



A Passion for Radio
Radio Waves and Community
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Chapter 18

Offbeat, In-Step: Vancouver Co-operative Radio

Dorothy Kidd

Co-op Radio is housed in a old stone building in Vancouver's Pigeon Park, the only public open space for blocks around. It used to be right in the midst of the city's centre but the commercial district has since moved west, leaving Pigeon Park on the margins. And what was once a well-appointed square in front of a prestigious bank is now used by people without money or resources, who are often homeless as well. The park is one of the clearest signs in the city of the widening gap between business development and the city's poor.

Inside Co-op's door, the sounds of the street follow you all the way up three long flights of marble stairs to the broadcast studios. The tall windows are not sound-proofed and the traffic noise punctuates every broadcast. There's a "honk whoosh" picked up every time the microphones go on, and you learn either to ignore the fire and ambulance sirens, or to make them part of the patter.

Listening in the car or at home, you would never mistake 102.7 FM for the flat, carefully modulated voices that arise from the sound-proofed studios at the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), Canada's State-funded service. When Co-op Radio first began, it modelled itself on the public access broadcasting of the heyday of the CBC, an era which gave *Citizen's Forum* and *Farm Forum* to the world. Early Co-op programmers used a CBC-like format of interview-based shows, although their speciality was the presentation of unedited versions of public meetings and events. The Co-op pioneers defined their work as "alternative," amplifying opinions and voices which were seldom heard in the mainstream. For many of them, "alternative" also meant opposition to the status quo.

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Ironically some of those early Co-op broadcasters went on to work at the CBC, where “public” has come to mean a centralised State service, and where budget cuts have reduced the staff to a small core of professional broadcasters. Co-op Radio, by contrast, despite continual financial concerns, and while keeping many of the CBC current affairs formats, also widened its notions of “public” and “alternative” to include programming by and for many of the city’s special interest and cultural groups.

WE’RE ALL FANS

One of the first challenges to the original “alternative” approach came from a group of young men active in the local music scene. Peter Thompson has been active in music programming since those heady days in the mid 1970s:

There was nobody else at the station who wanted music. So it was up to a few obsessed people with pretty highly developed visions to convince the station that in fact there should be a place for music. Once we went on the air, we didn’t start with very many music shows, but they were consistently the best shows.

Partly it was the material that was played, partly it was the passion of the people involved and partly it was the format. The presentation of music here is more distinctly different from mainstream or even college presentation than our current affairs is from mainstream or even college presentation. In North America, the core of radio programming is music. The music on commercial radio is treated like any other commodity that the station is advertising, and as stations compete for declining advertising dollars, they target their music programming to narrow bands of young consumers. The result is fewer kinds of music, and fewer selections. Combine that with a trend towards deregulation in Canada, and it is no wonder that few radio stations in Vancouver play anything but pop. In contrast to the commercial stations’ trend to “narrowcasting” as they shed unprofitable programming, Co-op Radio has broadened its programming to include communities no longer served by mainstream radio, a policy of “specialcasting.” The station brings together programmers who present music from all over the world, putting it into a historical and social context.

Janie Newton Moss co-produces a show on Sunday afternoons called *Black Tracks* which is devoted to African-American popular music.

Just take something like Black music. If you’re listening to it on mainstream radio you’re going to get the most commercial, the least interesting end of the spectrum. You’re going to get the records that sell.

Jim Stewart works on a Friday late-night show called *Offbeat*:

What you’re doing is presenting the foundations of something before it’s made its way through the ringer of the music industry.

Janie again:

We’re all fans ... it comes from a very obsessional place, which can be true of people involved in political change as well.

PLAYING MUSIC FOR FRIENDS IN YOUR LIVING ROOM

Gary Cristall's first aim was to "do radio as if you're playing music for friends in your living room." In 1977, he and Vinny Mohr started playing music from Latin America in a show they called *Tres Culturas*, to reflect its Indigenous, African and Spanish origins. At that time, there was nowhere else on the dial that you could hear Latin American music.

I liked playing it for people. We were able to introduce a lot of people to a lot of stuff that I don't think they'd hear otherwise. Amparo Ochoa, Chavela Vargas, some of the new song people ... We thought it was a way of introducing a lot of other people to something we believed in.

At the same time, he helped start the Vancouver Folk Music Festival. Through this work, he began receiving demo tapes from musicians around the world and he and Vinny began a show called *Music of the World*, their aim often unapologetically political.

I certainly regard the work I do with music as political work. Especially when you're working with music that's outside the mainstream, where every bit of it communicates ideas. It may be preaching to the converted, but I've never thought that preaching to the converted was wrong ...

