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He Likes That Old Time Rock 'n Roll

If you know the music of Dylan, Lennon and Jagger, and if you grew up around New York, within the sound of his voice, you probably know WFUV's Dennis Elsas. Now meet the Rye resident who has gently shepherded us through the past 30 years of rock 'n' roll.

BY: SUSAN HODARA PUBLISHED JUNE 7, 2007 AT 12:00 AM

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If you know the music of Dylan, Lennon and Jagger, and if you grew up around New York, within the sound of his voice, you probably know WFUV's Dennis Elsas. Now meet the Rye resident who has gently shepherded us through the past 30 years of rock 'n' roll.

By Susan Hodara

Mention Dennis Elsas to rock 'n' roll fans who have lived in the New York area within the past three decades, and they will most likely respond with a broad smile and a host of associations. They may know him from his on-air interviews with '60s and '70s legends including John Lennon, Mick Jagger and Elton John; from more recent sessions introducing artists such as Ben Folds and the Thorns; or from the daily doses of cutting edge music he has played and continues to play for his audiences. For over 30 years, this renowned radio disc jockey, who has lived in Westchester since 1982, has dispatched his smooth voice to travel the airwaves into homes, offices and cars, sharing his passion for the best of rock culture with countless listeners.

"My voice is a trigger," says Elsas, a trim man with a bounce in his step, brown hair that frames an angular face and deep-set blue eyes that blend intensity and warmth. "It takes listeners back to certain times in their lives, and provides a comfort level."

We are talking in a compact broadcast studio on the third floor of a stone classroom building at Fordham University in the Bronx, the home of public radio station WFUV-FM (90.7), where Elsas has hosted the afternoon "City Folk" program since 2000. Our conversation is punctuated by the ending of one song and the beginning of the next, by weather and traffic reports and promos about upcoming events. "Stand by," Elsas tells me more than once, donning headphones, gliding his microphone into position, and deftly manipulating the board before him.

On air, his persona transforms. A firmness grips his facial muscles, and his hands gesture to accompany his words. "When I put on these headsets, I'm no longer here," he tells me. "I'm on the highway, I'm at a desk, I'm in someone's room."

Raised in Queens, Elsas began his career while a student at Queens College. There, in 1966, he co-founded the campus radio station and later became its program director. It was the era, Elsas explains, when FM

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radio was establishing its identity. “Think back to the summer of '67,” he says. “It was the summer of love, of cultural explosion. FM radio, generally backed by corporations, was wide open, with nothing to lose.” It was in this climate that Elsas took his first job after graduating, at WVOX-FM in New Rochelle, where he created and hosted the progressive rock show, “Something Else Again.” Then in 1971, he began what was to become a 27-year stint at WNEW-FM, then just four years old; in 1972, he became its music director. “I was gatekeeper for the station,” Elsas recalls. “I was meeting all of my rock 'n' roll heroes. One day it was Pete Townshend, the next it was Robert Plant, the next the Grateful Dead were playing cards in the studio. There were so many pinch-me moments.”

He continues: “When in three years I'd met three of my idols—John Lennon, Paul McCartney and Bob Dylan—I thought, ‘It can't get better than this.’” His often-replayed 1974 interview with Lennon is part of the permanent collection of the Museum of Television and Radio and was excerpted in the Beatles Anthology book, video and television program.

Photographs from these days adorn the walls of Elsas's office in the Rye home where he has lived for the past six years with his wife, Nancy, a former actress who now works as a realtor with Houlihan Lawrence in Larchmont. They have a son and daughter, both married and living nearby, enabling them to spend, Elsas says, “a lot of quality time with our growing family.”

One photo shows Elsas with his arm draped over the shoulder of a young John Mellencamp before his first show at The Bottom Line in 1979, and a second with the artist at his New York City performance this past July (Elsas's interview with Mellencamp is scheduled on WFUV this month). Other shots feature the disc jockey with Mick Jagger, Elton John, Bob Seeger and Pete Townshend, and in a 1974 shot, with John Lennon in a fur hat. That one is signed: “Thnx for the freebies,” a reference, Elsas explains, to Lennon's visit with him at WNEW-FM. “I offered him some of the demos I'd received, and he walked out with a huge stack of albums.”

