

Profile

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ruled by music.

For more than a year, one of his *Music Lovers' Club* listeners—German ceramics artist Maren Kloppmann—frequently called the show. They bonded over electronic and downbeat music, and she occasionally sent him albums she liked. When they finally met, they realized they had much in common as expatriates and self-defined “world citizens,” as successful members in their chosen fields, and as lovers of water—both grew up in port towns, which accounts for their new apartment in a Minneapolis high rise overlooking the Mississippi River. They’ve been married for almost three years.

Wheat joined *The Current* a couple of weeks before the station went live. “How often do you get the chance to be involved in creating a radio station?” he asks. “And not just any radio station, but one run by Minnesota Public Radio? This is probably the best place to be in the nation right now. I feel like I’m at the top of my career.”

Some listeners have made Wheat a local-scene icon, creating pop art and seed-art images of him and writing a biographical entry about him on wikipedia.org, a popular online encyclopedia. He’s praised on blogs and shows up everywhere: cohosting the Minnesota Music Awards; reviewing music on American Public Media’s national radio show *Weekend America*; reading the shout-outs on the last track of *A Tiger Dancing*, the newest album by St. Paul hip-hop band Heiruspecs; and being featured in such glossy metro magazines as this one.

After twenty years of hard work, he’s becoming more than just a faceless radio voice.

“I’m conscious of fame,” he says. “I’m conscious of not letting it spoil me or go to my head or all those things. But I enjoy it. I’ll admit to always wanting a certain level of celebrity status.”

John Peel’s formidable presence is with Wheat every night: “He never lost that genuine enthusiasm of the fan,” Wheat says. “He never thought he was bigger than the music, and that’s one

thing that guides me.”

Wheat appreciated the Twin Cities’ music scene—especially the Replacements and Soul Asylum—years before he lived here. “I used to help out a WFMU DJ who’d come to Minneapolis once or twice a year to check out what was happening,” he says. But Wheat’s affection and respect for the scene aren’t simply nostalgic. Last year, when Minneapolis’s Rhymesayers Entertainment label had three releases in the *College Music Journal* list of top ten hip-hop albums, Wheat interviewed LA-based rapper and spoken-word artist Busdriver, who said that Rhymesayers is the thing in independent hip-hop. Wheat agreed, then “explained that you can go down the list, and in pretty much every genre, we have strong artists working in the Twin Cities.”

He says *The Current*’s success depends on the scene: “Some people have said, ‘The Current has totally re-energized the local music scene.’ I back off that. The scene was very strong and healthy anyway. We happen to be here. We couldn’t play as much local stuff as we do if the scene weren’t so strong.”

So how does he learn about new music and decide what to play? He works hard to stay informed, still reading *Mojo* and *NME*, and poring over more magazines, websites, and blogs (including *The Current*’s) than even most fanatics care to tolerate; he digests hundreds of press releases and prerelease CDs every month; and he listens when people on the street tell him there’s one band or song he just *has* to play. “I have a little notebook with me all the time,” he says, then recounts how a woman at the state fair told him to check out British singer-songwriter Thea Gilmore. “It turned out she was right,” Wheat says. “I played some Thea just the other night. That happens all the time.” He also takes e-mail requests, which appear on a computer screen next to his microphone.

Wheat’s colleagues and some professional critics say he takes his curatorial responsibilities seriously. For his part, Wheat considers DJing an art form. Mining knowledge and interacting with listeners are part of “doing essentially what all good artists do: learning a craft, then finding some way

of giving individual expression to it,” he says.

“If you feel like you know Mark from listening to him on the radio, you probably do,” says Steve Nelson, *The Current* program director. “He’s got no act, no cultivated persona. When you listen to Mark from 7 p.m. till 12 a.m., that’s who he is.”

Some nonbelievers say Wheat’s a snob: pedantic, didactic, and achingly long-winded between songs. He agrees. “I was thirty-five before I came to the conclusion that music doesn’t mean as much to everybody else as it does to me,” he says. “I am a music snob. But, there’s an audience that deserves a station that doesn’t treat music as a commodity, like what seems to have happened on commercial radio.”

“If you say ‘aficionado’ instead of ‘snob,’ it sounds different,” says Heiruspecs bassist Sean “Twinkie Jiggles” McPherson. “To be the kind of music snob he’s talking about, he has to be obsessive—and he is—but in a way that enriches him and the people who listen to him.”

Wheat says he’d like *The Current*’s DJs to find a way to convey deep knowledge without coming off as pretentious. “We set high standards for ourselves about trying to draw lines through musical eras and genres,” he says. “We have to try to present it in an intelligent way without sounding like we’re lecturing people every time we play a new or old piece of music.”

He’s got other ambitions for himself and *The Current*—ones that transcend the Twin Cities. “Being a national presence rather than just a local presence is something that I’d like to happen at some point,” he says. “But that would be the result of a team effort—something that represents what we’re doing as a whole here at *The Current*. A lot of my success has been linked to the local music scene. I’ve been lucky enough to be able to be in the right position to champion it, and I’d like to think that the next step of my career would include some reflection of that. I’d like it to come from the Twin Cities.” ▲

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