

Radio Unnameable

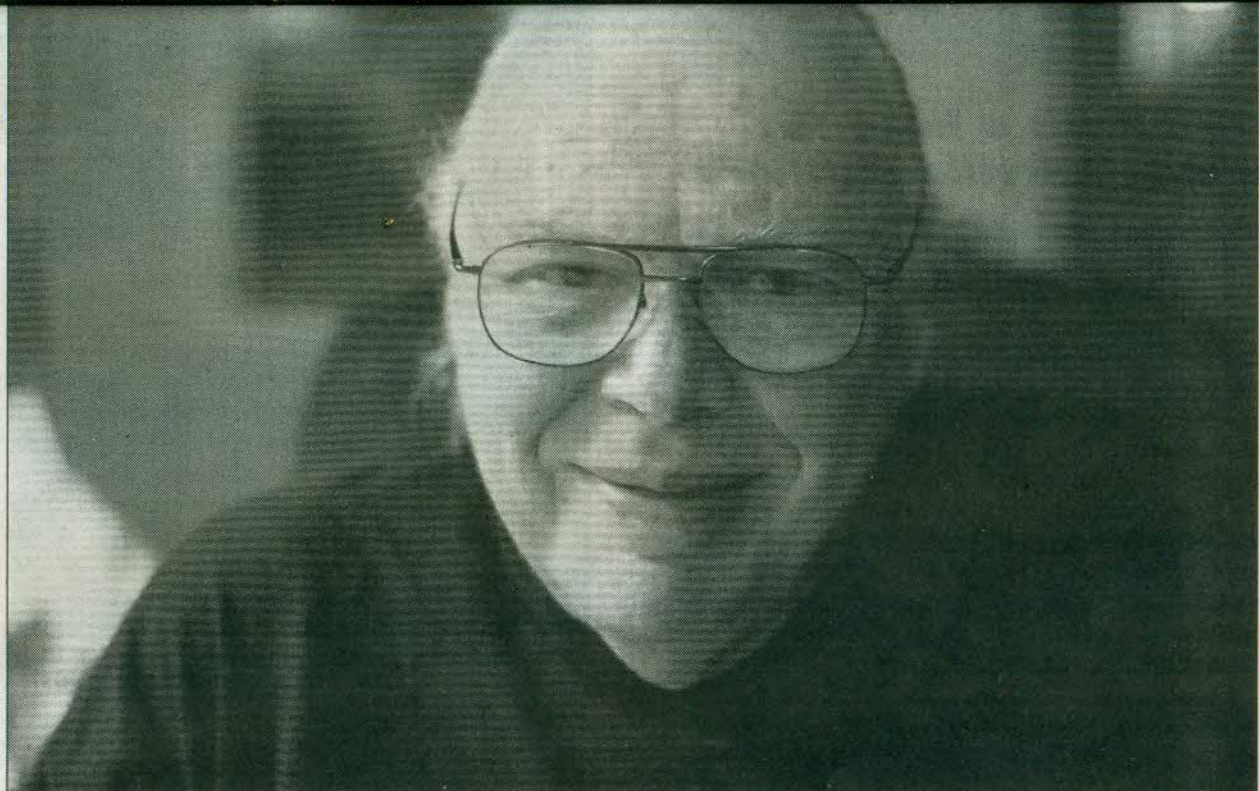
The film, the show and its host, Bob Fass

WBAI personality Bob Fass, whose nighttime show “Radio Unnameable” pioneered free-form radio, has been called “a midwife at the birth of the counterculture.” He’s known for organizing a “Fly-In”, a massive public party at JFK airport, and for bringing sound equipment to Washington to record the Fugs’ attempt to exorcise the Pentagon in 1967. At the request of Jerry Wapner, Spider Barbour, and other Woodstockers, he was the emcee of two Sound-Outs, rock festivals held at a farm on John Joy Road in the late 60s, precursors to the 1969 Woodstock Festival.

Fass, along with local Fugs member, poet Ed Sanders, answered questions at Upstate Films on November 8, following the showing of *Radio Unnameable*, a documentary about Fass’s role in catalyzing New York’s counterculture community of the sixties. The showing was a benefit for the Woodstock Historical Society, which has embarked on fundraising for a \$60,000 capital building campaign. Plans call for improvements to the historical Eames House, including work on the building’s foundation, a handicapped accessible bathroom, a connecting hallway, and an additional kitchenette/storage area.

Radio Unnameable highlights memorable moments on Fass’s midnight-to-dawn show, an amalgam of live music, conversations with callers, and commentary in the host’s languid, mesmerizing bass. Interviews with Bob Dylan and Paul Krassner alternated with calls from lonely New Yorkers and people working in the wee hours of the night. Arlo Guthrie first performed “Alice’s Restaurant” on the show, and Abbie Hoffman was a frequent guest, discussing the Chicago Seven trial and other events. Announcements by Fass helped to organize a Sweep-In, an enthusiastic cleanup of East Village streets during the garbage strike. It was followed by a Yippie-sponsored Yip-In at Grand Central Station, which led to a violent response from police, as anti-war protestors climbed atop the information booth and removed the hands from the clock.

For 14 years, Fass did his six-hour show five



Bob Fass

nights a week. In 1977, the climate at WBAI shifted, along with the sixties ethos. Women started their own show, addressing feminist issues at the largely male station. Minority groups, which Fass had championed among his causes, clamored for focused attention, and the new administration of WBAI forced Fass off the air. At Upstate Films, he commented on the rise of identity politics, stating, “I feel those identities have pushed us under a tent we’re eager to get out of. People who belong to a group want to be part of the whole. Putting people into boxes helped divide and conquer the movement.”

For five years, Fass drifted, doing occasional work at WFMU in New Jersey and some shows for public radio, but tending to slide into depression. His wife, Linnie, who met him when she was a record librarian at WBAI, explains in the film that he was so thoroughly adapted to his radio role that he found it hard to do any other work. In 1982, WBAI let him return to do a weekly show, for no pay. At the age of 81, he continues to broadcast one night a week, now from his house on Staten Island — still as a volunteer.

The film ends with a team of archivists going through the plethora of tapes from the show, stored at Fass’s house. The tapes were sorted, indexed,

and packed into plastic bins for storage elsewhere. Fass is now negotiating with universities to have the tapes permanently archived.

“The head of Pacifica radio told us to be careful they don’t go into a ‘darkive,’” said Fass at a reception at the Eames House after the screening. “Some places will actually keep the materials out of people’s hands. We want them to be accessible to researchers.” The idea for the film, in fact, came from the research of Paul Lovelace and Jessica Wolfson, who sought out Fass so they could use some of his tapes for another documentary they were making. They were so impressed by his materials and his story that the young filmmakers embarked on the production of *Radio Unnameable*, which took five years to make and was released in 2012. Fass praised the film, which he feels captures the key events of his career, devoted to community-building, cultural innovation, and political action.

“You could call me an anarchist,” he mused. “I do things better and more humanely, more effectively, than the state.” Referring to the Sweep-In, he commented, “We didn’t just clean the street, we got kids in the community to help clean the street.”++