

THE STYLISH GUIDE TO DJ STYLE

**Tips And Tricks For On-Air Talent
88.1 WMUC-FM College Park**

What Is This Thing?

This is a style guide. It's a guide to making you sound better on the radio.

Whoa. Relax.

"Better" doesn't mean commercial—that's not who we are at WMUC, and that's not what I'm trying to do.

"Better" does mean more confident. More comfortable. More polished. More professional. More whatever it is you want to improve.

If you're a new DJ, this is where to go once you've figured out how all the buttons and sliders work and you want to start taking your show to the next level.

If you're an experienced jock, this is a way for you to double-check what you're already doing and challenge yourself a little.

Read it. Think about how it can inform your show. Then experiment and see what works for you.

So Who The Hell Are You?

I'm Patchen (or, if you're old-school WMUC, S.P.E.C.T.R.E.*). I came to 88.1 WMUC-FM College Park for graduate school. By that point, I had already DJed all but one semester of undergrad, run concerts for my college, and interned at an independent commercial radio station. Since then, I graduated, was hired (and later let go) by a AAA-format NPR affiliate, and have written and directed a number of radio commercials. I also never stopped DJing.

So by now I know a little about broadcasting—not a lot, but enough to say I've been there. And these are the principles I try to run my show by.

Often I don't succeed—exhaustion, tardiness, and general stupidity have sabotaged my best efforts on more than one occasion.

But I try hard. And I'm writing this because I wish someone had written it for me.

Ahead are some basic steps for improving your show, along with extra credit challenges and some tips I've found helpful. Throughout this document I've also sprinkled some personal notes in italics—kind of like this.

So, on with the guide...

—Patchen Mortimer

* Scary, Patchen Even Controls the Transmission of Radio Entertainment. (My first co-host was a James Bond fan.)

Step #1 – Record Your Shows. And Force Yourself To Listen To Them.

This is—hands down—the single most important thing you can do to improve your show.

What you think you hear—even if you spend your entire show with the headphones on—is not what your audience hears.

While you're in the moment, you may think you're doing a great job—or a lousy one. But you can never really know. Until you become your own audience.

So record your shows—thankfully, the website now does this for you; all you have to remember to do is download them—and listen to your shows. Really listen. You'll discover hearing your own voice is painful. Do it anyway.

Listen for every stammer, every “Uh,” every awkward pause. You'll find out what jokes work, what jokes don't, what little catchphrases you have that you repeat. Listen for the transitions between songs, the consistency of your levels, and whether you've pinned the meters.

The good news is that you'll be surprised at how much of your show sounds just fine. But until you listen, you can't be sure.

The other great reason to follow this step is that, down the road, you will be glad you have these recordings. They're perfect time capsules of where you were and what you were listening to at this point in your life. As a frosh, I didn't tape my first semester of DJing, and now I so wish I had those lost shows.

I also didn't label or date my tapes sophomore year. I told myself I would go back and figure it out later. I'm still telling myself that.

Extra Credit

If you're really brave, give a recording of one of your shows to a DJ with more experience, a board member, or even a professor. Ask them to critique you. Take notes. If what they say strikes a chord, make changes.

I used to say, “This is Patchen coming at you.” A lot. When I got hired professionally, a boss pointed out it didn't fit the adult contemporary tone of the music we were playing. He was right, so I axed it.

Someone also pointed out that my shows seemed to flag a little in the second hour. I realized that was always right about the time I started playing Mahjong online (a violation of Step #4, by the way). Now I put more thought into the second half of my show and keep the Web use to a minimum.

And just this past week I repeated “More great stuff” three times in one talk set! Lame...

Tip

I used to try to both tape my shows and capture them as MP3s (In case I lost one or the other), but lately I have let the taping slide. I name my files with the initials of my show title and the date and time. So *The New Indie Canon* dated March 27, 2010, that I started at 10:00 becomes TNIC2010.03.27.10.mp3.

(I include the time in case I do more than one shift in a day, or in case I bleed into the next jock's slot and want to save that file, too: for instance, noon becomes TNIC2010.03.27.12.mp3, etc.)

I'm anal about the naming and numbering because...well, because I'm anal...but also because I like to link my shows to Facebook and sometimes to services like MediaFire or SoundCloud. Being consistent makes juggling everything a little easier.

Step #2 – Listen To Other DJs. Especially Listen To WMUC-FM.

Ideally, 88.1 WMUC-FM is the first preset on your car dial and the top bookmark on your browser. But even if it's not, be sure to tune in once in a while. There's no better way to get to know your fellow DJs, be exposed to new music, and support the station in general.

Plus, what you hear serves as a benchmark for your show. Who has great playlists that you can swipe artists from? Who inspires you to dig a little deeper into a band's history? Who is thought-provoking or funny in a way you can emulate? Who might you want to sub for, or collaborate with on a special show? Listening will impact what you play and what you say.

