The Myth of the Nassau Mausoleum
A Brainchild of the First All-Sports Radio Station

Relatively little historical research has focused on sports radio despite its growth in the American media landscape. From its inception in 1987, the world’s first all-sports radio station, WFAN in New York City, broadcast derisive commentary about a major hockey arena, Nassau Coliseum on Long Island. This historical article describes how three WFAN hosts, Don Imus, Mike Francesa, and Steve Somers, encouraged their listeners to view the venue as “Nassau Mausoleum,” a term that Somers popularized. Anecdotes from primary sources, including interviews with Somers and his producer, demonstrate that sports radio commentary can impact how listeners think and behave, exemplifying the two-step flow of communications. This article also considers how public relations executives from Nassau Coliseum and its National Hockey League team, the New York Islanders, tried to combat the negative remarks.

In 1990, ads began to pop up across New York City bragging, “We’ve got New York sports by the . . .” These captured the bravado of WFAN 660 AM, the world’s first all-sports radio station, a 50,000-watt, clear-channel juggernaut that had generated massive ratings since its 1987 debut. Three of the station’s most recognizable voices—morning shock jock Don Imus and afternoon drive partners Mike Francesa and Chris “Mad Dog” Russo—appeared as caricatures in the ads. Not pictured, but equally well known to WFAN’s loyal listeners, was Steve Somers, who worked overnights but also briefly cohosted a midday program between the hit shows Imus in the Morning and Mike and the Mad Dog. Together the men represented the daily cycle of sports in the world’s largest media market.

Looking back, WFAN’s dominance in this era seems all the more impressive. Today the New York sports fan can tune into regional all-sports television networks such as SNY and YES, or a second all-sports radio station, ESPN 98.7 FM. No alternatives existed in the 1990s, however, and WFAN enjoyed a lock on its niche market. When Imus, Francesa, and Somers spoke, sports fans listened. Executives from the New York Islanders, a team in the National Hockey League, began to worry when the three WFAN hosts trashed their aging arena, Nassau Veterans Memorial Coliseum in Uniondale, Long Island. Somers viewed the venue as a dump and popularized the term “Nassau Mausoleum.” WFAN seemed to have a vested interest in bashing the Islanders, too: The only sports radio station in town carried the games of the archrival New York Rangers.

Opened in 1972, the Coliseum reigned as the only major sports and entertainment arena on Long Island, and one of only a handful of high-capacity sports venues in the New York metropolitan area. The Coliseum held circuses, concerts, and ice shows, but its claim to fame was hosting the Islanders, a franchise that had won four straight Stanley Cup titles in the early 1980s. Neither Imus nor Francesa cared much about hockey, and Somers had set foot in the Coliseum only a few times in his life. Yet the three men spewed so much verbal venom toward the arena that officials from the Coliseum and the Islanders wondered if sports radio commentary could influence the attitudes and behaviors of fans.

The proliferation of sports radio stations in the United States demonstrates WFAN’s revolutionary...
impact in introducing a new media format to tap into our national obsession with athletics. Surprisingly, few scholars have explored the history of a pioneering station whose roster included two of the most prominent names in the past three decades of radio, Imus and Francesa. To start filling a large gap in mass communications research, this study examines one piece of WFAN’s early days—how hosts at the station affected the reputation and perhaps the fate of a major hockey arena. Anecdotes and background are culled from a wide variety of primary sources, including articles in period newspapers and magazines as well as interviews with Somers, producers and personalities who have worked closely with Imus and Francesa, and former executives from the Islanders and Nassau Coliseum. Driving the article is a critical research question about WFAN’s influence in changing public opinion about a well-known venue in the world’s largest media market.

Much research suggests that consuming media can affect one’s attitudes. Scholars Paul F. Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson, and Hazel Gaudet first proposed the two-step flow of communications, a process by which ideas flow from print and radio to people known as “opinion leaders” who closely monitor media and then pass along what they read and hear in their social circles. Sociologist Elihu Katz elaborated on how people are “most successfully persuaded” not by direct contact with mass media but through interactions with friends, coworkers, and relatives. Opinion formation, then, can be critically impacted by interpersonal influence. Recent scholarship has demonstrated that major media personalities can persuade large audiences to open their wallets. Oprah Winfrey, whose weekday talk show reached a peak of 13 million viewers per episode in the early 1990s, spurred a “national revival of reading” by launching a book club. In 2007, the New York Times reported that authors witnessed boosts in book sales after interviews with Comedy Central funnymen Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert, whose shows averaged nightly audiences of more than one million. Political candidates who appeared on The Colbert Report also saw rises in campaign donations, supporting the host’s theory of a “Colbert bump” effect.

Radio, too, has its opinion leaders. Conservative host Rush Limbaugh, who reached about 20 million Americans a week in the 1990s, was widely credited with swaying public opinion against President Bill Clinton’s 1993 nomination of Zoe Baird for attorney general and with improving voters’ perceptions of Republican presidential candidate Bob Dole in 1996. When the Republicans seized control of Congress in the 1994 elections, numerous party leaders attributed the victories to Limbaugh. Minnesota Congressman Vin Weber said, “Rush Limbaugh is as responsible for what happened as any individual in America.” Recognizing this effect, scholars David Barker and Kathleen Knight classify Limbaugh as an opinion leader who arms his right-wing listeners with “rhetorical ammunition that can be employed in attempting to win over spouses, friends, and acquaintances.” In turn, Limbaugh’s listeners become opinion leaders themselves.

Even narrow-format sports radio stations can influence audience behavior. Rick Reilly of Sports Illustrated believes that sports radio hosts in Tuscaloosa so consistently trashed University of Alabama football coach Bill Curry that alumni became angered by what they heard on air and drove Curry out of town in 1990. Two years later, WIP in Philadelphia urged listeners to vote for two borderline Phillies players for Major League Baseball’s All-Star Game, spurring fans to bombard the station with thousands of ballots marked for catcher Darren Daulton and first baseman John Kruk. And in 1999, a host at Kansas City’s WHB rallied eight thousand listeners to protest the perceived inequities in baseball’s economic structure by wearing “Share the Wealth” T-shirts to a game between the small-market Royals and free-spending New York Yankees.

Sports radio has witnessed impressive growth in the years since WFAN’s debut. In 2012, Crain’s New York Business counted about seven hundred sports radio stations across the United States, a statistic that does not include sports programming on websites such as Blog Talk Radio. While most WFAN personalities do not boast the nationwide name recognition or lofty ratings enjoyed by Winfrey and Limbaugh, they exude an accessibility and provincialism that may enhance their opinion leader potential, with listeners viewing them more like friends than media personalities. As author Philip A. Lieberman notes, morning radio personalities such as Imus became “more a part of our daily lives than almost any other media presentation,” especially in an era before an explosion
of cable television stations and the widespread introduction of the Internet and smart phones led to media fragmentation.\(^8\)

Sports radio hosts have long been criticized for forwarding strong opinions to bait listeners to call in, or at least keep them from turning the dial. Journalist Paul Brownfield ridicules sports radio for its propensity to create “trumped-up controversy,”\(^9\) while scholar Pamela Haag notes criticism that sports radio “circulates bull.”\(^10\) Challenged to fill several hours of air time a day, sports radio hosts may also criticize players just to get the phones ringing and ratings soaring. Reilly has contended that on sports radio, “it doesn’t matter who gets ripped, as long as somebody gets ripped.”\(^11\) In *Sports-Talk Radio in America*, the female general manager of Boston sports radio station WEEI is quoted acknowledging that audiences do not always catch on to the unserious bits: “A lot of people get up in the air because they don’t realize these guys are acting. . . . They’re going overboard to be entertaining.”\(^12\) This dynamic presents an intriguing potential for two-step flow: While the hosts joke or exaggerate to propel their ratings, some listeners may not realize what is happening and form or change opinions based on the farcical commentary they hear.

