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The Ballad of Laura Ellen

KPIG loses its matriarch and the radio industry its last maverick

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By WALLACE BAINE

Sentinel staff writer

To understand Laura Ellen Hopper, you had to talk music with her.

Oh, she had other passions. She loved horses all her life and spent as much leisure time as she could manage in the saddle. She was an excellent cook and was especially devoted to wood-fired stoves. She proudly restored an old Airstream trailer. She was devoted to her husband, Frank, her daughter, Elsie, and a confederacy of close friends that encompassed miles and years.

But any portrait of the woman mourned by so many this week up and down the California coast and across the country would have to begin and end with music.

Hopper's friend Gail Korich had countless conversations with her about music, many times sitting on the floor of her office at KPIG [107.5 FM] in Watsonville over coffee.

"There was nothing like the light in her eyes when she found something she really liked," said Korich, who works at the Santa Cruz-based Hawaiian-music recording label Dancing Cat. "She was

About Laura Ellen

Writer and former KFAT staffer Gilbert Klein is collecting stories about Laura Ellen Hopper from friends, acquaintances and fans. To contribute, go to www.fatchance.org.

For details on upcoming events remembering Hopper, go to <http://www.kpig.com>.

always saying, 'Oh, you've got to hear this.'"

Hopper died on Memorial Day at the age of 57, not even two weeks after receiving a diagnosis of cancer. To the base of "Piggies" that make up KPIG's fiercely loyal audience, it's an immeasurable loss. She was not merely one of many beloved on-air personalities at KPIG, though she was surely that. She could lay claim, more than any other individual, to be the soul of one of the most distinctive radio stations in America.

That she would never make such a claim is another key to understanding Laura Hopper. With a thimbleful of narcissism, she could have easily paraded around as the living symbol of country-

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PICTURED ABOVE: Laura Ellen Hopper in the KPIG studios in 1997. This photo was shot when she was chosen as a Gail Rich Award winner, the first year the local awards were established.

Ellen

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fried renegade radio, and no one would have begrudged her for it. But hype and self-aggrandizement wasn't her style.

"Laura was a real mover and shaker, but strictly behind the scenes," said Korich. "She liked being in the background. She was really very humble."

A co-founder of KPIG, a manager at its legendary forebear KFAT and program director at both stations, Hopper also occupied a unique space in the American radio industry. Stations like KPIG, in which music programming is a function of the creativity of the programmer and not a result of restrictive formulas and narrow playlists, were once plentiful in the go-go days of FM in the 1970s but are now all but extinct. Hopper was a charter member of the smallest club in the radio business, defenders of eccentric, free-form 1970s-style radio.

"She felt terribly alone sometimes," said old friend Amy Bianco, known on the air at KFAT as Amy Airheart. "As time went on, the great creative stations fell one by one and here she was, still fighting the fight."

Radio veteran Bill Goldsmith, who as "Wild Bill" was the longtime morning man at KPIG and was instrumental in establishing KPIG as an early programmer on the Internet, worked with Hopper at KFAT and KPIG. He said she represented the last line of defense of creative programming in the radio industry.

"She was convinced that KPIG could not be successful in a business sense, unless it was successful on an artistic level," Goldsmith said. "A lot of people in the radio business have believed that was true for a long time, but gradually every one of them has lost that fight, except for her."

The days of KFAT

Laura Hopper grew up in St. Louis, where she first worked in radio at the age of 18. She came to California in 1975 with her domestic partner Jeremy Lansman, who purchased a ramshackle radio station in downtown Gilroy and rechristened it KFAT.

The station quickly became notorious for its defiantly unfashionable programming, an anything-goes mix of country, rock, folk, blues and bluegrass that was often crude, pugnacious or politically incorrect. Typical of the titles played regularly on KFAT were "Caffeine, Nicotine, Benzedrine," "She's Acting Single [I'm Drinking Double]," and, most famously, "Moose Turd Pie."

For many in KFAT's enormous broadcast footprint it was brilliant radio, and it quickly garnered an enthusiastic audience base.

"I can remember what I was doing, where I was and exactly how the sun was falling on the windshield when I first heard KFAT," said "Dave Bob" Nielson, a longtime member of Hopper's extended radio family. "It changed my life, literally."

KFAT was also known for the less-than-pious lifestyles of many of its rambunctious on-air personalities, names that have gone down in legend such as Sister Tiny, Buffalo Bob, Cousin Al and Uncle Sherman.

A few months after its establishment, the station had already gone through a series of staffing melodramas. Enter Laura Hopper, who came in to try to bring a modicum of order to the chaos.

"It's just an astonishing story," Gilbert Klein said of the KFAT days. The former host of the station's talk show, "Chewin' the Fat with Gilbert," Klein is now writing the definitive account of KFAT, called "Fat Chance." On his talk show, Klein said, his favorite subjects were "drugs, sex and conspiracies," which is also, he



Richard Levine/Contributed

Laura Ellen Hopper loved horseback riding and tried to get in the saddle as often as possible. Here she is with Mac her horse, an unnamed person, Bill Farrington and Sandra Levine.

said, what the story of KFAT is largely about.

