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Hour After Hour, One Station Is Devoted to Pulse of New York

By WINNIE HU

For a first look at New York City's hottest bands, there is only one television station that taps into the underground music scene from the East Village to Williamsburg, Brooklyn.

For access to the city's biggest social events, there is again one station that devotes countless hours to the red carpet premieres at the Tribeca Film Festival, the runway shows at Fashion Week and the summer concerts in Central Park.

That station is none other than the city's official television outlet, NYC TV. With an

Once the city's meeting channel, now full of music and social events.

ever-growing roster of programs that delve into previously uncovered slivers of New York culture, this once-overlooked station, whose bread and butter used to be City Hall hearings, has soared in the ratings to 100,000 viewers for its most popular shows, and scored 14 New York Emmys.

So successful is the station's programming that its shows are starting to get picked up by television stations from East Hampton to Los Angeles, while Continental, Delta and South African airlines have featured its programs on their flights. Its signature theme, "Everything New York," even inspired a station in Seoul, South Korea, to reinvent itself as "Everything Seoul."

The comedian Dave Attell, who frequently appears on Comedy Central, is an admitted fan of NYC TV.

"I like shows about New York because that's where I live," he said, adding that he

likes the focus on history and things to do. "Good to see somebody's taking care of it."

NYC TV is largely an invention of the Bloomberg administration, which has aggressively applied the latest technology and business practices from the private sector to all levels of city government. Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg, who began Bloomberg Television as part of his media empire, knew better than most the value of a city television station, his aides said.

But the station's predecessor, which was known as Crosswalks Television, had languished for years. It did little more than replay City Council meetings and mayoral news conferences on its five channels, which were available only to cable subscribers in the five boroughs.

To build the programming, the administration tapped young people outside government, like Arick Wierson, 34, a former investment banker, who was put in charge of the city television station after working on Mr. Bloomberg's 2001 election campaign. Mr. Wierson teamed up with Seth Unger, 31, a co-founder of Messenger Records, a small label based in New York for singer-songwriters and independent rock artists.

One of their first collaborations was "New York Noise," a groundbreaking show that has attracted a loyal following among musicians. Tommy Ramone was the host of an episode, and bands like Fischerspooner, Animal Collective and the National have all been featured. The show is filmed around the city, from longtime clubs like Irving Plaza to offbeat hangouts like the accordion shop Main Squeeze.

With an array of new shows, NYC TV began in June 2003, and its operation was expanded last year from cable to broadcast, reaching viewers for the first time on Long Island and in Westchester, Connecticut and New Jersey. It accomplished that by merging with a broadcast station that was owned

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NYC TV

Ralph McDaniels is the host of "The Bridge," an NYC TV program that traces the evolution of hip-hop in the city and shows videos.



Ruby Washington/The New York Times

On "Eat Out NY," viewers get an insider's guide to popular places to eat, like Nathan's Famous hot dogs, and interviews with chefs.



NYC TV

Feliberto Estévez, a chef, with Julie Laipply, host of "What's Cooking at Gracie?" and Jordan Barowitz, a spokesman for Mayor Bloomberg.



One Station Is Devoted To the Best Of New York

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by the Board of Education and passed into the city's hands when Mr. Bloomberg took over the public school system.

This year, NYC TV will move to a new headquarters near City Hall, after a \$5 million renovation. Its staff of 76 has been shuttling between offices in Brooklyn, the Bronx and Lower Manhattan. About half the station's annual budget of \$4.6 million comes from the city, and the rest from fees paid by independent producers and others leasing time for their own programs.

On this relatively tight budget NYC TV has set itself apart with programming that is part history lesson, part travel guide, part reality television, often packaged with flashy graphics and a pulsing soundtrack. Among its 22 original series, there is "\$9.99," for shopping on the cheap, and "Blueprint NYC," which brings the city's landmarks to life.

