Radioheads: Lee L'Heureux and crew boost WMHB to the next level

Rebecca Green
It’s six o’clock on a Thursday night and the cave-like studio of WMHB bristles with the edgy mix of beats and boasts of the show Hip-Hop Nation as Big Lee (Lee L’Heureux ’03) queues his kuts and synchronizes tracks on the spinning turntables. The studio itself is dimly lit and badly furnished, but the walls are lined with the jewel boxes of thousands of CDs, from bluegrass to worldbeat to hardcore—all given to the station by record companies who want to get their music college-radio airtime. “You have a lot of power behind the microphone,” L’Heureux says.

But Big Lee doesn’t stay behind the mic. Dressed in a hooded Phat Farm sweatshirt, he disappears now and then into the headphones, floats around the wall of equipment, punches buttons and moves levers, occasionally “drops a bomb” on the air. As the console lights flicker from red to yellow, Big Lee keeps the music flowing, riffing on the hip-hop news in his breathless patter. Off the air, he is soft-spoken, even shy, but very serious about what he’s doing. Several times he complains that the equipment needs to be adjusted: the levels are warped. Kicking at the winter sludge tracked into the studio, he makes a mental note to have the studio vacuumed.

When L’Heureux walked into WMHB six years ago as a high school junior from Waterville, he wasn’t worried about the carpet. L’Heureux landed a radio show, became a regular and took over as the station’s summer general manager. By junior year he was WMHB’s general manager. Since then he has transformed WMHB from a sloppy outfit that actually lost its license in 1999 to a vibrant radio outlet that was profiled in the February 2003 issue of *CMJ* (College Music Journal) a trade magazine for college radio.

And for WMHB listeners and music fans of all kinds, L’Heureux’s timing couldn’t have been better.

Since the Telecommunications Act of 1996, college radio has become an increasingly vital alternative for the musically adventurous. “The problem is that companies like Clear Channel are buying up companies and homogenizing playlists,” says Assistant Professor Alec Campbell, who teaches the role of the media industry in Sociology 135.
(Politics, Ideology and Inequality). “College radio is the only place that plays anything that different. I listen to WMHB even when I don’t like the music, just because a thinking human being put some thought into it, instead of a bean-counting corporate executive.” With decisions on webcasting royalties still under negotiations and satellite radio waiting in the wings, it remains to be seen whether we will have more listening options, or merely a proliferation of the existing ones. For now, WMHB is an oasis of musical diversity on the dial. It almost didn’t turn out that way.

L’Heureux became general manager just as the frequency fiasco of 1999 caused a blackout at the station. WMHB had been improperly licensed with the Federal Communications Commission, which allowed Maine Public Radio to take over its frequency. L’Heureux spent his first months as the station’s g.m. managing dead air.

Sorting through the mess, L’Heureux “practically camped out at the station” venturing forth for meetings with a procession of engineers, lawyers and Colby administrators. By the fall ’99 semester, the station was up and running at 89.7 FM. L’Heureux hasn’t looked back.

Under his management and the WMHB board’s direction, the station has obtained new equipment for the studio and an Associated Press feed for a daily news show. He’s insisted on a more professional standard for DJs, developed links with The Colby Echo and started streaming the broadcast on the Internet in 2001. To promote its webcast, WMHB organized a Live Music Week in which 20 bands from the East Coast came to Waterville to perform live in the studio over six nights. The licensing body that pulled WMHB off the air four years ago recently did an inspection at the station: WMHB passed with flying colors.

The station’s place as a haven for listeners that want to hear non-commercial music is safe. An increasingly eclectic and dedicated roster of DJs, from students to faculty to community, program music they like, not what they’re ordered to air. “It’s the front line of breaking new records,” said L’Heureux.

Take Avril Lavigne, the Canadian singer who recently exploded to the top of the charts. WMHB Student Program Director Miko Yokoi ’03 said Lavigne’s then-obscure CD was being played on Mayflower Hill months before she became a household name, Yokoi remembers thinking, “Wow, other people like her now.”

