NEW YORK

Radio Therapy: Shock Treatment in the Morning

By Mike McGrady

"...No one at WNBC knows what to make of Don Imus, known only as Imus-in-the-morning. Even his fellow disk jockeys tend to give him a wide berth, for he is a master of the lethal aside..."

On this particular morning Imus is doing his live-auditions thing, inviting the listeners to try out for his "Columbus School of 101 Show-Biz Careers." So far he has had one guy telling bad Polish jokes, a young woman who claims her talent is kissing, and now this last woman who wants to whistle.

"What would you like to whistle?" Imus asks her.

"I'd like to whistle *On Top of Old Smokey*," the voice says.

"We are *not* gonna have any of those animal freak acts, not on *this* show," he snarls.

Click! Hanging up then, signaling for the Duracell spot, shaking another cigarette out of the L&M pack, lighting up with a borrowed lighter ("I never owned one of these monogrammed things; you can't hock them"). Picking up the phone, talking to a fan ("No, sir, I do *not* belong in an insane asylum"). Turning to his engineer ("I've got a tag on both the Eastern Airlines and the General Motors, so give me a buffer before we do the Rev. Billy Sol. First, give me the jingle.") Listening then to the jingle:

Gambling
Your rambling
Days are through
When it's raining, it's pouring,
Here's Imus in the morning.

Then the weather, always the weather: "WNBC's weather is going to be partly cloudy and windy today, high in the 40s. Clear and cold tonight, low in the 30s. In Manhattan, cloudy and 37 degrees." Followed by a one-liner: "I'd like to say a special hello this morning

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to all the guys who are listening over at . . . WABC News." Time out for Bill Hoffman's "direct-from-the-slope ski report," then a typical Imus aside: "I got this note from Bill Hoffman—'I spent a week at the Playboy Club in New Jersey. When I get back, remind me to tell you why they call it Great Gorge.'" This is followed by the recorded laughter of what must be an extraordinarily sensual young woman.

A break for the news. The red light in front of Imus blinks on and he halfstands to shout the words of his Rev. Billy Sol Hargis, speaking from the First Church of the Gooey Death and Discount House of Worship in Del Rio, Texas:

"By special arrangement with Him, Billy Sol is offering you the chance for Heaven-Right-Here-On-Earth, say *hallelujah!* That's right, He asked Billy Sol to purchase 700 acres of land for a Heaven-Right-Here-On-Earth. And he told Billy Sol, He said, 'Billy Sol, let them in on this tremendous offer' . . . Well, Heaven-Right-Here-On-Earth is as close as Miami Beach . . . That's right, because the Promised Land Development Company is making this offer for as little as $27.77 a month, VA and FHA approved . . ."

A song then, and the engineer glances at the console clock. He warns Imus that they are ten seconds short on the half-hour and that Imus should fill the ten seconds. Imus tells the engineer to stop the cartridge for ten seconds. The engineer looks up uncomprehendingly: stop the cartridge? Yes, Imus says, just stop the music for ten seconds.

The engineer reaches out, hesitates, hits the Off button. Ten seconds of absolute silence. WNBC's 50,000 watts—it is one of only nine radio stations in the country so blessed by the FCC—are being used to transmit . . . absolutely nothing. Heads bent over desks throughout the studios suddenly snap up. Silence. What does it all mean?

Station Manager Perry Bascom—Imus habitually refers to him as "Mr. Vicious"—has noticed the absence of sound coming from the oversized speakers flanking his desk. The color leaks from his face and when it comes back it is deeper, darker. Even before the ten seconds have elapsed, Bascom is placing the first of several calls. For what Bascom hears is not silence; it is something called dead air. Dead air happens to 1,000-watt stations, to those little mom-and-pop outfits out in the sticks. Dead air is not something that ever happens to WNBC.

Now Bascom is moving rapidly. He collars the studio's chief engineer, a


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RADIO

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man reduced to a series of shoulder shrugs. The engineer has checked the equipment. Everything is functioning properly. There has to be some . . . some logical explanation for those silent ten seconds. Bascom's voice is well modulated but it carries: yes, there better, by God, be some logical explanation.

