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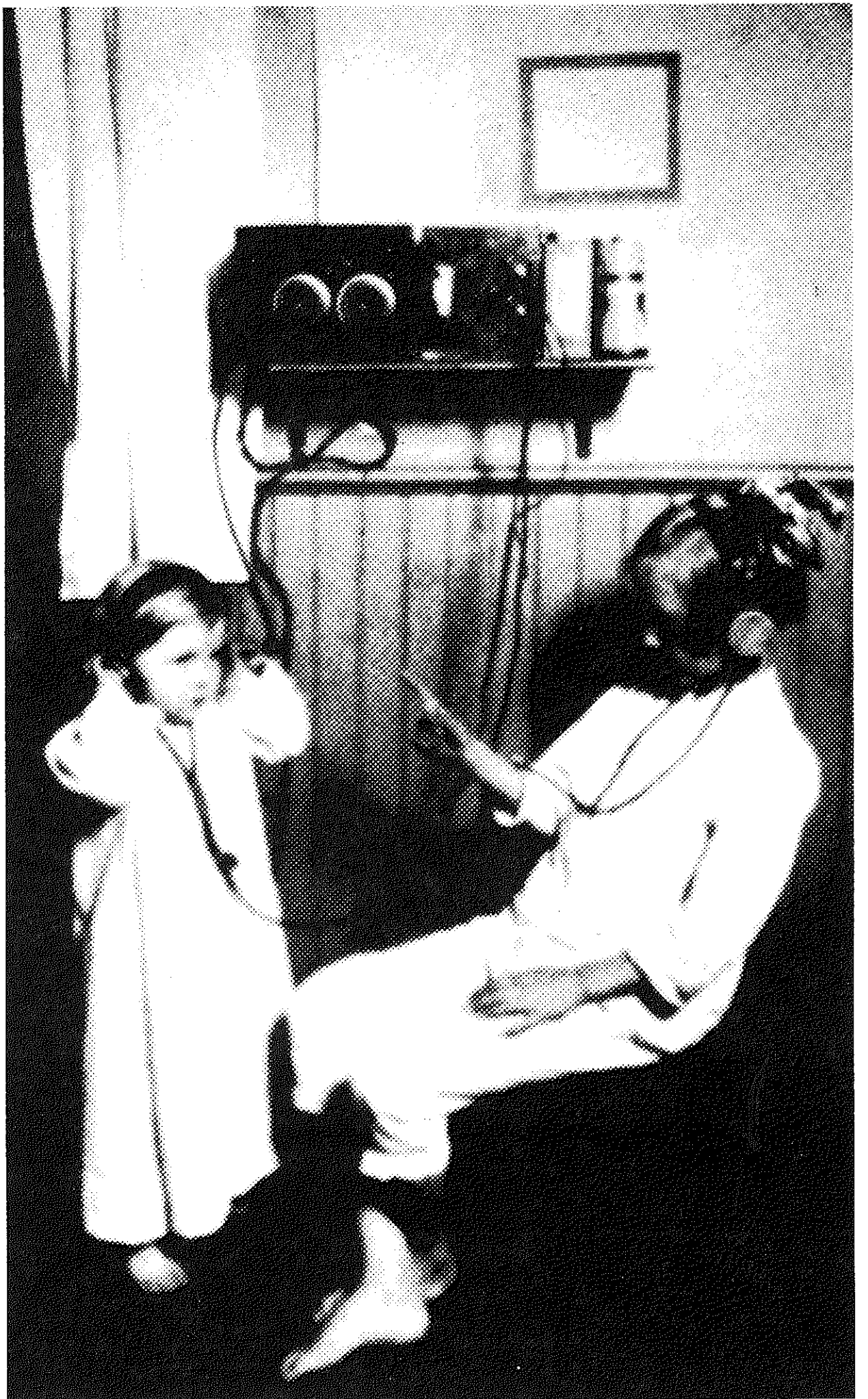
ONTRADICTING

M  
EDIATOWARDS  
A  
POLITICAL  
PHENOMENOLOGY  
OF LISTENING

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THE

number of human hours, days, weeks spent listening to the radio is phenomenal. The number of radios purchased, possessed, listened to in Canada is phenomenal. It wouldn't be Canada without radio. Despite noises made with the introduction of TV, radio did not disappear between 1950 and 1960 (though of course it changed). If anything its constant presence became more constant, since the transistor (and free-ways) appeared at about the same time. Radio hasn't gone away. What did disappear, to a correspondingly phenomenal degree, was critical attention to radio.



