



Mark sits in his makeshift radio studio and assumes the Hard Harry persona.

Pump Up The Truth: Christian Slater plays a cultural prophet

by NICK MEADOR

At the turn of the 1990s, the Allen Moyle film Pump Up The Volume pushed the value of free speech via access to FM radio, inadvertently predicting today's digital culture.

Pump Up The Volume is the story of disaffected high school student Mark Hunter (played by a young Christian Slater), whom has recently been relocated to the fictional Paradise Hills, Arizona (perhaps modeled after Phoenix suburb Paradise Valley?) when his father took a position as superintendent of the public school district. To ease the transition, Mark's parents give him an FM radio set with the strange hope that he will be able to communicate with his old friends on the east coast. Since the FM set cannot reach far beyond the city limits, Mark instead uses the transmitter to broadcast music and monologues.

His shows are unedited, unregulated and commercial free. When he plays music, he does so illegally. Mark broadcasts every night at 10 pm, initially as a way to pass the time. He's bored with his new surroundings and doesn't want to put forth the effort to make friends. He never expected many people to stop on his frequency, let alone give a hoot about his content. A scan of his cassettes (Primal Scream, The Jesus and Mary Chain, Pixies, Concrete Blond, Bad Brains, and Ice T) and LPs (Leonard Cohen, etc), and close attention to

the music that Mark plays on the air (Beastie Boys, The Descendents, and those previously mentioned), shows an strange amalgam of styles that is nevertheless appropriate for the birth of the alternative era.

Mark performs under the pseudonym Hard Harry and preaches a "talk hard" philosophy, inspired by the work of Lenny Bruce. He takes advantage of the soapbox to bash his new community, his parents, his peers, and practically everything else he's seen since moving to the cookie-cutter oasis. Mark harbors an interesting hatred for the '60s, rightfully claiming that the hippie revolution didn't really accomplish anything for the people involved, or for society as a whole. He swims in obscenity, not only playing offensive music but also regularly simulating masturbation on the air. During Hard Harry's first broadcast, he claims he's living in an "exhausted decade where there's nothing to look forward to and no one to look up to." (He's probably referring to the end of the '80s, when writing and filming would have taken place.)

At the start of the film, the public has already taken notice of Hard Harry's antics. Instead of wasting away at local malls or convenience stores, students gather for informal listening parties where the transmission is strongest: at the school's baseball field. Fans write in with comments, criticisms, love letters, and pleas for advice. They send the notes to a P.O. Box that Mark has reserved, and if they include a phone number, Mark promises to call them back. Here emerges the first parallel with modern times. Mark receives fan mail like a blog or Facebook wall gets comments, and those letters are read over the air for the public to hear. This allows for a new way to exchange ideas: asynchronous communication in an open public forum.

However, the equation is not that simple. First of all, Mark uses a voice disguiser on the air, so Hard Harry is an indistinguishable baritone. Mark senses the importance of anonymity, at least partially recognizing the danger of his actions. This concept of entering a telecommunications domain would explode in the mid-90s, when anyone with AOL and a 13.3 kbs modem could type their heart away in a chat room. The up: a person could say whatever he or she wanted to, with less of that pesky face-to-face inhibition to worry about. The down: LuVrGrL17 might actually be a hairy, 45-year-



old pedophile. Similarly, listeners have no immediate way to prove who Hard Harry is, or determine his true intentions. They just have a gut feeling that this person is doing something important and fascinating.

Mark starts attracting negative attention the first time he acts as a whistle-blower. He borrows a document from his father, the superintendent, containing secret information about a series of expulsions at his high school. Hard Harry calls the school's head guidance counselor to inquire into the matter, and at first, the counselor is delighted by the attention from a radio personality. Mark asks why a pregnant student was expelled, and the question infuriates the counselor, who then hangs up the phone. The unanswered question builds throughout the film to eventually unveil an evil plot driven by the principal, but we'll return to that later.



Caption: Nora Dinero listens intently to Mark's intriguing writing assignment. Although unassuming in the reality of school, Nora regularly sends provocative letters to Hard Harry.

