

ARTS

Digitizing 'Radio Unnameable,' a Free-Form 1960s Crossroads

By COLIN MOYNIHAN DEC. 28, 2016



Bob Fass in 1972. This image is in the Bob Fass archive, at Columbia University's Rare Book & Manuscript Library.
Donal F. Holway/The New York Times

When the counterculture swept through America in the 1960s, few places were closer to the action than the studios of WBAI in Manhattan, where Bob Fass manned the microphone at midnight for his show, “[Radio Unnameable](#).”

Bob Dylan discussed music there. Abbie Hoffman spoke about “the politics of confrontation.” Hunter S. Thompson described introducing Ken Kesey to the Hells Angels.

Now Columbia University is preparing to inventory some 10,000 hours of recordings from the show that it bought earlier this year to preserve a record of what such musicians, political firebrands and freethinkers were saying at formative points in their careers.

“We have taken on a major audio archive of an outsider figure who was positioned uniquely at a critical moment in American history,” said [Sean M. Quimby](#), the director of Columbia’s Rare Book & Manuscript Library. “At the end of the day, this is a huge corpus of data that will be used by historians.”

Most of the recordings purchased from Mr. Fass are on fragile quarter-inch acetate or mylar tape that is already deteriorating. Curators at Columbia are planning to transfer the broadcasts to digital files and have started a [crowdfunding page](#) to defray that cost.

Mr. Quimby said the show had functioned as “a sort of crossroads” of ideas that anticipated the unscripted communication and immediacy of contemporary social media. Indeed, Mr. Fass’s listeners sometimes turned to the show to spread word of events they had just witnessed or which were about to unfold.

In 1968 callers recounted how police officers swung batons at participants in a springtime celebration organized by the Youth International Party inside Grand Central Terminal. Twenty years later callers described officers assembling at Tompkins Square Park just before a melee with people protesting a curfew there.

Mr. Fass is the longest-serving host on WBAI, which for decades has been known as an

outpost for leftist politics as well as a home for a variety of arts programming. His improvisational approach is credited with helping to create free-form radio, and he has said that feeling a connection with his unseen listeners was always important to him.

Each night a steady stream of voices called into the WBAI phone lines from across a largely silent city to ask questions, offer opinions and bear witness to life in New York City. People phoned in to discuss a surprise snowfall or the resignation of Richard M. Nixon. One man called from his apartment to say that he had swallowed pills and was killing himself. Two New York City firefighters, strangely antagonistic fans of the show, called anonymously for years, telling Mr. Fass and his guests to “go back to Cuba.”

Mr. Fass sometimes used the airwaves to rally his listeners to action. One event he organized was a “sweep in” in 1967 to clean trash on the Lower East Side. “Amid chants of ‘Love,’ the clash of cymbals and the throb of bongo drums, about 200 young people plied brooms, mops, dust cloths and shovels yesterday,” The New York Times reported, adding, “One group attacked a large mound of broken wood and plaster in front of a tenement house while astounded men watched from windows of the Department of Welfare shelter across the street.”

Many of the recordings, including one that described the cleanup, were thrown out by WBAI in 1977 after Mr. Fass was banned from the air for five years as a result of an internal dispute of the sort that has periodically convulsed the station. Mr. Fass recovered the recordings from the trash, then stored them in the attic of his house on Staten Island. Later, a friend, Caryl Ratner, arranged for them to be placed in a climate-controlled warehouse. Several years ago two filmmakers, Jessica Wolfson and Paul Lovelace, along with Mitch Blank, a longtime music cataloger, transferred some tapes to a digital format for use in [a documentary](#) about Mr. Fass.

That material turned over to Columbia offers a preview of the wider trove. It includes performances by musicians like Muddy Waters and Phil Ochs. There are also conversations with the poet Allen Ginsberg and the boxer Rubin Carter. Some tapes contain Mr. Fass’s reports from the 1968 Democratic National Convention, in which he narrated turbulent conflicts between the police, National Guard troops and protesters in Chicago. “You can hear them — you can hear the reports of the gas grenades all up and down the streets,” he says at one point as booms and shouts echo in the background. “The crowd is being pushed back, and the gas is coming.”

Mr. Fass, 83, has not been inside the WBAI studio recently and now broadcasts the show over the telephone or from a studio inside his home. He still draws callers, though perhaps not at the volume he did several decades ago.

In a phone interview, he said the tapes that went to Columbia included recordings describing the takeover in 1968 of buildings there by students protesting the construction of a school gymnasium in a public park and the school’s affiliation with military researchers. Perhaps, he suggested, those recordings would resonate with contemporary students.

“When history is recovered it has a way of influencing the present,” Mr. Fass said. “I hope students at Columbia are informed by the compassion of what came before them.”