PACKAGED ALTERNATIVES:
THE INCORPORATION AND GENDERING
OF “ALTERNATIVE” RADIO

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A young couple talks at cross-purposes. She wants desperately to share her feelings, communicate, and be validated by him. He wants to extoll the merits of a Canon photocopying machine. When he suggests a trip to the mall to snap up this hot commodity, she exuls, “Shopping! You really do understand me . . .”

A popular clothing outlet helps young men to interact successfully with their female peers. As a kid tries to chat up a girl he likes, his slacker’s gaffes are corrected by a professional announcer’s smooth talk. Rather than praise the girl’s looks and invite her to watch mud wrestling, he should feign interest in poetry and ice dancing. With a final plug for the unspoken eloquence of cool male fashion, the spot concludes: “If you don’t talk, she won’t know how stupid you are.”

Two teenage boys contrast the delights of dating girls and eating at Taco Bell. While girls are all too likely to demand conversation and commitment, they conclude a taco is a hungry guy’s most obliging partner.

All of these advertisements were produced with young male consumers in mind. And all have been broadcast on KNDK 107.7, The End, Seattle’s self-proclaimed leader in “new,” which is to say “alternative,” rock music—a classification presupposing a young, white, middle-class, and (increasingly) male audience. It is not, I think, surprising to find these commercials—each of which tacitly appeals to rigid masculine norms—airing at a time when men compose only 40 percent of all U.S. students pursuing college degrees, and the liberal arts major, in particular, is perceived as a feminine domain. Such commercials, in other words, not only bespeak an era of corporate-packaged youth culture but also suggest the reciprocities between marketing objectives and a turn-of-the-century society obsessed by sexual difference, dominated by an increasingly deterministic logic of hardwiring, hormones, Venusian women and Martian men.

In this essay, I attempt to situate this contemporary phenomenon in three overlapping historical contexts. The first is a material history of deregulation and the subsequent concentration of radio and other mass media within fewer and ever more powerful corporate hands. The second describes the corresponding efflorescence and “incorporation” of alternative music and the surrounding youth cultures. The third concerns my shifting personal relations to alternative radio as ardent fan and consumer, skeptical materialist critic, and, most recently, concerned feminist. Although my general purpose is to relate a condensed history of “alternative” radio and youth culture, from the late 1970s to the present day, my specific focus is on sex/gender. As an increasingly monopolistic entertainment industry seeks to segregate markets, I argue, a youth culture once known for its gender-blurring androgyny has conformed to, and now perpetuates, profitable patterns of sexual difference.

The Public Interest

It is instructive to recall that in the 1920s, one of the most conservative decades in U.S. history, Congress instituted the “public interest” doctrine, mandating that commercial broadcasters “emphasize” the “interests, needs, and convenience” of the people. Although repeatedly upheld after the introduction of television, this legislative doctrine was effectively undermined by the Reagan era’s notion that market forces express, rather than compromise, the public’s interest. Since 1981 both television and radio industries have been subject to increasing deregulation, and the public’s ownership of the airwaves has been all but forgotten. Rules instituted over many decades to ensure that “broadcasters give back to their communities”—including those mandating public programming and limiting commercials—have been repealed or simply neglected.

The most important consequence of deregulation, however, has been to enable multiple ownership of radio, television, and cable stations, especially within the same broadcasting area. By effectively removing the limits placed on nationwide ownership, the Telecommunications Act of 1996 has completed the redefinition of the public and its interest from a model based on citizenship to one based on consumption.

The rise of a media oligopoly, concentrating broadcasting and pro-
duction within a few corporate hands, has further resulted in a drastic homogenization of content. In music radio, as newly acquired stations are expected to generate revenues in excess of their debts, emphasis on profitability translates into narrowly defined formats, hit-oriented playlists, slick DJs, and, of course, constant promotions and advertising. Although the total number of stations has grown, commercial radio has become increasingly formulaic. Programming in most major cities is identical, with, for example, "classic rock," Top 40, and "adult-oriented rock" stations playing the same songs to reach similar audiences. Because media conglomerates are, as Robert McChesney notes, "risk-averse," and wedded to "what has been commercially successful in the past," they shun diversity and experimentation in hopes of securing the large and demographically coherent audiences that advertisers pay to reach. Listener complaints about repetition and lack of variety fall on deaf ears. Commercial DJs adhere to computer-generated playlists, taking few, if any, unpredictable requests.

**Mainstream Alternatives**

Ironically, it was because of these effects that in the early 1980s, deregulation helped to codify "alternative" as a category designating the kind of music that commercial stations refused to play. In the mid-1980s—when, as a recent college graduate, I worked in the "creative" department of a large corporation—alternative music culture helped me to define my own ostensible opposition to the mainstream. Although I did not immediately realize it, the postpunk, gothic, and industrial youth cultures with which I identified had already become the institutionalized products of a handful of entertainment conglomerates. At the same time, my local "alternative" radio station, New York’s 92.7 WLR was conforming to an ever more commercial format to attract new listeners and raise advertising revenues.

It would be a mistake, however, to reduce alternative music culture entirely to the effect of deregulated radio. Readers of Dick Hebdige’s classic account of the reappropriation of British punk in the late 1970s will be familiar with the manifold commodifying processes by which a youth culture’s subversive meanings are first "diffused" (mass-produced) and consequently "defused" (politically neutralized). Indeed, it is fair to say that the unanticipated profitability of punk subculture, in a market just beginning to exploit the global potential of MTV, anticipated the entertainment industry’s determination to cultivate and promote its own margins: to reappropriate “alternative” by establishing it in the paradoxical form of an institutionalized opposition to institutionalized culture. Hence, by the late 1980s and early 1990s, postpunk youth culture had developed the distinctly paradoxical and postmodern form of a mainstream avant-garde: a mass "alternative" for the self-consciously hip.

In this commodified but ostensibly subcultural form, the postpunk music of this era, usually described as "new music" or "modern rock" by the radio stations that played it, provided stylistic and structural foundations for young middle-class identities. Marketed in the United States for white, usually college-bound or college-educated youth, the appeal of "alternative" was its deliberate challenge to the suburban norms that make such people demographically recognizable in the first place. Like most commercial alternative radio at this time, and in common with many noncommercial college stations, WLR specialized in the latest new wave, gothic rock, and industrial dance music from the U.K. In the eyes of America’s bored suburban teens and restless young professionals, Britain’s mostly male, mostly working-class Thatcher-era bands, still riding hard on punk’s leather coattails, were gloriously androgynous, exotically déclassé, and—if not precisely politically coherent—were, at any rate, rebellious, and in-your-face.

Of course, American youth might instead have sought alternatives in the contemporaneous hip-hop culture of urban African Americans. By and large, however, and despite some noteworthy crossovers, the postpunk preferred by white suburban youth remained aloof from inner-city music cultures. Through radio, clubs, magazines and fanzines, comic books, role-playing games, films, boutiques, and "postmodern MTV," white youths celebrated their dark sides in a U.K.-inspired, class- and gender-bending postpunk masquerade. In so doing, they tacitly declined to breach far more resistant boundaries of race.

