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# 'Everyone's Good Idea'

## WRFL was what Lexington needed

### By Kakie Urch

Back in those days, when I was looking for a classic conservative look, I pulled on the Cuban-heeled magenta suede cowboy boots. And walked down to clubs like Café LMNOP, the Bottom Line, Wrocklage, Great Scott's and later BabylonBabylon to see local bands like I.S., Paul K., Kiya Heartwood, Velvet Elvis, Active Ingredients and the occasional out-of-town act that braved our little college market without a college radio station.

I wrote the column "Radio Free Lexington: What UK Needs" in 1985, not to start a college radio station, but to be able to listen to one.

I was the UK Concert Co-chair and just loved music. Without a student radio station, I was spending most of my money on records and cover charges to see live bands. But because my name was attached to the idea in that column, people all over campus kept coming up to me and asking "When are we going to get a radio station?" I really thought that when the UK administration learned that we were the only school in the SEC except Mississippi State that didn't have a student radio station, they would just build one.

In the end though, it was up to us — the entire Lexington community, the entire readership of Ace [it hit stands in 1989] — the folks who were looking for something different. We looked at the methods available on campus and decided to model ourselves after the most successful independent student media—the *Kentucky Kernel*. So we became a student organization with the Kernel, Student Government Association and Student Activities Board members on the first board. WRFL's founding was a perfect example of collaboration between a number of student groups, UK administration, the community and local musicians. I like to say that WRFL was everyone's good idea.

And 20 years on, it still is. Coming back into town for this weekend's 20th Anniversary Celebration, I tuned the car radio to Lexington airwaves just outside of Waddy-Paytona. And there it was: *Pyromania* by Def Lep. I thought, "I never left." Then I went down to WRFL-FM and there was "The Black Fist," an amazing array of hip-hop that I had never heard, all pushed out into the Bluegrass Saturday night and then explained by a dj who traced the connections between groups, techniques and the songs he'd just played. For free on a Saturday night in a crap rental car, I got an education. And that's part of what WRFL set out to do and still does every day—bring new horizons to new generations in the Bluegrass. On Monday night, I sat at the fundraiser for the new WRFL tower and listened to the amazing Lexington jazz violinist Zach Brock tell the audience that he had

flown in for the Monday night gig (despite being booked at New York's Blue Note all week with Stanley Clarke's band) because WRFL had meant so much to him growing up in Lexington.



First day on the air. Mark Beaty and Kakie Urch

In junior high school, Brock said, he tuned into WRFL, "the ultimate rebel station," and was exposed to all types of music from his home on Easton Road. Then the classically trained Lexingtonian picked up his axe and played violin like Charlie Parker blowing Birdland any old day.

In building the station that got out there to the junior high schoolers like Zach Brock, we were somewhat protected by our youth. We simply didn't understand or accept how impossible this task was. So, we kept moving forward.

The WRFL playlist from an average disc jockey was in fact, the first iteration of the iPod playlist. Play what you like, what goes together in your world, whether it's Patsy Cline into Husker Du into Robert Johnson into Active Ingredients into Calexico into Bill Monroe. As we hit our 20th anniversary, the early WRFL staff has reunited online, more than 100 strong. Amongst that first group of 60 or 90 alone, we have people who have become major players in their fields, both inside and outside the commonwealth. Not only do we have doctors, lawyers, pharmacists and college professors, but also public accounting, Internet, advertising, public relations and publishing executives. There are world-renowned artists, photographers, musicians and filmmakers amongst the group. The guy who used

