

THIS WAS OUR MUSIC

by MIKE ROTHSCHILD

CHARACTERS

ALAN, late 50's
DENISE, early 30's

SETTING

A small studio in a public radio station

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Lights come up on a radio control room. A desk with a microphone, a headset and a primitive control panel. Vinyl records are splayed across the desk and a red ON AIR sign indicates we're live.

ALAN sits at the microphone.

ALAN

Welcome back to Moonlight Jazz on KCPR, California Public Radio. My name is Alan Palmer, it's 10:12 on a rainy Friday night, and we've got jazz records to see you through to the morning light. The piece you just heard was Ornette Coleman and "Blues Connotation" from his album "This is Our Music." Don Cherry on the pocket trumpet, Charlie Haden on double bass and Ed Blackwell on drums backing him up on the classic piece from 1961. Before that was "Four by Five" by McCoy Tyner. Joe Henderson on sax, Ron Carter on bass and the great Elvin Jones kept time on the drums.

As he speaks, a young-ish woman in formal clothing comes in. Alan barely takes notice of her.

ALAN

And we started off the set with a crazy piece of crazy from the late Charles Mingus, "Theme for Lester Young" from the great "Mingus, Mingus, Mingus, Mingus, Mingus."

(He shuffles papers)

We've got two minutes of business coming up, then we're on our way to Montreaux with Miles and Quincy, when they play the classic "Blues for Pablo." Right after this.

He hits a button and the ON AIR sign goes off.

DENISE

Hi. Alan, right? We met last week. I'm Denise, the new programming manager.

ALAN

Oh, right. Sorry, I'm terrible with names the first time I meet someone.

DENISE

Not a problem. I've met about a hundred new folks since Monday, so I'm having trouble myself.

ALAN

Are you still working? It's pretty late.

DENISE

Yeah, I had to stay to finish some paperwork, and I wanted to come down to chat with you.

ALAN

I'm on the air.

DENISE

Right, yes.

ALAN

If you want to sit in on the show, just let me know beforehand. I try to keep a certain vibe in here.

DENISE

Oh, yeah, yeah. Totally. You've been doing this for a long time and I don't want to mess with your mojo. Like I said, I just wanted to talk to you for a minute. You have so many records in here, how do you pick out what you want to play?

ALAN

I work on the playlists all day, keeping in mind work I haven't played in a while, what fits well together and what listeners respond to. Then I put it all together, make sure all the transitions work and go on the air.

DENISE

Wow. That must be a lot of work.

ALAN

It's only work if you don't love it.

DENISE

Totally. It's like exercise.

ALAN

Sure. I'm back on in about a minute, but I do the afternoon shift on Monday. We could talk then.

DENISE

Actually, that's what I wanted to talk about.

ALAN

My Monday show?

DENISE

Your show in general. There are some changes coming down the pike for the station, and I wanted to talk to you before any rumors start going around.

ALAN

Changes? What changes?

The ON AIR sign goes red.

ALAN

Thanks for sticking with us on a rainy Friday night. Up next we've got Miles Davis and Quincy Jones from their "Live at Montreaux" album, a great introduction to the journey that was Miles live on stage. After that we've got something a little more modern, with Freddie Hubbard performing a track from his 1971 album "First Light." Herbie Hancock, George Benson and Jack DeJohnette on that and Ron Carter popping up again on the bass. Hope you enjoy them, and we'll be back.

He clicks off his mic.

DENISE

You know all those names by heart?

ALAN

I've been playing these songs for years, and before that, I was listening to them. They're in my blood and my bones. What changes?

She sits down.

DENISE

As you know, the past few years haven't been kind to public radio, both in terms of ratings and finances.

ALAN

Yes.

DENISE

The challenges of staying competitive in an increasingly hostile market have forced the board of KCPR to explore ways that we can stay relevant while maintaining the station's signature values.

ALAN stares at her.

ALAN

We're changing formats? After 56 years on the air?

DENISE

It's not so much a change as it is a refocusing to concentrate on news and informational programming.

ALAN

You've got to be kidding me. We're becoming a talk radio station? The board signed off on this? Bobby Hanson signed off on this?

DENISE

It was Mr. Hanson's idea.

ALAN

This doesn't make any sense. California has innumerable talk radio stations and precious few outlets for jazz.

DENISE

I can assure you that this is mission-based decision rather than a market-driven one.

ALAN

That's fantastic. I want to see Bobby as soon as possible.

DENISE

He's asked me to oversee the transition. If you need to talk to him, you can talk to me.

ALAN

The hell I can. You're taking my station away from me.

DENISE

Alan, it's not that simple. Our market research indicates that people like the IDEA of jazz much more than they like listening to it. Honestly, most people can't name a single jazz musician other than Miles Davis. And your encyclopedic knowledge of the music, while laudable, is also intimidating.