**Men Who Feel and Cry**

As gothic rock, new wave, and punk-inflected alternative music entered the pop charts in the late 1980s and early 1990s, its distinctive trait was the cultivated display of androgynous masculinity: of men who feel and cry.
Male superstars of this era such as REM's Michael Stipe, the Cure's Robert Smith, U2's Bono, the Smiths' Morrissey, and eventually Nirvana's Kurt Cobain represented striking variations on the masculine heterosexual norm. These cult heroes of the suburban middle classes seemed to legitimate the oppositional edge of a mainstream "alternative." Their spectacular commercial successes entailed the popularization of nonheterosexual, antibinarizing notions of gender and sexuality, the trumpeting of progressive political causes, and the representation of male experience in a high-romantic and often decadent-aesthetic language of depth, pain, and failed transcendence. Thus to the minds of many fans, the platinum albums, chart-topping hits, buzz-bin videos, and Grammy awards were not necessarily subcultural sellouts, but triumphs of the Other—an Other much like the gothic-artist-in-the-suburbs portrayed in Tim Burton's Edward Scissorhands (1990).

From a feminist point of view, this mainstream "alternative" represented a kind of antifeminist sexism. For all its conspicuous androgyny, that is to say, postpunk music culture was unabashedly dominated by male musicians, prone to appropriating "femininity" as a male aesthetic credential rather than to empowering women. The gothic genres so integral to postpunk style obsessively rehearsed narratives of heterosexual masculinity in crisis. Through a familiar pattern in which traumatic loss (usually of a female beloved) finds expression in androgyny (as the lost female is replaced by a cathartic experience of "femininity"), normative male subjectivities were disrupted, refigured, and—to a certain extent—restored. Despite obvious limitations, the effect of this androgynous male performance was to stress likeness between the sexes. Alternative's male icons ranged from introspective poets to veritable drama queens—always ready to cry, bleed, and shriek for the sake of articulating their passions. Such men might obsessively mourn the loss of a female beloved, or rail against the limitations of human understanding—but they could never be content to bond with a taco.

Indeed, this "homologizing" effect was evident in many distinctive features of the alternative music culture of this era. For example, alternative music videos rarely featured the gratuitous display of female extras so common in more typically mainstream fare. Interviews with alternative musicians were unlikely to dwell on backstage sexual encounters with groupies. Commercial magazines and fanzines dedicated to the subject were produced with fans of both sexes in mind. The DJs at WLR, glibly professional though they were, were interchangeably male and female, noteworthy for their in-depth knowledge of, and enthusiasm for, music, rather than for the cultivation of slick gendered personae.

Like most rock music fandoms, the alternative scene of the 1980s and early 1990s probably included more males than females. By and large, however, the experience was of a nongendered youth culture, equally accessible to both sexes and, just as important, tolerant toward nonheteronormative sexualities of many kinds. Indeed, defying normative expectations of gender and sexuality (and, to a lesser degree, of class) was precisely the point of the androgynous aesthetic—of being "alternative."

**Mind the Gap**

In the early 1990s, U.S. and U.K. alternative music cultures diverged for the first time in their respective histories. In the United States, bands such as Nirvana and Pearl Jam popularized grunge, a non-dance-oriented, angst-ridden variation on rock, with little relevance to the sped-up, hedonistic rave scene preferred by young post-Thatcherite Britons. Grunge fused a retrospective identification with the blues- and gospel-oriented rock of the early 1970s, with striking articulations of postpunk isolation, anger, and ennui. By contrast, Britain's rave and techno were aggressively upbeat club- and dance-oriented music cultures—sites of a pointedly group-style escapism.

By the mid- and late 1990s, a variety of new transatlantic hybrids emerged. At the same time, however, alternative music culture in the postgrunge era has become difficult to account for in primarily musical or stylistic terms. As the broadcasting and recording industries become increasingly monopolistic, industry profits depend more on the concerted constitution and cultivation of segregated markets. This underlying imperative deeply impresses the current musical product of today, with "alternative" proving no exception. When I interviewed her in 1998, Kim Monroe, a Seattle DJ, asserted that the late 1990s had produced the worst music she recalled in more than twenty years of listening to, and working in, radio. I agreed. But it is important to stress that the difference between alternative music before and after the 1990s is not reducible to the limitations of individual recording artists or particular trends.
New Order

Many factors contribute to the likelihood that, in the twenty-first century, alternative radio culture will be less "alternative" than ever. Artificially pumped up throughout the 1980s by the introduction of compact discs, today's highly consolidated music industry demands more profits and takes fewer risks. Starved of radio play, independent labels continue to founder or be acquired by entertainment giants such as AOL-Time Warner and Sony. The higher costs of promotion further militate against diversification and toward the hyping of a few chart-topping bands in each category.

Radio stations, meanwhile, attempt to maximize audience share by repeatedly playing the most popular singles in their category. Rather than compete by offering a wide range of music, commercial stations attempt to carve up the local market by creating class-, gender-, and age-specific demographics. In Seattle, for example, older fans of alternative music can listen to KMTT 100.3, The Mountain, a kinder, gentler alternative station, featuring more '80s hits, avoiding harder-edged new music, and airing lots of commercials for Volvos, Web tv, and life insurance. Younger fans, by contrast—and, in particular, younger male fans—are expected to prefer The End. The distinction reflects a common trend whereby alternative stations must decide whether to "stay young with their listening audience" or to age with them.17

Of course, were The Mountain and The End competitors, they might be loath to define themselves so narrowly and thus limit their potential listening audience. But The Mountain and The End are not competitors. Both stations are owned by Entercom, the fifth-largest radio broadcaster in the United States—a NYSE corporation owning forty-two radio stations nationwide, seven of which are in Seattle.18 Unsurprisingly, stations owned and managed under the same corporate umbrella often find it more desirable to "share resources" than to compete: for example, choosing to broadcast certain artists, singles, and events on one station rather than on all stations, in order to more precisely define the audience of each.19

Although it is probable that as many as 40 percent of The End's listeners are female, the station considers its "core" audience to be men between ages eighteen and thirty-five. (In actuality, many listeners are much younger, but the self-proclaimed young-adult profile is more appealing to advertisers, and more suitable to the mature content of much of The End's broadcast-

I Know What Boys Like

While classification by age has long been a factor in commercial radio (demonstrated by the long-standing popularity of "oldies" stations), sex/gender is a comparatively recent demographic emphasis. Here radio exemplifies a wider trend in which gender increasingly determines marketing strategies in publishing, television, movies, and various Internet-related media, and even on college campuses.22 The fact is that for corporate broadcasters, demographic coherence is often more important than the actual number of listeners, making a sexually divided music culture an enhancement to profits. Unsurprisingly, what results is a vicious cycle of sorts: the more sexual difference is emphasized, the more segregation occurs, thus justifying even further amplification of gendered norms.

