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Sunday, April 27, 2003

Old-fashioned radio station plays the future

97X out of Oxford has been playing rock 'n' roll 'you haven't heard' yet for two decades

By Larry Nager
The Cincinnati Enquirer

OXFORD - The Future of Rock 'n' Roll is not comfort food.

"It's our job to play what people want to hear' - that's sort of where the model is right now in radio," 97X owner Doug Balogh says with obvious disgust. "That's the death of new music. You can't ask to hear the things you haven't heard."



Doug Balogh

That's how 97X (WOXY-FM, 97.7) earns its Future of Rock 'n' Roll title. For 20 years, the station's mission has been to play the music you *will* want to hear, but don't know it yet.

That feisty attitude has earned 97X years of accolades. In March, *Rolling Stone* named it one of four "Last Great Independent Radio" stations in the United States.

The Future of Rock 'n' Roll is a dinosaur, one of the few holdouts in a world of commercial radio consolidation dominated by the 1,200-station Clear Channel behemoth, which includes eight stations in Greater Cincinnati.



Linda Balogh

But 97X has beaten the odds by playing the newest rock and adhering to the oldest business values - customer service, community responsibility and, rarest of all in modern radio, a fanatical love of music.

"Our listeners come first in everything," says station Web master Bryan Miller, 28. "I answer all the general e-mail that comes to the Web site. Everyone gets a response within 24 hours."

"WOW... a reply e-mail? This was certainly a gift in my inbox. Thanks for caring. Too bad I can't listen in the car."

- 97X listener e-mail from Pam in Chicago

The philosophy behind this mom-and-pop anachronism comes straight from station owners Linda and Doug

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Balogh. In 1981, they were tired of Chicago (she worked in advertising; he was in TV) and decided to buy a small radio station. The couple paid \$375,000 for WOXY, a typical small-town Midwestern outlet playing classic rock and covering local sports.

Timing is everything. A new-music explosion was rocking the industry. MTV was launched in 1981, introducing new sounds from the futuristic funk of Prince to the quirky pop of Cyndi Lauper and new rock bands like U2 and R.E.M.

When the couple held informal focus groups on the station's direction, their young subjects kept saying the same things, Doug says. "They'd come back, 'I'm tired of hearing the same music over and over again on the radio,' and 'We're not hearing any of that new music on the radio.'"

★★★

"I am listening to 'Eyes of a Stranger' (by Payola) right now, one of my favorite songs. You guys play the best music."

- Patrick, Lansing, Mich.

Despite a signal that can barely reach Cincinnati and Dayton, WOXY had a potential audience of more than a million. Instead of keeping to the safer, small-town radio model, they went after bigger game, hoping to "somehow tap into in a meaningful way to the bigger area."



Steve Baker

Offering a product unavailable either in Cincinnati or Dayton, WOXY launched its new format on Labor Day Weekend 1983, becoming one of only six modern-rock stations in the country.

"We were the first station in the area to play Madonna, Prince, U2," says station manager and 6-10 a.m. "morning man" Steve Baker.

Listenership began growing by word-of-mouth. The real boost came in 1988, when Dustin Hoffman's Oscar-winning *Rain Man* character turned "97X. Bam! The Future of Rock 'n' Roll" into radio's most famous slogan.

"It never helped our cash register," says Doug. "But it's the sort of thing that encourages you when it's sometimes difficult not to do what everybody else is doing."

★★★

"I just discovered your radio station on the Internet. I absolutely love it. Keep up the great work. I sent your Web site to many of my friends. Cincinnati is so lucky to have a radio station like this."

- Christopher, Trinidad, Colo.



It became a little easier in the early '90s, when Nirvana ushered in the golden age of "alternative rock" and it became the decade's fastest-growing format.

Within a few years, though, it was just another corporate format. To 97X program director Mike Taylor, today's "alternative" radio is just "top 40 for males 12-24. It's Eminem, Limp Bizkit, Linkin Park, Kid Rock. We don't play any of 'em."

The station's target audience is older than the usual rock demographic. "We're really not a factor with teens until their musical tastes sort of sharpen up. Our target demographic is 20- to 45-year-olds," Doug says.

The teen audience can be pretty fickle, adds Taylor with a laugh. "Generation ADD, I call 'em."