ALAN

I am not allowing the board of KCPR to make my playlists.

DENISE

Our research indicates people want music that's more mellow, less confrontational and requires no knowledge of the history and players. We'd like you to transition to smooth jazz.

Dead silence.

ALAN

Smooth. Jazz?

DENISE

You know, Kenny G. And such. It's something that had a positive response in our focus groups. And the licensing fees are surprisingly low. We'll be leaving you on Friday nights and Sunday's. Also, we've made Tuesday at 4AM available, and that can be a free-form hour.

ALAN

Oh, thank you so much!

DENISE

And this is in the planning stages, so for now, keep playing your normal music. And don't say anything on air, please.

The red ON AIR light goes on. ALAN stares at DENISE, who frantically points at him.

ALAN

Uh...sorry. That was Miles Jones and Quincy...Jones...from the live album "Live at Montreaux..." I'm sorry, I've just received some disturbing news that I need to share with you.

DENISE shakes her head and waves her hands to get him to stop.

ALAN

As we know, this has been an especially brutal time for public radio. We're being blamed for all manner of federal budgetary nonsense while being hammered for being biased, liberal, intellectual and all of the above. Through it all, KCPR has provided you with an alternative to the screaming street-corner charlatans with their unending stream of depression, recession, war and death battering you from every direction. But market research triumphs good intentions, and next week, KCPR will become a talk radio station.

Now in a full-on panic, DENISE gets out her cell phone, and ALAN grabs it out of

her hand and tosses it off stage. She runs off to get it.

ALAN

I've also been told that the timeless, vital jazz music I've been playing all my life is no longer required or desired by the marketplace, and that I'm to begin playing smooth jazz. Now, you may wonder what I think of smooth jazz. I think smooth jazz is to music as getting a rectal exam is to sex. It's utterly free of soul, heart or balls. It's music that was made to be heard in dentists office, elevators and anywhere else you want to get the hell out of. If you held a gun to my head and said "listen to smooth jazz or die" I'd BEG you to shoot me. If I had my way, I'd round up anyone who plays or listens to smooth jazz and set them on fire while their children watch! But since I have no choice in what happens to me or my music, I'm going to abandon my normal playlist and play you the strangest, most abrasive and unlistenable jazz I can get my hands on. Starting with...

(looks through record pile)

Side 3 of Miles Davis' acid jazz tranwreck "Dark Magus." No melody, no tune, just 45 minutes of electric acid trip dark night of the soul freaking out. Back after this.

He flicks his mic off. DENISE stares at him.

ALAN

What? Oh, right. I wasn't supposed to say anything. Sorry.

DENISE

How could you do this? You just said anyone who listens to smooth jazz should be burned alive. ON THE AIR!

ALAN

They don't need to be burned alive on the air. Just burned alive.

DENISE

You were going to be given every opportunity to express your opinions and ask questions. The Tuesday slot was free-form! Do you know how rare that is?

ALAN

An hour in the middle of the night on Tuesday. Thanks for your generosity.

DENISE

I know this must be hard for you. You've been in the business for, what, sixty years? But times change, and KCPR has to change along with them.

ALAN

How? By spitting in our listeners faces?

DENISE

Read the market research! People listen to smooth jazz.

ALAN

Because they're getting a root canal when it comes on!

DENISE

Just play along. For the good of the station. And your family.

The red ON AIR light comes on.

ALAN

Play along? Nobody who got anywhere got there by playing along. Miles Davis didn't play along. John Coltrane didn't play along when he recorded "A Love Supreme." Charles Mingus and Charlie Parker didn't play along.

DENISE

And look where they are! They're dead! You play music performed by dead people and listened to by nobody who matters. Jazz is dead, just like poetry is dead, painting is dead and theatre is dead! Nobody cares about any of that crap except elitist intellectuals who would be sleeping under bridges if they had to do honest work!

ALAN

Then I quit. Any jazz station in the country would hire me in a second.

DENISE

Really? You know a lot of jazz stations that are hiring right now? You know a lot of jazz stations that EXIST right now? Because I sure don't. It's play or pay, Alan.

ALAN

Fine.

He gets up and starts to leave.

DENISE

Where are you going?

ALAN

I'm going to go home, have a whiskey and listen to some jazz. In the morning, I'll think about what I want to do with the rest of my life. In the meantime, we've been on the air for 45 seconds. I'm sure the elitist intellectuals still listening will be happy to go sleep under a different bridge with their disposable incomes and advanced degrees. But they don't matter, right?

ALAN exits. DENISE, in a panic, runs to the mic.

DENISE

Let me assure all of our loyal listers out there that the opinions of the previous broadcaster in no way reflect the views of KCPR, its board of directors or corporate donors.

(beat)

So who's ready for some smooth jazz? Right?

BLACKOUT