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SON OF KFAT



KFAT

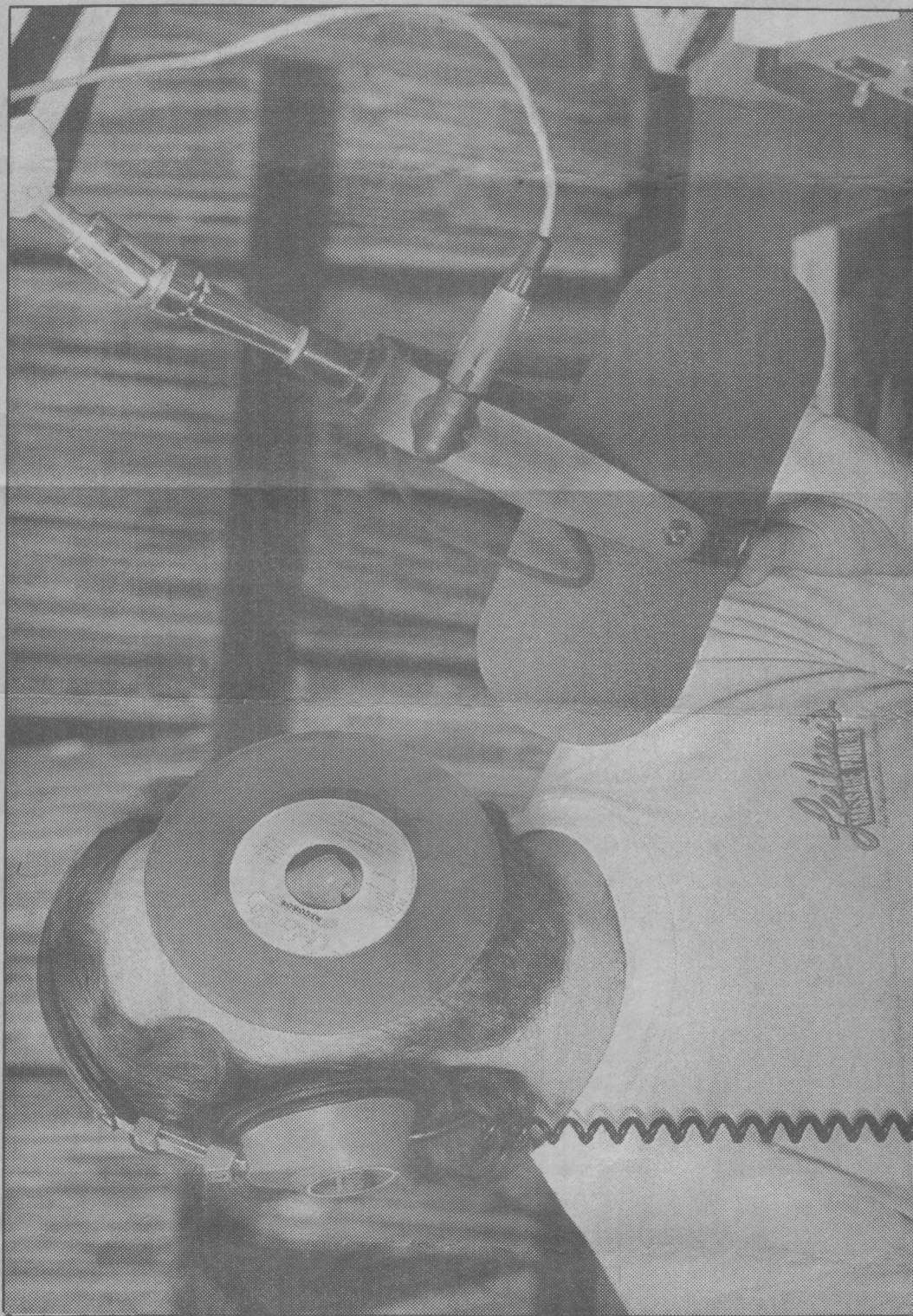
The old rebel
radio gang
returns as KHIP.
The catch is,
you probably
can't hear them

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The KHIP
crew: Amy
Airheart and
Robbin'
Banks, front;
Rider Rob
Bleetstein,
Felton
Pruitt,
middle row;
Uncle
Sherman,
Cuz'n Al,
back row.

