



70 YEARS ON THE AIR: KCRW IS NEW AS EVER



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1350 7th Street, Santa Monica, CA | www.santamonicahistory.org



Welcome!

My name is Susan Gabriel Potter, president of the Santa Monica History Museum.

We are thrilled to present the first ever retrospective spotlighting a true community staple: KCRW.

My mother, Louise B. Gabriel, started our museum as a labor of love.

Through our efforts at preservation

and educational programs, her deep commitment to the city of Santa Monica has fueled our organization's community service for over 40 years. As her daughter, it is my honor to follow in my mother's footsteps and to recognize the boundless contribution of KCRW to our wonderful city.

KCRW's amazing staff and volunteers devote themselves to bringing the very best programming to its listeners in Santa Monica and around the world through online broadcasting. The exhibit you are about to view not only commemorates 70 years of KCRW's history on air, it also chronicles its 70 years of dedication to the city of Santa Monica.

By visiting us today you are supporting our efforts to preserve this great city's history.

Enjoy your visit!

Susan Gabriel Potter, President



EARLY RADIO BROADCASTING

The tragedy of the *Titanic* in 1912 underscored the importance of radio as a vital communications medium. A functional radio aboard the nearby *Californian* might have spared many lives. Congress took notice, passing the Radio Act of 1912, mandating federal licensing for radio operators.

Early radio relayed signals as dots and dashes. The invention of the vacuum tube in 1904 and subsequent developments resulted in receivers and transmitters capable of accurately reproducing the human voice.

Post-World-War-I prosperity brought radio out of the hobbyists' workroom into the living rooms of Americans. In Los Angeles, KNX became the first local commercial broadcast station in 1920. National commercial networks rose with the founding of NBC and of CBS in the late-1920s.

FM RADIO

Frequency Modulation (FM) was first patented in 1933 to overcome static interference in AM radio. FM broadcasting debuted in 1936, and the FCC began licensing stations the following year.

Traditional radios were not capable of receiving FM signals, so manufacturers began selling FM radios and converter kits. In 1945, the FCC reassigned the spectrum for FM broadcasting to between 88 MHz and 108 MHz (the frequencies familiar to us today).

COLLEGE RADIO WORKSHOP

The mid-1940s saw an upswing in FM license requests from educational institutions. Santa Monica College (then SMCC) became Southern California's first public radio station when it acquired the 89.9 frequency in 1946. The following year, ownership passed to Santa Monica Unified School District, which held the license until the 1970s.

The station's founding is credited to Gene Owen of the Theater Arts Department, who formally proposed the idea to Santa Monica's Board of Education. Owen saw it as an opportunity for drama students to gain on-air experience and a tool for returning World War II soldiers seeking vocational training.

Though the college newspaper referred to FM as "a comparative fad," students and faculty enthusiastically undertook development of the station. Under the direction of Hillis Brown, students from the technical school built and wired the facility to broadcast from the auditorium.

In 1947, the *Evening Outlook* proclaimed: "Call letters for the new station are KCRW. Operation is on a frequency of 89.9 megacycles." KCRW stood for "College Radio Workshop." Upon completion of the station, the earliest broadcasts occurred in late 1947, and a 1948 dedicatory event celebrated the station's permanent FCC license.



ROCK & ROLL OUT

Programming included college sporting events, student-produced dramas, educational programs, faculty-hosted shows, and musical content. Music selections were limited, however. As Program Director Myles Weiner stated in 1965, "The station has nothing to do with current teen hits. This type of music is considered unfit." By 1967, exceptions were made for "quality pop, folk, and rock."

In the 1950s, DJs referred to playing records as "spinning platters," and announcers signed off saying, "This is KCRW presenting another outstanding student program direct from Santa Monica City College." Students from SaMoHi, the junior high, and UCLA also produced broadcasts for the station's two-to-five-day-per-week schedule.

In 1952, the station relocated to the Science Building basement due to construction of the new main campus. In 1960, the station expanded, installing a new tape recorder, two turntables, and a dual-channel mixer.

