

C'Mon Dave Herman, Play Us Some Rock and Roll

By Dan McCue

For WNEW-FM in New York, ROCK-tober, um, October, has always been a very big month.

While other New York stations have come on with huge promotions and quickly disappeared – WAPP's (remember them?) commercial-free summer being the most recent example that comes to mind – WNEW has not only survived, it's prospered in the world's most competitive radio market by remaining firmly committed to an album-oriented rock format that it's pioneered since shortly after the advent of progressive “free-form” FM radio in the late 1960s.

October 30th was the WNEW's twentieth anniversary on the air. Dave Herman, host of the station's Rock and Roll Morning Show, has been on its airwaves for 15 ½ of those years, putting him in the unique position of seeing the station's from the outside, while also being a stalwart of its most formative years.

“I was working at WHTG in Asbury Park, N.J., and it was a time of great personal upheaval for me,” Herman remembered on a recent morning after wrapping up his show for the day.

“I didn't really get into rock and roll until 1967. Up to that time I was a serious jazz guy, and what happened in 1967 was I got involved in that whole different lifestyle that was going on then; the antiwar movement, civil rights, and so on, and I realized what a privilege it was to have access to the media, and that there were a lot of things that people needed to know about the war and all the things that were going down.”

Herman is the picture of repose as speaks, his voice, even after several hours on the air is deep and smooth and his manner calm. About the only body language he exhibits that captures anything close to tension of era he describes is the way he fumbles a paper cup with his fingertips.

“Now, this is going to sound bombastic, but I thought, ‘I've got things to say and there's music to be played and music to be heard; there's got to be a radio station where I can do this... and then, one night in the fall of 1967, there it was, WNEW. There was a station doing what I wanted to do.”

In a sense, Herman had been preparing his whole life to be struck by that lightening bolt. The son of an Orthodox Rabbi, Herman said he was transfixed by radio for as long as he can remember, and longer, according to his mother.

“I can clearly remember being five years old or so and wanting to do nothing but be on the radio,” he said. “And then by about the age of seven, I was listening to every voice on every station in New York.”

Herman likened the process of assimilation that was occurring to “the way the Beatles might have been influenced by Chuck Berry and Buddy Holly”.

“People on the air certainly influenced other people on the air,” he said. “I was influenced by people like Jazzbo, William B. Williams, by Symphony Sid, who did an all night jazz show when I was a kid in the early 1950s.

“They influenced by delivery, my style, and then from that you kind of create your own thing,” he added.

And then, of course, there was his father, a renowned public speaker who took his son along to lectures he gave in addition to his congregational obligations.

“I was definitely influenced by my dad,” Herman said. “Especially when you talk about vocal quality. I think my experience observing him played a part in what I do as well.”

A jazz and blue aficionado, Herman was matter-of-fact when he talked about what suddenly sparked his interest in rock and roll during the late 1960s.

“Drugs,” he said. “That’s what was happening in 1966, 1967. That’s the answer, as weird as it may seem 20 years later. Now, I don’t want to make it sound like you’d smoke a joint or take a pill and turn onto rock, but there was a whole different lifestyle that was going on then.

“So I got involved in different things, in the counterculture, and I got exposed to rock and roll and said, ‘Wow, why have I turned my back on this music?’ ‘Why didn’t I – at the time, a self-admitted “serious” jazz guy – take it seriously?’

“So I developed this incredible appetite for this music and did nothing in any spare moment of time I had but go back and listen to the Beatles, the Stones, the Doors, and anything else that came out that was in the rock and roll vein.”

Still toiling in the radio wilderness, Herman worked in Top 40, country and other radio formats, honing his craft. One of those jobs was something called “Hits from on top of the it.”

“The ‘It’ was the It Drive-In, where I would go in.... it was just like a mobile phone, and you couldn’t go any further than the station wagon... and you’d try to talk to people in their cars and ask them for requests and try to do a little local show,” he said. “I also did Sunday morning church services and the news; small town radio is the best because you get to do everything.”

Once he set his sites on WNEW, it took five years for Herman to actually join its on-air staff. The simple reason? There simply weren’t any openings at the time.

