

Anthony Lathrop

KDA: Making New Music Work

Jim Ridley

In December of 1982, when Michael Jackson's *Thriller* had just been released, and Toto's "Roseanna" seemed to be the only thing you heard on the radio, and the *Flashdance* soundtrack was only a wicked gleam in Giorgio Moroder's eyes, the first new music station in Nashville trickled onto the airwaves. At a measly 1000 watts, the tiny WKDA-AM signal battled for survival in a world of telephone lines, CB radios and cable-dish anten-

Jim Ridley is an A&S freshman, but it's real hard to tell. He comes from Murfreesboro.

nas, all of which lie in wait for signals 10 times the size of KDA's. To someone living in Murfreesboro a scant 25 miles away, the 6 p.m. show sounded like a broadcast from the moon after winding through this aural obstacle course. But the most alien aspect of listening to KDA was the music and the lyrics. After all, this was Tennessee, and the big rock stations like WKDF and Gallatin's WWKX played a smooth and easily digestible mixture of AOR (album-oriented rock) and selective Top 40, neither of which allows room for bands like New Order, Elvis Costello and the Attractions, the Dream Syndicate or Nashville's own Jason and the Nashville Scorchers. But KDA did, and the weak and hard-to-pick-up signal from Nashville carried an excitement with it -- when you huddled around the radio with your friends trying to pick up KDA, you realized how kids must have felt in the 50s trying to find Wolfman Jack's show from across the U.S. border. And to think that all this excitement about new rock was being caused by an AM station that not several months earlier had been country. Ain't that America for you and me.

In late 1982 the radio consultation firm Burkhart-Abrams held a convention in San Francisco for program directors across the country. The convention would present all of Burkhart-Abrams' latest findings about radio marketing, and it was anticipated keenly in the radio world, for the word through the grapevine said that the firm had an important announcement to make. The message was, quite simply, that new music was cool to play, and it came as a shock to monolithic FM AOR stations that had played "Stairway to Heaven" every ten minutes.

The program director for KDA/KDF, Smokey Rivers, attended the convention, and in the new music message he saw a possible alternative to the country and EZ listening formats that had failed already at KDA. The time seemed perfect: an Australian band called Men at Work had bounded onto the charts with a reggae-tinged single

called "Who Can It Be Now?" that had stayed in the Top 10 for months; new bands like Duran Duran and ABC had created large followings through the magic of MTV; and besides, a number of KDA/KDF employees had expressed enthusiasm in trying a new music format. Smokey, the new-music enthusiasts and the management talked it out, and on December 15, 1982, WKDA-AM began broadcasting new music.

"We couldn't try new music with KDF," said Smokey, a tall, dark-haired man with a mustache and a hell-raiser's grin. "The areas KDF covers are too traditional -- there was too much risk of losing our audience. We didn't really have that problem with KDA."

The switch to new music was not a sudden one. "We had to ask ourselves, 'Is the audience ready to handle something like this?'" Smokey said. "We couldn't just spring all this progressive music on them. There are still a lot of people around here who would be content if all you played all day was Lynyrd Skynyrd and Led Zep. The trick was to play things that they were used to and gradually mix in the new music." This meant that in the first days of new-music KDA, hearing Van Halen followed by the Clash was not uncommon, but Smokey's Top 40 experience paid off handily and the response was very positive. "We couldn't have just gone full tilt boogie into new music," he explains. "We had to say, 'Here's a new format -- we'll turn you on to a new kind of music,' but we also had to keep in things that the audience was familiar with so they wouldn't lose their bearings. It worked."

"Technopop created the format," he added, referring to a form of music characterized by crisp melodies, heavy beat and lots of synthesizers. "There was a real desire to hear bands like Duran Duran, Human League and Cul-

ture Club by women. Not just teenagers, but housewives, too. This may be the first time that women as a group changed rock. Women are always the first to pick up on trends, and these bands achieved a kind of sexual parity in appeal through videos and things. The trend was spotted, and modern music format grew out of that."

Smokey, however, who has a background in Top 40 radio, doesn't have the time to listen to every new record that comes out, and his experience with new music was limited, so the station needed someone to screen the records and pick out the best and most commercially appealing new releases for his approval. Someone familiar with the new music scene. Perhaps it figures that she was a woman: Loren Gerson.