A lot of the shows I listen to are genres I wouldn't otherwise touch. For instance, I like electronica just enough to play certain crossover hits on my indie rock show, but I don't have the patience or the know-how to search it out. Christine Moritz (just to name one example at time of writing) does it so I don't have to.

Extra Credit

At least once in your life, listen to a morning show regularly. Listen every day for at least a week, and for as many hours each of those days as you can.

Even if you hate morning shows (I usually do), you owe it to yourself to listen to them. What those guys do is incredibly hard.

Imagine trying to juggle the traffic, the news, the weather, concert calendars, commercials, live callers, and more—and be entertaining—with a clock counting down every mark you have to hit and an entire city listening. Now imagine you're doing that starting at 05:00 every morning.

That's serious talent. Even if you hate morning shows, you can learn something from the people who make their living doing them.

I want to give a special shout-out to Elliott of Elliot in the Morning on DC101. He's constantly engaging...in part because he's so engaged—he is genuinely interested in his listeners, in pop culture, and in life.

Most morning show hosts are relatively conservative—not necessarily in the political sense, but in the wary-of-new-things-and-ideas sense. They're reactionary and slow to get excited about anything but the latest reality TV hit. Elliot is curious, excited, and always looking for what's most interesting and weird about a given topic. This shines through to his listeners.

Elliot also usually doesn't go in for the typical homophobia and sexism that plague morning shows. Sure, he does toe those lines from time to time, but he always manages to shift the conversation a little so that it becomes something unexpected, and he calls out bigots to their faces. Props to him for that.

Further Extra Credit

Listen to NPR. It will make you smarter. It will also change your ideas about what entertaining radio can be. *This American Life*, *A Prairie Home Companion*, *Marketplace*, and local favorites like *Hot Jazz Saturday Night* and *The Big Broadcast* are worth seeking out (and most of them offer podcasts or streams).

Listening to morning shows will teach you about organization, speed, and patter. NPR will teach you about space, pauses, the power of sound effects and ambient recordings, and that almost anybody can be fascinating on the radio if you give them a little time and attention.

Step #3 – Play New Music. Both New To You And New, Period.

We have a New Music Drawer. I capitalize it because it is that important.

And yes, you should play new music from it. A good rule of thumb is one out of every four songs. (Certainly at least twice every hour at the absolute bare minimum.)

Keep in mind that as WMUC evolves, the New Music Drawer may not be a physical drawer—at time of writing there has been a lot of talk about doing some kind of digital or online version. But the above still applies.

At my undergrad station, someone once carved into the Music Director's desk, "WCFM is the best chance most bands ever get." I really took that to heart, and it began a major shift in my DJing—from mainstream to much more independent, because those were the bands needed the spins.

This was reinforced by a station requirement to play new music. Yes, we were still free-form—no one dictated what you played song by song. But unless you had a specialty show, a quarter of the songs you played had to be new music. That jumped to a third if you were in prime time hours and 100% if you (duh) had a new music timeslot.

Every new DJ chafed at this requirement. And every DJ who stayed more than a year grew to love it. It's what kept our shows fresh and interesting, and gave us one more reason to be excited to show up for our slot.

An emphasis on playing new music also meant more previewing. Some of that was done on the fly in cue, of course...but we also had a listening room for previewing new music. So typically you'd show up 20-30 minutes before your show (see Step #5), grab a stack of new CDs, and take a listen.

Even if WMUC doesn't have such a room, it does have comfy couches, and most of us have laptops. Come early, take some tracks out for a practice spin, and play what you like over the air.

Tip

Admittedly, the New Music Drawer is less useful for some DJs. You might play a genre that doesn't often come into the station, or you might do a vinyl-only show. And Music Directors and their staffs are human, too. Exams, internships, and less noble excuses have crippled the station's new music flow more than once.

In that case, you need to do a little work and be your own Music Director. Try to bring in four new songs by at least two new artists a week. Now that it's so easy to explore, browse, and purchase new music online, you can radically expand your show library for only three or four bucks a week.

If you dig up a great song for your listeners, it's never a bad thing to tell them where you got it, especially if it drives traffic to a new band, site, label, or store. It's not that you're advertising—we're nonprofit, after all—but nowadays there's no one single place to find music, so it helps to give your listeners some signposts.

Plus, it's important to signal to listeners where to find music legally and legitimately. If you show that you support artists with ears, clicks, and/or cash, your listeners will do the same.

Extra Credit

The New Music Drawer is a feedback loop—both positive and negative. The more you use it, the more you bug the Music Director for tracks, and the more reviews you write, the more CDs it has and the faster discs (or, in the future, files) will rotate in and out.

Likewise, if too many DJs don't use it, the more likely it the drawer is to get stagnant, and soon no one will ever use it. That's bad.

So play music from the New Music Drawer. When it gets stale, speak up and/or review some tracks yourself. Keep the new music alive.

Again, no matter how great your taste in music, if you play just from your collection, your show will stagnate.

Either use the Drawer, or bring in a minimum of four new songs every single week.

