

BATTLE OF AIRWAVES

CAN INDEPENDENT STATIONS THRIVE IN A POP-INFUSED ERA?

BY RAGAN CLARK

I step out of the house, locking the door behind me. Coffee and trail mix in tow, I climb into the car to begin the long journey home. It's a promising start as the Nashville skyline disappears behind me, but as I put the miles between my city and myself, the fateful moment arrives. Just as I'm about to belt the chorus of my favorite Dawe's song, static begins to breach the sweet harmonies. Stubborn, I hold out. The next few songs battle it out, music and fuzz fighting for airtime.

Jack White's new single comes in and out until at last the distance from the radio tower is too great and the electric guitar is completely overcome by the static. A little defeated, I pilfer hopelessly through stations and find nothing but Blake Shelton chewin' tobacco and Pharell, who's somehow still incredibly happy, even after all this time. With a CD player that cuts out and no aux cord option in my 2004 model, my only options are suffering through Ke\$ha or enjoying the rest of my car ride in silence. If a car ride seems miserable with-

out Lighting, how much more miserable still might it be if all independent stations were silenced?

It's no secret that independent stations, like Nashville's Lightning 100, are few and far between. It is far easier to find a station playing your favorite pop tunes than to find one playing alt-rock. The commercial radio model followed by the United States seems to be suffocating stations like Lightning 100 and making it difficult for independent stations to survive, much less emerge. In the land of the free, it is a crime to let these independent, audience-oriented stations suffer for the sake of the greater good, but it seems they have a hard battle to fight.

The struggle of survival for independent stations all boils down to the fact that the United States functions on a commercial radio model. Stations are not supported by a tax like they would be in the public service radio model and instead have to rely on advertisements and function through competition.

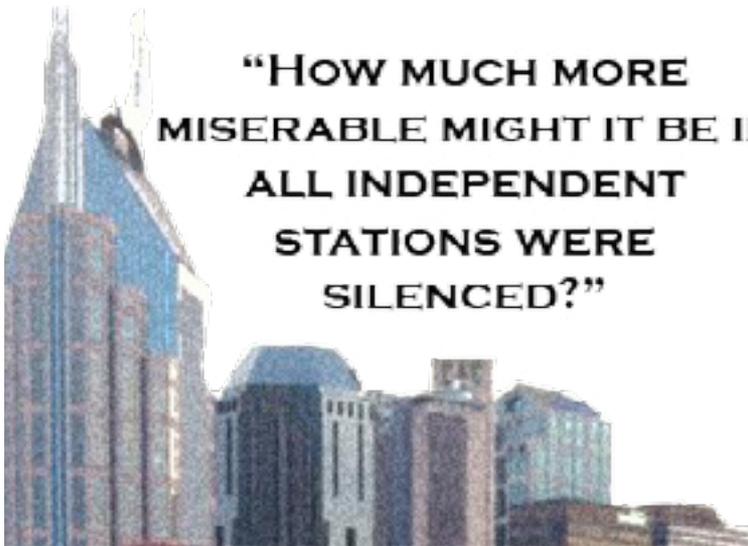
Under the commercial model, stations have to make the broadest appeal to the largest audience. The larger the audience, the more companies seek out the station for their advertisements, and the more profitable this station becomes. So, stations play pop music because it is listened to on the largest scale. To tap into the most listeners, they play music that has the highest demand, often neglecting genres that don't have mass appeal. While artists

like Tame Impala or Bear Hands might draw an audience, this audience won't be nearly as large, and therefore profitable, as the audience Taylor Swift would attract.

This almost exclusive catering to the majority is not the reality for all radio stations or all radio models. There are independent music stations that have chosen the less profitable route in order that niche audiences might still be tapped, despite the financial difficulties these stations are forced to face. There are also models that are more conducive to the catering of specific niches.

The public service model is one such model as it allows stations the luxury of not relying exclusively on mass appeal. Take the BBC for example. The BBC is funded by state taxes. This allows the BBC to have programming that caters to specific audiences instead of only the general public. The kind of programming and music that stations like the BBC comfortably broadcast are the same type that independent stations struggle to make profitable. While in London, I was able to experience this first hand. High caliber programming is a reality through the BBC. Knowing what radio programming can really be allows better appreciation for what independent stations are fighting for.