Compare the number of publications on tv or film in your local bookstore to those on radio and the culture of sound technology. The last major research projects on radio content and listening habits were conducted in the 1940s. Only in the last two or three years is this absence beginning to register.

This "renaissance" of interest in broadcast sound can be attributed, to a small degree, to the emergence of alternative forms of radio broadcasting, which themselves owe their genesis to major shifts and consolidations in the international and local structurations of technology, economics, power, and cultural production. Though alternative radio takes as many forms as there are cultural and political locations, these different forms of opposition articulate their strategies in relation to a common force: the global network of telecommunications whose musical arms have with unprecedented rapidity entered and transformed every social and cultural community in the world. It is said of music that it disdains all boundaries of language and location. If that can be argued, we are

indebted for both its proof and its counter-proof to the global explorations of the music industry. These explorations both transform boundaries and create the felt necessity for their rearticulation. Whether the "global village" towards which these powerful corporations drive us marks the end or the beginning of *autonomous* difference depends on a complex interaction of technology, power, and politics within which music plays a very central and unique role. Knowing how the struggle progresses means learning how to listen.

My own attentiveness to radio is logical enough, since I am a musician with a professional interest in media and politics. Also I am Canadian, and (even worse) a Canadian woman, which explains a certain paranoid ear for the discourses of power effected by technology, technological processes, mediated social relationships. At the same time, as I am completely inside of these, I am completely at the margin. But

this logic would never have followed its apparently inevitable course were it not for the influence of CKLN, a new campus-based alternative community FM station in Toronto. There I was one evening, sitting in the kitchen, reading Anthony Giddens of all things and listening to CKLN. Giddens was playing some fancy tricks with the terms "mob" and "mass" culture and I had just listened to about half an hour of uninterrupted music when I suddenly realized that what I was hearing was a totally different form of cultural/technological communication. I was being constituted as a member of a listening public in a way I hadn't experienced before (though similar stations in Australia first introduced me to such possibilities); most notably because the form of broadcasting had nothing to do with the usual injunction to recognize/desire/purchase the record whose commodity form corresponded to what I was hearing. I didn't always know whose they were, for one thing; and the different relationship between me and the music corresponded to a different relationship between pieces of music, which "made sense" of them in a different way. I forgot to be annoyed by the absence of immediate author-information. I wasn't listening to advertisements; I was listening to *radio*.

## STRUCTURE, SPACE, TIME

Radio is an alteration of space and a structuring of time. It extends space if you're making music; shrinks it if you're listening. It both joins people together and reaches them where they are lonely, which may be why it was embraced so vigorously by Canadians from the beginning. Its centrality is clearly related to the geographic scale of the country. Though if we recognize considerations other than the physiological, we have to say that in other respects Canada is a very small country, and that its smallness has had as determinant an impact on the development of its broadcasting as its largeness. Radio redefines space and structures time not only in its acoustic movement over distances but also in its format. Murray Schafer has argued that the joining of geographically and philosophically unrelated items in radio achieves an "irrationality of electroacoustic juxtapositioning" which we should refuse to take for granted.<sup>2</sup> Though Schafer has done as much as anyone to analyse the experiential effects of what he calls the "schizophonia" of modern sound technology and its splitting of sound from source, we can go farther by recognizing that the principles of juxtaposition which dominate ordinary radio programming are as "rational", i.e. motivated, as they are irrational, i.e. static.

