

The Business

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All Talk

Chicago Public Radio isn't just ditching its plans for an all-music station—it's ditching music programs altogether.

By Deanna Isaacs

When Chicago Public Radio general manager Torey Malatia announced plans last summer to split WBEZ programming into two streams—talk on 91.5, music on 89.5—he made a point of leaving himself some wiggle room. Last week he not only wiggled but did a major flip, announcing a change in plans that apparently came as a surprise even to many on his staff. The new plan, tentatively scheduled to go into effect early next year, calls for dumping music programs entirely and turning WBEZ into a second talk station. In a related move, longtime WBEZ music director Chris Heim was let go on April 4, her position eliminated. (Heim couldn't be reached for comment.) Tony Sarabia will replace her as host of *Passport* for the next few months. Malatia says the remaining music staff will be reassigned to public affairs or asked to help develop the new programming.

WBEZ, the Chesterton outpost acquired by CPR over three years ago, is about to get a wattage boost that'll expand its broadcast to nearly the entire Chicago area. The station is now being envisioned as a "multimedia service" intended to snare a younger and more diverse audience. Malatia says WBEZ will continue to do interviews with local musicians on shows like *Eight Forty-Eight*, and WBEZ will frequently play full cuts as segments within its public affairs-and-culture format, but neither will offer a "consistent stream of music, no place where you can go and hear music for a half hour at a stretch." Shows that will disappear include local productions like *Comin' Home*, *Encanto Latino*, and *Jazz with Dick Buckley* and syndicated programs including *Afropop Worldwide* and *Blues Before Sunrise*.

The new 89.5 will largely emanate from the Navy Pier studios—which are being remodeled to accommodate a newspaper-style city desk—but will also make use of community bureaus in the Chicago area and Chesterton, each staffed with a reporter and/or a producer. Aimed at people who aren't interested in "long-form network-based discussions," the programming will have a local focus. "It won't be civic journalism," he says, "but it will have elements of that—the firsthand view of the community through the eyes of the community."



Torey Malatia

Segments will be "mixed up" so you get a sense "in a short period of time of a whole bunch of things happening." He says that's the kind of pacing and variety nontraditional public radio listeners are used to, "what they hear when they go to [commercial] stations or to television or the Internet—one Web site after another, rapid movement." There'll be a separate Web site intended to feed the new stream, where people could be "talking about suggested segments or ideas, or even producing audio that we might be able to work with them on." If the plan is successful, he says, 89.5 will be so distinctive from 91.5 that "people will stumble upon it and wonder what this is and who's behind it. I don't think they'll have a clue that it's a Chicago Public Radio product."

Malatia says he wants to find a place for "every single person on staff" before anyone new is hired. Over the next six weeks they'll develop a budget to present to the board, which could still scuttle the plan. Though this has to be a more expensive option than an all-music station, he says it might be just as manageable if the Web component becomes a major source of content. Malatia doesn't know of any existing models for the whole package, and says he expects that as they experiment with these ideas they may "morph into something a little different." He says the change of heart was evolutionary, driven by the "melting away of public service media around us" through mergers and disinvestment. "As we

looked at the highest and best use of this new resource," he says, "it became clear to us that while doing music serves many wonderful purposes, what's needed now is a place where people can be encouraged to think about making change and can face issues that divide us as a community."

Dick Buckley, who's been on WBEZ for nearly 30 years as an independent contractor and on the Chicago airwaves since 1956, said last weekend all he knows is what he read in the paper: "They haven't discussed word one with me. But I've found during all the years I've spent in radio, once the big decision is made, nothing will change it." For Buckley, who's recovering from surgery and whose wife is in assisted

care, the loss of his Sunday afternoon gig comes at a particularly bad time. "I'm 81, too old to go out and humbly ask someone to hire a dinosaur," he says. "I've given this a lot of thought. I think I'll put together some lectures. But if you know anybody that needs a good jazz program..."

Hizzoner Would Approve

Why should ticket brokers be the only ones to benefit? Prop Thtr's production of Neil Giuntoli's *Hizzoner* is a hit, and Prop is raising the price from \$25 to \$32, effective May 1. Director Stefan Brun says the addition of a Saturday matinee means they have to feed cast and crew. The show's in an open run. **B**

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Restaurants

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R

Ladies and Gentlemen, Your Top 50

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The Raters are a small army of volunteers who send us feedback every time they eat out. Their reports feed the online database that helps keep the Reader's restaurant listings up to the minute.

