



SCOTT BONNER / RON KEITH

THE TASTI

The students who run college radio stations are increasingly influential in breaking new bands By Anthony DeCurtis

An anyone desiring proof that campus life in the Eighties isn't wholly a conservative's paradise should flip on the nearest college radio station. While formerly progressive FM stations have increasingly tightened formats and moved backward into oldies territory in order to appeal to the kind of older, wealthier listener that attracts advertisers, college stations are playing more new music and supporting local bands, fanzines, small independent labels and hip clubs and record stores. College radio staffers tend to believe that their programming ought to educate, not simply reflect, listeners' tastes. Airplay on college stations was the crucial first step toward mass success for bands like U2, the Police, the Bangles and R.E.M. This adventurous approach to programming remains college radio's most notable characteristic. "You have to give the people what they want, but you also have to give them what's good for them," says John Van Citters, program director of WUSC, at the University of South Carolina, Columbia. "You've got to mix in Mojo Nixon, the



SCOTT BONNER/IRON KEITH

Craig Keith, program director of WUOG at the University of Georgia in Athens (opposite); Jennifer Grossberndt, music director of WRAS at Georgia State University in Atlanta (above)

THE MAKERS

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MARIA ROBLEDO

Kandy Wilkins, music director of WXCI at Western Connecticut State University in Danbury

Screaming Blue Messiahs and Ruefex with R.E.M., the Ramones and Peter Gabriel. If you don't, then who's going to be the next U2, the next R.E.M.? It's college radio or nothing for most of these bands."

As a result, major record labels and commercial radio stations have begun to take notice of "this big thing that's been quietly going on," as Peter Standish, who tracks alternative radio for the trade weekly *The Gavin Report*, describes college radio. Record companies now have employees, and sometimes whole departments, whose sole purpose is to get bands played on college stations. And commercial stations monitor college radio to spot the next big breakout.

Attention, however, from big-bucks big shots in the music business doesn't exactly have everyone at the campus stations dancing on the consoles. After all, one of the greatest pleasures of college radio — for both listeners and the students who work long hours for little or no pay at the stations — is that programming is determined strictly on the basis of taste.

Free of the need for advertising revenue that has rendered commercial FM radio the victim of greed-crazed consultants who recommend playlists determined by shortsighted demographics, college stations have become the refuge of blues, reggae, jazz, hardcore, small-label releases and New Age and ethnic music — all sounds banished from the commercial airwaves. "For the most part, commercial radio stations simply don't care," says Scott Byron, the managing editor of *CMJ New Music Report* (a weekly publication covering college radio), who used to program music at WNUR at Northwestern University. "Their bottom line is money, and college radio's bottom line is music."

For this reason, while college stations often have their own heavy, medium and light rotations, they tend to give DJs considerable opportunity to program their own shows. "There are two ways to achieve the sound you want," explains Bill Burton, station manager of WXYC at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. "One is to find people who are in love with their voice and know nothing about music but who want to

be on the radio and just tell them what to play. The other is to find people who really are into music, and then you can just tell them to play whatever they want, because you know they're going to play something good. That's the way I choose to do it."

WXYC's relatively open format ("A typical segue might be Billie Holiday to Hüsker Dü," says Burton) results in part from Burton's unhappy year as a "lowly DJ" at a commercial station in Raleigh, North Carolina. "I used to beg the program director to let me play stuff," recalls Burton, who is now enrolled in UNC's law school. "He would always say, 'No one likes that stuff, it's New Wave, it sucks.' When I got fired, I made a list of the bands I'd wanted to play." The list: Talking Heads, the Police, Pat Benatar, R.E.M. and Elvis Costello.