Like many student radio hosts, Yokoi did her first show on a whim, thinking she might not get another chance in the future. Her current show, Lab Rats, was born in the summer of 2002, when she and a friend stayed on campus as research assistants. Playing new rock and punk for a few hours in the evening was a great release after long days in the chemistry and biology labs, she says. Organized and hard-working, she shares L’Heureux’s commitment to the station, but when she’s in the studio, she turns up the volume and airbands to her favorite songs.

Not that you can dance to everything you hear on WMHB. Philosophy Professor Jeff Kasser, who is among several faculty DJs, plays music on his show that has on occasion sounded like “very large insects” to some of his listeners. Take a buzzing bass clarinet, add an enraged trumpet solo and a pulsating piano, and you do have something that sounds like an amplified beehive, but Kasser prefers the term “adventurous jazz” to describe the ear-opening music he plays on his show, Cosmic Tones for Mental Therapy. The term “free” jazz is too narrow for the music Kasser plays, he says, and “avant-garde” doesn’t capture its sense of fun.

Kasser thinks of adventurous jazz as “precisely a paradigm of what this campus needs more of; something diverting but also a little bit educational.” Through his connection with WMHB, which also sponsors live concerts, he has brought artists like Dave Burrell to campus so that students can have a live encounter with this music.

Kasser doesn’t leave philosophy at the studio door. The faculty advisor for the station, he sees philosophical lessons in the ideas of musicians like Ornette Coleman, one of the front men in free jazz. Coleman “didn’t want to be part of a morally problematic way of listening to music: you know what’s coming and you congratulate yourself when it arrives. He wanted people to have to listen and thought that was something music should do as a moral function.” Coleman dispensed with tonality, the harmonic center that provides a kind of roadmap to the piece. That’s one reason why Kasser’s show is so demanding. “When I get a new record I have to sit down and find out what happens,” he said. “I don’t really know two minutes into it where it’s going to go.”

That could be said of the station in general. Tune into 89.7 and you could hear anything from an aural bubblebath of new techno to echoes from the dawn of gospel music. Currently WMHB features shows as diverse as Japanese pop, a show in Spanish and a guest talk show titled You Thought You Knew, which features a musical profile of a different Colby employee each week. You can even listen to Charlie Bassett (English) play the music he spun when he was a college student DJ.

“People can’t use their sets with WMHB,” said Pat Turlo, aka Cap’n Barney, whose show, Odd Rock, wakes up Colby every Monday and Wednesday at 6 a.m. He describes unpredictable programming as “our biggest strength and our biggest weakness.” Retiring to the area after 26 years in the Coast Guard, Cap’n Barney jumped at the chance to fulfill his “second career choice” of being a radio personality, though the long hours he spends at the station are strictly on a volunteer basis.

How odd is Odd Rock? When Cap’n Barney says he’s going to feature some bagpipe rock, he’s not kidding. You’ll hear plenty of “straight ahead rock’n’roll,” but be prepared for a Bee Gees cover by Slobberbone mixed in. “It’s a way to get music on air that no one else will hear. If I see a group is starting to shoot high, I subconsciously play them less.” His current favorite: Rock Dox, a bunch of doctors from Presque Isle.
Above left, President Bro Adams answers questions during a live call-in show moderated by Tennessee Watson ’03, left, and Erin Hanrahan ’03. Above right, Cheryl Townsend Gilkes (sociology) frequently joins in with the music during her Gospel show, An Uncloudy Day.

In addition to doing at least two radio shows a week, Cap’n Barney records promos for each new season, sends e-mails to keep track of the sponsors and fills in where he’s needed. He recently turned down a full-time paying job: “It would interfere with my DJ activities,” he said.