It was a Thursday night and the air outside felt grand as I walked up to Royal Albert Hall. The building itself was stunning with a Greek inspired relief, drawing my eyes upward. I walked inside, took my seat and waited for the music to begin. The concert hall was quite large, with nearly every seat filled. Even the pit, standing room



**"HOW MUCH MORE
MISERABLE MIGHT IT BE IF
ALL INDEPENDENT
STATIONS WERE
SILENCED?"**

only on the ground floor in front of the stage, appeared to be largely filled. I looked about, the sound of instruments being tuned resonating in the background.

At last the crowd hushed and applauded as the conductor walked onto the stage. For a moment there was complete silence as the crowd waited in anticipation. A rich, bellowing chord from the organ filled the space around me until the other instruments joined in. A small build that led to a softer string section. I watched the bows move in unison as the music drew me in, placing me in the midst of the orchestra.

The brilliant juxtaposition of builds within the piece immediately followed by the music's wane completely captivated my attention. You could feel the piece coming to an end, and as the final crescendo led into the apex, a shiver came over me, an impossible chill in spite of the heat of the congested balcony. The crowd erupted in applause. And as I looked to the woman beside me, I noticed that the performance had actually brought her to tears, something I had yet to experience myself or even seen another experience at a show. Hands down, it was one of the most phenomenal programs I have seen and I couldn't help but consider what a shame it was that a program like the Proms would never air on a major radio network in the States.

The BBC Proms reaches a massive audience and is able to be produced and aired without worry as to its popular appeal. This simply would not happen in the United States. Under the commercial model, major networks would avoid airing such a program, knowing that its appeal was not large enough to turn a significant profit. Because major stations refuse programs similar to the Proms, they are left to independent



stations who, while they may still choose to air them, are left with the burden of choosing the less profitable for the sake of quality. The BBC, not relying exclusively on audience is relieved from this burden. Beyond the Proms, BBC has other programs as well that would never receive airtime on a major network in the States.

While in London, I had the privilege to sit in as BBC's Mark Hagen spoke on British Media. At one point, Hagen began describing the latest program with which he had been working: a documentary on Harold Bradley, a Nashville session guitarist. Bradley has played on thousands of records and for a large number of big-names, Patsy Cline, Elvis, Willie Nelson and Buddy Holiday being just a few. This artist also played a large role in establishing the Nashville recording industry. It seems rather absurd that right here in Nashville, TN, many of us know little to nothing about this musician, while a Great Britain radio station is covering his story. Would it not seem more likely for a documentary such as this to instead be aired here? Again, it appears the commercial model is greatly limiting the survival of such programming.

As Hagen discussed other documentaries covered by the BBC and even his experiences interviewing Bruce Springsteen, Paul McCartney, and many others, I was struck by how few programs of this nature receive airtime in the United States. While not necessarily thriving here, I do believe they would have a listening base. But it's unfortunate that this base is not large enough to ensure their survival.

Were a station to have a more stable financial backing, as it would in the public service model, it could air such programming without having to worry about just how many listeners are drawn in. This would give stations more flexibility in their programming.

A station could air a documentary that draws a smaller audience with no repercussions, allowing a more varied listening experience, as stations wouldn't be limited to only using material that has mass appeal. Even independent stations that try to diversify their programming seem to avoid short documentaries of any sort, for fear of further hurting their ratings and profitability.

Now, though the commercial model does encourage a more mass audience appeal from major networks, I am not advocating for complete dismissal of the commercial model, but instead a consideration of the benefits of other radio models and an admiration for the programming put forth by these stations. The public service model has vices of its own and the commercial model has its own merits. While those are a conversation for another time, it is important to acknowledge their existence.

It is also important to acknowledge the efforts put forth by independent stations to go against this tendency towards mass appeal. Once the quality of public service model programming is better understood, it makes the replication of this programming by independent stations that much more impressive. Independent stations like Nashville, Tennessee's Lightning 100 may not produce anything quite like the BBC Proms, but they are creating quality programs that cater to specific rather than mass audiences, even without a lovely tax to help them out.