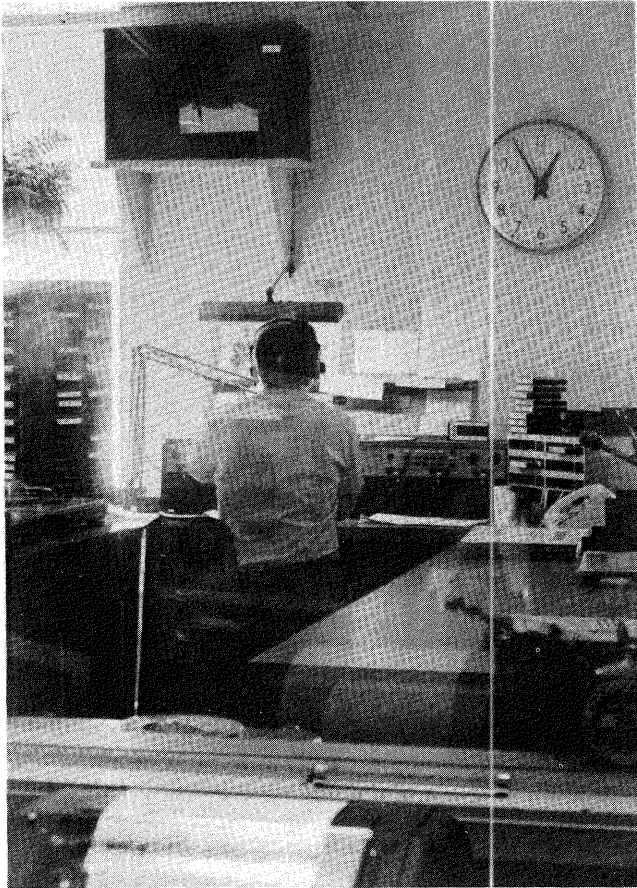
In an article in the *Hustler* on Vanderbilt graduate Loren Gerson, she was quoted as saying, "It was really weird to go to Cantrell's and see Factual or the Stray Cats and then have to come to work and play Led Zeppelin and the Beatles...it just didn't jive after a while." She was referring to her job at KDF as a nighttime jock, when she ran the "Sunday Night Six-Pack" show from 12 midnight to dawn. She was Laura Steele, whose smooth voice guided listeners through the hours of the morning when even television went off, and she did part-time weekend work at KDF for a year and a half.

In 1982, she began working on Andy Anderson's *Nashville Intelligence Report*, a new music fanzine that contains reviews and reports on modern bands. In this outlet she was able to listen and talk about new music as much as she wanted without having anyone complain about "all that punk shit." So when KDA announced its new format,

Loren Gerson, music director



Jim Ridley



Jim Ridley

A KDA disc jockey

she expressed her interest in the position of music director, and in February of 1983, she began work as KDA music director/assistant program director.

"Modern music is where all music ought to go," she said. "It's just a modern way to think of music. Yes, Genesis, Lionel Richie -- ideally you can play all those, and the boundaries break down a little. You have an obligation to turn people on to a happening sound. Of course, you strive for the hits, but our listeners want to hear both hits *and* new sounds. You can't blast your audience every single time -- things would get stagnant -- but it's great every so often. That's what's great about modern music, why it's happening -- it's for all of us. That's the way radio should be -- it's for all of us, you all can play it.

"What I've learned since I've been here is you should open your mind to all music -- soul, good old rock and roll, the Motowny stuff coming out of England now. I'm a hardcore modern music fan, but I like other stuff too."

Loren's job, basically, is to weed out the bad and the truly bizarre from the mammoth stack of albums in the KDA/KDF building at 200 2nd Avenue North. "If it sounds good it goes," she said. "I screen out what I know Smokey wouldn't want to hear. There have been some things that I liked but were just too weird for our audiences. For example, 'Breakdown' by Color Box. But most often we play whatever's happening. The new Echo and the Bunnymen song, 'Never Stop' -- I listened to that once and thought, well, this isn't really that great, but I wasn't sure, so I played it again. I still had some reservations, so I played it for Smokey and he wasn't real impressed with it either. But I decided to listen to it again -- there was just something *there* -- and now I think it's one of

the best singles I've heard recently. Sometimes you just have to listen to things a few times to see if you missed something the first time."

To keep up with the modern music scene, Loren orders albums and reads the trades, particularly the Burkhart-Abrams sheet and the "Friday Morning Quarterback," the *Variety* of radio. "You can't just read the trades, though," she cautioned. "They only appeal to radio, not much outside, and you can't tell your audience from them. It would be foolish just to read them and not listen to anything." It is hard to research a new sound, she says, because "you can't ask anyone if they like it. You have to pretty much go by instinct. Everyone who heard it thought 'Who Can It Be Now?' would be big. You have to keep your eyes and ears open."