Rising to the challenge of the new "Martian" masculinity, The End cultivates a self-consciously hard, rc-bashing, if also somewhat juvenile, male persona. By contrast, Kiss 106—garnering the lion's share of supermarket, diet-pill, and shopping-mall advertising—features a more pop-oriented playlist, a pink Web site, and a larger number of female and soft-edged alternative artists. Kiss's approach to programming, blending pop with alternative, also represents a notable shift from classifying music by categories to classifying music according to perceived gender preferences. Crossovers—when, for example, an alternative band enters the pop charts and is consequently played on "hit" radio stations—have always been a factor.23 Nevertheless when Kiss deliberately chooses to play popular artists such as Madonna and the Spice Girls alongside soft-edged alternative musicians, the logic is entirely different. Rather than allegiance to a music-specific style, Kiss's programming presupposes a feminine taste that privileges musical softness over any other factor. With a similar logic in mind, Kiss does not play Pearl Jam's hits—even though many are acoustic bal-
lads—because the band’s identification with grunge is, by now, perceived as a hard or masculine preference. Conversely, The End often avoids the softer alternative hits favored by Kiss and The Mountain.24

All of Seattle’s commercial music radio stations—including The End, The Mountain, and Kiss—are dominated by male DJs. Kim Monroe is The End’s only full-time female DJ, a singular status that she admits she enjoys. On the air she projects a tough, arguably “postfeminist” persona that is both distinct from, and harmonious with, the antics of some of her male colleagues.25 The pattern of one or perhaps two full-time female DJs is, at least in Seattle, the apparent norm for commercial radio regardless of category. Rather than hire female DJs, stations express their degree of interest in female listeners largely through male DJs’ personalities. Thus The Mountain’s male DJs are neutral and professional; the ones on Kiss tend to be more chatty and gregarious; and The End’s DJs distinguish themselves by digressing on subjects as varied as their favorite porn videos, their hangovers, and their experiments with Viagra.

Nice Guys Finish Last

One of the most telling indications of alternative radio’s now rampant commercialism is its capitulation to “shock jock” programming, a genre pioneered by New York’s Howard Stern. Here stations such as The End are responding to a national trend aimed at stanching the decline in targeted listeners by drawing in a young male audience by any means possible.26 Across the FM dial, the dulcet tones of men behaving badly have become as familiar to Seattle mornings as the café latte. One notable example of the thirst for “shock” is the success of the L.A.-based Tom Leykis show, syndicated on seventy stations nationwide, including Seattle’s KQAZ 100.7, The Buzz, yet another Entercom holding. When he first entered the Seattle market in 1999, Leykis’s image was plastered all over the city’s buses, accompanied by the telling phrase “Women hate nice guys.” Leykis’s show, the “stated ‘public service’” of which is “to help men get their balls back,” features a telephone format in which male callers vent their anger at women and inveigh against the alleged rule of political correctness. On one typical show, callers were invited to debunk the feminist myth of the “glass ceiling.” Women don’t become CEOs, the show concluded, because they are too lazy, too obsessed with child rearing, and too content with mooching off of men.

Significantly, this familiar brand of misogyny—d unning women both if they do and if they do not conform to feminine stereotypes—has permeated alternative music culture. Recent radio hits have proclaimed that “nice guys finish last,” have glamorized the lifestyle of the all-powerful pimp, and have staged monologues in which a hard-done-by guy rebels against his hyper-critical girlfriend, demanding, “What do I do right?”28

In another convergence between shock jock antics and alternative music radio, New York’s 102.7 WNEW, once a legendary rock station that competed with WLIR for alternative listeners, has shifted to a talk-only format. As journalist Jesse Oxfeld notes, talk radio on the FM dial “is a relatively new development, created in recent years as increasingly formulaic music stations have foun-
dered.” WNEW’s current hit is the Opie and Anthony show, New York’s first-ranked program in the young male demographic. Where the Leykis show plays on pent-up male anger, Opie and Anthony specialize in “sophomoric sex humor.” This approach is epitomized by the show’s trademark “Whip ’em Out Wednesdays,” during which female New Yorkers are encouraged to expose their breasts to male drivers sporting “W.O.W.” bumper stickers. Like Leykis’s harder-edged fare, such boys-will-be-boys antics invite young men to reclaim a state of nature putatively denied to them at home and in the workplace.29 Men are encouraged to see themselves as forced to capitulate to female expectations in exchange for sex and companionship—and to rebel against those artificial constraints as often as possible. A similar dilemma is expressed in “She’s Got the Look,” a recent End hit by the punk band Guttermouth. Rehearsing a litany of gendered differences between himself and his girlfriend, the speaker promises, nevertheless, to change himself (“For you I’d do it . . .”), vowing to wash his car, secure employment, use foot deodorant, recycle his beer cans, and cancel his subscription to Jugs magazine. For Guttermouth as for the shock jocks, women thus ambivalently represent both indispensable sexual gratification and emasculating discipline.30

Situated within this context, it must be said that The End’s talk-dominated morning show, introduced in 1997, and hosted by Andy Savage, represents a relatively tame variation on a growing national trend. Not unlike Opie and Anthony, the show features Howard Stern—like escapades, guest appearances by sex mavens and Playboy centerfolds, discussion of the day’s trivia, telephone pranks, and listener call-ins. Interviews with, and live performances by, musicians also take place regularly. Savage, a self-
professed admirer of David Letterman (rather than Stern), is rarely nasty
and resentful in the manner of Leykis, usually less juvenile than Opie and
Anthony, and displays nothing like the right-wing partisanship of Rush
Limbaugh and his ilk. Carolyn Coffey, Savage's female cohost until 1998,
was subordinate to Savage, but nevertheless a voice in her own right. She
frequently disagreed with Savage and never lapsed into the trite supportive
role to which so many female cohosts are relegated. When, as they often
did, Savage and Coffey gave advice to listeners who called in with personal
problems, the advice was usually compassionate and sound, never crudely
exploitative.

Some of the "shock" elements of the show do, however, warrant com-
ment. One recurrent setup called "the roses" emulates the sensationalism
of television shows like Jerry Springer. I confess to having thoroughly
enjoyed a bicycle race wherein contestants—stark naked except for the
numbers pasted to their genitals, pedaled up Seattle's steep Capitol Hill to
win concert tickets. When I interviewed Savage, he did not understand why
I insisted on distinguishing between this display of athletic prowess—as
well as male cheek—and a subsequent promotion in which a naked woman
was driven down Seattle's busiest freeway in the back of a pickup truck.
Several months before, I had written to the station suggesting that they air
a debate over whether to play a recent single entitled "Smack My Bitch Up."
The morning show aired the debate, and although there was no definite
consensus among callers, the single is, to my knowledge, now played only
after midnight. In a sense, it is because so much of the show is far better
than the Howard Stern prototype—so much of it genuinely and unin-
vidiously humorous and affable (if not remotely alternative)—that the
lapses into misogyny are so disturbing.

An example occurred when on a day after Coffey had been let go, Savage
and another male DJ conducted a telephone interview with the band Green
Day. The host asked if it is true that "nice guys finish last," to which Green
Day, known for their irreverent, bad-boy humor, replied, yes, and espe-
cially in love: James Brown did it to his woman with a crowbar, and he is
the king of soul. All the guys laughed, and Green Day followed by asking if
the kid whom they pulled onstage when they last played Seattle now "gets
lots of chicks." Yes, replied Savage, "I think he gets laid a lot." Asked what
they planned to give each other for Christmas, one band member de-
scribed a giant dildo, and the other mentioned a butt plug. This presum-
ably hilarious conversation was rebroadcast at various points during the
day to promote the morning show's singular attractions.

