

The Big Mouths

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Zoh Hieronimus, WCBM, 680-AM, 7 p.m. to 10 p.m.

"Zoh of Arc" provides easily the most distinctive three hours on local airwaves. "The Evening Show with Zoh" is a forum for host Zoh Hieronimus' outspoken libertarian idealism and her gift for spinning baffling but sometimes credible theories and massive conspiracy tales. Unrelenting in her questioning of all things governmental, but well prepared and never nasty. Shows usually feature a number of related guests. Pet topics: child immunization, homeopathic medicine, federal coverups.



WCBM'S OTHER UNREPENTANT SQUARE PEG, ZOHARA Hieronimus, reports similar findings from her wildly differing perspective. Born Jill Meyerhoff and an heiress to the philanthropic Meyerhoff family's considerable fortune, Zoh, as she usually goes by, stumbled into talk radio from a bewildering life of activism, world-wandering, and spiritual adventuring. In 1978, she appeared with her husband, Dr. Bob Hieronimus, on WBAL's Alan Christian Show for a Halloween special. By 1988, the couple had their own weekly syndicated show, 21st Century Radio, that explored everything from fringe science to conspiracy strangeness and which eventually boasted 60 national affiliates (Dr. Bob hosts the show alone now on Sunday nights at WCBM.)

Along the way, Zoh drifted from counterculture to New Age as a coordinator for Dr. Bob's Aquarian University of Maryland and then as founder of the Ruscombe Mansion Community Health Center, a clinic based on homeopathic medicine techniques. The Hieronimuses live and run their growing alternative-media empire from a magnificent domed house (a gift from her folks) on a secluded, fenced-in tract of woodsy land in Baltimore County.

But it is her daily evening talk show that now occupies Zoh's formidable attentions.

As one of a small handful of women doing talk radio in the region, Zoh would likely stand out anyway. But, by any definition, Zoh is a radio anomaly. "I'm a Democrat who votes Republican," she once announced on air. "But I'm really a libertarian." It is difficult to predict where she might come down on any given issue.

"In talk radio, most people are narrowly defined," she says, sitting in her cavernous living room. It's late morning and the phone rings regularly, but Laura Cortner, the Hieronimuses' assistant, is handling the phones from the basement offices. "Well, I don't fit any narrow definitions. And it really annoys a lot of people. They can't call me a liberal, and they can't call me a conservative."

What they do call her, sometimes, is a paranoid wacko, but Zoh can usually laugh it off. "I'm not paranoid," she says. "I'm informed."

A small and intense woman with a sometimes logic-defying ability to leap from topic to topic, Zoh describes herself as a "true seeker of knowledge" whose broadcasts are likely to encompass a dizzying range of topics, from alternative medicine to UFOs, one-world government, and a whole shifting mosaic of government conspiracy. Everyone from hard-core environmentalists to John Birch Society stalwarts find common ground with



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Zoh. She claims no political agenda and prides herself on reading primary sources, slogging through pages of legislation ("I'm probably the only journalist in the country who read the NAFTA cover to cover," she says) instead of relying on the usual "talking points" that political organizations fax to partisan talk-show hosts.

Like so many of her colleagues, Zoh loves the medium but rarely listens to it herself.

"I rarely listen to my colleagues' shows," she says, "because they make me so angry. I discovered it was healthier for me just not to hear what they have to say."

Originally, Zoh says she was brought into 'CBM's "dysfunctional radio family" as a nutty liberal foil for conservative Tom Marr on Friday mornings—"the great Rush Limbaugh feminazi," as she jokes. But soon that idea was stood on its head. "People thought I was a token liberal, and as it turns out I'm more conservative than all of them."

Zoh's unorthodox ideological stands make for pointed but unusually civil radio discourse. Their tone is less shrill than the talk-show norm, and Zoh's sweet, sometimes sassy style defuses some of the inherently quarrelsome nature of the format. Sometimes, she even does kids' shows (the most recent one was on dinosaurs). Plus, Zoh's shows are usually tightly plotted, with a series of expert guests and consistent themes instead of the open-forum rant that tends to dominate political talk radio. She is not, as she says, "hot-button-driven." She rarely offers the show as an opportunity to ventilate on whatever is in the news at the moment. On the day of the Oklahoma bombing, she went along with a scheduled program on another topic.

"I didn't get into talk radio to act as the commander of a reactive forum," she says. "Most talk-show hosts react to the story of the day. A lot of them are emotional arsonists. . . . [They] take advantage of a situation that has occurred and play the sides against each other. They will do their best to enunciate the most divisive aspect of the story . . . the one they know will get everyone angry at each other."

Zoh says that, as a woman in a male-dominated industry, she was "required to far outperform" her male colleagues, and she says that "it has not been easy for me to consistently stand up to indirect ridicule and sometimes very direct sabotage."

"For the most part, I don't like talk-show hosts," Zoh says. "I think they're arrogant. They're immature. And they're chauvinists."

Laura Cortner interrupts with a message from the WCBM offices. "It's Tom Marr," she says. "He wants to know if you have a copy of the Constitution."

It's early afternoon now; Marr is about to go on the air. In the wake of the official presidential displeasure with talk radio, free speech and constitutional rights are the hottest of hot-button topics, and no right-minded talker should be caught without his Constitution today. Zoh howls with glee.

"He doesn't have a copy of the Constitution? After he brags that he takes a copy of the Constitution into every show?"

Zoh savors the concept briefly, then tells Cortner to direct Marr to a box in her office full of citizens' handbooks on the Constitution. She, of course, is always prepared.



Talk radio's grand mistress of the coverup and conspiracy theory, Zoh Hieronimus spends time with her daughter.