to write 'zines in Lexington is now a major Hollywood comedy writer. One of our early general managers now runs national tours for the renowned Actors Gang Theatre founded by Tim Robbins, and takes her show featuring the music of Johnny Cash into California's prisons. One of our first music library staff now runs the circulation department for the library at Harvard. Steve Holland, a UK economics professor who did a show on the first staff became an economist with the Federal Reserve Bank. One of our early staffers who was a great punk rock devotee, now with her Master's of Social Work, operates one of the commonwealth's most successful facilities for troubled youth. Wyn Morris, the publishing expert who is opening Morris Books on Southland Drive, is one of our original staff. We have the author of a major book on GIS systems who keeps track of all the real estate and public projects in Contra Costa County, California, and the person who ran the California Digital Newspaper Project at Berkeley. Historian David King's book on Vienna 1814 has just been published. And of course, Ashley Judd, who did a great women's music show as "Holly Austin" on our first staff and still to this day is a strong supporter of women's causes and the Wildcats.

There are at least three people from the first group who have gone on to major radio careers. Paul Miles, who does your news on WLAP and WHAS in Lexington and Louisville everyday, was a key WRFL "Original Gangster," a major player Larry Joe Treadway, who was the incredibly popular talk jock on WLXG, originally hit the radio airwaves with the "Brains on Film" movie show with George Maranville on WRFL. And Jack K. Smith went on to run a group of Hearst Communications radio stations before he switched over to the Internet, which he built, with or without Al Gore's help.

It's an incredibly impressive roster but no, none of us had any idea that things would turn out that way. The biggest concern was the next fundraiser, next bake sale, next step in ordering and building the equipment and of course, the next live show by local and national musicians in Lexington's great clubs. We had fliers to make and put up on telephone poles, classes to go to, airshifts to do. The new Sonic Youth album was coming out.

We knew that we were building something important and tangible. A radio transmitter on the top of the Patterson Office Tower was proof of that. But the specifics of it, with WRFL staffers telling me that they were tuned in to our first broadcast at their high schools in Lexington and Richmond and the great successes of station management that has really kept the station amongst the top in the country in college radio, are really only coming clear to me now as we look at 20 years of history. The current music director of WRFL was born in 1988, the year we went on the air. All of us who were involved are glad to be part of a legacy that keeps reinventing itself every day.

Um, the new Sonic Youth album is coming out. Listen for it on WRFL. We made it for you. ■

# Radio Free Lexington

The guy who brought you the umlaut and held the antenna

By Matt Dacey

**G**rowing up in Albuquerque, heavy metal was ubiquitous, so I probably couldn't have avoided it even if I had wanted to. When I moved to Lexington in 1985, the culture shock was overwhelming

Albuquerque played host to one or two arena shows every month, with bands like Iron Maiden, Judas Priest, and Rush passing through regularly. The first few shows I remember at Rupp after I moved here include Genesis, Bob Seger, and Huey Lewis & the News. Not an umlaut in sight. As far as club shows, I was only 18, looked 15, and didn't know anybody, so that was out of the question.

Radio was the same story, only moreso. In Albuquerque, I could tune in either 94 Rock or Rock 108, and hear bands like Saxon and Accept, along with more prominent acts, every hour of every day. In Lexington, no such luck. There was only one rock station, and when they let their hair down, it was to play somebody like Night Ranger or Honeymoon Suite.

I basically gave up on the radio and started spending a lot of my time and all of my money at Cut Corner records.

I first learned of the movement to start a student-run radio station on campus during the Fall semester of 1986. It sounded cool, but I figured they would just play stuff like R.E.M. and the Beat Farmers all day long. It didn't even occur to me at that point that they might actually play metal. Early in 1987, that changed.

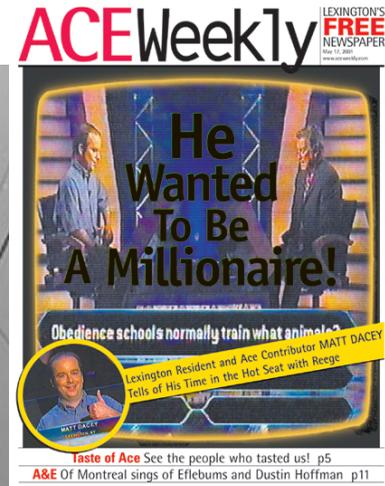
Radio Free Lexington had a booth set up in the free speech area on campus, and Mark Beaty happened to be at the booth when I walked by. I told him about a time when I had called WKQQ and requested Black Sabbath, only to have the

also held the antenna as it was bolted down to the roof of the Patterson Office Tower.

