

Radio Revolution

Riding the Santa Cruz air waves

By Brad Kava

WW

Welcome to Santa Cruz, the world's largest radio cul-de-sac, a petri dish of low-rent characters and formerly lower rents, that turned the airwaves on their ears.

Because radio waves stop at the Santa Cruz borders, backed up like traffic on Highway 17, our city of 59,000 has radio stations like no other in the country, with more style, intelligence and variety than you can find in some whole states. OK. Many whole states.

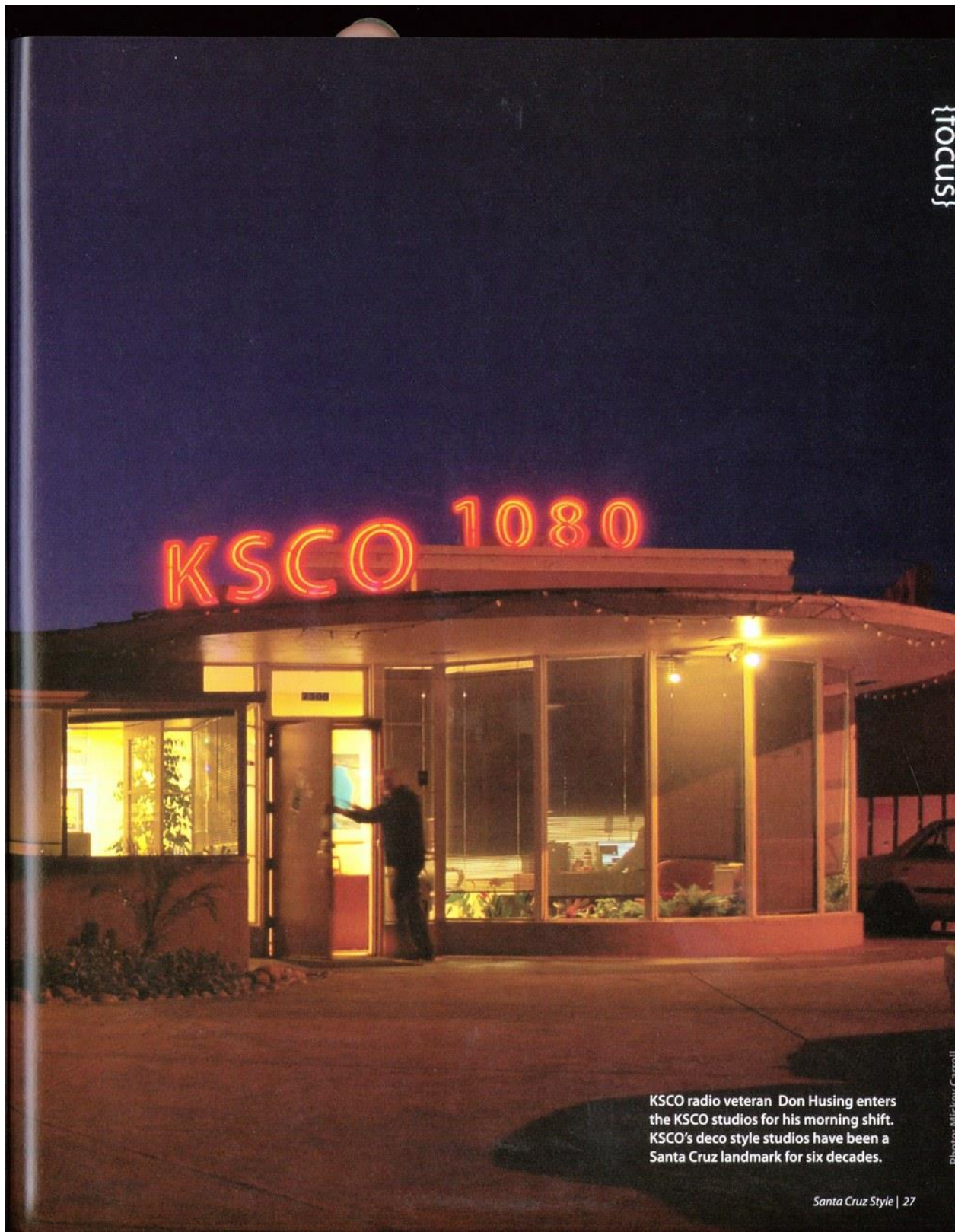
It was here that the term Americana began, for the twangy folk music that got booted off the radio in Austin and Houston and turned up on KPIG, the former KFAT, a beacon of noncommercial-sounding commercial radio.

