

Matthew Lasar, *Pacifica Radio: The Rise of an Alternative Network*. Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1999. 320 pp., 10 halftones; ISBN 1-56639-660-3; \$34.95 cloth.

For half a century, KPFA and its progeny, the other stations in the Pacifica Radio network, have functioned as a sort of left-wing CIA, whose alumni have penetrated into every facet of America's cultural life. At one point in the 1960s they had virtually stitched up the New York scene: Pauline Kael was *The New Yorker's* indispensable film critic; John Leonard edited *The New York Sunday Times Book Review*; Chris Koch at WBAI was infuriating the US government with his forbidden reportage from Vietnam and sending J Edgar Hoover into orbit by exposing his mental pathology; Eleanor McKinney headed the Broadcasting Foundation of America; and Jack Nessel was managing editor of New York magazine and Alan Rich (later to enliven the pages of *Time* and then *Newsweek*) its fearless music critic. Within the evolving National Public Radio and Television, Pacifica veterans nearly constituted a quorum. As I have remarked elsewhere, this cadre embodied an incorruptibility which came about, not because they were uniquely virtuous, but because they had received their formative training in an institution which afforded them the luxury of habitual integrity.

Like most great institutions, KPFA started as a gleam in the eye of a visionary, the pacifist poet and radio journalist Lewis Hill.¹ For such a seminal influence, it has inspired relatively little critical or historical analysis. Perhaps it's because it has refused to die: Black Mountain College, being finite, has inspired no end of post mortems, while KPFA has a nasty habit of continually rejuvenating in such a manner as to refute the latest autopsy. At the moment, stripped of its staff and placed under armed guard by Pacifica's Mafia, it appears to be playing a death scene worthy of an Italian opera. But it could be too early to close the casket and lock the mausoleum; the corpse may yet stand up and sing another aria.

KPFA's roots are deep in America's pacifist/anarchist tradition. Matthew Lasar's book, the first full-length critical appraisal to be published, carefully traces the lines of influence, communication and participation from Kierkegaard, Gandhi, the Quakers, the American Socialist Party, the War Resisters' League, and related inter-bellum organisations. Widespread pacifist sentiment suddenly evaporated on December 7, 1941, and principled war objectors were faced with the challenge of reaching a populace that were now either bored or offended. (This introductory material is somewhat truncated from Lasar's doctoral dissertation, but the essential structure gets through. These days he's lucky to have a publisher who didn't demand total emasculation.)

The time Lasar spent combing through all the successive versions of Hill's proposal for a radio station has paid off. In my own history I wrote, '... Pacifica had never been remotely proletarian except in sympathy.' In fact, Lasar demonstrates in a series of well-chosen quotations that Hill's original intention had been to set up an unequivocally

1. My own brief version of its early history is in 'The Lengthening Shadow: Lewis Hill and the Origins of Listener-Sponsored Radio,' in Dale Carter (ed), *Cracking the Ike Age: Aspects of Fifties America* (The Dolphin, 23) (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1992), 179-213.

populist AM station in the working-class community of Richmond, California. How well the elegantly sesquipedalian poet would have communicated with the working classes was never to be tested. Poverty forced the project onto the newly-launched, untried FM band and into the welcoming arms of Berkeley's intellectuals, where the station's founders, by culture and disposition, were more at home. There the station would for years be protected from right wing demagogues by being incomprehensible to them.

Although Hill and his co-founders did not intend that KPFA should be directly controlled by the community, its openness and informality led its listeners to presume a proprietary interest – it sounded democratic. This contradiction would be at the heart of all the attempted invasions and palace revolutions which over the years would make the Pacifica network a perpetual battleground. Lasar unravels these with the meticulous accuracy of a military historian, pinpointing each squadron and chronicling their attacks and counterattacks. (It is ironic that the history of this pacifist organisation should lend itself so readily to soldierly metaphor.)

Because of constant penury, KPFA's survival depended on a preponderance of volunteer labour, even on the air. Except for staff members, no programme participants or producers were paid, and so the airwaves were effectively open to whatever individuals and special interest groups could summon up the time and energy to occupy them. It was Hill's intention that these factions would settle their differences and reach an accommodation by engaging in dialogue, thus setting an example for the whole human race; but in practice it gradually resulted in a Balkanization [how that word has gained a new currency!] which in the 1970s would erupt into internecine warfare. Thereafter one's slot in the broadcast schedule would be ring-fenced and defended with ethnic bellicosity.

