radio

JUST CUZ

COUSIN BRUCIE HAS NAVIGATED THE SHOALS OF RADIO—FROM WA-BEATLE-C TO SIRIUS SATELLITE, THE MEDIUM'S NEXT WAVE

by Jesse Sunenblick / GSAS '03

Several Saturdays ago, a man from South Dakota named Charlie was listening to Sirius Satellite Radio when he heard the voice of an old, forgotten friend from his childhood in New Jersey: Bruce "Cousin Brucie" Morrow, the voice of New York radio for nearly 50 years. Like many people who grew up listening to Cousin Brucie play the hits, Charlie felt a kinship with the radio personality, perhaps because Brucie's cordial bombast has a way of worming itself into one's psyche, until it sounds familiar, like a family member's, or perhaps because for much of Brucie's career there were fewer options on the dial.

Brucie (STEINHARDT '57) came to New York radio in 1958, mentored by Alan Freed, who declared himself inventor of the expression "rock 'n' roll," at WINS. (Freed's claim to fame was playing black rhythm and blues before it was considered acceptable.) By 1962, he moved to WABC—WA-Beatle-C as the station was soon known for its penchant for playing the Beatles—and after FM metamorphosed into a broadcasting force, Brucie switched to WCBS, his perch for the next 23 years, until last June, when he was abruptly fired to make way for a cheaper, electronic, iPod-on-shuffle music format called "Jack."

Maybe it was the shock of hearing the voice of one of rock radio's mainstays coming from, of all places, a satellite, that prompted Charlie to pick up the phone and "give The Cuz a buzz" during the *Saturday Night Party*. (Brucie brought his famous call-in show, which debuted in 1963, over to Sirius only weeks after WCBS let him go.) Or maybe it was the sound of Brucie's youthful voice as sprightly as ever

"Holy mackerel!" Charlie said when The Cuz answered the phone. "I left Jersey 28 years ago and you're still alive! You sound great!"

"I *feel* great! Like I'm in my thirties!" Brucie tells me one Wednesday evening last fall, from his Sirius studio at Rockefeller Center. It's 15 minutes before the start of his weekly talk show and we are discussing his departure from WCBS. The move is emblematic of the kind of corporate ideology that has infected radio over the past decade, after the Telecommunications Act of 1996 liberalized radio station ownership rules and allowed two companies, Infinity Broadcasting Corp. (which owns WCBS) and Clear Channel Communications, to fill up huge swaths of the radio spectrum with what critics say is increasingly homogenized and profit-driven programming. Steven Van Zandt, Bruce Springsteen guitarist turned *Sopranos* actor, summed up the sentiments of many in a July address at the 2005 Radio and Records Convention in Cleveland when he said, "Replacing…CBS-FM with Jack is like replacing the Statue of Liberty with a blow-up doll."

> The Cuz's congenial on-air persona generates an intimate remembrance of radio's golden days, a time when teenagers kept transistor radios, and not iPods, hidden under their pillows.

BRUCE MORROW PUBLICITY CARDS—THROUGH THE YEARS.

"They tampered with a market, a culture, that is not forgiving," Brucie says. "My producer called me in the afternoon and said that as of five o'clock, WCBS as I knew it would no longer exist. It should have been done gently. I should have been given a chance to discuss it on air and prepare people." The statistics bear him out. While WCBS's listenership has plummeted—defying the spike-and-settle recurrence that has marked Jack's entrance in other markets—Sirius's audience, bolstered in part by the addition of Howard Stern, is on the rise, numbering more than 3.3 million listeners already.

To Brucie, an audience, and in particular a New York radio audience, is a sophisticated, sensitive organism, and once you "kick them," as he puts it, they'll never forgive you. This is especially true of Brucie's audience, for whom The Cuz's congenial on-air persona generates an intimate remembrance of radio's golden days, a time when teenagers kept transistor radios, not iPods, hidden under their pillows.

Morrow developed his "Cousin Brucie" persona one day at WINS, when an elderly woman wandered into his studio and asked whether he thought everybody was related.

"Yes, I do, I really do," Morrow said.

"Well, cousin, can you give me 50 cents, please?"

The name stuck.

ALL HISTORICAL IMAGES COURTESY OF COUSIN BRUCIE

PHOTO © JOHN PAUL ENDRESS

IN A 50-YEAR CAREER, COUSIN BRUCIE HAS CHUMMED WITH A WHO'S WHO IN MUSIC: (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT) THE RADIO PERSONALITY WITH THE INIMITABLE JAMES BROWN, THE BEATLES IN 1965, DEBORAH HARRY AND PAUL ANKA. BOTTOM LEFT: BRUCIE, HOSTING ONE OF HIS FAMOUS PALISADES PARK ROCK CONCERTS, IN HIS INFAMOUS LEOPARD-SKIN SUIT. THE SIRIUS DOG LOGO (LEFT), BY THE BY, IS INFORMALLY KNOWN AS "MONGO."