Burton's run-ins with the intransigent commercial station occurred in 1979 and 1980, the very years in which new-music programming at college stations began to gain popularity. By that point, the open formats that characterized progressive FM radio — itself created as a response to the narrow strictures of Top Forty AM stations — had been almost completely eliminated. At the same time, the punk movement had spawned a host of British and American bands with rabid followings and nervous sounds that didn't quite settle comfortably next to the high-gloss sonic finish of Fleetwood Mac and Eagles records. Inspired by the punks and given free rein by school administrators, as long as they didn't burn their studios down, college programmers began tracking discs with a glee best expressed in the dictum articulated by Faith Henschel, music director at KCMU at the University of Washington in Seattle: "Everything can fit your format."

At first, "everything"

didn't really mean *everything*. Since its earliest days, college radio has reached audiences well beyond the edge of campus, but playlists have reflected the white, essentially middle-class tastes of the media kids behind the mikes. In other words, precious little black music was played. This racial barrier is finally being dismantled — by conscious effort.

Charges of racism constitute "one of the biggest attacks on college radio," says Henschel, who has been with KCMU for five years. "Over the last couple of years, we've had an excellent African program, and we feature African music in our regular rotation as well. Reggae, same thing. R&B we just started putting in. We started a blues show." "We're not just breaking white, guitar-based R.E.M. clones," says Tim Hyde, the twenty-year-old music director of KUSF at the University of San Francisco. "When the new Black Flag album comes out, it's not a number-one record anymore," Hyde says about the sort of programming shifts that have taken place at KUSF, "whereas, when the new Run-D.M.C. comes out, that is a number-one record. That wouldn't have happened three years ago."

Of course, the degree to which *any* of this programming reflects the majority tastes of student bodies is not open to question: it simply doesn't. WRAS at Georgia State University in Atlanta represents one of the more extreme cases of this disjuncture. Because Atlanta is regarded as a critical radio market, WRAS is among the most influential college stations in the country. A recent power boost to 100,000 watts will enable the station to reach even more listeners.

Georgia State is a "concrete campus" commuter school; many of its 22,000 students hold full-time jobs, attend classes part time and have families. Is it conceivable that these hard-working folks get home at night, put the kids to bed, pour a Scotch and turn the radio on to groove to the Art of Noise, Siouxsie and the Banshees, the Jesus and Mary Chain and Flesh for Lulu?

"I'd say a lot of the students that go here don't even know we exist," admits WRAS music director Jennifer Grossberndt. "They may know that there's a radio station on campus, but they probably don't listen to it." But Kandy Wilkins, music director of WXCI at Western Connecticut State University, points out that such a situation might ultimately be for the best. The students who know what's cooking listen to her station, she reasons — and as for the others: "I'm not going to try to convince anyone on campus to listen to us, because that could possibly do more harm than good. They might want to



TERRY PARKER

Bill Burton, station manager at WXYC at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

KAREN SCHOEMER — *ROLLING STONE* summer intern and station manager at WCWM at the College of William and Mary — contributed additional reporting to this story.

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change the format. They might want to start hearing things that we wouldn't really program."

For the most part, few restrictions are imposed on the operation of college radio stations by school officials. Sometimes the arrangement is fairly straightforward, as at KCMU, where in exchange for free rent and utilities, the station lets journalism students broadcast the news on weekdays. "They come in, decrease our quality of air sound for five minutes and leave," Henschel says, laughing.

There are, however, occasional limitations on programming. The University of San Francisco is a Roman Catholic school, so, Tim Hyde of KUSF explains, "we can't play 'Fuck the Catholics' all the time, we can't get real wild like that. But that's cool." And at a Bible-belt station like the Atlanta-based WRAS, programming selections can sometimes take on a political edge. "I played the B side of a Translator single, called 'Ronnie Raygun,' definitely referring to Reagan and the nuclear-arms race," recalls Grossberndt. "It was really a comical song - I thought it was fantastic, and we got a lot of phone calls on it. Well, our previous general manager made me take it off the air. He was a young guy, but *definitely* Republican. He left, and it's back in our collection."