Meanwhile, Nora Dinero is a reserved, artistic type who listens to Hard Harry's show compulsively. She jots down clues revealed during the broadcasts, in a sort of primitive version of Facebook stalking, to ascertain the radio host's true identity. Mark only knows her as "The Eat-me-beat-me Lady," a mysterious woman who submits kinky poetry handwritten in black ink on blood-red paper, but who never lists a phone number. Nora, too, desires to be heard, but is afraid of the consequences of going public. Or even worse, she and Mark are probably both terrified of their own potential as students, as creators, and as human beings. Also, an idea that sprouts from an anonymous source – one that has no roots or chains holding it down – can potentially

survive longer than one that is constantly attributed to a specific person or group. In that case, if the person fails, the idea probably will too.

Mark's response to Nora's actions reflects the way people now use social network web sites (i.e. – MySpace, Friendster, etc) to present a more desirable version of themselves. "I bet in real life she's probably not that wild. I bet she's kinda shy, like so many of us briskly walking the halls, pretending to be late for some class, pretending to be distracted. Hey, poetry lady, are you really this cool? Are you out there? Are you listening? I feel like I know you, and yet we'll never meet. So be it." This phenomenon peaked around 2005, when MySpace users still felt like they owned their self-designed profile. And when it seemed possible to make friends or date in a virtual environment. And, undoubtedly, when the News Corporation didn't own the website and mine the posted data for highly advanced advertising techniques, as they do today.

Nora is willing to approach Mark, and even follows him to his P.O. Box, but no one else even begins to connect Mark with the hooting madman on the FM dial – not his parents, his peers, or the school administration. However, Mark finds himself in a predicament that would become commonplace later in the '90s: while he is comfortable speaking his mind behind the shield of the microphone, he finds it extremely difficult to communicate with Nora in person. After all, he's a timid nerd in public – the complete opposite of how he acts in the privacy of his own home. It's not until much later that Mark and Nora can bare themselves – both emotionally and physically (note – when they do undress, it is as much a symbolic act as a sexual one). When this happens, Mark and Nora could be the first couple in history to get together through what would now be called online dating.

Students find the broadcasts inspirational and liberating, as if they can sense that something is terribly wrong with their social environment, but they don't have a clue what to do about it. One entrepreneurial student sells bootlegged tapes of the performances – serving as an interesting tie-in with the file-sharing shenanigans that have littered the past ten years. The difference is that most illegal content sharing these days generates zero profit for the one sending the material into



cyberspace. However, the student's tapes generate a surprisingly profitable business, considering anyone could stick a cassette in their boom box and hit record.



Caption: A disgruntled princess (center front) storms out of the PTA meeting after blowing up her cosmetics collection in the microwave. In the back row (from left to right) are superintendent Hunter (Mark's dad), the henchman, a priest, the principal, a teacher, Mark's English teacher, and the guidance counselor.

The first turning point in the film arrives when Hard Harry calls a fan who asks via letter, "Should I kill myself?" Mark takes the suicide threat as a sarcastic joke, and doesn't really believe him. Mark definitely doesn't consider the consequences if the student actually does shoot himself. He does say, "Hey, maybe it's okay to be alone sometimes. Everybody's alone." With tears in his eyes, the boy responds, "You're not." Then Mark answers, "I didn't talk to one person today, not counting teachers. I sit alone every day, ya know. I sit in the stairwell eating my lunch, reading a book. What about you?" On one hand, Mark has drawn back from society, acting as a total recluse in his wired-up basement. On the other hand, Mark is breaking down societal boundaries that existed long before he ever arrived in Shittyville, Arizona. Mark is making human connections by bypassing traditional social methods. Mark is blazing a new path – one that most people wouldn't even start upon for another 15 years.

