

Profile

Music Head

Some call him obsessive, others call him a snob. The Current's DJ Mark Wheat says he's both.

By Chris Godsey

Standing at a microphone in a small radio studio, facing an array of computerized broadcasting equipment, British-born DJ Mark Wheat talks music to his own picture window reflection—a pale white guy with glasses, a razor-shaved head, and a hawkish nose—and to who knows how many people in cars, coffee shops, and kitchens listening to

the radio or the Internet.

"Brand-new local music on 89.3 The Current. The Retribution Gospel Choir—you might be familiar with Mr. Alan Sparhawk, doing the singing there. Mark Kozelek also helping out on that—of Red House Painters fame. A track called 'Hatchet,' and that's from a CD EP that the band hooked us up with."

As prime-time DJ at Minnesota Public Radio's The Current, Wheat's on from 7 p.m. till midnight Monday through Friday. Most evenings, he's also in his stocking feet. "The first thing he does when he gets to work is take off his shoes," says 89.3 DJ Steve Seel. "He pads around the station in his socks."

Seel, Wheat, and a small crew of other 89.3 music-fanatic DJs have had that sort of sock-footed intimacy since last winter. At 9 a.m. on January 24, 2005, after a short, frenetic planning process in cramped MPR quarters, The Current went live as the network's hip (some might pejoratively say "hipster") third station, under the call letters KCMP. Its first song, "Shhh . . .," a rapped ode to Minnesota and the Midwest by Minneapolis hip-hop group Atmosphere, accurately presaged The Current's format: a limited, eclectic range of alternative music, with a heavy focus on stuff creat-

ed and performed in the Twin Cities. It's far from freeform radio, but much different from what you'll hear, and how it'll be presented, on local commercial music stations.

The Current's on-air roster comprises a who's who of voices—among them Bill DeVillie, Mary Lucia, and Thorn—from the late, romanticized commercial station Rev 105 and listener-supported favorites, such as KFAI and the University of Minnesota's Radio K. In this impressive talent fleet, Wheat is the flagship. Passion, a little ego, and remarkably good fortune have defined his path to prominence. "I've always been obsessed with music," says Wheat, forty-five. "I used to say it was my hobby, but *hobby* has that belittling ring to it. I did the guitar-lesson thing for about a year, but I wasn't blessed with whatever it is that makes a musician or a performer. DJing always seemed to be the way I could have music in my life."

As a lad in Clenchwarton, a village hard by the North Sea, he read *New Musical Express* and *Mojo*—a British music fan's holy texts—and listened to the late, seminal BBC DJ John Peel, who gazes at Wheat from a black-and-white magazine photo taped to a huge CD shelf behind his desk. "I was inspired by John," he says solemnly. "That magical connec-

tion, listening to somebody late at night, kind of opened my world."

Wheat graduated from Leeds University and earned a teaching degree at the University of Bradford. Unable to find school work in England, he came to the United States in 1981 (he's had permanent resident alien status since 1985). He lived in Missouri and North Carolina—tending bar, trying to be a writer, hanging out—before moving to Hoboken, New Jersey, where his gradual transformation from garden-variety music geek to DJ began.

"[I] waited tables for fifteen years," Wheat says, "doing radio as a volunteer and learning the craft." He started in the late 1980s, in Jersey, where he opened the music-library mail at freeform radio bastion WFMU. When an overnight DJ shift opened, he was trained, then wound up hosting his own show. In the early 1990s, Wheat and his then-wife moved to Minneapolis so she could continue her art education (they divorced shortly after relocating). He volunteered at KFAI, eventually starting and hosting a show called *Local Sound Department*, and writing a weekly local-music e-mail announcement that reached approximately 500 people.

By the mid-1990s, Wheat was programming and hosting a weekly Zone 105 show, *Across the Pond*, that featured imported European music. Then he heard that Radio K's program-coach position was open. "For five years, it was a dream job," he says. "I got to do radio every week [a weekend show, *The Music Lovers' Club*], and I got to help young adults and give them a place on campus to come as music heads"—Wheat's term for people, like him, whose lives are

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