"We're still on a small scale," says the chuckling Smokey Rivers, punching a pen on the desk in front of him, "but I guess you could say we're sort of at the nucleus of new music in Nashville." KDA's influence in the Nashville new music area extends from records to bands to other stations, and it has been responsible for some of the most interesting concerts in the area. KDA has sponsored concerts by such prominent new music acts as the Bangles, the Psychedelic Furs, The Call and most recently X. "They were all pretty happy to play Nashville," said Loren. "People like X listen to country music a lot, and the response here has been good. We'll be getting more."

KDA has also been fairly supportive of Nashville bands. KDA recently helped promote the triumphant return of Jason and the Nashville Scorchers to the Exit-In after their signing by EMI Records, and the station has played cuts by the Scorchers, Practical Stylists, Factual and the White Animals. "It really helps these bands to have their tracks played on KDA," said Mark Pearson, the manager of Vanderbilt's 91 Rock. "They need the exposure on a commercial station, and I think it's great that KDA plays them.

"But," he adds, "you have to admit they don't play a heck of a lot of new bands. Their position in Nashville new music may be slightly overestimated."

Kay Clary, an employee of Praxis Records (the Scorchers' old label still run by their manager Jack Emerson), agrees. "I would like to hear KDA play some more music by local and American bands," she said. "I do think that they have given local bands a real boost, though, by playing them on commercial radio. They were one of the first commercial stations to go new music, and it was a good move."

One person who can gauge KDA's influence fairly accurately is Bruce Fitzpatrick, who is in charge of ordering imports at Cat's Records and Tapes on West End. "You can tell if KDA has had some influence," he said, "because it's the only place you can hear that kind of music. It has helped as far as exposing people to the music. People listen to KDA, hear something they like and come and buy the album. KDA's also gotten groups that would not have come otherwise--Violent Femmes, the Bangles, The Call. It definitely has an impact."

"A station like KDA is good for all of us," said Pearson. "If they turn people on to new music, people will listen to 91 Rock too. We've played new music for quite a while, and KDA gives us exposure by acquainting people with the music. They can't quite play the variety of things that

we can, though, because they are a commercial station. They have to cater to advertisers -- someone from Mrs. Winner's isn't going to want to hear his chicken ad played after the Dead Kennedys. They cater to an audience; we cater to *our* audience. But for a commercial station they do very well. Loren got a lot of her training at RVU and took it with her to KDA, and she's doing great."

KDA has helped Nashville bands also by plugging their songs to other stations across the country. "We heard a Practical Stylists cut we thought would work well for this station in L.A., so we sent them a tape," said Smokey. "We have connections that we tell about acts we think they should know if they are coming to town."

Loren says that the atmosphere for new music bands in Nashville is better. "The record companies are accepting more," she says. "It's good to support local bands. It's good for them to be played locally. We promote shows, play songs, do what we can. The new White Animals album, *Ecstasy*, is excellent-- it has a possible chance of going somewhere. It would be nice if locals would hire local bands, but I don't think it will happen soon. People are becoming aware, though, that Nashville bands aren't just country."

"A lot of people think modern music is finished," Loren said. "Our ratings dropped a little this last time, and it would be easy to blame the music, but the fact is that we just haven't promoted ourselves enough. We have lost the edge on playing modern music, though."

An unexpected competitor that KDA has influenced

has been KDF. "Maybe five, six years down the road, KDF will be like KDA," said Smokey. This is how KDA has lost its edge. KDF now plays many of the songs that appear on KDA: Duran Duran, Human League, even Peter Schilling. KDA no longer exclusively plays new music; everyone else is on the bandwagon. "The new music changed every band's sound," Loren commented. "The ultimate example is the new Van Halen album. Look at the use of synthesizers! That's Van Halen saying, 'We understand this trend, we know synthesizers are happening.' The trend is over. In a little while it will be called music -- not modern music, not new music. This will hurt independent labels, small groups and college stations. Even 'Friday Morning Quarterback' has dropped the "new music" section. I don't know what to think about what's going on. You just do what you can to help one trend." Her voice has an edge of weariness.

"The boundaries are opening up," says Smokey, his pen doing a drum roll on the desk. "We can be more flexible in a lot of ways. The molds are not quite as rigid. We like to keep up with what is going on, and we'll be able to get more and more artists on. The barometer is: Do you like it or not?" He smiles.

You can hear it in a Porsche or on the 20-year-old radio in a '64 Dodge Polara. You can hear it in a McDonald's or in a dorm at Vanderbilt, where, as a friend renowned for his possum imitation so eloquently states it, "it beats the hell out of that bogus jazz shit." "Listening to the sad song that the radio plays," asks one of today's most perceptive songwriters, "have we come this fa-fa-fa to find a soul cliché?" Whether the answer is yes or no, new music is available at last in Nashville. □

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