WRAS has a strong national profile and an impact on the playlists of Atlanta album-oriented commercial FM stations - "They watch us very carefully," says Grossberndt - but it's also notable because it serves as a "learning laboratory" for Georgia State's degree program in Commercial Music/Recording Engineering, one of the few programs of its kind in the country.

This relationship indicates how, while college radio formats are radically different from commercial ones, many students still view their experience at school stations as a steppingstone into the mainstream music business. Bill Burton of WXYC opposes this attitude. "If somebody comes in and tells me they want to work here to get experience to go into radio, I generally don't hire them," he says, "because what you learn here

College stations were the first to play bands like U2, the Police and R.E.M.

will not help you at a commercial station. I'd rather somebody said to me, 'I'm a botany major, but I listen to the station all the time, and I really like what you guys did last Thursday, mixing up Tangerine Dream with John Lee Hooker.'"

Grossberndt, who is enrolled in Georgia State's commercial-music program, feels that her experience at WRAS would make life difficult at a commercial station. "I'm really leaning more toward the label end of the business rather than radio," she explains, "simply because I've been spoiled rotten here. I have total creative control and a terrific job. Unless I were to work for a station like WLIR in New York or WFNX in Boston, I wouldn't have the opportunity to be in a situation like I have here. And I think that I would find that really stifling."

But Craig Keith, program director of WUOG at the University of Georgia in Athens, says, "I'm flexible. If you get so picky that you'll only work at one type of station, you'll never get a job." Still, it's ironic that

this program director at the college station that helped launch such left-of-center rockers as R.E.M. and the B-52's is weighing an internship at Burkhardt/Abrams, the Atlanta-based consulting firm most often blamed for sabotaging progressive FM programming in the Seventies. "They consult for certain stations, like 96 Rock, the big AOR station in Atlanta," says Keith about Burkhardt-Abrams. "They have a lot of stations around the country, and they basically talk to the program director and tell him what records he should play and what records he should not play. It's kind of misleading, because you have a program director at 96 Rock, but he just plays what the consulting firm tells him to play. And they're very, very successful."

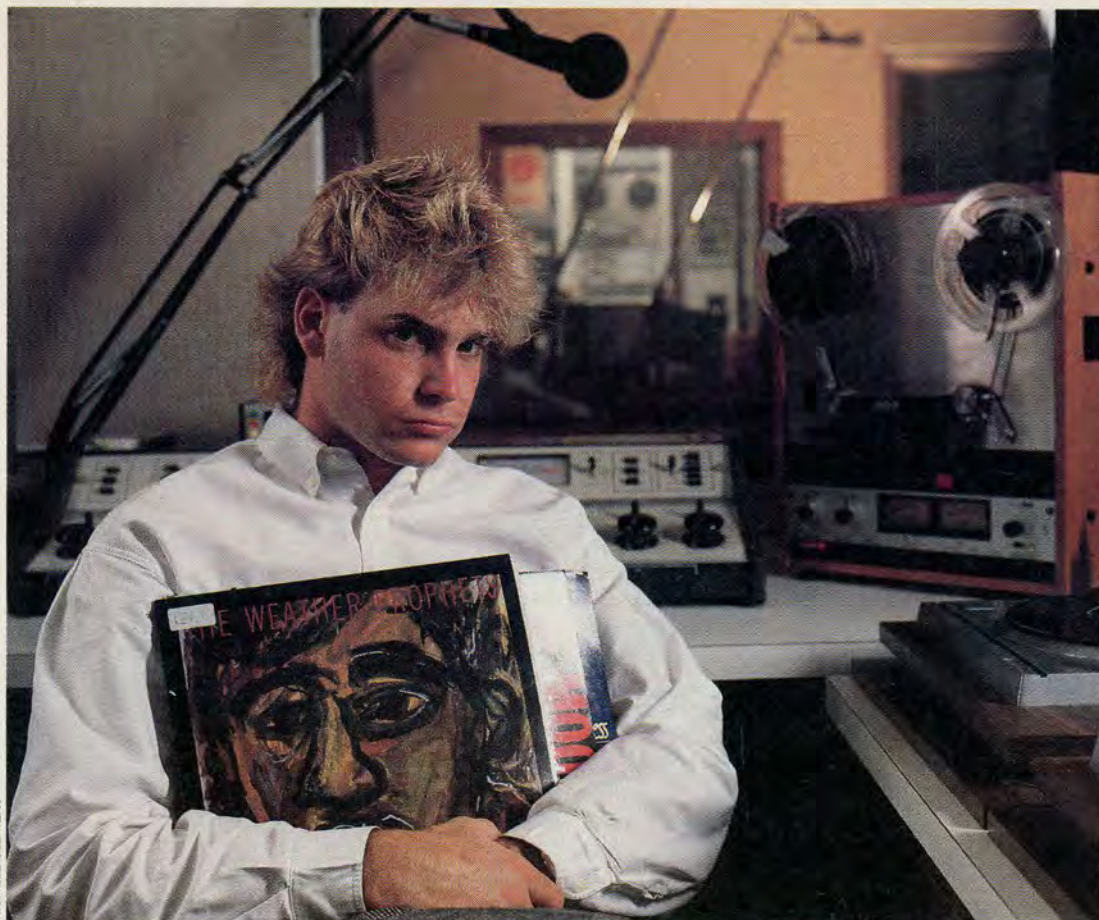
Like Keith, college radio is at something of a crossroads these days. On the one hand, college stations pack more punch than ever. Major record labels, eager to expose their new bands, are courting college stations with uncustomary zeal. Events like the annual New Music Seminar and the CMJ convention - both of which started as support networks for proponents of alternative music - have been marked in recent years by swaggering displays of hipness on the make.

