

Don't touch that dial

Radio arts organization broadcasts from Acra

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Freeman staff

A BROOKLYN-born, radio-inspired arts organization called free103point9 Transmission Arts started upstate programming in Acra last year.

Contrary to neighborly confusion and the 103.9 FM portion of the Greene County radio spectrum, the arts organization has very little to do with obnoxious shock jocks.

"People would drive by, tune into 103.9 and get Howard Stern and get upset," said Tom Roe, free103point9's program director.

The only connection to Howard Stern is that he, too, has roots in FM radio. Before Stern switched to Sirius Satellite Radio, he used traditional radio waves as a means of transmitting his improvisations.

While gritty in its own way, free103point9 is more ethereal. Today, most of its interaction with the public comes on its Web site, www.free103point9.org.

There, people with good Internet access can hear streaming Internet "radio" broadcasts produced by members of the organization. Material played ranges from experiments in sound, to rebroadcasts of eclectic recordings made at free103point9 events.

That isn't to say free103point9 ignores the radio waves. The group began nearly 10 years ago with microbroadcasts in New York City.

On April 15, Roe is to preside over a skills-sharing and microcasting workshop at the group's Wave Farm site in Acra. Newbies are welcome, but the workshop is supposed to focus on the use of routers and antennas (antennas made from discarded Pringles cans) to boost the power of wi-fi signals (meant for use with devices like wireless-enabled lap-

tops). Technology-obsessed "geeks" and aspiring radio-program microcaster wannabes can find out more about what it takes to produce small radio broadcasts on the group's Web site.

The tutorial begins with warnings about checking out the legality of such broadcasts and advances into the technological nitty-gritty of building the right equipment and how to select portions of the radio dial that are vacant.

Some radio waves may leak from the Acra site, but they are said to be of such low power they shouldn't go beyond the boundaries of the 30-acre Wave Farm, according to Galen Joseph-Hunter, executive director of free103point9 and wife to Roe.

For a time, even Joseph-Hunter's and Roe's dog, Maggie, wore a radio receiver on her collar. That was no art project, however. Rather, the collar was a commercially produced component of a "radio fence," specifically designed to train her to stay close to home.

That microbroadcast was terminated early because the dog naturally wanted to stay close to home, Roe said. "We didn't need it."

On Aug. 5 at Wave Farm, a different animal will participate in a program designed by performance artist Karin Bolendar. Titled "Signal to Pink Transmissions," the performance piece pushes the parameters of artist/performer, audience/participant.

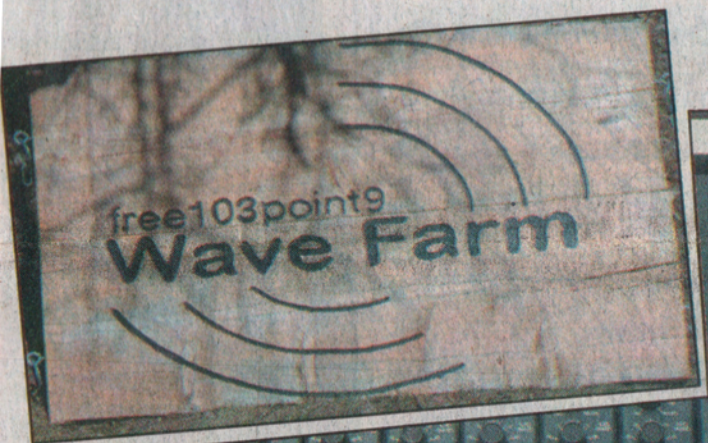
"Pink is the name of her pygmy goat," Joseph-Hunter said. "Pink will be pulling around a wagon that's outfitted with a transmitter relaying some recordings from a project Karin's working on in Virginia

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Freeman photos by Tania Barricklo

Tom Roe, program director of free103point9, takes a call on his banana radio.



ABOVE: The radio group uses a Soundcraft 200BVE mixing board.
RIGHT: Galen Joseph-Hunter, free103point9's executive director, speaks into an antique microphone.
BELOW: Musicians and sound manipulators broadcast live from one of the group's outdoor events. (Photo provided)



Sounds interesting: Radio artists air creations

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this spring and summer. Also, we'll have a microphone and we'll be incorporating live sounds and live feeds."

Roe said that the fight for the right to produce more conventional radio micro-broadcasts — such as the ones Roe rode herd on during free103point9's first roving broadcasts in New York — earned the group an early description as a microbroadcasting collective.

Over time, the purpose of the group expanded to include the encouragement of experimental broadcasts. The new Acra site is being designed as a sort of Upstate outpost for shaping conceptual works for radio transmission.

THE ARTISTIC potential the airwaves can encourage and disseminate is yet to be realized, Roe said. "There's still not many people doing much creatively with them besides speaking into a microphone, being a DJ and playing the same 200 songs."

By 2007, a new studio/study center for artists in residence should be completed at the Wave Farm. In the interim, a range of entertainment events — including camp-out concerts and performances — has been planned. The summer's first, planned for the weekend of July 15 and 16, looks to include groups such as Latitude/Longitude, Bunnybrains, Feathers, The Dust Dive and Matt Valentine + Erika Elder Medicine Show.

Like almost everything free109point9 does, the weekend events will be streamed live from the group's Web

site.

Although its roots are edgy, the organization has received support from somewhat mainstream sources, including the New York State Council on the Arts Electronic Media and Film Program and Meet the Composer's JP Morgan Chase Regrant Program for Small Ensembles.

Support for art projects such as the Wave Farm should be applauded, according to Joseph-Hunter.

"Art and culture are critical to our lives — period," she said. "Dealing with interesting content on the airwaves and keeping artists' voices alive and keeping access is important."