



While **Night Lines** of Winnipeg provides an alternative format for those who are bored with conventional radio, it enables new or obscure bands to get the exposure they require.

"I live on a potato farm. What do you call home?" ask Walt Ohamma of Ranier, Alberta as the first chords of his song radiate from the radio.

Ross Porter, the producer of **Night Lines**, said he wants people to say 'I can't believe you did that' when they listen to the program. His goal is to achieve the '80's equivalent of free forum radio a decade ago, when radio was more than just background noise.

When **Night Lines** was created in 1984, it was to fill the night time hole in CBC Stereo programming, to appeal to listeners in their early 20's and to be cheap, explains

Rob Robinson, the original host. While it is difficult to gauge the exact size of the present audience, a Broadcast Bureau of Measurement (BBM) survey showed five per cent of the Canadian population listens to the radio between midnight and six.

Finding a balance between new and established bands was their task and was difficult, said Robinson. "We played music with intelligence and promise and overlooked the technical problems."

Finding the new music required just as much effort as finding the balance. "It took two hours of work to put one hour of **Night Lines** on the air," Robinson explained. During the daylight hours of 9 to 5:30 they "wrote music news, did research, interviews and listened to music, listened to music, listened to music. It was a sifting process and we picked the best and the most interesting."

Many of their early leads came from the magazine **New Music Express** and **Melody Maker**. "Britain really is a place of fads and fashion," says Robinson. "What they go through in months, we struggle to keep up with."

While **Night Lines** has a co-operation of major record companies and has a record library of 5,000 and a growing collection of CD's, Benmergui maintains that they're not a "flack for record companies. We don't play disc after disc."

"It's a lot harder to track down the independent labels" (those like Netwerk of British Columbia and Green fuse), the host says. In addition to finding bands which play in Winnipeg's alternatives venues of Verna's, Wellington's and Broadway's, **Night Lines** solicits material.

"We get tapes from people and those with the best chance are those who can afford to put together a disc. Bands must realize that music is a business, it just mean you have to be organized," said Benmergui, once the lead in a 1960's bar band in southern Ontario.

"Music is getting the message across. You must think it through. The tension in art is between expression and accessibility. How much are you saying and how much are people listening?"

Looking for gems in the chaff has paid off for the **Night Lines** staff, and for deserving Canadian talent like Jane Siberry.

"We were on to her long before she got her 50 stop tour contract," said Robinson. "She is on a different astral plane, like a stranger passing in the night ... we did three interviews with her."

"We were very happy that we had been playing the music that Liz Jancek wrote about in her new music column in **Music Express**. We were always ahead."

Between the music and a few unusual contest, interviews are important **Night Lines** fare. Benmergui has interviewed people of the night, like strippers, but the majority of interviews are with band members. While many interviews are CBC studio hookups to Toronto, some are live and anything can happen.

Robinson describes two such unforgettable incidents. "Sugar Cane Harris was at the mike for an interview and I asked him to say hello to Canada and as if he were on stage, he shouted 'Hello Canada'. The technician with his hands on the (control) dials almost died."

Another time, Blue Gate-mouth Brown, "who had been travelling for 24 hours, suffering from son's asthma, drink and who was almost out of it hit the mike with his head and belched. I asked, 'is that a statement or a question?' and went on. Seconds on air seem like an eternity if it is silent."

If the hours do bring out the crazies, the time slot has created more problems than are readily apparent. Robinson's role was "to be there be awake and stay happy. We did it on coffee — the only drug we took or were offered."

The late hour slot had one more drawback because **Brave New Waves** with host Brent Bambury is broadcast Sunday to Thursday from CBC Montreal. This show is a forum for the truly unusual, said Robinson and some listeners expected **Night Lines** to conform to the same style. Yet the composition of the audience is markedly different on the weekends from the weekdays. "We're not **Brave New Waves**. 'Drone or shout' is strongest when it is between 'normal' stuff. I'd never steal drama from a performer by playing five such songs in a row. We played the **Residents** on Ralph records and had a lot of fun with that."

The unique ability of both **Night Lines** and **Brave New Waves** to cater to a particular listening public comes from being part of CBC Radio which is entirely supported by taxes. This free CBC programs from the trap of commercialism.

Jim Johnson, Assistant Programme Director of 92 CITI FM of the private firm Moffat Communications, said, "I wish we could do it, but radio is a one shot thing. Our night-time program is mostly album cuts. We've got to remain somewhat accessible to maintain ratings."

Life is not all roses being dependent on government financing. Benmergui says his "biggest frustration is the lack of money to promote the program. People don't know we're there."

Benmergui's other peeve is when people call up the answering machine and say "play this. What am I? A service industry? ... but most people give a part of themselves. I think its a fair trade. Spark my imagination, I'll spark yours."

Studio 22: Music, voices, and more music. Says Benmergui: "We like to have just plain fun."