The couple renovated their house in Rye (they had previously lived for 15 years in Mamaroneck), refurbishing the basement to house what Elsas jokingly refers to as “The Elsas Archives.” One wall is lined with shelves of vinyl LPs, the opposite with CDs, and drawers hold a collection of 45s. There are tapes of interviews and radio shows and biographical material on hundreds of musicians; framed gold records awarded to Elsas by various record companies adorn the walls. “The nice thing about working at WFUV is that I can actually dig into this stuff and use it on my show,” he says.

Elsas glances at the oversized digital clock on the studio wall and sees it is approaching the hour. “Time for news,” he says, taking a sip from a bottle of spring water and introducing NPR News. While it runs, he heads off to the window to see if it's raining (“so I sound like I know what's going on outside”). When he returns, he checks his e-mail for messages from listeners (to which, he says, he always responds) and peruses the web for music news. (“I'm a media junkie,” he explains. “I might pick up a story I can use later on my show’.) Then, “stand by” he tells me again, as he gets back on air and launches the next set of songs.

He continued as WNEW-FM's music director until 1976, when he was given the coveted 6 to 10 p.m. show (“primetime radio in those days,” he says). In 1982, when he was shifted to a weekend slot, he created “The Beach Party.” “I love the beach, and figured if I had to work weekends, I'd recreate the beach on the air. I used the sound of surf and seagulls and gave away WNEW-FM beach towels.”

His new schedule enabled Elsas to pursue a simultaneous career in voiceovers. Since then, he has supplemented his radio work with freelance voiceover jobs, his already familiar voice promoting such products as Lancôme, Oil of Olay, and Fruit of the Loom, and television programs including Dateline, 48 Hours, and ABC's Paul McCartney special, “Back in the U.S.”

Elsas has just finished telling his audience about an upcoming concert and begun airing a Ben Harper number to be followed by an early-'70s Kinks song. When a listener calls to inquire about a selection played earlier in the day, Elsas takes the call and cheerfully locates the name of the song. Performing as DJ, taking CDs from the shelves beside him, flipping through notes, turning on speakers to check out a live performance by Losers Lounge in studio down the hall, his skills and years of experience are evident. He is fast, adept and calm. When I ask how he knows just when to push what button, he replies, “It's like cooking. You just know.”

After WNEW-FM's “self-destruction,” as Elsas puts it, in 1998, and several years focusing on voiceover work, he joined WFUV. “It's been three years and I couldn't be happier.” Elsas's show, weekdays from 2 to 6 p.m., follows the station's commercial-free “City Folk” format, which incorporates old and new music, live interviews and gently delivered commentary. It is a format Elsas appreciates.

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“One of the greatest things about being at WFUV is that you’re not locked into repeating your history,” he says. “People my age are always saying, ‘They don’t write ‘em like they used to,’ but that’s not true. Good music is being written, you just don’t hear a lot of it on the radio. In general, radio is not an adventurous medium, but that spirit of discovery is alive at WFUV.”

Rita Houston, WFUV’s music director, was a fan of Elsas well before he joined the station. Houston, 42, grew up in Mt. Vernon. “WNEW was my station,” she says. Elsas, she continues, fits right in at WFUV. “There is a friendliness in Dennis’s on-air personality,” she says. “He is perfectly suited to what WFUV is about.”

Elsas’s arrival brought with it a loyal group of listeners, Houston notes. “You can’t be on the radio for as many years as Dennis without having a following. Those listeners followed him to WFUV and contributed to the growth of our audience.” According to John Platt, the station’s development and marketing director, WFUV’s audience has grown 54 percent in the past three years. The station, which streams its programming online (www.wfuv.org), boasts more than 300,000 listeners per week, about 15 percent of whom live in Westchester, and 20,000 members, with more than 3,000 from Westchester. Meanwhile in the studio, hours have passed, and Elsas finds a cough drop in his pocket. “I’m losing my voice,” he says. “That’s what happens when you interview a disc jockey.”

Then he waxes reflective: “A lot of people grew up listening to me on the radio, but I don’t feel my age. I love my connection to the history of rock and roll, but it’s not over yet. It’s still going strong.”

Susan Hodara is a freelance writer living in Mt. Kisco and a fan of the music Dennis Elsas played and continues to play.

Elsas’s Picks

Where to Hear Live Music

As intimate with the music world as he’s been throughout his career, Dennis Elsas is reluctant to name his all-time favorites (though he can’t help but mention the Beatles, whom he calls a benchmark). While he says he appreciates a singer/songwriter’s ability to express pain and angst, he declares: “My love is for the music of optimism and hope.”

