

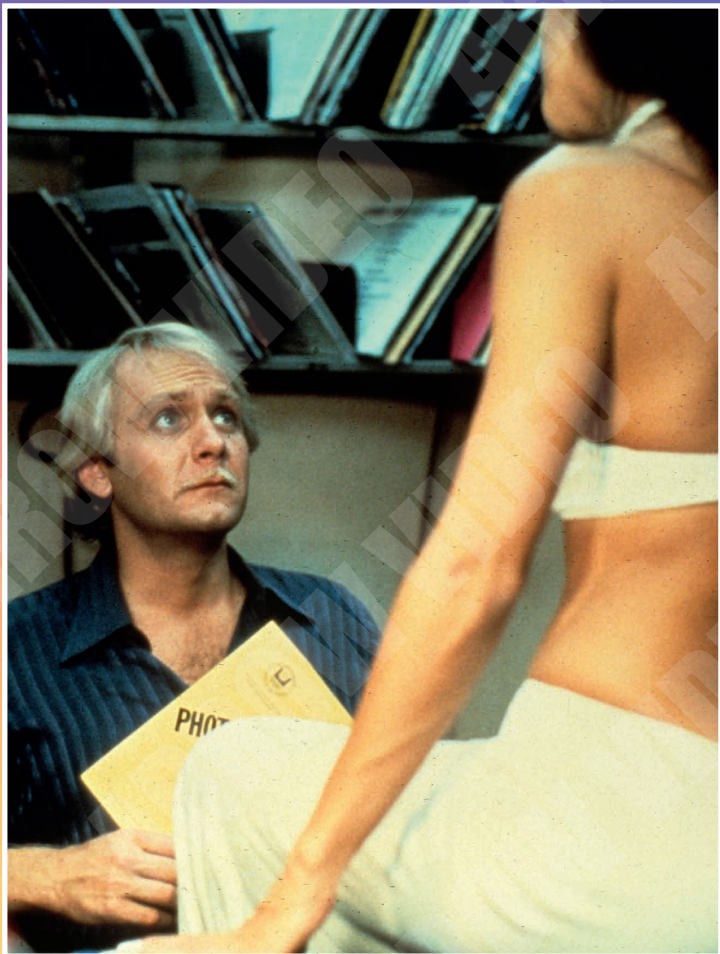




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CAST

Michael Brandon Jeff Dugan
Eileen Brennan "Mother"
Alex Karras "Doc Holiday"
Cleavon Little "The Prince of Darkness"
Martin Mull Eric Swan
Cassie Yates Laura Coe
Norman Lloyd Carl Billings
Jay Fenichel Bobby Douglas
James Keach Lt. Reach
Joe Smith Albert Driscoll
Tom Tarpey Regis Lamar
and

LINDA RONSTADT
JIMMY BUFFETT
TOM PETTY
REO SPEEDWAGON:
Kevin Cronin
Gary Richrath
Alan Gratzer
Bruce Hall
Neal Doughty

CREW

Directed by **John A. Alonzo**
Produced by **Rand Holston**
Co-Producer **Robert Larson**
Written by **Ezra Sacks**
Director of Photography **David Myers**
"FM" Title Song Composed and Performed by **Steely Dan**
Edited by **Jeff Gourson**
Sound **Bruce Bisenz**
Production Designer **Lawrence G. Paull**
Set Decoration **Peg Cummings**





DO YOU REMEMBER ROCK 'N' ROLL RADIO? FM AND THE DECLINE OF THE FREEFORM DJ

by Paul Corupe

Today, changing over from the AM band to the FM band requires just a quick flick of a radio knob. But for the broadcast industry and the people who once kept it humming across North America, FM radio's rise to the top was a complex shift that sparked more than its share of conflict. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, FM radio's unique approach to programming may have excited listeners, but it also laid bare the smoldering tensions between on-air talent and owners, creativity and commercialism, and rock 'n' roll and Top 40 pop. As FM began to surpass AM's listener numbers at the end of the 1970s, the dramatic story of those struggles helped inspire several television shows and films including *FM*, a raucous ensemble comedy about DJs trying to maintain their independence at a chaotic Los Angeles radio station. The film's director, John A. Alonzo, not only captures the rebellious nature of "freeform" radio at the height of its influence, but even depicts its improbable triumph over the more rigid programming preferred by the business-minded station owners.