There are people out there who think they are alone in what they think. Sometimes when they hear the ideas that go around in their heads – sort of inarticulate feelings – articulated by great artists, that encourages people, in the sense of giving people a sense they're not alone, reinforcing the ideas they have.

Certainly in the women's movement, in the peace movement, the environmental movement, the trade union movement, music has played a big role. Very few people can remember speeches that they have heard at political events, but most of them can remember songs they have heard. And I think that's always a kind of litmus test of the importance of music in political activity.

Gary and Vinny were unusual among those early music programmers. Most of the others would have defined their shows as "alternative" rather than "political." While mostly young and white, their musical interests were very eclectic. Their shows tried to provide an historical and social context, whether it was for rock and roll, rhythm and blues, country, folk, gospel, or jazz.

They also recorded local bands live at a number of the clubs in Vancouver or brought them in to play live in the studio. Peter Thompson:

This is pre-punk, this is pre-people putting out their own records and tapes. So we had to record the music if we wanted to play it.

Those live shows tapered off as clubs stopped hiring musicians in favour of piping in taped music, and as that generation of programmers started getting tired of spending long hours dragging equipment up all those stairs. Many of them still present shows at the station. Many have also put their energy into building a number of alternate music enterprises, putting on concerts and festivals, or producing music shows for the CBC. Their years and breadth of experience brings a real strength to the station's programming.

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Their widening range of contacts also means that they can feature music that is either ahead of the record stores, or unavailable on the commercial market.

THE NEXT GENERATION(S)

In the ensuing years, newer generations, and very different subcultures and communities have started music programmes. The list is long from reggae, to punk, to classical, to Hong Kong pop, Jewish traditional music, women's music and aboriginal music. A lot more women and people of colour have become involved in creating their own shows and participating in a few of the established ones.

For many of these new groups, there is still the need to record live material; it is still the case that women make up 10% of the pop charts and, except for rap artists, there are few recordings of Aboriginal people or people of colour. From 1985-1991, Ina Dennekamp produced a show called *Women of Note*, which focused on the work of women composers.

It was fantastic to have the musicians come down to the studio, set up the band and talk about what they're doing. They were grateful to Co-op Radio to have this opportunity. They're in there making music and I'm just feeling wonderful about meeting the people on the other side of the music.

Kerry Charnley features the work of First Nations artists in her show on Friday nights called *When Spirit Whispers*. There are few artists recorded, so she collects tapes that other artists have produced themselves, or does her own recording of performances and events.

Part of why we started doing *When Spirit Whispers* was as an educational thing, to show people that there's more than Plains drumming as far as Native music goes. There's rap and there's jazz and there's classical...

It seems that there's a lot of public affairs programming (about Native issues), but there wasn't any musical or art programming. And that's a big part of any culture. So we thought it would be really important to get the music and the words out from Native people, so that the artists would have a forum, have a voice through the radio and thereby get the philosophy within Native cultures, Native nations out there.

That sense of music as a way to bridge gaps strikes a common chord among many programmers. Rani Gill thinks that "music can be really subversive." In a show called *49th and Main*, directed to the Indo-Canadian community, she plays a wide variety of classical Indian music and contemporary bangra, Punjabi dance music that mixes traditional forms with western instrumentation. While bangra's popularity began in England, it is also closely tied with the identity of the second and third generations of the community here.

It's a way of drawing them in. That's their music. That's what they identify with.

“IT’S KIND OF LIKE A TUPPERWARE PARTY”

Some of us in the North American women’s movement a generation earlier, used music in much the same way. Music was magic, in its capacity to articulate both voice and passion, and mix it with pleasure and collective cohesiveness. Connie Kuhns was the first woman to test that out at the station with her show *Ruby Music*.

The whole idea of tying women’s music and radio together was to create revolution. Those were the words we used at the time...I knew that this music was really really important. I’d been to enough concerts to watch women transformed, thousands of them at a time. One thing that was really lacking was any sort of women’s musical perspective at Co-op Radio.

She originally conceived of her show as a kind of “consciousness raising,” from the 1970s feminist idea of the “personal as political,” where every story can be put into context. She laughingly described it as “kind of like a Tupperware party, getting together for the day to day.”

Because of the work of Chris Williamson, Holly Near, Alix Dobkin and Meg Christian, American feminist music that had been so important to her, Connie originally planned to feature only those recordings from the American women’s movement labels.

From my own lack of musical history, I didn’t fully appreciate what women had done before me – I thought women’s music began in 1973. My eyes were opened as I began to look at the music of my youth, of my teenage years, and instead of wondering why women weren’t doing certain kinds of music, I was wondering why I wasn’t ever told what they did.

At the time I saw (my audience) as the women’s community, but within two years I had a lot of others, men and women who hadn’t been involved in the community at all, listening.