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ITALIAN | DINNER: MONDAY-SATURDAY | CLOSED SUNDAY

■■■■ A Tavola is the sort of place you could walk past a hundred times and never notice. There isn't a sign in front, only the restaurant's name etched in the frosted glass of a front window. The dining room, on the first floor of a converted house in Ukrainian Village, is dimly lit and intimate, with only nine tables total. The menu is equally tiny, enough so that strict vegetarians will have a difficult time making the most of it. I went with the halibut, lightly

dusted with seasoned flour and panfried, accompanied by a lemon and caper sauce—simple, but perfectly moist and light. Of the three appetizers on the menu, the combo of grilled portobello and sauteed oyster mushrooms stood out—the flavor was surprisingly complex. There are also three small pasta dishes, including the best gnocchi I've ever had, swimming in sage butter and topped with fried sage leaves. The "vanilla-scented" panna cotta (sorry, but that's a descriptor best left to candles) I had for dessert looked like flan and tasted like marshmallow. Fortunately, I like marshmallows. I'm also one who believes there are few more wonderful things you

can do to food than bake it with a crisp crust of Parmesan cheese, which is why the polenta, thick and gooey, may have been my favorite. There was one bite left at the end of the night, and I seriously thought about having it wrapped up. **David Wilcox**

Alinea

1723 N. Halsted | 312-867-0110

F 10.0 | S 9.7 | A 8.3 | \$\$\$\$ (6 REPORTS)

AMERICAN CONTEMPORARY/REGIONAL | DINNER: SUNDAY, WEDNESDAY-SATURDAY | CLOSED MONDAY-TUESDAY

■■■■ Discreetly located in a town house spitting distance from chef Grant Achatz's first

employer, Charlie Trotter, Alinea is marked only by a valet's sandwich board at the curb. Inside, a dining room and glass-walled kitchen share the first floor; up a set of glass stairs covered by metal mesh mats are two more small, luxuriously spare dining rooms. The menu has changed since I went there, but the concept remains the same: prix fixe tasting menus of experimental cuisine in 12 (\$125) or a daunting 24 (\$175) courses; wine pairings add to the bill. Achatz's initial offerings included bacon mounted on a trapeze and the by-now-notorious PB&J amuse—a peeled grape slathered with peanut butter, wrapped in brioche, and served, with stem, atop a wicked-looking wire contraption. His

current menu opens with Hot Potato, a tiny bowl of chilled potato soup with a pin bearing a chunk of hot potato, Parmesan, butter, and a slice of black truffle; to eat it you slide the pin out so the potato and truffle drop into the soup, then slurp it as you would an oyster. Lamb comes under a veil of eucalyptus, foie gras with hibiscus over a small bowl of blueberry soda, duck with a pillow of "mace air." The Alinea experience remains tightly controlled, with specific instructions as to how certain dishes should be eaten. Under less polished conditions this would be annoyingly pretentious, but the soothing rituals of fine dining can take the edge off the edgiest of cuisines. **Martha Bayne**

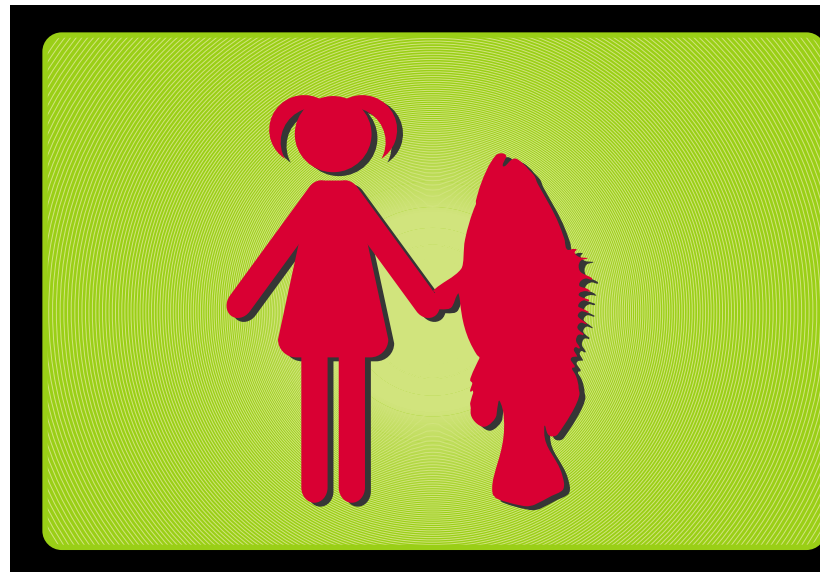
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