



Photos by JILL CONNELLY / Los Angeles Times

KSCA-FM disc jockey Terry Gladstone, left, has an on-air conversation with visitor Dietricha Sweeney, a loyal listener.

The Day the Music Died

DJs, Fans Bid Farewell to KSCA's Eclectic Sound and Each Other

By ROBIN RAUZI
TIMES STAFF WRITER

Deejays get paid to talk through anything. But at the end of her on-air shift Tuesday, Nicole Sandler choked.

The Kinks wound down "Around the Dial" and as she started a goodbye to listeners and co-workers at KSCA-FM (101.9), Sandler's voice cracked. For a moment, before she put on Bruce Springsteen's "Thunder Road," she stopped speaking altogether.

"I really did lose it," she said later. "I never broke down on the air like this."

She wasn't the only one.

Tuesday was a highly emotional day for Sandler and other disc jockeys at KSCA, because they hadn't just worked at the station, they built its format—a combination of new and classic rock, acoustic and electric. And at midnight Tuesday night, the 2½-year experiment was over.

KSCA was bought by Heftel Broadcasting Corp., a unit of San Antonio-



Deejay Nicole Sandler cries during her last shift on the air. The station began Spanish-language programming today.

based Clear Channel Communications, which runs mostly Spanish-language radio stations, including KLVE-FM (107.5), the most popular station in Los Angeles.

Starting today, KSCA changed to a "Mexican regional" music format, similar to that of KLAX-FM (97.9).

A still emotional Sandler got better news an hour after ending her show: a

job offer from a music-industry magazine.

"I'm still sad," she said. "Driving into the station, it was like that feeling of driving to the hospital to see a friend who's dying."

No throngs of fans crowded the nondescript office building adjacent to Burbank where the station was based. This is the 1990s, after all. Instead, mournful listeners called. They faxed. They e-mailed.

Sandler said she had to stop taking calls after a while. The sound of crying fans made her tear up as well.

With her answering machine broadcasting sympathy and congratulatory calls in the background, Sandler flipped open her laptop computer, which had received nearly 600 messages through Monday.

One faithful listener, Dietricha Sweeney, did walk into the office and wound up on the air. Sweeney suffered a severe head injury two years ago that left her temporarily blind and autistic. Though she had loved music, the injury left her

Please see KSCA, B8



JILL CONNELLY / Los Angeles Times

Program Director Mike Morrison hosts his final show. KSCA played a mix of rock and folk music.

KSCA: Alternative Music Format Ends

Continued from B1

with a painful sensitivity to sound. To combat it, she would force herself to listen to the radio.

"The first time I was able to really listen to music and feel that love again, I was listening to this station," she said. "And I never changed the station."

Now working again, Sweeney can spend up to 10 hours a day in her car driving to meet clients, her radio always tuned to 101.9 FM.

Sweeney composed a letter to the staff but decided that she had to come into the station. For people who are autistic, she said, touch and proximity are the most powerful statements. "It was important to me to reach out and shake people's hands," she said.

Even with the phone ringing nonstop, Program Director Mike Morrison seemed to have found some peace in the station's final hours. Program directors are an anxious lot, he said, always worrying, trying to keep up with everything that's going on.

"They know that any moment it could veer off the road," he said. "So a day like today, it's also kind of liberating."

For the station's last day, Morrison gave each deejay a one- or two-hour block to play whatever he or she pleased. He

encouraged them to put listeners on the air. Several musicians, including rocker Melissa Etheridge, called in to express how much they would miss the station.

"They have something to say, and they can express emotions that people who are listening—but aren't calling—can relate to," Morrison said. "And that makes great radio."

The purchase of the 5,000-watt station from cowboy star and businessman Gene Autry and his wife Jackie for \$112 million is fairly typical of the trends in radio today, explained radio consultant Allen S. Klein, president of Media Research Graphics Inc. in Encino.

Since radio ownership restrictions were loosened by Congress a year ago, big firms have been snapping up radio stations to "position themselves with more than one property in each market," he said.

That's driving prices up, so there's more pressure on stations to build mass-market appeal, boost advertising revenues and pay off big debts, Klein said. KSCA made modest profits last year, but not enough to satisfy these new radio economics, agreed KSCA Marketing Director Robert Lyles.

Although nearly one-third of the city's residents are Spanish-

speaking, according to the last U.S. Census, only 10 of the 50 radio stations in Los Angeles offer programming in Spanish. And Spanish-format stations claim less than 20% of the city's \$500-million-per-year radio advertising market, Klein said.

"KSCA is a darling of the industry. It has a small, loyal, very upscale audience, ages 25 to 54, and virtually all white," said Klein. "But it isn't a mass-appeal format. They could never make it grow."

On the air for their final six hours, Morrison, Sandler and Mimi Chen took listeners' suggestions for what to play as their final song. There were lots of recommendations for Led Zepelin's "Thank You" and for Wall of Voodoo's "Mexican Radio," a none-too-subtle reference to the station's new format.

But in their play-what-you-want and say-what-you-want time, more than one deejay picked Alanis Morissette's "Hand in My Pocket," which seemed to capture the feeling at the station:

I'm broke but I'm happy / I'm poor but I'm kind / I'm short but I'm healthy, yeah / I'm high but I'm grounded / I'm sane but I'm overwhelmed / I'm lost but I'm hopeful, baby / What it all comes down to / Is that everything's gonna be fine fine fine.