

Bringing it All Back Home

Interview with Larry Miller

Fifth Estate Collective

1968

Editors' Note: Larry Miller, known to his longtime listeners in the Detroit area as the man who invented “underground radio,” has returned to Detroit after two years as “Midnight Miller” on KMPX-FM in San Francisco and is presently partying on at WABX on Saturdays and Sundays.

His radio programming is probably the most tasteful in the country, and his influence has spread to stations and disk jockeys all over the U.S.A. Miller’s Saturday afternoon shows on WDTM in Detroit in 1965 and 1966 introduced contemporary rock and roll music (Beatles, Stones, Bob Dylan and the Byrds at that time) into the FM radio scene, and his midnight-to-6 am show on KMPX in San Francisco set the scene for the current FM-rock revolution.

Miller can be heard on WABX Saturdays, 4–8 pm, Sundays, 6 pm to 1 am and, for now, weekdays, 1 to 5 pm.

FIFTH ESTATE: You were a disc jockey at WDTM about two years ago. Where was the city at then and what were you into?

LARRY MILLER: As far as my show was concerned the main thing was folk music. Whoever was playing rock and roll was playing at bowling alleys and there wasn’t anybody with any intelligence playing rock and roll. Three years ago it was just starting, people were getting into electric guitars. My show was mainly a folk show, an hour show daily and a three hour show on Saturdays. I was at DTM for two years, and for most of that time I was doing the folk thing regularly.

In terms of what was going on in the city, between three years ago and two years ago, which was the time I left for San Francisco, the scene developed and centered on the Chessmate, the Living End, the Poison Apple, and I guess the Raven. There really wasn’t a dance scene going on then, in fact the dance thing had just started in San Francisco at that time. So we’d either entertain each other at our own houses or go to one of these clubs. There were some concerts, though, public concerts that involved the kind of music we were aware of or involved in. We had shows at Wayne and there was a show that was put on at the Midtown, a legendary landmark occasion. That show was pretty advanced considering what we were doing. We were experimenting with light show forms, running a cartoon out of focus behind the Spikedrivers. Everything was pretty quiet though. The underground was really underground, you had to look very hard to find it.

FE: Why did you leave?

LARRY MILLER: I left the city because I had always liked San Francisco, I had been there when I was in the service and I’d been in and out of the city many times since. And two years ago, word was reaching us here that a scene was developing with the dance concerts, the light shows, and a lot of good bands. I initially went there to try and find work as a musician. But I found out that what I was about to do as a guitarist didn’t have anything to do with what the bands were doing out there.

FE: How did you get involved with KMPX?

LARRY MILLER: I reached the point where it was time to just take care of business and get a gig. I got married and had to get into something. I can do only two things, and when one thing bombed I decided to fall back into radio. The first thing I did was to look for an FM station where I might be able to program almost a continuation

of what I was doing at DTM. At the time I left Detroit my show had evolved into 50 per cent electric music and it was as if I had never gone off the air for six months, because as soon as I went on the air at KMPX we picked up right where I left off, with the evolution built in. It was mainly a rock show, but the Tim Hardin, Richie Havens, Judy Collins folk music was there too.

FE: I'm talking with people who returned from the coast. Word got back that Larry Miller was probably the most popular disc jockey in San Francisco. How did that happen?

LARRY MILLER: I was just in a position to be doing something that nobody else was doing. When I first went on the air with KMPX there was no place on the whole West Coast where you could hear whole album cuts played on the radio. That was the initial thing that made people listen. See, even when KMPX was into rock music, the guy that did the all night show had no concept of programming. He would play a Supremes cut and then a Dylan protest song, and it was just chaotic. The guy quit, I got the job, and things started happening.

FE: How do you rate WABX?

LARRY MILLER: I think the change of management at ABX changed things a lot. The disc jockeys have better attitudes about things, there's a whole new positive, energetic attitude towards what they're doing. The people at ABX are really very groovy guys. I enjoy going into the station and talking to the people, whereas before it was sort of depressing to go in there. In the case of Dave Dixon and myself, we had gone through negotiations with the former management for months; audition tapes were lost and we were given a run around.

I initially contacted ABX last November when Ted Lucas and Dick Keeler were doing their show on ABX. I spent, like over a hundred bucks out of my own pocket talking to John Small on the phone. And the problem with WKNR is that their programming is being done by a man who has a very good Top Forty background. But I've discovered in my own experience, that it's almost impossible for people who are in Top Forty to make the transition to FM programming. They still think in the pattern of which song is going to be the most popular; which song will sell. They are almost incapable of thinking of recorded music in terms of which is better, which is the better quality record.

FE: How do you see Detroit now?

LARRY MILLER: Since I've been back, the one thing that impressed me the most was the free concert at Rouge Park. The music was good and I saw some very good music played, as good as I have seen in similar concerts in San Francisco. The number of people that showed up and the feeling that seemed to be predominant in the crowd was very similar to those kinds of functions on the coast. If that's indicative of where things are at here, then I think it's groovy.

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Fifth Estate #65, October 31-November 13, 1968

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