“But they also said they owned a station in Philadelphia, WMMR, and that they were thinking of doing the type of show in Philly that there were already doing in New York,” he said. “So, I got the job, but the people at the station weren’t so sure [the WNEW style] was going to work in Philadelphia. They said, ‘In six or eight months, if it doesn’t work, we’ll have to pull it.’”

Herman smiled.

“It took off in two weeks,” he said. “It was remarkable to find that there were all these people hungering for it,” he said.

Herman’s show, the Marconi Experiment, was an undeniable hit. Riding the wave of its success, Herman returned to New York, but still found that there was no room for him on WNEW’s schedule. Instead, he

went to work at WABC-FM. Although in some ways very similar to WNEW, WABC-FM routinely got creamed in the ratings. To this day many believe that the reason wasn't that he was wanting for listeners, but that the listeners who actually filled out the books upon which ratings were based were somewhat lax in their reporting.

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, any book in which a listener said they listened to WABC was credited to the legendary WABC-AM, a giant in the market.

In an oft-told tale, Herman is credited with renaming the FM station, suggesting that they change its call letters to W-P-L-J, the title of an old R&B tune that had recently been covered by Frank Zappa.

"It was one of those things we were constantly talking about at the station and the inspiration for a meeting at which the sales and on air staff were called together to search for call letters," he said. "Now, at the time, they had thing big directory of call letters being used across the country, so whenever one of us would make a suggestion they'd look it up and say, 'Oops. No, that one's no good.'"

As it happened, Herman had played the Zappa track on his show that morning. After a few suggestions were shot down, the disc jockey offered the song title. It was an instant hit around the conference room table and a "new" New York radio mainstay was born.

Not long afterwards, though, Herman finally got the call he'd been waiting for from WNEW, although when it came, the station's offer gave him a moment of pause. Scott Muni, the New York radio icon who served as the station's program director wanted him to do mornings.

"You have to understand, in those days, night time was prime time in FM radio, and the morning didn't matter at all," Herman said. "In fact, when it was first suggested to me, my first thought was, 'Do people even listen to FM radio in the morning?'"

Nevertheless, Herman took WNEW's offer and became its morning man in May, 1972.

Jumping from the past to the station's anniversary, Herman said, "More than anything, what we're really celebrating is not the history of the station, but the history of rock and roll in New York."

An anniversary documentary produced by the station bares that claim out. A compilation of "moments" rather than a straight oral history, there's much in the program to jar the memory, much to celebrate, and not a few things that will surely tug on the heart strings.

"You heard Jonathan Schwartz on the air, Zacherley on Halloween night, Allison Steele reading poetry... and some of the things we did in the past were really quite hilarious," Herman said. "we used to call ourselves 'The New groove, WNEW-FM.'"

"On the other hand, we broadcast live the night they closed the Fillmore East, and of course, there was Bruce Springsteen at the Bottom Line. There was the time that the Stones came and played "Brown Sugar" on the back of a flat-bed truck as it went down Fifth Avenue," Herman continued. "Scott (Muni) and I covered that live."

“If you think about it, over the last 20 years, any major event that’s happened in the city that had to do with rock and roll, from Woodstock to Bruce opening the Meadowlands to the present and presenting artists like Robert Cray, the station was there,” he said.

At WNEW, the music has always been pushed to the forefront. The station has never had screaming DJs nor annoying jingles cluttering its sound. Herman’s morning show is a case in point.

“All the elements that we have in my show, the wake-up call, name that tune, calls from listeners, and the other people involved in it, Marty, Donna, Kurt, my producer, all have to be made to fit within the context of the rock and roll morning show,” he said.

“The whole idea here is that we always remember that we are coming from the rock and roll point of view,” Herman explained. “It’s like, George Carlin comes from the rock and roll point of view; Henny Youngman doesn’t. But they’re both comics. By the same token, we do a morning music show; so does Z100. They have all the elements, but we come from the rock and roll point of view. That’s what sets us apart. That’s what I think sets the station apart. So in that way I think that we are still an alternative to the other things on the air.”

But being that alternative has not made the station immune from controversy. One criticism leveled at the WNEW is that it doesn’t play artists like Prince or Michael Jackson, black artists with crossover appeal.

Herman didn’t shrink from the question when asked about it.

