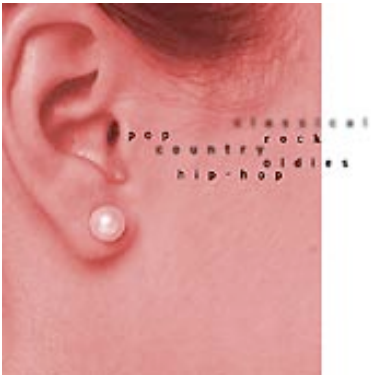


This is a printer-friendly version. The navigation and other unnecessary elements have been removed.



Listeners are left bewildered and angry when their favorite type of music disappears from the airwaves.

[MORE PHOTOS](#)

Monday, September 18, 2006

Fading frequencies

Listeners are left angry and bewildered when their favorite type of music disappears from the airwaves.

By PETER LARSEN
The Orange County Register

Diane Dennis set her car radio to 93.9 FM in the early '90s, and for 15 years and two different cars the button never moved.

So it was more than a small surprise when one morning in August she slipped behind the wheel, turned the key, and found that overnight the country music she loved had vanished.

Instead of KZLA-FM, country singer Faith Hill and morning DJ Peter Tilden, out of her radio blared an unwelcome mix of upbeat pop rock and announcements that Rick Dees, the former king of the airwaves, would soon be hosting the morning show.

"I probably would have stuck with KZLA forever," said Dennis, of Santa Ana. "I guess it's happened in the past to other stations, but it's never happened to me."

Dennis was one of dozens of radio listeners who responded when we ask people to tell us what it is like when their favorite stations change formats and disappear from the radio dial.

"Well, this was really a kick in the chaps!" said Sheri Black of Tustin. "One minute I am listening to the only country station in Orange County and seconds later I have rap crap ringing in my ears.

"What is the owner of the station thinking?"

And it wasn't just the KZLA crew who responded. Like the girl or guy who breaks your heart, many listeners seemed to have never gotten over the stations that went away.

"I really liked the Fabulous 690" – an AM adult standards station – "and I miss the Rat Pack and Mel Torme songs," said Mary Erb of Garden Grove.

"As a teenager during the '80s, and a fan of hard rock, I grew up listening to KMET," said Mike Wheeler of Anaheim, who plastered his school books with blue-and-yellow KMET stickers and stayed up late Fridays for "The Mighty METal Shop.

"Sometime in 1987 or 1988, I believe, I tuned into 94.7 and heard the likes of Kenny G and other soft-jazz musicians playing to the sounds of ocean waves crashing on the shore," he said. "The Wave had taken over."

Still, KZLA – because it was the only country station serving the local market and the change blindsided listeners – was the main station listeners said they missed.

"What happened?" asked Sally Jahke of Fullerton. "I'm driving to work one morning listening to my favorite radio station and by midmorning it's gone!

"No explanation, no warning, no nothing!" she said. "Losing (the DJs) was like mourning the loss of a close relative who dies unexpectedly. Does this radio station care or even comprehend our loss?"

The business side of the dial

While radio listeners might think of the on-air personalities as friends or family – and the music they played, a soundtrack to their lives – from the side of the station owners, it's a business that needs to turn a profit.

And if a format isn't providing enough profit, sooner or later, it goes away.

"KZLA – there's a station that had about a half-million listeners and the company really needed a million listeners to make money," said Jerry Del Colliano, a professor of music industry at the University of Southern California, with extensive experience in radio.

"And when they project the income of that station over the next few years, it goes down every year. So if you owned it, you'd say, 'I can no longer afford to do country.'

"Rick Dees alone should be enough to make that station profitable," Del Colliano said. "Advertisers love him, mothers of my students love him, and it's really going to be a radio station built around one personality."

As much as KZLA listeners feel that they and country music have been singled out right now, it's really an old, old story, said Don Barrett, publisher of LAradio.com, and a longtime observer of the

Los Angeles radio scene.