It's here that we hear one of the last big family-owned talk stations that represents a minority in a bastion of liberality so tightly-knit that Republicans are as rare as landlubbers – that is, the conservative talk station KSCO.

It's here that we have so much desire for National Public Radio that it blasts from two signals, a waste of precious airwaves, according to some, or a sign of higher callings and better intents, to others.

You want Mexican, African or Hawaiian music, psychedelic rock from Istanbul, talk from radical lefties, radical righties or people who believe that the government is vaccinating people to turn them gay so they won't reproduce? We've got all of that here, and more.

Take a similarly-sized area in a red state and you get three kinds of music, country, Rush Limbaugh and country. Yet somehow, we have more quality and variety here than in San Jose, a city about 20 times bigger.



KSCO radio veteran Don Husing enters the KSCO studios for his morning shift. KSCO's deco style studios have been a Santa Cruz landmark for six decades.

Photo: Michael Carroll



Photo: Mickey Carroll

Local singer/songwriter Dayan Kai (L) performs in KPIG's studios during the broadcasting of an edition of *Please Stand By* hosted by John Sandidge.

Cloistered Cruz

The story of Santa Cruz has always been as much about keeping outsiders out, as inviting them in.

Even our radio, which travels on invisible waves that penetrate thick walls and roofs democratically, stops at the border. San Jose and San Francisco radio stations have as much trouble getting over the hill as a VW van with a leaky radiator.

San Jose, which is the nation's 36th biggest radio market, is fully enveloped by radio from San Francisco, the 4th biggest. As a result, big conglomerates have bought up as many of those stations as possible to cut competition and sell more market share to advertisers.

Ideally, Santa Cruz would have been folded in as well, but the mountain range staved off intruders and kept Santa Cruz in the 83rd largest market, connected to Monterey and Salinas.

While people here lost links to the greater Bay Area, it allowed for a more home-grown and lower-budget medium to take hold. As a result, Cruzans get the kind of local, non-formatted radio that folks in bigger cities can only dream of.



Austin artist Michael Priest designed the original KFAT flyer for consultant Larry Yurdin. Surprisingly, KFAT's cowboy resembled Yurdin himself.

We have the opposite of what happened in Minot, N.D., where the radio company Clear Channel bought the six biggest stations in the market and to build the bottom line, cut all overnight staffs and let computers run the stations. In 2002, when a train crash spread toxic fumes and police tried to call the stations to broadcast alerts, there was no one home. The cloud of anhydrous ammonia killed one person and injured 1,000. So much for public service.

With all the independent stations here, someone is bound to be home.

The sty in the sky

It was the spirit of independence that formed Santa Cruz's most famous station, KPIG, which has a worldwide following and is a model for free ranging formats across the country.

The Pig, as it is lovingly know, at "107 oink 5" on the dial, plays what has been called Americana music – roots rock, country and blues with lots of banjos and pedal steel guitar.

A typical playlist includes Ray Stevens' "I Saw Elvis in a UFO" into Madeleine Peyroux's "La Vie En Rose," followed by Robert Cray's "I'll



Photo: Bill Lovejoy

Michael Zwerling has been a radio devotee from the time he attended Santa Cruz High School. Zwerling's family bought KSCO in 1991.

Always Remember You" and Sue Foley's "Little Things."

"We used to call it folk music," says "Sleepy" John Sandidge, who does KPIG's 10 a.m.-noon Sunday morning show *Please Stand By*, featuring live performers.

