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D.J. of the Counterculture Narrates Another Mishap: His Own

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Bob and Lynn Fess, with their cat Space Creature, have been sleeping on a couch in Staten Island since a fire in their new home in Connecticut. Yana Paskova for The New York Times

For a half century, Bob Fess, 85, has presided over the late-night airwaves of New York City with a radio show named “[Radio Unnameable](#),” which has aired since 1963 on [WBAI-FM](#), the listener-supported haven for the radical left.

As a self-described “midwife at the birth of the counterculture,” Mr. Fess, in his time behind the microphone, has borne witness to some unusual episodes.

The second night his show aired, a listener set the tone by delivering marijuana to the station. There was the time, in 1966, when Bob Dylan [showed up](#) in the studio and began taking callers and cracking jokes. In 1971, Mr. Fess essentially talked a caller out of committing suicide while on the air.

But lately, Mr. Fass's life has begun imitating the craziness of his show, ever since he and his wife, Lynn, attempted to move out of their Staten Island home to a new house in Danbury, Conn., setting off a misadventure worthy of one of his distressed late night callers.

Last month, moments after he entered his new home, as the movers were carrying in his belongings, Mr. Fass casually flicked on a gas fireplace, which promptly malfunctioned and set the house on fire.

It was a two-alarm blaze that left Mr. Fass, who uses a wheelchair, inhaling smoke for several minutes until the movers rushed in and carried him out.

"I could have been roast D.J.," said Mr. Fass. "Have you ever heard the Warren Zevon [song](#) 'I was in the House When the House Burned Down?'"

And so the "Unnameable" radio host now faces an unknowable future.

Even in adversity, though, Mr. Fass, whose show airs Thursday nights at midnight, can be counted on for a pithy take on things. His improvisational monologues and his mix of guests and music helped pioneer free-form radio, and his show was a vital forum for activists, musicians, and everyday people to come together around issues including the Vietnam War, drugs and social justice.

After the fire, with nowhere else to stay, the Fasses returned to their empty house on Lake Avenue on Staten Island, near the Bayonne Bridge, where they live with their 10 or so adopted feral cats.

A single couch now serves as their shared bed as they sort out their future. Most of their belongings either remain in storage or were damaged by the fire.

The bulk of Mr. Fass's radio archive was recently [acquired](#) by Columbia University, with payment for the [acquisition](#) going toward the new house, he said.

But numerous boxes of radio recordings that Columbia had not acquired were damaged in the fire, Mr. Fass said.

"There's a lot of history in there," said Mr. Fass, who is no stranger to dealing with tumultuous events: His show became both a communications and coverage hub for Yippie events, the 1963 March on Washington, the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago and the 1988 Tompkins Square Park riot.

His callers have ranged from Black Panthers to John Lennon to ordinary New Yorkers. One of Mr. Dylan's first broadcast appearances was on Radio Unnameable. The Yippie movement leader Abbie Hoffman was a regular guest, as were Hunter S. Thompson, Allen Ginsberg and Timothy Leary.

The Danbury house fire occurred just before the Fasses were set to close on both the sale of the Staten Island house and the purchase of the Danbury home. So the fate and details of both transactions are in limbo, he said.



Mr. Fass on the air with Abbie Hoffman, left, circa 1968. Robert Altman/Michael Ochs Archives, via Getty Images

The Fasses said they signed an agreement with the developer buying their house stipulating that they vacate by the original move-out date last month or face daily monetary penalties.

A lawyer for the buyer did not respond to messages.

Even if they had the money to rent a place, it might be hard to find a landlord who would welcome a colony of cats, said Mr. Fass, who had already taken two of the cats to the Danbury house. During the fire, one of them, Plutarch, escaped and remained missing for several weeks, until Ms. Fass found him.

Mr. Fass recently completed a three-month hospital stay and is recovering

from heart problems. The smoke inhalation from the fire has added a chronic cough to his health concerns.

Mr. Fass, a native of Brooklyn who lived for decades in Manhattan, moved to Staten Island 25 years ago, but said he had grown weary of the increasing truck traffic at a warehouse across the street.

The Danbury house was an affordable option that allowed Ms. Fass to continue to commute to her paralegal job in Brooklyn. Mr. Fass had been broadcasting his show remotely in recent years from a studio in his house, and planned on doing so from Danbury.

In interviews, the Fasses' broker and the lawyer handling the purchase of the Danbury house both insisted that the Fasses will be able to move into the house after a renovation covered by the seller's homeowners insurance.

But the Fasses said they have no guarantee of this, and with much of the purchase price for the Danbury house in escrow, they are being pressured to close on the property.

“This type of thing is really not my area, and I have no money for a lawyer to figure it out,” said Mr. Fass, whose radio career was depicted in a 2012 documentary, “[Radio Unnameable](#).”

The seller of the Danbury home did not respond to an email, and her lawyer, Lawrence M. Riefberg, said he could not comment without her permission.

In a poetic reversal, Mr. Fass recently called in to his own show — which is being temporarily handled by a colleague, Bill Propp — and described the fire story on WBAI (where this reporter is an unpaid co-host of [a weekly talk show](#)).

Mr. Fass said he stopped receiving a salary from WBAI in 1977 and relies on Social Security benefits. Over the years, some of his listeners have donated to a retirement fund for him.

After the fire, some of his longtime listeners — the Fass “cabal,” as he has always called them — organized [pages](#), which have raised roughly \$2,000.

On the radio, Mr. Fass often helped raise funds for demonstrations and for legal defenses for such figures as the boxer Rubin “Hurricane” Carter, the activist Wavy Gravy and Mr. Hoffman, not to mention institutions like the East Village Other newspaper.

“Bob’s been a voice for the people for so long, and so many listeners have called in to his show in their time of need,” said Jessica Wolfson, who with Paul Lovelace, [produced](#) and directed the “Radio Unnameable” documentary. “And now he has a chance to move to a comfortable living situation and the whole thing literally goes up in flames.”

Resting on his couch in the living room, next to his walker and his oxygen tanks, Mr. Fass disposed of a telemarketer by feigning a heart attack while on the phone. Then he sighed.

“I’m just overwhelmed by everything that’s happening,” he said. “It might sound amusing, but not when it’s happening in your own life.”