A good place to listen to classic Cousin Brucie shows is the Museum of Television and Radio in Manhattan, despite the fact that its ancient listening equipment (which is being overhauled) makes much of the radio collection unlistenable. A few choice samples include the first broadcast of Cousin Brucie's *Saturday Night Party* call-in show on WABC and a 1964 broadcast (also on WABC) of Brucie with the Beatles in a now-famous publicity stunt in which Brucie, his program director, Rick Sklar, and fellow radio personality Scott Muni helped Ringo Starr recover a St. Christopher's medallion that an overzealous fan had ripped from his neck.

BRUCIE: "Somebody took a medallion, a St. Christopher's medallion, right off Ringo's neck in the excitement, and I'm sure they didn't mean to do this…Here's Ringo …Ringo?"

RINGO: "Hello, how are you…good to be back in New York anyway."

BRUCIE: "I'm sorry. Your shirt's been ripped. I don't like the way you look."

RINGO: "The only thing, the medallion, you know, I haven't had it off me neck since I was 21. It's three years. It's sort of a keepsake, it's from me auntie…and…if anyone's got it…"

Angie McGowan, the excitable fan, was listening at the time, and she promptly returned it. But WABC stretched out the drama for another day, and in the budding media circus put McGowan on the air with Ringo, who kissed her, a fantasy smooch for the thousands of fans who listened.

In 1964 the Beatles owned New York, and WABC was their "official" station. WABC got exclusive interviews and new singles, which Cousin Brucie (whose show reached over half of the American markets) would take from an armed guard and mainline to America's awestruck youth. The Beatles saved the music industry from its darkest hour—the payola scandal of the early '60s when disc jockeys who accepted bribes to play certain records were sanctioned by Congress. After payola, much of Brucie's and other radio hosts' power was taken away—compared to a time in the late '50s when a disc jockey could single-handedly make or break a career with his music choices. In the doldrums that followed, stations' playlists were restricted by mandatory music selection meetings. "People were scared," Brucie recalls. "Then…something wonderful happened: these four mop heads who made music that sounded like it was from outer space; they *looked* like they were from outer space."

> At Sirius, Brucie can play whatever he wants—and say whatever he wants—without worrying about being slapped with a fine for breaking one of the FCC's sketchily drawn moral parameters.

Most conversations about satellite radio touch on the fact that it is beyond the grasp of the Federal Communications Commission, radio's governing body since 1934, when the Communications Act was passed, stipulating that the radio spectrum belonged to the public and must be managed by the FCC in accordance with the public's "interest, convenience or necessity." This short phrase packs within it every complication radio has experienced over the years—from payola to the wave of legislation that has, in the past decade, allowed a handful of companies to buy up radio and television stations, monopolizing both industries. Infinity, for its part, used the results of "research groups"—members of the public paid to listen to songs in hotel rooms while being observed by company employees behind two-way mirrors—to reduce Brucie's record cache, year by year, until by the time he left WCBS he could only play songs off a playlist of 280 records. That this sophisticated marketing maneuver could ever be interpreted as being in the public's interest demonstrates the malleability of the FCC's mandate—and of radio itself.

At Sirius, Brucie has access to thousands of albums—all stored on a computer database. He can play whatever he wants—and say whatever he wants—without worrying about being slapped with a fine for breaking one of the FCC's sketchily drawn moral parameters. Yet the irony of all this perceived freedom is that satellite radio, though more powerful than its terrestrial counterpart, is still only radio. Just like other radio stations, Sirius and XM Satellite Radio, its main competitor, operate with licenses from the FCC, but in an upper band of the usable spectrum. Just like terrestrial radio, a satellite signal is subject to occasional interference from its spectrum neighbors. And just like terrestrial radio's transformation from an open playing field of quirkily diverse voices in its early days to a starchy, heavily regulated drone today, so too the satellite band may someday face a similar challenge if regulators step in.

For the moment, however, Brucie isn't concerned. On the day of my visit to Sirius, the Broadway star Judy Kaye is his talk show guest, followed by a surprise appearance by the '60s singer Lou Christie. Normally on Wednesdays, Brucie doesn't take call-in requests, but when a trucker named Jim tells Auntie Em, Brucie's hippie technical director and sometime sidekick, that he is "halfway between lost and found," an exception is made. Jim wants to hear "Shilo" by NYU alumnus Neil Diamond, which is appropriate, as the song is about a fanciful relationship between a child and his imaginary friend.

"Jim, you better stop and get out of the machine and find out where you are," Brucie says, as the song started.

"Alright, you can put me down Auntie Em," he jests, thwacking the table with his palm as though she held him tight and dropped him.

"She's dancin with me! She's dancin with me!"