They started writing and calling me. And then the male music programmers eventually came around and they were gracious enough to admit they were prejudiced. Once they came around I knew I was onto something, and it’s been a pretty broad-based audience ever since.

Connie still gets a strong reaction from her listeners for her mixture of contemporary song and story.

I met a woman a couple of years ago who had found her way out of her previous life by reading *Kinesis* (a local feminist publication) and listening to *Ruby Music*. When she had had enough, she came to the city.

Another woman wrote and said that when she first started listening to my show, she would get mad at me all the time. Part of the reason (was that) she was getting mad at herself, because she couldn’t believe that she was as old as she was and didn’t know that woman had accomplished so much.

Connie attributes the impact of her show to the beauty and power of woman’s music, and also to the nature of radio.

Radio is so personal and so private. You get a chance to reach people without embarrassing them, or without making them have to take a stand. They can sit

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at home and hear something and feel something and there's no one around to see, and they can take it from there.

ISOLATING WOMEN'S MUSIC

In the last ten years, Co-op Radio has widened its schedule to include music from women and from other disempowered groups in Canada and the rest of the world. However, as a listener and programmer, this change doesn't always seem consistent throughout the schedule. The tendency to compartmentalise does not go unnoticed by women programmers.

As Connie Kuhns says:

More women are doing music shows, and not just women's music but all kinds of shows. But I don't know that music shows produced by men are that conscious, except on special occasions, to play music by women ... I think it's still mostly women's work that's doing it.

Like Connie, Ina Dennekamp's *Women of Note* had a varied listenership of both women and men, classical music lovers and those willing to experiment with the unfamiliar. Ina:

I presented the material as though it had every right to be anywhere. I'm a real believer in making feminist inroads into people's lives and experiences in many different ways. Radio gives you the opportunity to present material that is different or unusual or perhaps challenging to people in a way they can hear it. Whether I dealt with feminist issues, or lesbian issues, or music by lesbians, it would be presented as such, but it would be done in the context of – this deserves to be heard anywhere. It's feminist by definition.

Nevertheless Ina was affected by the tendency in the station to isolate women's issues.

There's a danger of having a "woman and anything" program. It tends to be ghettoised. The station says, "well now, the 'woman and whatever issue' is taken care of, because there's Ina's program over there," which is exactly opposite to the original intent. Here I am gathering up all this information, but still it is separate from and aside from mainstream Co-op even, to say nothing of mainstream life anywhere else.

During the 1980s women programmers such as Ina, Connie, Janie, myself and many others began to encourage other women and men to do programming about women, at least during the week of March 8, for International Women's Day.

The intention was that all programmers take up the idea that women's issues are not particular to women, that it is a global problem, that it is a community problem. It's still a problem. There simply wasn't enough of that. The integration simply hasn't taken place – that was always the danger in my mind of having a ghettoised program.

FUTURE TRENDS

We have a special challenge on community radio stations like Co-op Radio, whose traditional approach to programming has been the “patchwork quilt” of special interest publics and shows. The station’s Board and Programme Committee is working towards creating an integrated overall vision which will allow for special needs and interests, by encouraging the participation of new people and the development of new shows.

Music programmers have demonstrated a number of strategies on their own. Connie makes sure to bring in younger women to guest host and tell their own musical stories from time to time and a few of the other established shows have made a point of integrating women into their programme staff. The newer shows have presented another way to see the problem and resolution.

One of Kerry’s dreams is to produce programming from the Musqueam and Squamish reserves. Another is to bring in more elders “because they have a lot of knowledge and experience in the culture, philosophy and values, and also have a real way with words.”

Knowing that much of her audience is not aboriginal, she wants to produce a bilingual language spot in Salish and English, “so people would get familiar with the sound of the Salish language.” It sounds similar to what Rani Gill of *49th and Main* has suggested.

That’s what people should be doing more of, to stretch people’s listening. Interviews have a place, not just music, because using voices is music. I want people to be listening to marginalised voices and languages. You don’t need to understand a language. You can listen to the rhythms of the breath, the tonality of the voices and how they intersect. I want to use voices as a form of music and mix them, both for those who know the language and those who don’t. That’s what Co-op Radio is supposed to be about, bringing voices in from the margins.

Walking through Pigeon Park this morning you can look up into the tall trees that stand by the windows of the studio. Two of the station’s pioneers, Howard Broomfield and Hildi Westerkamp created music by hanging their mikes out onto those trees to bring the voices in. Since those days of environmental music programming, Co-op Radio has opened up the airwaves to more closely represent Vancouver’s population, and especially to those who are denied access elsewhere by virtue of their race, sex, class or politics. There’s a lot more room for institutional changes but a creative renewal is beginning, revamping and recycling older ideas of music and of formats to better fit the sounds of today’s streets.

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