Radio achieves this rational irrationality by its ability to place together sound messages which are disparate in terms of their location of origin, their cultural purpose, and their form, in order to create a continuous enveloping rhythm of sound and information. The rhythm's "reason" isn't about insight, originality, history, logic, or emancipation. It's about the market. Since the continuous rhythm of sound is more powerful than any single item enveloped in its progression, the reception of particular items is substantially determined by the larger discourse of radio programming, which teaches us addiction and forgetfulness. In commercial radio, the pleasures of location and identity, of specific recognitions or discoveries, are sacrificed to the (real) pleasures of the media's "boundless hospitality", which defends itself against anarchy by being totalitarian in its mode of address and in its structuring of program, genre, and rhythm. The tempo of events, information, pleasure, and interruption, with its prescribed balance of familiar and unfamiliar, is determined by economics, market research, and convention, before the DJ ever gets there. Music is meted out by measure to reward the listener. The carefully managed rapidity and predictability of pattern maintains what might be called a community of listeners who identify with its generic classifications (Top 40, country, "easy listening", big band, classical, "new music", etc., all rigorously carved up by market research and broadcast regulation) and who share a certain locus of informed style.

Because of increased mobility, transience, fracturing of urban space via transportation, shopping centres, centralization and marginalization, conditions which radio restructures but is simultaneously inseparable from, this listening community rarely exists today without radio having first brought it together. Imagine how different radio would be if there were real urban planning. The listening community is predominantly constituted, at least by ordinary radio, on the basis of a paradoxical and abstract relationship to depression, if I can use this precariously psychological term. We listen to radio, or rather, hear radio without always having to listen too closely (and in fact *hear* less and less) to keep from being depressed or isolated, to feel connected to something, to enfold ourselves in its envelope of pleasure, information, power; while the absence of any spontaneous or innovative event, or of any specific (vs. abstract) intimacy, contributes ultimately precisely to depression, which after all is merely a sideways description of powerlessness, of being prevented in various ways from achieving anything spontaneous or innovative, of having or living a new idea.<sup>2</sup>

But this can be re-presented in economic terms, by locating the actual development of radio language in relation to the developing structural integration of the various sections of the communications industries.

## THE PLAY OF TECHNOLOGY: ENTER ECONOMY, CENTRE STAGE

Radio entered the marketplace in the 1920's, the same decade in which American entertainment capital began the sweeping process of concentration and integration which now dominates the international production and dissemination of music. The first station networks were established in that decade, and linked, via corporate ownership, to the production of radios, records, record players, music publishing, and film. The entertainment monopolies have triumphed through a process of continuous centralization and integration of all the stages of music production and dissemination; their imperatives of growth have marked the development of music technology and its communicative discourses from the beginning of broadcasting history.

Commercial broadcasting has become the dominant mode of promotion for musical commodities, i.e. records, and is totally dependent on the strategies of those record companies for its musical programming. DJs and local programmers have become a substantively irrelevant embellishment, and the medium of radio a totally instrumentalized form of communication. Record company profit is in turn dependent on the airtime acquired through various infamous strategies (though most communities have their own exceptions to point to). The profitability of record production contributes to the continuous *economic* centralization, which itself depends on exploiting the "strategical margins" of independent labels and innovative trends. But such centralization of profit also contributes to *symbolic centralization*, whereby the dynamics of technical innovation led by the big companies create more and more sophisticated sound production values, through which listeners learn to judge musical value. The changing modes of musical performance are, if not determined, certainly mediated by the evolving strategies of the big companies, who monopolize the development of new technologies and the marketing of music as a whole. In terms of the dominant discourse, there are only thirty "real" musical acts in the world. The rest are shadows, or so it would seem, flabby imitations, or marginal testimonies to the mythology of boundless hospitality by means of which the industrial powers weave their web.

Of course this is not the whole story, since behind this bland mask of boundlessness is the productivity of music itself, which is always also a social productivity. The traces of this are audible in the ruptures of rock, in black music, third world or womens' musics, the "experiments" with space of new music, in all the spaces where location names itself and makes itself heard. The history of communications technology is not only that of the discourses of power, but also of opposition and difference, and of the interaction of these. At certain times the cultural productivity of making music becomes also an oppositional expression of new social formations and values. To work out when such cultural productivity becomes oppositional practice, it is important to understand more precisely how cultural domination works, and how it creates not only its own structures of imprisoned desire but also its own alternatives and oppositions.

