WEFT station office, located at 113 N. Market St., C.

News-Gazette Photo by Robert E. [illegible]

C-U's Community Radio

After Overcoming The FCC Goliath, WEFT Faces An Even Greater Giant — Funding

By John Erickson

AFTER six years of off-the-air hassles, WEFT-FM 90.1, hit the airwaves Sept. 25. Then a bolt of lightning hit back and the station was off the air again — 23 hours after its first live production.

According to one WEFT supporter, God was merely showing the post-hippie generation who's boss.

WEFT is Champaign-Urbana's first so-called "community" radio station. Fortunately for the station's small but dedicated group of followers, it had a second coming a few days after the Sept. 26 electrical storm when the lightning-damaged transformer in the station's transmitting system was replaced. As in an earlier but lengthier confrontation with another celestial giant, the Federal Communications Commission, WEFT survived.

But whether the station thrives or dives may depend on if WEFT's brand of radio — non-commercial, educational and occassionally nonsensical — finds a niche in a community that already boasts some 15 local stations on the radio dial.

"You're not necessarily going to like us all the time," said Bill Thomas, WEFT's station coordinator. He added that the station will attempt to introduce programming "the community hasn't had a chance to listen to before."

It's a safe bet much of the community had not listened to "My Foetus Lived on Amboy Street" before it aired on WEFT last week, or the candid interview with Alvin the Chipmunk the station aired Nov. 2. Nor are Bolivian folk music festivals or science fiction radio dramas standard fare on the competition.

Add to that the reggae, rock, blues, jazz, folk and gospel music the station routinely plays and WEFT can lay an honest claim to the area's only experimental radio station.

"People here are more dedicated to the idea of presenting music that is more challenging to the community," said Tim Barwald, an air shifter at WEFT. "We're playing music the other radio stations don't touch."

WEFT is the latest in a long line of community and public radio stations that have opened up the airwaves to cultural and diverse programming.

They can afford to. Because the stations are non-commercial, they are largely responsible only to their listeners, and who's to say who they are. Community stations have become so daring as to air forums on feminist and gay rights. And one station, WBAI-New York, had the gall to broadcast George Carlin's infamous "Seven Dirty Words" recording.

The tape from that record even was played in the U.S. Supreme Court where justices ruled it to be "indecent."

Indecent or not, community radio survived, even flourished if you consider a 300 percent growth rate in the last six years to be flourishing. The figure is a little misleading because some stations — like WEFT — had been stumbling in the FCC basement for years only to emerge a new commodity.

But community radio has doubtlessly come out of the closet.

"Five years ago community stations had a reputation of being great when they were great and lousy when they were lousy," said Tom Thomas, president of the National Federation of Community Broadcasters. "I think that's changed some."

The changes have been gradual. Community radio got its start, if not its name, in 1949 when radio hall-of-famer Lew Hill formed the Pacifica Foundation and started KPFA-Berkeley. The new broadcasting alternative was to be listener-supported, meaning its programming wouldn't be influenced by threats from commercial sponsors to withdraw accounts if a certain program weren't removed.

FM listeners were suddenly treated to programming previously considered taboo. Some of it was absurd but nearly all of it was different. KPFA and the early Pacifica stations would air two hours of African music and follow it with an hour reading of Greek poetry.

Interspersed in between might be an angry dissertation on a local politician's unresponsiveness to the minority wing of a political party. The high-minded sorts who struggled through those early years talked of free and open access to the public and First Amendment rights when defining their new concept.

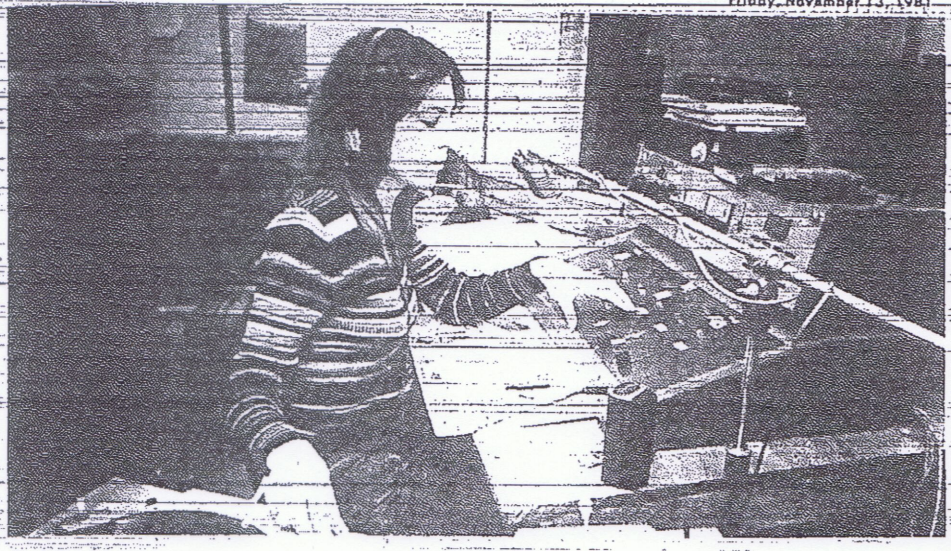
BUT it largely lacked definition. Hill and his disciples weren't so much giving the public what it wanted to hear as what it wasn't hearing on commercial radio.

