

WMPG-FM: Somet

By STEVE SAUNDERS
Staff Writer

Don't tell anybody, but tucked away in the low end of the FM radio dial — down where you're most likely to run across the classical music or erudite news of public radio — is a Portland-area station that is broadcasting a lot of what you won't hear anywhere else.

It is WMPG-FM, the radio voice of the University of Southern Maine. And if you've never stumbled across it, or have written it off as strictly amateur radio, you might consider giving the 1985 version of the station a listen. It may surprise you.

WMPG, at 90.9 on the FM dial, has come a long way since its first, unlicensed broadcasts in the early 1970s from a dormitory room on the Gorham campus.

For most of the years since then, the station was limited by a weak 10-watt signal and cramped studio space in the USM-Gorham student center. But in the past 18 months, it has boosted its signal to a more healthy 50 watts — strong enough to be heard clearly, most of the time, in Portland — and moved last fall into a comfortably spacious new studio.

It has also sought to broaden its audience to serve the community as a whole, not just those connected with USM. With its growing student staff, and the help of a several experienced non-student contributors both on and off the air, station manager Ernie Freeberg believes WMPG is finally coming of age as an "alternative" station.

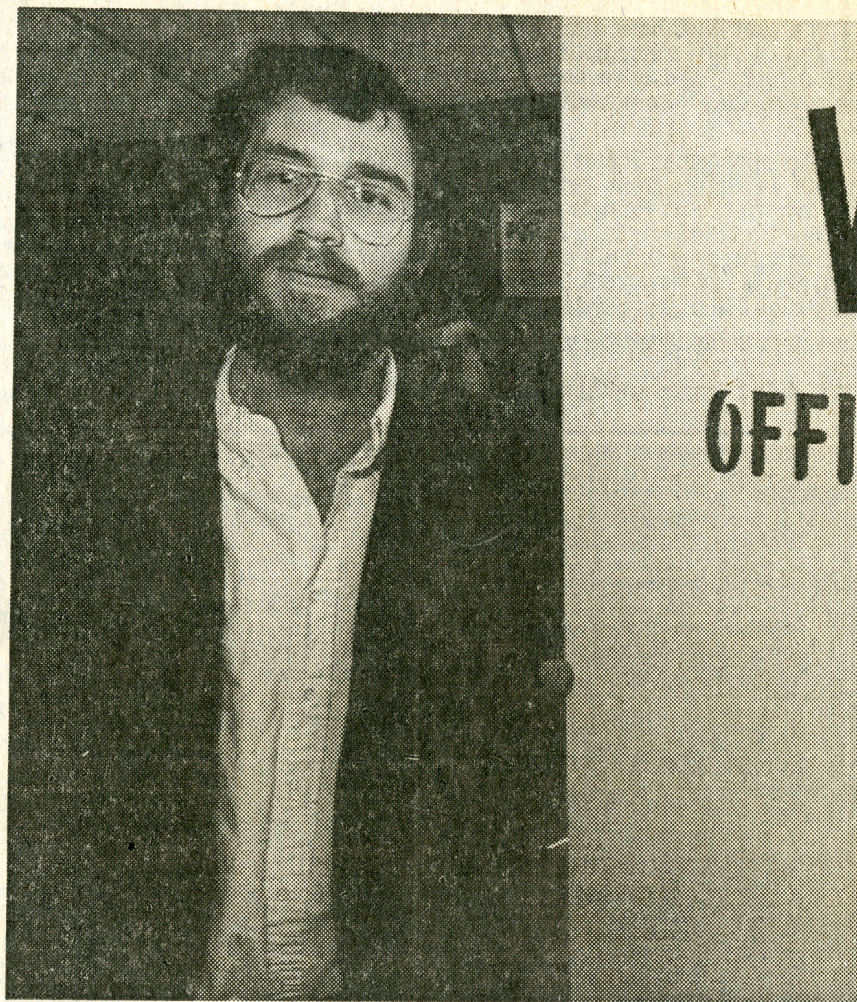
The programming is an unpredictable mix of music and community service programs, with an emphasis on musical styles that aren't often broadcast on traditional commercial or public radio stations — everything from punk and hard-core jazz to traditional bluegrass and undiluted reggae.

"We like the idea that people aren't always sure what they're going to get," says Freeberg. "We're trying to give airtime to all music that's being neglected by commercial radio."

And although, like public radio, it is free of advertising, there are several differences. Musically, WMPG tends to feature more modern, and often less familiar, classical and jazz music than is typically heard on PBS.

And the station is inclined more to local news and public affairs programming than the Orono-based Maine Public Broadcasting System, says special productions director Peter Twitchell, who has helped organize the Radio Rodeo series of variety programs at State Street Church.

Reflecting the high proportion of "non-traditional" students at USM,



Station manager Ernie Freeberg outside the new offices and studio of WMPG-FM.

many of those who work for WMPG are somewhat older than the average college radio staff.

Program director Laura Cianchette, for example, is an English major who had been out of school for several years and had never considered getting involved in radio until met a friend of Freeberg's while working for the Portland Review of the Arts, a literary magazine.

"I was excited by the possibilities of radio," she says, and became involved in the production of a show focusing on local writers.

The station also encourages those outside the university community to become involved, and gives airtime to several people who are active in the local music scene.

They include Jim Pinfold, the co-owner of Manassas Records and co-producer of the Summerjazz concert series last year at the Portland Performing Arts Center, who has a Wednesday night jazz show. And Richard Julio, the booking

agent for Geno's Pub on Brown Street, spins his favorite psychedelic garage-band music every Sunday evening.

The changes in the station over the past few years have not come without critics, however. A series of letters last fall to the university newspaper, the Free Press, charged that Freeberg, a paid university employee, had turned his back on students who had long been involved in the station in favor of people who weren't USM students.

In Freeberg's view, the criticism was prompted by an attitude that "the majority of people listen to rock 'n' roll, so the station should be playing rock 'n' roll." He says the critics also rejected the idea of WMPG as a "community" station and viewed it more as a "radio club" for students similar to any other extracurricular activity.

"But we felt an obligation to provide something outside the mainstream," he says. "We have a very diversified student body and we want our programming to reflect that."

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WMPG

CE & STUDIOS

There's something for all

As with any college radio station, the programming at WMPG-FM can vary from semester to semester, depending on the interests of the students who come and go. But the current schedule offers healthy doses of jazz, classical, new wave rock 'n' roll and reggae music.

Weekday mornings are a blend of mostly jazz programming, with some reggae mixed in, says station manager Ernie Freeberg.

On Mondays through Thursdays from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m., the style shifts to classical music, with an emphasis on 20th century composers. That time period on Friday is filled by an offbeat "fine arts" rock 'n' roll program that also features readings from such books as Richard Brautigan's "Trout Fishing in America."

Early afternoons offer another mix of styles, with shows on three days devoted to folk music, and a reggae program and a program of African dance music on other days.

"Alternative rock 'n' roll" is offered from 4 to 6 p.m. each weekday, followed by an hour of news and public affairs programming.

Jazz programming is featured on Tuesday and Wednesday evenings from 7 to 10 p.m., with new wave dance music filling that time slot on Monday and Thursday.

And from 10 p.m. to 1 a.m. each night, the station features rock 'n' roll with an emphasis on new music.

Much of the weekend schedule is devoted to rock and blues music, highlighted by a Saturday morning reggae show, Richard Julio's rare record program and the Sunday evening Radio Rodeo.

The station welcomes volunteers from the community who would like to become involved. For further information call 780-5416.

Staff photos by Jack Milton



Announcer Joan Muldoon sets up the next record on the turntable.