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Page: A1

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WEQX: Something different for 20 years

Alternative radio station plays what it wants and helps out new bands

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MANCHESTER, Vt. - From the ceiling of every room in the 150-year-old Victorian house, speakers broadcast alternative music from a disc jockey's booth at the top of the spiral staircase.

A tabby cat named Fred and a dog named Samson romp past walls laden with framed silver and gold records. By a front door no one uses sits station owner Brooks Brown's office, which also goes unused despite the requisite bookshelves and impressive desk.

Brown has other places to be to keep WEQX (102.7 FM) running, like the 180-foot radio tower broadcasting 50,000 watts of the next big thing.

"This place looks just like it sounds," says program director Tim Bronson. "Homegrown."

Twenty years ago, a broadcast of Linda Clifford's disco song "If My Friends Could See Me Now" marked the birth of Vermont's - and the Capital Region's - only independently owned, commercial, alternative rock radio station.

The station isn't at the top of the charts. Arbitron, which ranks radio stations much like Nielsen ranks television shows, has WEQX at 21 out of 27 stations in the Albany metropolitan area.

Most of the bands it showcases are far from household names and often aren't tracked by the Billboard magazine charts, which list the bestsellers that tend to determine radio play.

Yet the chart-topping Spin Doctors credited their career to Brown, and the station's house boasts framed copies of write-ups in Spin and Rolling Stone.

In an industry dictated by chart-toppers, WEQX plays what it want and breaks new bands, which gives the station clout far beyond the Green Mountains.

"Alternative radio was always a David and Goliath story," Brown says. "It's hard to compete. It's always been something I like to do, but it's a struggle."

Independent record labels similar to those that launched bands like Nirvana and R.E.M, alternative acts that reached commercial heights, credit the station with giving their music a foot in the broadcast booth.

On a recent morning, Bronson perches on a desk while Doug Daniels, DJ and station promotions guru, squats on the floor, petting Fred. The punk rock chorus of Bad Religion's "Los Angeles is Burning," a social commentary channeled through guitars, wails over the ceiling speakers. Don't know the song? It's not on any Top 10 list, except maybe WEQX's.

"You've got so many options available to you as a radio listener," says Daniels, a Niskayuna High School graduate who met Brown in the 1990s while bartending in Schenectady. "We're not that big corporate conglomerate that's coming at you."

Says Bronson, "It's a little more personal."

Since the 1980s, big companies increasingly have bought up local stations, according to industry trackers. Of 13,936 stations in the United States, 1,788, or about 12 percent, are independently owned commercial operations, according to the BIA Financial Network, an industry-tracking firm. Their music includes gospel, classical, talk and alternative.

Corporate radio works like any chain, with a main office calling the shots and focusing on sure things. The advertising, too, feeds the play loop. International recording companies pump millions into promoting their artists, so those are the

names people know, and those are the songs radio stations play the most. It's a cycle with minimal room for independent artists on small budgets, industry analysts say.

"The singly owned radio station - I won't say it's vanishing, but it's significantly decreasing," says Mark Fraterik, a BIA vice president.

But he believes opportunities exist for independent stations, especially those that focus on local communities. That's part of WEQX's mission.

"I think radio is more than just the music," Brown says. Highway stations around Manchester warn drivers to tune in to 102.7 for weather advisories. Listeners drop off coffee for the DJs.

But a fluid definition of alternative music makes its success hard to track. Songwriters who wear the alternative label could also don the mantles of hip-hop, acoustic, Latin or country music, or several at once.

One of the station's most requested songs this summer was the perky pop tune "I Was On The Moon," by the Boston-based band Apollo Sunshine, off the Brooklyn label spinART. Label owner Jeff Price said WEQX works like a secret password. Dropping its call letters at larger radio stations gets messages returned.

It wasn't always like this, Price says. The multiplatinum band Nirvana changed things. Wall Street noticed when the Nirvana-driven, Seattle grunge scene hit nationally in the 1990s, millions of albums sold and alternative stations proved they could spur big-bucks spending on records and concerts, Price says.

WEQX began before that boom. In the early 1970s, the itinerant Brown, a Texan, realized no local station existed in that part of Vermont. A ham radio junkie since childhood - he once burned himself soldering radio parts in a hospital bed - he followed a woman to Oklahoma, then went to Aspen, Colo., and on to New England.

His quest for permission to broadcast on a previously unused Vermont frequency required engineering reports and market research, plus legal wrangling once he determined there was space on the dial. The paperwork and permission took seven years and about \$60,000 to finalize with the Federal Communications Commission, he says.

Some things have changed over the past 20 years - the synthesizers and hair, for example. Others haven't. This fall, Bronson championed the latest single from the Pixies, whose jangled blend of melody and sonic chaos first hit stores in 1987.

"There are plenty of songs from bands that we wish the rest of the world would catch up to," Bronson says. "The Pixies' new song - where is the rest of the world? Why won't they wake up?"

Brown says he doesn't have a specific plan for the future other than to keep the station running as is. It's worked so far, he notes.

He describes himself, teasingly, as an old man who tries to keep up. He recently discovered the latest disc by The Streets, a London rapper. "I like that 'Push It Forward,'" he says. "It was fun. I'm more of a person who likes the sound in the music, the hooks in the music. Today, I was getting into the words."

He turns to Bronson. "Do you know what he's saying?"

"He's saying that everyone complains about the music," Bronson says. "It all sounds the same, but people keep buying it. It's a vicious cycle."