American broadcasting has been officially private (with notable exceptions) since the 1927 Radio Act, a government decision of characteristically heroic self-denial which empowered the newly formed Federal Communications Commission to licence and regulate radio communications "as public convenience, interest, or necessity requires."<sup>3</sup> 1927 was also the year that NBC and CBS took control of programming and production. Obviously "public interest" offers a controversial framework for broadcast regulations, as indeed it has been in Canada since the federal government bestirred itself to create an alternative public broadcasting system in the 1930s. The American interpretation of "public interest" represented a clear victory for private interest and thus, explicitly, for direct broadcast advertising. The consequent strategical imperatives were imposed on broadcasters uniformly. They entailed the maximization of audience size in order to increase advertising revenue, and this meant both a continuous standardization of musical styles/forms and an increasing reliance on the mass-produced recorded music of the big companies. Such music, while cheaper, was produced through increasingly sophisticated processes, which encouraged the entrenchment of powerful implicit values of what constitutes "good" music. This control of technology is the real motor of symbolic centralization, rewarding listeners with continuous pleasure and thus continued confidence in the freedom of our pleased ears.

But most of us, like our comrades in the "developing" nations, don't need to be reminded of what "free speech" really means in terms of American communications policy. As its horizons expand, we can enjoy wonderful things from Cuba, Warsaw, Liverpool, Kingston, Harlem, Nigeria, or Kamloops, B.C. We are in a particularly advantageous position to celebrate what McLuhan called the "global village". This privilege, like the Trojan horse, introduces the power dynamics of the technological conquering of space, and this has also been the case since broadcasting began.

## MUSIC IN/OUT OF CANADA

Canada - the space, the people, the airwaves - has had to deal far longer with the cultural and economic effects of the American communications empire than most other countries. We're not unique with respect to this challenge; but because the problem is a much older one here, it takes a different form. When the world hears African music, which it increasingly seems to want to do, our immanent recognition forms part of the pleasure and experience of listening to what is heard as African music. (Or, as music whose producers have heard African music and wanted to join in, which is also increasingly the case.) African-ness can be heard. The music fills a specific symbolic and social space, that which is constructed as African-icity. Our hearing it is part of an international technological network by which African-ness, to us a symbolic of pre-industrial culture, is itself affected. As the tools of that network

edge their way into the various centres of African music (which itself has never been a single style or discourse), they transform its social organization and, to some extent, its form. Africans themselves have, in response, begun to mobilize their own music production through various strategies of technological appropriation: cassette tapes and broadcasting policy in those countries, like many others, have become central to campaigns for cultural self-production. What we hear as "African" is increasingly inflected with the strategical language of such resistance/appropriation.

The same phenomenological representativeness marks American music, in a completely different sense. Its power signals not only the entrepreneurial prowess of the "big 5" of the music industries, but also the symbolic powers attached to American formulations of the modern, the free, and the fun. American and African music articulate different kinds of aspirations for listeners in various locations. This difference is also a relationship, again not only economic, but also in terms of symbolized value systems struggling over formulations of the modern, the free, and the fun. Of course it is people who actually struggle, not symbolic systems. In all this global symbolic warfare, this "creative" tension between centre and articulate margins, where do we stand?

When you hear Canadian music, its Canadian-ness doesn't often reach out and grab you as the first note sounds. It becomes an issue, so to speak, after the fact. This is part of how we are constituted as listeners. We may know that Rough Trade or Joni Mitchell or Burton Cummings or Ann Murray are Canadian, but we mainly know this factually, not musically. To ask whether the music we listen to is knowable musically as Canadian raises a number of questions which in themselves have been dubiously productive. Here I place native and Quebecois music in brackets. In any case, hearing "prairies" or "Toronto" as a climactic aura framing the voice may be an externally informed part of the experience of listening, but it is part of it nonetheless. We still claim what we want of it as ours. What arises more readily as an immanent question from our historical experience as listeners concerns what we hear and how we hear what we hear. How we hear what we hear has, from the moment there was a listening "we", been predominantly from the radio. Because of this fact, and the specific patterns it implies, how we hear what we hear has been a question as long as we have heard it, and so this question is part of what we have always heard, though we haven't always heard it musically.