Finally, of course, don't steal new discs. Or old discs. Even borrowing "just till my next show" is insidiously habit-forming and deprives your friends for that week.

Step #4 – Be Present For Your Show. And Be Present In Your Show.

Show up for your show. Dead air is bad. Be there, and be there on time (see Step #5).

If you can't make your show, let the listserv know and put your slot up on the sub registry well ahead of time. (More on this subject down the road at Step #13).

But it's just as important to be present *in* your show.

Be aware. Be listening. It's OK to be online, but it's not OK to be a slave to Facebook, IM, or Solitaire when you should be spinning.

This is my main objection to laptop and iPod DJing—especially the iPod kind. Back in the day (did I really just type that?) DJing off of CDs and vinyl demanded a certain attentiveness...or the music simply stopped. It's too easy now to just construct a playlist and let the music run for three hours.

I'm all for preparing ahead of time (Steps #5), but you also need to be listening in the moment, checking levels, and talking over the air every two or three songs (Step #6). It's not OK to just push Play and check out for a half hour.

I tend to pick on iPod users, but CD and vinyl folk can be equally asleep at the switch. I've already mentioned my Mahjong habit. And grading papers while playing a compilation on Remain? Guilty as charged (in my sordid grad student past).

Also, be on the alert for the phone, the door, for other folks in the station. There are always people dropping by calling or wandering in and out of the station, and you should have an ear out for them.

Anyone who cares enough to call is a listener you want to keep. So it would be a shame to miss her phone call because you had the monitor too high.

And the DJ with the busted swipe card is really going to be pissed you can't hear him hammering on the door.

And you never want to miss an EAS test.

There are also problematic people out there. We've had things stolen from the station. We've had homeless people try to live in the station. And we've had plenty of parties that never should have happened. It's good to know who's in the station, and good to ask who they are and if they should be there.

There are also dangerous people out there. All of the above goes double if you're female and it's after midnight. College campuses aren't as safe as they look.

But enough doom and gloom. And while we're at it, enough woolgathering. Steps #1–4 were about philosophy. Now let's move to the practical: making your style tight and making you sound friggin' sweet.

Step #5 – Be Prepped For Your Show. And Preparation Starts With Being On Time.

Seriously. Show up to the station on time.

Ah, but we all have different definitions of “on time,” don’t we?

On time doesn’t mean when your show starts. It means 15 minutes before your show starts, at least.

Full disclosure: Yes, I am not the best about this. So I may be a hypocrite, but that doesn’t make me wrong.

Say hello to the previous DJ. Sign in and begin reviewing the clipboards. Ask if anything wonky is happening on the technology end that day (no disrespect to our great staff, but this is college radio; something usually is). Begin to pull and preview new music.

Some DJs plan their entire show out in advance. I’m not that guy, especially since my show is (ideally) so reliant on what’s in the New Music Drawer. But I always try to at least know what the first three songs are going to be for the top of each hour. It’s saved me a lot of headaches.

Most importantly, discuss with the previous jock how you want to handle the change-off. There is no reason for dead air, fumbling, confusion, or the awful on-air unplugging and replugging of auxiliary cables. Whether they end with patter or a song, you should be ready to pick it up seamlessly.

I tend to like to sign off a few minutes before the show ends, then play one last song. Then it’s easy for the next DJ to come in either with music or on the mic, and I don’t risk losing my last words when the stream ripper switches slots.

Tip

Transitions should only be tricky if you’re playing back-to-back music from the same source (say, when there’s only one aux cable and you’re both using computers). In that case, it’s best to:

- 1) Pot that channel down.
- 2) Say or play a legal (see the 1st Corollary to Step #6) to cover the cable switch or CD unload and load.
- 3) If you’re using a computer or iPod, double-check the source machine’s volume. (My laptop drives me nuts by lowering the volume whenever the headphone jack is first engaged).
- 4) Pot the channel back up.
- 5) Play your track.

Extra Credit

At many college/nonprofit stations, the top of the hour has to be timed to an NPR or ABC news feed. WMUC doesn’t require you to be as much of a time-stickler.

Still, if you're trying to time exactly to the top of the hour, the easy way is to play a song that will come up short, then talk for the remainder.

The slightly harder way is to decide your last song in advance and then talk toward the time you have to put to push the play button. So if you have a song that lasts for 3:32, play music until roughly four minutes before the hour, talk for about half a minute, and then hit the play button at XX:56:28

Otherwise, keep a playlist, mix CD or iTunes playlist of songs arranged by time handy. A little quick math and you can pick the right song to end the moment the clock turns XX:00:00.

Step #6 – Branding Matters. Say The Station ID.

88.1 WMUC-FM College Park is a brand. It's as much of a brand as Coke or Pepsi. And branding matters.

We are a free-form radio station—one of the last in the country—just outside our nation's capital. That is really, seriously special

Especially since most universities are all too happy to turn their stations into NPR affiliates or lite jazz nightmares. We are incredibly lucky to a) exist at all, and b) have supportive faculty/staff advisors and alumni willing to go to bat for us. All the more reason to treat the station well (Step #11) and keep our daytime airwaves clean (Step #12).