"I don't like dead air," Bascom says. "I resent it. We're supposed to be professionals . . . I have very simple principles. I don't like surprises."

Imus is fully aware of the turmoil on the other side of the plate glass barriers but he chooses to ignore it. That isn't alway easy. Particularly when a lesser executive comes up to him to warn him: "Look, Imus, I can't cover for you any longer. If he asks me, I'm going to tell him what happened."

"Back off," Imus says. *"Back off!"*

Then he turns back to his engineer.

"Let's do the Jap spot next," he says.

"The *what*?" he is asked.

"Japanese Airlines," he says. "This morning I think I'll do a tag: 'But don't try taking it to Honolulu.' I wonder if I can get by with saying that."

"I don't think so," his engineer says.

"Well, how could I word it?"

"You could word it any way you like," the engineer says. "It'll still cost the account."

The Japanese Airlines commercial plays—straight—and Imus fidgets: "Well, I guess that wraps it, doesn't it? Six months ago I wouldn't have given the Jap spot a second thought, but these guys at the studio have taken a chance on me and I almost feel an obligation not to louse them up. Still, I ought to leave them with something to piss them off."

No one at WNBC knows what to make of Don Imus, known here only as Imus-in-the-morning. (The sound is eye-mus.) He's a new voice at WNBC, and even his fellow disk jockeys tend to give him a wide berth. For one thing, he is not above imitating them on the air. For another, he is a master of the lethal aside. His first week on the job, Imus stopped to note that it was a great pleasure to be working with veteran Ted Brown, who was even then "at the twilight of a mediocre career."

Every morning just before six Imus comes into the WNBC studios resembling nothing quite so much as an émigré from a 1943 comic book. There is the Prince Valiant haircut. Overalls —not jeans but genuine overalls. A fake-fur coat covering his see-through body shirt. And always he shows the colors —either his sneakers, his shirt or his hip-huggers will be carrying the pattern of Old Glory.

But then, it is not Imus's intention to blend in with his environment. For years WNBC has been the nice-guy station. Jim Lowe forever calling his listeners "Old Buddy"; neo-rural Big Wilson talking about his latest model airplane; Ted Brown cooing "I love you" into a microphone; everyone—with the sole exception of Long John Nebel—telling the audience how fine it is, how grand, how . . . lovable. The only trouble with all this is that it has shown once again precisely where it is that nice guys finish.

The radio race is run between the hours of six and ten in the morning. "As the morning goes, so goes your station"—a slogan often repeated by WNBC station manager Bascom. The morning hours are broken down into A time, double-A time and triple-A time. At a station like WABC the prices for a minute spot range from $240 to $270 to $290. At WNBC the prices are considerably less. This is so because the two major rating systems indicate that a great many people listen to WABC in the morning; they have not said as much for WNBC.

Now, to the rescue, a former railroad brakeman who tells everyone he's 28 but will settle for 31, who's just four years out of disk jockey school and who today describes our leader as "New York's Barbie doll Mayor, John-John Lindsay"; who suggests that Ted Kennedy give the graduation address at the Air Force Academy; who invites his listeners to discuss the subject, "David Eisenhower—Moscow's Triumph or America's Shame?"

Imus is one of the few morning men to rely heavily on scripted material. In the afternoons, when William B. Williams is doubtless hobnobbing with Steve and Edye, and John Gambling is doing his rambling on a Long Island estate, Imus is locked in his hotel room writing relatively elaborate sketches for the next morning's show.

It might be a spiel from the Rev. Billy Sol, proprietor of Holyland, America's first truly religious amusement park. Or possibly Judge Hanging, an LBJ sound-alike who feels that police brutality is "the fun part of law enforcement" and moreover that the law is our friend "and anyone who hurts our friend should be beaten senseless." Or perhaps Crazy Bob, who tells such favorite fairy tales as the one about the princess who kisses the frog and gets warts all over her lips.