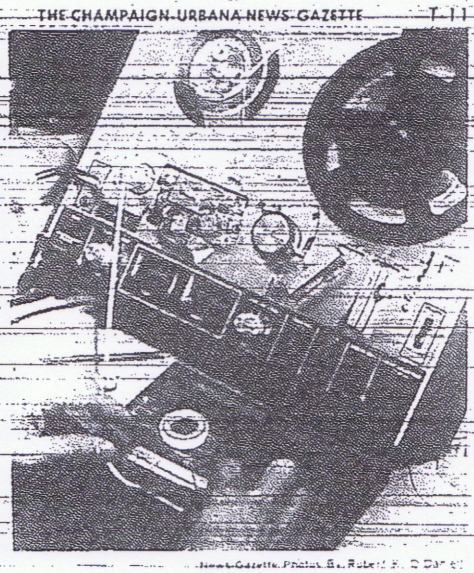
Steven Post, of WBIM, wrote a book in the early '70s called "Playing in the FM Band," in which he said Pacifica sought to build stations that spoke to the minority.

"Those of us who broadcast over listener-sponsored, Pacifica-owned stations say what we want to say, when and how we want to say it, as long as it's not in direct violation of FCC regulations," Post wrote. "And even then we have been known to broaden the interpretation of those regulations."

Typically, the new outlet for expression — of any kind — had some difficult years. With freedom in broadcasting usually comes poverty and KPFA showed the effects of community radio adolescence. On the air in 1949, KPFA was off the air a year later. In 1951 it went on the air again. Through it all, the station suffered internal disruptions that nearly tore it apart.

In 1952 KPFA received a $100,000 grant from the





Disc jockey Maria Schwieter, top left, starts an album in WEFT's studio. That segment of 'alternative' programming was Bolivian folk music. A WEFT worker, top right, is editing tape. Original programming is one thing WEFT hopes will make it a cut above local commercial radio stations.

Rockefeller Foundation's Fund for Adult Education. Though anchored in financial solvency, KPFA still had other problems. Hill wanted to expand the station while another faction favored using the new money to help pay back salaries.

In July 1953, Hill submitted his resignation. Much to his surprise it was accepted. But a year later Lew Hill was invited back to save a floundering KPFA and with it, perhaps, community, listener-supported radio.

Hill returned, but the same factions were still fighting over control of KPFA. In 1957 Hill fired two employees who happened to be members of the American Federation of Teachers. Faced with a union threat to picket the station, KPFA's board of directors overruled Hill's authority. Burdened by the power struggle, an $18,000 station deficit and chronic arthritis, Hill committed suicide.

He was 38.

HILL'S death didn't halt the growth of community radio as much as the Vietnam War and the birth of the counterculture gave rise to it. Pacifica stations had been started in markets such as Houston and New York, but the '60s proved community radio could flourish in places other than the top 50 markets.

One of the early pioneers, Lorenzo Milam, started KRAB-Seattle in 1962, the first non-Pacifica community station. Now a communications instructor at the University of San Diego, Milam recalled in a phone interview the void that helped open the education band to alternative radio:

"You must remember when I got involved in all this nonsense American television and radio was very ugly," Milam said. "There were very few non-commercial stations, and those that were put some nitwit on the air to talk about calculus and called it good radio."

Milam's station took off. In fact, community radio adopted the nickname "The KRAB Nebula" after the programming aired in Seattle. KRAB would play hours upon hours of Indian music, Milam's favorite, obscure compositions from the baroque period, chamber music and other forms, and support it all with a healthy dose of public affairs programming.

"We thought the public had to listen to some of that stuff to grow into it," Milam said, acknowledging that it wasn't always successful. "Most people went to sleep on it," he said, "but we loved it."

Milam said the original community radio concept sought to provide debates, lectures and a forum on arcane subjects, "an American form of the BBC. Then when PBS (the Public Broadcasting Service) was funded by the federal government we had to take off in a new direction."

The new direction was often a political one. Being non-commercial and listener-supported meant freedom and both Pacifica and non-Pacifica stations were learning new ways to experiment with radio.

"The listeners weren't that important," Milam recalled. "We saw our role to lead and not to follow."

Milam wrote a book in 1971 called "Sex and Broadcasting. A Handbook on Starting Community Radio Stations." Though he vows to have written it in three days, it sold, exhausting the first printing in less than three months.

