

Nikki Sandler, right, of WUSF's rock-oriented 'Free-Form Radio' show, wants more hours added to the program's format to make WUSF more responsive to students' tastes. But station manager John Young says rock-oriented formats would find public funding difficult to obtain.



David Okamoto photo

Rock program sidetracked after the demise of radio's 'Railroad'

By DAVID OKAMOTO
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For most college students, weekends are long-awaited sanctuaries, a chance to escape from books and lectures and partake in any number of parties, movies, concerts or bar-hopping excursions.

There are those who even use the two-day break to catch up on missed class assignments.

However, University of South Florida broadcast major Nikki Sandler spends her Friday and Saturday nights walking the empty halls of WUSF-FM (89.7) studios, scrounging through the station's dismal rock 'n' roll record collection and anchoring "Free-Form Radio," WUSF's only student-oriented rock program.

From 11 p.m. to 1 a.m., Sandler and co-announcer Stu Septoff (the pair also anchor WMNF's Thursday night rock show) introduce listeners to mostly New Wave acts, most of which receive little if any airplay on other bay area rock stations.

Talking Heads, Specials, Elvis Costello, Sex Pistols and the Ramones are mixed with mainstream artists like Bruce Springsteen and Todd Rundgren in between public service announcements aimed at the university community.

"I love it," Sandler said while sifting through a stack of albums. "I don't care about the Friday and Saturday nights. I've got my whole life ahead of me. I want to make a career out of radio and this is the best way to go about it."

Most of the station's rock collection has fallen victim to sticky fingers, leaving Sandler and Septoff to supply their own albums.

As she cued a track from the new B-52s album on the turntable, the 21-year-old USF senior discussed the program's recent transition from tape to live.

"Anybody can put things out on tape because you have a million takes to do it over," she said. "But with live radio, it's a one shot deal, and that's what it's all about."

"Free-Form" was originally supervised by the USF student government; hence, since WUSF policy states that only station employees can go on the air live, all shows were taped two days in advance to give station personnel an opportunity to screen the broadcasts.

"I guess they (station management) were afraid that whoever was doing the show would push the drug and sex lyrics, which they prohibited," she said. "I could never see any sense in it. I wanted to go live in the very beginning."

Sandler, who's been with the show since its inception in May 1979, finally got the go-ahead for live programming this summer when the station assumed responsibility from the student government.

Rock music had been absent from the WUSF airwaves, which feature chiefly classical and informational programs, since the demise of the notorious "Underground Railroad" in 1974.

In November 1978, the USF student government communications committee resurrected the familiar "Why isn't there student-oriented programming on WUSF radio?" controversy, eventually leading to "Free-Form" after lengthy disputes with university officials, notably station manager John Young.

"It may seem that I'm just negative about 'Free-

Form' and student programming," Young said last week. "That is not really the case. What I am is strongly pro-classical, jazz and formats I cannot send the two million bay area people to."

As a result, the station, ironically located in the basement of the university's Student Services building, has become almost totally community-oriented and, some charge, oblivious to student needs.

"It's a ridiculous broadcasting decision for us to in any way duplicate what these other stations (WQXM, WYNF) are doing with far more money," Young said.

WUSF is funded not only by the university but by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and the Florida Department of Education, he said, "and both of these grants are based upon our programming format being cultural, educational and informational. A predominantly rock format would suddenly find itself very broke."

Though Sandler is not advocating total abandonment of the station's current classical format, she said she would like to see "Free-Form" get more hours.

"I'd even switch with (89.7 Jazz Place, which airs from 1 to 3 a.m.) if I could go all night," she said.

Many students feel that a campus station, theoretically, should program rock and jazz music for students, interspersed with USF-related news and perhaps even live coverage of USF basketball games.

Broadcast majors would also have an opportunity to gain on-air experience.

Sandler and Young both agree this would be an ideal situation but Young pointed out several obstacles.

Among them are the lack of advertising and audience attraction, since "Free-Form" explores the lesser-known music circles rather than the most popular artists.

Most importantly, he explained, non-commercial stations like WUSF serve a huge number of small audiences, "people who tune up and down the dial, say it all sounds alike and expect us (non-commercial stations) to make everybody who is unhappy with commercial radio happy."

"So, we get students who say they're unhappy with 98 Rock and Y-95 and want WUSF to play what they don't play," Young continued, "but they're not the only ones."

Sandler, on the other hand, sees student apathy as a problem.

"Students aren't united the way they used to be," she said. "They go about their own business and they're not that campus oriented, especially at this school."

She added that there are few students still on campus who were around during the "Underground Railroad" days.

"They (students) don't even know there was a predominantly rock station on campus."

Despite the odd hours and the dismal hope of getting more air time before she graduates in March, Sandler says she's thankful for the opportunity she's been given.

"I have a chance to play rock 'n' roll two nights a week for two hours a night on the radio," she said, "which is a chance a lot of people don't get."

"It's not all the experience I'd like," she said, "but it's given me a good start." □