Sandidge, 73, who moved here from Santa Monica in 1977, had been a liaison for Jane Fonda's benefit concerts, quickly became instrumental in Santa Cruz's music scene. He heard what was then KFAT, out of Gilroy, and fell in love with radio.

That love affair has taken him to seven local stations, where he has done both music and talk shows. The septuagenarian, who defies his age and still surfs and promotes concerts, says his radio life was only possible in Santa Cruz.

"We have one of the most lively radio markets in the country," he says. "There is a lot of diversity in this market.

What's his vision of the future of Santa Cruz radio?

"Because of all the different outlets, Internet and satellite radio, I think community radio will become the most important thing," says Sandidge. "There will have to be community involvement. If you just want music, you can get that on the Internet. If you want

to know about your community, that's what local stations can still deliver."

Sleepy John is one of many local radio personalities whose passions were first stirred by KFAT, the free-wheeling country-rock-Americana station that was on the air from 1975-1983.

Although it was based in Gilroy, most people think of it as a Santa Cruz phenomenon.

"The people who owned KFAT were of a sixties sensibility and the people they hired were of that sensibility, and its operation reflected that," says Gilbert Klein, a former KFAT DJ who wrote a book on the station called *Fat Chance* (Mainframe Press).

"However, by the time KFAT went on the air in August of 1975, the sixties were largely over, except in rare outposts like those in Humboldt, Marin and Mendocino Counties, where the hippies who left the Bay Area hippie scene relocated, and to a large extent, still live there.

"And Santa Cruz was one of the few remaining outposts of the sixties, and that was why the people of Santa Cruz responded so enthusiastically to KFAT. We were a voice for a people and a consciousness that had moved on to more mundane pursuits, like

jobs, families, careers, saving and investment accounts and responsibility. As I say in the book, responsibility is an admirable trait, but it's just not for everyone."

Station owner Jeremy Lansman had run a freeform station in St. Louis, where part of the station's community service was having a washing machine for people to do laundry. That's where he met Laura Ellen Hopper, and they ended up in a relationship.

Lansman got the format for KFAT from a Texan named Larry Yurdin, who had tried it in Austin and Houston, but was booted out of both.

Somehow, with Hopper's deep passion for the music and the colorful characters Lansman hired as hosts at \$3.25 an hour, including a prostitute and a drug dealer, it worked here, although the music was more about Texas than California.

"Not only were the listeners 'Fat Heads' but the jocks were too," says Klein. "The calls we got from listeners weren't just 'Who did that cut?' They were 'Who played pedal steel? Where was that recorded? Who wrote the original?' Intelligent, informed listeners were calling."



KUSP founder David Freedman, Jeb Henly and Rhonna Wallace on the roof of the station's studio located at the Santa Cruz Yacht Harbor in 1972.

The earthy station from space

Late nights on KSCO-AM (1080) you can hear a nationally syndicated show where George Noury treats UFOs, Bigfoot and Time Travelers as serious news events.

A little earlier, you can hear Texan Alex Jones rant about how the government is out to take away your rights to grow a garden and is trying to emasculate and homosexualize men by giving them vaccines.

In midmornings, Rush Limbaugh holds court with fantasies no less insane, about how "Femi-Nazis" are emasculating men and gays are out to crush the church while President Obama is working on becoming a dictator.

Somewhere in between these big-ticket syndicated hosts, Station owner Kay Zwerling and her son Michael also produce the kinds of local shows that make this feel like a community.

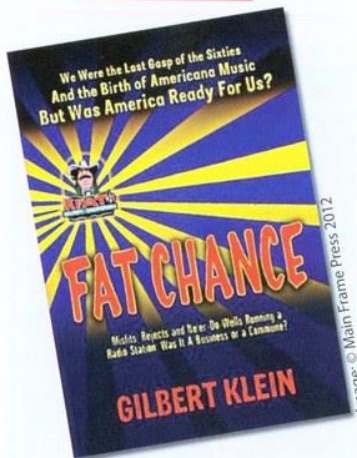
From 6-9 a.m., Rosemary Chalmers has held court for two decades on Good Morning Monterey Bay, a smart variety show that always brings the community to life, whether she's giving away the pet of the week or having high school choirs perform live. It's almost enough to balance the other wackiness.