So say the station ID. It does no good to give your listeners an amazing listening experience if you're not going to attach that experience to something they can identify and return to.

Say "88.1." Say "WMUC-FM." Say "College Park." Say "wmucradio.com." Say your name. Say the name of your show. Say the names of the bands you play. Say all of this, and say it often.

The station ID is the professional jock's "Uh..." Can't remember what you were going to say? Say "88.1." Computer slow to call up weather.com? Say "WMUC-FM, on your dial at 88.1." Stumble over a band's name? Say "Full playlists, schedules, and more are at wmucradio.com." You get the idea.

To put it another way, every time you fire the mic, 88.1 or WMUC-FM should be in there somewhere. Every time.

Tip

When I was a professional, the rule of thumb was no more than two songs should go by without the jock or the computer doing a live or recorded station ID.

This is a good rule...though perhaps a bit excessive for a free-form show, especially if you're juggling CDs and/or records. But every three songs or every ten minutes (whichever comes first) should be a hard and fast commandment.

This applies to everybody. Even electronica and classical DJs. Scratch that—especially electronica and classical DJs. Just say it quietly or sample it in, even if you are midway through Beethoven's 9th. Classical stations do this all the time. News stations will even break right into the President's State of the Union address with a station ID when they need to.

The following examples should work for most shows:

[Talk with station ID]
[Song 1]
[Song 2]
[Song 3]
[Talk with station ID]

...or...

[Talk with station ID]

[Song 1]

[Song 2]

[Station ID]

[Song 3]

[Song 4]

[Talk with station ID]

...or...

[Talk with station ID]

[Short song 1]

[Short song 2]

[Station ID]

[Long song 3]

[Talk with station ID]

...etc.

Extra Credit

You can record your own station IDs. And you should.

Grab an engineer. Ply him or her with pizza, beer (not in the station please), and flattery to reserve some audio expertise for a couple of hours. Then throw a station ID-recording party. Grab some friends, a laptop, some mics, and start writing and performing station IDs. Give them to the board to approve and distribute. Bask in your glory.

Putting my money where my mouth is: somewhere around the station are the IDs I recorded, such as: "88.1 WMUC-FM College Park. Everyone likes us but racists. [Pause] ...You're not a racist, are you?"

That said, serious IDs have a longer shelf life than funny ones. Record some of both. (Remember Subway's Spongmonkeys? Neither does anyone else, which is why the clip of me singing like one is no longer amusing, just weird.)

Further Extra Credit

Whenever we have a live act in the station, have them record a station ID. Ditto if noteworthy alumni are anywhere in the vicinity—say, giving a lecture on your class or at a SEE concert. Get a station ID from them. Then make sure it gets back to the board.

The station can and should have a library of IDs—a binder with CDs and tracklists is one way, or a drive of some sort, or an online archive on a server—and they should be played whenever there is a good reason to do so (like when you play a song by an artist whose ID we have).

We made local news recently after someone dug up an old WMUC station ID featuring John Lennon. You never know if someone you get a legal from might go on to make history.

I'm also excited to note that, in just the time since I first began writing this guide, an online ID library has begun to be developed, which is awesome. Let's keep it up and keep it stocked!

1st Corollary To Step #6 – The Legal ID Is Not The Station ID.

A station ID is any variation or chunk of 88.1 WMUC-FM College Park; you can play with it as you see fit.

But the legal ID is the whole “WMUC-FM College Park.”

Without all those words, in that order, it ain’t a legal. (And adding 88.1 doesn’t hurt: “88.1 WMUC-FM College Park.”)

Tip

Upon turning on the transmitter, turning it off, and within five minutes of the top of every hour, you have to say our full, unabridged, unaltered legal ID: “88.1 WMUC-FM College Park.” Period. Those are the first and last words the listener has to hear. So do it.

At the top of the hour, you can work it in however you like; “You’re tuned to 88.1 WMUC-FM College Park” is perfect. But at start-up, ideally you start with the station: “88.1 WMUC-FM College Park is now on the air.” Or just say “88.1 WMUC-FM College Park” and slam into a song. Whatever, as long as “88.1 WMUC-FM College Park” is the first thing the audience hears.

Likewise at shutdown, just saying “88.1 WMUC-FM College Park” and leaving it hanging there feels weird. But that’s correct.

I often say...

“88.1 WMUC-FM is now on the air. Good morning! You’re listening to the New Indie Canon.”

...and play a song.

If I have to shut down...

“88.1 WMUC-FM is now going off the air. We’ll be back on with [DJ name or show name] at [time]. Full schedule, playlists, and more information are at wmucradio.com. Thanks for listening to 88.1 WMUC-FM College Park.”

Then I pot the mic down and off.

You can also ask a board member if they have a preferred startup/shutdown format, or a cart you can play instead of winging it.