Cover Story



Karen T. Borchers — Mercury News

KHIP disc jockey Felton Pruitt really gets behind his music

From FATties to HIPpies

The signal's weak, and the Moose isn't loose yet, but country raunch radio is back

By Dana Rubin
Mercury News Staff Writer

HOLLISTER

THE NAIL polish bottles still rattle in the trays at the beauty parlor upstairs.

Despite the mounds of insulation plastered on the walls, it's just too dang noisy for the neighbors who share space with KHIP radio in the old Hazel Hawkins Memorial Hospital here.

Only 15 months ago, KHIP radio (93.5-FM) burst onto the airwaves out of the ashes of the homespun, honky-tonk country music station KFAT, lamented throughout the Bay Area since it was yanked off the air in January 1983 after years of money and management turmoil.

The old half-crazed KFAT crew is still there — disc jockeys who prefer to call themselves "air personalities" like Cousin' Al Knoth, Sister Tiny, Uncle Sherman, Amy Airheart and Yuma Arizona.

Instead of Gilroy, the garlic capital of the world, the old gang now broadcasts from Hollister, the earthquake capital of the world, and it's no joke at all, what with the tremors that now and then cause the studio to shake and the records to skip.

What's important is that they're still spinning more or less the same offbeat and sometimes off-color songs they always did, and slinging insults whenever they can at the pre-packaged pabulum served up at most commercial radio stations.

But some of the raucous rebelliousness that made KFAT so beloved, if a bit off balance, is gone. This time around, the gang is actually trying to make it work.

"The big thing is that we're all a little older and wiser now," says production manager Gordy Broshear, aka Yuma Arizona to his Saturday morning listeners. "We were all blithely going along as though we were the saviors of commercial radio without paying attention to the commercial aspects, like, uh, paying our bills and stuff."

But before KHIP can really sink its roots, there are... well, a few problems to be ironed out.

Such as the fact that right now, practically nobody outside the Monterey Bay area can hear the station. Unlike KFAT, which reached a good chunk of Northern California with the equivalent of a 50,000-watt transmitter on lofty Loma Prieta, KHIP transmits a mere 3,000 watts from nearby Fremont Peak. Naturally, KHIP would like to boost its signal so it can reach all those old diehard devotees, but finances and strict FCC regulations have put that on a back burner for now.

In the meantime, station manager and mainstay Amy "Airheart" Bianco has cooked up a scheme to start a corporation independent of the station that will package and feed the same rowdy format into other affiliated stations around the state. That way, if KHIP ever folds or faces the same kind of off-again, on-again crises that KFAT did, the corporation can keep putting the music out there.

What she has in mind is a full-fledged corporation — yep, the kind that requires a board of directors, bylaws,

and private stockholders.

If it all sounds a bit starchy for the kind of laid-back and loosely run station that KFAT used to be, that's because the KHIP crew has grown weary of starting all over, weary of bounced checks and bruised egos, and weary of worrying that they won't be able to play the kind of music they like.

Because for the most part, the music at KHIP is the same as the music at KFAT. Whether they call it progressive country, country rock, cowpunk or honky tonk — nobody at the station likes labels, anyway — it still reflects that familiar combination of raunch and twang. And it's still eclectic enough to include a smattering of just about whatever you want in there, from bluegrass and blues to folk, swing and plain old C&W.

"We're in the same place KFAT would've been if it had kept going," said morning jock and longtime FAThead Felton Pruitt. "It's just a natural progression."

What's changed a bit is that the folks at KHIP care more nowadays about music for music's sake. Not that they don't still play plenty of songs about drowning in whiskey, getting hit by tumbleweed and falling off barstools. It's just that they're a little less inclined to play all those weird and wacky tunes like Bobby Bare's "Drop Kick Me Jesus Through the Goal Posts of Life" or "I Never Went to Bed With an Ugly Woman (But I Sure Woke Up With a Few)," the kind that gave KFAT its irreverent image.

See KHIP, Page 4

Cover Story

KFAT's country copy shoots from the HIP

KHIP, from Page 3

In fact, Uncle Sherman Caughtman — one of the celebrated "Fat Four" arrested in 1980 for stealing 1,800 records from the Gilroy station one moonlit November night after a spat with KFAT management — makes sure to point out that he hasn't played the KFAT classic "Moose Turd Pie" since he came to KHIP.