There are other local hosts including Charley Freedman, maybe the only media figure in Santa Cruz to argue that fracking is a good idea; Ethan Bearman, a political moderate whose show is being syndicated; and Rebecca Costa, best-selling author of a serious book about why communities fail called *The Watchman's Rattle*.

They also have Mark Silverman, the former producer of KGO's Ronn Owens show

and for a time; Bill Wattenberg, from KGO was a semi-regular but now is heard nationally syndicated on Sundays. (In the interest of full disclosure, I did a show there for three years.)

Sometimes it seems like Michael Zwerling, 61, runs the station like he's rolling



Former KFAT DJ Gilbert Klein's book on KFAT radio, *Fat Chance*.

dice. One minute he alerts the press that the station is up for sale; the next, he's trying to hire the staff of San Francisco's KGO after they were fired.

A radio fanatic from the time he was at Santa Cruz High School, Zwerling's family bought the station in 1991. It was founded in

1947 as a soft music station and its art deco style building and three towers on Portola Drive are enough to make any radio lover drool. This is what a local station should look like, right down to the bomb shelter in the basement, now used to produce shows for veterinarian turned vitamin seller Joel Wallach, whose show is nationally syndicated.

For three years before the Zwerlings bought it, the station was called KLRS and was the first in the country to play New Age and World music.

The Zwerlings made it the area's only fulltime talk station, often running it on a shoestring.

Behind the scenes, Michael Zwerling acknowledges that without his hyping of multi-level marketed health aids by a veterinarian and a former dentist, the station wouldn't stay afloat.

Rather than pay most of his hosts, he gives them minutes of ad time to sell. There's no way to tell how many listeners the station has because Zwerling won't pay for Arbitron ratings, but its signal stretches south to King City and can be heard as far north as Sunnyvale and even towards Sacramento on a good day.

For a time, Zwerling had conservative hosts on KSCO and put the liberals of Air America on his other station, KOMY. He dropped that format because he couldn't sell ads there, he said.

To his credit, Zwerling has built the local answer to the old TV show WKRP in Cincinnati. Anything goes and he gives his hosts free rein to say what they want.

And when disasters such as the fires of 2009 and the Tsunami of 2010 struck, the station was a beacon of local news and information. People depended on it for what radio does best: tell people what's happening in the community.

"I don't believe that people realize how unique KSCO is not just in this town, but in the national scene," says Program Director Rosemary Chalmers. "Whether it's science, technology, antiques, animals, politics of all kinds, there's no one else offering as many hours as we do with such a diverse group of programs."

Michael Zwerling got bit by the radio bug when he was 14 and got to do a show on KSCO for station founder and manager Vernon Berlin. He did a half hour a week Wednesday evenings, called Santa Cruz High on the Air, about schools.

He was fired for making a raspberry noise on the air. Before that he had tried to talk Berlin into competing with KGO and doing talk, instead of the soft music for retirees he'd been playing for 20 years. It didn't work, but finally, Zwerling, who was then in real