The irony is that while Savage's show is often entertaining, most fans of
"alternative" would prefer to hear music in the morning. The problem is
partly that so many other stations have moved to shock-oriented formats
that Seattle's DJs now vie for media attention as well as audience share.4
Savage explains that his goal is to make people laugh, and not to offend
anyone, but he seems genuinely to believe that frequent discussion of sex
and antics involving female nudity are what it takes to get people's atten-
tion. Yet while Savage's show appears to have won a satisfactory audience,
The End has since truncated it. During drive time (the popular listening
hours between 9 and 10 a.m. and 5 and 6 p.m.), the station broadcasts
"end-to-end music." Ironically, "end-to-end music" features a more diverse
and less repetitive playlist, with more personalized input from the DJ
and fewer commercial interruptions: precisely what alternative radio offered in
the days before corporate profits were its self-evident priority.

Presumably, were the station to adopt an "end-to-end music" format all
day long, it would have a happier core audience, but one that is more de-
mographically diffuse, less disproportionately male, and possibly smaller.
(They would also have far less time to air commercials and advertise the
station's own promotions.) Describing the difference between the station's
1991 debut and the current avatar, one unhappy listener explains, "They
have killed what the original End Team built by pounding the same songs
into our heads over and over." Because young men have been found to
listen to radio for only a few minutes at a time, the logic is that only by
playing the most popular songs as often as possible—including the most
popular older songs—can the station successfully increase its target au-
dience. Nevertheless it seems likely that by attempting to overcome the
problem of fickle listeners, commercial radio has in fact exacerbated it.
Alternative radio fans in the 1980s were typically extremely loyal to their
radio station, since they closely identified it with their alternative way of
life. By revealing the underlying commercialism, and, especially, by re-
ducing variety, stations such as The End have increased listeners' proclivity
to "surf" from channel to channel. Hence another reason why emphasizing
masculinity is so potentially desirable a feature. In the station's present-day
form, Seattle's young males might no longer distinguish greatly between
the alternative credentials of The End's music and that of competing
formats—but they might, nevertheless, be persuaded to identify themselves with the station that brings topless women into the studio and promotes such stunts on its Web site.

We Can Be Heroes

Nevertheless it seems clear that there is only so much mileage to be had from a topless woman in a pickup truck. For obvious reasons, radio is not the ideal medium through which to exploit nudity: the description of Seattle drivers’ responses to a topless woman during rush hour, delivered live by an intern named Snot, is not the kind of programming to generate long-term listener interest. The fact remains that the recording industry, and, to an extent, the music radio industry, have a considerable investment in making sure that youths of both sexes continue to find heroes in pop-stars: alternative or otherwise. Yet as the diversion to shock radio suggests, that investment has, to a certain extent, been damaged by commercialism.

Indeed, after years of declining sales, during which the recording industry lost out to video games and the Internet, some insiders began to opine that alternative music needed to recuperate the passion of its postpunk and grunge-era glory days. Androgynous masculinity returned in the late 1990s in the form of Marilyn Manson, whose calculated homage to David Bowie is, perhaps, convincing for fans too young to remember the original Ziggy Stardust. Although many catchy, inventive, and moving songs do get played on the radio, the commercial “alternatives” of today often take the form of trendy pastiche. This was especially true of 1997 and 1998, years in which End listeners harked to Oasis’s incongruous blend of crass machismo and imitative Beatlemania, and witnessed the bizarre resurgence of swing.

With some notable exceptions (e.g., Manson, Rage against the Machine, Radiohead), fewer and fewer alternative bands are cultivating the enduring fandoms that once characterized a youth culture in which favored musicians were revered as prophets. I have no doubt that today’s young fans are drawn to alternative music for the same reasons as their predecessors, and with many of the same effects. But in today’s ultracompetitive and profit-driven market, the rhythm has changed. Record labels—determined to find and to milk the next big thing—seldom promote more than one or two singles off of individual albums. Popular singles are played incessantly while they are hot, and then disappear. Only a rare few join the hundred or so songs deemed sufficiently popular to constitute the station’s regular catalog. What was once a pantheon of alternative heroes increasingly resembles a crowded field of fallen wonders, forgotten flashes in the pan.

What is clear, therefore, is a potential divide between the kind of “alternative” music culture that serves radio stations like The End, and the kind that serves the Napster-besieged recording industry. Radio stations can thrive off of catchy, overplayed hits that attract a mass audience, using promotions and shock-jock antics to boost listener interest. Record companies, by contrast, rely on a more dedicated consumer, willing to spend as much as twenty dollars to buy a full-length compact disc (complete with liner notes and other trimmings unavailable through free downloads). As young male consumers spend more time and money on everything from hit movies to computer games, soda pop, fast food, fashion, sports equipment, car stereos, and chat lines—all products that are advertised on The End—the share they devote to music diminishes. Moreover, even as they help to create a male consumer with numerous extramusical desires, stations such as The End are in a position to increase their own revenues by sponsoring and promoting special concert events.

Since the late 1990s, one of the most notable trends in alternative radio has been the fusion of rap and hip-hop with rock and heavy metal. This marks a difference between the 1980s, when white alternative fans expressed little interest in a largely black hip-hop culture, and the 1990s, when white alternative musicians began consciously to model themselves on African American precedents. Along with the Beastie Boys, one of the most influential pioneers of rap-rock fusion is Rage against the Machine, a racially mixed L.A. band, who—significantly—represent an important exception to the apolitical commercialism of recent “alternatives.” It is ironic, therefore, to find the hard-rocking, aggressive rap sound that many fans identify with Rage’s leftist politics appropriated by newer artists such as Kid Rock and Limp Bizkit. For these newcomers, black hip-hop and political militance provide desirable stylistic models for the crafting of commercial masculine personae. Hence Limp Bizkit’s “Nookie,” ranked number one by End listeners in 1999, translates a discernibly Rage-indebted sound into depoliticized anger at an unfaithful girlfriend. In Kid Rock’s seventh-ranked “Bawitdaba,” the white speaker identifies himself with inner-city life, attributing the plight of his incarcerated “homes” and misunderstood “hoods” to everything from crooked police officers and
hookers to the IRS. Unfortunately, this cross-race identification lapses into misogynistic fantasy in "Cowboy," another Kid Rock favorite, in which the speaker imagines himself as an L.A. pimp. An even more over-the-top instance of fantasized, hip-hop-inspired omnipotence is Crazy Town's "Revolution Door," a 2001 hit in which the speaker boasts about his mansion, "the way that [he's] hung," and his consequent ability to keep an endless supply of women "in rotation." Hence, as in hip-hop itself, commercialization has defused the political opposition voiced in Rage's groundbreaking fusion, or in African American pioneers such as Public Enemy. Moreover, as political radicalism is reduced to stylistic pastiche, male political passion is conflated with misogyny, sexism, and homophobia.

As I write (in mid-2001), it is as yet too soon to determine the extent to which the current surge of rap-rock fusions is a passing fad. To be sure, rap-rock has already outlasted such minor ephemera as swing, and judging by its commercial success, it may well enjoy as long a run as grunge did. But even if it does, will this latest "alternative" provide the lasting heroes of grunge and its postpunk precursors? Glancing at the station's "Top End Songs of the Millennium," what stands out is how very few late 1990s hits—rap-rock or otherwise—made it into the top two hundred. Is it possible that those who voted were conscious of a qualitative difference between men who feel and cry, and the recent emphasis on posturing machismo? Is it evident, perhaps, that when music and music videos follow the cue of shock jocks, porn flicks, men's magazines, and late-night TV, the entire notion of "alternative" music collapses, reduced as it is to a kind of license for brazenness? If the answer to these questions is yes, can the recording industry survive in the postdigital age by peddling ever more explicit musical products, to an ever younger audience?