WMUC should have (and has had in the past) official startup and shutdown tracks to fall back on, as well as an array of legal IDs. So if you want to make sure you’re doing it right, have an engineer help you record a bunch. Then make sure copies are available in the station. It helps everyone, and it makes you the voice of WMUC.

2nd Corollary To Step #6 – A Tagline Can't Hurt.

To the best of my knowledge, the station doesn't have an official tagline. But having one would help reinforce the brand. In the absence of one, our old bumper sticker slogan works just fine—"College Radio Is Good Radio" (with "Get Listenin', Kids" as its sassy kid-sister alternative).

Try it out for yourself:

"Hey, [your name] here. You're listening to 88.1 WMUC—College Radio is Good Radio. Up next, new music from..."

See? Easy.

Extra Credit

Taglines from some of our competitors:

- WAMU: Your NPR News Station in the Nation's Capital
- WTMD: Radio For Music People
- WYPR: Your Public Radio

...or...

Your Station for Music, Arts, and NPR News and Entertainment

Further Extra Credit

Your show can have a tagline, too.

A tagline is not necessarily a description—"Nike: Just Do It" is a line designed to spark an emotion rather than explain—but for our purposes a description is often useful, so listeners immediately know what your show is about. So when in doubt, look to your show description on the station schedule and build your tag from that.

Rightly or wrongly, I tend to change my show title every year (though recently I've hung onto The New Indie Canon). But I've definitely settled into a tag: "The Best New & Independent Rock, Pop, & Folk in the Capital Region."

Step #7 – Think About What You’re Going To Say On The Air. Preferably Before You Say It.

Whenever you fire the mic, you should have some idea of what you’re going to say. So take a minute and prepare yourself.

Too often when you listen to college radio, you hear lots of “Um”s*, paper shuffling, and pauses. A little of this is charming, but doing it every break for your the entire show is too much.

So take a moment to prepare. This should be second nature to most jocks, but just in case:

- 30 seconds before you go live, get yourself together. Make sure you’ve loaded the right CD, cued up the right file, etc.
- At 20 seconds, call up your playlist and remind yourself what you’ve played. Go over anything else you’re going to cover that break.
- At 10 seconds say “Stand by” to whoever’s in the room.

That’s pro DJ-speak for “Shut up.”

- At five seconds, clear your throat, then turn on the mic and pot it up.

Mic on first, then pot up (not up and then on). Otherwise the audience hears the difference in the empty air as it goes from dead to fuzz (sometimes they even hear a click). And when you’re done, do the steps in reverse: mic down, then off.

- At zero, talk away.

Remember (per Step #6) that every time you talk, you should say the station ID. You should also always back-sell the songs you have just played. If your listener heard a good song, she’ll want to know what it was.

And it doesn’t hurt to front-sell what you’re about to play...either next or within the hour...or announcements you’re going to make (such as updates on local shows). Give listeners reasons to stay tuned.

* Remember Step #6: when in doubt, “88.1.”

1st Corollary To Step #7 – The Top Of The Hour Matters. Structure It.

If you want your show to sound tight, a great place to start is the top of the hour. That's when almost every radio station stops for the legal, commercials, announcements, etc.

Structuring your top of the hour gets important stuff out of the way, introduces you, and gets your show off to a strong start.

Tip

Here's one way to tackle the top of the hour:

- 1) Say or play the legal ID.
- 2) Introduce yourself and your show title.
- 3) Say your show tagline or genre.
- 4) Announce the weather, cover any announcements, and generally talk to the audience.

Sites like weather.com will hook you up with this. If you're really feeling up to it, you might even tackle beltway traffic during rush hour (or bridge/beach traffic in the summer) using traffic.com.

Then again, since your audience is mostly students, things like football game parking lot closures are probably a lot more useful.

- 5) Bring it back to the music.
- 6) Front-sell some of what's coming in the next hour.
- 7) Hit Play.

2nd Corollary To Step #7 – Use The Clock.

The best way to plan what you're going to say for your show breaks is to think of the face on a clock. You're going to be talking about every ten minutes (remember Step #6), so divide it into six chunks.

Then come up with a list of things to cover. Maybe there's a Mountain Goats show coming up, an all-station meeting that week, and you found a cool Wiki entry about a band. That's three break subjects right there.

Tip

Here's a sample hour's worth of things to say (in addition to the station ID and the songs you've just played):

- XX:00 Top of the hour: Legal ID, your name and show name, the weather, station announcements or PSAs, etc.
- XX:10 Facts about bands just played (or about to be played)
- XX:20 Upcoming Third Rail shows
- XX:30 Features of wmuclradio.com (playlists, show archive, etc.)
- XX:40 Upcoming local concerts
- XX:50 DJ schedule for the day

The second half of the hour is often a good time to look forward. Who's on after you? Who's playing later that day? What bands are in town tonight, tomorrow, or over the weekend?

Note also how I try to avoid repetition—Third Rail shows and other local shows are separated by a break, as are WMUC news items, so I don't pile too much similar stuff on top of each other.

