



Jean Feraca talks about
“Here on Earth,” a call-in radio show that
brings together the best things
happening on our planet.

INTERVIEW BY JOAN FISCHER

Photos by Gerhard Fischer

FROM AFGHANISTAN TO ZIMBABWE and all points in between, Wisconsin Public Radio host Jean Feraca's got us covered.

That's the intent of "Here on Earth," a radio show she started in summer 2003. Show time in Wisconsin is 2-4 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays, but listeners in time zones around the world can channel her by radio or computer (webcasting makes this possible) and call in by phone or e-mail. A handy guide on the show's website (at www.wpr.org) helps listeners everywhere figure out where and when to tune in.

But it's the show's mission that makes it truly global. "'Here on Earth' was conceived to galvanize our international world community," reads the show description. "We search out the gems of the world—international movements, world citizens, cross-cultural conversations, democracy-building initiatives, and the best world literature, movies, arts, food, and culture."

By seeking out all that is constructive and inspiring and emphasizing what we have in common, the show seeks to combat the ills of our time, xenophobia and cultural isolation being chief among them.

That's a lot to ask of a radio show, but Feraca, who's been with Wisconsin Public Radio for 21 years and hosted her daily "Conversations with Jean Feraca" call-in show for 13 of them, thrives on the challenge.

How did you come up with this idea?

There were many steps along the way. The very first step was seeing pictures from the first mission to the moon—to see earth from space without its geopolitical boundaries, the earth as one. And I felt that that's the direction

that we were tending in. That was a long time ago.

The biggest prompt came on 9/11, when my husband and I were in Cordoba, Spain. We had just visited the great mosque, which was an extraordinary experience and a real insight into Islam. And we'd gone to the synagogue, which was Maimonides' synagogue. He was a great 12th-century Sephardic philosopher. We were in the gift shop outside the synagogue when the second plane struck, and we watched that on television. It was stunning and shocking, and people were very, very kind to us. They said it was as if that had happened to them. In order to exit the city you have to go through a museum that celebrates the golden age of Islam, when all three religions and all three cultures and philosophies reached a height and worked together under Muslim rule.

What struck me on that momentous day was the complacency and indifference that I, I think typical of most Americans, had felt toward the rest of the world. And I felt that we had to do something to change that.

So my program is really dedicated to trying to counter the effects of the tendency to turn inward, to shore up nationalism—this notion that we have so much to feel superior about. And it's true that we have a lot of gifts to give the rest of the world, but we also have a lot to learn from others. Plus we have this extraordinary international community right here at home.

What gave us the practical momentum was the anniversary of 9/11, when there was a collaboration between WAMC in Washington and the BBC—a live global call-in program that generated 50,000 calls and broke the system. It demonstrated that there really is an international public radio community to be cultivated. And nobody since then has really stepped into the void. So [then-WPR director] Greg Schnirring, in his wisdom, saw right away that there was a niche.

Why Madison, Wisconsin—why here and why now?

Why *not?* [laughs] I want to mention that we've had a lot of help from the UW Division of International Studies. The director, Gilles Bousquet, got right on board, and he's given us funds to hire a research assistant. That made a tremendous difference. The partnership with International Studies has been a real boon.

But getting back to why Madison. This is a place that has always had foresight and was always connected to the rest of the world. Right now, the university's definition of itself, according to the old Progressive banner, is that the boundaries of the university are the whole world. It's no longer the boundaries of the state. The influence of the university is worldwide, and that's really obvious,



because we have an international community and we graduate people who go back to their countries all over the world and stay connected for the rest of their lives.

Also, Wisconsin has many sister city and sister state relationships. There was a lot of connection with Central America during the period of the civil wars. And churches have fostered international relationships. This is one of the places in America where people really take responsibility for leadership and use influence and affluence appropriately.

John Nichols [associate editor, *The Capital Times*] had a lot to do with this as well. He and I were on a panel that the International Institute sponsored, looking at the way international news is reported here at home. The consensus was that most of what gets reported is news about

breakdown—for example, genocide, political corruption, disease, famine. These images and reports tend to reinforce the American notion of cultural and moral superiority, and also insularity—everyone's dying to come here and we don't need to care about the rest of the world, we're just lucky to be Americans.

John and I started a monthly feature on "Conversations with Jean Feraca" called "From Shanghai to Sheboygan," just to test the waters and see if people would be interested. John would bring in headlines and stories from newspapers from around the world and talk about issues from an international perspective. And it really took hold. It was obvious that people cottoned to this and wanted more of it. We continue that. He still visits on a monthly basis. And that was the germ, you might say, of "Here on Earth."

You're also collaborating with Radio Netherlands. How did that happen?

Radio Netherlands put out the word that they were looking for new partners, and we responded. They have a program called EuroQuest. It's in magazine format and is hosted by an American who's living in Amsterdam, Jonathan Groubert. It's actually a program that explains Europeans and the European Union to non-Europeans. Through them we get to play in a bigger pool. We have a new source of program ideas and guests to draw from.