FM was released in the spring of 1978, when the popularity of the newer Frequency Modulation (FM) band was surging, thanks to both its superior clarity and progressive programming. At the time, stations like Los Angeles' legendary KMET-FM had become much-loved for their freeform radio format (sometimes also called underground or "creative" radio), a novel approach in which the DJ – not the station management – fully controls the content, from playlists to on-air patter. As an alternative to the iron-clad pop playlists and manic personalities that cluttered the AM dial, KMET and other freeform stations specialized in long sets of rock album tracks, and allowed on-air talent to address political issues, read poetry, chat on the phone or whatever else they felt like, with few commercials to interrupt their flow. The DJs – often self-styled mavericks who craved this programming freedom – spoke directly to listeners more interested in Iron Butterfly than The Cowsills, and prided themselves on cultivating an inclusive sense of community and shared experience.

If the spirit of KMET seems to loom large in *FM*, it's because screenwriter Ezra Sacks largely based the script on his experiences working at the station during the 1970s. In the film, Sacks focuses on a group of iconoclastic DJs at fictitious LA station Q-SKY who are compelled take a stand when their programming manager resigns over the owner's



demands they air a series of tacky US army recruitment ads. Yes, *FM* is another rock rebellion movie at heart, but in a more understated way than similar films of the time like *Rock 'n' Roll High School* (1979) and *Quadrophenia* (1979). *FM* isn't interested in adolescent contrarianism and thumbing your nose at authority, it's about the struggle to maintain independence and personal integrity within a system that isn't designed to tolerate it.

To appreciate *FM*'s fictionalized take on freeform radio and its fast rise to fame, you have to turn the dial way back to the late 1960s, when pioneering underground San Francisco station KMPX-FM was helping to nurture the unconventional format. For many listeners, the laid-back approach and deep focus on rock bands was an immediate hit, but not for KMPX's owners, who in 1968 introduced new rules to rein in some of their DJs' on-air antics, including – curiously enough – a dress code. In response, the KMPX staff staged an angry walk out, and were soon joined by freeform DJs at sister station KPPC-FM in Pasadena. The strike lasted two months before management prevailed, despite strong support from listeners and bands including The Doors and The Rolling Stones. But that battle turned out to be just a taste of what was to come – facing the possibility of mass layoffs just a few years later, the KPPC DJs again mobilized to lock out management and take control of the airwaves, creating another tense stand-off that only ended after police arrived. Again, the DJs were handed a defeat, and KPPC's entire on-air roster was fired and replaced in 1971.

Many of those former KPPC and KMPX staffers ended up at upstart LA station KMET, which had been exploring a similar freeform approach since it first hit the market in 1968. As with *FM*'s Q-SKY, KMET was driven by its quirky on-air personalities (including popular novelty record show host Dr. Demento) and attention-grabbing stunts that propelled it to be not only the top outlet in its market, but among the most profitable radio station in the United States. Former KMET DJ Jim Ladd captures some of the madness of the era in his 1991 book, *Radio Waves: Life and Revolution on the FM Dial*, recounting tales of setting off fireworks live in the DJ booth and encouraging listeners to overwhelm the White House switchboard with protest messages. Ladd also describes his own dispute with station brass over his refusal to play army ads due to his anti-war stance – a conflict that, along with the KPPC lockout, appears to have formed the real-life basis for *FM*'s script.