Photo: © Don Mussell

Image: © Main Frame Press 2012

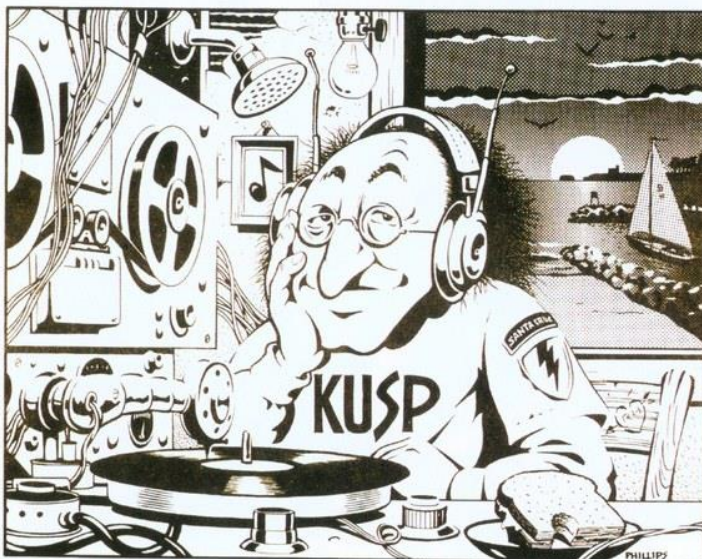


Illustration: © Jim Phillips 2012

Local artist Jim Phillips was a dedicated KUSP listener. Phillips designed many of the station's first logos and concert posters, including this rendition of a KUSP disk jockey.

estate, got to buy the station, do the format he wanted, and have a bit of revenge for being fired.

He says that his network marketing has helped keep the station live and local, while others, even his role model, KGO, are going with more syndicated content or struggling financially.



Photo: Dan Coyro

Station manger Valerie Ross, aka Val-Pal, broadcasts from KZSC's state-of-the-art studios.

He said he had his revelation in 1996 after Joel Wallach, who had been buying time on the station for two years at 7 a.m. Saturday and Sunday mornings, had built a huge audience and wanted more time.

Zwerling said he was skeptical of network marketing, but found that the products worked.

"You can sell someone snake oil once," he said. "But if they come back, you must be doing something right."

Do iPod-loving college students still care about radio?

When UCSC senior Lois Rosson, 21, walked into the redwood building on a hillside that houses KZSC, her eyes grew wide with what was around her.

"All that vinyl!" she recalls. "As soon as I stepped in and saw that vinyl collection I was excited."

That was her freshman year. The excitement stayed with her as she worked her way up to program director, managing more than 100 volunteers. Unlike some college stations, whose breadth stays on campus, KZSC has a large following all over the county and its hosts range from freshmen of 18 to Sleepy John and Bruce Bratton, literal seniors over 70.

"We have a huge following in Soledad prison," Rosson says. "They call all the time."

She says her fellow students aren't all enamored of the digital age.

"Vinyl is making a huge comeback now. I feel like it is for a pretty legitimate reason. In the digital age vinyl is a big, tangible object. It's got art, lyrics and you can hold it in your hand. I think that resonates with a lot of people. It's like a footprint. The sound is really rich and we have a lot of listeners who like hearing it better."

Raised in Hemet by a father who liked country and western ballads and a mother who liked the Bee Gees, Rosson is the perfect programmer for a station that is nothing if not eclectic.



Photo: Santa Cruz Archives

Laura Ellen changing radio history at KFAT.

Rider in the sky Laura Ellen Hopper

It's impossible to talk about Santa Cruz radio without spotlighting Laura Ellen Hopper, the KFAT and KPIG founder who pioneered web radio and invented the alt-country/rock hybrid that became known as Americana. Her death in May 2007, just days after being diagnosed with cancer, came as a shock not just to locals but to the worldwide KPIG community.

"They received condolences from all of the continents, including Antarctica," a listener from Eastern Washington wrote in a comment on one of her many obituaries. "That's how wide her influence is."

Hopper had an uncanny ear for the eclectic mix of country, bluegrass, newgrass, Hawaiian, and zydeco music that made KPIG unique.

"Where else can you hear Mimi & Richard Farina, Son Volt, and Israel Kamakawiwo'ole within a few minutes of each other?" Silicon Valley tech blogger Rob Hof wrote in Business Week.

"It's folk music with bacon grease on its fingers. It's gospel with electric guitars," Soquel blogger Tana Butler wrote. "And it all came from a very small group of people committed to doing things their own way, and insisting that this was an art form, and a way of life. It was a huge family of great people. At the center was Laura Ellen."