At its inception in 1972, Nassau Coliseum was considered a state-of-the-art arena. Early brochures trumpeted the “ultra-modern,” “fabulous new Coliseum” and its anchor team, the National Hockey League’s Islanders.\(^13\) The sales pitch from the Islanders stressed the convenience of enjoying first-rate hockey on Long Island. In the past, fans had to trek to Madison Square Garden in Manhattan, the arena that housed the Rangers. The Islanders’ eighth season culminated in the spring of 1980 with the first of four consecutive Stanley Cup championships.\(^14\) During its glory days, Nassau Coliseum gained the nickname “Fort Neverlose” because of the Islanders’ domination in winning a record nineteen consecutive playoff series, a feat unmatched by other hockey dynasties such as the 1950s Montreal Canadiens and the 1980s Edmonton Oilers.\(^15\) The Islanders remained respectable into the 1990s, and sports commentators continued to laud the Coliseum’s sightlines as among the best in the NHL.\(^16\) The arena also hosted a team in a formidable national league for lacrosse and some of the highest-grossing concerts on the planet, featuring the likes of the Grateful Dead, New Kids on the Block, Rod Stewart, and Frank Sinatra.\(^17\)

Twenty years after its opening, however, the aging Coliseum started to show some warts. In 1993, a *New York Times* reporter saw garbage bags and trash cans strewn about the Islanders’ locker room to catch dripping water.\(^18\) Complaints started to filter in about the Coliseum’s dim lighting, long lines for its bathrooms and concessions, and a leaky roof patched with temporary sealants and tape.\(^19\) Still, the Coliseum enjoyed a mostly positive image in the industry, and it kept booking headliners. “Any show that the Garden or the Meadowlands [in New Jersey] had, so did Nassau Coliseum,” Hilary Hartung, the arena’s marketing director for much of the 1990s, said in an interview.\(^20\) “In those years, we were still one of the top-grossing arenas in the nation because the Islanders were playing well. Every concert, every family show, everything was there. Everything.”

Negative sports radio commentary, however, posed a significant public relations challenge for the Coliseum. Top executives acknowledged flaws with the arena. But Pat Calabria, the Islanders’ vice president of communications from 1992 to 1998, maintained that Imus, Francesa, and Somers exaggerated the Coliseum’s flaws because the Islanders were no longer perennial championship contenders. “There was a vigorous focus on what was wrong, and the building became a lightning rod for the fans’ disaffection for the way the...
team was performing,” Calabria said in an interview. With three of its most prominent hosts attacking the Coliseum, WFAN reinforced a “Nassau Mausoleum” image that became very difficult to shake.

Radio insiders recognize Don Imus as the original shock jock. Born into a wealthy cattle-raising family in California, Imus developed an irreverent persona by ridiculing sponsors, bosses, and even the very listeners he was trying to attract. Before his run with WFAN, Imus forged his bully pulpit during the morning time slot on WNBC 660 AM, a full-service station that featured Top 40 music and hourly news reports, which began airing Imus in the Morning in 1971. WNBC also broadcast the games of the NBA’s New York Knicks and the NHL’s Rangers.

Imus’s emergence in the market paralleled the Coliseum’s. Imus in the Morning made its New York debut on December 2, 1971, a month after the NHL had awarded Long Island an expansion team that would become the Coliseum’s anchor tenant. Imus attained national renown when Life magazine profiled him on November 3, 1972, during the Islanders’ inaugural season. WNBC cleaned house and fired Imus in August 1977, but he triumphantly returned to the station and the New York airwaves on September 3, 1979, a month before the Islanders set out on a memorable season that would net the team its first Stanley Cup championship.

All this time, Imus was growing in prestige, popularity, and influence. Working in Sacramento in 1969, Imus landed the Billboard award for top DJ in a medium market. Then he went to Cleveland and captured the 1970 Billboard award for top DJ in a major market, leading to his 1971 hiring by WNBC. Only a year after his arrival in New York, Imus had upped WNBC’s morning ratings from seventh to fifth overall, and second in an important demographic, listeners ages eighteen to thirty-four. In 1980, the New York Times singled out Imus as “vitaly important” to the success of WNBC, which boasted the second-best ratings of any music station in the New York metropolitan market.

Imus’s act evolved into more than just acid-tongued barbs. By interviewing politicians and wonky authors and journalists, Imus appealed to listeners who were opinion leaders themselves. Esquire raved that Imus lured doctors and lawyers, “the listeners who buy Heinekens and Jeeps,” the type of demographics “that Rush Limbaugh or Howard Stern or anybody else would die for.”

The Columbia Journalism Review touted his popularity among the media elite and “high-income, highly educated folks advertisers love.” At one point, Imus in the Morning reached more male listeners earning more than $100,000 than any other morning talk show.

Imus also held sway on the Coliseum’s home turf. In 1972, a crowd of three hundred people waited in line at a Long Island gas station to have Imus autograph everything from a shirt to a shoe to a cantaloupe. Larry Kenney, an impressionist who appeared regularly on Imus in the Morning, said in an interview that the Long Island lifestyle, which often involves driving to a job in New York City, lent itself to morning radio. That view was echoed by Long Island-raised comedian Jane Gennaro, who was frequently called onto Imus’s show to impersonate celebrities such as Leona Helmsley, Joan Rivers, and Diane Sawyer. She recalled how her father was once interviewing for a job at a major financial management company in Garden City when the company president, who apparently listened to Imus, asked if he was related to Jane Gennaro. “I said [on air] plenty of times, ‘You’re all just a bunch of seventh-grade boys,’” Gennaro remembered. “He had a big following out there [on Long Island] among guys, and not just young guys—guys who were successful, working men who also liked to hear a lot of dick jokes.”

Recognizing Imus’s enormous influence, Nassau Coliseum’s director of operations, Lance Elder, said in an interview that he began courting the host in order to drive listeners to the arena. Tasked to promote boxing at the Coliseum on a paltry advertising budget, Elder said he sent posters for some matches to Imus and called into the show a few times, hoping Imus would mention the events on air. The strategy worked. In 1980, Imus agreed to come to the Coliseum for closed-circuit coverage of a highly publicized match between Sugar Ray Leonard and Roberto Duran, live from Montreal. In the weeks leading up to the June 20 bout, Imus talked up the Coliseum viewing event on WNBC. Elder arranged for a limo to pick up Imus, and Imus’s newsman, Charles McCord, came too. The men had dinner in a restaurant in the Coliseum named the Arena Club, where Imus and McCord impressed Carl Hirsh, the Coliseum’s marketing director. “They were the best,” Hirsh said in an interview. “They went into the kitchen. [Imus] talked to the cooks. He was tremendous.”

Elder attributed the large turnout that night to Imus. “I had no marketing budget and we sold the event out, so [Imus] was really important and valuable,” Elder said. “It was a great fight for starters, but more importantly he started talking about how he was going to be there. People want to see him. When he’s got the fan base that he had back in the day, I think there was some recognition that he was going to be there and maybe we want to be there as well.” Lyndon Abell, Imus’s producer at the time, confirmed in an interview that Imus had a wide reach in the region. “If I was a boxing promoter in Long Island and I wanted to get attention to my boxing match, the first person I’d try to interest is Don Imus,” Abell said. He continued:

We were far and away the No. 1 station in Long Island. We had coverage that blistered across Long Island. There wasn’t a single corner of Long Island that you couldn’t pick up WNBC on. He was the morning show host. Everybody knew who he was. It would be like, pick the most famous person in whatever town you’re in and multiply it times ten. And then say, if you were having an event, would you like that guy to show up?