"Hey, just wanted to drop you guys a line and let you know that you rule. I listen to you every day on Netscape radio and I'm very impressed. Keep the tunes blazin'."

- David, Chattanooga, Tenn.

At a recent music meeting, the discussion was about which cut from the White Stripes' *Elephant* CD should be the next in heavy rotation. They pick "Ball and Biscuit," an eight-minute epic whose length would be death at almost any other commercial station.

New songs by Pete Yorn, the Notwist, the Raveonettes and other new artists also received spins by the committee of Taylor, 39; assistant program director Matt Sledge, 30; music director Matt Shiv, 27; intern Donna Zimmerman, 21; and intern/part-time DJ Rob Mason, 22.

"We're like friends, sitting around listening to music together," says Taylor. That sense of fun and openness pays off, he adds. "I know we were the first station in the country to playlist the Strokes on an import (before the band's American release). We were the first station in the country to playlist the Hives. We were on the White Stripes extremely early."

"Just have to tell you I love WOXY! You play songs weeks earlier than they make it on the air here, if they play some of the music at all. Keep it up!"

- David, Orlando, Fla.

TOPS, OVER THE YEARS

97X Top 10 of 1984

(the first full year of the station's modern rock format)
Frankie Goes to Hollywood, "Two Tribes"
U2, "(Pride) In the Name of Love"
Prince, "Let's Go Crazy"
Duran Duran, "The Wild Boys"
Frankie Goes to Hollywood, "Relax"
R.E.M., "Wind Out"
Lou Reed, "I Love You Suzanne"
Cyndi Lauper, "Girls Just Wanna Have Fun"
INXS, "I Send a Message"
Duran Duran, "The Union of the Snake"

Top 10 albums of 2002

The White Stripes, *White Blood Cells*
Coldplay, *A Rush of Blood to the Head*
Weezer, *Maladroit*
Jack Johnson, *Brushfire Fairytales*
The Strokes, *Is This It?*
Elvis Costello, *When I Was Cruel*
The Flaming Lips, *Yoshimi Battles the Pink Robots*
Red Hot Chili Peppers, *By the Way*
Moth, *Provisions, Fiction and Gear*
Wilco, *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot*
No. 1s over the years:
1985 - Tears For Fears, "Shout" (last year for singles)
1986 - Violent Femmes, *The Blind Leading the Naked*
1987 - U2, *The Joshua Tree*

The between-song banter also sets 97X apart. In the age of Howard Stern, WOXY jocks talk music, not bodily functions.

"Doug and I knew from Day One that we were going to live here and we were going to come face to face with our neighbors in the Kroger store," says Linda. "Our listeners come here for the music; they don't come here to be shocked. Our jocks are not jerks. They don't do anything remotely racist or sexist. It just wouldn't work here, it wouldn't fit."

Assistant program director Sledge lives and breathes radio, music and sports. He's the station's local-music director, running its annual 97Xposure local band contest and hosting *Local Lixx* on Tuesdays and Thursdays (8:30 p.m.), and the 60-minute *Homebrew* on Sunday nights (10 p.m.).



Matt Sledge

He spends most of his life at the station or at WOXY-related events. "More than anything else, it's for the music," he explains. "This is not a job for me."

Working his way up from intern, Sledge has been at 97X for nine years, a long career in the rock-radio biz. But most staffers have found longtime homes at this brown wooden building on Oxford's outskirts.



Susan Schreiber

Station manager Baker has been at 97X for 20 years; sales manager Susan Schreiber, 11 years; mid-day music jock and host of the station's blues and reggae shows Barb Abney, nine years; promotion manager Phil Kollin, four years, two full-time; music director Shiv and Web master Miller, five years.

Taylor put in eight years during and after college, until he took a job with Toyota. Four years ago, he quit the corporate world. "I got to the point where I just wasn't very happy in what I was doing," he says. "I never want to be one of those people who look back and say, 'You know what? Maybe I should have (done) *that*.' "

For them all - and for the listeners phoning and e-mailing requests, suggestions, criticism and love letters - the Future of Rock 'n' Roll isn't just a spot on the dial.

"A lot of people today have just given up on radio," says Miller. "So when people discover us ... there's something special about a real, legit radio station that's still doing what they love. A lot of people thought it was extinct."

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