



Mr. Miller recording a segment of The Vinyl Vault on Summer, featuring The Kink's hit "Sunny Afternoon" - a RODE NT2A microphone into an Aphex 230 Master Voice Channel processor, then into a digital mixing board and finally recorded into Garageband on a Mac computer

JORDANA DIVON

JORDANA DIVON

SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL

PUBLISHED AUGUST 16, 2013

UPDATED MAY 11, 2018

PUBLISHED AUGUST 16, 2013

This article was published more than 6 years ago. Some information in it may no longer be current.

0 COMMENTS ← SHARE

On a spring night in 2008, three friends sat around a table in a north Toronto basement lamenting the state of contemporary radio.

"It was part gripe session, part thinking about what could be done better," Todd Miller, one-third of that trio, admits five years later from the same basement.

At the end of that conversation, two of those friends vowed to create a station that would meet their standard of excellence. Though Mr. Miller's co-conspirators would eventually bow out of the project, the 48-year-old software consultant remained committed to the task.

Within a few months, Mr. Miller launched Radio That Doesn't Suck (RTDS) from his newly re-outfitted basement. The Internet-based station is a labour of love that he has since nurtured to the tune of \$25,000 – a veritable bargain, he says, thanks to his decision to stream the entire production online.

"With a traditional radio station, there's hundreds of thousands of dollars in transmitters and equipment. I put a significant investment into this studio, but as long as you're on the Internet it's fairly simple to do," he says, noting he can control the entire system from his iPad, a convenience that allows him to maintain his consulting career and even "go on the occasional vacation" without missing a beat of on-air programming.

Though he recently started a separate, for-profit station called Listen UP! Talk Radio, in order to make a bit of money in relation to his love of radio, Mr. Miller says his decision to keep RTDS untouched by sponsorship and commercials means he pays for its modest monthly operating costs out of pocket.

There still appears to be great value in that exchange. Radio That Doesn't Suck has managed to attract a steady stream of listeners who, so far, would seem to agree with its lofty title. Mr. Miller says his website receives around 10,000 unique visitors a month, while tracking software reveals that listeners are tuning in as far away as Russia and China and from places as remote as a UN ship docked off the coast of Africa.

"We're also huge in Germany," the Toronto native says. "I don't know why. It's bizarre."

Mr. Miller admits his format-free programming is not for everyone, and that his eclectic choices "annoy" as many people as they entertain, but this unpredictability is exactly what he found lacking in formula-driven mainstream radio.

"[My show] is so diverse; [the audience] is going to hear a song by Led Zeppelin, then they'll hear a classic piece by Vanessa Mae, then they'll hear a comedy piece from Martin Mull then they'll hear Toni Braxton, then they'll hear jazz by Louis Armstrong. And it repeats. And they don't know what to make of it," he says.

The lifelong music lover has always entertained a taste for the unusual. Like many who follow the beat, Mr. Miller's started honing his radio chops early, mimicking announcers with a stick in his hand in front of the mirror at age five. As a teen, he spent hours pawing through rows of vinyl records at Yonge Street's Sam the Record Man to seek out interesting artists and began composing and performing his own songs in high school.

After graduating from Northview Heights Secondary School, the ambitious young musician landed a job at Sony Records, inspecting compact discs (CDs) for quality control in the label's manufacturing facility.

"I thought, what better way to get my material showcased than by walking the same halls as these power brokers in the music industry, seeing them every day and saying, 'Hi, how are you? Oh, by the way I write songs here's my demo.'"

Though his drive to become a performing artist would eventually fizzle, Mr. Miller's stint at Sony drew him into an unexpected career. Thanks to his experience in quality control, he was hired by a quality management software company in 1999 and would spend the next eight years flying around North America to train companies on the technology.

An independent consultant since 1999, Mr. Miller also helps companies compile documents that outline their ISO quality standards for staff training purposes. "The daytime consulting is very left brain, non-creative, strategic thinking," he admits.

But as anyone who's ever been bitten by the bug will tell you, the music will always find a way to lure you back. By 2004, the entrepreneur found himself dabbling in online radio just to revive the old connection. He started compiling and uploading playlists to a dumb server (essentially an open-source server where people can upload content for free) in the U.S., teaching himself how to navigate the online radio format.

The leap to a more sophisticated operation like RTDS would take some time, but Mr. Miller's ease with technology has made it a fairly smooth transition. His business experience has also taught him how to run a more efficient on-air ship.

"I've had to be smart because when you're a solopreneur you have to be really nimble. I have to be able to respond to challenges quickly because I don't have that depth of talent I can rely on yet. At some point hopefully," he says.

He's building up to it slowly, having introduced seven volunteer hosts and an assistant musical director into the fold, but RTDS remains very much a one-man show from the control decks where Mr. Miller oversees every aspect, from online scheduling to equipment selection.

He's proud of what he's built. "We decided to do it right, so I spent the money to get professional equipment. When you hear someone with a second-hand laptop and really cheap microphone, you can hear the difference," says Mr. Miller, who also hosts

under the stage name Don River.

His Rode NT2A microphones, worth \$1,000 a pop, are the same you'd find in any mainstream hit factory and were purchased to match the quality of his Aphex 230 Master Voice Channel processor, compressors and digital mixing board.

Sound quality is key for the self-taught broadcaster, but Mr. Miller admits he was keen to make an impression on the eyes as well as the ears. "I even got the professional-grade microphone stands that the radio stations use so that people walk in and the optics are, 'OK, we're talking about a pro setup here. That's really the vibe I want to give off.'"

Despite this penchant for modern technology, there's one vintage indulgence on which Mr. Miller refuses to budge: vinyl.

With a personal collection of 2,500 records, plus an additional 4,000 records on loan from a friend, Mr. Miller's basement is an analog music lover's dream. Walls of records stacked in a cluster of well-organized shelves could keep a vinyl fan happily occupied for weeks.

Although it takes him much longer to process songs for airplay from his record collection versus a CD or mp3 track, the father of five says it's worth the effort.

"Vinyl is warmer. CD is math, it's digital," he explains. "I prefer to digitize the vinyl, the pops and the scratches and the noise that people can hear and know that it lovingly came from vinyl."

It's also the reason for his unusual demographic gap. Mr. Miller's largest group of listeners fit the 45-to-54-year-old demographic "because the music we skew toward which is typically of the vinyl era, so most of our shows are in the mid-60 to 80s."

What it doesn't explain, at least intuitively, is why his second largest demographic consists of 13-to-17-year old boys. Mr. Miller's teenaged nephew quickly set him straight on that matter.

"[He] started drooling the first time he came down here," he says with a laugh, acknowledging the substantial group of CD – and iPod-reared youngsters who nurture an enormous passion for vintage records.