Lasar's account ends with the US Senate investigation in 1963 of supposed Communist influence on the Pacifica stations, and the never-to-be-resolved bitterness over the Board of Directors' decision to co-operate. Survivors could still come to blows over the thorny question of whether the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee should have been defied and if necessary challenged in the courts. Lasar has a different view from my own, but I can read his account of the facts without becoming apoplectic. What better tribute to his objectivity?

Among the most controversial figures in KPFA's history was its long-serving public affairs director, Elsa Knight Thompson. Coming circuitously to KPFA from the BBC, which she had left when her meteoric rise was abruptly terminated by the gender barrier, she had more high-level media experience behind her than any other staff member in the station's history. In the process of getting her programs on the air, she trained a succession of producers who would go on to distinguished careers and who would remember her with affection and respect; but her impatience with imprecision and ineptitude, together with her gift for the devastating *mot juste*, made her as many enemies as friends. The line of demarcation recalls an early split between Lewis Hill and usurper Wallace Hamilton and lies roughly between the proponents of structured and unstructured programming. Lasar tells her complex story with delicacy and impartiality, but there are still battle-scarred veterans who will never forgive or forget. Lorenzo Milam, a community radio guru who fell foul of Elsa in his early days as a KPFA volunteer, seems to have been left with open wounds, for he devotes much of his review of Lasar's book to a frenzied attack on the ‘

Wicked Witch' who has evidently haunted his dreams for the past four decades. He should stop worrying her defenceless corpse and turn his attention to livelier enemies.

Most of the media attention paid to KPFA has been devoted to its political programming, and so its history has been largely written in those terms; you would never guess that for years half the hours were devoted to 'good' music, mostly classical. And so it is enormously satisfying to find that Lasar has given space to Kenneth Rexroth, listening to whose home-recorded grunts and wheezes was like eavesdropping on Mount Olympus; Alan Rich, one of the most enthusiastic and enlightening music critics of his day (or any other); Alan Watts, whose chats on Zen were a model of intellectual fluency and professional competence; Anthony Boucher, whose smoker's wheeze was the instantly recognisable signal that we were about to be enlightened and amused in equal measure; Phil Elwood, who formed the taste of two generations of Bay Area jazz lovers; Lawrence Ferlinghetti, who claimed to have learned much from the station in its early days and repaid it many times over; and Pauline Kael, who trashed movies and listeners with equal abandon.

Most importantly, Lasar writes of these figures with sympathy and understanding. As with a great cuisine, one does not grasp the essential flavour of Pacifica's broadcasting simply from a series of menus. Along with the hacks and the amateurs, a succession of first-rate minds and talents passed through Pacifica's studios, taking full advantage of the fact that they had entered a mass medium at a unique point where they could express themselves without compromise. Those who never heard these stations at their finest should read Matthew Lasar's stirring and lucid account. It's the nearest they'll come to the real thing.

John Whiting

October Sound, London

ENVOI:

KPFA as we knew it is off the air. Even as I write this review, e-mail bulletins are coming through every couple of hours telling of burgeoning demonstrations and mass arrests outside its Berkeley studios. Hundreds of protestors have been arriving and half a hundred Berkeley cops have been sent – on whose orders? – to break up the crowds and haul away the imagined ringleaders. The fortress-like building is now occupied by IPSA International. 'You may need assistance to address threats to the assets or the proprietary information of your company,' says their publicity. This they have just accomplished by yanking one of the station's most respected news analysts off the air in mid-sentence and pulling the plug. Back on the air after a couple of minutes, all is now bland uniformity, with old tapes being played by a junior engineer rushed in from Pacifica's Houston station. A rogue e-mail, apparently from Pacifica Foundation's treasurer-elect, outlines plans for selling off their most valuable assets, KPFA in Berkeley and WBAI in New York. This the board hotly denies. Who knows? The autonomy which was meant to keep Pacifica free of outside influence now serves to cloak its manoeuvres in total secrecy.