



# LEARNED IT ON THE RADIO

HOW COLLEGE STATIONS, FROM BIG TO SMALL, CONTINUE TO BREAK HITS, SERVE COMMUNITIES AND LAUNCH CAREERS

BY GARY TRUST

“IT’S NOT RADIO. It’s college radio. There’s nobody listening. Nobody. Maybe, like, three guys in a dorm somewhere.” When a then-senior at Boston University Howard Stern crafted “the single worst moment in radio history” after toppling over a pile of carts (a long-lost cousin of the long-gone 8-track) and halting a spin of Deep Purple’s “Smoke on the Water,” the eventual “King of All Media” was convinced that his radio career had ended after mere rotations of an LP on campus radio station WTBU.



The moment, as depicted in the hit 1997 biopic "Private Parts" (with Stern in all his mid-'70s hirsute glory), includes a friend incredulously listening to Stern's drama over the gaffe. "It's not radio. It's college radio," he counters, seemingly more as fact than an attempt to ease the budding air talent's horror.

Decades later, college radio maintains its schizophrenic nature. It's not radio in the sense that countless student-run stations don't boast audiences that stretch much further than their campus limits. DJs are learning their craft. Mistakes air.

It is radio in the sense that students gain skills in the art and philosophies of broadcasting: music selection, news, sports and public service production, copywriting, promotion and more.

From tiny carrier-current frequencies whose main mission is teaching the basics of radio to FM powerhouses that compete with commercial, corporately owned signals, people are paying attention to college radio, even if audience totals aren't always robust. Major labels continue to allot resources to promoting new artists to college stations, which were the first to recognize the linchpin alternative acts of the '80s and '90s, like R.E.M. and Nirvana.

"College radio helps lay a foundation for an artist," says Capitol college and specialty radio manager Erin Ginty, who cites the exposure that French electronic music act M83 got at college radio as crucial to the band's success at alternative radio, where "Midnight City" was a top five hit.

Rising acts rely on the inroads that college airplay provides. And college programmers respect the responsibility of breaking new music.

"We aired Arcade Fire, the B-52s and Mumford & Sons, among others, years before they made it to commercial stations," says Anastasia Zimitravich, a senior at Georgia State University and GM of the school's WRAS (Album 88) Atlanta. Along with the Georgia Institute of Technology's WREK, WRAS boasts the largest wattage (100,000) of any student-run station in the world. "It's a really beautiful thing when 50 students can work together

on something and present that to the community."

WRAS PD and fellow GSU senior Stephanie Jones adds that college radio's noncommercial status affords a unique opportunity to not let dollars dictate airplay.

"Instead of spinning the latest pop star rehash cash cow, college radio can play the small label, the weird and the forgotten," Jones says. "We live up to the noncommercial spirit. Our sound ranges from indie to obscure, and it's crafted out of a love and appreciation of music that exposes listeners to the unordinary, undiscovered and unexpected."

Zimitravich says that such adventurousness creates a bond between WRAS and its audience. "WRAS is like a club or a fraternity, where like-minded misfits can find their niche."

The tradition of college radio's long history predates Stern's shocking jock error (to him, anyway), or WRAS, which first went on the air in 1971. This year marks the 100th anniversary of the earliest form of the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities' KUOM (770 Radio K).

"In 1912, we were broadcasting the school's football games in Morse code," says PD Caleigh Souhan, who begins her senior year this fall. "Technology is, and always has been, the force that changes broadcasting. We are focused far more on the Web and other digital technologies than we were even five years ago. Radio is now a moveable medium and we work to ensure that wherever you are, you are within Radio K's broadcast range, whether that's studying abroad in Scotland, riding

the bus plugged into a smart phone or even, like the old days, listening to a radio."

Souhan touches on another element that makes college radio special. Student-staffed stations mirror the intellectual stimulation that a college education helps foster. College radio plays new artists not just because ratings are secondary, but also because an open mind is a hallmark of the collegiate experience.

"College radio provides audiences eager for music that challenges and engages," Souhan says, "and for that open exchange of ideas that often happens only on a college campus."

And, if a Radio K student DJ just happens to, say, cascade carts onto a turntable while a record is spinning... oh, well.

"I believe that the magic of college radio is that failure is an option," Souhan says. "We can mispronounce a band name, we can have an awkward, nervous sweaty break—or two—and life goes on. Our listeners are our ultimate judge. They're the dean's list of college radio. As long as they're listening and calling in, we're making the grade."

## PROFESSIONALLY SPEAKING

Not all college stations run purely on student initiative. While Boston University's WTBU is student-run, its other outlet, WBUR (billed as "Boston's NPR news station"), is professionally staffed. It's also a ratings winner, sporting a 3.5 share and a cume of 408,000 among listeners ages 6 and older in Arbitron's June Boston rankings. In Philadelphia, the University of Pennsylvania's triple A WXPX drew 298,000 listeners 6-plus in that period. In Los Angeles in that span, college radio listening totaled more than 1.2 million, courtesy of outlets providing classical (the University of Southern California's KUSC), freeform (Santa Monica Community College's KCRW) and jazz and triple A (California State University's KKJZ Long Beach and KCSN Northridge, respectively).

