

In the World of Radio, She's a Rare Bird

In the radio world, Alison Steele is something of a rarity. As WNEW-FM's self-proclaimed "Nightbird," she is the only full-time woman disk jockey in the city and one of the few in the country. (The National Association of Broadcasters has no precise figures on the number of women disk jockeys).

"I've been at WNEW longer than anyone else who's on the air now," said the red-haired, freckled Miss Steele as she smoked one of her "pure tobacco" Nat Sherman miniature cigars. "I started June 4, 1966, and I worked hard for my time slot [six nights 10 P.M. to 2 A.M., Sundays, 8 P.M. to midnight]. I came through the fire for that — I used to be on 2 A.M. to 6 A.M. straight through the week."

Miss Steele's only companion in the 13th floor studio at 230 Park Avenue is her champagne-colored French poodle, Genya, who is likely to be exploring the wires underneath the studio's two record turntables or chewing on a bone as Miss Steele tells her listeners what music has just played.

A native of New York, Miss Steele said she doesn't mind her hours.

"I'm a night person," she said. "I think it has a mysterious quality. I never get lonely up here." Perhaps that's because she gets 25 or 30 phone calls every night.

What Job Entails

At WNEW-FM, which plays mostly rock music, the disk jockeys work without scripts and are free to play any of the 2,000 records shelved alphabetically in one corner of the 12-by-12-foot studio.

"I don't prepare for a show too much," Miss Steele added. "My opening [a poem and a greeting like 'You're on the threshold of a dream. Come fly with me, Alison Steele, the Nightbird'] is created during the day, and I never know what music I'll feel like playing."

Because no engineers are on duty during the late evening and morning shows, the disk jockeys also need some mechanical knowhow. Each has a third class radio operator's license, which entitles him to operate the station's microphones and volume controls.

Although she is not fond of some of the taped commercials, she is required to air. Miss Steele refrains from publicly commenting on them. "I don't think it's my place, and when Friday comes and I go to get my check, if it weren't for the commercials..."

She says little between songs, announcing only the record, who wrote it and occasionally a word about its history. "I don't believe in trying to influence people, they're not interested in my opinion," she said.

'In Show Business'

But Miss Steele does not hesitate to comment on the news that she broadcasts only at midnight. (The midnight newscast has too many racing results, she said.) During one recent broadcast, Miss Steele stumbled through some wage and price regulations and then editorialized: "It sounds complicated, but it means they can't rip you off any more."

Commercials and news aside, Miss Steele said she enjoys her work. "All the experience of my life is going



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Alison Steele, disk jockey, is known as "Nightbird." Dog is her only companion in the studio.

into what I do now. Ever since I was 3, I've wanted to be in show business."

Eleven years later she got her start. At 14 Miss Steele was an errand girl at a local TV station "looking over everybody's shoulder." She worked through high school and instead of going to college ("I was too impatient") she continued to work at TV and radio stations in the area.

Eventually Miss Steele became a production assistant and associate producer at a New York radio station and joined WNEW after hearing an ad for female disk jockeys.

"They auditioned 800 girls

to find four, and I was one of them," Miss Steele said. The station had planned to have all women disk jockeys but abandoned the format in 1967 after an 18-month trial. "I was the only one they asked to stay," she said.

Where some women have complained of discrimination in seeking a job, Miss Steele has not. "I've never thought I didn't get a job because I was a woman. If I didn't get it, I assumed it was because I wasn't good enough," she said.

Miss Steele, who admits to being over 30, said she has not encountered any problems with her listeners, the

majority of whom are men between 18 and 34, according to the most recent American Research Bureau study. The study also says 78,000 people tune her in every night with her closest FM rival at that time, WOR-FM, with 67,100 listeners.

"It amazes me that I've never gotten an obscene phone call or any lewd remarks while I'm on," said Miss Steele, who wears bell-bottom pants, boots and jersey tops on the job. "I'll have some men call who say they're madly in love with me or offer to buy me a cup of coffee."

The more avid "Nightbird" fans send presents, usually artificial birds.

"I have the greatest collection of owls," Miss Steele said the other day as she opened a package that contained another.

When she is not at the studio, Miss Steele, who is not married, is either in her East Side apartment listening to new albums or out auditioning for commercials (the ones she likes) or occasionally speaking about her work at colleges in the area.

Being a woman in broadcasting has had its drawbacks, however, Miss Steele said. "I've felt I've never been allowed the luxuries of pampering myself or making errors. I've never called in sick. I've worked hard and built my own following. I never use my feminine wiles on anybody."