There is much of that music to be heard in Westchester and vicinity. Following are some of Elsas’s recommendations of where to hear quality folk and rock music in and around the county.

Bodles Opera House

39 Main Street, Chester, NY

(845) 469-4595; www.bodles.com

About an hour’s drive away, across the Hudson in Orange County, is the Bodles (pronounced “boodles”) Opera House., which offers music and dining in a rustic setting. Coming up: “Remembering Phil Ochs,” hosted by Sonny Ochs, Thursday, September 11; Steve Forbert and A.J. Swearingen with Jonathan Beedle, September 13; Leon Redbone, September 26; Vanilla Fudge, September 27.

Clearwater Music & Environmental Festival/ Great Hudson River Revival

Croton Point Park, Croton-on-Hudson

www.clearwater.org/revival/

This annual weekend festival in June has celebrated the beauty of the Hudson River for more than three decades. Over 90 performers on seven stages play a range of music, including blues, rock, reggae, salsa, bluegrass, jazz and folk.

Emelin Theatre

153 Library Lane, Mamaroneck

(914) 698-3045; box office:

(914) 698-0098

www.emelin.org

The fall music lineup includes the progressive rock band Rat Race Choir on September 20; Tuck & Patti, November 1; and bluegrass band Bob Paisley & the Southern Grass, November 14.

Factory Master »

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Taste Maker »

The Friends of Music's "The Mansion"

14 Wilcox Avenue, Middletown
(845) 342.0878; www.friendsofmusic.net

The Friends of Music is a nonprofit organization whose mission is to bring folk, blues and bluegrass music to the area. "The Mansion" is its house concert series, located in the Victorian Morrison Mansion on the campus of Orange County Community College (about an hour from Westchester). Scheduled performances this fall include Tom Rush, September 7; Patty Larkin, September 14; Vance Gilbert and Ellis Paul, October 26; Richie Havens, November 9.

The Paramount Center
for the Arts

1008 Brown Street, Peekskill
(914) 739-2333
www.paramountcenter.org

This historic landmark theater presents a mix of theater, dance and musical performances.

Performing Arts Center at Purchase College

735 Anderson Hill Road, Purchase
(914) 251-6200
www.artscenter.org

Events of interest for the 2003-2004 season include: Southern Soul with Mavis Staples, November 8; Blind Boys of Alabama, February 14, 2004; Neville Brothers, May 15, 2004; Rock & Roll Hall of Fame with Chuck Berry, October 17, 2004.

PJ's Café

451 Esplanade, Pelham Manor
(914) 738-6008

Rabbi Lea Gavieli of the Pelham Jewish Center, a self-described "folkie," created PJ's Café last year as a means of opening the synagogue's doors to all members of the community. Concerts are held right in the synagogue, and refreshments are served afterwards in the social hall. PJ's second season opens with identical twins, Chris and Meredith Thompson, on September 7. November 2 features Hugh Blumenfeld, Connecticut's "State Troubadour."

Tarrytown Music Hall

13 Main Street, Tarrytown
(914) 631-3390; www.tarrytownmusichall.org

Upcoming events include an Oldies concert, September 13; David Bromberg Big Band, October 26; and Little Feat, November 6.

Towne Crier Cafe

130 Route 22, Pawling
(845) 855-1300; www.townecrier.com

Now in its 31st year, the Towne Crier combines dinner and music on Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays, with renowned artists. Coming this fall are Jesse Colin Young, September 14; Patty Larkin, September 27; Garland Jeffries, October 11; The Kennedys, October 17.

The Turning Point

468 Piermont Avenue, Piermont
(845) 359-1089; www.turningpointcafe.com

Since 1976, this Rockland County venue has featured nationally prominent musicians such as Joan Osborne, Janis Ian and John Mayall (for whose album it is named). Fall highlights include Richie Havens, September 5; Al Stewart, September 17 and 18; Chris Smither, October 2.

Watercolor Café

2094 Boston Post Road, Larchmont
(914) 834-2213; www.watercolorcafe.net

This intimate bistro presents, along with four nights a week of jazz, weekly folk acts of national repute. Coming this fall: John Gorka on September 8; Vance Gilbert in October; Sloan Wainwright in November; Cheryl Wheeler in December. Each artist will also participate in the café's Master Songwriters Workshop Series, leading an afternoon program on the day of their show.

– S.H.

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