

# StarTribune

## Radio K: 100 years young

Article by: KRISTIN TILLOTSON

Star Tribune

September 28, 2012 - 6:01 PM

In the DJ booth at Radio K, Josh Olson, surrounded by wall-to-wall CDs, had just put on "Joey's Song" by Xiu Xiu. With four computers at the ready for smooth transitions and maximum options, he scanned his playlist to pick the next track. Overhead, a tiny purple My Pretty Pony glued upside-down to the ceiling -- for luck -- cast a watchful eye on Olson. In the age of Internet streaming, college radio may be dying across much of the country, but it's still kicking at K. At the ripe age of 100, the University of Minnesota broadcaster is the nation's oldest licensed non-commercial station, and one of only a few major campus stations that are completely student-run. As other colleges sell off their signals to public radio, Radio K continues to get funding, increase its listeners and members, and attract more volunteers.

The term "college radio" may conjure the image of a couple of stoners broadcasting "Yah, bro"-style out of a Wayne's World basement, to an audience consisting of five of their buds. But Radio K occupies most of the sixth floor of the Rarig Center on the University of Minnesota's West Bank. Its student volunteers range from freshmen to sixty-somethings who have returned to school after retiring.

Every available surface is plastered with rock posters. In one studio, a few volunteers were dropping a spot, aka recording a station promo.

"We're 100 years old and never sounded so good," a nervous Ashley Pearl rattled off into a mike, going a mile a minute. "We're as old as your grandpa and just as bad at dancing."

"Try it again, slow," said production engineer Greg Sakowski encouragingly. "Like, un-com-for-ta-bly slow."

'Nerdy DJs wanted'

Since Radio K's first 24-hour broadcast day in 2009, Arbitron-calculated listenership has risen every year, more than doubling in the first quarter of 2012 from 17,500 to 34,000. Hardly market-dominating figures, but respectable for a student-run operation.

Most of its weekly shows are music-related, but there's also "Culture Queue," reporting on offbeat cultural topics, and "Two Scrubs & a Mic," a sports show. Any student who wants a one- or two-hour show can apply.

Four years ago, only about 50 students showed up for the beginning-of-school studio tour. Now it's closer to 200, said Sara Miller, station manager since 2009. (Although the station is student-run, it has a few university employees who advise and oversee.) She and programming adviser Sarah Lemanczyk attribute it partly to the appeal of digital broadcasting and podcasting, but also a renewed interest in old-fashioned storytelling.

"We've got kids who want to put on 1940s-style radio dramas," Miller said, pointing out the Foley Box, a sound-effects tool that imitates doorbells, ringing phones and slamming screen doors.

The popularity of Minnesota Public Radio's youth-oriented station 89.3 the Current -- which, ironically, bought its broadcast



Rachel Dorn filmed Jason Sunde of the Daredevil Christopher Wright band during a recent live broadcast from Radio K's studio on the University of Minnesota's West Bank campus. The student-run station is celebrating its 100th anniversary.

Richard Tsong-Taatarii, Star Tribune

### WHERE TO HEAR RADIO K

**Daytime only:** 770 AM (5,000 watts; covers two-thirds of Minnesota and western Wisconsin).

**Day and night:** 104.5 FM and 100.7 FM (99 watts each; together, they cover the metro area's 494/694 loop).

**Online:** [www.radiok.org](http://www.radiok.org).

frequency from St. Olaf College -- also is a factor.

"People are realizing it's possible to have a fun career promoting music," said program director Caleigh Souhan, noting that the station is trying to have a bigger presence on campus. (One example: postcards in dorms that read "Nerdy DJs Wanted (hot ones accepted)."

Radio K has about 300 volunteers, 61 of whom have taken DJ training. Things aren't as anything-goes as you might think.

"One-third of the songs per hour are pre-scheduled by the music director," Souhan said. "For another third, the DJs who have a lot of different tastes, get to pick from different categories we've created based on different sounds. The DJs get to move the songs around how they want, so you might get techno after hip-hop, or two rock songs back to back to keep it as varied as possible."

Those who don't land the plum DJ gigs still get to create promotion campaigns, working with clubs like First Avenue and the Triple Rock on concerts the station sponsors, or learn engineering and produce recordings.

Other than being a currently enrolled student, "you have to wear pants -- that's about the only rule," Lemanczyk said.

Rolling with the changes

Radio K was born in 1993 with the merger of two campus stations: KUOM and WMMR. The first song it played was the Ramones' "Do You Remember Rock 'n' Roll Radio?"

Its funding is divided in thirds: university money, state grants and two membership drives a year.

The station has been through many mutations as it evolved from a professor's first experimental transmissions a century ago.

It also has been a training ground for future radio stars, including Garrison Keillor, Current DJ Mark Wheat and Cities 97 personalities Thorn and Brian Oake.

"I'm a big believer in learning by doing," said Thorn. "It filled a huge void as the U itself was moving away from teaching those sorts of hands-on skills, and it completely shaped my own musical tastes."

Perhaps no one has helped the station make more history than Marion Watson, KUOM's manager from 1969 -- when she was one of only three women in the nation in such a leadership role -- through 1988. Now 90, Watson recalled what she considers one of the most valuable public services the station ever provided: carrying antiwar demonstrations on campus, live and daily, during the Vietnam years.

"We did it for rumor control," she said. "After Kent State, we thought it was important for people to know that Minnesota students were demonstrating responsibly."

In the 1970s, she hired two women announcers, a first. She also opened the door for Hispanic and American Indian programs and the first African-American current-affairs show.

"I found that if you give people a forum and opportunity and then back away, they'll develop something really fascinating on their own," she said.

Today's listeners might count themselves lucky: from 1984 to 1993, KUOM had a call-in format featuring university professors discussing various topics instead of DJs playing hip-hop and alt-rock.

Back in the present, the Radio K crew was gearing up for an in-studio performance by Canadian electronic duo Purity Ring. Hundreds of bands have been aired live in the studio during the past two decades.

Lemanczyk expected this one to be "pretty nuts."

"The kids just can't get enough of that Purity Ring," she said, laughing.

The band didn't show up, but there's always next time. Radio K will be around.

Kristin Tillotson • 612-673-7046

© 2011 Star Tribune