Radio Free Lexington's transition from student organization to radio station was a very exciting time to be both on campus and in Lexington. The local music scene at the time was vibrant, and highly supportive of the WRFL movement. Unfortunately, as the metal guy, I possessed a single-mindedness regarding music, and my own apathy caused me to miss out on a good number of local shows that I had the opportunity to see but chose not to. My tunnel vision eroded, though, as other jocks exposed me to a lot of different artists that I probably never would have heard otherwise. WRFL expanded my horizons tremendously.

But not just mine. WRFL has had a profound and prolonged impact on Lexington.

Twenty years ago, Lexington had one commercial rock radio station, and with all due respect, it sucked. Today, Lexington has two commercial rock radio stations, and they



to a wider audience.

Many campus radio stations throughout the country only broadcast during certain hours of the day, and/or only during the school year. WRFL has broadcast 24/7/365 for over 20 years. Maybe I'm biased, but I think that's amazing.

But then, WRFL has been very fortunate to continue to attract the people it has. Those of us who actually took the station live knew our roles and responsibilities, and did what we were supposed to do. It was a special bunch.

The people who've come along since have been tremendous stewards of what we started. I've had the opportunity to become acquainted with a number of those people over the years, and their collective dedication to WRFL

has never ceased to impress me.

The current staff is an amazing group of people. They knew full well that the 20th anniversary would occur under their watch, and they were bound and determined to mark that anniversary appropriately.

Visiting the station recently, I left with the feeling that I

**I joined about a year before WRFL actually hit the airwaves. While I was the metal guy, I was also the music librarian, and had the task of cataloguing and organizing the music library as we acquired it, sometimes hundreds of records at a time. That was my primary contribution to WRFL prior to going on the air. I also held the antenna as it was bolted down to the roof of the Patterson Office Tower.**

DJ on the air hang up on me. Then I asked him if there was any chance that Radio Free Lexington might play metal, and he told me to come by the office in Miller Hall. I was just hoping they would have a metal show; I had no idea I was gonna be the guy to do it. But I went by Miller Hall, started hanging out, and Radio Free Lexington adopted me as the token metal guy.

I joined about a year before WRFL actually hit the airwaves. While I was the metal guy, I was also the music librarian, and had the task of cataloguing and organizing the music library as we acquired it, sometimes hundreds of records at a time. That was my primary contribution to WRFL prior to going on the air. I

both play a much wider variety of music than the one station did in 1988. And way more metal.

In 1988, Lexington had a very good independent record store in Cut Corner, and a good portion of the staff was involved in WRFL to some degree. Today, Lexington has one of the best independent record stores in the entire country in CD Central, and many of the people who've worked there over the years have also been affiliated with WRFL.

The local music scene is somewhat more fragmented than it was in 1988, but it is still vital. And WRFL still provides a reliable outlet where local musicians can have their music exposed

had lent them my car, and they washed it before they returned it with a full tank of gas.

WRFL still kicks ass. ■

*Matt Dacey is the guest editor of this week's issue, and will be on air on WRFL 10pm to midnight on Thursday (online at wrfl.fm).*

*Matt Dacey hosted Matt's Metal Mortuary from 1988-1992, and is now the Customer Service Manager at the Beaumont Kroger. Matt is happily married to the former Kimberly Prenatt, and dad to Brady (age 8) and Claire (age 2).*

# From Scratch

How Radio Free Lexington was built with 'no money, no political sway, and 25 members'

By Mark Beaty

My introduction to the Lexington music scene was immediate. Sitting in Great Scotts, Active Ingredients were on stage, Lawrence Tarpey a writhing mass of energy, shirtless in the heat of Lexington's summer. As a recent import from Chapel Hill I couldn't have been happier. It seemed my new home would stand up well to my memories of nights at Cat's Cradle, The Cavern and the numerous CH house parties that served as a launching pad for the likes of REM, the DB's, Let's Active and a vibrant blues scene. It was during the day the void became clear. Radio in Lexington sucked! Nothing but arena rock and oldies up and down the dial was enough to drive you to despair until ... an article in the Kentucky Kernal said there was going to be a new student-run radio station at UK.