But while Mark tries to empathize, he fails to simply say, "Don't shoot yourself." When the authorities learn that a student committed suicide, and that he spoke with Hard Harry just before pulling the trigger, Mark becomes a target. The authorities had already caught wind of the broadcasts, and their intolerance was

slowly growing to this peak. The automatic assumption by adults – the principal, in particular – is that Mark encouraged the suicide, while teens familiar with Hard Harry's show know that it was inevitable. Mark's first reaction is to shut down the operation, but Nora tries to convince him that it wasn't his fault. Not only that, she feels that Mark has a responsibility to continue, and not abandon his enlightening ways. From this point on, a cheesy TV news anchor appears regularly at the school, offering a quick comment on what mainstream media deems newsworthy (i.e. – the horrible cliché, "If it bleeds, it leads.")

During a following call, a homosexual student asks Mark for advice about a humiliating encounter with a would-be lover. Long story short, the boy was taken to a private destination and then coerced into revealing his attraction to men. Next, the boy's romantic interest, and two friends hiding nearby, called him names and made fun of him. Thankfully, they only harmed him emotionally, and not physically as well. Mark handles the call with grace, despite the pressure he is under. Mark says, "I'm just thinking how strong people can be, and how everyone is alike in some way, and how everyone needs the same things."

Keep in mind that this was at the tail end of the AIDS decade, when homosexuals were targeted for more than just their abandonment of puritan ideals. This was way before *Will & Grace* and *Queer Eye For The Straight Guy* and all other gay interjections into mainstream culture. But Mark has removed a few more bricks from the wall between truth and everything else. He is peering deeper into the core of human nature – the longing and the sorrow. Then the caller hangs up strangely dissatisfied, and Mark is shown walking around his suburban wasteland as the slower "UK Surf" version of Pixies' classic "Wave of Mutilation" plays somberly in the background.

Outside of the student sphere, things are starting to boil over. Parents become terrified after the news of a suicide, fearing the same fate for their own *helpless, vulnerable* children. At an emergency PTA meeting, the adults discuss what to do about the Hard Harry broadcasts. Mark's parents even start to get worried, never imagining that their own son could be



using the FM radio set *they gave him* for mischievous behavior.



Caption: Mark and Nora broadcast from an FM-radio-equipped Jeep while avoiding the Feds, until Mark finally chooses to face the heat.

The administration considers Hard Harry a dangerous threat, providing a microcosm that applies to any oligarchy. The principal is frightened of what will happen if Mark divulges further secrets, like the accumulating files on “questionable” students being assembled with the help of a McCarthy-like henchman. To ensure that the school maintains the highest SAT average in the state, the leaders expel misfits, troublemakers, and anyone else they want – regardless of what Mark’s dad calls “a basic right to education.” On the other hand, a friendly English teacher encourages Mark to be open about his feelings regarding his lauded writing assignments. She listens to every Hard Harry show, but is eventually fired for her unwillingness to participate in the principal’s vile scheme.

The second main juncture in the film arrives when authorities learn that Hard Harry’s broadcasts are being looped beyond city limits, at which point they notify the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). Arthur Watts, head of the FCC, arrives to address the situation. Upon exiting his limo, he says, “We at the FCC believe that democracy is all about protecting the rights of the ordinary citizen. Unregulated radio would result in programming of the lowest common denominator – the rule of the mob.” Then he turns to graffiti on his truck and says, “This is vandalism, not free expression!” Watts is an archetype for the social responsibility model of mass media creation and distribution. In other words, the individual’s rights, desires, motivations and emotions

should be sacrificed to ensure the stability of society. Hard Harry, on the contrary, represents the libertarian ideals that prioritize individual freedom over the top-down umbrella-shaped system of control that has evolved in industrialized nations – most notably the U.S.