Given the uncertainty ahead, it is unsurprising to find the recording industry exploring strategies of many kinds. In lieu of advertising new releases and indirectly promoting radio play, labels might begin simply to buy blocks of airtime for the music they want to pitch to consumers. When this proposal was discussed on The End's morning show, both listeners and DJs were predictably skeptical. The DJs were loath to be stripped of what little autonomy over programming remains to them. Listeners, for their part, are already compelled to change channels frequently in order to hear music they like. It seems likely, however, that neither DJs nor listeners, but rather corporate executives, will decide whether to develop the idea further.

An Alternative to "Alternative"

There is, in fact, another option available to Seattle's alternative music enthusiasts. Indeed, the city is fortunate in supporting a bona fide (non-commercial) alternative radio station, 90.3 KCMU, licensed through the University of Washington, but funded directly by listeners through semiannual pledge drives. Although KCMU easily raises the support it needs to cover its operating budget, the station remains vulnerable to outside interests eager to purchase it and turn it into yet another commercial enterprise. So far the University of Washington remains committed to public radio and uninterested in instituting the kind of management that would make the station more competitive with commercial counterparts.

What is interesting about KCMU is how emphatically it contrasts with commercial radio stations, even the comparatively "alternative" commercial stations of the 1980s. KCMU not only airs no commercials (apart from mentioning community sponsors) but also conforms to no established commercial format. The morning show, hosted by John Richards, is among the most recognizable of its offerings, concentrating on recent alternative and indie rock (some of which is eventually played on commercial stations). But other shows are either devoted to specialty categories that would, on commercial radio, receive little or no airplay (indie rap and hip-hop, blues, world music, reggae, jazz), or they are so diverse and unpredictable as to suggest no particular category. Although, to be sure, it is possible to construct a KCMU listener profile—one that would doubtless demonstrate that listeners are, by and large, college-educated and middle-class—the management of the station has no interest in this endeavor. KCMU believes that it serves a comparatively wide age demographic, plays far more non-European and African American music than any other station claiming "alternative" status, and makes no assumptions about the tastes of male and female listeners.

The Girl with the Thorn in Her Side

In 1994, when I first moved to Seattle, I immediately became a loyal End listener. On The End I discovered many of the same bands that were then being played regularly on WLIR, with, perhaps, some additional emphasis on grunge (an obvious Seattle favorite). Friends of mine were already devotees of KCMU, and I occasionally tuned into the station while in their
company. I found it jarring when the programming shifted from experimental forms of alternative rock, to hip-hop, to country music or world music. I was not necessarily opposed to any of this music; I was fully capable of enjoying it on a case-by-case basis. But, to put it simply, KC MU was too alternative a station to suit my well-entrenched "alternative" predilections.

Although I did not fully realize it for quite some time, I had become identified with a commercial music culture that, however glib and formulaic, provided me with an idiom that I valued, both as a teacher, and for its own sake. By keeping up to date with "alternative," I believed I could track the passions and interests of my students; I could peer into their cultural unconscious while simultaneously enlivening my own. By functioning as a "mainstream avant-garde," alternative music culture could help me to identify with students considerably younger than myself, just as it had helped me, as a college student, to relate to male peers, and, as a young professional, to relate to like-minded individuals at the workplace. The best part of all is that I could do all this while taking part in a culture that seemed deliberately, even insistently, to blur artificial boundaries between the sexes.

That gender-transcending potential is, I believe, at least for the present, almost entirely gone. Although I still enjoy some of The End's programming, too often I feel as though I am poaching on the terrain of teenage boys. Moreover, the more I listen to KC MU, the less tolerance I have for overplayed singles—much less for commercials, promotions, and the swagger of DJs. I also no longer wish, as I once did, that KC MU would commit itself exclusively to playing alternative rock music. In the absence of a viable youth-culture community, it seems unjustifiable to wish to exclude forms of music that are already all but inaudible from this rare public forum—this truer alternative. Indeed, perhaps through more concerted support of public radio, through a wider recognition of its value, it might be possible to form a community based on diversity and the public interest rather than on what—at least since World War II—has become the most typical "sub-cultural" foundation: the alienation of youth. That was undoubtedly the vision of those who nearly succeeded in enabling community organizations to broadcast on low-power radio stations, a plan killed by commercial broadcasters and National Public Radio in December 2000.

Like so many of the new products it advertises and discusses—movies and television like Orgazmo and The Men's Show, the Hooters restaurant
chain, Maxim or Gear magazine—The End and its ilk have helped to concretize a new masculine "nature," exemplified by the careless misogyny of DJs, and encapsulated in the tag line from a frequently played commercial: "If you don't talk, she won't know how stupid you are." Men, according to this formula, are simpleminded, instinct driven, goal oriented, competitive, and unemotional. But for their relentless sex drives, they would be content to play video games and turn up their tunes. Women, by contrast, are complex, inscrutable, sensorial, creative, unpredictable, demanding, and maddening. The irony is that women are everything that alternative's male musicians once were. Indeed, it is perhaps for that very reason that today's men are expected—even encouraged—to resent women so deeply.

To the seasoned ear, the recent successes of Korn and Marilyn Manson, both of whom have captured large male audiences by dramatizing male pain and frustration, may seem woefully imitative and insincere. Yet whatever their limitations, the success of these bands testifies to the continuing relevance of the man who feels and cries. Indeed, even white rapper Eminem's disturbingly homophobic and misogynistic music represents, as Richard Kim has observed, male "pain and negativity" in a deliberately commercialized form. "Faggot," says Eminem, "doesn't necessary mean gay people," but "just ... taking away your manhood," an experience he ties to his humiliating past as a "poor white trash" schoolboy. Where 1980s predecessors had sought to heal such traumatic losses by an alternative exploration of the feminine, today's more rigid sexual norms have invited a new generation of male sufferers to negate the feminine in a kind of anesthetizing psychic disavowal. Hence Eminem's imagined violence against women and "faggots" is but the darker obverse of Kid Rock's omnipotent "Cowboy"—whose limitless mastery over women implies his invulnerability. What is certain, in any case, is that ostensibly passé forms of masculinity are inscribed everyday in the music of bands who are unlikely—at least for now—to be played on radio stations like The End. For all of these reasons, it remains possible and even important to believe that the man content to bond with a taco, and the man behind the "Revolving Door," are still largely the wished-for projections of their corporate sponsors.

Epilogue

In March 2001, 90.3 KC MU became KEXP, reflecting a new "partnership" between the station, the University of Washington, and Experience Music
Project, a recently opened interactive music museum, described by the Seattle Times as Microsoft billionaire Paul Allen’s “$240 million rock ‘n’ roll plaything.” When rumors first surfaced about the contemplated changes, fans of the station feared that the University had succumbed to commercial pressure in one of its most insidious forms. But for the time being at least, the partnership has enhanced the profile of the station without any discernible changes to its programming or staff. KEXP, now located off-campus, has almost double the broadcast signal of its predecessor, and—more significant—its CD-quality audio stream is at the vanguard of Web broadcasting technology. Hence Seattle’s community music radio station—still largely supported by local listeners—is now at the forefront of a new radio technology that “could make the AM/FM dial obsolete.”

