

# Triple A listeners: ready to love some radio

By **Ken Mills and Bruce Warren**

**Y**ou hear the songs all over public radio—the musical “bumpers” between stories on *All Things Considered*, program themes, stories about new musicians and CDs. Contemporary music has become the soundtrack for public radio.

Yet station leaders accept the myth that contemporary music can be a successful public radio format only in Philadelphia, Santa Monica, Calif., or Austin, Texas. The rise of contemporary music on public radio is a national development that deserves

respect.

On the more than 40 public radio stations that have adopted contemporary music as a major format, the name they usually give it is “Triple A”—adult album alternative—a blend of not-so-old music that strikes a chord with many listeners.

Triple A is radio-industry jargon, but the format’s dimensions are defined locally—in Los Angeles and Philadelphia, Spindale, N.C., and Anchorage, Alaska—in terms of the artists played. The boundaries for what “Triple A” means to radio listeners is as wide and deep as the works of Muddy

Waters, Richard Thompson, Dave Matthews, Jack Johnson, Phish, Beck, Johnny Cash and Norah Jones.

The rise of contemporary music on public radio stations is remarkable because it is largely a homegrown phenomenon. It results from disenfranchised music fans, independent musicians and labels, and the desire of public radio broadcasters to serve new communities and listeners.

Contemporary music formats are the fastest-growing type of music programming on public radio. Momentum is building. The el-

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Triple A’s range includes such diverse artists as (clockwise from top left) the Dave Matthews Band, Patty Griffin, Bob Dylan, Norah Jones, B.B. King, Phish and Jack Johnson, with guitar. (Photos: Griffin by Scott Newton for *Austin City Limits*; King © 2002 Bob Guthrie. Design: Victoria Maulhardt.)

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ements are in place for contemporary music to contribute substantially to the expansion of public radio's service.

Over the past decade, news-and-information programming has given public radio unprecedented growth in audience and time spent listening.

Just over the horizon, Triple A is another perfect storm in public radio programming. Whether it's called "alternative" or even "the anti-format," public radio leaders are beginning to pay attention.

A new generation of public radio stations has found a way to be significant in the lives of listeners—winning new listeners for public radio, succeeding financially, strengthening community ties and garnering notable ratings.

Perhaps you've noticed recently:

■ In January, Minnesota Public Radio ended WCAL's decades-old classical music format and flipped to progressive contemporary music "89.3 The Current." The Current says it's "capturing new music that defines our era—and its musical roots and influences." MPR paid almost \$11 million for WCAL and a repeater station in Rochester, Minn.

■ In September, Philadelphia's WXPB moved into new, state-of-the-art facilities, sharing space through an innovative partnership with World Café Live, a for-profit live music venue and restaurant named for the station's flagship music program. WXPB commands a 2.6 share in the market, competing against strong album-oriented rock and classic-rock stations.

■ WYEP, Pittsburgh, broke ground Jan. 28 to build its \$3.4 million Community Broadcast Center. This is quite a revival for a station that was forced off the air in 1985 because it couldn't pay its power bill. WYEP calls its format a mixture of "quality music and provocative ideas."

■ WFPK, part of the Public Radio Partnership in Louisville, Ky., just had its best spring pledge drive. Of the three Public Radio Partnership stations, WFPK brought in the most new members, with a 46 percent increase. The Public Radio Partnership describes WFPK's mission as "... focusing on emerging and independent artists" and says "many featured artists are locally based, ensuring that WFPK truly is Radio Louisville."

■ KEXP, Seattle, recently completed a record-breaking winter pledge drive. KEXP's mission, according to its website, is to be "more than just a radio station. In addition to its eclectic music mix, KEXP has

a goal to teach listeners more about the craft of making music, the history of popular music, and the musicians making today's new sounds." Contemporary music artists heard on KEXP range from Air and the B-52's to Nirvana and Woody Guthrie.

■ WFUV, New York, will upgrade its coverage of the market via a new antenna atop a 28-story building, the highest location in the Bronx. Even with its current limited coverage area, WFUV is the fourth-most-listened-to public radio station in New York. WFUV delivers what it calls "FM radio that's still an adventure of musical discovery," featuring a mix of contemporary artists including Norah Jones, John Mayer, Joni Mitchell, Bob Dylan and B.B. King.

Noncommercial public radio stations from Baltimore to Cincinnati to Los Angeles are airing distinctive blends of contemporary music. These stations reach a critical mass of listeners who support the programming. A new generation of music stations are building important community ties and significance.

Many have put one foot in Triple A. Maine Public Radio, Wyoming Public Radio and KRCC-FM in Colorado Springs, Colo., are just a few that have contemporary music as a secondary format.

Networks are noticing, too. NPR's multimedia online music program *All Songs Considered*—heavily populated with contemporary music—started after the network received numerous inquiries from listeners who wanted to know more about the music played between stories on NPR's newsmagazines.

### Why now?

Eclectic contemporary music and NPR programming blossomed around the same time in the early 1970s. They involved many of the same people as listeners and as broadcasters. Both favored idealism and community.