As it turns out, the antics of Jim Ladd and KMET's other on-air personalities were wild enough to inspire another development deal. Premiering on CBS a few months after *FM* hit theaters, radio station-set TV sitcom *WKRP in Cincinnati* (1978 – 1982) mined remarkably similar territory in its depiction of DJs and their battle against creative conformity. If Gary Sandy's portrayal of WKRP station manager Andy Travis is eerily reminiscent of *FM*'s

Jeff Dugan (Michael Brandon), it's because they were both reportedly based on KMET program director Mike Herrington. Likewise, *WKRP* overnight DJ Venus Flytrap (Tim Reid) has a virtual twin in *FM*'s own funky, smooth-talking late-night fixture, The Prince of Darkness (Cleavon Little). And a familiar friction over the importance of advertising often plays out between WKRP's sleazy sales manager Herb Tarlek (Frank Bonner) and spaced-out jocks like Dr. Johnny Fever (Howard Hesseman, himself a former KMPX DJ).

Despite these obvious parallels, *FM* boasts a broader cast that allows it to explore some of the other typical characters who drifted in and out of the glass DJ booth throughout the 1970s. These include Alex Karras' Doc Holiday, who struggles with low ratings in his midday slot, Mother, portrayed as a fed-up veteran jockey by Eileen Brennan, and Q-SKY engineer Bobby (Jay Fenichel), who really just wants an on-air gig as a news announcer. But perhaps *FM*'s most memorable addition is Eric Swan, a narcissistic caricature of the typical freeform radio DJ played by Martin Mull, who at one point screams, "Nobody walks in this booth when I am making my art!" In his debut film role, the former *Fernwood 2 Night* (1977) TV star gets many of *FM*'s better gags, including claiming a few moments of dead air are actually a new hit song from famed mime artist Marcel Marceau, and scrambling for an explanation after accidentally broadcasting the ecstatic moans of an amorous fan. In another notable sequence, Mull has Swan launch into an intense on-air meltdown in which his entire emotional world is demolished and then – over the course of just a few songs – completely rebuilt so he can emerge from the DJ booth reborn, surrounded by a crowd of adoring female listeners.

According to Jim Ladd, KMET's staff saw themselves as "merry pranksters" who refused to let commercial demands interfere with the integrity of their work. It's an attitude that is reflected not only in *FM*, but other films of the time, including *Slipstream* (1973), which follows a freeform DJ (Luke Askew) who broadcasts out of a secluded barn in rural Canada and clashes with his producer's commercial demands. Pioneering 1950s rock 'n' roll DJ Alan Freed didn't exactly follow the freeform format – as the radio payola scandal that ended his career made clear – but his 1978 biopic, *American Hot Wax*, features early scenes in which Freed (as played by Tim McIntire) adopts a similar rebel attitude, downing beer while on air and catching heat for playing an R&B song on the management's "do not play" list. Ladd even appears as himself in the low budget 1979 comedy *On the Air Live with Captain Midnight*, waxing poetic about the freedom enjoyed by a mysterious teenage DJ (Tracy Sebastian) who sends out pirate radio broadcasts from his van.

Aside from trying to preserve their on-air independence, many FM DJs were also dead set against the commercialization and consolidation of the broadcast industry because they saw radio as an essential lifeline to their communities. Ideally, radio serves a



wide spectrum of listeners by transmitting local culture and acting as a kind of public bulletin board (or, in Ladd's words, a "tribal drum"), and many freeform jocks believed that advertisers directly threatened this lofty purpose. Even during the 1970s, it was obvious that independently-run stations were being gobbled up by bigger corporations that wanted them to air music, news and national advertising that was often determined in an office building on the other side of the country. Without that homegrown connection, the importance of these stations within their communities was noticeably diminished.