If, as is expected, the Internet goes wireless, it will almost certainly transform radio as we know it. To be sure, a theoretically infinite wireless Internet will provide a means to bypassing corporate radio; but will it provide a means to realizing the community interest? In fact, some of the most innovative Internet broadcasting options offer a personalized playlist, a feature that not only removes “radio” from a local context but also dispenses with the tangible listening community that the current technology provides. For the moment, however, commercial stations (many of which, like The End, also broadcast over the Web), still dominate despite the growing popular malaise—not least because listeners continue to tune in to traditional radio in their cars.

Since my first draft of this essay in 1999, several additional changes have taken place in Seattle radio. Kiss 106, Seattle’s not so subtly “feminine” station, is now a memory; replaced in 2000 by a more hits-oriented adult contemporary format. Howard Stern has at long last entered the Seattle market, with the city’s buses currently proclaiming his appearance on 99.9 KISW, Entercom’s classic rock station. Andy Savage has a new and younger female cohost on The End’s morning show. Although it is difficult to document such changes without inside knowledge, it appears to me that his show has begun to recognize the station’s large adolescent listenership. To be sure, sex is still a recurring theme: cropping up in general discussion, through guests hawking sex-related products, or through gags such as inviting strangers to “make out” in the studio to win free concert tickets. Savage himself has recently married, prompting his younger and single cohosts to tease him about his newfound enthusiasm for “relationships.”

What seems clear, in any case, is that events involving public nudity figure less, and interviews with bands figure more.

Last week, according to The End’s Web site, Mark Hoppus, a member of Blink 182, called, allowing the DJs to discuss the “inside scoop on the new CD and the truth on farts and poop.” Despite this unpromising start, I clicked on the file; the band in question records a catchy and often enjoyable variety of postpunk pop. The discussion focuses on the new video (which I have not seen). When the record label wanted to spend $750,000, the band resisted, preferring an unscripted approach, shot on the streets of L.A. with a handheld camera. In the end, the video was shot on the streets but still cost $500,000 to make. Hoppus verifies that the homeless person who is found in the video and taken to a strip club was a real homeless person—though what became of him afterward, Hoppus does not know. The old lady seen shaving her head was paid only $100 for her trouble and, Hoppus muses, may not have hair again for many years to come. I click off before the discussion turns to farts and poop.

It could be my imagination, but in the last few weeks I have sensed a certain sea change. Rap-rock acts from 1999 and 2000 such as Kid Rock, Limp Bizkit, and Eminem are no longer new, and more recent examples of the genre, such as Crazy Town’s “Revolution Door,” have slipped from the charts. In the meantime, newer End favorites are tending more toward postpunk and other rock fusions—familiar musical fare, in which young male angst is less frequently tied to misogyny. A commercial for a local car dealership is urging men not to be too “practical” when they choose a car; the right choice, they are told, requires “bonding” and “passion.”

The End is currently playing two songs that, to my mind, represent the best in today’s alternative music. The first is “Short Skirt, Long Jacket” by Cake, a band played frequently on KCMU before crossing over into the mainstream. What I like most is the song’s witty ironization of male expectations of women as they are often voiced in song. The girl whom the speaker desires will cut through red tape with a machete, tour facilities, drive a Chrysler Le Baron, and have “a voice that is dark like tinted glass.” She will wear a “short skirt” and a “loooooooong jacket.” In the last four days, driving to and from work for about twenty minutes during the most popular radio hours, I have managed to hear the song every day, and sometimes once each way. The second song is “Rexall,” from the second solo album by Dave Navarro, a musician who started out in 1991 as the guitarist
for Jane’s Addiction, a dark-edged, hard-rocking California band. The
tune is a measure of the last wave of “alternative” music to
focus on the experience of men who feel and cry. It is a brooding tale of
dying love that manages to convey the speaker’s pain without misogyny:
“There is no love left in your eyes,/There is love between your thighs.”

When I heard the song on The End this afternoon, the DJ introduced
Navarro as the man now having sex with MTV celebrity and Maxim cover
girl Carmen Electra.

Notes

Early versions of this essay were presented at an MLA session on radio in December 1998, and at the Radiocacy conference in Cardiff in November 1999. My thanks to DJ Kim Monroe, Andy Savage, Carolyn Coffey, and John Richards. Sara Pourghasemi’s independent study on radio culture catalyzed my interest in this area. Bryce Bernard’s research assistance was most helpful, and Ken Nagelberg’s expertise was invaluable. Thanks also to Mark Sammons and Kelly Davis, and to Susan Squier for her superb editorial comments.

1 Like most commercial stations of its kind, the current management of KNDD does not explicitly describe itself as an “alternative” radio station, preferring more neutral terms such as “new music.” But End listeners frequently use the term to describe the music they hear on the station, and the station and its ilk are described as “alternative” within industry circles. The term “alternative” has become increasingly vexed, simultaneously signifying opposition to, and an established sector within, mainstream commercial music. In this essay, unless otherwise specified, I use the term to connote a paradoxical category that both is and claims not to be mainstream and commercial. Wherever appropriate I use quotation marks to emphasize attendant ironies and ambiguities.

2 On the declining enrollment of young men, see Tamar Lewin, “American Colleges Begin to Ask, Where Have All the Men Gone?” New York Times, 6 December 1998 (online).


[radio] almost overnight... into a highly concentrated market in which a
handful of firms own hundreds of stations and nearly every market is dominated
by two or three firms maxed out with six to eight stations each” (“Kennard, the

5 McChesney, Rich Media, 33.

6 My description of deregulation’s effects on music radio is indebted to Sara
Pourghasemi’s unpublished essay “Radio Culture.” A 1998 article in The Stranger,
a free Seattle weekly, was devoted to readers’ complaints about The End. One
reader claimed to have received the following response when he called to com-
plain about repetition: “I’m playing what the people want to hear, you stupid
fuck! Nobody listens to the radio for more than ten minutes!” (Kathleen Wilson,
should add that many of the DJs I interviewed said that verbal abuse, particularly
from young listeners, was one of the most difficult aspects of their jobs. Andy
Savage, The End’s morning DJ, has aired conversations with callers in which he
explains (civilly) that the station is obligated to play what people are buying, for
as long as they are buying it, in order to attract the largest listening audience.
The explanation indicates how little the station conceals its commercial priorities and
also how much it relies on its “alternative” image to distinguish itself from a
“hits” station pure and simple.