Several months after the match, some Coliseum executives went to WNBC’s Christmas party in New York City, and Imus and McCord greeted them warmly. “He came right up to us—he and Charles—and talked to us,” Hirsh said. “It was the greatest thing. There was a connection.”

From Imus’s perspective, the association with the Coliseum

“Imus’s act evolved into more than just acid-tongued barbs. By interviewing politicos and wonky authors and journalists, Imus appealed to listeners who were opinion leaders themselves.”
made sense at the time. A month before the Duran-Leonard fight, the Islanders had snared the first Stanley Cup in franchise history on a dramatic overtime goal at the Coliseum, commencing a dynasty era that would see the team win four straight titles from 1980 to 1983. Imus, who was born in California and grew up in Arizona, had no emotional ties to New York area teams, so he became a front-runner to connect with his local audience. “His teams,” as one writer put it, “are whoever is winning at the time.” Rooting for the Islanders, then, became a logical fit. On his show, Imus would sometimes speak over the phone with an Islanders box-office employee who showered him with free team apparel.

When the Islanders faltered later in the decade, so did the Coliseum’s relationship with Imus. As Calabria noted, “Imus made his career on being a smart aleck, and the Islanders were an easy target, so why not dump on them, whether it’s true or not? It’s an easy thing to do. It doesn’t require any research.” Imus would still entertain phone calls from Hirsh, who became the Coliseum’s acting general manager from the fall of 1987 to the spring of 1988. But their exchanges came with a price. Imus called Hirsh fat on the air, and when Imus grew bored, he triggered a sound effect of a cheering crowd awaiting an atom bomb explosion. “He would bust my balls about something and then blow me up,” Hirsh recalled. WNBC colleague Jay Sorensen admired Imus’s ability to cue the explosion to cut off guests at just the right time.

Unfortunately for the Coliseum, Imus was probably more influential in the era when he was nuking Hirsh than when he came to the boxing match. Imus’s 1992 endorsement of Bill Clinton was credited with helping him win the New York State presidential primary. As president, an apparently grateful Clinton kept an Imus bobblehead on his desk in a study off the Oval Office and went onto Imus in the Morning several times. By 1993, Imus in the Morning was syndicated in Boston, Tampa, and Providence, among other major cities, and accounted for one-third of WFAN’s projected revenues. Like Oprah Winfrey, Imus had tremendous success promoting books, too. His praise guaranteed additional printings and bestseller status for I Am Amelia Earhart (1996) and Spin Cycle (1998), and he successfully hawked his own writing, including Two Guys, Four Corners (1997). In 1997, Time magazine named Imus one of the top twenty-five most influential Americans, noting that he boasted an audience three times the size of the Sunday television talk shows.

Multiple attempts to interview Imus for this article were unsuccessful. The executive producer for the Imus in the Morning simulcast on the Fox Business Network said Imus was not doing interviews. Subsequent efforts to reach the host via the Imus Ranch in New Mexico, his charitable program for kids with cancer, were also unproductive.

While Don Imus was unquestionably the No. 1 star on WFAN in the 1990s, Mike Francesa came in a close second. Mike and the Mad Dog, the five-hour afternoon drive show pairing Francesa with the excitable Chris “Mad Dog” Russo, debuted on WFAN on September 5, 1989. In this important time slot, Francesa and Russo soon drew the highest ratings in the New York market and became the top-rated program among male listeners age twenty-five to fifty-four.

Some believe Mike and the Mad Dog changed the course of New York sports. In the spring of 1998, Francesa and Russo fielded dozens of phone calls from fans urging the Mets to trade for star catcher Mike Piazza, who had just been sent from the Los Angeles Dodgers to the salary-shedding Florida Marlins. Days later, the Mets pulled off the deal. The trade may have been in the works before the parade of Mets fans called into WFAN. However, Rich Ackerman, a longtime voice of sports updates at WFAN, said in an interview that he thought Mike and the Mad Dog convinced Mets ownership to pull the trigger on the Piazza deal: “When you’re hypothetically [then-Mets co-owner] Fred Wilpon and you hear call after call after call saying you need to get Mike Piazza, ‘Why aren’t you getting Mike Piazza?’ I think that starts to resonate after a while. I don’t see how it can’t.” Piazza went on to put up Hall of Fame numbers with the Mets and to lead them to the 2000 World Series.

Mike and the Mad Dog rarely talked hockey. However, Francesa began criticizing the Coliseum when the Rangers challenged the Islanders for bragging rights as New York’s best team in the mid-
But it was a good attempt at trying to calm him down.” Elder said. “I don’t think. Hartung recalled telling Francesa. “We’re really not that bad.” He handed the toy to the host. “Here, this white elephant’s for you,” Francesa was broadcasting. Hartung, shaking with nerves, playfully pounced. of the 1994 NCAA Men’s Basketball Championships, Hartung recalled Francesa labeling the Coliseum a “white elephant,” an idiom referring to something that requires a lot of care and money but does not offer much profit or enjoyment. “It just hurt your feelings that someone would say something so mean about your home,” she said. One day, Hartung was pulled aside by Elder, the general manager. “Hilary, we gotta do something with this guy, because he’s killing us,” Elder recalled saying. “I don’t know what the answer is, but we need to stop him.” At the same time, Elder feared that attempts to silence Francesa’s criticism might boomerang:

With guys like Mike, the thing that can happen is, if you call them up and you say, “You gotta knock this off,” it makes it worse in theory. He doesn’t care about us, about the Coliseum, or anything else. . . . If you confronted anybody that was making misstatements or incorrect statements or anything like that, it’s potentially a real rocket, just waiting to light it up. It can absolutely, totally backfire.

When Francesa ventured to the Coliseum for an early round of the 1994 NCAA Men’s Basketball Championships, Hartung pounced. The circus had recently passed through Long Island, and a promoter dropped off stuffed animals—including a white elephant—for Hartung. She grabbed it off the shelf in her office and set out toward the Zamboni entrance by Section 210, where Francesa was broadcasting. Hartung, shaking with nerves, playfully handed the toy to the host. “Here, this white elephant’s for you,” Hartung recalled telling Francesa. “We’re really not that bad.” He accepted the gift but continued to criticize the arena on air. “I’m not sure that it did anything positive,” Elder said. “I don’t think. But it was a good attempt at trying to calm him down.”

As Francesa continued bashing the Coliseum, the Islanders embarked on the 1995-1996 season, which drew the worst average attendance in franchise history at the time. The Islanders’ on-ice struggles undoubtedly contributed to the decrease in fan turnout. However, it is arguable that losing alone did not account for diminished attendance at the 16,200-seat Coliseum. The Islanders had previously had higher attendance in a losing season than they had in a winning campaign. The Islanders also had the same number of wins in the 1998-1999 and 1999-2000 seasons, but average attendance slid nearly 14 percent, from 11,299 to 9,748, and the number of season-ticket holders dipped almost 17 percent, from 4,200 to 3,500. Francesa’s comments could not have helped the Islanders draw fans to an arena he portrayed as dilapidated.

