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97X took flight from humble start

Radio station unsure how it'll sign off May 13

By Lauren Bishop
The Cincinnati Enquirer

WOXY-FM 97X started as an entrepreneurial undertaking in 1981, when Doug and Linda Balogh bought what was then a struggling Top 40 and classic rock station for \$375,000.

The former Chicago residents bought the station knowing it needed some work, not only in its format but also physically, Doug Balogh said. Then it was located in the basement of a fast-food place called Burger Chef in uptown Oxford, and raw Coke syrup used to drip through the ceiling onto the reception desk.

"It's kind of a metaphor for how we started," Doug Balogh said.

Moving to College Corner Pike in Oxford was priority No. 1 and the first of many milestones in the station's history.

The Baloghs converted the format to modern rock on Labor Day weekend 1983, after area college students in focus groups told them they were tired of hearing the same songs and that they weren't hearing new music.

What 97X gave them when they first went on the air was like nothing radio stations in the area had played before, Balogh says - bands that are now modern-rock mainstays such as U2, R.E.M. and the Beastie Boys.

The first song the station played was U2's "Sunday Bloody Sunday."

News of the station, which reached 60 percent of Cincinnati and 40 percent of Dayton, spread by word of mouth.

In 1988 came the most famous event in 97X's history: Dustin Hoffman repeating 97X's, "Pow, the future of rock and roll!" slogan in the Oscar-winning movie *Rain Man*.

The event gave 97X staff and listeners something to talk about, Balogh says, "But it didn't make selling the alternative music format any easier."

That same year, the station spent about \$80,000 on a taller antenna, a new transmitter and other equipment to expand the station's reach. The reach expanded even farther when the station began streaming its programming onto the Web in 1998.

Since last year, when the Baloghs first signed up to be tracked by Arbitron, 97X has been the most listened-to commercial alternative radio broadcaster on the Internet.

The station has received dozens of other accolades. *Cincinnati CityBeat* repeatedly has named 97X the best radio

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station in the city. In 2002, *Friday Morning Quarterback*, a trade magazine, named it one of the top five radio stations of the 1990s. *Ohio* magazine called it the best FM radio station in the state in 2001. Last year, *Rolling Stone* said it was one of four "Last Great Independent Radio" stations in the U.S., and *Esquire* said it was one of the country's best commercial radio stations.

How the station will say farewell to legions of listeners on the expected sign-off date of May 13 is still a mystery, even to Balogh.

"We're just going to have fun," he said, "and the music's going to be great."

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