



A much broader broadcast for KEXP

By Florangela Davila

Seattle Times staff reporter

Long before the masses discovered catchy Afrobeat preppies Vampire Weekend, public radio station KEXP-FM played their music. So what if the band didn't yet have a manager, a publicist, a label or an ounce of industry buzz? The DJs at KEXP liked what they heard, and they figured their listeners might too. And they were right.

That's just the latest example of how the Seattle radio station has helped vault bands (Modest Mouse, Death Cab For Cutie, Nirvana) from obscurity to fame. "No commercial station was playing our music," said Ezra Koenig, Vampire Weekend's lead singer. "On the first tour we did, by the time we got to Seattle, it was like everyone was familiar with the song ('A-Punk')."

Now, KEXP's own profile is about to rise. Starting today, KEXP's shows will air on WNYE-FM in New York, exposing the Seattle station to as many as 14 million listeners.

KEXP (90.3) will provide the New York public-radio station 39 hours of weekly programming, including simulcasts of its signature "Morning Show" with John Richards, who will split his time between coasts. The arrangement gives the Seattle station major-market visibility and affirms its muscle in the music industry.

The partnership should also benefit local listeners, giving the station better access to the New York music scene.

Still Seattle-centric

The station's management insists that KEXP, revered as quintessentially Seattle, won't be any less focused on the local music scene.

"We dedicate a slot every hour to a Northwest artist. We have no interest in losing our Seattle-centricity," says executive director Tom Mara.

"When we've gone to other cities — Portland, New York, Austin — we're bringing the music of Seattle to those cities. [Now] we'll be in New York, and we'll be at street level at the music scene there, and that's part of our obligation, too — to bring music into people's lives."

Building KEXP

The cultural force that is KEXP started in 1972 as tiny, scrappy KCMU. It had an all-volunteer staff and an album-rock format. Its station was housed at the University of Washington with a signal strength that didn't stretch much beyond campus.

Now, the 36-year-old station, rechristened as KEXP in 2001 when Paul Allen got involved, has an operating budget of \$3.8 million, some 40 full-time staffers, an army of volunteers and a state-of-the-art facility on Dexter Avenue North.



MIKE SIEGEL

As part of a new partnership, KEXP-FM DJ John Richards' morning show will be simulcast in New York starting today.

KEXP in New York

A joint programming venture between Seattle's KEXP-FM and New York's WYNE-FM launches today. KEXP-produced shows that will air in New York include:

"The John In the Morning Show" Three hours of John Richards weekday morning show will be simulcast on the New York station. The show's Seattle time slot (6 a.m. to 10 a.m.) won't be affected even when Richards broadcasts from New York.

"Wake Up" Kevin Cole, KEXP afternoon DJ, hosts a weekday drive-time morning show for WNYE. The show will be a combo of live and prerecorded segments.

"Music That Matters" A weekly show on WNYE hosted by various KEXP DJs.

"MoGlo" A daily midnight show on WNYE featuring Seattle and New York turntablists.

A pioneer in Internet radio, the station's listening audience already reaches around the globe (maps with push-pins showing listener requests from all seven continents hang in the studio).

Until today, its radio broadcast reached an audience of some 2 million; now, KEXP programming will go out to some 14 million people in the Tri-State area. The joint venture, expected to cost between \$100,000 and \$200,000, will be funded through underwriting support.

WNYE (91.5 FM), New York City's publicly-owned radio station, catered largely to the city's immigrant enclaves. Recently, however, the station decided to revamp its programming and was looking for something fresh when it came upon KEXP.

"These guys are doing it right," says Matthew Tollin, chief financial officer and general manager of WNYE radio operations. "They have this hunger of experimenting, of redefining things."

Musical matchmaking

Tollin first met Kevin Cole, DJ and senior programming director at KEXP, two years ago at a public-radio conference in Los Angeles. And when Cole started talking about the music in rotation at KEXP, it was obvious how much New York indie rock the station was already playing

The pair started talking, and in October 2006, Cole began hosting a weekly pilot show for the New York Station — "Music That Matters" — sort of an abbreviated version of his current KEXP variety show. It was a success, Tollin says, for an audience that's decidedly finicky.

"When you go to lounges and clubs [in New York], people pride themselves for not being played a top-40 national formula," he says. "They're really hungry for content. So the idea of giving them something new and fresh and different is something they're really into."

Fans and critics

Indeed, KEXP sees itself as the antithesis of commercial-music radio stations. Its DJs have no mandatory playlists; every KEXP show is unmistakably, inarguably, theirs.

But like anything that's popular, the station has its haters. An ongoing and exhaustive online "Stranger" forum, for example, takes issue with its expensive and failed effort to expand into Tacoma and Olympia in 2004, its talent and management salaries and even its musical choices.

Yet just as passionately, fans laud Richards as well as the station for what they've done to elevate the local music scene, not just by playing local musicians but by tirelessly promoting local music events.

Others also praise the station — honored this year with a Plug Independent Music award — for being enormously influential.

"It's almost like KEXP and Pitchfork [an online music magazine] are the two starting points for anyone who is looking for new music," says Brian Beck, a former DJ on Seattle's "The End" and now a rep for Canvasback Music. He lives in New York.

"Anyone who's into indie or new music listens to the station. Part of the job is to look at their playlists every week to see what's new or been added," says Jon Treneff, a buyer for Sonic Boom Records in Seattle.

"They mean everything to our bands," says Megan Jasper, executive vice president at Sub Pop Records. On record-release day, Sub Pop angles for a KEXP in-studio appearance. Such appearances, Jasper says, directly affect sales.

"We're a touring band, and when we travel all over, people in Vienna, in Zagreb come to our shows and say, 'I heard you on KEXP! I listen to it on my computer,'" says John Roderick, of the Seattle-based indie band The Long Winters. "They [Richards and DJ Cheryl Waters] are famously, deeply connected to the music scene. They hear about bands because everybody talks to them, and they make it a point to listen to stuff that isn't yet released."

Hunting for gems

A little before 6 a.m. on a recent Thursday morning in KEXP's Dexter Avenue studios, DJ Richards culls music from the station's massive library. He pulls from a stack of music that's already been designated as "new," or from files discovered on MySpace and off blogs, and some that people gave to him.

Some 1,000 or so CDs arrive at the station every week, he estimates. And someone reviews every single one. It's how you make discoveries, how you forge relationships with emerging artists and cement credibility with listeners who could so easily tune out.

On this day, Richards is ready to bust out a new song by the local band Fleet Foxes. And another, an artist so new that he still hasn't quite figured out how to pronounce her name: Yila.

Richards plays a set of Cloud Cult, Jeff Buckley and Fleet Foxes. A listener e-mails in: "There's an artistry in what you do."