There are those who would claim that Imus occasionally lapses into good taste. If true, this may well be a result of several lengthy discussions he has had with the station manager and the program director, his "Mr. Vicious" and "Mr. Numb." The upshot of these discussions is that he will never, never, *not ever* do any more jokes about Chappaquiddick or Lance Rentzel, or, for that matter, anyone else involved in a personal tragedy. It was this side of Imus that seemed to upset members of the Cleveland press. When he left Cleveland for New York last December, one headline had it this way: "Garbage Mouth Goes to Gotham."

Well, at least Imus is a change of pace. The traditional role of the morning man is the security blanket you can take with you wherever you go. Never mind that the newspapers are still reporting an endless war in Asia or an inflation that won't let up; the voice on the radio is always assuring you that there, there, everything is going to be all right. The town's top deejays —John Gambling, Harry Harrison, William B. Williams, Gene Klavan—are forever dispensing tranquilizers. Some of them—Herb Oscar Anderson comes to mind—practically provide lobotomies.

But this is not Imus's function. He demands that the listener *listen.* He clashes, he jangles, and withal it might be argued that he is taking the best advantage of the medium. Radio has traditionally been done very well by strong, identifiable personalities. The men mentioned above are still identifiable; they have simply become too familiar and it is a familiarity that breeds boredom. There is nothing that William B. Williams will ever say again that will surprise any of his regular listeners.

Because he is so different, Imus represents a major gamble for Bascom. When Bascom arrived at WNBC 27 months ago, he seemed to live up to the Imus tag, "Mr. Vicious." He quickly canned the sales manager, the program manager and the advertising-promotion manager. His first acquisition was Ted Brown from WNEW—this designed to show the WNBC survivors that he intended to play in the big leagues. Next he brought in the Knicks and the Rangers and sportscaster Marv Albert to provide accompaniment. Finally, there was one major opening.

"We could resolve everything else," Bascom says, "but until we had our strong morning man, we couldn't do it

WNBC's morning gamble, Don Imus: "Garbage mouth goes to Gotham."

"...To be sure that Johnny Carson learns of his presence, Imus mentions the television host's marital difficulties hourly..."

all. The morning is everything. As the morning goes, so goes the station."

Both Bascom and program director Pat Whitley began the search a year ago. The hottest radio talents—Robert W. Morgan in Los Angeles, Larry Lujack in Chicago, Dick Purtan in Detroit—are signed to contracts that will not allow them to burp for WNBC.

What they found, finally, was Imus. Before getting into radio, Imus lived a life off the book jacket of a bad novel—gas station attendant, copper miner, would-be rock singer, uranium miner, railroad brakeman, marine and, in 1968, while recuperating from a railroad accident, he found himself entering the Don Martin School of Radio in Los Angeles. His initial interview there was with Robert Konop, who considered Imus "an average prospect—although he seemed to have an inert sense of humor going for him."

Imus's early moves were not always voluntary. He began as a $100-a-week disk jockey for a rock station in Palmdale, California, moved on to Stockton, a conservative agricultural community of 100,000 north of San Francisco.

But Stockton was not the town for Imus. KJOY was a leisurely 1,000-watt operation where the deejay sat behind windows on the town's main drag and was expected to devote a great deal of time to girl-watching. In such a setting a man's mind tends to wander. One morning Imus decided to sponsor a little contest; he announced his Eldridge Cleaver Look-Alike contest with a first prize of seven years in jail.

That was his last morning there. While between engagements, as they say, Imus ran into station manager Jack Thayer in Sacramento.

"He was going through a little identity crisis at the time," Thayer recalls. "He seemed uncertain when I first talked to him. But all that changed the minute you put him behind a microphone; it was like putting a good pilot behind the controls of a 747."

Thayer worked closely with Imus in developing his cast of characters. It was in Sacramento that Imus first won the Billboard Air Personality of the Year award for a medium market; here that he dominated the local ratings and took home a salary of $200 a week; here, too, that he started a series of memorable stunts. On a whim he dialed the Hertz Rent-a-Car office in Indianapolis and asked if he could rent a car for just a few afternoon hours on Memorial Day. He would like to rent a Shelby 350. And, oh, would they mind taping the headlights and installing a roll bar.

