

Baltimore station takes heat for silencing a popular voice

By Mike Janssen

Last month's firing of popular talk-show host Marc Steiner at Baltimore's WYPR-FM has outraged listeners, who have flooded the station with e-mails, posted angry comments on blogs and picketed the studios daily.

The management of the city's main NPR News outlet explained the Jan. 31 firing by citing sagging ratings and a need for a fresh voice on the air.

Steiner had hosted his midday talk show since 1993, when the station, then WJHU, was owned by Johns Hopkins University. In 2001, when Hopkins moved to sell the station, Steiner led a campaign to buy its independence.

Taking flak for firing a longtime host is routine, and many pubradio programmers have battle scars to prove it.

But Steiner's fans reacted with uncommon ire. To them, Steiner was not just a host but the station's signature voice, a big personality who fought to keep their public radio outlet on the air at a critical time and who focused public discourse on hot-button local issues such as crime, drugs, politics and education.

In the days after his firing, "no one talked about the Super Bowl or Super Tuesday," says Jason Loviglio, director of media and communication studies at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. "Everywhere I go, all around the community, people are talking about this. I've never seen anything like it in nine years in Baltimore."

Many critics, including Steiner himself, say the firing suggests WYPR management is out of touch with listeners. "The station management has seen fit to go against the mission of what public radio is supposed to be—providing for the needs of the community," says Maria Allwine, a Baltimore activist who is organizing protests over the firing.

Allwine used to sit in her car on her lunch break just to hear Steiner's show, she



Ousted radio host Steiner stands among protesters outside his former workplace. (Photo: Patricia Bennett.)

says. "They've removed the heart and soul of the station."

WYPR President Tony Brandon disagrees. "Forty people who work at WYPR are extremely committed to the values of public radio," he says. "This was not about any one person. This is about the best interests and the future of WYPR."

Steiner's replacement is set to take to the air next week. The station announced Feb. 12 that Dan Rodricks, a longtime *Baltimore Sun* reporter and columnist and a veteran of local commercial media, will take over the show Feb. 25. The show airs 12 p.m. to 2 p.m. weekdays.

Ratings or clashing personalities?

Ratings were one reason WYPR decided to seek a new midday host, Brandon says. Over five Arbitron books, it became clear that listeners were tuning out before Steiner's program and tuning in after it ended. "Numbers were down significantly," he says.

The Marc Steiner Show recently showed less "energy" and "commitment," says Andy Bienstock, WYPR's p.d.

"Marc did his thing and was very set in his ways, and he did a good show," Bienstock says. "It wasn't as good recently

as it had been, but at one time, it was a wonderful show. I would just say that sometimes in this business, it's time for a change." Bienstock says he tried to suggest changes to the show. The suggestions were not heeded, according to Brandon.

Steiner counters that WYPR management never suggested changes and that for many years he had faced "personal animosity" from Brandon and WYPR Board Chair Barbara Bozzuto. "They didn't want me to be the voice or the face of the station," he says.

The host says he and Brandon had fought over management issues "from the beginning."

The two started working together when WYPR broke away from Johns Hopkins. Steiner founded Maryland Public Radio, the foundation that bought WYPR, and served as its president. He then teamed up with Brandon, who helped secure financing to cover the station's \$5 million price tag.

Steiner later became a v.p. at WYPR, and Brandon stepped up to serve as station president, recently leading efforts to buy frequencies outside Baltimore to expand the station's reach across Maryland.

Since Steiner's dismissal, he has battled with Brandon over his role in saving the station. In an Feb. 5 interview on WYPR, Brandon said Steiner raised "less than 5 percent" of the \$5 million. The same day, Steiner wrote on his blog that he had raised three times that amount from listeners. He called Brandon's statement a "bald-faced lie."

Until then, WYPR's website had featured a link to Steiner's blog, but, as some listeners noticed, it was removed when the post criticizing Brandon went up.

"We didn't think that was an appropriate level of discourse at that point," Bienstock says.

"New and different energy"

Steiner says he himself has been surprised at the outcry over his firing. "I think that the station did not expect, and neither did I, quite frankly, this kind of response," he says.

As of last week, WYPR had received 500 e-mails and letters about Steiner, Brandon says. Most were critical, though some supported the decision, he says.

Steiner has been keeping in touch with fans via his blog, marcsteinerblog.wordpress.com. "This is, in some ways, a real struggle for the soul of public radio at the moment," he says.

His supporters have been organizing protests and preparing for upcoming meetings of the WYPR Board and its Community Advisory Board. "We are mobilizing like the dickens, I tell you what," Allwine says. "People are so angry, and we are going to be pursuing this." But Allwine acknowledges that the station is unlikely to change course.

Meanwhile, as Steiner's replacement is preparing to come on board, the station delayed its February pledge drive. The rescheduled fundraiser, planned for April, will give Rodricks time to settle in, Brandon says.

Rodricks' show will have a "new and

different energy," Bienstock says. It will work more closely with WYPR's news department, expanding beyond panel discussions but covering a similar mix of issues.

Rodricks says he considers his predecessor a friend, though he knows him only from appearing on the show. The new host even criticized WYPR's firing of Steiner in a post on his *Sun* blog, just days before accepting his new gig.

"The dumping of Marc Steiner as host of the midday show at WYPR-FM—a public-radio station that very likely would not exist were it not for him—is sad and infuriating," Rodricks wrote. He later



Brandon cited low ratings as a reason for the firing.

posted several comments from upset readers.

Rodricks has taken heat from readers for taking Steiner's job after criticizing WYPR but says he sees no contradiction in the decision. Even after his hiring, he joins his fellow Baltimoreans in questioning the station's decision.

"There must have been something else that could have been done to make the departure more understandable to people . . .," Rodricks

says. "It just didn't seem right, the way it happened. But maybe it just couldn't have been done any other way." ■