

Eagleton Institute Academic or Bluegrass Disc Jockey? Don't Make Him Choose

John Weingart cherishes his political work and his musical alter ego

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Photo: Devika Balachandran, WPRB

John Weingart has been a Sunday night folk and bluegrass deejay on WPRB radio since he was a Princeton graduate student in the 1970s.

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During the week John Weingart is a man of scholarly demeanor who helps run Rutgers' Eagleton Institute of Politics, and a respected public servant known for his decades working in state government.

But on Sunday nights – a world away from his office at Wood Lawn, a 183-year-old mansion on the university's Douglass Campus – Weingart morphs into a radio deejay. From the basement of a Princeton dormitory, dressed down in a T-shirt and jeans, Weingart hosts *Music You Can't Hear on the Radio*, which brings attention to a mostly ignored music genre in New Jersey – folk and bluegrass.

He has been doing the show, broadcast weekly from 7 p.m. to 10 p.m. on Princeton's student-run FM station WPRB, since his days as a Princeton graduate student in the 1970s.

Keeping the show in his life throughout his professional career has been a way for Weingart to express another side of himself. "I have tended to work in bureaucracies, and I like that," he explains, "but in those settings almost no important decisions are completely my own. On the radio I am totally in charge of what I play and what I say, and that's a lot of fun."

Weingart, who grew up in New York City, discovered his passion for folk music during grade school. When he was 9, he started spending summers at a camp owned by a half-brother of the folk legend Pete Seeger, where guitars were everywhere. As a teenager, his favorite hang-out was the Greenwich Village folk scene. From folk songs it was just a short leap to bluegrass, especially after he got his hands on a cherished pair of phonograph records – one a Folkways sampler called *Mountain Music Bluegrass Style*, and the other an album by a band called The Greenbriar Boys.

On his show, Weingart shares his love for artists with names like Pokey LaFarge, Gid Tanner and the Skillet Lickers and the Carolina Chocolate Drops. He provides a rare platform in New Jersey for little-known humorous songs such as *Jehovah's Witness at the Door* and moving ones like *We Are Each Other's Angels*. He artfully weaves the songs together into sets that often blend into musical themes.

True to his day job, one recurring theme is politics. Weingart segues smoothly from songs of protest to patriotism to political parody and back again. On the first Sunday after the partial federal government shutdown began on October 1, he started the show with a song called *I Think We're Just Too Stupid for Democracy*. On another recent show he treated listeners to "Gov-er-nor Rod Bla-go-je-vic ..." (to the tune of a certain Christmas song about a reindeer) followed by a song by a band whose lead musician is Maryland's governor Martin O'Malley.

At Rutgers, most people know Weingart as the associate director of the Eagleton Institute who worked for New Jersey's Department of Environmental Protection, where he helped to implement New Jersey's coastal zone management program and Hudson River walkway plan. He is quoted often in the news media, especially lately with his analysis of this year's New Jersey races for governor and the Legislature and the just-concluded special election that sent Cory Booker to the U.S. Senate.

By now, many of his colleagues and a few of his students have gotten to know and appreciate both sides. Even more people on campus will have that opportunity on the afternoon of November 4, when Weingart gives a talk on "Music Created and Inspired by Governors," an outgrowth of his leadership of Eagleton's Center on the American Governor. That presentation, at the institute, will include a tune with great Jersey roots that recalls an eight-day stretch when New Jersey had [five governors](#). The song, by David Kleiner, is an homage to "DiFrancesco, Farmer, Bennett, Codey, McGreevey," who held the job in rapid succession in January 2002.

Ruth Mandel, the Eagleton Institute's director, says that she and other colleagues have come to expect and even to count on John's gift for what she calls "low key humor." "John is blessed with a warm, clever wit, seemingly always at his disposal," says Mandel. "He encounters the often troublesome world of politics and its often trouble-making inhabitants with equal degrees of realism and affection."

Weingart cherishes both his profession and his hobby and hopes to continue this form of self-expression for as long as possible. "I have always felt, certainly in my adult life, that if I didn't have a radio show I would be really unpleasant to know because any time I saw people I'd say, 'You've gotta stop and listen to this!' And I don't feel quite the same necessity to do that when I'm not on the air."