Hopper's gentle nature belied her strength and unwavering commitment to her vision for the station.

"She was small in stature but big in direction and big in focus," KPIG marketing manager Ed Monroe told the San Francisco Chronicle. "She wouldn't back down from anyone."

Hopper truly was the glue that held the station together.

"Laura Ellen was the heart, soul and glue of KPIG," John Sandidge, KPIG on-air personality told the San Jose Mercury-News after Hopper died. "Losing her is like losing an old-growth redwood tree." — Liz Barrett



Photo: Dan Coyro

Lois Rosson, KZSC's program director, searches through the stacks of vinyl in the station's library.

One of her favorite shows is Galactose Intolerance, 8:30-10:30 p.m. Fridays, which focuses on Santa Cruz music. She's also proud of the 12-4 p.m. block of jazz programs on Tuesdays and Garden Variety 4-6 p.m. Tuesdays, which features indy pop.

"Radio is something that can never really be outdated," Rosson, a history and art major, says. "Part of this is the idea of a community. Radio keeps you company in the way that a playlist on shuffle can't. It's like there's another presence with you, not just an iPod."

She loves finding gems in the vinyl collection like the songs of women coal miners from the 1950s and the psychedelic rock of Istanbul, and she takes the public's interest seriously and doesn't understand how the airwaves have been leased to companies that don't.

"I don't think the airwaves should be sequestered for Top 40 or the latest thing. They should be reserved for the public's interest. Spaces for that are shrinking. One of our main goals is to serve the community and be a space for that to happen," Rosson concludes.

On the KUSP of the next thing

In his nine years with Santa Cruz public radio station, KUSP-FM (88.9) General Manager Terry Green has also tried to serve the public interest. He has to. The public, not advertisers, pays his bills.

As a public station, 40-year-old KUSP depends on donations to keep its 115 volunteers and five fulltime staff members going. About 60 percent of its programming

is syndicated and the rest is local.

Its most popular shows are National Public Radio's Morning Edition and All Things Considered. Marketplace, Democracy Now and news from the BBC are also attracting listeners. The station sandwiches local news in between those shows and has four locally-produced talk shows and a host of music shows.

The talk shows include one about health called Ask Dr. Dawn, which airs Saturdays at 9 a.m. and the Poetry Show, which airs Sundays at 9 a.m.

Perhaps the biggest news at KUSP is that the station is an early adopter in the idea that radio will soon not be limited to the radio. Its website is loaded with podcasts that allow for listening without a schedule.

The days of just listening in the car are over, says Green, who adds that most listeners hear KUSP at home and now on computers, laptops and mobile devices.

"We believe that more and more people will spend audio time with things other than traditional AM and FM radios. Radio stations that are able to thrive in that environment, that have the drive to be providing a useful service, will continue to thrive," Green says.

While some stations are shrinking their output and talking about "hyper local" community coverage, Green sees a picture bigger than Santa Cruz.

With his transmitter perched on Mount Toro in Salinas, the signal stretches a long way from the funky studio by Twin Lakes Beach to San Benito and Monterey counties. His chal-

lenge is in being local to a lot of people.

"I think the thing I came to realize fairly quickly after coming to Santa Cruz is that for a population area of its size, it's extraordinarily fragmented," he says.

He sees his competition as not just a dozen or so local stations, but more than 70 that his listeners might hear on their commutes.

It makes the share of the pie split between stations increasingly small and "a special challenge to gain real loyalty."

One of his formulas is to hire music programmers with a passion for what they play, be it Latin Jazz, classical, blues or soul.

"They are playing songs they love and they are storytellers, explainers, who are passionate about the music they are playing and they want to share that passion with others," he says.

None of it fits into formatic pigeonholes, he says. "Our balance point changes on what people are interested in. We're proud of that." *

If you tune in

KUSP 88.9 FM

KZSC 88.1 FM

KSCO 1080 AM

KPIG 107.5 FM