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Music - Thursday, June 17, 2004

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Homegrown radio station exports Ithaca's sounds

By Ryan Pasquale
 Special to The Journal

To expect a town of Ithaca's size (roughly 29,000) to produce not only the amount but also the variety of music made here every year would seem farfetched. But with a growing population of listeners and practitioners, as well as playing host to several annual music festivals, Ithaca is fast becoming a common ground for new music. Based on these realities, local resident Mike Levy has responded by creating Radio Free Ithaca. What started as "...a love of the local music scene" for Levy has graduated into a station that finds itself with a constituency of loyal listeners.




Provided

All in the family: Mike Levy, founder of Radio Free Ithaca, with his daughter -- and RFI co-host -- Izzy.

"It all happened pretty suddenly," is how Levy describes the creation of Radio Free Ithaca, the Internet radio station committed to broadcasting music produced solely in the Ithaca area. After attending 2003's Grass Roots Festival, along with noticing the growing trend of Internet radio sites, Levy decided to create the station that now finds listeners not only on the national level, but internationally as well.

"There are regular listeners in Europe and in South America, and in different areas of this country, from Florida to Arizona," Levy said. "It's an affirmation that there really is something special here, if people from all over the place, faced with almost infinite options as far as music on the Internet goes, click on this Ithaca station and stay there."

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The diversity for which Ithaca's citizenry is known is also evident in the music created here. Bands drawing from foundations in jazz, blues, rock and reggae find themselves mingling with those of Cajun, punk, and African style rhythms to create a large breadth of experimentation to which fans and listeners have resounded with appreciation.

There is method to the versatility that defines Radio Free Ithaca's daily playlists. Groups such as Donna the Buffalo and Paso Fino are regulars on the station whose goal is, according to Levy, "to spread all the wonderful music of this area far and wide."

In describing the varied formats Radio Free Ithaca enjoys, Levy said "...A commercial station probably couldn't play all these different styles, not in one show, anyway. But it works as a cohesive station because so many bands blend styles, and because a great many bands share the same attitudes about music."

RFI also creates the opportunity for expatriate Ithacans to become re-connected with the homegrown music they thought they left behind. "All music aside, there is something pretty special about our town. People who leave, for whatever reason -- be it for family, jobs, because they graduated, etc. -- want to keep touch with what's happening here," Levy said. "I've heard from quite a few ex-Ithacans living abroad who are glad to be able to hear the Horse Flies again or the Burns Sisters."

Recently, Levy embarked on a month-long campaign of previewing acts appearing at the 2004 Ithaca Festival. "My recent collaboration with the Ithaca Festival was with the station, but it also gave me an even wider view of the music scene, since I couldn't possibly hear it all at the festival." Looking to the future, Levy also hopes to recreate his experience, not only with the Ithaca Festival but also with the other music festivals held annually in the area.


As a musician, himself, playing bass with the Marty Withers Band, Levy realizes the importance of his broadcasts. "It has been exciting to see the station become a part of the music community." Because of RFI's proximity to its subject matter, it is also in the unique position to publicize up and coming artists and groups through their broadcast. "A few artists have approached me to preview their CDs before official release this summer. I'm thrilled to be able to help out," Levy said.

The station is also a family operation, with Levy's young daughter Izzy sharing some of the hosting duties. "You've heard her voice if you've listened for more than an hour," Levy said. "She also helps me select the music... She can detect insincere music a mile away and knows what's groovy. I sometimes ask her straight out which tracks on a certain CD sound good, and she's usually right on."

Radio Free Ithaca broadcasts 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. As part of the Live 365 family, the largest radio network on the Internet, RFI continues its goal of exporting Ithaca's hometown talents to the rest of the world. When asked what influences continue the vitality of RFI, Levy answered, "I just continue to be impressed by the volume of creativity we see here."

To experience all that Radio Free Ithaca and the musical community at large have to offer, simply go to their Web site: www.radiofreeithaca.net.

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