

Monday Extra

Reviews • Comics • Puzzles • Columns • Features • TV Schedules

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Section

C

Nighttime's the right time

Roanoke's all-night DJs

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It's midnight.

Parties are dying down, traffic lights are blinking at empty streets and restaurants are finishing their clean-ups.

Pat Garrett, Steve Finnegan, Chris Michaels and Tom Ohmsen are just coming to work.

The four are the Roanoke Valley's all-night disc jockeys. They toast late night revelers, nurse hospital employees through the graveyard shift and sound the alarm for early risers.

Garrett mans the shop for WFIR-AM at Towers Shopping Mall. On this night, he is shoeless and wears faded blue jeans and a T-shirt. He is the picture of serenity. Just before he switches on the mike, he coughs hoarsely to clear up his drawl.

At WROV on Cleveland Avenue Southwest, Finnegan plays requests from custodians at shopping centers and young adults manning convenience stores. He makes entries on his "All-night Business Hot Sheet," which lists the names and occupations of his callers.

A bearded Michaels at WSLC in Salem sets up long records and drops to the rug for a quick set of 20 sit-ups. During shorter records, he dashes out of the studio to check teletype machines. There are few new stories.

Because WLRG-FM on Virginia 419 in Roanoke County is almost entirely automated, Ohmsen, 24, has the most pressure-free job of all. He spends the wee hours preparing news and features for Glenn Edwards' morning show. Every half-hour, the bluegrass lover broadcasts weather reports, affecting a smooth, mellow voice to maintain the station's relaxed format.

Each of the night talkers prefers this time of work to all others. Said Ohmsen: "This really is a pretty sedate shift."

That's the way they like it. Garrett called daylight a time of "car horns honking, people swearing at each other, people night."

Finnegan agrees. "It's crazy around here during the day," he said, indicating with a broad sweep of his arm WROV's sales and management offices.

Michaels, who three times has declined moves to normal hours, prefers the after-midnight shift because "it's more laid-back and relaxed." Michaels is so used to having WSLC to himself that on the rare occasions when he comes in during the day, "I'm constantly bouncing into people."

The morning shift's distance from the madding crowd isn't its only lure. In the daytime, secretaries intercept calls to WSLC's disc jockey. But Michaels has made several friends among his listeners. People often call to say, "I'm just getting ready to go to bed. I wanted to say good-night."

WFIR is "a lot more liberal at night," according to Garrett. About 30 percent of the station's records are marked with red dots, which means they can only be played between 7 p.m. and 5 a.m.

Ohmsen appreciates WLRG's nighttime informality. "I can come in here without shaving for three days," he said. Even if early morning etiquette were more strict, it couldn't be enforced. Every day until 5 a.m., said Ohmsen, "I'm my own boss."

The morning shift has another advantage: Between 12 and 5, there are hardly any commercials.

The four jocks have always been night people: Not staying up all night would be against their natures.

When he was a student at Cave Spring High School, Garrett used to stay up all night playing Monopoly — and occasionally dashing to the all-night downtown hamburger and hot dog stand, the Texas Tavern.

One of Garrett's opponents in those marathon Monopoly games became his rival on the airways. WROV's Finnegan worked with Garrett first at Cave Spring's student radio station and later at WFIR.

The two "friendly" rivals of everyday stationing. They'd like to play progressive and southern rock.

The station probably will never come into being, but they enjoy discussing it during anti-dozing phone calls they exchange during their work shift.

When one of the friends gets a request for records not in his station's library, he gives the caller the other station's number.

"We kind of trade people off," said Garrett.

Staying awake is tough for the all-nighters, but most of all for Ohmsen, who only goes on the air for weather reports. Except in emergencies, the only other things he has to do to keep the broadcast going is switch on the network news and reprogram the music machine every hour.

The greatest challenge to his alertness, Ohmsen said, comes when he is recovering from vacations and weekends. It takes him about three days to adjust to regular time when he goes on vacation — and another three to re-adjust when he gets back.

"I usually end up sleeping twice on Sunday," Ohmsen said. The old week's schedule doesn't quite mesh with the new one, and he runs into a "fold in the system." Having retired at an almost-normal hour Saturday night, he's never really sure when to sleep on Sunday. Sometimes he doesn't — till Monday morning.

Ohmsen remembers going to sleep at a



Staff photo by Dan Doughtie

After a night of music, WFIR's Pat Garrett still finds it relaxing at home

fiddler's convention where his band was playing at 5 a.m. Sunday, then waking up at 8. He didn't sleep again till 9 a.m. Monday. That's 24 hours on three hours of sleep.

For Michaels, too, "weekends tend to be a little rough." At times he has stayed awake for 40 hours straight.

Since he works from Saturday midnight until Sunday at 10, Michaels rarely goes to bed when he gets home from work Friday morning. He wants to get as much mileage as he can out of a short weekend.