"Laura was what passed for discipline at KFAT," Klein said. "She'd always be there with her list of fill-ins in case one of her DJs was too drunk, stoned, far away or in need of bail."

Klein said Hopper moved to fill a vacuum of leadership at KFAT, but had to earn her respect from a dubious staff of what he called "misfits."

"Everyone gradually got what she was talking about as her tastes in music were demonstrated as spot-on," he said.

Hopper became a minority owner of the station, but eventually sold her share and left KFAT before it changed format and passed into local legend in 1983. She spent several years at the classical radio station KBOQ before joining fellow radio veteran Leo Kesselman to start KPIG in 1988.

Birth of the Pig

Hopper's idea was to re-establish the KFAT sound without the anarchy. The approach didn't work at first — KPIG fell flat after a couple of years, but was revived in 1991. Eventually, the sound found a profitable niche, and Hopper began to receive national attention for her innovations and tenacity. In the mid-1990s, the radio industry created a format largely to describe KPIG's appeal: Americana.

"Laura is to Americana what Bill Monroe was to bluegrass," said "Sleepy John" Sandidge, longtime host of KPIG's Sunday morning live show, "Please Stand By." "If she really knew what kind of influence she had, she would have been living in France with servants waiting on her. But money was never a motive for her."

She gave her programmers great latitude in choosing their music. But many of them took their cues from Hopper because of her impeccable radio instincts.

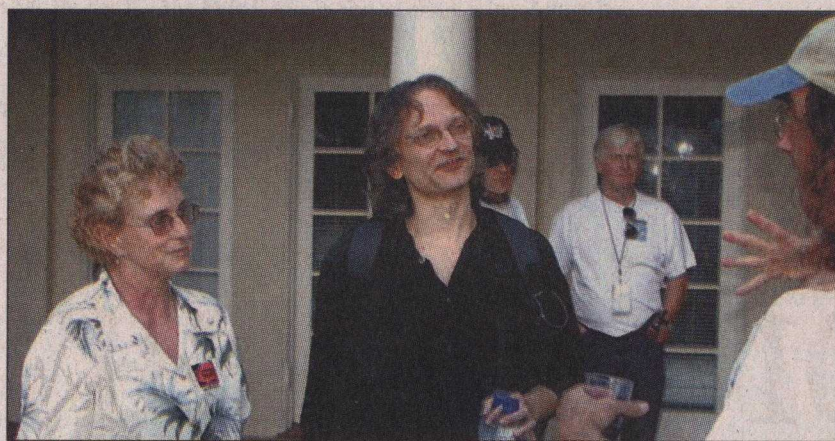
"She was the most talented programmer I've ever known," Amy Airheart said. "She was really good at the musical segue. I learned how to segue from one song to another, paying attention to the themes, from Laura."

Bill Goldsmith now runs Radio Paradise, a pioneering Internet-only station inspired by his work at KPIG. He said that Hopper was guided by a stubborn adherence to an ideal.

"To her, nothing was more important than the music and treating the music and her listeners with a certain amount of respect. And that's unheard of in the radio business today," Goldsmith said.

"There was no such thing as Laura playing your music because she was your friend," said Gail Korich. "It had to live on its merits."

Hopper and her cohorts at KPIG



Richard Levine/Contributed

Laura socializes with Sonny Landreth and James McMurtry, whose music she helped champion on-air.



Richard Levine/Contributed

Laura with Mary Gauthier, far left, and Bill Farrington at Villa Montalvo. Laura helped launch and sustain the careers of many artists with her keen ear and love of Americana.

helped launch and sustain the careers of several singers and songwriters that would otherwise remain largely obscure: Robert Earl Keen, Todd Snider, James McMurtry, Iris Dement and Mary Gauthier.

"There are some artists who owe their whole careers to her," Goldsmith said.

The fighter

But none of this great programming came without pressure to cave in to commercial realities. Hopper dealt with a succession of corporate owners in her career and each time she was called on to defend the KPIG way. Many of those who worked with her said her lasting legacy will be as a fighter for the freedom to be different.

"She faced off with corporate culture many times," Dave Bob Nielson said, "and there was always Laura standing on her desk with her cowboy boots, saying 'No freakin' way!'"

"She fought like a mother lion to protect that vision," said Amy Airheart, who now lives in Arizona.

"The Monterey Bay is so lucky to have had her and KPIG. But she had to fight tooth and nail to keep that sound that so many people love. And I'll respect her for that till the day I die."

In the mid-1980s, Hopper was diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis, which became a painful reality during the second half of her life. Leo Kesselman, who co-founded KPIG with Hopper, was a friend going back to the KFAT days. He said Hopper was given a choice before KPIG was even established that might have made her life easier.

"She was told that if she took life easy and didn't strain herself, she could live an easy, full life. Or, she could choose to have an active life and do these physical things and put herself under stress and have to take all these exotic drugs. And she chose the latter of those two options, riding her horses on the weekend and working hard. That's who she was."

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