Death of a Motor City Talk Jock

Two-thirty in the morning and the radio station's caller board was still blinking. Ever since the wildcat strike – unauthorized by the national union – had begun in the fall, it seemed every autoworker in Detroit had something to say. A few callers volunteered their names, but most voices on the line remained anonymous, fearing reprisal from either the company or the union. Regardless, they wanted their turn on the town's audio soapbox, WBTL, *The Bolt,* 960 on the AM dial.

The radio host, shirtsleeves rolled to mid-forearm, shoulders rounded, a graying ponytail draped over his collar, pressed his paunch against the edge of the desk and leaned into a tabletop microphone. "I'm Rocky Rhodes, and whether you choose to picket or punch it, I'll be here to take your calls until six a.m. Jack Frost's nipping at your nose, with overnight lows going negatory, so cuddle up with a good friend and keep it tuned to The Bolt all night and all day, workin' the line or on your own time, up high or down low, get the lowdown right here… with local news and local views. Back for more of your calls after these messages." Rocky waved to his sound engineer, who sat beyond the soundproof glass, and rolled back from the desk, pleased.

Like many shows since the strike began, tonight's had word-of-mouth buzz, enough rage or soul-baring to boost listenership with each passing hour. Rocky knew his audience well. He'd spent twenty-six years behind the microphones, through three reincarnations of the 10,000-watt station.

He'd hired on fresh out of trade school and spun 50s oldies until the station was bought by a doddering Ford heir with too much time and money on his hands. The old man considered the likes of Jimi Hendrix and Jim Morrison as corrupting as Karl Marx, as if *Purple Haze* and *Break*

on through to the Other Side were subliminal messages to the country's rag-topped youth. His answer was to fill the airwaves with what he called *the soundtrack of America*, a blend of crooners and Big Band. He figured Bing, Frank and the Dorsey Brothers could inoculate even this blue-collar bastion against infections of liberalism and malcontent.

Rocky tried but failed to convince the old man that rock 'n roll wasn't only for long-haired college kids shouting *One, two, three, four. Mr. President, stop the war*. It was also for a different silent majority, anyone disenfranchised and desperate to be heard. Yes, they were on campuses, but they were also in factories from Pittsburgh to Detroit to Milwaukee.

The dusty format died and, soon thereafter, so did the old man. A new owner came along with an idea: give everyday people a voice. WBTL would be all talk, all the time, and all about auto assembly and the men and women who got the job done. What could be better in a community where one of three radio listeners owed their livelihoods to the building of cars?

Six months after the change, good fortune paid a visit like a spring robin. The burger franchise across the street from the plant folded. The Bolt's owner snapped up the building and moved in the broadcasting equipment.

Now, the big windows that once displayed Burger Chef posters gave an unobscured view of workers coming and going through the main gate, and gave the station's key demographic a view of *talk jocks* as they steamed up the microphone.

Listenership climbed. Rocky became a local celebrity. *What's the word?* became his very own catchphrase. The Rocky Rhodes Show from 10 p.m. to 6 a.m. had the highest ratings. The dual effect of drink and darkness tore down the walls of inhibition and lubed the tongue of any auto assembler with pent-up frustration about his ball-buster foreman. All-night workers tuned in their radios, desperate for distraction from the tedium of their duties.

WBTL now served a different cuisine from the boogie-woogie, doo-wop and saccharine

pop of the old days. The talk jocks were master chefs, whipping up fresh dishes from the basic ingredients of human emotion: rage, desperation and hope. When a caller would lose himself recounting a battle with man or machine, the seven-second delay would shield listeners from splatters of profanity. In such moments, Rocky could feel his audience leaning closer to their radios.

He'd developed a sixth sense for detecting when a caller was holding back. He'd prod with talk of brotherhood: *Don't your fellow workers deserve to know?* He'd light a fire with core values: *When did you know you had to take a stand?*

Talk jocks had the best gig in radio. At a minimum, a music DJ was white noise. At most, he was mood lighting for a Friday night party, work shift or lonely drive home. But a talk jock was so much more, a thinker, interpreter and therapist. He was also a community leader, and, like all leaders, he had to be aware of his constituencies, made difficult by the unauthorized strike.

Without the clarity of an official sanction by the national union, the wildcat action split the town between picketers and clock punchers and left the worker to choose a side.

Strikers painted a familiar picture: the downtrodden everyday hero just wanted to get the job done for a fair wage, but he was undermined by moneygrubbing overlords. The punchers countered: wildcatters were on a floating island, out of a paycheck and out of the brotherhood. If the gamble were to fail, they would be cast adrift forever.

The station's owner had been clear: "Both sides pay the rent."

Rocky looked across the street to the main entrance. The sliding steel gate was joined at the center by a ridiculously thick chain, a symbol of the company's might. The gate had been locked up for weeks now, all workers directed to a side entrance with beefed-up security.

During the days, strikers in knitted hats and wool coats paraded with their signs, taking

breaks to warm their hands over oil drum fires. But now, in the wee hours of the night, the strikers had gone home.

