

# Monitor

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## To Live And Die In L.A.: KSCA's PD And MD Say Triple-A Was Never Equipped To Win

by Marc Schiffman

The long-anticipated sale of Golden West's triple-A KSCA (101.9 FM) Los Angeles should close by the time you read this, with new owner Hefel flipping it to a Spanish-language format.

This, less than a year after WNEW New York's short-lived experiment with triple-A, leaving the top two markets without commercial triple-A outlets. What happened to the station that many in the industry hoped would be a triple-A flagship? In this exclusive look back at KSCA, PD Mike Morrison and MD Nicole Sandler contend that KSCA never had the commitment of financial resources that would have made triple-A a player in L.A.

KSCA's predecessor, soft AC KLIT, the last station in the Gene Autry family's Golden West chain, was initially due to be automated. Morrison says, "They felt like they could sell it for more money in a couple of years . . . The mandate was, we'll keep it, but let's not lose any more money running it."

Then somebody in the Autrys' other business, the California Angels organization, heard triple-A KZON Phoenix



during spring training and called KLIT GM Bill Ward, inviting him to Phoenix to hear the station. It was love at first listen, and Ward hadn't left the Phoenix airport before phoning consultant Dennis Constantine for more information on triple-A.

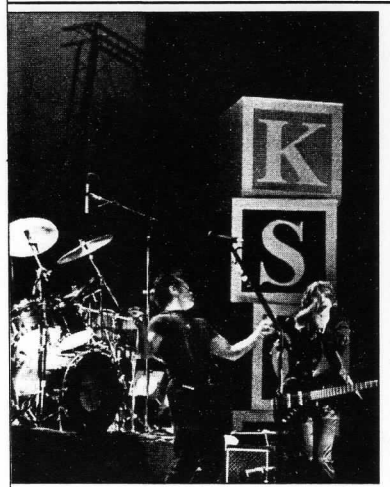
"It was clear from the start this station was always for sale," says Morrison, "[but] they wanted an exorbitant amount of money for it. The irony is that the number that was bandied about when we first came on, \$60 million, was a joke." The station-sale boom created by last year's Telecom legislation allowed the Autrys to sell for over \$100 million.

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### LACK OF WATER

Morrison, previously PD of noncommercial e-A WXPX Philadelphia, knew the situation SCA. But now he admits to being naive about it could be done under the circumstances. He lls Ward's ratings goal for the station. "He ted us to get a 2 share 25-54," says Morrison. ought that would be a cakewalk, because N had considerably better ratings than that. t wasn't so easy . . . We were never able to lly get into the 2s, which was a disappointment ne. I would have liked to have done that, be- . . . we could have made a lot more money probably withstood a sale with the format." it you have to spend money to make money, Morrison and Sandler say that the station never properly armed. Since its debut in t, Morrison says, no music research was done. did no focus groups. We did no perceptual ies," he says. "When we were playing music,



John Mellencamp onstage at KSCA's Christmas/Toys For Tots Concert

we had no real idea what effect the songs were having and what people liked and didn't like. It was all based on gut."

"We were missing half of the tools," says Sandler. "We were flying blind . . . There's music that I loved and fought for, but had no way of checking [audience acceptance] other than the phones."

Morrison says, "Our entire marketing was two vans driving around, passing out keychains at concerts . . . You cannot exist on that in L.A. First of all, L.A. is huge. And people are spending millions of dollars on advertising campaigns for their stations. And especially if you're targeting adults, to expect them just to find you is too much. Even if word-of-mouth is good, which it is. You can't get it up to where it needs to be with word-of-mouth alone."

Morrison notes that he and Sandler had to pull air shifts. Speaking only for himself, he says, "I feel my strength is off the air. I wouldn't hire me to be on-air in drive time in a major market . . . Not only does it take up time that I could be using to do more important things, but we don't have the best talent on-air that we could have."