Further Tip

I tend to play my PSAs at the top of the hour, just before the legal ID. So I don't lose my listeners, I often give them a heads-up that the PSAs coming and when regular programming will be back:

“Up next, some important announcements. Then there's more great music on the way, so stay tuned—I'll see you in sixty.”

Then again, doing PSAs plus legal and weather and everything else risks losing listeners if you're away from the music too long. You personally might like your weather at XX:10, or your PSAs at XX:30. Experiment, listen to the results (see Step #1), and use what works best. It's your show.

Step #8 – The Phones And Level Meters Are Your Friends. Your iPod Is Not.

Remember it's not just the songs you play, but how they get transmitted that matters.

- The monitor speakers can be deceiving. So make sure you spend a fair amount of time with your phones on. That way, you're hearing exactly what your audience hears.

When I was first starting out, you don't even want to know how often I had shows leopard-spotted with dead air because I'd left a channel in cue and didn't have my phones on to hear it.

- The meters are there for a reason. When you go too far into the red, your sound quality suffers as it gets clipped, distorted and cut off. (Plus, pinning the meters eventually breaks them.) So go near the red, but don't set off the light.
- At the beginning of each song, be ready to adjust. Laptops broadcast at different volumes than CDs. Old tracks are much quieter than new ones. Be ready to pot channels up and down.

Especially down. I am constantly playing older CDs at a high volume so they match my other discs, then blowing out my eardrums when I next use that channel because I left the slider up.

- Remember that any sound your laptop plays goes over the air. So adjust your main volume and iTunes volume ahead of time, and turn off any email alerts, rings, etc. IM programs, especially, are notorious radio-ruiners. (If you must adjust partway through your show, pot that channel down and off first.)
- Don't even get me started on iPods.

They're too hard to navigate on the fly both well and quickly, and we can hear you doing it. Unless you have two iPods, it's better to spin CDs or get a laptop.

...Which is actually a good point to expound upon, so I will:

It's always better to be playing music from more than one source, so you can run songs together and make the transitions overlap, and overall not be dependant on just one device or format.

Currently, it's very difficult to do that with many programs, especially iTunes—you can clearly hear certain songs being cut off or interrupted. (Yes, there's an auto-crossfade function, but it often fires songs too early or late to be useful.) And if you're playing one song on iTunes, it's hard to cue up another from the same computer. So a mix of laptop, iPod, CDs, and records is still the best option (provided you can get the volume levels right).

Trust me, I've switched mostly over to laptop DJing, too. But when I listen to old shows and hear how I used to string songs together, in my heart I know I sounded better with CDs.

It's not about format per se, (or about me being some anti-MP3 geezer) but control. You have simply more of it when you're not chained to one gadget.

Step #9 – Know Thyself And Be Thyself. And Either Embrace Or Ditch Thy Co-DJ.

You don't need a clever DJ name. You don't need a perfect radio voice. Just go on the air and be yourself.

DJ names, like tramp stamps, have a way of getting old and saggy after a while. So if you're leaning that direction, pick yours carefully, because it'll be with you for a while.

Also understand your personal brand. While it was fun to be S.P.E.C.T.R.E, I held onto the name far too long—my own name is a distinctive enough identity. A DJ name that works for a Jane Smith just isn't necessary for a Malika or Siobhan. Genres like hip-hop or electronic might demand a DJ name, but it feels a little silly for indie rock or folk.

Since you can see how many listeners you have online, it's also tempting to play to that audience. Keep an eye on how many listeners you have—if one song or genre always drives them away, that may be useful to know—but don't twist yourself into knots. What repulses one listener will draw in another. Know the music you're passionate about playing and play it...and have faith the audience will follow.

On the other hand, listeners who actually pick up the phone or IM should be treated like gold, even if it means cramming in a somewhat awkward request. Do whatever it takes to keep them. If they're engaged enough to make contact, they're listeners you want every week.

Meanwhile, co-DJs are great when you're just starting out. Until DJing becomes second nature, there's a lot of technical stuff to remember, especially when you have a 3 a.m. slot.

After your first semester or two, though, you want to think about how you and your co-DJ want to operate. If there are two of you, what does that do for your show? Does it lead to better music? Better conversation? Entertaining on-air arguments? There are two of you in the booth, so look for ways to use that strength.

But it can also be a weakness. Isn't it bizarre, for instance, how many shows with two DJs show up on the sub list? You'd think that since there are two jocks, they'd be only a fraction as likely to miss their show.

Of course, that's not what happens. Since we take cues from our friends, we often feed each other's own worst instincts. "I can't make it this week" from DJ A inspires "Maybe I'll bail, too" from DJ B.

You're made of tougher stuff, though. Right? Right.

Step #10 – It's Neat To Make Your Show Neat.

Once you've got things humming smoothly, don't rest on your laurels. Shake up your show (and yourself) once a month or so by going the extra mile to make your show more interesting.

- Bring in a guest DJ.

