

the guide

arts • entertainment • dining • nightlife



NEW ON DISC: Petric reviews
the new Wu-Tang album **15**

LIVE MUSIC 33
THE AGENDA 37

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RENEGADE RADIO



Making fun of the "spandex dudes" Zach Henkel, whose bicycle-themed radio program, Cranksters, airs on the Simply Living (102.1) station

***Fed up with Columbus's
not-too-progressive radio choices,
a group of wannabe broadcasters
struggled for seven years to start up a
station where liberal talk would rule.
Now you can finally hear it—
provided you're in the right place.***

BY RICHARD ADES

Carol Fisher said she nearly drove off the road the first time she heard Simply Living's new radio station. "I almost had to pull over because it was so fresh, so clear," said Fisher, one of the green-minded group's more committed volunteers. "It was like hearing clarity when there's been nothing but static around you from every media."

Fisher obviously was waxing metaphorical about the station's politi-

cal clarity, as listeners are likely to hear quite a bit of static on the new WCRS. Because it's a low-power FM station, its signal will be hard to grab in many parts of Central Ohio.

But Marilyn Welker, Simply Living's director, isn't complaining. She's just glad the station is finally on the air with its mix of progressive national programs and earth-friendly local shows. It was launched earlier this year after a long effort that Welker said was complicated by the Federal Communications Commission's lack of commitment to community radio.

"The low power frequency is low on the hierarchy of priorities set by the FCC," Welker said.

Continued on next page

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RADIO

Continued from previous page

That's too bad, she said, because such stations are needed to supply the kind of varied viewpoints that not even National Public Radio, much less commercial radio, is willing to supply.

"I don't think NPR is any longer a voice of diverse points of view," Welker said. "Their funding fragility has mandated that they avoid controversy."

Simply Living's station definitely won't avoid controversy, judging from one of its hosts. Zach Henkel recently started producing *Cranksters*, a show promoting that most green of activities, bicycling. But the self-proclaimed "street biker" made it clear that he isn't all touchy-feely about everyone who climbs on two wheels, especially those who do so while encased in spandex.

"Oh, no, we make fun of those spandex dudes," the 25-year-old said, defining them as "middle-agers who live in Clintonville and other wimpy places and just ride their expensive bikes on trails." (His show, for the record, is produced at Simply Living's offices in the allegedly wimpy Clintonville.)

Judging from another Henkel comment, some of Simply Living's radio shows also may stray from the group's green and health-minded image. Asked why he rides, Henkel says it's neither for exercise nor to save energy. "It's more because of poverty," he said, "and secondly out of belonging to a subculture that I enjoy."

If Henkel veers from Simply Living's hug-the-earth message slightly, that's OK with Evan Davis, a free-lance radio reporter who's helping out at the new station. WCRS has no "political agenda," he said, but is devoted to "providing an outlet for voices, information, culture and perspectives that are excluded elsewhere

in the popular media.

The excluded voices, he said, include high-school students, even though the local public radio station WCBE is owned by the Columbus Board of Education.

"(WCBE) does not have any programming by, for, about or including Columbus public school students," Davis said. "And that creates a void."

Welker agreed that she and other Simply Living members decided to go into radio because they felt the need to put "a broader number of voices" on the air, particularly those focusing on environmentalism. What they couldn't have known was just how long it would take to actually launch the new station.

The effort started back in early 2001, when the FCC set up a narrow window of time during which applications for low-power stations could be filed. Urged on by a broadcast activist named Ken Kraska, Simply Living filed an application along with three other groups that wanted to share the signal.

"So we've worked almost seven years on getting the station up and running," Welker said, blaming the delay largely on FCC's foot-dragging.

She said the process also was complicated by Congress's decision—in response to pressure from NPR and another broadcast group—to eliminate three-quarters of the low-power signals it had planned to dole out. In the end, she said, most of the signals went to small communities with little competition.

"Columbus is very fortunate," Welker said. "We are actually the largest market in the country to have a low-power station."

WCRS also lucked out in other ways. For one, it was able to hire Henkel to run the station's day-to-day activities while his salary is paid by the federal service organization AmeriCorps.

And, thanks to financial support from the group that puts out the *Columbus Free Press*, the station also has a "translator" station that simultaneously rebroadcasts its programs, increasing its coverage area. WCRS's regular frequency is at 102.1 and is broadcast from a tower in Northeast Columbus, while the translator is at 98.3 and has a tower in Marble Cliff. Between the two, said Welker, the station can be heard as far out as the Outerbelt and the first ring of suburbs.

What will viewers hear when they tune in to 102.1 or 98.3? Depending on when they tune in, they may or may not hear WCRS. The Bexley Public Radio Foundation, one of the three groups that filed to share the frequency with Simply Living—and the only one that also decided to get into broadcasting—is on the air from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. weekdays under the call letters WCRX.

As for WCRS, it broadcasts from 3 to 8 p.m. weekdays, during which time it runs national shows from the liberal-minded Pacifica Radio and local shows with names such as *Conscious Voices* and *Simply Living Healthy*. And, of course, it runs Henkel's *Cranksters*.

Davis said WCRS would like expand its hours and its programming, but that can't be done until Simply Living sets up a fully functioning broadcast studio at its Clintonville offices. For now, Henkel runs the station from a computer in a back room overlooking the Aladdin's parking lot, while most of the producers record their programs in their own homes.

With a low-powered signal and limited hours, WCRS may sound like a modest achievement. But for Fisher, who has watched Welker and others spend the last seven years trying to make it a reality, there's nothing modest about it.

"It's an act of heroism as far as I'm concerned," she said.

Kathleen Madigan

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