The 10-hour shift Sunday makes it "hard to really get into church," says Michaels. But he adds he gets to hear three hours of religious programming at work.

Weekends aren't the only fatiguing time for Michaels. He drives to Lynchburg twice a week for a part-time job that lasts up to 14 hours. Then he drives home and returns to work at WSLC.

Tiredness isn't just irritating for the all-night disc jockeys; it can also be dangerous. One rainy morning last October Michaels was driving home on his motorcycle when a car pulled out in front of him. In trying to stop he slipped and dislocated his shoulder.

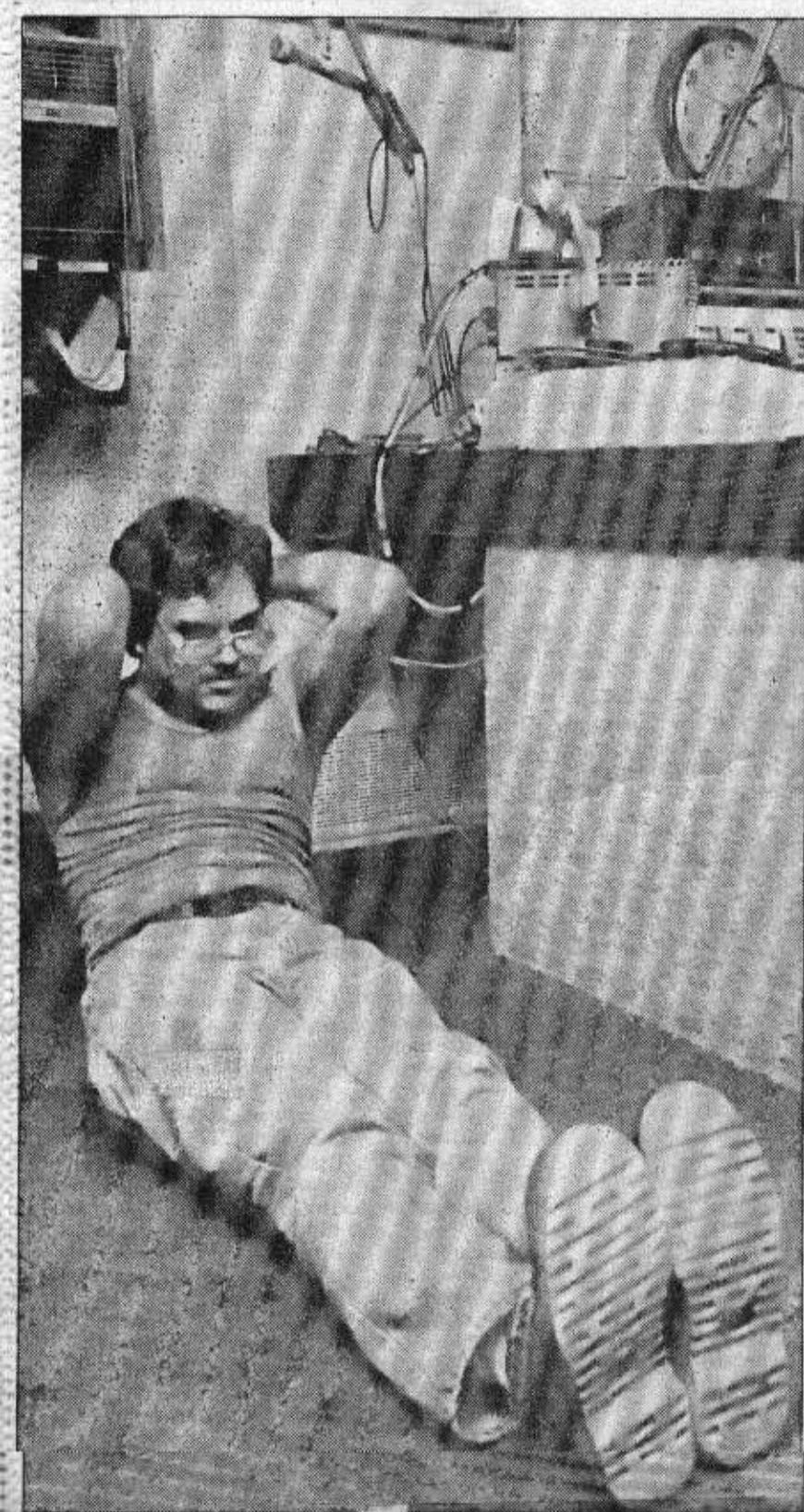
Michaels says the injury, which still gives him trouble, could have been avoided if his reaction time had been shorter. Now

See Night shift, Page C-3



Staff photo by Don Petersen

WROV's Steve Finnegan steadily fills the ashtray with cigarette butts



Staff photo by Don Petersen

2 a.m. sit-ups help keep WSLC's Chris Michaels awake



Staff photo by Dan Doughtie

WLRG's midnight DJ, Tom Ohmsen, plays mandolin at his doorstep