The artists Lightning 100 plays may

not be as high on the charts as Nicki Minaj, but that have a great listener base nonetheless. This allows listeners who aren't interested in hearing music from America's Top 40 list played in succession, to have other options. Lightning even goes so far as to not only cater to a specific Nashville listening audience, but to also cater to the needs of Nashville musicians by providing them a forum by which they can be heard. Lightning features a range of artists, some of which are local artists they've chosen based on music submissions.

It is not necessarily an easy feat to be a successful radio station and play such a diversified range of artists, but Lightning 100 seems to be in an almost perfect position to do so. In a city plagued with people in beanies, skinny jeans, and flannel, who are quick to tell you they've been listening to that artist you "discovered" for quite some time now, Lightning has found a prime location. Many wouldn't be caught



Live on the Green performances top to bottom by: Ingrid Michaelson, Capital Cities, The Head And The Heart



dead pulling up to Frothy Monkey with Jason Derulo pulsing from their speakers, but The 1975 now, that's more acceptable. Being located in Nashville certainly has its perks and it provides Lightning with a larger listening base than it would likely have in other cities.

Beyond just the music played on this independent radio station, Lightning 100 also sponsors many programs for the Nashville community. These programs, like the music diversity played on the station, are largely successful because Lightning 100 has a large audience in Nashville it is able to target.

As a freshman in college coming from a small town in Kentucky, I enjoyed my first Live on the Green experience in a state of complete elation. As the kick drum started and the familiar riff I'd grown so fond of pulsed out of the speakers in front of me, I didn't care that I was shoulder to shoulder with hundreds of other sweaty fans; all that mattered was that Brittany Howard, lead singer of the Alabama Shakes, was absolutely killing it on stage. I had no idea how I'd lucked upon finding myself in a college city that offered a free concert series with music of this caliber. The music scene in my hometown was non-existent. Occasionally, you could pay \$70 to see a "big" act like Garth Brooks or the Jonas Brothers play at the closest city, about a 30 minute drive away, but that never excited me much. I was often uninterested in the artists that were playing or otherwise didn't want to foot the \$70 bill for a ticket. Coming from this background made my experience at Live on the Green ever so profound.

Even this year, as I watched the incredible yet haphazard performance of Cage the Elephant I couldn't help but wonder how on earth I was enjoying this performance for free. Some audience members even had the privilege of getting lead man Matt Shultz's sweat wiped onto them completely free of charge (Shultz, known for his outlandish concert antics, wiped

sweat off his bare chest to the audience members beneath him as he crowd surfed, saying something to the effect of, "put it in a bottle and rub this on your pillow tonight").

As grateful as I am for my Live on the Green experiences, I also recognize that it would likely be far less successful in many other locations. Even had a program like Live on the Green emerged in my hometown, it would have been incredibly short lived. I can imagine the events unfolding, and see myself cringing as the guy next to me, decked out in Carhartt, tells his friend, "Nah, man. I'm not going. Don't know who that Cage the Dragon, or whatever they're called, band is, so I'm not really feelin' it." Yeah... Live on the Green in my small town in Kentucky would not quite be the best fit.

While it seems a blessing Lightning be located in an area so well suited for its success, it is also a bit discouraging to think of the reality of larger independent stations as a whole.

Yes, Lightning is successful. Yes, Lightning enjoys a large listenership. But regardless of these merits, producing an independent radio station is simply not as profitable as producing a station playing pop music of a mass appeal. And, unless a station is located as optimally as Lightning, the niche audience is sometimes not quite large enough to allow for the stations' success and survival.

There are clearly many setbacks for independent radio that make their production a little less enticing, but the outlook is not all bleak. While independent stations have a few odds stacked against them, they will hopefully have the support of music lovers rallying beside them, who aren't quite ready to let Ryan Seacrest rule the waves. Maybe one of my long drives home will find me under better circumstances. I can only hope that when Lightning 100's wavelengths no longer reach, I can simply change the station to hear St. Vincent singing back.