This historical centrality of radio to Canadian cultural experience is a function of geography, which was given, and of intention, which was made, and which took form, not long after American radio had firmly taken root, as a conscious strategy of public purpose in the name of national unity. Following the trail of the CNR, the CBC developed a radically different approach to broadcasting and specifically to music broadcasting. This is a rich and fascinating history of cultural self-defense (mediated by colonial elitism) which remains largely unwritten. For some decades, the CBC was the single most influential support system for the production and dissemination of Canadian music. Composers and historians maintain that without CBC radio there would not have developed a community of music producers able to conceive of the possibility of making music.<sup>4</sup> The CBC organized, produced, and broadcast across the country a range of musical performances, from new operas to a prize-winning pipe band of CNR employees, from big bands to Irish folk songs, from commissioned compositions for radio and film documentaries and dramas to national talent-hunt singing contests.<sup>5</sup>

No doubt it was an inspiring moment, that bringing together of so many voices under the protective rubric of the nation. Listeners congregated in rural living rooms and wrote letters about being truly thrilled by the sound of the bells ringing out from the Ottawa hill-top. . . . In retrospect it may seem like so much state-funded maple syrup. But clearly something was happening in Canada in the 1940s and 50s. Regions and communities had their voices and their voices could be heard. The CBC provided a space for this to happen in, if not a context for the larger implications to cohere in a political sense. They proved that when people themselves produce such complex sociality, the juxtaposition of sounds and messages starts to become intelligible (rather than "coherent", a term that implies singularity). The provision of resources for expressive social communication, and the making of such communication in a continually new and different way, rather than simply the making of new things to fill solidified frames; these are the bases of "value", if such a concept can be retrieved with respect to radio.

The CBC, however, could not grow to accommodate its own resources. Instead it was gradually transformed by a narrowing concept of public interest, with its related notions of "quality", and, equally important, by its growing vulnerability to commercial pressures and decreasing protection from the Canadian state.<sup>6</sup> These pressures led to the consolidation of broadcasting conventions in which music broadcasting in urban centres (especially the more "serious" FM) has become largely as predictable and dead as it is predictable and transient on the private stations. The fertile interdependency of music production and broadcasting, which had found articulation in changing musical thinking, has mostly given way to the triumph of the economic and formal interdependency of broadcasting and pre-recorded music. A former CBC music producer argues that this change has worked to discourage imagination, to decrease the producer's control over the final broadcast format, and to sever the relationship between host and musician. The effects of the transformed mode of musical packaging are passed on to the listener,

to whom the daily spate of music becomes simply a component of the familiar daily environment. Music on radio ceases to matter. Against such an attitude it is all the more difficult for the radio producer of imagination and originality to make his



own demands on the time and special attention of his potential audience . . . . The will to create, to experiment in imaginative and significant radiophonic forms, indeed to provide musical services as only radio can, seemed to be far less influential than formerly.<sup>7</sup>

It is no wonder, to add an apparent aside, that increased content quotas are treated with such aversion by the Canadian public. (Though significantly this is more true with respect to TV.) To suggest further restriction and regulation of the present petrified frameworks of broadcasting is bound to invite opposition in this context; not only because of the systematic training of cultural value through which American modernization effects its strategies, though this is important; but further, because "content" remains an empty formula for evoking public sympathy as long as the more essential "content" of media discourse - its unending, unbreakable flow - continues to reproduce itself through productive and regulatory processes which allow little participation other than consumptive choice (coke or pepsi?). The public chooses "freedom of choice". A militant absence of illusory freedom points to the absence of the real thing. So what else is new?