Rocky pressed a spent cigarette into the ashtray, which doubled as a clock, filling to capacity by sunup. He thought of his mother, now gone eight years and four months, who graced the only picture in his wallet. She'd hated the smokes. If he were to find himself unemployed like so many of his listeners, he'd chuck the Camels out of respect for her wishes. But for now, he liked the Jack Palance gravitas smoking gave his voice. He'd never worked the line nor carried a union card, but he had the pipes of a man who'd paid his dues.

A lone figure in a hooded parka trudged down the street toting a large protest sign. Rocky shook another Camel from the pack and tapped the filter end on the desktop. The man, his back turned, positioned his sign in front of the oversized chain and reached to tie the upper corners to the fence. Nice touch, Rocky thought, covering up that God-awful chain. The man appeared to be in no great hurry, taking time to secure the sign well.

The security guards would have it down before daybreak. Affixing strike propaganda to company property was forbidden. But the defiant gesture sent a stronger message than the painted words, which read *Roll All Managers' Heads*. The guy had guts, talking brass like that. A caller with such spirit could start a fire at the top of a show and Rocky could fan the ensuing flames of debate until first light.

What a great dramatic moment: the impassioned worker venturing out alone in numbing cold to post his crudely painted sign. Rocky decided to kick off his next segment with the story and give it a David-and-Goliath spin. He thought of that old poster of a mouse in the shadow of an attacking hawk, talons extended for the kill. But as a last ballsy act of defiance, the mouse flew a bird of its own: a middle finger.

Rocky thought of all the hawks from high school, and imagined the sweet satisfaction of

holding his flip-off digit an inch from their upturned noses. At Lincoln High, he'd dwelled in the underworld like HG Wells' Morlocks. He'd been an audiovisual guy, wheeling projection carts from classroom to classroom as invisibly as Mr. Jim, the black janitor. Back then, Rocky was grateful for anonymity. To be noticed was to be ridiculed, untouchable and unlikable.

Earlier that month two members of the high school's Radio Club had visited the station. Rocky recognized in his guests the frightened creature that had been Stuart Tomlinson, the name on Rocky's driver's license. One kid was skinny like Rocky used to be. The other kid had Don Knotts eyes and no chin. Both responded to questions with the word burps and awkward silences of someone who'd suffered self-inflicted verbal gaffes since entering the public school system.

But they came out from behind their defenses when they saw the equipment, fridge-sized transmitters and consoles with more knobs and dials than a plane's cockpit. Rocky remembered escaping to the school's audiovisual supply room, a place the popular kids wouldn't be caught dead in. He remembered the smell of solder, 4-in-1 oil and scorched dust on vacuum tubes. Most of all, he remembered the relief.

Rocky watched the students, with their bad haircuts and scrawny necks, as they marveled. He wanted to grab them by the shoulders and say *I know you race between classes like a sniper has a bead on you. I know you'd rather tear out your own fingernails than set up projectors for the football team, the players' eyes on your back as they compete to be the cruelest, their put-downs like lashes from a leather whip. I know what you'll* never *tell, that in those moments, with an ache behind your breastbone, you see your mother's face. You're glad she'll never know how they torment you, but you still wish she'd whisk you away.*

Of course Rocky hadn't said any of these things. Instead, he showed the boys around the studio and extended more courtesy than they'd ever known. In their moments together, he'd

enjoyed their admiration a bit too much, which now made him feel guilty.

He tapped off a dangling ash and raised his eyes to the plate glass window. The man in the parka was gone.

Beyond the glass, the audio engineer counted down with his fingers until the ON AIR sign lighted above Rocky's head.

"We have, um, Joe calling," Rocky said cheerfully, "Hey Joe, you're on The Bolt. What's the word?"

"Let's talk about privacy," said a faraway voice. "Does the company have the right to know who's fucking who?"

Saved again by the seven-second delay, the sound engineer intercepted the FCC violation without raising an eyebrow. The station’s jingle played only long enough to obscure the profanity.

"Let's keep a lid on the four-letter words, my friend," Rocky said, "but your point remains. You think the company crossed a line?"

"They practically cavity search guys showing up for work, and now they're going through lockers. You think that's right, Rocky?"

The caller's voice sounded distant and tinny, and accompanied by a steady buzz like an old neon sign. Rocky touched his ear as he made eye contact with his engineer who shrugged and looked bored.

Disguised voices had become more common since the strike. Callers would hold their noses, cover the mouthpiece with a handkerchief, or speak through a cut-out milk carton. Rocky didn't care what they did as long as they sliced open a vein on the air and bled bright red emotion.

"The company claims it's a security measure because of the bomb threats," Rocky said. A pro-union underground organization that called itself Ram’s Head had sent threatening notes to the plant manager. "You don't buy it?"

"It's pure intimidation, just like sixty years ago. They call it union busting."

"You seem to know your history."

"Now let's say they don't find a union pamphlet in some guy's lunchbox. Instead they find a love note from his girlfriend. You think they'll fold it up neatly and put it right back under the PB&J where they found it? Hell no. They'll drool over every sexy word. Where's the dignity in that, Rocky?"