It was almost 22 years ago when I walked into the basement of Miller Hall thinking I had found a pretty easy way to be a DJ. Miller was kind of an old, moldy-smelling building but easy to find right off the main quad, a good thing for someone just arriving in on campus. I had done a fill-in shift or two at UNC's venerable WXYC student radio, but getting a full time shift there was nearly impossible. So, I was completely pumped to see that a brand new station was forming at my new home. I was certain this would be the cool, three-hour a week diversion I would need to break up the stress of my medical school preparation.

Walking in to the second-ever meeting of Radio Free



Photo courtesy Kakkie Urch

WRFL's first music staff in the Miller Hall offices. From left to right: Amy Boucher, Kakkie Urch, Rhea Perkins, and Diane Pipes

## The truth was immediately clear. Radio Free Lexington was a newspaper article and the dreams of a few 20-year-olds

Lexington I found about 10 folks in a bare room with two or three folding chairs between us. After giving an extra 30 minutes to the late-comers who never showed, Kakkie Urch started the meeting. The truth was immediately clear. Radio Free Lexington was a newspaper article and the dreams of a few 20-year-olds.

Over the course of a few months the core group of the faithful grew and by then included Lexington radio legends Jamie Tittle, Jack Kirk, Paul Miles, and Amy Boucher. The obstacles to success were formidable. We had no money, no real political sway at the university, and some 25 regular members trying to figure out how to make this thing happen. A few of us had some experience with production or some background in working as a DJ but no one had ever built a radio station from scratch before. In retrospect, this organization did the most remarkable job of creating, learning and implementing plans de novo I have ever seen.

Fundraising started from absolute zero with efforts ranging from concerts (featuring sympathetic local artists such as Vale of Tears, 9 Lb. Hammer, and Active Ingredients; to whom WRFL will forever be indebted) to days long phone-a-thons with hundreds of cold calls to

Lexington residents explaining the project and begging for a little spare cash. Slowly a base of support grew in the community and within the university culminating in help from the Student Government Association which really made the project look within reach financially.

So then the work really began. I remember lots of long days and nights fueled with caffeine, lots of cigarettes and trips to Tolly Ho while we figured out how to physically build the facility, create the relationships we needed within the record industry, acquire and review thousands of records (yes, records in those days), put together and train an air staff AND teach everyone how to work on these new personal computer things. So much for the three hours a week easy DJ shift.

What has WRFL meant since then? No doubt it has strengthened the cultural diversity in Lexington and offered a creative outlet to hundreds of student staff for the past 20 years. 88.1 is the first place I tune to when in town, not without a touch of pride each time. For me, most importantly, WRFL's founding

members are collectively the finest group of people I've ever worked with in any of my endeavors. The level of dedication and creativity was remarkable and vestiges of the work that group did are still audible at the station today. Through it all, we had a hell of a lot of fun, and I hope they still do. ■

Mark Beaty was president of Radio Free Lexington from 1986 until WRFL went on the air in 1988. He was then program director at WRFL from 1988 through 1989. He is now a Facial Plastic Surgeon beautifying Atlanta.



