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By Robert Feder

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Kevin Metheny

Well, it's nice to know there's at least one thing the notorious program director of WGN-AM (720) and his critics can agree on: He very well may be screwing things up at the Tribune Co.-owned news/talk station.

[Kevin "Pig Virus" Metheny](#), the man who's been at the center of the controversial (and, in some cases, inexplicable) changes at WGN for the past 18 months, acknowledged that his efforts could result in damaging what he called "the crown jewel of American broadcasting." Metheny's comments came during a lengthy interview posted Thursday with media blogger [Margaret Larkin](#), a production staffer at WGN who hosts a series of "[Radiogirl](#)" podcasts.



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Paraphrasing Tribune Co. CEO [Randy Michaels](#), Metheny compared WGN to a

fading dowager, telling Larkin: “Probably the best thing you can do for a grand old lady of AM [radio] is to buy her a new pair of shoes and take her out dancing.” Of his mission at WGN, Metheny said:

“We have this incredible, indescribably meaningful crown jewel of American broadcasting, and we have the rather awesome challenge — privilege — of extending her meaningful life expectancy and beginning that before she gets sick. We can tell from the vital signs that dramatic action is necessary. But you attempt to create more relevance, you attempt to create improved ratings at a place like WGN circa 2010 at some peril, because it’s possible to screw things up and do damage as you attempt to take preemptive, decisive action. But all we really are trying to do is be more relevant to more people by paying more attention to the things that we can do well. We are known for news and information services, we are known for play-by-play sports, and we are known for talking about the events of the day. Those are the three things that we are focusing on doing.”

Larkin didn’t ask Metheny specifically how hiring an out-of-town swellhead like [Greg Jarrett](#) for mornings or a radio neophyte and convicted felon like [Jim Laski](#) for evenings could possibly be considered improvements. But then again, Metheny is her boss, so let’s cut her some slack.

To his credit, Metheny did express tolerance for his critics in the blogosphere (“Some of these people seem like really bright, thoughtful individuals,” he said, citing no one in particular) — even as he dismissed their criticism of his performance:

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“I don’t see a lot of merit to getting disturbed about somebody writing something when what they’re basically doing isn’t journalism, it isn’t reporting. They’re doing the same thing that they want to hold my feet to fire for doing, which is they basically are doing a talk show with a blog. These things are better, they’re more interesting, they are richer if they tell stories — as I attempt to get our talent to do — just tell fascinating stories. But you want context in a fascinating story, you want it to be colorful ... you to provide some historical context, you want drama, you want heroes, you want *villains*, you want sensory experiences, you want more than just the sound, you want the taste and the smell and the texture — those things

make great stories. So I'm really at peace with the people who write about WGN with not only very little understanding of what we're doing or why we're doing it, but very little interest in having any understanding of what we're doing or why we're doing it. Because they need me to be Snidley Whiplash, *nyah ah ah!*"

Metheny also explained how he acquired the nickname "Pig Virus," as immortalized in [Howard Stern's](#) 1993 memoir *Private Parts* (and changed to "Pig Vomit" in the movie adaptation of the book). With his *s-l-o-w*, deliberate way of speaking, Metheny underscored how little he has in common with Paul Giamatti's portrayal of him in the 1997 movie "Private Parts" as a sputtering rube. Without ever uttering the nickname himself, Metheny said:

"It was something that was a device for use in a broadcast that I worked with 20-some years ago, and it served our purpose at the time... . It was the Howard Stern broadcast in the afternoon at WNBC in New York, and the purpose was to create an amusing and disgusting name to use when vilifying the 'prop boss,' which is something that's been going on in literature and theatre and broadcasting since the beginning of each of those things. People love to hate the boss. So you make the boss an incompetent buffoon and caricaturize him. And so that was part of what came along with that. And that was fine... . I was kind of pretty much in on the joke. I understood what I was getting into."

Of his contentious relationship with Stern during the early '80s, Metheny recalled:

"What really happened was we had a really, really miserable six, eight, nine months. And then I had a major life-shaking recognition of the fact that he was doing something that we didn't understand — I'm not so sure he completely understood it at the time either — that what he was trying to do by way of entertainment was really more important than playing all the Air Supply songs in correct sequence and getting the traffic and weather on on time, and things like that. I figured out that probably the most purposeful and helpful role I could serve that would make the ratings go up would be rather than trying to beat him into submission and bend him to my will, which wasn't making either of us terribly happy, [to] figure out how to make the world a safe place for him to creatively do the thing that he does, which is create."

Other words of wisdom from Metheny:

- "We understand that much of the [WGN] audience has a rare and special bond to this radio station. It's not like anything you find anywhere else. I've worked at some of America's finest radio stations, but there is no other radio station like this."
- "The best way to do well is to identify an audience and hold up an accurate mirror over that audience with your radio station, reflect its cares and concerns and thoughts and fears and desires and aspirations back to that

community that you're targeting. There's enormous power in one person speaking to one other person on the radio. Listening to the radio is essentially a solo practice, it's a solo activity, even if you may have multiple people listening to the same speaker at the same time — car-pooling, for instance.”

- “I have a bias in favor of taking more chances rather than fewer, I suspect, although I think they need to be intelligent and well-informed chances. But if you operate in a completely risk-free environment, in addition to being just bloody boring, then you're not adapting to world as it changes around you.”



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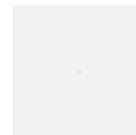
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