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Indie scene can be heard now on WNYE

By DAVID HINCKLEY
DAILY NEWS STAFF WRITER

WNYE (91.5 FM), long one of those shadowy stations floating around the lower left side of the FM dial, wants to become a player starting today.

At 6 a.m., it's breaking out "Radio New York," a format that will feature indie music anchored by six hours of live programming every morning.

There will also be an hour-long nightly world music show at midnight and a two-hour show every Thursday evening, all produced in conjunction with Seattle's hip alt-music mecca KEXP.

Matthew Tollin, the CFO and general manager who has been shepherding the new format, says the station will have a strong New York focus despite the Seattle connection.

"Half of what KEXP plays is already New York music," Tollin says. "Brooklyn is second only to Seattle as the biggest indie music scene in the country."

KEXP's playlist includes bands like Suede, Dinosaur Jr., the Pixies, Arcade Fire, the Helio Sequence, Jamie T, Neon Neon, Bole 2 Harlem and Deerhoof, with world music, Caribbean music and a sprinkling of classics like the New York Dolls or Aretha Franklin.

It also features personalities who talk about the bands, the lineups at local venues and other music matters.

"This is something New York radio needs," says Tollin. "Local clubs and artists are excited about our arrival, and we're already working on affiliations. We'll be doing a lot of live music."

One big challenge, he acknowledges, will be giving WNYE an identity, since for a number of years it has carried a disparate mix of public radio programs and foreign language programs with a scattering of local shows like Vinny Aceto's weekly scholastic sports hour.

Tollin says the station will drop some NPR and BBC programming and honor existing contracts with ethnic programs. He leaves open the possibility more Radio New York-style programming could be phased in as they expire.

Some of the future also hinges on funding, which at WNYE has always been and remains modest.

The nonprofit station was originally licensed to the Board of Education, which never quite figured out what to do with it and often seemed to operate it on a shoestring.

Independent public radio station WNYC, which has over the years developed a large and generous private donor base, quietly tried in recent years to acquire WNYE to expand its own programming. But in the end, says Tollin, Mayor Bloomberg and the city "decided WNYE was an asset worth keeping - provided we could make it meaningful."

Still, Tollin cautions, "We don't have a ton of money for original programming."

So discussions began on the KEXP deal, which is designed to provide maximum program quality for the money.

The 6-9 a.m. show, produced by KEXP, will be hosted at first by KEXP program director Kevin Cole, with room for local cut-ins. The 9 a.m.-noon show will be a simulcast of KEXP morning host John Richards, who says he will begin spending some of his time in New York.

"What's really exciting," says Tollin, "is that in terms of music, we're going into the streets and the clubs and building this station from the bottom up. That's something radio hasn't done in a long time."

Interestingly, WFUV (90.7 FM) is launching a show this month called "This Is Only a Test," which will focus on local indie bands. It can be heard tonight at 10 and then moves permanently to Friday nights at 10.

Tollin thinks radio listeners are ready for something different. "Finally," he says, "New York listeners can hear New York's most innovative bands on New York radio."