WRFL's first playlist

WRFL gets its license

# The Only Alternative Left

Love music, talk about music, play music, and teach music

By Chuck Clenney

I came to WRFL in fall 2004. It was a Wednesday and I was in between Astronomy and English when I walked past the on-air room and I found something I would come to love. The General Manager at the time, Michael Powell, was DJing and I wandered in the on-air room with a million questions. I was wearing a T-shirt that I won from Cincinnati's WOXY (97X), a fellow independent station, and that struck up a conversation that ended with us disagreeing about the quality of the latest Cure album and me filling out an application.

I went on to a 3am - 6am slot for a year (with an English class at 9am—what crazy times). My sophomore year, I moved up to Midnight-3am on Wednesdays and hosted an underground hip hop show called "Underground Beef."

My junior year, the current general manager, John Edwards, recommended that I apply for the training director position at WRFL. I applied, got the job, and trained 80+ people how to operate a board, FCC guidelines, etc.

Then in May 2007, I became General Manager of WRFL and have been bringing the jam since.

I've come to love WRFL because it is a rare community of true auralphiles: 100+



volunteer DJs who love music, talking about music, playing music, and teaching music who have been educating Kentuckians, without automation, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year since 1988.

This is a monumental feat, especially in lieu of a radio market saturated with cookie-cutter corporate stations playing the same 35 songs over and over again. WRFL is, truly, the only alternative left. ■

*Chuck Clenney is WRFL's 88.1 FM General Manager.*

Growing up here, I had heard of 88.1. It oozed an essence of untouchable cool that can only come from admiring something you think is way too hard for you to ever do. The thing that surprised me was how open everyone was. It wasn't hard to settle in, there were little or no 'dues to pay.' Because that's why we're all here—it's where we 'belong.' We know that WRFL is out of the way, it's hidden in the corner of the student center and it's not necessarily the most widely socially acceptable thing to take part in. So just by being here, it proves you're a comrade.

We are united by our desire for and our love of another choice. In a pretty impersonal city and an even more impersonal university, I don't want to be told what is good music. I want to explore and define it for myself and let everyone else come along for the ride. But most of all I feel comfortable here. WRFL is where I fit and where the most unusual people all fit together. ■

*Ainsley Wagoner is WRFL Music Director.*

## What WRFL Means to Me

By Ainsley Wagoner

Ironically I wasn't drawn to WRFL for the music. That was secondary to me. Of course I have always loved good music, but who doesn't think the music they listen to is the best? I was seeking a niche that I knew would come from being involved in a community of fringe music lovers and all-around weird kids.

It's hard, in such a large university, to have any sort of personal experience and that's what I was looking for when I came to WRFL last year. I needed a small organization but not any sort of forced brother or sisterhood. Sports just weren't doing it for me. Dorm life wasn't the instant friend-making opportunity it had said it was.

So I came, I applied, I sought people. And I found people! These are my kind of people. With subversive senses of humor, feet on the ground and headphones on head I have found what I needed from UK to survive in such a mass-produced journey of higher education.

## WRFL Celebrates 20th Anniversary with Free Music Festival

WRFL-FM (Radio Free Lexington), the University of Kentucky's student-run community radio station, is celebrating its 20th anniversary of commercial-free programming with "Alternative Music Week" from April 19-27, and building to a 12-hour, free admission FreeKY Festival in downtown Lexington on the roof of the downtown Lexington Transit Center (corner of High St. and Martin Luther King, Jr. Blvd.) on Saturday, April 26 from 11am-11pm.

### About WRFL

WRFL-FM first went on the air March 7, 1988. It was founded by a University of Kentucky student organization called Radio Free Lexington that worked to obtain an FCC license, funding, university support and space in the UK Student Center for the station. From its inception, the student and community-run station has presented music broadcasts and live performances in genres ranging from Bluegrass, world beat, hip hop, and college alternative to blues, jazz, metal, noise and punk. WRFL is committed to playing and supporting the work of local Lexington musicians.

The station broadcasts 24/7/365 at 88.1 MHz with a volunteer staff of students and community members and has been approved by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to increase its signal strength from 250 watts to 7900 watts, extending its coverage area over much of the Bluegrass Region. The construction permit granted by the FCC allows WRFL three years to complete the upgrade.