"Certainly every decade has had some earthquake-like tremors that have disappointed a lot of people when changes are made," Barrett said. "So the recent changes at KZLA are not unusual at all."

What has changed since the mid-'90s – when corporations were allowed to buy more stations in the same market – is what happens after a station switches formats, Barrett said.

"Before consolidation, there were so many different owners that they would grab up a format that wasn't being served and run with it," he said. "The problem today is that they know if they don't pick up country, no one else is either."

That partly explains the question fans of country or adult standards or dance music raise over and over: Why, in a market with more than 10 million listeners, do formats such as contemporary hits multiply when others disappear entirely?

"Does (the owner) understand that every other station is the same?" asks Black, the KZLA listener from Tustin. "Why do we need another of the same?"

Barrett said part of it is the evolution of the airwaves. Where country has no representation on a Los Angeles or Orange County based station now – K-FROG (KFRG-FM/95.1) in San Bernardino is the closest now – 25 years ago, country was everywhere on the air.

"After 'Urban Cowboy,' there was an interesting dynamic here; there were three or four country stations," he said, ticking off call letters such as KHJ, KIEV and KLAC as stations that came out of that trend. "When the population seemed to want to be cowboys, there were a lot more."

And while to unfamiliar ears, the pop formats might seem the same, Barrett sees them as narrower flavors from the same family of sound.

"They color it a different way," he said. "It seems to an outsider they're playing the same music, but they really aren't."

This is what the future sounds like

Diane Dennis, like many KZLA listeners, has gravitated toward K-FROG, though its reception is spotty in some areas and the mix of music and DJs still sounds strange to her ears.

And while KZLA's country music is still being streamed online and broadcast over the station's high-definition channel, more listeners say they are switching to country broadcasts on XM or Sirius satellite radio, compact discs, and searching the dial for something that comes close.

Many listeners compromise, Barrett said. "If they don't have CDs to put in Faith Hill songs, they can get Faith Hill songs on KOST-FM/103.5, if you are willing to put up with Michael Bublé to get some Faith Hill."

That's where R.J. Venable of Santa Ana landed.

"Now we have the car radio tuned to KOST because that's about the only station we can both agree is not completely odious," he said of the search he and his wife did on the dial after KZLA dropped country. "Hell of a thing when you make a choice based on that criterion, isn't it?"

He's thinking of getting satellite radio soon. That's where Guy Ball of Tustin went several years ago – KZLA being just the latest in a string of flopped formats at stations including the rock once played at KEZY and Adult Album Alternative at KSCA.

"I'm a veteran of pain and depression," Ball joked about the favorite stations that have disappeared from his dial over the years. "Satellite radio has been the saving grace for me. I can listen to whatever type of music I want, when I want it."

He likes satellite, too, for its eclectic programming – "I go anywhere from electronic to country to Sinatra to old-time radio" – which seems increasingly hard to find on broadcast radio, he said.

According to Del Colliano, the lack of variety in broadcast radio is what threatens to doom it in the future.

"Radio people have screwed up," he said. "The terrestrial operators could have put variety in their formats a long time ago, but they didn't."

He points to the music habits of the USC students he teaches – they consume a lot of music, but in different ways than previous generations.

They download music online instead of buying albums in stores. They carry portable MP3 players like the ever-present iPod and radio is not as essential as it was to older generations on the go.

"It's the sunset of traditional broadcasting," he said. "And those owners will either learn how to compete in the interactive world or they will fade away."

That day, if it comes, still belongs to the future. For listeners now, the first priority remains finding new stations – K-FROG, come in! – or alternative ways to tune into the music they lost, such as satellite or HD radio.

Or, in decisions that suggest Del Colliano might be onto something with his dire predictions on the future of radio, they're doing what Donna Johnson of Laguna Woods did recently.

"I thought someone had been messing with my radio," she said of the day KZLA's format changed. "How did I replace it?"

"I tried to find something that I liked and finally turned the radio off entirely, and put on a CD."

CONTACT US: 714-796-7787 or plarsen@ocregister.com

