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# A little bit country, a little bit rock 'n' roll

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The world of commercial radio tilted just slightly on its carefully programmed axis at the stroke of midnight three weeks ago.

On April 23, long-standing classic-rock outlet KZPS/92.5 FM tossed out Foreigner and Fleetwood Mac, replaced them with Willie Nelson and Wilco, and gave birth to Lone Star 92.5, a station that straddles the lines of old-school country, alt-rock Americana and Southern-fried rock.

But it wasn't just the music that changed. Blaring, high-volume commercials had shape-shifted into low-key, PBS-style corporate sponsorships.

The resulting switch in musical and advertising approaches raised eyebrows not only in the Metroplex but around the world. Newspapers from New York to Canada and France took note, as did late-night TV comedian Stephen Colbert, who labeled the station a "musical menace": "KZPS, commercials remind us that we need things," he admonished in his best mock-Bill O'Reilly style. "If it weren't for commercials, I'd forget to buy food."

Yet KZPS isn't some renegade indie station upsetting Madison Avenue's apple cart. It's part of the communications empire run by Clear Channel, the San Antonio-based radio/TV giant. While it's too soon to pronounce the switch a ratings hit or flop - the next quarterly Arbitron survey results come out in July - or to know whether Clear Channel will use it as a template for other markets, it's certain that this format change is symbolic of today's quick-changing media environment, where satellite radio, HD radio, the Internet and the iPod have begun to shift how listeners consume music.

"One of the things that's happened in terrestrial radio is that we've gotten away from making changes. Too many times, we used a cookie cutter from market to market," says J.D. Freeman, president and market manager for Clear Channel Dallas. "One of the things corporate said was, 'Look, if we didn't put any barriers on you at all, what would you guys do?'"

KZPS, which, Freeman says, had been experiencing audience declines for four or five years, was thought to be a good candidate for a stylistic makeover. (Though, ironically, it showed a slight bump in the most recent, pre-switchover ratings, moving from 18th to 16th in the market.)

Program director Duane Doherty had been thinking about something different, too: a Texas-centric album-rock format that could tie together fans of country, classic and alt-rock. It would be a spot on the dial where the good ol' boy Charlie Daniels, singer-songwriter Bob Dylan and Dallas neo-country outfit Old 97's could find common ground.

Tried first on KZPS's HD channel (many FM stations now broadcast alternative programming on their high-definition frequencies), the format was deemed successful enough to move to the flagship signal, and classic rock was relegated to HD.

"All these different styles and genres fit together in my mind," says Doherty of how Lone Star 92.5 came to be. "The feedback was very positive. Streaming online and with the limited number of HD radios in the

market, we got lots of positive feedback via e-mail."

### Quiet approach

But it's been KZPS' way with commercials that has attracted the most national attention. Other stations have flirted with the idea of sponsorships in recent years: last year, Cadbury Schweppes' Snapple brand sponsored 40 days of programming at Boston's WFNX-FM, and Pizza Hut purchased 60 minutes of drive-time air in 50 markets for *The Pizza Hut Free & Cheesy Music Hour*. In 2005, a small radio-station chain in eastern Long Island briefly experimented with the concept. All of these deals are a throwback to radio and TV's early days, when single-sponsor shows were common.

But the KZPS plan may be the most determined effort in a major market. So far, the likes of AT&T, Southwest Airlines, Coors Brewing Company and Guitar Center have signed up to sponsor segments.

"It was born out of trying to match Duane [Doherty]'s approach of 'no hype,'" says Kelly Kibler, the station's sales director. "Commercials tend to be hype because they're trying to break through the noise. I was trying to come up with something for the format. ... We needed to make the sponsorship model work along those lines."

This combination of programming and understated advertising has the radio world looking at North Texas. "It's a pretty interesting idea and it's a pretty good one," says Joe Howard, editor-in-chief at *Radio Ink*, a broadcasting trade magazine. "The million-dollar question is will advertisers embrace it.... It's a tale as old as radio: how to have more music and fewer commercials. This is a pretty clever idea."

"Long before the iPod, long before satellite radio, general managers have been trying to figure out how to make this work. They might be in a bigger hurry now, but this is something they've been talking about for more than 20 years," says Sean Ross, music and programming vice-president radio with Edison Media Research, an opinion and marketing research firm. "I worked at a Clear Channel station in 1994 and the general manager said, 'Why don't we let Coke become the official sponsor?' Everyone just started blankly. ... No one knew how to make it work."

Along with a singular approach to the music and ads, Doherty wanted the DJs to be more than just talking heads. By keeping long-running announcers Bo Roberts, Jim White and Jon Dillon and bringing back Redbeard, of the long-gone Q102, Doherty says he wanted the station's voices to be knowledgeable about the music. "These guys really do connect [to the music]," Freeman says. "They have sidebar stories about some of the artists."