"If you want to get a good feel for New York, it's the place to tune in," said Jacqueline Gonzalez, executive director of the New York chapter of the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences. "Here it's the central character, as opposed to being just the backdrop where the action happens."

NYC TV also continues to cover city government. For the 2005 elections, Mr. Bloomberg and other candidates were given free airtime to discuss their views. And during the transit workers' strike, the mayor's news conferences were broadcast live from City Hall.

Councilwoman Gale Brewer, the chairwoman of the Technology in Government Committee, said that NYC TV has strayed too far from its core mission. She has complained about the station's broadcast of fashion shows, only to be told that they are part of city life.

"What are we learning from it?" she said. "They're focusing on tourists and visitors rather than on New Yorkers who need basic services and want to know what their elected officials are doing."

Deputy Mayor Edward Skyles, who oversaw the development of the station, rejects such criticism, saying that NYC TV has struck the right



Ruby Washington/The New York Times

The set crew for "Eat Out NY" filmed Kelly Choi, the host, behind the counter at Nathan's Famous hot dogs.

A Sampling of What's On

NYC TV, the city's official television station, broadcasts on Channel 25 and is carried by the Time Warner, RCN, Comcast and Cablevision cable services.

"\$9.99" A guide to free and cheap attractions.

"SECRETS OF NEW YORK" Explores abandoned train stations, ancient cemeteries, hidden jails and other forgotten places.

"EAT OUT NY" An insider's guide to popular places to eat and interviews with celebrity chefs.

"BLUEPRINT NYC" Tours the city's most famous landmarks, including Gracie Mansion, Wave Hill and the Brooklyn Bridge.

"COOL IN YOUR CODE"

Suggestions on places for people to meet and things to do in the city's 200-plus ZIP codes.

"NY 360" Behind the scenes with "The Sopranos" and "Law & Order," and backstage at Fashion Week and the Gotham Comedy Club.

"THE BRIDGE" Traces hip-hop's evolution in the city with rare videos featuring early stars like Afrika Bambaataa and Grandmaster Flash.

"NEW YORK NOISE" An hourlong broadcast of music videos, concerts and interviews.

balance between civics and culture. Mr. Skyles himself alternates between watching "City Classics," which replays old mayoral press conferences, and "What's Cooking at Gracie?"

"My idea of cooking is cereal," he said. "But I like to learn. I like to eat food, I just don't know what I'm doing."

The success of NYC TV largely reflects the enduring appeal of the metropolis that it calls home. It is that

factor that sets it apart from a station in, say, Syracuse, and what makes shows like "\$9.99" marketable even in the affluent Hamptons, where WVVH-TV will begin running NYC TV shows next month.

But NYC TV has also benefited from shrewd marketing and business strategies, several television executives said. By focusing on its own programs, NYC TV does not have to compete for viewers against more established public television

stations like WNET and NJN.

"It was smart not to be the 'fifth channel,'" said Dalton Delan, executive vice president of WETA in Washington. "You don't want to be the triple-A team. You want to find a new ballpark where you can be No. 1."

As NYC TV's programs have found an audience, the benefits have flowed to the restaurants, shops and attractions they have featured.

For instance, after the Pan Latin Cafe in Battery Park City appeared in "\$9.99," customers came from as far as the Poconos to sample its fresh-baked pan de queso.

"Certainly they spent more than \$9.99," said Sandy Kraehling, the owner and chef.

NYC TV has also helped improve tourism at Snug Harbor, a sprawling cultural center and park on Staten Island, to more than 450,000 visitors a year from 350,000.

"They say all the time, 'We saw this on channel 25,'" said Adele Sammarco, the marketing and public relations director for Snug Harbor. "It's an education. People think that all Staten Island has to offer is the ferry."

Mr. Skyles said that NYC TV is proving that it is possible to have a format where New Yorkers can learn more about their government as well as the place where they live without being bored.

"Clearly by the ratings, people are watching," he said. "It's free advertising for New York City."