

# California

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## KFAT's twisted trail is at an end

By Edvins Beitiks  
Examiner staff writer

GILROY — In the 7½ years it's been on the air, KFAT has whistled up "Cattle Call" and Taj Mahal and Frankie Ford and T. Texas Tyler and "Dueling Banjos" done by Donald Duck and Goofy ("Play, magic fingers! Ha-yuck").

Over that period, the station has tried to hemorrhage in every way possible, from managerial musical chairs to DJ insurrections to the Great Library Theft. But the latest change, the sale of the station to Western Cities Broadcasting, may be the last word. KFAT, out of Gilroy, may be out of luck.

The day after drawing their severance pay last week, KFAT's former disc jockeys sat around a table covered with Budweisers and music mags and the latest Jerry Lee Lewis album and talked about the decline and fall of FAT.

Dallas Hess, better known as Dallas Dobro on the air, explained that KFAT's sound called up Depression-glass country music, with a few electric-guitar outlaws thrown in.

"It was a combination of Tex-Mex, Cajun, '50s honky-tonk, Western swing, rockabilly, Linda Ronstadt, Jerry Jeff Walker and Waylon and Willie," he said.

"Kenny Rogers is just Perry Como with a pedal-steel guitar. To us, that was never country music."

A typical set might have Chuck Wagon and the Wheels doing "Ra-whide," the Riders in the Sky humming "Pretty Prairie Princess," Jerry Reed's "She Got the Gold Mine, I Got the Shaft," some Bob Wills, and a country fiddle version of Dave Brubeck's "Blue Rondo a la Turk."

In between there'd be KFAT's own version of commercials: "Be it ever so humble, there's no place like Fat," or a mail-order service offering insights on "how to turn unbearable pain into extra income... how to spot truly ambitious people in church... how to be a greaseball."

But just as the station seemed to call up some bucks (it had a higher percentage of listeners making \$25,000 or more than any other station in the Bay Area), owner Harvey Levin died of cancer at 38. Although he asked in his will that the KFAT format stay alive as a non-profit operation, with profits to be channeled into five charities, the money ran out last fall.

KFAT's "small, loyal audience," re-



Examiner/Fran Ortiz

**FORMER KFAT DJs DALLAS HESS, WITH SON LUKE, AMY AIRHEART AND FELTON PRUITT**  
**'It was the three-piece suits telling us, the artists, what to do. We wouldn't budge'**

portedly about 5 percent of the market, wasn't enough to keep it going, and the estate put the station up for sale.

A \$50,000 payment came due in November, "and we couldn't make that, so they put the station on the chopping block," said DJ Amy Airheart, who questioned the outcome of the non-profit concept.

"We're wondering what happened there, but nobody's talking," she said.

Western Cities — which owns half a dozen other stations in Nevada, Arizona and California — has made no bones about getting away from the KFAT sound. Palmer Pyle, former sales manager at KZZP in Phoenix and new KFAT general manager, said it should be only a matter of days before

the station's call letters change to KWSS.

Pyle has called a press conference for Jan. 17 to announce the new format, but there are clues as to what it might be: Western Cities' station in Sacramento, KZAP, owns 17 percent of its market playing AOR (album-orient-

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Examiner/Fran Ortiz

Two KFAT favorites: Stephen Terrell's 'Picnic Time for Potatoheads' and Utah Phillips' 'Good Though,' which includes 'Moose-Turd Pie,' a hot seller in Gilroy these days

## Making Gilroy safe for Barry Manilow

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ed rock). Western Cities wouldn't mind more of the same for KWSS.

"Whatever works, I guess that's the word," said Pyle. "That's the statement of the day."

KFAT's DJs, confused by their status, put on a three-hour farewell program a week ago, then came back on the air under new names like Disco Dan and Nancy Drew ("It's a mystery to me"). Unhappy about being in limbo, they finally called it quits.