### Pans and praise

If it's KZPS' way with ads that has the industry buzzing, it's the playlist that has classic-rock fans fuming and some country and roots-rock aficionados applauding.

"Of all the formats to put together, Texas Country and Southern Rock. You could not have found two music styles I hate worse to put together! ... May radio die an unhealthy and painful death, Clear Channel you deserve it!" wrote one disgruntled listener on a KDFW-TV media blog.

"I like it," another responded, expressing a minority view, at least on this blog, "but they still play the best of what was already on KZPS, plus some stuff I've never heard before."

"My initial reaction is too much country, not enough rock," groused the blogger Prince of Torts on his site.

KZPS' program director, though, maintains that the listener feedback he's gotten has been overwhelmingly complimentary. "We've got hundreds of e-mails, the majority of them very positive," Doherty says. "Ninety-plus percent are very positive about it."

He adds that he's very open to tweaking the station's playlist, which may evolve to include as many as 1,500 songs. "It's a little outlaw country, a little rock, a little alt-country. If a song feels right, we're going to play it," he explains. "What we're avoiding is the polished Nashville sound. It's all about grit."

So far, the playlist has been overwhelmingly male, heavy on such names as Willie Nelson, Tom Petty and Creedence Clearwater. "I just added about 12 Lucinda Williams songs, and we're playing Janis Joplin," Doherty says. "It's a work in progress."

And while several songs, from artists like George Thorogood or Kenny Wayne Shepherd, might be steeped in the blues, don't expect to hear authentic blues. "We're not going to delve too far into the blues, but blues-based rock and country will work," he says.

Walking that hair-thin line in luring both Hank Williams Jr. and Wilco fans could be like coming up with a car that appeals to both pickup and Prius drivers. But *Radio Ink's* Joe Howard points to the popular "Jack FM" programming (the multi-genre pop format heard here on KJJK/100.3 FM) as proof that listeners may be more open-minded than programmers previously assumed.

"The final word isn't written on the Jack, play-anything format, but at least the initial popularity of those kinds of channels has opened radio's eyes that people's tastes may be more wide than they're given credit for," he says. "Charlie Daniels and Bruce Springsteen are two artists I would listen to back to back."

Edison Media Research's Sean Ross is pulling for Lone Star to succeed as a business and music model. "If it works, it's a showcase for the format," he says. "I hope they make it work. It's something a lot of people in the industry would like to see."

#### **The Lone Star list**

Here are 20 tracks you might hear these days on KZPS/92.5:

Old 97's, *Barrier Reef*

Drive-By Truckers, *Gravity's Gone*

Lucinda Williams, *I Lost It*

Waylon Jennings, *I'm a Ramblin' Man*

Johnny Cash, *I've Been Everywhere*

Dire Straits, *Lady Writer*

Tom Petty & the Heartbreakers, *Listen to Her Heart*

Janis Joplin, *Me and Bobby McGee*

George Thorogood & the Destroyers, *Move It on Over*

Wilco, *Outtasite*

John Mellencamp, *Rain on the Scarecrow*

Robert Earl Keen, *The Road Goes on Forever*

The Black Crowes, *Seeing Things*

The Charlie Daniels Band, *The South's Gonna Do It*

Slobberbone, *Trust Jesus*

Son Volt, *Tulsa County*

The Rolling Stones, *Tumbling Dice*

The Grateful Dead, *Uncle John's Band*

Stevie Ray Vaughan, *Voodoo Chile*

#### **The competition's view**

Three of Lone Star 92.5's Metroplex country-music competitors are keeping an eye on the new kid on the block. But, so far at least, they're not sounding alarms. Here's what they had to say:

"It's not going to affect what we do. We're a country station, and we've expanded our base to include country-rock. We've always played Pat Green, Keith Urban and Lynyrd Skynyrd. But we're pure and simple a country station. KZPS, with what they're doing, is still a rock station."

-- *John Sebastian, program director, Dallas' KPLX/99.5 FM "The Wolf"*

"We are still the place for Texas country. They're playing such a small percentage of Texas country. Your true Texas fans would rather listen to us than Southern rock. As a radio guy, I'm kind of encouraged that a large company like Clear Channel would take a chance like that. [But] I think it needs some serious work."

-- *Andy Meadows, operations director, Fort Worth's KFWR/95.9 FM "The Ranch"*

"The difference in what they do and what we are is that we focus a lot on the singer-songwriter stuff and more Texas-centric things. ... We don't delve much into the classic and Southern rock end of things. ... [But] there are different tastes for everybody ... it falls under the same umbrella. If it brings people to the format, it brings everybody up. If it gets people to listen to this kind of stuff, I'm all for it."

-- *Dallas Wayne, program director, Plano's KHYY/95.3 "The Range"*