### The Celebrations

"Alternative music Week" includes fundraising concerts at Natasha's Bistro, the Kentucky Theatre, The Void Skateshop and AI's Bar to benefit WRFL's "Build the Tower, Boost the Power" campaign to raise \$150,000 for construction of a tower and a new transmitter boosting the station's power from 250 to 7900 watts.

FreeKY Fest will feature The Apples in Stereo, Jolie Holland, The Coup and Mahjongg, highlight the festival's music lineup. The fest, like the station's programming, runs a stylistic gamut from gospel to hip hop to indie rock to folk. Additionally, the festival will feature a concourse including interactive art installations, oversized inflatable midway attractions and concessions. The entire venue design is the work of University of Kentucky Architecture Professor Drura Parrish and his students.

There will be an audio/video lounge inside the Transit Center showcasing an "Auralgraffiti" installation by Lexington artist Jason Corder and music performances by Daniel Mohler & Everyone Lives Everyone Wins. There will also be a printmaking demonstration from Lexington's

Cricket Press, a bike performance art exhibit by Shane Tedder, 12 hours of live music, and a celebration of eclectic culture.

FreeKY Fest's main music stage will open with a children's concert at 11am featuring Robbert Bobbert & the Bubble Machine (a.k.a. Apples In Stereo frontman Robert Schneider), Pezhed & the Blipsquad, Mecca dance studio's Rakadu Gypsy Dance and Snow Monster. Following the children's show, locals Big Fresh will present a "History of College Radio" covers set, and WRFL's Music from India host Veena Bensal will lead a performance of Punjab and Dewali dance.

Local Kentucky food vendors include Mr. Gyros, Sharkey's, Jake's Lemonade, Punjab II, Mr. Savs, R&K Barbecue and Gumbo Ya Ya.

Alternative Music Week is a WRFL tradition since 1988 that brings a variety of outstanding national acts to Lexington to perform in a variety of venues. This year, Alternative Music Week includes several benefit events designed to help raise money for the station's planned transmitter upgrade.

**Wednesday, April 23:** The Void Skateshop (518 E. High St.) will host a benefit for WRFL featuring Lexington artists Jason Zavala, Ben Allen, and Eyes and Arms of Smoke. Tickets at the door are \$3. The show starts at 8pm.

**Thursday, April 24:** WRFL and AI's Bar present the Bluegrass Benefit at AI's Bar (601 N. Limestone) featuring Dean Osborne, The Blue Dawg, 23 String Band, the Downtown County Band, Quote, The Floorwalkers, Daniel Ellsworth, Brother Barret and the Rainjunkies. Show starts at 5 and tickets are \$10. All Ages!

**Friday, April 25:** WRFL presents an alumni photography exhibit in the Cat's Den at UK's Student Center. The Yellowbelts, will perform at the reception starting at 8:30pm.

Also, there will be a WRFL Art exhibit at Isle of You on display all day. The exhibit will be curated by Lori Houlihan & Robert Schneider from Apples in Stereo.

There will be an exhibit of WRFL's Past fliers and RiFLe magazines at Third St. Stuff all day.

Later that night, WRFL & AI's Bar presents "Radio Vaudeville: A cosmic Vaudeville journey sacrificed at the altar of New Orleans jazz." Doors open at 9 with Performances by The Mezmer Society from Asheville, NC as well as performances by Rakadu Gypsy dance and music by The Swells. All Ages.

**Saturday, April 26:** WRFL's FreeKY Festival atop the Downtown Lexington Transit Center, from 11am to 11pm.

**Sunday, April 27th:** WRFL and the Lexington Art League host the All-WRFL Picnic and Potluck at the Loudoun House (209 Castlewood Dr.) from noon - 4pm. featuring performances from Half Handed Cloud and Lake. ■