

# Setting the Stage for Change

A 1970s conference that began as a study of mass media quickly U-turned into a wild, hippie festival. Even so, its legacy lives on in progressive media formats around the United States.

**T**he Alternative Media Conference (AMC) held at Goddard in June 1970 started out as sort of a class project. It wound up being a “happening” that drew about 2,000 people from around the country and freaked out the good people of Plainfield.

The AMC was organized by Larry Yurdin, a graduate student who taught a class titled “Mass Culture – Its Implications for a Society in Transition.” At the time, free-form rock radio stations were popping up everywhere, and even small cities had their own underground newspapers. Yurdin recognized the need, in those pre-Internet days, for ways to share information.

The conference covered topics including women in the media, black-oriented radio and low-budget films. Attendees included FM radio DJs, a new breed of record company promoters, underground newspaper reporters, and hipster big-wigs such as Freak Brothers cartoonist Gilbert Shelton, Baba Ram Dass, *Rolling Stone* photographer Robert Altman, and Marvel Comics’ Stan Lee.

Jim Higgins, now a freelance writer and a teacher at Spaulding High School in Barre, Vt., then lived at Maple Hill commune near Goddard. He says his first impressions were of a serious, nationally significant but “slightly intimidating” event.

But this was at the tail end of the ‘60s, and the serious conference quickly morphed into a “happening,” featuring an overwhelming hippie influx, drugs, rock music and skinny-dipping. Atlantic



such a national conference, I believe, signaled the official and self-conscious birth of an entity such as Alternative Media.” And the most local outcome from the AMC was WGDR radio at Goddard, still decidedly a free form of alternative media after 35 years.

People, both participants and those who wish they had been, continue to

**THIS LITTLE GATHERING CHANGED MY LIFE AND THAT OF SO MANY OTHERS – STRONGLY INFLUENCING THE COURSE OF WBCN; AND I CAN’T BEGIN TO GUESS THE EFFECTS IT HAD ON THE FUTURE OF HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS OF OTHERS, DIRECTLY AND INDIRECTLY.**

**CHARLES LACQUADERA**, WBCN-BOSTON RADIO ANNOUNCER, FROM “NETWORKING THE COUNTERCULTURE”

Records donated \$5,000 and shipped in Dr. John, Cactus and the J. Geils Band to put on concerts. The money helped, but the music distracted from the AMC’s intent, and Dr. John’s loud music upset a nearby farmer’s cows.

The results? Negative articles in *The Boston Globe*, *Atlantic Weekly* and local papers, and more than \$7,000 in bills, including the tab for a chartered jet from California. Still, the AMC changed lives. Many conference attendees went on to media careers, including Hendrik Hertzberg, a senior editor at *The New Yorker*, and Danny Goldberg, whose company has managed the careers of rockers Nirvana, the Allman Brothers and Bonnie Raitt.

“There was undoubtedly a ‘halo effect’ from the AMC,” Higgins says. “The mere existence of

reflect on the long-term ramifications of the AMC. Doctoral student Liz Faber and Professor John L. Hochheimer of Southern Illinois University have written a paper on the conference, “Networking the Counterculture,” and they continue to contact attendees about their experiences. On Facebook, the 1970 Alternative Media Conference page boasts 875 members.

The event’s 40th anniversary was marked this past summer with a panel discussion at the annual Haybarn Retreat. The panel was organized by Rick Winston, who moved to Plainfield just a few months after the event. The panel featured two then-faculty members, Marc Estrin and John Turner, then-Goddard student Dan Chodorkoff, and festival participants Delia Robinson and Peter Burmeister, who was passing through and wound up working in the kitchen.

“[The conference] was not just a freak show...,” Estrin said in the panel discussion. “It was a symphony of a time extremely rich in potential and also, in the middle of the Vietnam War, a time extremely rich in urgency for change.”

– JEFFERY LINDHOLM



PHOTOS: MARK GOFF