When Thayer moved on to Cleveland's WGAR, Imus followed a month later. Here he won the *Billboard* award for major markets, and here he battled his way again to the top of the ratings. But Cleveland was not a pushover. His satiric excursions into politics, religion and ethnic humor were undertaken long before Archie Bunker made them fashionable. People tended to take him seriously. There was, for example, a suit by a local television weatherman who took umbrage when Imus hinted that he was hitting the bottle.

It is a mistake to take Imus too seriously since he is a specialist in the art of the put-on. Many examples can be found in his first album, the RCA-released *1,200 Hamburgers to Go*. The title comes from a Cleveland stunt, the morning he called a McDonald's hamburger stand, identified himself as a sergeant with the Air National Guard, and ordered 1,200 hamburgers to go. Once the order was accepted, Imus was on his way:

"Now, listen, on 300 of those I want you to hold the mustard but put on plenty of mayonnaise and lettuce. And I don't want any onion on those. And on 200—well, make that 201—I want you to hold the mayo and lettuce but lay on the mustard and make those medium rare. And on the first 300—let's see, on the first 300, if you can cook 275 of those rare with onions and mustard and mayo and no lettuce . . . You got that so far? No lettuce. And it's okay to hold the mustard on those and don't butter the buns on half of those but put butter on about 134. Half of 275 would be 134, right? And we want 250 just plain. With no mustard or mayonnaise or lettuce or onions. No, wait a minute. You can put lettuce on three of those and cook them medium-well with no butter on the buns. And could we get some chocolate shakes for everybody. Hello?"

When Imus got the call to come to the Big Apple, he was "scared to death," according to Jack Thayer. In searching for a home for his wife and four children, Imus decided to settle down in Greenwich, Connecticut. The fact that he has rented a house instead of purchasing one might be taken by some as an indication of anxiety. Actually, the nervous ones were Bascom and Whitley.

"We felt we had to talk to everyone in the building before Imus got there," Bascom says. "I warned everyone that this was a man who was going t shake up people. But I didn't wan anyone to think we were just bringin in Blue Daddy—blue material. Righ at the outset, we set up, well, not re strictions at this point, but guidelines.

One man's guidelines are inevitabl another man's restrictions, and Imu has accepted them as he has accepte all other suggestions from on high—warily, but with a kind of resignation He has softened the questionable stuf and concentrated more heavily on the satire. He will probably not try to cap ture his audience's attention with ten seconds of silence in the near future After a lengthy discussion centered on certain clauses in his contract, he ha agreed to make every effort to arrive at the studio before his program begins.

It must be noted that WNBC's management fully appreciates the potential of Imus. Imus is the sole reason that Long John Nebel was moved from his midnight hour to an earlier time. Nebel's following is an older audience, a faithful coterie that might well be inclined to tune out Imus. So now the pre-dawn hours are occupied by a new disk jockey who seems to specialize in blandness and makes Imus seem even more exciting simply by comparison.

Still other evidences of management's appreciation can be found in the contract. Imus's starting salary is $100,000 annually, and should he happen to survive the five-year term covered in the contract, he will be rewarded with graduated increases.

These are the kinds of gestures that make a young man more confident. And confidence seems to be an Imus trademark. He cannot understand why Johnny Carson has not yet invited him to appear on his television show. To be sure that Carson learns of his presence, Imus attempts to mention the television host's marital difficulties on what seems to be an hourly basis.

Imus is not easily impressed. He has studied New York radio and finds only monologist Jean Shepherd worth anyone's time. He thinks Jonathan Winters is an enormous talent, and he had to think quite a while before coming up with anyone else he admired. Then this: "David Steinberg—he's very funny for a Jewish person."

In point of fact, the entire town doesn't impress him all that much.

"I'll tell you the truth," he said once, "I look at it like eight Clevelands. I mean you have 300 tight-assed advertising agencies and a whole lot of phonies and that's about it."