You say you're getting calls from all over the world. What other kinds of signs are you getting that this is catching on?

This is not scientific, mind you, but radio has never been scientific. Radio is anecdotal. Radio is people. And I know, from the difference in the quality of responses, that people are beginning to discover us and we are developing a loyal following. And it is interesting that we have regular listeners in New Orleans and in Italy ...

There's this guy named Hadi who's been listening since day one. He's a regular caller. He had an interesting accent, but I didn't know where he was from

until we did a program with these two guys who happened to be here for a conference on African literature. One of them is Kwame Dawes. He's a poet who teaches in South Carolina and is originally from Ghana, and he grew up in Jamaica. We had him on with a man from Congo, Ricardo Lamko, who is a fabulous musician and has created a fusion of music from Congo and Cuba. So we paired these two and had a wonderful program about the music and influence of Bob Marley. Hadi called in and was so excited and inspired. He told us he's from Mali, and he talked about how he has been able to overcome mental slavery through the influence of Bob Marley.

So I love it that we have loyal listeners like Hadi.

How do you cope with language problems?

At first we deliberately went for people who had an accent because it brought in a sense of internationalism. But we quickly learned that you have to have fluent English speakers, and that the accent can't be too strong because the voice is all you've got. You have to be able to understand. So we do preinterview our guests.

Which shows so far have been the most successful and why?

The program I described with the two men from Africa. Because when you think of Africa, what do most Americans probably think of?

As you said, there is a lot of negative stuff—AIDS, famine, warfare ...

Well, these guys were just a hoot. They were full of energy, very bright, incredibly creative, contributing to the culture in new ways and creating what I call "world jazz." That's really what I'm going for. The theory is that because the world is swirling and melting everybody together, there is a synergy about all of that, and new forms are emerging. Now, one of the worst is Wal-Mart. But there are other things that are happening, and these guys are the embodiment of that in terms of

music and in terms of cultural jazz—that's what we're on the lookout for.

Another program that really worked and that I was thrilled by—do you know the children's book, *Beatrice's Goat*? It was a bestseller some years ago, and it's a true story. There was an article in *The New York Times* about the real Beatrice—a young girl in Uganda, the eldest in a family where there wasn't enough money to send her to school. You have to be able to buy a uniform and books, and the family couldn't afford that. Fortunately they were gifted through Heifer International with a goat. It fell to Beatrice to tend the goat. Because they had the goat, their nutrition improved, they had protein in their diet, and they were able to sell what they didn't need at the market, and that gave them petty cash. And lo and behold, Beatrice was able to go to school. Beatrice was very smart, and she went right up the ladder and then went to an all-girls school in Kampala. Now she's finishing up a transitional year at a special school in New England, and she's going to Middlebury College this fall.

And she was on your show?

She was on our show, and she was so sweet. I had her read from the book. And Rosalee Sinn, who was the coordinator of all this at Heifer International, was on the show with her. We also heard from the headmistress of her school. I happen to have known all about the high school she went to in Kampala because we'd done another program on Uganda with a woman who'd graduated from the same school ... and then, what was really funny—somebody called in and said that they had donated a goat to Will Allen! [Editor's note: Allen runs an organic farm for inner-city youth in Milwaukee and has been featured on Feraca's old program as well as in the *Wisconsin Academy Review*.]

And I thought, yes! This is what I wanted! This is the wraparound, this is the weave, this is the transcendence that I was hoping for. This is the poem of the world.

And then somebody else called in, in tears he was so moved by the program,

because not only did Beatrice get to go to school, but all of her siblings got to go to school. It totally transformed the life of this family. Somebody called in and said they'd been looking for something like this, and ordered lots of copies of the program and the book. And I happen to know that a friend of mine sent a \$1,000 contribution to Heifer International. That's the power of radio used at its best.

We had a program on Canada recently that was controversial. Our guest was a social researcher from Toronto who wrote a book called *Fire and Ice*, and who was just as convinced of Canadian superiority as we are of American superiority. And, frankly, he irritated the hell out of me. But it was a very interesting program. It was provocative. It was premised on the difference between "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" and the Canadian "peace, order, and good government," and on other very interesting differences in the origins of our countries and the way the national character of our two countries has developed.

So although your show's publicity materials say "Come celebrate what's right about the world," you also foster critical examination. Would you say the show is equal parts celebration and critical examination?

I came into journalism as a poet. I think like a poet. What does a poet do? A poet takes the raw materials of experience, refines them, orders them, and strives for transcendence. It's not that you deny reality, it's that you think of it as a kind of yeast. If you massage the materials in the right way, something's gonna rise. And people absolutely need ... I mean, to me, I couldn't live without art. And this is an art form that I think is absolutely vital and necessary to survive the information age and the onslaught of horrific news that we are barraged with day after day. We have to have a counterstream. And in my own little way, this is a little candle we're trying to light in this immense darkness that we're living through. z

Joan Fischer is editor of the Wisconsin Academy Review.