brogue and sly wit on the monstrously popular *The Celtic Show* have earned him more than a kilt following. "It's all about the music and the people. They get it. We all feel the power, the spirit and the joy of it." When he's not playing the sonorous strains of the British Isles, Donnelly spreads warmth and cheer with the "Celtic Cuddle," his personal take on the bear-hug. "It's the greatest barrier-breaker," he notes. "Total strangers ask me for it."

"We sound human," says Cathy Ennis, host of *The Listening Room*.

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"Each of us puts our own show together. We relate to the audience in a way commercial radio can't." Indeed, CKUA announcers routinely receive rousing ovations when introduced at concerts and cultural events across the province. "People think it's amazing, when all I do is play records for a living," smiles Ennis.

But CKUA announcers don't just play and talk about the music. They live it. Their ranks brim with accom-

plished vocalists and musicians in jazz, folk, bluegrass and blues, along with writers, actors and arts impresarios. Lionel Rault (*Lionel's Vinyls, The R and B Review*) is an acclaimed folk-roots guitarist and songwriter with a career approaching the 30-year mark. Holger Peterson (*Natch'l Blues*, Canada's longest-running blues program) is a producer who runs Stony Plain Records, a Canadian roots music label celebrating its 25th year. A staple on the Celtic circuit, Donnelly is on a first-name basis with many of the acts he plays on-air. Coxworth has some 6,500 folk records in his collection and a recording studio in his basement.

The excellence of CKUA's programming was recognized by a Prairie Music Award for best media outlet in both 1999 and 2000. But the most eloquent tributes come from the listen-



The Celtic Show host Andy Donnelly

ers themselves. They phone in pledges from their combines. They write of the music distracting them from tracking down runaway steers. And since the station began broadcasting on the Internet last year, they send e-mail from all over the globe. A recent campaign saw pledges from seven provinces, two territories, eight American states and locales as far-flung as New Zealand and the United Arab Emirates. An hour of *The Celtic*

Show was sponsored by someone from Bogota, Colombia.

"It's radio raised to a level that's really a public service," says Senator Banks. "But as wonderful as it is, it still hasn't reached aspirations for the kind of programming we want to see. We'd like to do more creative programming



Announcer Cathy Ennis

involving Alberta artists—more outreach programs and recordings of concert music, literature and drama—but it's no longer affordable."

So despite the pioneering, the decades of service, the sense of community ownership, the eclectic, award-winning programming and the fervent support of its fans, the privatized CKUA's future remains uncertain.

On the one hand, listener loyalty is stronger than ever. The audience is growing at home and abroad. On-line donations jumped from \$4,000 in the spring 2000 fundraiser to \$40,000 last spring. Advertisers ranging from EPCOR, an Edmonton-based utility company, to Prego Cucina Italiana, a Calgary eatery, are delighted with their sponsorships. But the station continues to run on a shoestring.

"For three years, we've been scratching and clawing just to survive," asserts Regan. "We're alive, but we're only one bad fundraiser away from disaster."

Although CKUA has managed to generate enough revenue to keep operating, it has no capital budget to maintain its infrastructure. Its 17 transmitters across the province are operating close to or past their life expectancies, some held together by silicone, baling wire and duct tape. Equipment is outdated and consequently expensive to repair. When asked how they maintain the transmitters without a budget, technical operations manager Neil Lutes says, "With great difficulty."

With less than half the preprivatization budget, there is less staff and

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more work now than before 1994. Pensions have been frozen and pay cut by one-third. "It means being more efficient, focused and aware of time," says Allen. "Everyone has more than one job." He lists his duties on any given program as announcer, technician, producer, editor, music director and researcher, "all at the same time and sometimes on the fly."

This raises the question of whether CKUA should be funded by government again. For some, public donations exceeding \$1-million per year are

ample demonstration that Albertans want CKUA. "There's no more convincing evidence of support than writing a cheque," observes Banks.

"If government wants arts and culture in the province, it should recognize CKUA's role in Albertans' daily life," declares Steen. "We talk to rural Albertans like no one else. We put bums in seats when arts productions come here. I believe we're making better Albertans by playing this kind of music.

"I'm very pleased that we picked up the old lady, dusted her off and got her back on her feet, but we have a long way to go," he adds. If some generous benefactor gave us \$10-million to spend and \$10-million from which to draw interest for capital improvements, we'd be okay."

"It's vital that people support CKUA because it's unique in Canadian broadcasting and a part of Alberta historically, culturally, socially, politically and economically," concludes Regan. "It's not right to let important institutions that helped define us as individuals and as Albertans disappear."

So it boils down to this. After nearly three-quarters of a century of pioneering, mind-broadening and delighting, CKUA's survival has become an acid test of the unique and entrepreneurial spirit that inspired it.

Stay tuned.

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A FAN SPEAKS

"Sunday afternoon found me in a jeep overlooking the canyon, looking through binoculars for an escaped Black Angus steer. Or I should have been looking, because I made the mistake of turning on the radio. [There] was some incredible Irish choral music and I stopped to listen. Well, there was the coffee thermos and by the time I got the mug full, some Ben Tobiasson had glued me to the seat. I was beginning to think about feeling guilty when this overachieving radio host smacked me across the ears with Tafelmusik. I knew I was in trouble, so with firm resolve, I lunged, finger poised, for the off button as the final chord faded. I hope you're pleased with yourself. The steer is still missing."

— from a letter to CKUA announcer Monica Miller