Kicked Off Airwaves, Station Finds New Home on Internet

Radio  •  Santa Monica-based Channel 103.1, reborn as WorldClassRock.com, is first to make direct leap to cyberspace.

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SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

A couple of early fouls, then nothing but Net.

That's been the story so far for WorldClassRock.com, the Web incarnation of KACD/KBCD-FM (103.1), which earlier this week became the first radio station to leave the airwaves directly for the Internet.

'It's scary, and, yeah, it's a little sad to say goodbye to the FM signal. But I'm so glad we're getting our shot,' says Nicole Sandler, program director of the Santa Monica-based station.

Squeezed out in a corporate merger, the station known as Channel 103.1 either had to relocate to the virtual world or disappear completely. After the station went off the air and online at 9 a.m. Monday, unprecedented traffic hit its computer server and cut out connections for some listeners. Then, about noon, an error at another station muted Sandler's broadcast for two hours. But engineers solved both problems, news crews covering the changeover left the cramped broadcast booth, and once again the office 'feels just like a radio station,' Sandler says.

The departure for the Internet became necessary last September, when the station's parent company, radio giant Clear Channel Communications, merged with another chain, AMFM. That gave Clear Channel more stations in the Los Angeles area than the Federal Communications Commission allows. Because Channel 103.1 had a relatively small audience and counted for two stations, KACD in Santa Monica and KBCD in Newport Beach, it seemed a natural for the auction block.

But Clear Channel didn't want to give up the station's educated and affluent audience members, who are fans of its Adult Album Alternative format, featuring artists such as Tom Waits, Bonnie Raitt, Lucinda Williams and the Dave Matthews Band. Company officials figured that, with about 80% of the station's 400,000 listeners having Internet access, a move to the Web was more of a business opportunity than a gamble.

'The station had to go away because of the law. It's not because we didn't succeed, it's not that we didn't do well,' said morning disc jockey Andy Chanley, who helped Sandler usher in the new era Monday. 'There's no looking back. Now we're straight ahead.'

And they're hoping to draw listeners from around the world, when before the station barely reached the San Fernando Valley.

Camera crews from CNN, Fox and KTLA-TV joined other observers squeezing into and out of the control room Monday to watch the station's final on-air moments. At times Sandler's Akita-mix dog, Sandy, barked at the commotion and hallway traffic, her complaints going over the airwaves.

'I had a little bit of dread going into the thing,' Sandler said afterward. 'It's a little scary, but definitely exciting.'

And less funereal than the last time she

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ushered a station off the air. Three years ago Sandler was program director at KSCE-FM (101.9), an AAA station that Gene Autry sold to a Spanish-language broadcaster. For KSCE, there was no Internet after-life.

To sign off the airwaves at 103.1, Sandler chose the same tune that was the swan song at KSCE, Michelle Shocked’s “Come a Long Way.” She thought the lyrics were apropos for the station’s metamorphosis—“I've come a long way, and never even left L.A.”

After the song ended, Sandler told listeners, “We’ll see you on the other side.”

When the big moment came, there was no cartoonish giant red switch to throw. An engineer simply unplugged a cable TV-type wire from one socket in an intimidating bank of electronics and inserted it into another. If they kept their radios on, listeners began hearing Latin-flavored pop simulcast from KSSE-FM (97.5), whose parent company bought the 103.1 frequency.

Some listeners didn’t take it well. At least two callers asked the staff for suggestions of alternative radio stations to tune in to. Chanley told them that was like “calling Burger King and asking for the directions to McDonald’s.” One listener, not enjoying the joke, cursed and hung up on him. Another called saying, “This is like the second time in a couple of years I’ve heard you go off the air, and it’s like being stabbed.”

“That’s the hard part, some people take this really seriously,” Chanley says.

“Don’t hate me, I’m just the executioner,” said Elaine Hernandez-Hawkes, chief engineer for KSSE, the one who literally pulled the plug. “I should’ve been wearing black.”

Sandler has spent the last couple of weeks jotting down songs appropriate for the day, with themes of loss, renewal and change for the better. The first Internet-only song was “Put the Message in the Box” by World Party, with the line, “You might hear a new sound coming in, as an old one disappears.”

Unfortunately, three hours later the new sound disappeared too.

KMMX-FM (95.9) was another of the L.A.-area stations Clear Channel sold after the merger, and Monday about noon a staffer there decided to do some housekeeping with its computer network.

“It was one of those weird things,” Sandler says. “Somebody there pulled a connection, figuring they weren’t part of the network and didn’t need it.”

But WorldClassRock.com did, and was off for a couple of hours before Clear Channel engineers figured out the problem and restored the signal.

Earlier, a different connection was cut on purpose, because callers to the station were hearing the new 103.1—with Ricky Martin and Enrique Iglesias—as the hold music.

Sandler equated what she and her staff are doing to the early days of FM radio, when the signal wasn’t available in cars and people were ridiculed for leaving safe jobs in AM radio for this new frontier. Now auto makers are working on making Internet radio available on the road, and Chanley surmised that wristwatch receivers, à la Dick Tracy’s, can’t be far off. Already listeners have told him they bought new computers, or sound cards, or speakers to prepare for the station’s Internet conversion.

“It’s going to take a little bit more for people to follow us. But people will come looking for us because we’re playing stuff you won’t hear anywhere else,” Chanley said Monday. One upside: “I won’t need to do traffic after today, will I?”

Sandler puts WorldClassRock.com “about five minutes ahead of the technology,” so when it catches up, the station will be waiting for its listeners, “We’re just hoping we’re not a half-hour early.”

And the station isn’t simply some stepchild of Clear Channel, she says. “We’re the flagship Internet station. We’re the baby everyone wants to see grow up and do well,” Sandler said. “I was sad to see the signal go away, but I’m glad we’re past that hurdle. Now we can see how far we can take this thing.”