KBOO Community Radio

In 2008, KBOO Community Radio (90.7 FM) celebrated forty years on the air since its humble beginnings as a barely audible 10-watt repeater signal in a tiny basement studio in downtown Portland. The station was born of the radical ‘60s culture that had migrated to the Rose City and whose founders wanted to challenge the region's commercial broadcasting establishment. Its mission was to provide the station's listener-owners with countercultural musical, news, and public affairs offerings not found on the commercial airwaves. Since those early days, KBOO has evolved into a locally produced platform for multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, feminist, gay, lesbian and transgender, politically left, and non-mainstream news, public affairs, and music and arts.

The inspiration for the Northwest's citizen broadcasting came from Lorenzo Milam, known as the "Johnny Appleseed" of community radio, who had worked at Berkeley's KPFA, the country's first (1949) and now oldest nonprofit, listener-sponsored radio station. Milam left KPFA to organize a station in Seattle, KRAB. Blessed with a significant personal inheritance and a penchant for humorous station names, he also helped start a "KRAB Nebula" of fourteen community radio stations, including KTAO in Los Gatos, California; KCHU in Dallas; WORT in Madison, Wisconsin; KUSP in Santa Cruz, California; KPOO in San Francisco; KDNA in St. Louis; and KBOO in Portland (after the Berkeley vernacular for pot).

The number of such independent radio stations has dwindled in recent years, while commercial radio has rapidly consolidated, but KBOO continues to broadcast public interest news, information, and cultural programming. It is the only station in the country, for example, with a daily, locally produced Native American news program and one of the few that still produces its own news. The station also supports the city's and region's large activist community through progressive program features and event co-sponsorship. It remains KBOO's mission to represent the underrepresented and provide a platform for local composers, writers, artists, and musicians, with a minimum of advertising.

The extent of volunteerism also distinguishes KBOO both from Portland's other non-commercial radio stations and from other community radio outlets around the country. With a small meagerly paid staff, KBOO provides radio training for its more than 400 volunteers, who are almost entirely in charge of radio programming. A third of its on-air programmers are people of color who produce 35 percent of the station's local content. KBOO community radio has played a significant role in the Portland area airwaves, culture, and community through broad social representation and public access.

Written by Gerald Sussman

Further Reading:

Sussman, Gerald and J.R. Estes. "Community Radio in Community Development: Portland's KBOO Radio," in *The Portland Edge*, C. Ozawa, ed. Island Press 2004.

http://kboo.fm/

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