

Air raid

A new kid comes to town as Seattle's indie-loving KEXP moves onto city-controlled airwaves.

By Colin St. John

Certainly, the five boroughs support an ever-burgeoning (and hard-to-pin-down) independent music scene with one borough—guess which one!—the present international hub of hipster activity. With that in mind, city-owned public radio station WNYE 91.5 (a.k.a. Radio New York) is dumping its regular, talk-heavy lineup and partnering with Seattle-based station KEXP to present an indie music-oriented lineup.

Based at the University of Washington since 1972, KEXP has long been a harbinger of musical trends. The station regularly plays unsigned—and unheard-of—artists: Kevin Cole, senior director of programming and host of the weekday afternoon show, observed in a recent conversation that the DJs have been playing Vampire Weekend's demo for over a year. This commitment to breaking bands and discovering new music, as well as KEXP's emphasis on Internet broadcasting (they were the first station in the country to offer uncompressed audio, a real-time playlist and full-song podcasting), is what led Mathew Tollin, the general manager of radio operations for the NYC Media Group, to reach out to Cole more than two years ago at a public-radio conference. Recalls Cole, "At the time I met Mathew, they were focusing on Channel 25 [the city's public-affairs TV station], but were thinking of the radio program. They knew who we were. We have a certain profile within the noncommercial, NPR radio world as being a really adventurous station from a programming perspective, as well as being very forward-thinking on the technology side of things."



SEATTLE SLEW John Richards of KEXP brings an avalanche of new music to the New York radio market.

The WNYE facelift (or perhaps more accurately, total body surgery) discussed at that conference is almost complete; the new model, dubbed "Radio Liberation," rolls out Monday 24 at 6am. (If you're really excited about the upcoming programs, you can check out the countdown clock at kexp.org/newyork/default.aspx.) The new WNYE schedule will feature 39 hours a week of KEXP-curated programming. Monday through Friday from 6am until 9am, Cole will host an all-new, WNYE-exclusive morning show Wake Up. At 9am, WNYE airwaves will simulcast KEXP's John in the Morning, hosted by John Richards. Both programs will showcase idiosyncratic acts and live in-studio sessions (KEXP featured 433 last year) as well as recordings.

Richards, who also serves as the Seattle station's associate director of programming and will split his time between there and New York, says that the shows will appeal to listeners in Gotham and beyond. "Right now our online audience is pretty massive. Even now I have to bring in the listeners that are international, so I think it will be a natural movement."

The partnership will also feature a one-hour global music/electronica show every night of the week. KEXP says that it may frequently feature a new DJ or a rotation of various experimental musical minds. Kevin Cole likens the show to their current program Wo' Pop (not to be confused with the Chinatown restaurant), hosted by Darek Mazzone. Rounding out the lineup will be a two-hour show called MTM: Music That Matters, which has already been airing on WNYE for over a year.

The rebranding of WNYE, unsurprisingly, has caused quite a stir among the noncommercial music radio stations in New York. Chuck Singleton, the program director of WFUV 90.7 (which is affiliated with Fordham University), doesn't see a hole that needs filling. "The first thing that struck me when I heard about this was, Gee, this is redundant. Somebody didn't do their homework. The city already has an established public radio station that's been known for local independent music for decades." Singleton is, of course, referring to his station, which he sees as being in touch with New York needs. WNYE? Not so much. "They're not radio people, they're bureaucrats making decisions." Singleton also finds it curious that the KEXP-WNYE fusion comes on the heels on WFUV's announcement in August of a second radio stream and HD station (supported by a \$500,000 grant from the N.Y. State Music Fund) focused even more intently on independent music. He also adds that Fordham's second station is "something that's going to be made in New York by a staff of music fans that spends more than 30 percent of their time in New York." WNYC 93.9 had no comment on KEXP's cross-continental shift.

In terms of fund-raising dollars, KEXP will not be conducting pledge drives on WNYE; Radio New York is run almost solely through taxpayer dollars. Still, Tom Mara, executive director at KEXP, understands that "there's a natural level of anxiety that happens when a new program comes to town, but our mission is not to steal listeners from other stations." While it may not be their explicit goal, the battle lines are being drawn.

"Radio Liberation" begins broadcasting Mar 24, 2008, at 6am on WNYE-FM 91.5.