DJ JAMES DEAN

In 1950, KCRW's Friday afternoon announcer was a young student named Jim. Five years later, James Dean became an icon—starring in *East of Eden*, *Rebel Without a Cause*, and *Giant*. Though officially enrolled in the pre-law program, Dean was on the basketball team and active in the drama department while at SMC.

KCRW JOINS NPR

In 1970, SMCC left the Santa Monica school district and became Santa Monica College. KCRW relocated to John Adams Junior High School, where listeners could occasionally hear children playing in the background.

In 1972, KCRW became an NPR affiliate, committing to 24-hour schedule in 1974. The transfer of station ownership from the school district to SMC in 1976 saw a modest budget increase and a "radiothon" to raise money for equipment.

A major milestone occurred in 1977, when Ruth Seymour became General Manager—a position she would hold until 2010. Seymour's vision for the station included expanded programming to target a wider range of audiences, such as establishing the critically acclaimed *Morning Becomes Eclectic* her first year. The title comes from the 1931 play, *Mourning Becomes Electra*, by Eugene O'Neill. Though the passage of Proposition 13 in 1978 significantly reduced public funding for the station, it freed Seymour up to implement innovative ideas.

NATIONAL PUBLIC RADIO

NPR was formed as a last-minute add-on to the bill that formed public television in the late-1960s. NPR's first broadcast was in 1971, with a relaxed and conversational approach. Announcers were encouraged to



talk to listeners as if they were friends and celebrate differences rather than deride them. NPR's early mission statement stated the organization would "celebrate the human experience as infinitely varied [and] encourage a sense of active participation."

IT ALL COMES TOGETHER

In the 1980s, synchronicity between KCRW's news programming and a string of significant national events helped build a loyal listenership. Expanded and diverse music programs helmed by knowledgeable DJs attracted a wider audience. As *MBE*'s host through the 1980s, Tom Schnabel was credited with popularizing World Music.

Seymour's knack for hiring top talent led to notable long-running shows by hosts such as Harry Shearer and Joe Frank. Frank's landmark weekly program *Joe Frank: Work In Progress* served as Ira Glass's inspiration for *This American Life*. In addition, Seymour optimized KCRW's loyal listener community, hosting record-breaking pledge drives.

In the late 1970s and 1980s, Seymour insisted on professionalism in operations, reducing student involvement in programming to avoid jeopardizing NPR funding. SMC's administration was supportive, noting that KCRW was no longer a hyper-local resource. Instead, by 1983, the station served a huge community as NPR's flagship of six Los Angeles affiliates.

TRANSMITTER & SIGNAL STRENGTH

KCRW utilized its 1940s-era transmitter—which had a broadcast radius of about five miles—until 1984. A new remote transmitter was built in the Hollywood Hills, greatly increasing signal strength and audience reach. The remote setup allowed KCRW to move back on campus to its current home in the basement of SMC's Student Activities Building.

A STATION OF TALENT

In the 1990s, KCRW continued to recruit the high level of talent that helped build its reputation for excellence. After a guest appearance covering the Los Angeles riots, veteran newscaster Warren Olney was hired as a full-time host. Michael Silverblatt, host of *Bookworm*, was brought onboard and featured guests such as Norman Mailer, Susan Sontag, and Gore Vidal. Chris Douridas took over hosting *Morning Becomes Eclectic* (*MBE*) in 1990, broadening the music selections and breaking unsigned acts such as Beck.

Nic Harcourt helmed *MBE* for a decade, hosting from 1998-2008. During his tenure, Harcourt was the first to play Norah Jones and Coldplay in the United States, and gave artists such as Adele their first exposure to the L.A. market. He gained a reputation as a tastemaker, cited by *The New York Times* as "the country's most important disc jockey and a



genuine bellwether.” Santa Monica native Jason Bentley took over hosting *MBE* in 2008. Named “America’s most influential radio DJ” by *Billboard* in 2013, Bentley considers himself a custodian of *MBE*, building on the success of past hosts by bringing unknown artists to the forefront.