Radio's unique ability to bring people together and circulate local information is made clear in *FM*, when the Q-SKY DJs harness the power of their listenership by rallying fans to throw a street party as part of their protest. It's a view that wasn't uncommon in films of the time – in *American Graffiti* (1973), for example, early rock 'n' roll and hip DJ patter (courtesy of Wolfman Jack) spills out of car radios to create a persistent audio backdrop that helps bind the film's characters and their stories together. Richard Dreyfuss' character Curt even personally visits the station to request that they broadcast a desperate message to a mysterious girl (Suzanne Somers). Similarly, *Vanishing Point* (1971) has *FM*'s Cleavon Little in another DJ role as Super Soul, a blind radio host who broadcasts information to help a car delivery driver (Barry Newman) evade the cops, while in *The Warriors* (1979), Lynne Thigpen plays a shadowy radio announcer who helps rivals track the location of the titular gang as they head back to Coney Island.

While *FM* romanticizes the commercial-free possibilities of radio far more than those other efforts, one common criticism is that the film's message is undermined by its corporate pedigree. MCA Inc. owned both Universal Pictures, which released *FM*, as well as MCA Records, whose president Irving Azoff managed most of the featured artists, including Linda Ronstadt, Tom Petty, Jimmy Buffet and REO Speedwagon. While KMET's DJs were able to pick and choose songs to broadcast at will, Q-SKY appears to heavily rely on artists associated with Azoff and MCA Records, including Billy Joel, The Eagles and Dan Fogelberg – major label artists who were somewhat tamer than other bands who regularly appeared on FM radio's progressive rock playlists.

But regardless of whether you buy into the sincerity of its anti-corporate stance, there's no denying that *FM* provides a fleeting glimpse into a bygone era. Scanning through the airwaves more than 40 years later, it's apparent that the once-promising FM approach has largely conformed to the AM model it once tried to subvert, with increasingly indistinguishable national programming and pre-programmed, repetitive pop playlists. Even KMET ran out of steam in 1987, and has since evolved into 101.9 FM The Wave, specializing in adult contemporary pop and syndicated smooth jazz programs. And that was just the beginning – when the United States deregulated the radio industry in 1996,

it scrapped limits on the number of stations that a company could own. As a result, iHeartMedia Inc. (formerly Clear Channel) now holds a near monopoly on the American airwaves, with more than 850 stations under its central control and programming. Satellite radio and internet broadcasting may provide more alternatives for listeners, but these outlets rarely address community-level issues in the way that local radio stations once did.

It's because of these more recent developments that the Q-SKY DJs' last-minute victory in *FM* seems especially bittersweet. As far back as the strikes at KPCC and KMPX, freeform DJs saw their on-air freedoms gradually eroded as they lost battle after battle over pre-determined formats, invasive commercial breaks and station rules designed to curtail their behavior to appease both advertisers and the Federal Communications Commission. *FM*'s climactic moment, in which Q-SKY's owner suddenly recognizes the value of the community's support, may have been more than just wishful thinking or convenient plotting, but an optimistic attempt to right past wrongs and to envision a world where commercial freeform radio not only endured, but thrived. In the age-old struggle between creativity and commerce, it's unfortunate that artistic freedom only really seems to win out in the movies, but *FM* still stands as a hopeful reminder that we shouldn't ever give up that fight.

Paul Corupe is a film historian and the creator of Canuxploitation.com. A regular columnist for Rue Morgue magazine, Paul's writing has also appeared in Cinema Sewer and the Spectacular Optical book series, among others.



ABOUT THE TRANSFER

FM is presented in its original aspect ratio of 2.35:1 with 2.0 and 5.1 audio. The master was prepared in High Definition by Universal Pictures and delivered to Arrow Films.

