

An Inventive Los Angeles Music Station Will Change Format, a Casualty of Radio Economics

By ANDREA ADELSON

Junior Wells, a Chicago harmonica legend known as the godfather of the blues, was never a regular on the pop charts. But his remake of the singer Tracy Chapman's "Give Me One Reason" in the gut-bucket Mississippi Delta blues style, his harmonica wailing over an acoustic slide guitar, was a regular on the play list of KSCA-FM (101.9) in Los Angeles.

Since going on the air in July 1994, the station's blend of acoustic, elec-

tric, pop and roots music, along with live studio performances, never broke into the top 25 in the radio rankings. But it did develop a loyal following among listeners, including Bonnie Raitt and Bruce Springsteen.

"It doesn't get any better than that," said Nicole S. Sandler, KSCA's music director. "If serious musicians listen to us to hear other serious musicians, then we're doing something right."

Even so, at midnight Tuesday KSCA will sign off, to be reborn a day later as the 11th Spanish-language

station in the nation's No. 2 radio market. In its reincarnation, the station, now owned by Gene and Jackie Autry, will be managed by a company controlled by Clear Channel Communications Inc. That company already owns two top-rated Los Angeles Spanish-language stations, KLVE-FM and KTNQ-AM.

"If I were them, I'd do exactly what they're doing," said Bill Ward, KSCA's general manager. "But listeners are the poorer for it."

The makeover of KSCA is, in many ways, a parable for the changes

sweeping the radio business. It reflects the industry's deregulation, which allows one company to control several stations in one market, as well as skyrocketing station prices and new audience demographics.

The Autrys paid \$15 million in 1985 for the 600-watt station, eventually increasing its transmitting power to 5,000 watts. On Jan. 15, the Clear Channel unit, the Heftel Broadcasting Corporation, signed an option to buy the station for \$112 million on Gene Autry's death. The deal is part of the Autrys' continuing liquidation of assets; Mr. Autry is 89.

"Revenue has no relationship to the purchase price," said Allen S. Klein, a ratings consultant in Encino, Calif. "The signal is the commodity. There's a chess match going on because everyone is maneuvering for the future. In order to be a player in L.A. today, you have to match the ethnic profile of the marketplace."

KSCA's mostly white, baby-boomer audience earned the station a

ranking of No. 30, or 1.1 percent of the audience tuning into the 48 commercial stations in Los Angeles and Orange Counties, in the most recent Arbitron ratings. Mr. Ward said the station had been profitable since its inception as KSCA in July 1994, but it generated no more than \$10 million in gross revenue, by one estimate.

But revenue is the reason KSCA's format will vanish, Mr. Klein said.

In paying such a high price for KSCA, Heftel is hoping to better exploit opportunities for selling advertising with three stations. Spanish-language advertising represents 13 percent of the region's \$550 million in annual ad revenue, and the bet is it will soon start to catch up with the growing Hispanic population.

According to Mr. Klein, low-power stations are commanding high prices "to fill in weaker coverage to make sure they cover the entire market."

Since limits on radio ownership were lifted last February, a record 2,159 stations have changed hands in

deals totaling \$13.8 billion, according to Radio and Records, a trade paper. Among the most voracious buyers was Clear Channel Communications of San Antonio, which spent \$1.2 billion in four separate group acquisitions last year. Mark Mays, a Clear Channel executive, did not return telephone calls seeking comment.

"I don't blame the Autrys," said Mr. Ward, who helped review auction proposals for the station. He said no potential bidders would commit themselves to retaining its current format and "no one came close to Clear Channel's offer."

"With prices going through the roof, larger companies aren't willing to take a chance," he said.

Steven Baker, the president of Reprise Records, went on the air last week decrying the station's loss, particularly for a stable of artists that got little air play elsewhere.

"When we go away," said Ms. Sandler, "there'll be a lot of artists who'll be homeless."