The music nevertheless failed as a commercial radio format. As the value of FM licenses zoomed in the 1970s and 1980s, operators were less willing to take a chance

with innovative music formats. Over time, the music on commercial stations became more predictable and restrictive. As commercial music stations were sold to bigger and bigger companies, they cut their news spending and turned their music formats into gated communities where new and local artists were not welcome.

As we know, the changes in commercial radio benefited public radio. The rapid rise in listening to NPR news stations is well documented.

Now, many of the same elements are boosting the growth of noncommercial contemporary music stations. Hyperconsolidated music companies and commercial broadcasters are ignoring most new and local artists. They have ceased to serve many contemporary music fans, creating a growing pool of underserved music lovers. Highly educated and socially aware, these fans are a perfect fit for listener-supported public radio stations.

### Rise of a noncommercial music community

In every city a community has developed around music that is not only noncommercial but sometimes anticommercial. These listeners and musicians embrace new technologies for distributing music directly to fans. The performers can now make digital multitrack recordings on their Macs and distribute their music through websites. They can thumb their noses at big corporate empires and still have real music careers. For under-served, alienated music fans, public radio can be a window into his world.

On the national scale, broadcasters also have developed a community centered on the annual Non-Commvention. More than 400 radio programmers, artists and vendors are expected to gather in Philadelphia May 19-21 for the fifth annual "Non-comm," as it is known. It will be held in WXPB's new facility and the World Café live-music venue next door.

In many ways, the growth of the Non-Commvention is a mirror of the growth of contemporary music in the public radio system.

In 2000, Dan Reed, then p.d. of WFPK, Louisville, organized the Non-Commvention in conjunction with the owners of the website TripleARadio.com.

More than 100 people attended the first conference, and attendance has grown each year since then—in organization and influence. It is now one of the most-attended

**In Pittsburgh, WYEP broke ground for a \$3.4 million facility. Twenty years ago it couldn't pay its power bills.**

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public radio conferences, providing sessions on fundraising and programming practices and showcases for who's who in contemporary music. Musicians featured at past Non-Commventions include Sonic Youth, Patti Smith, Joan Osborne, Rufus Wainwright, Patty Griffin, and J.J. Cale.

### Built on the basics

Perhaps the best reason contemporary music formats work on public radio stations is that people are drawn to the programming and will support it. Contemporary music reaches a substantial audience, attracts enthusiastic core listeners and creates bonds between the station and the community.

Public radio has traditionally been slow to change and most managers are risk-averse. Perhaps some people in the system are resistant to contemporary music on public radio because they don't know the artists and feel left out of the scene.

It's time to go beyond the comfort zone. Public radio has the opportunity to build a new programming franchise.



*Ken Mills is a public radio programming consultant who got his start in the biz working at underground radio stations in the late 1960s and early 1970s. You will find "Hurt" by Nine Inch Nails, "Moonlight Mile" by the Rolling Stones and "Hello Stranger" by Barbara Lewis on his iPod. Bruce Warren was a founding producer of World Café at Philadelphia's WXPB and is now the station's assistant station manager for programming. He serves as treasurer of Public Radio Program Directors. Visit his blog at [www.somevelvetblog.blogspot.com](http://www.somevelvetblog.blogspot.com) to learn why he wants you to "Get on up, let's boogaloo."*



## Will contemporary music continue to be a growing programming format on public radio stations during the next five years? Why?

**Sarah Lutman**, senior v.p. for cultural programming, Minnesota Public Radio:

Public radio is ideally suited to the task of finding and developing new talent and new voices—the authentic contemporary music that both reflects our local communities and that will help define American culture for a new generation.

Educated, involved, curious audiences that are drawn to the values and ideals of public broadcasting are . . . willing to take a journey with a local radio station that takes creative risks—to join in the discovery process.

**Jay Kernis**, senior v.p. for programming, Programming, National Public Radio:

Ten years ago, fewer than 100 public stations were experimenting with Triple A and other [contemporary] music formats. The newest numbers we have, from 2004, show that number grew to 233 stations.

This music also fits beautifully into what public [radio] does best; it touches the heart and pleases the soul, and often makes you think. It's clear there is a hunger for music with substance, music that tells stories and has artistic value.

**Ruth Seymour**, g.m., KCRW, Santa

Monica, Calif.:

Contemporary eclectic and cutting-edge music is a natural for public radio and an alternative to commercial music formats which have sent listeners fleeing to the Internet.

Public radio's reluctance to accept this format illustrates its lack of daring and imagination. Even the success of stations like KCRW has not persuaded the system that there's a great opportunity to build a younger audience and showcase what's happening now. Instead timidity reigns.

**Dale Spear**, g.m., WYMS, Milwaukee:

There is so much great music that deserves to be heard, and public radio can play an important role in providing that gateway, filling the void created by commercial radio's narrow and safe playlists. I see [iPod sales] as a signal and opportunity for public radio to provide an alternative to commercial radio by playing much deeper playlists and do what we have done for news—provide a more in-depth presentation of contemporary music.

—Compiled by Ken Mills