## RECLAIMING THE DISCOURSE

I said earlier that the recent emergence of alternative broadcasting is tied to major shifts in the international and local structuration of technology, economics, power, and cultural production. While this structuration works internationally, its local forms vary, as do strategies of local mobilization and cultural opposition. For many years "alternative" broadcasting in Canada took the form of a national public network (demanded and fought for by Canadians) whose mandate was to broadcast on behalf of a national community whose identity it simultaneously sought to build. That mandate could only have been fulfilled by allowing a far more complex and multiple concept of "public" than the dual imperatives of national (cultural) defense and the economy of dependency have permitted. The failure of the CBC joins with the simultaneous effects of a more universal colonization of musical resources, which make cultural opposition at once more international and more local. The "margins" reassert their power and find mutual recognition. The potential strength of CKLN is that it can exemplify and reinforce this dialectic of internationalism and localism; both are strengthened as it participates in the evolution of cultural self-determination within, and between, the various musical communities in Toronto.

As the station's manager explained to me, CKLN has no difficulty fulfilling Canadian content requirements because they like to play local music. A resource can be a catalyst: after a year of broadcasting, their library now contains two hundred and fifty local cassette tapes. Without CKLN (I speak from experience!) many of these would not have been made. Many won't be heard elsewhere. The more complex and open the musical thinking of the station's programmers, the more autonomous, and "significant" as communication, can be the musical thinking that goes into making these tapes. It is not so much the individual authorship of music which is important within the programming discourse of the station, but the control and creative use of the medium as it mediates our musicality and our sociality. This can only evolve through an interaction between the station and the community, between listening and playing, and between music and other issues and activities.

The programs in which local tapes appear are not ordinarily organized around Canadian-ness, though there are special programs on local music (as on women's music, Reggae, blues, imported music, experimental music, jazz; musical "location" is a funny thing). Most frequently they are woven into a fabric of music discourse which draws connections in many different directions. Nowhere else would you hear the particular combinations and threads connecting those pieces of music. The juxtapositions cutting across time or space pull different sound thoughts together, as (for instance) when I heard The Birthday Party follow Janis Joplin, and suddenly recognized something about the voices of west-coast angst, or when I heard a series of pieces by the end of which I Really Heard the guitar. Such eventfulness can change as it responds to - is produced by - the community which is also the listening public. This process of enfranchisement has political effects, evident in the production of "documentary" talks on social issues in which the music intervenes, not (reduced) as illustration, not (inflated) as propaganda, but as a separate-but-equal moment of musically embodied expressive response to a politicized world. The station's evolving strategies of mediation make possible the development of a political phenomenology of listening, without which no emancipatory strategy in sound is possible.

## NOTES

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1. Murray Schafer, *The Tuning of the World* (Toronto, 1977), p. 94
2. I am indebted here to Keith Talbot (National Public Radio, U.S.A.) who confesses his own depression and thinks himself out of it in *Radio Renaissance*, N.Y., 1983
3. Frank Peers, *The Politics of Canadian Broadcasting 1920-1951* (Toronto, 1969), p. 12
4. cf. The Canadian League of Composers, Briefs to the C.R.T.C. and to the Federal Cultural Policy Review Committee; Clifford Ford, *The History of Canadian Music* (Agincourt, 1982); Keith MacMillan, "Broadcasting", *The Encyclopedia of Music in Canada*, etc.
5. MacMillan, "Broadcasting".
6. See Dallas Smythe, *Dependency Road: Communications, Capitalism, Consciousness, and Canada* (New Jersey (!), 1981) for an analysis of the "fate" of the CBC, also Peers (1969) and E.A. Weir, *The Struggle for National Broadcasting in Canada* (Toronto: McLelland and Stewart, 1965).
7. MacMillan, *ibid.*

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The game was easy,  
posing,  
no real threat to the trapper.

The language I speak "within myself"  
is not of my time;  
it is prey, by nature,  
to ideological suspicion.



Whatever he wanted was there.  
It was new, exciting,  
yet somehow, natural.

The new is not a fashion  
it is a value,  
the basis of all criticism.