The proximity of big-time recognition, on the other hand, has sent a number of stations scurrying for the edge, anxious to define the line beyond which the corporations fear to tread. Some programmers have gone to the elitist extreme of dropping their support for bands they once ardently backed - like the Replacements and Hüsker Dü - simply because those groups signed with major labels. Such programmers "remind me of struggling artists who are really great but afraid of success," says *The Gavin Report's* Peter Standish, who used to program new music at KUSF. "They end up being *unsuccessful*, they end up not having as much influence and impact in their market." *CMJ New Music Report's* Scott Byron counters, "Not every station believes that achieving the greatest amount of market influence should be the goal of college radio."

With varying degrees of success, however, many stations are trying to balance power in their market with the greatest possible musical integrity. For Faith Henschel, who faces competition in Seattle from AM progressive station KJET, this has meant making KCMU simultaneously "more alternative and more professional." Among other things, this involves improving the station's signal and also eliminating the more annoying aspects of amateurishness: "You can listen to the station - it's not dead air. The records aren't on the wrong speed. The DJs aren't stuttering. . . . It's not like a masturbation session, where you go, 'I wanna play *my* favorite artist.' That is looked down upon. You are *one* person; you have *many* listeners."

The gradual growth of college radio's influence will ultimately result in its having a more profound, long-term effect on programming, contends Byron. "When things take on a faddish nature and make a sweeping impact," he says, "they tend to be dismissed very quickly. I think it's very good that college radio has grown slowly, and that the college departments at the record companies have grown slowly, and that community feelings about the stations have grown slowly. As music directors and program directors and DJs at college radio stations graduate from college and some of them get jobs at record companies, retailers, radio stations and tip sheets, the attitude of the music industry will start to shift."

Or, as John Van Citters of WUSC puts it: "I find the record industry a really sleazy business. I'm not sure if I want to get into it, because there's an awful lot of real slime out there. But it's a lot of *fun* also. I've always got these ideal dreams: 'Well, I'll *change* it.'"



MICHELE CLEMENT

Tim Hyde, music director at KUSF at the University of San Francisco