

The Voice of UCSC

Still KZSC After All These Years

by Richard von Busack

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Behind Merrill College in a grove of redwood trees, the voice of UCSC was going through a typical day. The station manager sifted through a stack of public service announcements, including a novel-length message about a warehouse full of merchandise that a student was trying to unload. In the entranceway, a man was arguing with one of the workers about the schism between two anti-nuke groups. In one of KZSC's three studios, Steve Gerow, KZSC's news director, wrestled with some obsolete equipment. In the meantime, Grandmaster Flash and The Furious Five's "The Message" was being channelled through wires, sent up to the top of the transmission tower, and broadcast all over the greater Monterey area.

KZSC has just celebrated its second year as a high power station. I remembered the days when I had risked a broken neck fastening an aerial to the ceiling of my dormitory cubicle, in a vain attempt to pick up the weak 12 watt signal. Interim station manager Vivian Brown laughed. The FM

signals still are capricious, she said. "We broadcast to Watsonville, Salinas, and parts of San Jose, but there are places on campus that can't pick us up."

The technical difficulties of putting out 24 hours a day of unique, non-profit radio are many. "This summer," Brown said, "we had to work around a tape studio breakdown. We couldn't tape anything in the studio or do any tape editing. And most of our equipment is so old, all you have to do is sneeze on it and it'll go down."

During the summer, the station had to rewire their telephone system for on-the-air calls. On at least one talk show, the engineer had to take the callers' questions, transcribe them, and run them in to the studio. Yet KZSC's biggest problem is not obsolete equipment, nor funding problems, but a lack of volunteers for the station. "It's difficult to find people who are willing and able," Steve Gerow said.

KZSC began nearly ten years ago as a pirate dormitory station which broadcasted out of a garbage can on top of Kresge



Vivienne Brown, aka Blue Skies. Part of the KZSC management committee

photo by J. Lockhart

KZSC began as a pirate station broadcasting out of a garbage can on top of a dormitory. The proto-KZSC was a Deadhead's dream, playing tape after bootleg tape of the Grateful Dead.

College. The proto-station was a Deadhead's dream, playing tape after bootleg tape of Grateful Dead concerts. "Once," Brown reminisced, "some students came in and took over the station so that they could play third world music for a change—by which they meant Stevie Wonder." The FCC tried to close the station down, and so the young programmers went through the necessary licensing to get it back on the air. They moved into a building behind Applied Sciences ("like a closet," Brown said) where they remained until their move into the new location, a small building with three studios, 65 staffers (mostly volunteers) and 15,000 records.

Through the years, KZSC has undergone a few major political changes as well. The old position of station manager, whose personal prejudices and tastes too often decided the musical programming, has been eliminated. KZSC is now run by a programming board of five, elected by the staff. Every semester a new programming board is chosen.

"It's a lot more fun to work for now," Brown said. "People feel more involved."

Volunteers for KZSC are required to attend a semester's worth of orientation, after which they make a demonstration tape for the programming board. When they are accepted (as they are about two out of three times) they are scheduled for one of nearly thirty slots during the week. The programming reflects the diversity of KZSC's audience: ethnic music, jazz, classical, new wave, and even a little mainstream rock for the freshpeople.

About a quarter of the day's broadcast is news coverage; state, local and otherwise. KZSC simulcasts Pacifica news from KPFA in Berkeley. In addition to this, they have news specials and live remote coverage from the county clerk's office on election night.

The election coverage involves a month of planning," Gerow said. "We make arrangements with the telephone company, and then we test out the wiring five or six times to make sure it works."

The constant checking of equipment is one of the most important tasks in radio. Vivian Brown remembered the worst moment of equipment failure she ever experienced. "I'll never forget the time we interviewed the ambassador from Zimbabwe. Just as the guy started talking, the mike went dead. We had to borrow a wire from KUSP."

KZSC's fall programming schedule begins Sunday. Brown will have a new wave show under the nom de radio Sue Nami. But KZSC also has several long term plans. These include more community affairs programming ("Bring us your issues, your interviews, your demos, and your concerts," Brown said) and outreach to senior citizens and minorities. KZSC would also like to purchase a mobile unit for covering concerts and demonstrations. The station is relatively financially healthy, but would like to hire a professional grant writer. The station has not been too adversely affected by cuts in the University budget, although they didn't get all the money they requested this year. Their subscription drive this summer helped the situation. "Of course," Brown said, "about 60 percent of the money promised hasn't arrived yet. But we're optimistic."

KZSC's track record for placing alumnus is as impressive as the quality of their programming. KZSC disc jockeys and news writers have been placed at stations as diverse as KZAP, KLRB, KFAT, KPFA. "People aren't just using KZSC as a ladder. Programmers who have graduated still volunteer here. It's nice to work some place where you can do what you want to," Brown added.