



The Indies

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Filling The Void

A New Station Brings Indie Radio Back To New York

New York has always had plenty to offer indie labels and bands. It is one of the biggest touring stops in the country, with venues ranging from the slick and professional Bowery Ballroom to small, off-the-beaten-path spaces like Goodbye Blue Monday. Plenty of labels have offices here, and lord knows you can't swing a cat in some parts of Brooklyn without hitting a guitarist. In fact, New York seems to have everything an indie could want, with one notable and glaring exception: its lack of a top-notch, indie-focused radio station.

KEXP, the groundbreaking Seattle station, is about to change that. On March 24, KEXP and WNYE (Radio New York), the city's public radio station, will launch Radio Liberation. The programming will feature a three-hour drive-time eclectic music show followed by three simulcast hours of "The Morning Show With John Richards," a nightly world music program and a weekly music variety show hosted by KEXP DJ/senior director of programming **Kevin Cole**. Radio Liberation will broadcast 39 hours of music per week, with 24 hours of programming produced in New York.

To be fair, a few smaller stations in the city already play independent artists. New York University's WNYU; free-form WFMU Jersey City, N.J.; and Fordham University's noncommercial triple A WFUV all provide alternatives to corporate stations, but all three are also limited in their signal reach and lack of marketing budgets. Radio Liberation, however, has the benefit of being affiliated with the City of New York, and thus offers a number of unique promotional resources.

"Because we're affiliated with the city, we have access to ads in bus shelters, on the subway and on TaxiTV," Radio New York GM **Matthew Tollin** says. "We even provide the hold music

that residents hear when they call the city. There will be a huge marketing juggernaut."

And indie labels, which traditionally face an uphill battle when it comes to being played on terrestrial airwaves, have a lot to gain. KEXP has broken a number of indie acts through the years, **John Richards** says. "We were the first with **Modest Mouse, the Dandy Warhols, Neko Case**."

"We get hundreds of CDs every day, and we listen to all of them," Richards says. "We're not consumed with slowing down the process by testing everything in focus groups. We're all inspired by [legendary British DJ] **John Peel**."

KEXP executive director **Tom Mara** has a similar philosophy: "Our DJs are really proactive when it comes to selecting music," he says. "We give them the freedom to play what they want."

Morgan Lebus, a rep for indie label Domino Records, says, "No market needed this more than New York City. We have artists that sell 200,000 copies and can't get on the air here in New York. The existing stations had great progressive programming but didn't motivate buyers or have a real effect on sales the way KEXP and other well-known indie stations like KCRW and WOXY do."

While neither of the other two stations is planning on setting up shop in New York, they are both growing and expanding their reach in other ways. WOXY Cincinnati has launched a partnership with London magazine *Artrocker*, and KCRW Los Angeles recently debuted a new customizable online player and continues to sponsor live music events across the country.

Even major labels are talking notice of such stations' growing reach and influence. "I've had more label presidents call me in the past year-and-a-half than I did in the first eight years I did the show," KCRW's "Morning Becomes Eclectic" host **Nic Harcourt** says. "People are starting to see that public radio has taken the lead where commercial radio has just given up."

For KEXP, taking the lead means focusing on local acts in both of its markets. "Our goal is really to tap into and represent the New York music scene, much like we've connected to the Seattle scene," Mara says. "Our DJs in Seattle go out all the time and are constantly looking for promising new acts in clubs. To kick the expansion off, John is planning on spending half his time in New York, and we'll be bringing on other staff as well."



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