Some things haven't changed. Old KFAT features like the FAT-grams — personal classified ads on the air — have been recast as the HIP Lip Service. And the acidic commentary of Travis T. Hipp can still be heard three times a day, providing "all the news you never knew you needed to know right now."

The station still hasn't got an official format, or for that matter a playlist from which the members of the airstaff pick their songs. They more or less play whatever is in their heads, and if that seems nearly always to include the likes

of Willie Nelson, Emmylou Harris, Dwight Yoakam and Marty Stuart, that's just because their heads are all kind of operating on the same wavelength.

Officially, Uncle Sherman is known as the program director, but that's a term used rather loosely around the station.

"Someone has to make the final thing and that's me," he says, when asked to describe his responsibilities. "Like, there are decisions that have to be made on occasion," he added.

Such as?

He can't think of one right off.

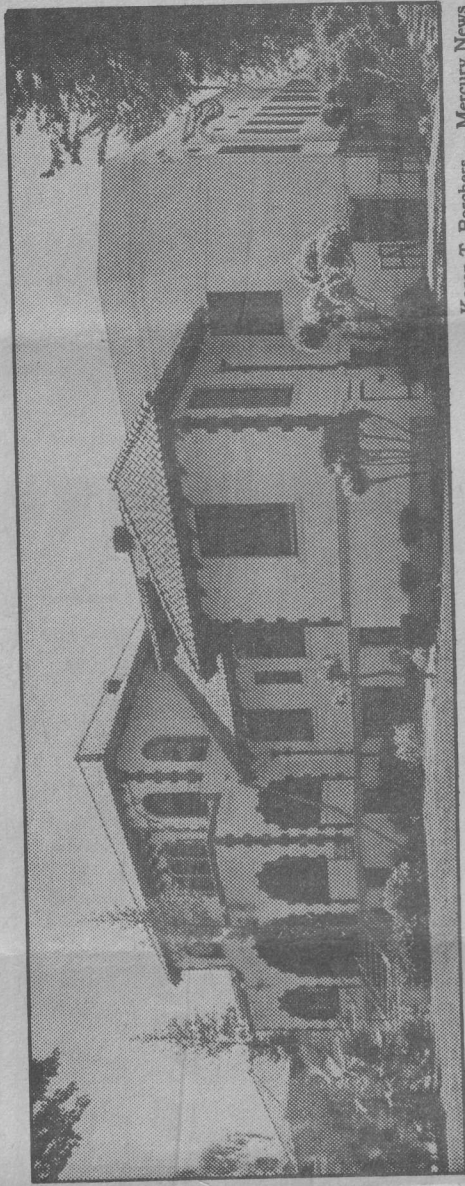
To KFAT's fierce loyalists, reported to be 150,000 strong, it seemed incredible that their station could simply fold up and fall silent. But it made more sense to those who worked inside the morass of financial and directional problems.

"One of the problems at FAT radio," said Cur'n Al, "was that management never understood the

air staff — our eccentricities, bad habits or good habits, or the music, the reason for the music."

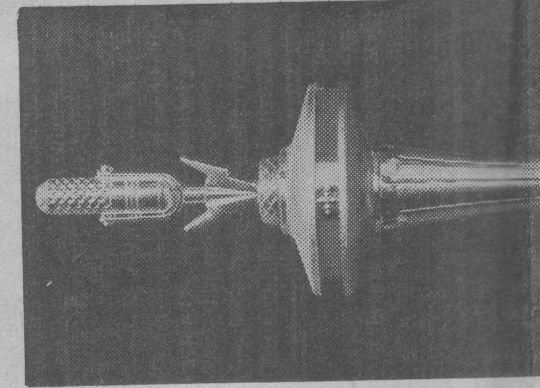
In the thick of its troubles, the station was purchased by former radio executive Harvey Levin, and for a short time in 1981 seemed to clamber back on its feet. But Levin died only a year and four months after he took over, and eight months later the station was sold again.

The new owners, Western Cities Broadcasting, were more interested in profit margins than in KFAT's kind of music, and within weeks the station had been transformed into KWSS, with a Top 40 format designed for "contemporary mass appeal."