I like to bring in local artists I like and have them spin a set of CDs that have influenced them, then talk about them. They have a great time, I get someone to talk to, and what they say can be really revealing.

- Bring in a band (subject to the rules and times approved by the station).
- Experiment with genres.
- Play a weekly guilty pleasure.
- Do flashback sets.
- Do sets organized around a theme.
- Play music based on the month, season, or time of year.
- Play songs popular this week last year, five years ago, and ten years ago.

Professional stations do this all the time. It's a nice way to make sure your back catalog gets rotated. You can do this by scanning old Billboard and CMJ lists. Purchased songs on iTunes are also easy to see and catalog by date.

- Read track reviews over the air (but give credit to the author!).
- Take calls.
- Let people contact you via IM during your show.
- Set up a Facebook group.
- Set up a Happy Hour for after your show.
- Give away a mix CD.
- Give away concert tickets.

This is a pretty basic list. You can easily top it.

Step #11 – Treat The Station Well.

WMUC is an amazing station. But the treatment of the facilities—especially the booth itself—can often be subpar.

I seriously do not understand how we can run the amazing live shows we do—on a weekly schedule that would exhaust most professional stations—yet we can't put away CDs or keep the booth from getting mysteriously sticky.

We all need to take better care of the station.

Common sense rules apply, but as a reminder:

- Throw away your trash, preferable outside the booth (especially if it's food).
- Don't let things fall behind the equipment. If they do, don't leave them there.
- No beer in the station.
- No drugs in the station. McGruff said so.
- Don't give the janitorial staff, the maintenance staff, security, or anybody else paid by the university a reason to complain.

Maintenance is not your friend down the hall.

You never let Maintenance copy your notes. You never invite Maintenance to your parties. You never score Maintenance weed. And you never thank Maintenance.

And since Maintenance is not your friend down the hall, Maintenance has no reason to clean up after, lie for, or even tolerate you.

- You are responsible for your friends and any guests.
- Put anything you touch back where it come from, exactly how you found it.
- That includes music. Alphabetical order is your holy obligation. By first letter in the New Music Drawer. Strict ABC order everywhere else.
- It also includes legal CDs, announcement binders, etc. Everything in the booth has a place. Put it there.
- Be nice to the old people in the station. We're cranky, but sometimes we'll dig up cool records and CDs for you.

Extra Credit

A refresher on alphabetization:

Bands get filed by name, ignoring "The" (but not "Los" or "Les" ...and "A" is a judgment call).

People get filed by last name.

People with other people, or with bands, get filed under the first person mentioned's last name. So Pete Yorn & Scarlett Johansson's *Break Up* gets filed under "Y," while Billy Bragg & Wilco's *Mermaid Avenue* goes under "B."

Step #12 –There Shalt Be No FCC Violations. Obey Safe Harbor Hours.

This, technically, should be a Corollary to Steps #7 or #11. But it's so important I have to give it its own space.

No foul language can go over the air from a recorded source, except from 10 PM to 6 AM. And you can *never* say foul language yourself.

The exact number of forbidden words (and the words themselves) is often a subject of debate. So defer to the station staff and your training.

That said, the general rule is no excrement (shit, piss (I know, that one always surprises me, too)); sexual content, body parts, or orifices (fuck, cunt, tits); or riffs on the above (cocksucker, motherfucker). "Dick" is okay as a name, but not as a penis; "ass" is okay because it's a donkey, but "asshole" is not.

It's also best to steer clear of inflammatory terms like "bitch" and "nigger" even if they aren't enshrined in the above list. There are all kinds of historical and etymological reasons why those words have been exempted, but it doesn't make them any easier on listeners' ears, so better avoid them.

Tip

If you put in a song and suddenly remember it has a swear (note the singular), there is an easy fix. As the swear is about to arrive, hit the Cue button for that channel (you will hear the swear in the monitor) and then hit Cue again after the swear has passed.

(Of course, to do this successfully you need to be sure you hit the cue button for the proper channel! Also, potting the channel down may seem like a good idea, but in practice it isn't fast enough and sounds weird. Stick to Cue.)

Again, this is for accidents. Do not take this as a nudge-nudge-wink-wink instruction for editing on the fly. You *will* fuck it up.

And if you realize the song you're playing has lots of swears, it's best to just bail and say the CD skipped/laptop failed.

Unless you are exceedingly vigilant, you should not run a hip-hop show (or play Ben Folds) outside safe harbor hours. It's just not worth the risk.

And don't even think about freestyling live. Record that [beep].

I'm not hating on hip-hop; it's just that the Spider-Man rule applies: "With great beats comes great responsibility." And FCC fines suck. Speaking of which...

Extra Credit

FCC violations are the dirty laundry of radio. Everyone commits them. You can't work in radio for any length of time and not have them. And most go unreported.

But if a swear does go over the air and the wrong person complains, the fine, if one is leveled and not successfully appealed, can cripple a station—especially one as small as ours.

So you have to take swears seriously...and so do the station board members and staff. Follow their instructions if you mess up...but do your best not to mess up.