Determined to tamp down Francesa’s barbs, Chris Botta, a longtime public relations executive with the Islanders, began inviting Mike and the Mad Dog to broadcast one show a year from the Coliseum. “I would ploy them with Diet Coke and all the guests that I could find and a lot of access and made it a nice day for them. They were good. Those guys were always good to us. They’d talk hockey infrequently. Everybody knows that. But when they did they were respectful for us, and that show was important.” Botta said he always worried the Coliseum broadcast would coincide with the breaking of a major New York sports story, meaning that Francesa and Russo, though sitting in the Coliseum, would spend the program talking about a team other than the Islanders. To ensure Islanders discussion, Botta scheduled a series of interviews for Francesa and Russo with Islanders coaches, players, and famous alumni. “I kind of booked the show for them, but always thinking that they’d be like, ‘Chris, we can’t be talking to Islander people all day,’” Botta said. “But they were always real gentlemen about it. I know people have problems with Mike, but I had a nice relationship with him. It was one day a year, don’t get me wrong. They rarely talk hockey. They never talk the Islanders now, or Mike doesn’t. But for one day a year, they were good.” The day after a Mike and the Mad Dog broadcast at the Coliseum in 2002, Newday ran a graphic noting the hosts’ “rare appearance” there and applauding them for dedicating time to “a sport they tend to ignore: hockey.”

Francesa did not respond to several interview requests for this article. Messages left for Francesa at WFAN went unreturned, and WFAN’s general manager, Mark Chernoff, said in an email that Francesa “doesn’t do a lot of interviews.”

Unlike Imus or Francesa, Steve Somers cultivated a courteous on-air persona that made him one of the most beloved figures in WFAN history. Raised in California, Somers had spent seventeen years as a television sportscaster in San Francisco, Sacramento, and Los Angeles before being hired by WFAN in 1987 to work the overnight shifts. Though he cohosted a midday show from 1995 to 1999, Somers—alternately nicknamed “Captain Midnight,” “the Fearless Forecaster,” and the “Schmoozer”—became best known for his late-night work. According to a New York City television station, Somers grew into “one of the most recognizable voices in New York” thanks to his witty rhymes, wordplay, and alliteration, as well as a soothing tone that meshed well with his overnight shifts.

While Imus gained influence by occupying the prized morning time slot in New York City, Somers parlayed his late-night turns on WFAN, perhaps unintentionally, into a role of an opinion leader, too. Somers’s audience was more likely to be relaxing at home compared with the frequently harried listeners of Imus or Francesa,

Publicity photograph of WFAN host Steve Somers.

1990s. Despite his Long Island roots, Francesa did not seem to care enough about the Islanders to visit the Coliseum very often. Still, Hartung, the marketing director, recalled Francesa labeling the Coliseum a “white elephant,” an idiom referring to something that requires a lot of care and money but does not offer much profit or enjoyment. “It just hurt your feelings that someone would say something so mean about your home,” she said. One day, Hartung was pulled aside by Elder, the general manager. “Hilary, we gotta do something with this guy, because he’s killing us,” Elder recalled saying. “I don’t know what the answer is, but we need to stop him.” At the same time, Elder feared that attempts to silence Francesa’s criticism might boomerang:

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While Imus gained influence by occupying the prized morning time slot in New York City, Somers parlayed his late-night turns on WFAN, perhaps unintentionally, into a role of an opinion leader, too. Somers’s audience was more likely to be relaxing at home compared with the frequently harried listeners of Imus or Francesa,
in their cars on the way to and from work. Somers’s nighttime slots lent themselves to intimate conversations—often unrelated to sports—with listeners treating him like part of the family. “You’re company, you’re in their bedroom,” Somers said in an interview.102 “I don’t think anyone has been more personal and more intimate than I have with the callers.” Somers described how his anonymous callers have opened up to him about coping with losing a relative, similar to an interaction with a therapist. His shtick won over the likes of film critic Gene Shalit, actors Charles Grodin and Tony Roberts, and comedians Steven Wright and Jerry Seinfeld.103 In the same Talkers magazine ranking that listed Francesa as America’s most important sports talk radio host in 2012, Somers clocked in at No. 56.104

In fact, many listeners took Somers’s shtick at face value. After former football star O.J. Simpson was accused of murder in 1994, Somers jokingly promised his midday show audience an exclusive interview.105 Somers, who is scrawny and Jewish, playfully claimed that he went “all the way back to the ‘hood” with two retired black athletes, Simpson and fellow football player Al Cowlings, who drove the white Ford Bronco in Simpson’s highly publicized slow-speed chase by police.106 Somers’s cohost at the time, Russ Salzberg, said that listeners “kept calling up, waiting for the interview.” Remembering the incident a few years later, Salzberg remained incredulous: “Could you imagine Steve Somers growing up with O.J.?” Apparently the audience did.

Somers adopted the Rangers as his favorite hockey team.107 He started taking shots at the Islanders through distinctive wordplay, referring to them as the “Icelanders,” skating at “Nassau Mausoleum” on “Short Island.”108 His act depended on drawing a stark contrast between the suburban Islanders and the big-city Rangers, who played at the world-famous Madison Square Garden. In a 2013 interview, Somers said he set out with the goal of “really accenting, italicizing, capitalizing the rivalry.”109 Somers said that he employed phrases such as “Nassau Mausoleum” to encourage chatter about hockey in a crowded sports market: “Those were my flashpoints for riling up the crowd, to get the rivalry going, and to get some acknowledgement for hockey in a New York area that looks at hockey as the fourth major team, or the fourth major sport, outside of baseball and football and basketball.” Somers also benefitted from the more common use of cell phones, which allowed fans who attended a game to call WFAN as soon as it ended.110 In the days before social media, rabid fans had few other outlets for instant venting.

But Calabria, the Islanders’ public relations executive, felt the “Nassau Mausoleum” label did not accurately portray the raucous atmosphere at the Coliseum on many nights, such as when the Islanders made an unexpected Stanley Cup run in 1993.111 “That place was far from a mausoleum during those playoffs,” he said. He added:

The game entertainment was great. Was it a little old-fashioned compared to what goes on today? Yes. It was basics: It was organ, rock music, video, and that Queen song We Will Rock You, which we used heading into

Nassau Coliseum on a wintry day. Photograph by Nicholas Hirshon.
the third period of the games, or overtime, and it was not a mausoleum then. But what I learned very quickly is, once you get a label, it is really hard to shake it. The media attaches the label to the arena and it won't let go of it. So while it was fair on many occasions to chide the franchise with the phrase "Nassau Mausoleum"—the building name—there were many nights when that simply wasn't the case.\(^{112}\)

Somers insisted he had no motive behind perpetuating the "Nassau Mausoleum" moniker beyond his attempt to spice up debate about hockey and an obvious desire for higher ratings and more listener phone calls late at night. He said he employed wordplay "just for the fun of it," and did not mean to advocate for improvements to the Coliseum. "I wasn't trying to shake things up," he said. Though Somers viewed the Coliseum as a dump, he felt he was merely voicing the same opinion of the arena that many Islanders fans held. "Fan opinion regarding that facility has always been there," he said, adding that most fans consider the Coliseum to be antiquated and run down. "I think it was just having some fun at their expense. Not too many Icelander fans—or Islander fans—disagree."

