For two-and-a-half years, U of M students have used AM airwaves to spark their own radio revolution

By James Diers
Photos by Craig Bares

Rig Center, on the West Bank in Minneapolis, is typical of the University of Minnesota's grim modern architecture. A gray, monolithic mass of concrete and brick, the building looks more like a correctional facility than a home to some of the university's more creative organizations. A cost of eager, art-look ing students shuffling about this gloomy fortress is the only real sign that life here is anything beyond well, institutional. Maybe it's to be expected at a school visited too frequently by the quandaries of underfunded education.

Make your way up to the fifth and sixth floors, and the world seems brighter. Up here, the cold rock walls are plastered with rock posters. Names and images ranging from Edmund to Nucci Griffith to Boiled in Lead ramp up the energy level, as does the constant stream of music flowing from room to room through a scattered garden of radio speakers — it's always a live broadcast, originating from a studio more yards away. Welcome to KUOM, better known as Radio K, 700 on your AM dial. If you're bored with rock radio, it's where you belong.

Since October 1, 1993, Radio K has been by far the biggest and most successful student-run station in town operating on an annual budget of around $300,000. In contrast, Macalester College's WMUCN works on a budget of less than $10,000 a year. Fellow noncommercial jocks at KFAI work with $350,000 a year, while many local commercial budgets drop well into seven figures. Staffed by 31 paid university employees and more than twice that number of student volunteers, Radio K counts on the university for 20 percent of its funding, with another 30 percent coming from student service fees, federal and state grants make up the rest.

Dollar signs aside, Radio K is about bringing all manner of cool music together on one airwave plate and refreshing the feel of rock radio for the university populace, and whoever else wants to tune in. There is, admit tedly, a certain indie chic here, a hipness rooted to service to the same family of indie and sometimes obscure artists and labels that provide industry-backing ammo for music snobs from coast to coast. At the same time, there's nothing at all smug about-uniting fertile rock genres — guitar pop, hip-hop, lounge, retro, punk/thrash and techno among them — and enhancing the blend with an honest, localized perspective.

By all accounts, Radio K is thriving now as much as ever, broadcasting seven days a week, white AM signal and FM cable — only cable after dark. In a city whose alternative radio market has been forcefully invaded by a pair of slick, decidedly commercial corporate arms — KEGE (The Edge) and KROQ/WREY (The Hits) — Radio K has turned a deaf, deceptively simple vision of radio into a profoundly refreshing format that wins high marks from its immediate target audience as well as from members of the local music community.

"We're a bunch of radio geeks," says music director Dan Sigelmann. He's in the middle of an on-air set, situated behind the control board in jeans and a Noise Addict T-shirt, sliding from a mellower-cut Pink Floyd dusty to new stuff from Guided By Voices. When asked to define the station's format, an impressionistic gathering of styles, vintage and original, he gets a smirk: "I don't know... whatever's good."

To virgin ears, the Radio K experience can be disorienting. Any given hour-long donation is likely to contain a good measure of indie rock, a pinch of punk and funk, one or more world beats or international tracks, a good ska tune, a new local release and perhaps something from James Brown's earliest to round out the mix. It's hard to predict, really. Despite the fact that the station employs a weekly playlist, DJs are free to take spontaneous turns that reflect a variety of musical tastes. "We're a really different college radio station, because about 90 percent of what you hear is programmed," Sigelmann says. "At most college stations a guy..."
on the air. “It’s a constant process trying to make the DJs better,” he says. “I do cut them some slack. I don’t want them to be overprofessional showmen like DJs. But a lot of these people are building a resume, so they aren’t going to be screwing around.”

“I think Radio K is great—I completely support them,” says Kevin Cole, program director of KMUW at the University of Kansas. “At the time I was on the air.”

Cole says, “The freedom we had was pretty exciting—to be able to play music in the way we wanted to, to play on a morning show, that was great. I’d never been deeply steeped in the intricacies of radio, and it was a great training ground.”

“Personally, I’d like to see us get more political,” says Paul Hartling, host of Sunday mornings’ “Radio K International.” “But as we’re on noncommercial stations, there’s a limit to what we can do.”

Under FCC guidelines, non-commercial public stations are forbidden from making any direct “call to action.” While Radio K has an active news department with a daily morning broadcast and regular brief updates, the station seems more bent on profiting than politics.

If the station’s funding is slashed, however, it will be thanks to the impact of politicians on the supposedly insulated Corporation for Public Broadcasting, which is as popular with representatives in Congress as with Montana’s Freeman. With CPB providing 10 to 30 percent of Radio K’s current budget, Helgeson is concerned. “We’re facing the grim reality of a future without CPB funding, and we have to look at other avenues. We don’t want to have to ask listeners for money, especially when we’re aiming ourselves toward a college-aged audience who don’t often have a lot of disposable income. But if it means keeping the station in existence, like it or not, we’ve gotta have to.”

“Though it may not be in the form of legal tender, Radio K has garnered steady support from listeners.”

At home in the U of M alternative-rock world, Volunteer Coordinator John Sommer kicks back. From figures on the local music scene, “They’re just doing what people in radio are supposed to be doing,” says Pat Dreyer, distribution manager for locally based Ambrosia/Remove Records. “We need to have people who care about music on the air. Radio K is almost the last remolding moment in radio, if there’s going to be one.”

Christian Rangel, frontman for Collage Abbey and a veteran of “Off the Record,” admits to being a fan: “They’ve got a great listenership. This is a perfect city for a station like that. I like the REV and every- thing, but I really dig what Radio K does.”

“They do an awesome job,” Cole says, “but it’s a hard job, as well. I almost feel like they’re our sister station. The REV offers more consistency, a more professional approach,” he adds, “and it’s in FM stereo. Being a college sta- tion, Radio K has a lot of different goals. You never know what you’re gonna get.”

As a founding father of sorts, Musil passes occasionally as a real- ist: “I’ve always thought that people really believe in what we’re doing. In theory we’re one of the few stations in town, but in practice it’s just easier to listen to the edge or the REV, either because of the [Radio K’s] AM signal, or because sometimes our music makes really abrupt changes that you’re not used to. Even for the most die-hard indie-rock fans, it can get old after a while, and you’d just want to hum along with a song you know.”

As for Radio K’s technical limitations, blues it on poor judgment by U of M Biggins at mid-century. When nighttime broadcasting became available to the station, university sponsors elected to pass. Twenty years later, when FM took off, the Biggins’ high-hope towers were convinced it was only a fad. That the U had the foresight to give Radio K a shot in 1953, all things considered, is a small miracle.

“Their passion for the fact that it’s not easy. One of the ways we choose the music we play is we put it on and it makes this grim reality—if we got that kind of response from a really silly hole, this would be great.”

While the rampant repetition and utter pred- dictability of corporate alternative radio turns on, Radio K promises stupid grins and pleasant surprises day after day to those willing to brave the great divide between FM and AM. To actually volunteer at the station requires that one be a registered student at the University of Minnesota, which is why some DJs are in no rush to grab their sheepskin.

A number of staff members confess to delaying their coursework or taking post-graduate extension classes just to remain the right to stay on the air at just what may be its best rock sta- tion in town, or at least, a more plausible step toward radio revolution.

“At any radio station, you always have the people who love radio and the people who love music,” Musil explains. “What I’ve always tried to do is to get those two people to cooper- ate—it seems pretty obvious here. I get all the music I need from Radio K.”

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