In late 1980s, KCRW featured two hours per day of dramatic theatre and in the 1990s, KCRW partnered with L.A. Theatre Works to produce audio readings of classic plays. Actors included Ed Asner, Marsha Mason, and Ed Begley Jr.

DEIRDRE O'DONOGHUE

From the 1980s to the mid 1990s, Deirdre O'Donoghue hosted *SNAP* (Saturday Night Avant Pop). Known for her cutting-edge musical sensibility, she was an early champion of artists such as R.E.M. In her 2001 obituary in *L.A. Weekly*, music critic Robert Lloyd wrote, “She made being a disc jockey seem a noble calling, made her listeners feel like family, [and] gave important exposure to countless left-of-center bands, some of which would become very big.” O'Donoghue helped build KCRW's reputation as a musical powerhouse, and was beloved by staffers and listeners alike.

ADVANCEMENTS IN A NEW ERA

As a consistently forward-looking organization, KCRW has been an early adopter of many technologies. The station's website debuted circa 1997, and a few years later the station began

podcasting content. Longtime *MBE* producer Ariana Morgenstern pitched the concept to Seymour as “TiVo for the radio.”

KCRW was one of the first radio stations streaming live content on the web, and by 2002 had perfected its sound quality and was attracting online listeners around the globe. The website now has three live streaming channels as well as more than twenty years of programming archived on its website. In 2015, approximately 2 million hours of content were consumed digitally each month.

The station connects with its audience via a strong social-media presence and has developed successful mobile apps, including one that gives users a virtual reality experience. Unique live events such as live broadcasts, concert series, film screenings, and interviews with leading figures in film, art, politics, literature, and pop culture are held throughout the year.

KCRW is continually evolving and developing new programming. The station produces more than 100 hours of original content each week, with programs on public affairs, politics, music, food, literature, and architecture. Several of its shows, such as *To the Point* with Warren Olney, *The Treatment* with Elvis Mitchell, and *Left, Right & Center*, are broadcast to outlets across the country via PRI syndication. KCRW's combination of music, news, and cultural programming attracts a diverse audience throughout the day. Olney



has said that the station’s music shows bring a younger and broader audience to his current events programs.

VOLUNTEERS

Volunteers are integral to KCRW’s success, and donate approximately \$1 million of in-kind labor to the station annually. Several of the current staff members, including President Jennifer Ferro, started as volunteers. On air talents Garth Trinidad and Jason Bentley were once station volunteers as well. SMC student volunteers are valuable members of the KCRW community, lending support to numerous aspects of the station’s day-to-day activities.

NEW HOME ON THE HORIZON

Currently under construction, KCRW’s new home is the environmentally friendly centerpiece of Santa Monica College’s Academy of Entertainment & Technology Campus, located at Stewart Street and Olympic Boulevard.

The 35,000-square-foot KCRW Media Center will have performance spaces where listeners will be invited to experience live programming. Of the project, KCRW President Jennifer Ferro says, “For the first time in our history we will be able to bring the community into our home and share the incredible performances and discussions that take place on a daily basis.”

KCRW ON THE MOVE

1947 ~ KCRW’s first broadcast from Santa Monica College’s (then SMCC) auditorium

1952 ~ KCRW was relocated to basement rooms in the Science Building when the college’s main campus was built

1970 ~ KCRW and its transmitter moved to John Adams Junior High School, a short distance south of the main campus

1984 ~ With the installation of a remote transmitter and antenna, KCRW moved into the basement of the remodeled Student Activities Building (Cayton Center) at SMC

2018 ~ KCRW Media Center on SMC’s Academy of Entertainment & Technology Campus

KCRW’s MISSION STATEMENT

KCRW creates and curates a unique mix of content centered around music discovery, NPR news, cultural exploration and informed public affairs. KCRW is driven by the spirit of Los Angeles and delivers in innovative ways -- on the radio, digitally and in person -- to diverse, curious communities around the corner and around the world.

THANK YOU TO OUR GENEROUS SPONSORS!

Jean McNeil-Wyner

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