But Somers, known for his humility on air, may be downplaying his impact on fans' parlance. Soon, the "Nassau Mausoleum" moniker spread throughout the press. Ironically, the first application of the term to the Coliseum appeared in the major New York dailies in a 1993 Newsday article slanted toward the Islanders.\(^{113}\) Reporter Greg Logan described the Rangers perishing at the Islanders’ arena: "Nassau Mausoleum—This is the place where the Rangers have come to die since Oct. 28, 1989, the date of their last road win against the Islanders." At that point, the Rangers were winless in their last thirteen games in Uniondale, and the Islanders could still stake a claim to No. 1 in the New York hockey scene. Eventually the moniker was also picked up by the fans and reporters to inquire about the Islanders' expense. Scozzare, his producer, impersonated an Islanders executive at a news conference to announce the signings of no-name free agents the team had picked up days earlier. Somers announced on air that WFAN was about to cut to live coverage of "a major press conference at the Nassau Coliseum."\(^{119}\) At the time, rumors were swirling that the Islanders might be close to signing superstar free agent Jeremy Roenick. Botta said that fans and reporters began calling the Coliseum to inquire about the nature of the announcement, perhaps thinking the Islanders had come to terms with Roenick.\(^{120}\) In fact, the team had nothing to announce. Somers was merely setting up one of many bits at the Islanders’ expense. Scozzare thanked Islanders fans for showing up—"both of you"—over sounds of snoring and crickets.\(^{121}\) When Scozzare was asked about Somers’s anti-Islanders shtick, he replied, "It’s just a fun radio bit, and a lot of people took it very seriously."\(^{122}\)

With phones ringing at the Coliseum, Botta called WFAN to ask if Somers would quit the act. "I was genuinely annoyed," Botta said. "It wasn't like we were getting a million calls, but we got enough that it was annoying to our receptionist at the time."\(^{123}\) On his blog, Botta wrote that Somers "couldn't comprehend that people would take him so seriously."\(^{124}\) The bit had fooled so many Islanders fans that it even earned a few paragraphs the next day in Newsday.\(^{125}\)
During a 2013 interview, Somers quipped that Islanders fans would assault him for perpetuating a negative image of the team: “I’ll probably get booed and thrown at with tomatoes.” Longtime WFAN anchor Rich Ackerman said that many listeners look upon Somers, “whether rightly or wrongly, as some authority.”

In the summer of 1996, Islanders coach and general manager Mike Milbury took aim at Somers—literally. During a charity softball game in Massapequa Park on August 15, Somers was approaching the plate when the Islanders player on the mound feigned injury. In came the replacement hurler, Milbury, who threw a knuckledown pitch. Recounting the incident almost two decades later, Somers said he was frazzled. After all, Milbury was a gritty former hockey player who had once jumped into the stands at Madison Square Garden to fight with Rangers fans in 1979. “If I didn’t back off and duck, that thing hits me in the head,” Somers said. “He threw it hard.” Botta, informed years later that Somers was actually frightened, replied, “Good. I’m glad he was.”

The Islanders’ public relations team sought a less violent way to stop Somers’s bashing. Somers said Ginger Killian Serby, the Islanders’ onetime media relations director, sent him gifts and took him out for lunch in an apparent attempt to curry the favor of an opinion leader in New York sports. By Botta’s count, more Islanders players appeared on Somers’s show than any other program on WFAN. Botta prepped Islanders players for these radio appearances, warning them that Somers would likely refer to the “Icelanders” or “Nassau Mausoleum.” He sometimes refused the requests for player interviews, citing Somers’s antics. A bemused Somers recalled how they were doing all of these things to get me to stop calling them the ‘Icelanders’ and to stop calling it the ‘Nassau Mausoleum’ on ‘Short Island.’” But it was a vital part of his act, and he still uses the lingo on air to this day.

Interestingly, Somers said he has been to the Coliseum only a couple of times in his life for Islanders-Rangers games between 1987 and 1990. Elder bristled at the notion that someone with little experience at the Coliseum popularized a term that so greatly damaged its reputation. “That’s always been a bugaboo with me,” Elder said. “If you’re going to talk about something, you have some knowledge and background. And if he was really interested and if he really felt that it was what he claimed it to be, then he’d call up and we’d take you on a tour, we’d show you what the positive aspects of the building are, and we’ll talk about all those things. But that never happened.”

Facing persistent “Nassau Mausoleum” bashing, the Islanders decided that if you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em. The team sought a legal order in 1998 to pull out of its Coliseum lease, which would not expire for another seventeen years, by alleging the hoists supporting a seven-ton sound system and ten-ton scoreboard above center ice were faulty. Like Somers, the Islanders seemed to be overstating the evils of the Coliseum. The team sat on the wrong side of a lease that did not afford it any share of parking revenue or concession sales, and the Islanders also had to cede 11 percent of ticket sales before taxes and 40 percent of revenues from arena signs. Nassau County, which owns the Coliseum, called out its hometown team for making “totally false” accusations about the arena’s safety and countered the allegations “existed merely as an excuse out of an unfavorable contractual agreement.”

Calabria, who was no longer running public relations for the Islanders at the time, questioned the motives of ownership. “No question, it was a terrible strategy, and it was a lie,” he said. “I can explain the issue about the hoist to you in very simple terms. The hoist was safe.” A state judge ruled against the Islanders—and, in effect, against the myth of a “mausoleum”—by granting an injunction requiring the Islanders to play there. Inevitably, however, the media coverage of the Islanders’ lawsuit damaged the Coliseum’s reputation even further. Elder said:

If you say it’s a dump and you’re the prime tenant, then I think it’s going to have an adverse effect ultimately on the attendance certainly at Islanders games and subsequently at other events. I think they drove it. I think they started to hear it, whether it be from Mike [Francesca] or whoever, that it’s a “white elephant,” it’s a “mausoleum,” it’s all of these things, and they jumped on that bandwagon.

By the late 1990s, the Coliseum could no longer lure as many top-tier performers as it had only years earlier. The arena did not appear in the weekly rankings of top-grossing concerts in the trade publication Amusement Business nearly as often as it once had. The Coliseum even closed the millennium disappointingly. As journalists Peter Botte and Alan Hahn note, “Incredibly, on a night when just about every major venue in the country hosted some kind of celebration event with headline acts, the Coliseum was locked and dark on New Year’s Eve 1999.” The “Nassau Mausoleum” moniker popped up more frequently in the media, first in the New York Times, and later in tweets by ESPN sports business reporter Darren Rovell and sports talk radio personalities from as far away as Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, and Houston. In 2011, Rangers fans stuck the derogatory moniker on anti-Islanders T-shirts.

In media circles, the term “Nassau Mausoleum” has become commonplace lingo when reporters share stories about working at the Coliseum. Denis Gorman, a reporter who has covered many Islanders games at the Coliseum for the Associated Press and the free daily commuter newspaper Metro, credited Somers with popularizing the moniker. In an interview, Gorman said he had heard the phrase “Nassau Mausoleum” so often that he went into his first assignment there in 2008 expecting the worst. While he found the arena to be run down, he said he did not agree the Coliseum was as quiet as “mausoleum” implies. Tim Sullivan, a former sports editor for the New York Post and the Associated Press, also traced the prevalence of “Nassau Mausoleum” talk to Somers. “Even if they didn’t listen to Somers, where it started, they listened to somebody who listened to somebody who took the lingo and ran with it, so it sticks,” he said.

“The Islanders’ public relations team sought a less violent way to stop Somers’s bashing. Somers said Ginger Killian Serby, the Islanders’ onetime media relations director, sent him gifts and took him out for lunch in an apparent attempt to curry the favor of an opinion leader in New York sports.”
The Coliseum witnessed its darkest hour on October 24, 2012. After decades of griping about the Coliseum, the Islanders announced the team would relocate to the state-of-the-art Barclays Center in Brooklyn in the fall of 2015. In 2013, the musician most associated with the Coliseum, Long Island–raised rocker Billy Joel, signed an unprecedented residency agreement with Madison Square Garden, agreeing to play there once a month “as long as there’s demand.” In light of the Islanders’ desertion, Nassau County unveiled plans to scale back the number of seats at the Coliseum from more than 16,000 to about 13,000, essentially pulling it from the ranks of elite, high-capacity arenas.