Through the distortion, the voice was more air than vocal cord, controlled and cyclic, hitting a peak with the word *dignity* and floating down like a leaf.

Rocky had dealt with every character imaginable over the years, and he could handle them. There was the fry cook who accused his wife on the air of banging their pastor. And there was the newly unemployed and despondent line worker, clicking the cylinder on a revolver next to the phone's mouthpiece.

But Joe -- probably a made-up name -- kept putting the question back to Rocky. That was unusual. The talk jock kept it moving. "Let's hear from listeners who share--"

"Some manager signed off on those locker searches. His head oughta roll, don't you think, Rocky?"

What? Rocky connected the dots. He met the engineer's eyes and pointed a thumb toward the street. The engineer nodded and scratched his chin.

"Joe, did you just hang a sign on the front gate of the plant?"

"Yes I did. Would you please read it aloud for the benefit of your audience?"

"Fair enough. Hey everybody, I'm looking at a cardboard sign, maybe a few feet square,

that says *Roll All Managers' Heads*. Now Joe, that's pretty intense, man. Anger like that comes from the soul. What sent you out on a brass monkey night? Something to get off your chest?"

"I'm angry, Rocky. How can anyone not be? How can anyone sit on a fence in times like these? Which side are you on, Rocky?"

"You're not alone, my friend. Many workers are feeling--"

"No, I'm talking about *you*, Rocky. How do you sleep when good men and women are having their dignity trampled by greedy company bosses who oughta have their heads on pikes along the street like lamp posts?"

A switched flipped in Rocky's mind. Joe had entered dangerous territory by mentioning violence, whether metaphorical or not. The talk jock faced a decision. He could drop the caller now, leaving the danger hanging in the airwaves, or keep him on the line and try to defuse the situation. The engineer passed an index finger across his throat. Rocky flashed an open hand and spoke. "No one should get hurt because of this strike, don't you think, Joe?"

"Name one great struggle for the working man that didn't spill blood. March 7, 1932: company thugs shot and killed four autoworkers over in Dearborn. Maybe it's our turn, huh Rocky?"

The engineer grabbed the phone and began punching digits.

Rocky decided to try to keep Joe on the air, at least until the police could get involved. "That group, er, Ram's Head... they made threats, but what good did it do? Now everyone's suspicious, as if every worker has a bomb in his coat. We don't want that."

Joe paused before responding. The dead space made Rocky uneasy. "Very clever, Rocky. You figured out my poster faster than I thought you would."

Rocky massaged his temples, confused. He looked out the window and read the sign again. Then it became clear. The initials of the first three words, followed by...

"You're Ram's Head," Rocky declared softly, his throat suddenly dry. He muted his microphone, fumbled for his cup and took a gulp of lukewarm coffee.

"One of many, and our numbers are growing. Tell the listeners how you feel now, Rocky?"

The talk jock desperately wanted to be asking the questions instead of receiving them, but he couldn't focus. "Many people don't think you're for real."

"That's about to change."

"Meaning what?"

Another unsettling pause. "Rocky, do me a favor and maybe save a life."

Rocky's stomach flipped, like when you thought you'd reached the bottom of a staircase but one step remained.

Joe continued. "Look out that fast food window of yours and tell me if anyone's walking along the street. I can't see from where I am."

The engineer looked pale, telephone handset to his ear, lips moving fast. Rocky picked up the microphone and cleared the cord from the edge of the desk. The equipment felt cold and wet in his hands. He walked to the floor-to-ceiling glass and peered in both directions.

"The street's clear. Why do you want to know?"

"Because I don't want any of my brothers to get hurt by the explosion."

Rocky felt unable to breathe. His next words were almost a whisper. "W-what about me?"

But before Joe could answer, Joe's sign, and the gate on which it was hung, blew up.

When Rocky was a child, his mother told him he couldn't fly. Birds, bats and even some squirrels could fly, but people could not.

Of course, it was too soon for her to know the truth.

He passed through the glass as if it were wax paper. He lifted off, his arms angled back like

the wings of an F-15. He'd gained so much weight over the years, but now -- oh! -- if she could see him. She'd purse her lips at something so daring, yet inside she'd be proud of him, flying free with none of the old worries about his place among people. He looked down at them now, with their cars and struggles and black rooftops.

Mother used to quote Browning: *My sun sets to rise again*. Rocky raised his eyes to his future bright, the sky brilliant white from a distant dot on the horizon, all framed by roiling black clouds. A rumble reverberated from a heavenly burst and spidered red lightning like varicose veins on an old woman's leg. Streamers of red satin softly swayed, their ends attached somewhere above. His arms brushed the crimson strips and rippled the parallel lines. For a moment, he felt he was doing it wrong.

Nobody taught us how to fly, and nobody taught us how to die. But all along there'd been a right way to leave behind this mortal coil, if only we weren't so late to learn. He twisted his body until he could pass between the ribbons without touching them, his wing-limbs gently leading his torso, light as a leaf.

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