7 In contrast to my more general use of the term, Nagelberg strictly defines “al-
ternative” music and radio as noncommercial (usually either public or college-
owned radio). In so doing, he demonstrates why it is so difficult to stabilize the
definition; in particular, why it is both easy and desirable to appropriate “alter-
native” for decidedly commercial purposes. “Alternative radio,” he explains,
“program[s] music that is either too new, too complex, or too controversial to be played on commercial radio stations.” Noncommercial radio is thus implicated
in legitimating the lucrative “alternative” credentials of many highly successful
commercial products. Corporate producers and broadcasters monitor the reception
of bands signed to independent labels with an eye toward developing the latest in commercial “alternatives.” Indeed, profitable indie labels (such as the
Seattle-based Sub-Pop) are frequently purchased by huge entertainment con-
glomerates. Hence, in addition to promoting commercial “alternatives” to
commercial radio, the current climate features “indoor” record labels that are both
directly and indirectly dependent on corporate support. My thanks to Ken
Nagelberg for permitting me to cite his unpublished conference paper “What Is
the Frequency, Kenneth? A Case Study of the Mainstreaming of College Radio.”
See also Ken Nagelberg, “No Alternative: The Death of Alternative Radio in

8 Characteristic of the effects of deregulation during this period, WLIR (broadcast
from Long Island) was for a time WDRB but is now WLIR again. It was and
remains a commercial (rather than public or college-owned) radio station.
10 Other important merchandising developments in the popular music industry in the 1980s and early 1990s included tie-ins with movies, Lollapalooza-style megatours, and, of course, the Internet.
11 I describe these notions at length in the introduction to Goth Style, a forthcoming coedited anthology. Some of my thoughts on the subject have been published in "Postmodern Gothic: The Lost Brides of Frankenstein and the 'Dark Taste of Fear,'" Diegesis: Journal for the Association of Research in Popular Culture 1 (fall 1997): 21–53.
12 On the representation of male experience, see my "Postmodern Gothic."
13 See my discussion of the gothic rock music of the Cure, the popular comic book novella The Crow, the film version of Anne Rice's Interview with the Vampire, and Poppy Z. Brite's popular novel Lost Souls in my "Postmodern Gothic."
14 On the modern (post-Enlightenment) shift from "homologous" to "incommensurable" constructions of sexual difference—a shift from understanding sexual difference as a difference in degree to understanding it as a difference in kind—see Thomas Laqueur, "Orgasm, Generation, and the Politics of Reproduction," in The Making of the Modern Body, ed. Catherine Gallagher and Thomas Laqueur (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 1–41.
15 The failure of grunge to attract a sizable U.K. audience is discussed in Flavia, "Rebels without a Clue," Cups 87 (February 1998): 18–19.
16 Bands like Rage against the Machine (U.S.) and the Prodigy (U.K.), for example, fused hip-hop beats and raps with elements of the gothic, industrial, grunge, and techno long familiar to alternative fans.
18 Entercom has almost doubled in size since my first draft of this paper in 1999: as of June 2001 they own ninety-five stations nationwide and boast of operating "multistation groups" in eighteen markets including twelve of the nation's top fifty markets, one of which is Seattle. Significantly, the company's Web site boasts that "radio enables advertisers to pinpoint their message to specific consumer groups with demographically specific radio stations that maximize their advertising investment." See www.entercom.com.
19 Interview with John Richards, February 1999.
20 Prior to Entercom, The End was owned by Viacom, owners of MTV. I am not suggesting that Entercom invented or even intentionally deployed a masculinizing strategy as such. It seems far more likely that having acquired The End while already operating The Mountain, Entercom encouraged the station to pursue its "core" audience (men under age thirty-five) in ways that minimized overlap with their "adult" radio station. That, in the postgrunge era, such men (often adolescents) would be expected to desire a "hard" masculine persona is not, of course, the result of any single corporate policy.
21 Like The End, Kiss does not make its gender preference explicit. According to its (pink-shaded) Web site, 62 percent of its listeners are female, and over 90 percent are between the ages of eighteen and forty-four. (Radio stations seem loath to admit that many of their listeners are under eighteen, although the Kiss Web site is happy to inform potential advertisers that a significant share of its listeners are the parents of young children.) On Kiss's format change in 2000, see the epilogue to this essay.
22 See Lewin, "American Colleges," for a report on how liberal arts colleges have begun to design different brochures for male and female students, emphasizing internships for the former and intimate classroom experience for the latter.
23 When, for example, "Lovesong," a catchy single off the Cure's otherwise brooding and lyrically disturbing album Disintegration (1989), peaked at number two, long-standing fans might have heard the song on "alternative" stations such as WLR (then WDRH), or they might have heard it on 2100, a Top 40 station in the same listening area.
24 The latest releases from Alanis Morissette—an artist heavily played on The End as recently as 1997—received very little KNDD airplay. Yet the Grammy-winning Morissette was among the most heavily played "alternative" artists on the "feminine" Kiss 106. Again, it is not necessarily the case that The End consciously conspires against softer and female alternative artists. In addition to monitoring sales and nationwide airplay, the station introduces new music during specialty shows and tracks listener requests. Such active listeners—probably among the youngest of The End's audience—are the most likely to be influenced by the kinds of music the station has already committed to playing. Thus the "masculine" preference becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Moreover, the most frequently played singles in any given period are played on an almost hourly basis, for weeks and even months at a time, allowing for astonishingly little variety. This means that the great majority of new alternative singles, let alone new music, receive little or no airplay.
25 Monroe, for example, has commented on music videos featuring partial female nudity, protesting against the absence of "equal time" for men. Carolyn Coffey, the female cohost of The End's morning show until 1998, often voiced comparable opinions. It is perhaps fair to say that the station's deliberate anti-PC rebelliousness is, at best, offset by the predisposition to favor "equality" between the sexes. Unfortunately, while "equality" is sometimes invoked to criticize "PC" preferences—for example, the Lilith Fair tour's preference for female backup bands, which was criticized by The End's morning DJ—it is, to my knowledge, never invoked to question why so few female artists are played, or so few female DJs are employed. On the whole, however, I feel disposed to congratulate Monroe and Coffey for the spirit and integrity they display on the air. Their voices, however circumscribed, offer important exceptions to what would otherwise be an unmitigated boy's club.


28 "Nice Guys Finish Last" is the title of a 1998 song by the postpunk band Green Day; Kid Rock’s "Cowboy," one of the Top 20 End hits of 1999, narrates a fantasy of watching "lots a crotch," rocking "bitches," and finding "West Coast pussy" for one’s friends back in Detroit: "[What Do I] Do Right" by Jimmie’s Chicken Shack was ranked 105th by End listeners in 1999.

29 Jesse Oxfeld, "Not So Dumb Jocks," Brill’s Content 4, no. 5 (June 2001): 100–103, 137. According to a Manhattan radio consultant, the show is so popular with young women because "every day society gets progressively more PC, so their opportunity to be a guy gets diminished" (102).

30 To do justice to Guttermouth—who, having recorded postpunk albums on independent labels since 1991, are making their first-ever foray into commercial radio—the song is not without some nuance. The lyrics imply that in addition to Venus/Mars sexual difference, the speaker is troubled by his girlfriend’s persistent interest in "doing" his friends and fellow band members. On the other hand, female infidelity has become a common theme in alternative music, providing a handy justification for male anger. It is worth noting that while most alternative musicians are in their teens or twenties, the shock jocks tend to be considerably older. According to Oxfeld, Opie and Anthony are, respectively, thirty-six and thirty-nine years old; according to Rahner, Leykis is forty-four. Andy Savage, the host of The End’s morning show, did not divulge his age during our interview or on his Web site: he looks to be about forty. Howard Stern has been around forever.

31 After several months during which The End’s morning show DJs were all male, in 2000, another female cohost joined its ranks: younger and slimmer than the departed Coffey, but, like the latter, a voice in her own right.