But, Morrison adds, "given the fact that we kept costs down, the fact that we weren't spending a lot of money on marketing and other things, we were able to be a profitable station with a 1 share."

### PROUD MOMENTS

Morrison also notes that the deal for a recent John Mellencamp/Brian Setzer Christmas show and Toys for Tots drive had just come to fruition when news of the sale hit. His first thought was, "OK, we just put 2½ months work in for something that's going to come completely unraveled as soon as word [of the sale] gets out. But it didn't."

Location won the station a high-profile audience. Morrison tells of actress Jamie Lee Curtis being interviewed on the morning show of a New York station. Fiona Apple's album had just come out, and Curtis was offered a request during the interview. "She said, 'How about Fiona Apple?'"

And they didn't know who she was," he says. "She said, 'Are you kidding? It's the hottest thing. 101.9 in L.A. plays it all the time,' on the air in New York, which was gratifying. We've heard reports that people like Springsteen and Melissa [Etheridge] and Petty are regular listeners."

Being in an entertainment capitol meant attention from other media, as well. Morrison recalls fielding weekly calls asking, "What is this song? We want to put this in a movie."

Morrison and Sandler agreed that one of the high points in the station's history was breaking new artists. "I'm very proud of our role in helping to break Joan Osborne," Morrison says.

Sandler recalls Osborne's live, on-air performance in the "Music Hall," one of KSCA's trademark elements. "She did 'One Of Us,'" she says. "It was so amazing. Mike flipped, and we added that song. And then we watched her take off."

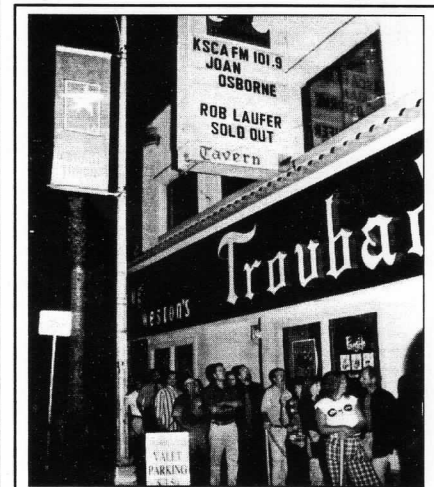
The real payoff came when Osborne committed to a free show at the Troubadour for KSCA listeners. A week after finalizing the deal, cross-town modern KROQ added Osborne. "At that point, we knew, 'OK, this is just going to be the hottest ticket in town.' We were going to have Joan Osborne at the Troubadour, and the sky was the limit. She could be all over MTV, and we would be doing this exclusive listeners-only Joan Osborne show," Morrison says.

### MUSICAL NEIGHBORS

Flanked by modern AC KYSR (Star 98.7) and heritage rocker KLOS, Morrison says he worried more about the recently classic rock-sounding KLOS than Star. "A lot of people were saying this type of radio has to evolve into the Star format if it's going to be successful," says Morrison. "Well, guess what? Star, yesterday, added Celine Dion."

Modern ACs, Morrison says, "actively target females . . . It's not about owning artists. It's about playing songs you can sing along to." Adds Sandler, "Our audience is more musically intelligent . . . Music is a more important part of their life than the Star person who doesn't know what they're listening to."

However, "KLOS sounds a lot like we sound," says Morrison, noting such shared acts as U2, the Wallflowers, and Dave Matthews Band. "While there are differences, they have the edge, because they have the research, production, [and] mon-



A line of KSCA listeners wait to get into sold-out Joan Osborne show.

ey to market the thing. I may have a different take on the music, slightly, in that we don't play Van Halen, but that's such a subtlety. I don't think people even pick that up."

Sandler disagrees. "It's this philosophical argument that Mike and I had all the time," she says. "I would like us to be a lot more adventurous . . . I think if we had stayed true to the original vision of playing deeper album cuts and playing more new music and taking more chances, maybe it would have done better. It goes against all common sense when you know how radio works. But, I think people didn't come to us to hear what they could everywhere else."