Why so devoted? “I’m a ham; I just like hearing my voice on the radio,” he said. But there’s another reason: “I don’t think I’d be so involved if it weren’t for the charity work.” Turlo is particularly involved in activities that support the Mid-Maine Homeless Shelter. In addition to running public service announcements for the shelter, WMHB holds an annual food drive that is the shelter’s largest, and the station supports the shelter’s annual walk with a live remote broadcast.

Without community volunteers like Turlo (and there are many), WMHB would not be able to sustain its year-round, round-the-clock broadcast. Every break, every new semester, every summer, the schedule at the station changes as the student population fluctuates. Someone has to make sure there’s something on the air. That’s the job of community program director Joe Languet, another of the many community volunteers that Kasser refers to as the “soul of the station.” Known on his blues show, Six Strings Down, as the “Quiet DJ” because of his aversion to chatter, his behind-the-scenes devotion ensures that it’s never completely quiet at WMHB after the students have left campus.

This special partnership between Colby and the community began in May of 1986, when D.K. Gray was cruising around Waterville. “We decided to visit the station and the general manager was about to leave for the summer and he handed us the key—I’m sure the administration didn’t know about it—and he said, ‘the station shouldn’t be shut down just because the students are gone, you know. It’s a good signal and it serves the community.’” Just so happened Gray was a professional DJ whose honeyed radio voice gives no hint of the earnest astrologer in long braids and a knit cap. She and her friends helped keep WMHB running from 2 to 8 p.m. “as an experiment.” Shortly after, WMHB switched from 10 to 110 watts, and the station has been supported by community members ever since.

These community DJs are sales reps and artists, social workers and merchants, but why would a professional DJ want to volunteer her time at a college radio station?

“It’s because of what’s happened to radio,” Gray said, her eyes flashing behind huge red spectacles. “I first got into radio in 1974, when DJs were the programmers and you could play whatever you wanted. . . . You could take requests.” Gray tried to keep ahead of the playlists and programmers, moving from Hartford to Maine’s WBLM to Boston to Portland, then finally Skowhegan, where she worked at four different stations over 20 years. At one station the owner removed half the records from the studio, including “reggae, jazz, a lot of black music; basically, he left the classic stuff—white male rock.” At WMHB, Gray could stretch her on-air persona “Annie Earhart,” programming music that was off limits at her commercial station. She and her friends Abby Shawn and Jim Fangboner (whose show, Songs All Around the World, can still be heard on Tuesday afternoons) found “a little bastion where we can still play reggae, black music, world music.”

Annie left full-time commercial radio in 1999. By then, her job was to drop her voice into a computer to promote a show that was...
programmed in Atlanta. To fill her allotted 60 seconds of air she began telling stories. That was the beginning of The General Store, a variety show that she and her biologist husband, Andy Wendell (aka Timewalker), now spend between 20 and 40 hours a week to produce in their home recording studio. The General Store features elements that Annie says are missing on commercial radio: a true variety of music, interviews, a narrative thread. Their syndicated show is also heard on WERU (an alternative community station out of Mid-Coast Maine) and on www.thepublicradiostation.com.

In a couple of months, L’Heureux himself will join the ranks of the community supporters of WMHB. So what’s next? L’Heureux already is music director for WRED, Maine’s only commercial hip-hop station, based in Portland. He is also the east coast representative of ESP, a promotion company out of Cleveland, and he writes a hip-hop column for Face, a ‘zine on Maine arts and entertainment. An impressive start to a career in commercial radio? L’Heureux gives a modest shrug: “I’m just kinda hustling, ya know.”

Will L’Heureux be able to listen to WMHB on the Web after he graduates? It’s anyone’s guess, but he insists, if he’s still within driving distance, he’ll be in the station himself on Thursday nights at 6 p.m., flowing with the Hip-Hop Nation. “I don’t have any interest in giving up the show any time soon. Ultimately what makes it so fun is being around other people that care so much about their shows, whatever kind of music they play.” As for his concerns about the future of the station, “There will never be any obstacle too big for WMHB because too many people care so passionately about the station. It’s fun to be one of those people.”