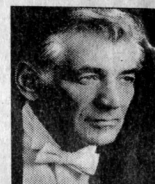


Tempo

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TODAY IN
1918

Leonard Bernstein, conductor and composer of "West Side Story" and "On the Town," was born in Lawrence, Mass.

Source: Chase's Calendar

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Making (radio) waves

A mainstream station abandons broadcasting to go on the Web. Is the future of radio online?

By Gary Dretzka
TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

SANTA MONICA, Calif. — Until very recently, out-of-favor radio stations, like old soldiers, tended to just fade away. But out here on the foamy cusp of the Pacific Rim, one traditional station is using cutting-edge digital technology to forestall death, and maybe even usher in the future.

If, by moving its operation lock, stock and barrel to the Internet, KACD-FM 103.1 is able to stay alive in the face of rampant merger mania, the Santa Monica-based purveyor of "World Class Rock" will have accomplished something no other station has done. If it fails, the worst that can happen is that KACD's experiment will be dismissed as being slightly ahead of its time.

Web-based mass radio is going to happen. It's only a question of when, and, of course, how much money shareholders are willing to invest before they lose patience. But KACD's bold move is in stark contrast to the fate of such stations as Chicago's WMAQ-AM, which recently joined countless other venerable stations on the broadcast industry's ever-expanding junk heap.

"We think the time is right," says Nicole Sandler, KACD's program director and a mainstay in the SoCal Adult Album Alternative (AAA) radio scene. "With the arrival of wireless Internet appliances like the Kima player, Kerbango and Sonic Box — even Napster, which is so different than what we're doing — it shows us that people are willing to get their music from the Web, and the record labels are starting to deal with it, as well. It's become a reality, where, a couple of years ago, it was a concept.

"It's still a bit early, but we want to be there when the technology catches up to the demand."

At a time when almost every radio, TV and gas station has its own Web site KACD's venture is noteworthy because it marks the first time a major chain has committed to moving one of its properties entirely from broadcast to broadband. (Entravision's country station in El Paso has since joined the parade.) As such, WorldClassRock.com (a.k.a. www.channel1031.com) won't be able to rely on shared advertising with a broadcast partner, a reliable base of off-line listeners or income from subscribers.

And for reasons known only to the geniuses who buy radio time, the demonstrably affluent and educated demographic that favors such artists as Neil Young, the Indigo Girls, Sting, Van Morrison, Elvis Costello, Bonnie Raitt,

Sheryl Crow, Lyle Lovett and Ben Harper isn't valued nearly as much as the Clearasil crowd. In addition to its reliably eclectic playlist, KACD regularly airs live performances and interviews, as well as programs specifically dedicated to blues, roots, reggae and world music.

"AAA is a hard-to-pin-down format, because no two stations are formatted in the same way," explains Sandler. "These stations aren't that easy to find, and, in L.A., there's nothing even close to what we do. In the cities they exist, the stations enjoy a dedicated, loyal audience.

"That's one of the reasons KACD will work on the Internet. People seek us out, because we

Illustration by Tom Nick Cocotos

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are special."

In the brave new world of broadband radio, WorldClassRock.com will face challenges from those commercial rock stations already being simulcast on the Web, fledgling Web-only enterprises and strictly niched music-only subscriber services.

Starting as early as next year, motorists will be able to buy in-dash appliances that will allow them to tune to the same services now available to computer users and digital cable customers, thanks to wireless streaming.

"Our owner, Clear Channel Communications, is the biggest broadcaster to start an Internet-only service," adds Sandler, sitting in an office overflowing with CDs, autographed photographs and gold records. "I think we're still an experiment to them, but they have enough evidence that it's coming and the time is right. We have a product that isn't readily available in every city you turn a radio on in."

While most major markets can claim several top 40, country, hip-hop and talk stations, a roster of the nation's commercial AAA outlets can be rattled off using two hands. Chicago's widely admired WXRT-FM 93.1 is among that number, but its parent — CBS-owned Infinity Broadcasting Corp. — is biding its time before committing to the Web.

"In my mind, they've been waiting too long and now are behind the curve," argues Adam Jacobson, radio editor of the respected trade magazine *Radio & Records*. "If you have a Web site, you should be Web-casting. Infinity seems to be waiting to create its own portal, so it doesn't have to deal with an outside provider."

Patty Martin, WXRT's music director, would love to have the station's signal transmitted via the Internet.

"We get e-mails all the time from people around the country who would like us to stream our programming," says Martin, who further asserts that WXRT "rocks harder" than KACD. "We'll get there eventually."

Like WXRT, the Santa Monica station — which can be found five blocks from the beach, in a nondescript suite of offices directly above Hair Caf , Caruso's Custom Tailor, Nail Affairs and Laird's Hearing Aids — is the only game in town when it comes to AAA content.

While demographically appealing, AAA stations generally don't do all that well in the quarterly Arbitron books. The larger Internet community should provide a much more favorable environment for advertisers, especially if they take advantage of all the interactive possibilities.



Photo for the Tribune by John Hayes / AP

Nicole Sandler, program director of Web-based radio station KACD in Los Angeles, with dog Sandy. "We want to be there when the technology catches up to the demand," Sandler says.

For instance, with the push of a button, listeners will be able to purchase the works of the artists they're hearing, and concert tickets, too. Down the road, advertisers will be able to target ads to individuals.

KACD (and its twin station KBCD, in Newport Beach) were able to post a small profit after Clear Channel switched its newly acquired 103.1 frequency from dance-oriented "Groove Radio" to AAA in the fall of 1998. When, earlier this year, the company announced that it was merging with AMFM Inc., it was forced to divest itself of some Southern California frequencies.

"It's a Wall Street world and Clear Channel has to answer to stockholders," Sandler concedes. "When you look at the stations they'll have after the merger, and you look at the FM dial, there's KIIS, KBIG, KOST and Star, all of which register higher in raw numbers. They're all making money and they're all very successful."

"How can they justify to their shareholders taking one of those signals off to put us on? Because we've always been on an impaired signal, we don't have full market penetration and we've always had to rely on word-of-mouth publicity."

Already, the station's on-air staff is becoming familiar with a new group of Internet fans.

"I've gotten e-mail from Brazil, Ireland and Italy, and people are just now finding us," says morning jock Andy Chanley. What will drive listeners to traditional stations, like KACD and San Francisco's KFOG, rather than upstart Web

ventures?

"A radio station has to have a personality," suggests Sandler, who shares her office with her dog, Sandy.

"People have to know they're going to get the quality music that we always deliver. One of the problems with Internet radio is that there aren't any filters."

"You can go to SonicNet and create your own little radio station, but I think a lot of people are going to trust us to filter out the crap. There's so much music out now, much more so than in the early days of FM, when not everyone could press a record and release it."

Despite the freedom — some call it anarchy — allowed by the Internet, Sandler doesn't foresee a return to the Wild West beginnings of FM radio, when deejays were inspired mostly by the nature of the drug that was kicking in at any given moment.

KACD is as carefully programmed as any top 40 station, the difference being that "heavy rotation" means playing a song every seven or eight hours, instead of the usual 65 minutes.

If nothing else, Clear Channel knows it can count on the 26,000 loyal listeners who agreed to sign online petitions in support of the venture.

"We could have gotten no response," Sandler says. "Our listeners weren't registering to win anything, and we were asking for personal information about themselves, so the response was very encouraging. In fact, our old server crashed on the first day we asked for responses."