Part of the attraction can be attributed to the title (Milam claims his Great Aunt Beulah convinced him a book with the word sex in its title would double its sales and quadruple its readership), but most of it must go to the increased interest in listener-supported radio.

COMMUNITY radio has had three major waves of development, with WEFT a belated entry in the most recent one. The first, of course, started with Hill and KPFA and lasted until 1965, when the alternative stations began to adopt more of a listenership. The counterculture gave rise to the next wave, but it was hardly a flood.

Of some 10,000 radio stations across the country in 1975, only 18 were community stations.

That proved to be a big year for the movement as a group of radio enthusiasts — mostly the back-to-earth types that had characterized listener-supported radio throughout the years — decided to form a union.

The union became the National Federation of Community Broadcasters an organization that has seen some of its finest moments in the halls of Congress. NFCB made community radio more visible to Congress and to the foundations that were supplying arts and humanities funding.

"That," said NFCB's Thomas, "was the real breakthrough." His organization now claims as members 60 community radio stations.

WEFT has no illusions about becoming a KRAB overnight, although station coordinator Thomas & Co. are seeking consistent programming with a heavy slant to local events. The station plans to air documentaries on local topics (its first is scheduled for later this month), local community affairs programming, local music and to provide open access to anybody who cares to be heard on virtually any subject.

"I think we've done a good job for getting the station off the ground," Thomas said last week. "But we have a lot to do to build the station."

IRONICALLY, WEFT has been building the station for six years while waiting on the FCC to approve first a construction permit then an approval to set up its transmitting system in Downtown Champaign.

Unlike newspapers, radio stations must obtain government approval before sending out their signals to the public. It's a process that rarely takes less than a year and sometimes takes forever.

WEFT grew out of the same convention that produced NFCB when Thomas, Roger Diggle and a few other local alternative radio enthusiasts emerged from the conference thinking a listener-supported station would fly in East Central Illinois.

The group held a public meeting and organized as a not-for-profit, tax-exempt corporation called Prarie Air Inc. Originally the group sought a 4 kilowatt station that would cover roughly a four-county area surrounding Champaign. But WEFT ran into a formidable opponent, namely the Moody Bible Institute of Chicago.

Known as WMBI-Chicago, the institute currently broadcasts on the same frequency as WEFT but is safely out of the Champaign station's broadcast range.

In an application to the FCC in the mid-'70s, WMBI asked to put its transmitter on top of the Sears Tower, a move that would carry its programming well into WEFT's proposed coverage area.

Few people expect the FCC to approve the proposal (it would make the Moody Bible Institute one of the most powerful radio stations in the Midwest), but the commission has a policy of treating pending applications as if they are already on the band when considering other applications.

WEFT was forced to lower its expectations to about 920 watts — enough to cover most of Champaign County and the FCC still hasn't acted on WMBI's request.

BUT WEFT suffered other problems along the way that delayed processing of its application. Many of the delays were beyond the station's control, the FCC being the ponderous bureaucracy that it is, and alternative radio got put on hold.

In May 1980 the FCC sent a telegram to the Champaign station saying its name would be WEFT and that it would be only a matter of months before the license approval. Thomas was hired to run the show and volunteers began assembling a studio at the station's new home, 113 N. Market St. in Downtown Champaign.

In December 1980 the FCC sent another telegram, this time saying a paperwork "logjam" would delay processing of the application as much as six months. Anxious to get its act together, WEFT began putting out programming via the Champaign-Urbana Cable TV system.

Originally viewed as a compromise, the move became a blessing of sorts because it gave the station's largely inexperienced staff a test run for the real thing that would come later.

Finally, on August 10, WEFT received the word it had long been waiting for, courtesy of the FCC. And now comes the hard part: making good on all those promises of quality programming.

THE station's future is largely dependent on that programming. WEFT received a small grant from the Champaign County Arts and Humanities Council and a larger one from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, but listeners are being expected to pay 80-to-90 percent of the station's bills.

WEFT currently is some $9,000 in the hole and funding problems have forced air shift programmers to rely almost entirely on "needle dropping"; there's plenty of records being played but little in the way of public affairs programming.

If WEFT is going to make good on its promise of an open access community radio station, it's going to have to solicit enough listener support to keep the station going. Toward that end, WEFT's expanding pool of volunteers has staged concerts, garage sales, rent parties — even on-the-air auctions — in an attempt to raise money. The future holds much of the same.

"We are going to get more creative with fundraising," pledges Bill Taylor, the grandfather of WEFT, "than this town has ever seen."

Taylor, a Monticello farmer and one of a handful of WEFT programmers with previous experience, said the station hopes eventually to build a news department that can produce a daily local news show to complement the station's wide selection of musical offerings.

"Our goal is to give people as broad a choice as possible," he said. "That may mean playing some things a majority of the people in the station don't like.

"But," he added, "we try to do it well."