They've now formed a central core of ex-KFATs called Future Fat Format Farmers, and those interested in hiring them en masse are welcome to write, care of the Gilroy post office.

Hess, talking around the coffee table, shook his head over the future of KFAT, predicting it would wind up with "progressive elevator" music.

"Who's going to be playing 'Moose-Turd Pie' or Ralph Stanley or Bob Wills or the New Grass Revival or Waylon and Willie singing 'Write Your Own Songs or Kiss My Ass' now that we're gone?" he asked.

Most radio, argued Hess, "is just on as background. You could have dentist drills going, or shopping carts clacking together for the amount of attention people pay to it. But KFAT was a radio station you could watch. You got this vision of people gathered around and looking at the radio."

Calls came in from all over, said the DJs. Terrell Lynn Thomas talked about calls from "San Luis Obispo, Willits, Bear Valley, Fresno and Nevada City." Hess smiled and added, "Even got one from an old man in Kansas who picked us up on his dentures."

Hess talked wistfully of a FAT Museum in Gilroy "where we'd have our melted Barry Manilow records."

The KFAT crew came to country in different ways. Sherman Caughman, 40, remembered "going to a Command-

### The FAT diet: grit, no candy

KFAT's DJs picked out the following 10 tunes to be remembered by:

"If I Lose." The Stanley Brothers.

"Riding Down the Canyon." Old Gene Autry tune by Johnny Lee Wills.

"I Reckon." John Hartford.

"Have Yourself a Good Time for Me." Jonathan Edwards.

"They Ain't Makin' Jews Like Jesus Anymore." Kinky Friedman and the Texas Jewboys.

"I Want the Real Thing." Chip Taylor.

"Don't Give Me No Plastic Saddles." June Stearns.

"For Free." Joni Mitchell tune done by The Byrds.

"Lovesick Blues." 1928 version by Emmet Miller and His Georgia Crackers.

"A Pirate Looks at 40." Jimmy Buffett.

er Cody concert, gone on acid, and hearing these old Bob Wills tunes, realizing that's what my mom wanted me to listen to all those years."

Thomas called back a memory from Seaside when his father was a soldier at Fort Ord: "He used to turn on the radio and leave me out in the car, alone, whenever he'd go into a bar. I was a year or two old and I'd sit there with that radio going and listen to Cottonseed Clark and Hank Williams and all those country singers before the battery finally died. It's the music I

remember."

Hess' father owned an arcade and he recalled the days of "pilfering 45s and playing on a pinball machine without the glass, watching the ball bounce out. My first stereo was a Seeburg jukebox, and music was everything."

KFAT's audience was something else, explained Caughman: "You couldn't say, 'That was Hawkshaw Hawkins in '49,' when it was actually Moon Mullican in '51. They called you on it right away."

Utah Phillips' "Moose-Turd Pie," kind of a KFAT anthem, has sold like crazy since word got out the station's dying, said Gary Steinmetz, owner of Gilroy's California Music Co. "Picnic Time for Potatoheads," another tune popularized by KFAT, is also a big-seller, he added.

But it's KFAT T-shirts that have brought on the bonanza, explained Steinmetz. He usually sells a hundred a month, but in December he sold more than 520, along with 38 in the first three days of this year.

"It's like there are a lot of closet FATheads out there," said Steinmetz. "They come in with their three-piece suits and sneak out to their cars."

Thomas said the station's sales people were unhappy "because our music didn't fit in a category they learned in broadcast school. Guys in white belts and white shoes were trying to sell KFAT, and it couldn't be done."

Management was "never worthy of the talent they collected," said former DJ Alan Knoth. "It was the three-piece suits telling us, the artists, what to do, and we wouldn't budge. Neither one of us backed off and that spelled the end of it."

Knoth said the station's "been dead since '79, although I may be misreading that. It may have been just a long coma." It's dead for sure now, he added. "But boy, I'll tell you. It was a fine ride while it lasted."