As with many studies of radio broadcasts, examining the history of the world’s first all-sports radio station becomes difficult because most WFAN programs seem to have never been recorded or were lost over time. The lack of period broadcasts of Don Imus, Mike Francesa, and Steve Somers discussing Nassau Coliseum complicates efforts to establish causal relationships between their derisive commentary and the arena’s battered image.

Nevertheless, this research sought to reconstruct the hosts’ remarks about the Coliseum through interviews with employees of the station, the arena, and the arena’s anchor team. Substantial evidence demonstrates that Imus, Francesa, and Somers were opinion leaders with the ability to affect how their listeners think and act. Startlingly, they had a profound impact on the reputation of a major-market arena that they hardly visited. The moniker “Nassau Mausoleum” remains in common parlance among New Yorkers decades after being popularized by Somers. The Coliseum certainly had its flaws, amplified by the struggles of the home team. However, the three WFAN hosts proffered the myth that the Coliseum was a “mausoleum,” conjuring the bleak image of a final resting place, which it assuredly was not.

This study’s validation of WFAN’s influence has broader implications for sports radio research. Imus, Francesa, and Somers remained on the air as of the date of this publication, influencing untold numbers of listeners as well as other sports radio hosts who may be shaping minds of fans in dozens of large markets. Surprisingly little scholarship has focused on the influence of sports radio hosts, and future research should explore the significant weight of WFAN and hundreds of similar stations operating nationwide.

In his seminal study on two-step flow, Elihu Katz notes that interpersonal relations can create social pressure to conform to the predominant thought processes and actions of a group. When Imus, Francesa, or Somers ridiculed the Coliseum, many WFAN listeners probably figured the arena had a generally poor reputation and began to adopt the “Nassau Mausoleum” lingo to better connect with friends discussing the Islanders at the game or the local bar. Through repetition, Somers’s colorful phrases in particular spread into common parlance. Importantly, Katz also describes how “influentials and influencees may exchange roles in different spheres of influence.” Only the most ardent fans tune into sports radio, so WFAN listeners were probably viewed as opinion leaders on sports topics among their friends, relatives, and co-workers, becoming disciples of the “Nassau Mausoleum” message.

As the ranks of sports radio stations grow, scholars interested in media effects and public relations should explore the role that sports radio hosts play in the two-step flow of communications. Sports executives would be wise to consider how sports radio impacts the reputations of arenas, teams, and athletes. While Nassau Coliseum ultimately failed to overcome its dreary image, sports executives might mimic the prudent efforts described here to wine and dine Imus and Somers and present the stuffed white elephant to Francesa as a lighthearted peace offering.

The influence of hyperbolic sports radio hosts might be explained by the vividness effect. Scholars Paul M. Herr, Frank R. Kardes, and John Kim note that word-of-mouth communications can “often exert a strong influence on judgments of products,” especially when a message is presented vividly. In sports radio, few messages about Nassau Coliseum could be more vivid than Imus “nuking” its general manager, Francesa evoking a “white elephant,” and Somers repeating colorful terms such as “Nassau Mausoleum.” Considering existing research on the vividness effect, it is easy to imagine listeners believing the hosts’ negative, hyperbolic remarks about the Coliseum.

NOTES


3 For Somers’s popularity, see Sullivan, Imus, Mike and the Mad Dog, & Doris from Rego Park, 81-98. For Somers’s daytime forays between Imus in the Morning and Mike and the Mad Dog, see Sullivan, Imus, Mike and the Mad Dog, & Doris from Rego Park, 84.

4 WFAN inherited the Rangers from its predecessor on 660 AM, WNBC, and continued to air Rangers games through the 2003-04 season. After a lockout canceled the 2004-05 season, the Rangers headed to ESPN Radio and WFAN picked up the New Jersey Devils. For more on the Rangers parting ways with WFAN, see “ESPN Radio to Carry Garden Teams’ Games,” *New York Times*, Feb. 5, 2004.


6 For Imus’s New York debut, see Reed, *Everything Imus*.


11 Hilary Hartung, telephone interview by Nicholas Hirshon, Dec. 9, 2013. Hartung worked in various roles at the Coliseum, including group sales and marketing, for about fifteen years starting in 1983.

12 Pat Calabria, telephone interview by Nicholas Hirshon, Dec. 10, 2013. Calabria and Lance Elder, the Coliseum’s former general manager, both said in interviews that the arena was at a disadvantage from years of shoehorning more seats into the bowl, leading to less leg room, more foot traffic in the concourse, and longer lines at the bathrooms and concessions. Calabria, who was an Islanders beat reporter for *Newsday* before helming public relations for the team, also insisted that sports media in the New York market never cared much about the Islanders: “The influence of WFAN at the time was really quite profound. And because FAN is a city-centric station, they always are going to give more attention to the Knicks and the Rangers and the Yankees and the Mets and the Giants and the Jets than they are to the [New Jersey] Devils and the [then-New Jersey] Nets and the Islanders, particularly when those suburban franchises, or not-within-the-city-limits franchises, are struggling. The New York media has always treated the Islanders like stepchildren, even when the Islanders were successful.”


14 For Imus’s roots, see ibid. For Imus’s on-air persona, see Richard Woodley, “I’m Imus, I’m the Best,” *Life*, Nov. 3, 1972, 63-64, 66-67, 72.


16 Ibid., 64.


20 Woodley, “I’m Imus, I’m the Best.”

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid., 72.


25 Woodley, “I’m Imus, I’m the Best.”

26 Larry Kenney, telephone interview by Nicholas Hirshon, March 29, 2014. Except for a brief period when Kenney had his own radio show from 1979 to 1982, he consistently did impressions on *Imus in the Morning* from 1973 to 2008, voicing Wilford Brimley, Henry Kissinger, Rush Limbaugh, Richard Nixon, and Elvis Presley, among others. Speaking about Long Island commuter culture, Kenney said, “Long Islanders tend to be driving commuters and they tend to drive to work more than other people around here, therefore they’re listening in their car, listening on their drive to work every morning.”

27 Jane Gennaro, telephone interview by Nicholas Hirshon, March 27, 2014. For Gennaro’s role on Imus’s show, see Reed, *Everything Imus*, 71.


29 For confirmation that Nassau Coliseum offered closed-circuit coverage of


“66” Lyndon Abell, telephone interview by Nicholas Hirshon, March 27, 2014. Abell said that he worked for WNBC from 1979 until March 1984, including two years as the Imus in the Morning producer from about 1979 to 1981. He said he did not recall the Coliseum event specifically but spoke more generally about Imus’s popularity on Long Island. “Celebrities have that appeal,” he said. “Today the radio audience is splintered. It’s much more fractious. Back then there were fewer stations and you didn’t have Clear Channel owning nine radio stations in the same market so that they would specifically splinter them. You had people battling for top dog so you could have a radio station that had far more listeners. There were fewer choices for listening to music or entertainment: iPod didn’t exist, CDs didn’t exist. FM radio wasn’t in every car, believe it or not. Tape decks weren’t in every car, believe it or not. So you got to your car and you turned on the radio and you might have a handful of choices. Every radio didn’t even have presets, believe it or not. It was a very different time.” Asked about Imus’s appeal, Kenney said, “He was huge back then. He was indeed the kind of celebrity, if you will, that people were attracted to come out and see and hear what he said about certain things.”