“It’s very simple,” he said. “If you took 1,000 of our listeners at random, 950 don’t want to hear it. Radio has become very specialized. People say, ‘I can hear Prince on WPLJ and Z100 and KISS-FM; I turn to WNEW to hear an alternative to that. I get that everywhere else; I want to hear rock and roll.’

“They don’t consider him. I do. I’d love to play those people. You go as far as you can, but you can’t alienate your listeners or ignore what they indicate they want,” Herman said.

Herman’s initial run in the morning time slot lasted exactly a decade, when, in his words, the station “went through a bad period, lost its way, and lost touch.”

“One of the reasons for that was that within the music and radio industry the consensus was that rock and roll was dead,” he explained. “The belief was that new wave was going to take over, and the station seriously thought that it was going to go out of business. We really questioned ourselves. We didn’t know what to do.”

In the midst of the turmoil, Dan Neer became the morning man, Scott Muni took over mid-days, and the station brought in Meg Griffin, whom Herman described as “then a young upstart,” to do afternoon drive.

“I went on the air after her, and what happened is, we essentially became three different stations at one location on the dial, and our ratings, understandably, suffered,” Herman said. “Then Charlie Kendall

came on program director and got us back on track, doing what we always had done, and Mark Chernoff, our current program director, worked with me to create a new kind of Dave Herman morning show.”

Herman said he never realized how much he loved being on in the morning until he wasn’t anymore.

When he came back, he found that certain elements had been added to the show – he specifically cited a segment called “rock and roll jeopardy” – that he just didn’t care for.

“It took a few months of working very closely with Mark every day to make the show something we could be proud of,” he said.

“I really wanted Donna (Faducia) on their air with me very badly, that took time to work out; The way Marty is worked into the show, that took three, maybe five months to take form. Finding Kurt Chaplin was, well, I’m not all that into sports, but I fully realize it’s importance to basically a young male demographic, which is what our station has – it’s a morning show, it’s a rock and roll show, and it seems to be working.”

Herman described the relationships between the members of the on-air staff as critical to what actually winds up on the air.

“At the station you always hang out with the people who are on the air before or right after you. That’s a daily thing,” he said. “We’re also constantly running into each other because we all really go to a lot of music. We’re all at the Ritz, or the Garden, or the Spectrum, or some party that’s going on, and when we do see each other, what we tend to talk about is the station and the music and we’re always turning each other on to records.

“Ray will come in and say, ‘I don’t believe that you’re not playing this record, have you heard this?’ or I’ll run into Dan-O at a concert and we’ll be sitting together watching Pink Floyd, as we were a few weeks ago, and talk about new records. ‘Have you heard this?’ ‘Have you heard that?’ ‘What’s good?’ So there is a lot of input back and forth between us and that stuff does emerge on the air,” he said.

Looking back over almost 16 years at WNEW, Herman said two memories stick out in his mind.

“One nobody claims to remember is the time I had to do my show live, without records, from the Empire State Building, because the lines connecting us to the building had been flooded,” he said. “The room must have at some point been a broom closet, but sure enough, when I got there, I found a microphone sitting on a desk and when on the air, just taking... it was an... well, an experience.

“The second memory is the live broadcast we did with Bruce Springsteen at the Bottom Line,” Herman continued. “The most embarrassing moment of my career came as the show ended and I got up on stage and called him ‘Bruce Springstreet and the E Stein Band.’ Bruce came running back on and said, ‘Give me a break.’ Give me a God damn break. At least get my name right.”

With that, Herman seemed to get a little wistful, to grow a little bit more reflective.

“I think the thing that has continued to get better over the years here, the thing that’s so nice about being in the position I am now, is to feel respected... not only by the people that I work for, but by people in the industry, managers, artists, by people at the record companies as well, because ‘disc jockeying’ is a very pejorative thing to do. It’s really nice to get to the point where people will want to do your show on the basis of the good things they’ve heard about you.

“You know, I think that we’re starting to get to the point here at WNEW, and I hope it’s not just my optimism, where we are going to be able to open up more and more,” Herman added. “I think we’re starting to get to a point where people are so into music, it’s becoming such an important part of their life again, that they really want to be turned on to a lot more things.

“Especially with Mark Chernoff at the helm,” he said. “Mark is a rock and roll crazy and a good, really good program director, and I have a sense that we are going to be a little more progressive than we have been the last few years and that’ll be fun.”