

Iconic NYC disc jockey Dennis Elsas still spinning

By LARRY MCSHANE

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A full five decades after his first shift at the legendary WNEW-FM, iconic New York DJ Dennis Elsas is looking forward to ... well, not retirement.

“What’s that?” he joked last week. “I don’t play golf.”



Dennis Elsas (Courtesy of Dennis Elsas)

The Queens-born DJ remains a radio fixture 50 years after his July 11, 1971, debut on WNEW, a fill-in gig working the overnight shift. His on-air homes are different but the songs remain the same as he does up to eight shows a week: Monday-Friday on WFUV-FM, two more on SiriusXM’s “Classic Vinyl” channel and another on its Beatles Channel.

“Not many people in the world have the chance to say ‘I love what I do,’” said

Elsas, who will mark his milestone with a Monday afternoon show on WFUV. “If you told me

growing up, I'd still be playing rock and roll records It was always what I dreamed of, but I didn't imagine I could do it."

Elsas grew up on the records spun by the city's legendary Top 40 DJs of the '60s: Cousin Brucie Morrow, Dan Ingram, Murray "The K" Kaufman and Scott Muni — who hired Elsas at WNEW.

Elsas recalled his arrival in the halcyon days of the station, with a parade of rock legends walking down the hallway to sit with Muni: The Rolling Stones, Pete Townshend and Roger Daltrey, Robert Plant and Jimmy Page. Before long, they were sitting down with Elsas, too: Elton John, Jerry Garcia, Joni Mitchell, Elvis Costello, David Crosby — and most famously, John Lennon, who sat for two hours on Sept. 28, 1974.

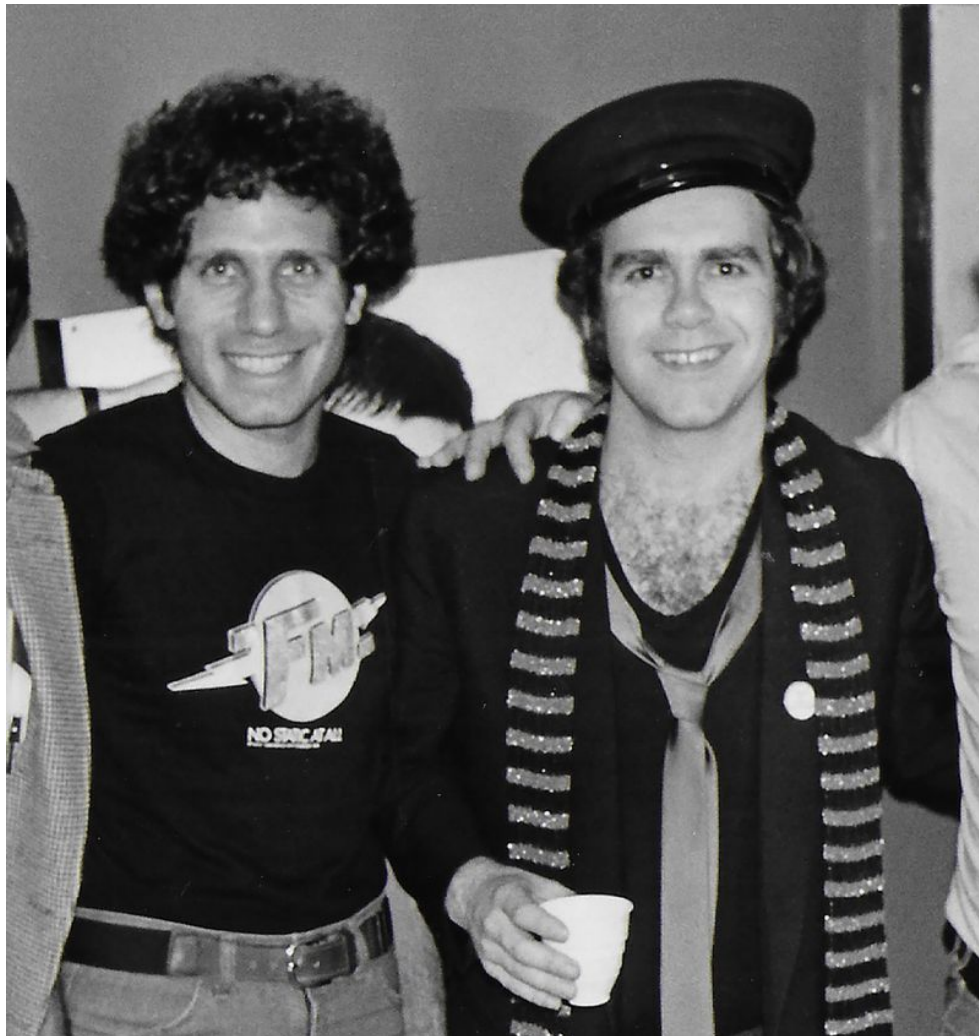


Dennis Elsas with John Lennon (Courtesy of Dennis Elsas)

Highlights from those interviews and more will be featured on the four-hour anniversary WFUV show, airing from 2 p.m.-6 p.m., with Elsas planning to play the songs that he considers the soundtrack of his career. He first arrived at the public radio station 21 years ago.

Elsas somehow survived the endless changes of the industry across the decades, with its steadily switching formats and the rise of the shock jocks and the game-changing arrival of satellite radio.

“I don’t know if I saw the path was changing, but if the road opened up I did my best to be on it,” he said. “If you told me in 1998 I was really not going to be on commercial radio, but satellite and public radio, who knew? It looks like a grand scheme, but I’m just fortunate it worked out.”



Dennis Elsas with Elton John (Courtesy of Dennis Elsas)

Elsas' decades of work did not go unnoticed along a storied career: He's featured in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame's exhibit on influential DJs, and provides the voice of rock history for visitors to the Woodstock Museum in Bethel, N.Y.

And for a generation of New Yorkers, he remains a defining voice of their youth.

When Elsas launched his career, the merger of FM radio with rock and roll music was just getting started. By the turn of the century, its heyday was already in the past.

"The place of rock radio in the 20th century was very different than what it became in the 21st century," says Elsas. "It's not necessarily a good thing or a bad thing. It's just the way the world has evolved."

Whatever it's become, he's still a part of it. Elsas invokes a classic Bob Seger song to explain what keeps him going.

"'Rock and Roll Never Forgets' — to me, that's more than a song title, it's a philosophy," he explains. "It sums up the relationship I have with the music and the artists, the connection I have with my audience, and the support I have received from them."