

# In the community

## NY free-speech WBAI radio ceases local broadcasts

By Vinette K. Pryce  
Special Assignment

Listeners to New York's listener-supported WBAI-FM, community radio station were shocked Monday when programming switched from local morning broadcasts to feature west coast California features.

For the very first time since going on air in 1955, local programming was abruptly pre-empted, station manager and program director along with full-time staffers were given pink slips.

"We realize this news will come as a deep and painful shock, but we can no longer jeopardize the survival of the entire network," Pacifica Network, the parent company that also owns stations in Houston, Berkeley, Los Angeles and Washington D.C. said.

Reportedly debts in the millions with little promise of a bailout attributed to the demise. "I was listening and heard the program but didn't think anything of it because I assumed it was part of the fundraising lineup scheduled since the beginning of the month," Habte Selassie, host of the long-running "Labbrish" aired there said.

Selassie, a 40-year volunteer of the liberal station said soon afterwards his phone buzzed with breaking news about the change in programming there. Engineer and program host Reggie Johnson had already reported to work at 388 Atlantic Ave. in Brooklyn when he was told his service was no longer needed.

Along with paid colleagues who regularly show up he was informed that the station had switched formats. "Due to serious and persistent financial losses" all paid staff were fired.

According to reports from the parent company "Pacifica Across America Network" will replace the local New York shows. Pacifica Foundation claims that the sudden change was forced due to the recurring drain on four other sister stations that have regularly funded salaries and other expenses.

Local producers maintain that despite relentless and consistent pleas to supporters to help defray burgeoning costs — which have been reported to exceed \$4 million — the station has continued to operate at a deficit.

Located at the middle of the radio dial at 99.5 FM, throughout the years WBAI boasted an alternative format partly enabled by generous contributors who regularly donated to pay for an expensive transmitter at the Empire State Building as well as Manhattan addresses at Wall St., 34th St. and Eighth Avenue.

Although a majority of the producers donate their time



to feature programming representing "the 99 percent" it seemed as if there was never enough money to sustain the station.

The non-commercial, progressive medium also described to be a "free speech radio" aimed at a diverse ethnic listenership that accommodated Caribbean, Irish, hip-hop, music, film, science, science fiction, politics, theater, poetry and a myriad of interests.

"Any Saturday" hosted by David Rothenburg introduced a plethora of topical news. Reportedly, one of the all-time favorites the two-hour program delves into a potpourri presentation with the host opining on topics relevant to television, radio, film, books, television, commentary, interviews as well as reliably offering choice seats to Off-Broadway and Broadway shows.

The former publicist to Elizabeth Taylor, Mel Torme, Bette Davis, Rosemary Clooney and numerous celebrated Hollywood names, the veteran public relations specialist is also founder of the Fortunate Society, an organization that provides half-way house accommodations to exonerated prisoners.

Each Saturday he is also known to entreat listeners with summaries of tweets by President Donald Trump and other White House and City Hall insiders. Followed by "On The Count," another programs hosted by former prison inmates attracted huge audiences interested in prison reforms and offered pertinent updates about incarcerated and freed individuals.

Throughout the years, the Saturday broadcasts was followed by "Radio Free Eyre," a program aimed at a predominantly Irish audience. Presenting current news about conflicts with England, Catholics and

Protestants, the IRA and news mainstream media frequently ignores, its appeal crossed continents with clear, concise two-hour presentations.

Felipe Luciano focused on Latin rhythms. His stellar

productions connected music from Cuba, Puerto Rico, Spain, the Dominican Republic with rhythm and blues, hip-hop, jazz and reggae.

For 40 years, Jamaica-born Selassie refined his "Labbrish"

to accommodate talk and music Africans and Caribbean nationals tuned in to hear before dawn. Lister Hewan Lowe, another Jamaican aired more fiery rhetoric on his "Burn, Baby Burn" Thursday morning segments.

Featuring current information from co-respondents in England, Jamaica and throughout the USA, the former promotion ace to launch Bob Marley from Island Records owned the 3 a.m. timeframe he broadcasted.

Each Friday evening, Im-hotep Gary Byrd claimed the "Global Black Experience" to connect cultures for a unique perspective that highlights the African American heritage.

In a LATE-BREAKING UPDATE, by Tuesday a Supreme Court judge overruled the decision citing "Inappropriate" action by the parent company. By blocking the action, the judge ordered the station to return 10 displaced staffers to their positions. The legal decision also included a ruling to program local shows. The temporary restraining order will remain in effect until Oct. 18 when a second hearing will be held.



Lister Hewan Lowe, host of "Burn, Baby Burn"