“67” Hirsch telephone interview.

“68” Hirshon, Images of America: Nassau Veterans Memorial Coliseum, 76-84.

“69” Reed, Everything Imus, 10.

“70” Ibid., 68. Many sources confirm that Imus was a frontrunner. For instance, he wore a New York Yankees cap in the summer of 1996, when the Yankees were headed to their first World Series title in fifteen years. This photograph can be seen in Andrea Renault, “Tennis, Anyone?,” in Everything Imus, on the fifth page of photographs following page 84. For the Yankees winning their first World Series in fifteen years, see “Championship Clubs,” New York Yankees, http://newyork.yankees.mlb.com/nyy/history/championships.jsp.

“71” Both Elder and Hirsch recalled this in interviews with the author.

“72” It is not surprising that Imus turned on the Islanders so quickly. Kenney, who described Imus as mercurial, relayed an anecdote that suggests Imus never had much knowledge of hockey, even if he sporadically purported to be an Islanders fan: “Somebody took him to a hockey game when he first came to New York and he knew nothing about it. I think it was [New York Daily News columnist] Mike Lupica who tells this story. The third period ended and Imus just kept staying in his seat because he was waiting for the fourth period. They had to tell him, ‘The game’s over. We leave now.’ No, he didn’t care for hockey. There were not a whole lot of things he liked. As you can tell by the air, he’s a curmudgeon. He doesn’t like much in life unfortunately.”

“73” Calabria telephone interview.

“74” Hirsh telephone interview.

“75” Kenney recalled how many targets of Imus’s ire actually enjoyed the attention: “People just thought it was the greatest thing in the world. To be put down by Imus was considered an honor. ‘Did you hear what he said about me?’ People would call in and say, ‘Can I get a copy of the tape where he called me a fat bastard?’ It’s a badge of honor.”


“77” Jay Sorensen commented on the atom bomb sound effect in an email to the author on March 28, 2014. Sorensen, who worked with Imus infrequently from 1986 until WNBC’s final day in 1987, attested to the popularity of nuking an on-air guest: “It IS funny (still is) and was copied by many jocks across the country. People would call in and say, ‘Can I get a copy of the tape where he called me a fat bastard?’ It’s a badge of honor.”


“79” “Imus in the Morning” producer Mike Elder, telephone interview.

“80” Idem. Elder recalled. Reeder commented on the atom bomb sound effect in an email to the author on March 28, 2014. Reeder, who worked with Imus from 1986 to 1999, attested to the popularity of nuking an on-air guest: “It IS funny (still is) and was copied by many jocks across the country. Perhaps even HE got it from someone else.” Sorensen had also praised Imus in an earlier email on March 26, 2014: “His timing is impeccable. He knows what to ask in interviews. He doesn’t throw softballs like most hosts seem to do these days. I always liked his ability to catch people either off-guard, or to ask something that nobody else would think or dare to ask. He knows when there is a punch line and when to move on to another element. Ya see, when you come from a Top 40 style background, you know when it’s time to hit the jingle or commercial break or song. It’s instinctive. Almost unexplainable to the layman.”

“81” Abell interview. Abell’s comments about the atom bomb sound effect evoke a political-economic relationship in which Imus rebelled against structure, in this case an arena owned by Nassau County and run by a corporate entity. “In the morning program when I worked with him, you got a program where you are broadcasting to people who are going to work and a lot of them would love to say ‘f**k you’ to their boss,” Abell said. “And it was kind of cool when he said ‘f**k you’ to his boss, because they could live vicariously through that. That doesn’t mean he wanted the boss to go to hell. You know what I mean? But he could be the rebel for them in certain instances.”

“82” Abell also said he did not think most listeners would have taken Imus’s ribbing of Hirsh very seriously. “It’s a comedy show. They knew it’s comedy. You make fun of some kid in school. You work with somebody and you make fun of certain things. It doesn’t mean you don’t like them. It doesn’t mean you think that about them. … It depends on who you’re talking about and how they’re doing it and then to another extent the listener. I suppose some people are pretty literal and just say, ‘Wow. He thinks that guy’s fat.’ But it’s a comedy show and if he’s saying, ‘Oh my God, you fat tub of lard. How dare you come in here! Your Coliseum stinks.’ It’s so outrageous that you kind of go, ‘He’s obviously giving the guy the business, right?’”

“83” Elder interview.

“84” Douglas, Listening In, 307; and Reed, Everything Imus, 99.

“85” Reed, 99-100.


“87” Reed, Everything Imus, 88-89.


“89” Hartung telephone interview.


“91” The executive producer, Thomas Bowman, wrote this in an email to the author on Jan. 6, 2014.

“92” Sullivan, Imus, Mike and the Mad Dog, & Doris from Rego Park, 46.


“95” Sullivan, Imus, Mike and the Mad Dog, & Doris from Rego Park, 134-35.


“98” For Francesca’s lack of interest in hockey, see Alan Hahn, “Touch Still Golden: Peca’s Shorthanded Goal with 1.4 Seconds Left Gets Isles a Tie,” Newday, Feb. 27, 2002. Francesca’s rare appearance at Nassau Coliseum was referenced in a graphic titled, “Inside Game 58.” Sullivan also spoke to Francesca’s disinterest in hockey.


“100” Hilary Hartung, telephone interview by Nicholas Hirshon, Dec. 5, 2013.

“101” Elder interview.

“102” Hartung telephone interview.

“103” Elder interview.


“106” For instance, average attendance at the Coliseum was 13,117 in the 1989-1990 season, when the Islanders finished seven games below .500 with only thirty-one wins and seventy-three points. Meanwhile, the Islanders averaged a mere 12,036 fans in 1992-1993, the team’s best season of the decade, which brought forty wins, eighty-seven points, and the franchise’s deepest playoff run since 1984. See “Regular Season Attendance for NHL’s Wales Conference,” “New York Islanders