Remember, swears are inherently unfair. Plenty of bad DJs play swears and never get caught. Plenty of good DJs have screwed up once and been hammered. If you play a swear and get nailed for it, you never know when it's going to be a slap on the wrist or your third strike. So don't risk it!

If you go onto professional radio, keep in mind that FCC violations are also useful to management in the same way the office email policy is. Everyone uses office time to send personal email...but you can still be fired for it. That's why they write the policies that way. Likewise, everyone lets a swear or two slip over the air...but you can still be fired for it.

Trust me on this one. I worked at a station where we actually had to install a delay system because one of the weekday jocks was so bad about swears on a regular basis. Meanwhile, in my entire time there I only let one slip out—during a live broadcast as my shift was ending and the other DJ hadn't stepped into the booth yet. But as a weekend part-timer, I made a very convenient example for a boss who was looking for one...and so I was out.

You don't want to go the same way.

Step #13 – Have A Backup Plan. The Sub Registry Is Not It.

Things break. Things get borrowed. Things get lost. Things get stolen. You need to be ready anyway.

Have a backup plan for what you will do if you arrive in the studio and there's only one turntable, no auxiliary cable, or the like. 99 times out of 100, you'll never need that plan, but you'll be glad the one time you do. Instead of going to the sub list for an emergency fill-in, you can keep spinning like a champ.

When WMUC introduced the aux cables, a strange thing happened almost overnight. It suddenly became acceptable for DJs to skip their shows if they forgot their hard drive/iPod/collection of choice. Because they had "no music."

Apparently, when faced with a roomful of CDs, many jocks now feel they have absolutely no music to play.

*This is allowed, under WMUC rules, and has been reinforced on the listserv.**

It's also pretty pathetic.

Rules are rules, but this is a style guide—we get to make different judgment calls here. As long as we have shelves of CDs (especially in the New Music Drawer—see Step #3) and you have a rough handle on the alphabet, there is absolutely no reason for a DJ with any sense of style to miss your show.

If it's your first semester of DJing or play a rare genre, I'll give you a pass.

But otherwise, if you can't sit in the studio and find a show's worth of music in the drawers we have, you probably need to rethink why you're in the station in the first place. Period.

Tip

Even if you're the most dedicated laptop DJ ever, make a few mix CDs to hold in reserve. I have about four—all FCC-safe—that I keep in both a CD wallet and replicated on my computer. That way, unless every CD player and both auxiliary cables are gone, I can run my show for over three hours with no problem.

It's also a good plan for long bathroom trips. Just sayin'.

* At time of writing, the current policy is: "If a DJ feels that he or she cannot perform their show properly without their own music arsenal at hand, then it's their decision, because it's their show."

Step #14 – Have Fun. Seriously.

I've lectured a lot while writing this. Sorry. I'm just trying to save you a little time and trouble, covering in a couple of pages what it took me years to learn. Don't let me stress you out too much.

More important than anything else I've said is this:

When you're in the booth, have fun. Your audience can tell. The more fun you have, the more they will, too.

Appendix – Concrete Ways You Can Help WMUC Right Now That Are Really Easy.

- 1) Pick a letter every show. Alphabetize that drawer during long songs.
- 2) Put up posters for the station.
- 3) Put up posters for your show.
- 4) Get your friends to put 88.1 on their alarm and car radio presets, and wmucradio.com in their bookmarks.
- 5) Better yet, shout about your show (and theirs) in your IM status, on Facebook, on Twitter, or wherever. Include the link so it's easy for anyone to click and listen.
- 6) Give gifts of copies of your favorite shows (yours and other DJs') as mix CDs, thumb drives, etc. to your friends.
- 7) Attend station events. Bring a non-DJ friend every time.
- 8) Go to board meetings. Bring a DJ friend every time.
- 9) Ask a board member how you can help them. Follow through and do it—once a month at first, then one a week.
- 10) Set up a listening area/room/booth for previewing CDs.
- 11) Write reviews based on your previewing.
- 12) Burn CDs that the station is missing—or that have been stolen (or are likely to be stolen)—and file them.
- 13) Tell your favorite band about WMUC.

One Final Thought – Someone Is Always Listening.

Someone is always listening.

No matter what time you're on. No matter what genre. Someone is always listening.

I got hired at an NPR affiliate because a station manager found me at 10:00 AM on a Saturday and decided to tape me on the spot. It was the indie rock nerd version of being called up to the major leagues.

When he got tired of me two years later, he listened until he found a reason and I was gone. Such is radio.

I took some time off, then came back to WMUC and found out there were still ears out there for me. And I still run into my old listeners from Baltimore from time to time, too...and when they tell me they miss hearing me, I'm always sure to tell them where they can find me.

Someone is always listening.

And that's really, really cool.

Someone is always listening. And their time and attention are precious. So give that someone the respect they deserve. Do what you can to make your show the best it can be.

This guide offers some ideas. But you'll come up with plenty of your own.

When you do, share them with the station. We're listening, too.