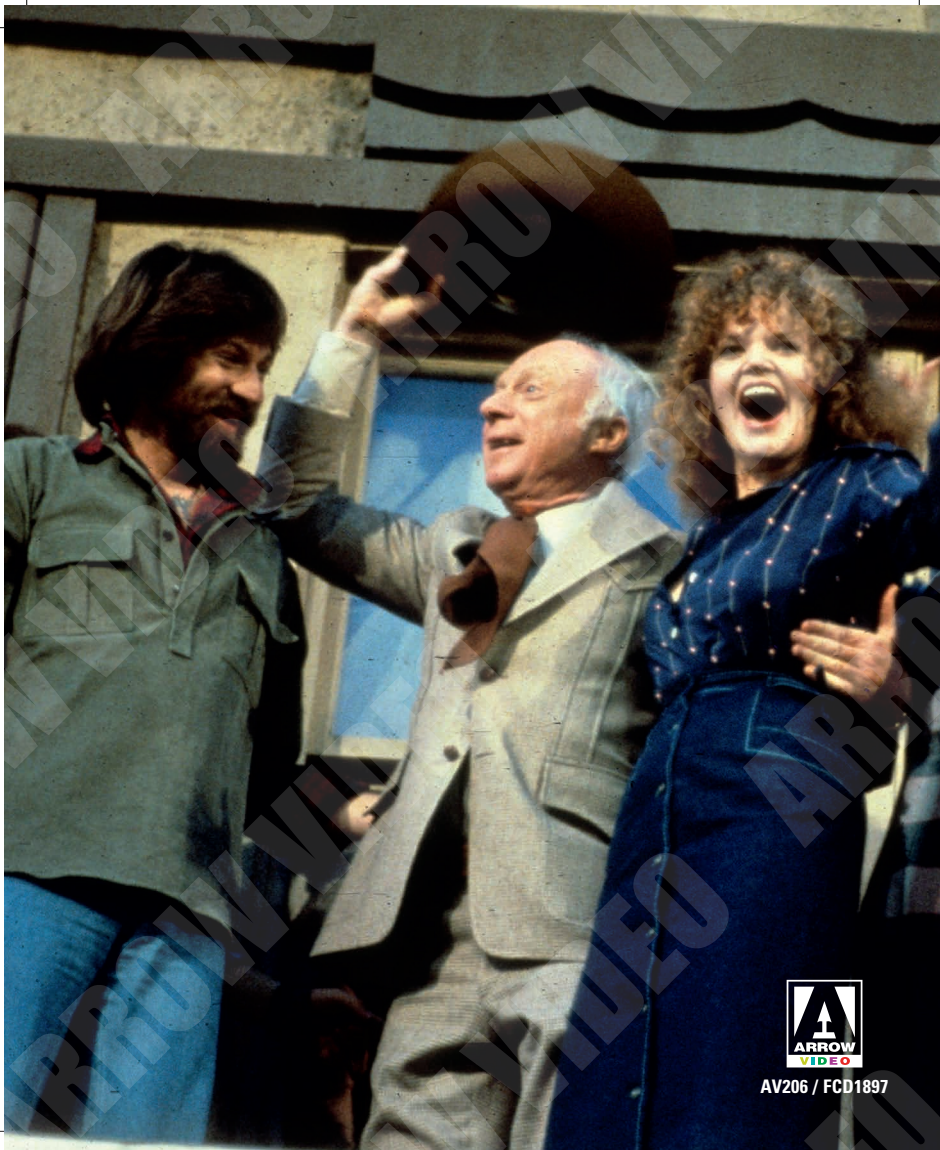
PRODUCTION CREDITS

Disc and Booklet Produced by **James Blackford**
Executive Producers **Kevin Lambert, Francesco Simeoni**
Technical Producer **James White**
QC **Nora Mehenni, Alan Simmons**
Production Assistant **Samuel Thiery**
Blu-ray Mastering and Subtitling **The Engine House Media Services**
Design **Obviously Creative**

SPECIAL THANKS

Alex Agran, Pat Bauman, Michael Brandon, Paul Corupe, Chris Edwards, Glenn Kenny,
Cathy Price, Jon Robertson, Edwin Samuelson, Ezra Sacks





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