KCSN's staff includes PD Sky Daniels, formerly of triple A KFOG San Francisco; Jed the Fish, a former 30-year veteran of Los Angeles' alternative KROQ; and even Berlin lead singer Terri Nunn.

"Due to the experience and relationships of our staff, we are aggressive in establishing new acts, both local and internationally, as well as extending careers of creative legends,"

Daniels says. (True enough, U2 manager Paul McGuinness told the Los Angeles Times last year: "In every era there will be a mold-breaking, ground-breaking, taste-making station, and KCSN sounds very clearly like something we ought to support.")

Still, approximately 35 students contribute to KCSN, whether on the air, in social networking or marketing efforts, learning alongside respected industry veterans. "Students are exposed to a high level of professional awareness and interactivity," Daniels says. "They get real-world training if they have vocational desires toward the music and entertainment industries."

With such experienced radio experts at the helm and millions of listeners tuning in, it's no wonder that college radio is a favorite target of labels, especially independents, whose mind-sets tend to fall in line with the DIY affinity of discovery that marks the college years. I.R.S. introduced R.E.M. in the early '80s with the support of college airplay, while labels like Sub Pop are practically synonymous with college radio, having helped popularize grunge in the early '90s through signees Nirvana and Soundgarden. Sub Pop's success has continued with newer acts like Beach House, Fleet Foxes and the Postal Service.

The amount of major-label love for college radio, however, appears to vary from label to label.

"It's hard enough getting attention at commercial radio," one major-label executive says, with some majors relying on independent promoters only in working college radio. Conversely, Capitol Records is among the majors that consider college airplay a key starting point for acts with multifaceted potential.

"We've seen crossover success with the Decemberists, Gorillaz and, more recently, M83," Capitol's Ginty says, adding that the label also employs indie promoters to help "cover as much ground as possible." After Mute worked M83's sixth album, *Hurry Up, We're Dreaming*, to college stations, the label teamed with Capitol's alternative promotions department, resulting in the alternative hit "Midnight City."

Count Ginty among those grateful for college radio's willingness to foster the development of new acts. "Without this format," she says, "some musicians could never get airplay."

WRAS' Jones concurs. "We love music. We have the rare opportunity to play pretty much anything we want," she says. "We are not going to waste it."

## HONOR ROLL

Five college stations that are clearly doing their homework

### WERS Boston

"WERS is a true hybrid of college radio innovation and sound programming principles," says Jack Casey, PD of Emerson College's professionally and student-staffed station, which plays triple A music weekdays from 2 a.m. to 7 p.m. and specialty shows at night and on weekends. "Our students are media-savvy and understand that radio is fundamentally a business. Our rotations are open enough that we can expose our audience to a wealth of new artists while providing enough familiarity and consistency to help listeners feel at home." Emerson radio alumni include actor Denis Leary, reality TV pioneer Vin Di Bona and 26-year Boston radio veteran Barry Scott, now of WROR.

### WSOU South Orange, N.J.

Most college stations lean alternative, but Seton Hall University's WSOU blasts hard rock and heavy metal. That's right: such acts as Brain Drill, Demon Hunter and As I Lay Dying on a Catholic school's airwaves. All lyrics are screened for content to ensure they don't undermine the church, and some of the heavy metallers (like Demon Hunter and As I Lay Dying) are in fact Christian.

### KVRX Austin

Only a college station could proudly proclaim that it plays "none of the hits, all of the time" in its on-air slogan. The University of Texas at Austin's student-run outlet also takes advantage of its location by working with South by Southwest to present annual showcases at the festival.

### KEXP Seattle



JEREMIAH FRAITES of the Lumineers, who performed at KEXP Seattle in July.

The University of Washington station has grown incredibly from its launch as a 10-watt signal 40 years ago, earning a cume of 124,000 in Arbitron's June Seattle ratings. Spinning everything from alternative, blues and rockabilly to hip-hop and world music, "KEXP is so plugged into the local music scene," Capitol college and specialty radio manager Erin Ginty says. Last year, the station signed a 30-year extension with the school.

### KPSU Portland, Ore.

Beyond its on-air frequency, Portland State University's student-staffed station offers podcasts of several of its shows online, including the cleverly titled indie rock-focused "College Collage," hosted by DJ Jake, a PSU graduate student and teacher. Adhering to college radio's trademark quirkiness, KPSU specialty show "Guitar Rock" celebrated Christmas on July 18, decking campus halls with carols by Alice Cooper, Los Lonely Boys and Heart's Nancy Wilson.

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