Karen T. Borchers — Mercury News

KHIP broadcasts from the basement of the old Hazel Hawkins Hospital.



wiped out \$60,000 worth of transmitting equipment, and they were forced to vacate. The month of September was spent broadcasting from a trailer at a truck stop in Gilroy. Then they settled into their current humble headquarters on Hawkins Street in the basement of the former hospital — two studios and three offices down two hallways in what looks suspiciously like it might've been a morgue.

So far, Miller's hands-off philosophy seems tailor-made for the feisty KFAT crew. A 63-year-old businessman who made his money in coin-operated cleaners, he lives in Cupertino (where he can't even get the signal) and mostly stays out of the day-to-day affairs on "I

“★★★★★. One of the best movies

of the year. I loved it!" —Roger Ebert,
CHICAGO SUN-TIMES



"About last
night..."



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CINEMA
CENTURY 10
MOUNTAIN VIEW
960-0970

SEE SHOWSLATE FOR SHOWTIMES

rary mass appeal."
Overnight, the KFAT crew was
disposessed.
"When KFAT died, it was like
losing your mother and your dog at

GOULD
RAW DEAL
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(R)
(R)
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1:00-4:50-6:20-8:10-10:00

SHORT CIRCUIT
1:30-5:30-8:30
MURPHY'S ROMANCE
3:30-7:30

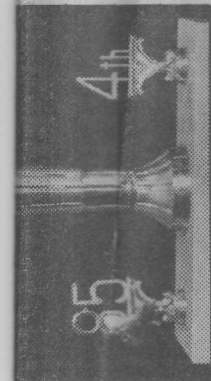
MY LITTLE PONY
1:00-2:40-4:15
SPACE CAMP
6:00-8:00-10:00

RAW DEAL
3:45-7:45
COBRA 1:45-5:45-8:45

POLTERGEIST II
1:30-5:30-8:30
AMERICAN ANTHEM
3:30-7:30

OUT OF AFRICA
2:00-5:00-8:00

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KHIP finished fourth
in a tug-of-war between
four radio stations.

the same time," says Airheart, who
sold her Toyota and took off for six
weeks in Europe. Other KFAT
employees drifted into different
jobs; some collected unemployment.

But the biggest affront came
when the new owners boxed up the
station's collection of 2,000 records
and carted it off to the Gilroy pub-
lic library — without even giving
the airstaff a chance to make a
bid.

After a two-year lull, Uncle
Sherman and Airheart got a han-
kering to "do radio" again.

Together, they made a pitch to the
owner of KHIP, then a lackluster
rock 'n' roll station in Hollister
that had been around since 1979.

Vern Miller bought the idea; his
station wasn't making money any-
way. Airheart, Uncle Sherman and
other former FATies pooled their
personal record collections to get
the station going. And the old gang
started drifting back. Out of 15 air-
shifts, 10 were filled by former
KFATers.

They started out in March 1985,
with a tiny studio on a side street
in Hollister and production facili-
ties that couldn't compete with
most home stereo systems. After
six months, a fire in the building

get the signal) and money stays out
of the day-to-day goings on. "I
don't intend to mess with their
heads," he says. "I'm not trying to
tie them down — only that over a
period of time they should prove
profitable."

But does he like the music?
"I don't mind it," he says.

Even if Miller's not keeping a
close watch on his employees' p's
and q's, they've been doing some of
their own editing. For one thing,
more attention is being paid to the
time-proven tricks of commercial
programming, starting with the
basics like speaking more clearly
and making sure the station ID
gets broadcast every quarter hour,
to tightening their musical sets —
making sure they don't lead off the
hour, for instance, with some
obscure blues tune, but with some-
thing that people will recognize
and stick with.

So far, KHIP hasn't shown up in
the Arbitron ratings, the regional
market surveys that reveal who's
listening to what stations.

Perhaps the most oddball thing
of all is that a lot of its listeners
have never set foot in Hollister.
"It's almost like this mythical little
place," Airheart says. "People
don't know where it is, and it's only
40 miles away."

Now and then, truck drivers will
pull into town off of 101 to stop by
the station and say hi. Most of
them turn out to be old KFAT fans
who want to hear "Moose Turd
Pie" one more time.

Like all offspring, the crew at
KHIP is still living off its legacy,
but fighting it at the same time. As
Sister Tiny put it. "You can't play
'West Texas Walkz' forever and
ever."