32 Listeners (usually women) who suspect that their partners are cheating on them are encouraged to call in. Savage then calls the suspected two-timer and tells him that his name has been drawn to receive a free bouquet of roses that he might send to his sweetheart. If he then provides the name of another woman, he finds that he is part of a radio hoax and that his aggrieved partner is on the line ready to have it out with him, all for the delectation of the Seattle listening area. When one male listener learned by these means that his live-in girlfriend had been straying, he was especially piqued that the "boob job" he had paid for was now being "worked" by another man. The girlfriend replied that he deserved it for destroying her self-esteem.

33 For more on this controversial single by the Prodigy, see Flavia, "Rebels without a Clue."

34 Typical of the kind of media attention that morning-show antics garner in 1999 the Seattle Weekly (another free local paper) did a cover story on the subject. The article is accompanied by several photographs of Savage dreamily ogling an obviously nude (but discreetly posed) model. The cover of the Weekly features one such photograph alongside the words "SEX in the Morning." Not only Savage but several other local morning shows are described. See J. Kingston Pierce, "Radio Raunch," Seattle Weekly, 8 April 1999.

35 Interview with Andy Savage and Carolyn Coffey, September 1998. Again, I want to emphasize that most of the discussion of sex is nonexploitative and—while inappropriate for children—usually interesting.

36 According to Pierce, in 1999 Savage’s show ranked number three with listeners between the ages of eighteen and thirty-four.

37 Cited by Wilson, "Stick a Fork in Them."

38 John Richards interview.

39 This was the opinion of a record industry representative who appeared as a guest on The End’s morning show but declined to be interviewed.

40 For an interesting article on Manson, see Chris Heath, "The Love Song of Marilyn Manson," Rolling Stone, 15 October 1998. In his earlier embodiment as "Antichrist Superstar," Manson was likened to heavy metal legend Alice Cooper rather than glam rocker Bowie. Manson’s "Family Values" tour succeeded in rousing the ire of a number of respectable communities across the United States. One cannot help but admire Manson’s genius for reinventing himself in ways using manifold cult predecessors to create an ever-transforming "alternative" pastiche. Most recently Manson has been promoting his December 2000 album, Holy Wood, through an art exhibition.

41 After two best-selling albums, Oasis’s popularity has plummeted, and the swing fad is all but forgotten.

42 Radiohead, whose 1996 album O.K. Computer was a Grammy nominee and a commercial success, despite comparatively little radio support, is, of all of the most recent bands, the most comparable to the postpunk, pregrunge-era alternative scene. In fact, the band has been together since 1990. Singles off of Radiohead’s two most recent albums, Kid A (2000) and Amnesia (2001), have enjoyed modest airplay on The End.

43 Of course, the same corporate entities sometimes have considerable holdings in both broadcasting and production. Napster is one of several Internet sites that allow users to "trade" downloads of digitized music.

44 Each year The End organizes and incessantly promotes at least two concert extravaganzas, featuring the year’s hottest alternative artists: "Deck the Hall Ball," an indoor concert in December (tickets conveniently go on sale months before so that young listeners can purchase them prior to seasonal shopping), and "Endfest," an outdoor summer concert. The End has also sponsored and promoted "Board This," an early-spring outdoor event featuring snowboarding and
other popular sports as well as music. The obvious lucrativeness of promoting mass youth culture events while effectively advertising them free of charge on one's own radio station demonstrates The End's incentive to expand its adolescent audience, in addition to the adult male listeners that constitute its official “core.”

Among many other political activities, the L.A.-based Rage, who have been building a following since the early 1990s, played a free concert to fans and demonstrators during the 2000 Democratic National Convention. The band's Web site, www.ratm.com, is devoted to various political causes. The Beastie Boys' variation on rap-rock fusion, dating back to the late 1980s, is marked by a more humorous, often tongue-in-cheek, and wholly apolitical tone. The song features an enraged speaker railing against the unfair “girlie” who has “fucked” his “homies” and reduced him to a “chump.” In the oft-repeated refrain, he protests that he “did it all for the nookie,” so she can take “that cookie” and “stick it up [her]—yeah.” In the popular video, this theme of wounded pride is undercut somewhat, since it features the lead vocalist being followed by a throng of adoring women. At the same time, the video attributes Rage-like political credentials to the band by having the police arrest the lead singer for performing an illegal concert. One Seattle mother told me how difficult it was when her eleven-year-old son, whose classmates were also Bizkit fans, insisted on buying the album (she eventually agreed that he could listen to it in his room, out of earshot of herself and her seven-year-old daughter). She was not clear whether her son had heard the song on The End, a Top 40 station, or perhaps both.

See note 28 on “Cowboy.”

With hip-hop and Rage against the Machine doubtless in mind, Crazy Town's promoters portray the band as products of L.A.'s urban tensions; but one band member rather more honestly likens himself to “an X-rated Dennis the Menace.” In the video for “Revolving Door,” which was shot by a porn director, the band is surrounded by barely clad women. In contrast to these groupies, two skater girls express initial reluctance until, at the very end, they remove their sweatshirts to reveal that—in the words of one band member—“they're the two most bangin' girls there.” See John Wiederhorn, “Crazy Town into the Skater Chicks in New Vid,” MTV News Online, 7 June 2001. Crazy Town has been cited as one of several bands played on The End whose “explicit content music” is advertised during after-school programming. Eric Schumacher-Rasmussen, “Blink 182, Crazy Town, Too Explicit for Teens, Report Says,” MTV News Online, 24 April 2001.

Homophobia is most notoriously at play in the music of the Grammy Award-winning Eminem, another white rapper and recent End favorite. It is worth noting, however, that the most controversial elements in Eminem's music are not especially evident in the radio hits. For a superb analysis of Eminem, see Richard Kim, “Eminem—Bad Rap?” The Nation 272, no. 9 (5 March 2001): 5–6.

50 On March 30, 2001, KCMU became KEXP, a development I describe in the epilogue to this essay.

51 For a detailed description of Louisiana State University's very different attitude toward the management of its college radio station, see Nagelberg, "What's the Frequency, Kenneth?" and Nagelberg, "No Alternative."

52 John Richards interview.

53 My experience is not atypical, nor is it limited to listeners of my age and sex. One twenty-eight-year-old man conveyed a typical opinion when he told me that he no longer feels comfortable with the End, which strikes him as serving a kind of trendy, slackerlike male adolescent identity. However, my college-age students (female as well as male) often listen to The End, and I have also heard it playing at day care centers, cafés, and other places where young people work.


55 Korn is particularly recognizable as a derivative of Nine Inch Nails, a pioneering industrial-gothic band that remains popular with young listeners.

56 Kim, "Eminem.”

57 A good example is Pedro the Lion, the recording artist name for David Bazan, a Seattle-based indie musician frequently played on KCMU. Bazan's minimalist music and intimate first-person lyrics are almost startlingly intense.


61 Martin, "Brave New Radio.”

62 A 1999 survey found that two-thirds of all teenagers were willing to pay a subscription fee to receive commercial-free programming, a statistic that bodes well for this kind of venture. For this citation and a description of various Web broadcasting formats, see Martin, "Brave New Radio.”

Works Cited