With Nora’s guidance, Mark builds up the courage to broadcast again, even though he knows that the FCC will be using their scanning technology to locate him. Mark wires his radio equipment (somewhat unrealistically) into his mom’s topless Jeep Wrangler, and asks Nora to drive while he talks. Without even hearing Watt’s speech, Mark says, “Imagine a fucking political hack being in charge of free speech in America. I’ll bet Watts was the guy who took names in high school when the teacher was absent. He’s the kind of phony in politics who wears a wig.” Watt’s hears this and says, “This is the problem with free speech.” This recalls the backwards mentality of Orwell’s *1984*, where the government develops “newspeak” to confuse and control the population. In that terrifying world, the Ministry of Truth is in charge of burning books, altering newspapers, and dissipating lies to secure their power. Words are literally deleted from existence, so the ability to think becomes drastically reduced.

In Mark’s final on-the-run broadcast, he tries to mend any wounds he has unintentionally created. He abandons his busted voice disguiser and heads straight for the mass of people listening behind the high school. “We’re all worried. We’re all in pain. That comes with having eyes, with having ears. But just remember one thing: it can’t get any worse. It can only get better. I mean, high school is the bottom. Being a teenager sucks! But that’s the point. Surviving it is the whole point. Quitting it is not going to make you strong. Living will. So just hang on and hang in there. Ya know, I know all about the hating and the sneering. I’m a member of the ‘why bother’ generation myself. But why did I bother to come out here tonight? And why did you? I mean, it’s time. It begins with us. Not with politicians, the experts, or the teachers, but with us. With you and with me – the ones who need it most. I believe with everything that’s in me that the whole world is longing for a healing. Even the trees and the earth itself are crying out for it.”

One interesting cry during Mark’s mobile broadcast was this: “Welcome to radio free America.



America's ready! I'm ready! I mean, I want a million voices crying out in the wilderness!" The most shocking notion, and possibly the hardest to understand or accept, is that this spirit of anarchy could be the very thing that saves democracy. If the powerful few who control a society (i.e. - politicians, corporations, churches, etc) can no longer hide their dirty secrets, and those who have traditionally delivered information to a population (i.e. – newspapers, radio and television) lose their secondary control over the flow of that information, this is going to be a very different world.

It's important to note that *Pump Up The Volume* was not an enormous success. There are just as many tacky moments as memorable ones, even if the tackiest parts are realistic to everyday teenage discourse.

Volume survives by employing important themes, suggesting useful ideas, and showcasing decent performances by Christian Slater and Samantha Mathis. At that time, there was no way to know that the Internet would eventually allow millions of people to act similarly. Even at the turn of this decade – when the Dot Com frenzy was still burning out, and the interactivity of Web 2.0 had not yet been born – vast amounts of user-generated mass media seemed improbable. One key difference is that a blog, like any web site, is accessible anywhere in the world. A radio station, while appealing more directly to the emotions than words on a computer screen, has a limited broadcast radius.

What the film does not predict is the role that the music industry – and their guard dog, the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) – would play in modern times. They will stop at nothing to protect their economic interests from the threat to profits posed by illegal file sharing. Granted, Mark's activities are more akin to a music blog than a peer-to-peer downloading network. Today, innumerable people post MP3s on their blogs for people to listen to worldwide. Regardless of whether or not those people have permission to do so, it seems that they aren't usually asked to take the music off of their web site. Some people – especially young artists – view this as a global advertisement that they wouldn't otherwise have. Of course, Internet radio stations have also become prominent these days, particularly the ones that tailor music to the listener's tastes like Pandora and Last.fm. But even Internet radio

has come under attack from the music industry, who tried to impose per-song fees that would destroy most of the operations.

Perhaps Moyle's greatest failure was not showing us what happens to Mark after he is arrested in the film's final scene. Unfortunately for the viewer's sake, Mark's dad only suspends the principal instead of firing her, there is no confrontation between Mark and his parents, and we don't know the extent of legal action taken against Mark. Instead, Moyle chooses to end the film with a collage of like-minded pirate radio broadcasts around the country, implying that the truth is infectious – and the means for obtaining and sharing it existed even in 1990. But today, with the interconnectivity of the Internet, that potential is greater than ever. The difference now is that more individuals are willing and able to fight for justice in the world, and less afraid of the malevolent forces of the past.

A million voices cry out in the wilderness, echo off the wall of tyranny, and return united as the voice of truth.

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