93 “New York Islanders Franchise Index.”
94 “New York Islanders Yearly Attendance Graph.”
95 El Bashir, “Islanders Reduce Payroll, Optimism.”
98 Hahn, “Touch Still Golden.”
99 Chernoff wrote this in an e-mail to the author on Jan. 23, 2014.
102 For Somers’s nicknames, see Sullivan, Imus, Mike and the Mad Dog, & Doris from Rge Park, 86. For Somers’s midday stint, see Sullivan, Imus, Mike and the Mad Dog, & Doris from Rge Park, 94.
104 Steve Somers, telephone interview by Nicholas Hirshon, Dec. 11, 2013.
105 McGrath, “Time to Schmooze.”
106 “2012 TALKERS Heavy Hundred of Sports Talk.”
109 Somers telephone interview.
110 Ibid. For confirmation of Somers’s use of “Icelander” and “Nassau Mausoleum,” see Sullivan, Imus, Mike and the Mad Dog, & Doris from Rge Park, 86.
111 Somers telephone interview.
112 In a telephone interview with the author on Jan. 3, 2014, journalist Tim Sullivan, who wrote a book on WFAN’s history that is cited many times in this article, spoke to the role of Somers’s program before the dawn of the Internet: “Steve’s show became something of a message board before the Internet where fans could come literally out of the Garden or out of the Coliseum and right onto their phones to talk about the game. And it was sort of a bar without the stools, and Steve sort of ran with that.”
113 Calabria telephone interview.
114 Attesting to the notion that winning cures all, Calabria said that criticism of the Coliseum stopped during the 1993 postseason run: “I challenge anybody to say that it was the Nassau Mausoleum during the 1993 playoffs when we beat Pittsburgh in Game Six, and then went to Pittsburgh and won the series. Or that it was the Nassau Mausoleum when we were in the semifinals against Montreal. Nobody was focusing on the building’s woes then. Nobody called it the Nassau Mausoleum then. No one was writing about the narrow corridors then.”
115 Greg Logan, “Lady Luck Smiles on Rangers: Get Key Calls in Tie with Isles,” Newsday, Feb. 2, 1993. The earliest reference to “Nassau Mausoleum” in Newsday, and perhaps in any New York newspaper, appears to have come in a Jan. 28, 1941, article on the debate over a new courthouse in Mineola, Long Island. The article, titled “Courthouse Termed Nassau ‘Mausoleum,’” described a taxpayer who “enlivened” a Board of Supervisors’ meeting in the old courthouse by “calling the new courthouse a ‘mausoleum’ and then entreated to the board and county executive to try in every way to curtail spending on the reconstruction and alteration work planned for the old building.” The article ran on page 8 without a byline.
116 Sullivan figured that some listeners adopted Somers’s colorful lingo about the Coliseum to prove their fandom: “It’s also sort of a badge of courage. When you pull out that, when you pull out ‘Icelanders,’ when you pull out some of those other lingo items, it shows the person you’re talking to how much you’ve listened to the FAN, how much you enjoy it, how much it’s a part of your life.”
117 Eddie Sc佐zzare, telephone interview by Nicholas Hirshon, March 5, 2014. Sc佐zzare said he began working part time at WFAN around Labor Day 1989 and became full time in November 1991, when he started as Somers’s overnight producer. In 1993 he was promoted to midday board operator, and a year later he became the midday producer, eventually reunifying with Somers on The Sweater and the Schmoozer show. Somers cohosted the show with Russ Salzman, whose penchant for wearing sweaters on the air played into the title of the program. Sc佐zzare moved to Mike and the Mad Dog as board operator in 2004 and shifted to the morning show featuring Craig Carton and former NFL quarterback Boomer Esiason in 2007.
118 Sullivan, Imus, Mike and the Mad Dog, & Doris from Rge Park, 94.
121 Sc佐zzare said that Somers’s anti-Islanders bits would often include the sounds of ducks and sheep as well as clips from the films When Harry Met Sally (1989) and Caddyshack (1989). Somers would also play portions of the song “The Surrey with the Fringe on Top” from the 1943 Broadway musical Oklahoma! The song includes the lyrics, “Chicks and ducks and geese better scurry/When I take Surrey.”
122 Sc佐zzare telephone interview.
123 Botta telephone interview. Botta described his call to WFAN in detail: “I’m like, ‘Dude, can Steve stop it? ’ ‘Oh, it’s funny.’ I’m like, ‘That’s debatable, whether it’s funny or not, but the bottom line is that people are calling our offices. They know Steve’s joking about the sound effects, but they really think that we’re making some sort of major announcement.’ We didn’t have a major announcement, and he kept it going for a few minutes and then the bit just wore out after a little while.”
124 For confirmation of Somers’s use of “Icelander” and “Nassau Mausoleum,” see Sullivan, Imus, Mike and the Mad Dog, & Doris from Rge Park, 86.
125 “2012 TALKERS Heavy Hundred of Sports Talk.”
126 Russ Salzman, who briefly cohosted a midday show with Somers, recounts this story in Joel Holland er, ed., WFAN Tenth Anniversary Commemorative Magazine (New York: WFAN, 1997), 10.
128 Somers telephone interview.
129 Ibid. For confirmation of Somers’s use of “Icelander” and “Nassau Mausoleum,” see Sullivan, Imus, Mike and the Mad Dog, & Doris from Rge Park, 86.
130 Somers telephone interview.
131 In a telephone interview with the author on Jan. 3, 2014, journalist Tim Sullivan, who wrote a book on WFAN’s history that is cited many times in this article, spoke to the role of Somers’s program before the dawn of the Internet: “Steve’s show became something of a message board before the Internet where fans could come literally out of the Garden or out of the Coliseum and right onto their phones to talk about the game. And it was sort of a bar without the stools, and Steve sort of ran with that.”
132 Sc佐zzare telephone interview.
133 Botta telephone interview. Botta described his call to WFAN in detail: “I’m like, ‘Dude, can Steve stop it? ’ ‘Oh, it’s funny.’ I’m like, ‘That’s debatable, whether it’s funny or not, but the bottom line is that people are calling our offices. They know Steve’s joking about the sound effects, but they really think that we’re making some sort of major announcement.’ We didn’t have a major announcement, and he kept it going for a few minutes and then the bit just wore out after a little while.”
134 Interestingly, in the same interview, Botta said he does not think Somers has a large listenership: “I don’t know how much of an impact he made on the image of the Coliseum. FAN is 50,000 watts. They have a big reach. Steve’s audience is never that big, please include that. He’s still a local radio guy and the people who listen to Steve have been to the Coliseum or kind of know about it. So it’s not like Steve has this nationwide reach or North American reach to damn the perception of the Nassau Coliseum.”
135 For Somers’s midday stint, see Sullivan, Imus, Mike and the Mad Dog, & Doris from Rge Park, 94.
Fans credit. The Nassau Coliseum doesn’t sound like the Nassau Mausoleum I remember,” https://twitter.com/cliffsaunders/status/35111100481179136.


152 Denis Gorman, telephone interview by Nicholas Hirshon, Jan. 3, 2014. Gorman figured that Somers ribbed the Coliseum so often because he knew it would fill empty air time during his late-night shifts: “He’s trying to get people listening and talking for three, four, five hours, whatever he has, and what’s an easier way to get people talking than goofs on Nassau Coliseum? You’ll get the Ranger fans calling in and cracking their jokes about the Coliseum. And then Islander fans will call in to defend their team and defend the building, and pretty soon you have a couple hours of air time filled.”

153 Sullivan telephone interview.


155 Gorman suggested the Islanders reinforce the “mausoleum” image: “You hear words such as dump and outdated and past its prime [among reporters]. I know the Islanders and the Barclays Center people, when they gave the NHL media and the Islander media tour of the Barclays Center prior to the Islanders’ first day of training camp this year [in 2013] at Barclays, there were a lot of jokes about, ‘Well, this place is just a little bit nicer than the Coliseum.’”


157 Before the announcement, Joel had been so linked with Nassau Coliseum that a banner was raised to the rafters on May 4, 1998, commemorating his nine sold-out shows there as part of a world tour. The banner was still hanging there at the time Joel announced his residency agreement with Madison Square Garden. See “Billy Joel Immortalized at Nassau Coliseum: Superstar Honored with Spectacular Banner,” May 6, 1998, https://groups.google.com/forum/#!topic/alt.music.billy-joel/Pm5VZL650Y.


160 Ibid.

161 Arbitron shows the number of sports radio stations grew every year from 2002 to 2010, from 413 in 2002 to 634 in 2010. Sports-themed programming can also be heard online through websites such as Blog Talk Radio, which allows individuals to create their own radio shows or podcasts. More data on sports radio can be found in “Number of Dedicated Sports Radio Stations Grew Each Year from ’02-10,” Sports Business Daily, Feb. 14, 2012, http://www.sportsbusinessdaily.com/Daily/Issues/2012/02/14/Research-and-Ratings/Sports-radio.aspx.
