

CATALYST

RESOURCES FOR CREATIVE LIVING

Feature: KRCL: Salt Lake's Radio gem

25 years of community radio history recalled

By Barb Guy

To really understand how KRCL came to be, you're going to have to A) be old enough to remember certain things, or B) have a good imagination.

You know those old news clips you've seen of the civil rights movement? You need to picture a white kid from Bountiful, Utah, a returned missionary, in the middle of it all. You know those old news clips you've seen of Vietnam war protests? Picture that same kid there.

The guy's name is Stephen Holbrook, and he invented KRCL.

One more thing you need to be able to imagine is a time when there were three television networks. Three. Not a million.

Holbrook tells a story: "When Nixon invaded Cambodia in 1970, a group of 2,000 students from the University of Utah stormed Social Hall Avenue where all three TV stations were located. We demanded they cover the opposition to the Vietnam war. Until then, if they covered anything they covered the oddities, the weird things

about the peace movement, not the heart and soul. I went into KSL with these 2,000 people clamoring outside. We met with all three stations and eventually negotiated to get three live debates on the war."

Holbrook, by all accounts a gifted leader, was a young man who already had experience explaining injustice to the media. In 1963 he worked in Washington for a U.S. Congressman from Utah. He played press secretary to a delegation from Utah who came to see the march on Washington where Martin Luther King gave his 'I Have a Dream' speech. Raised in Bountiful, he went on a life-changing mission for the Church of Jesus Christ Latter Day Saints to Hong Kong. "I was really affected by the poverty I saw," he recollects. When he became involved with the NAACP, the congressman gave him a choice: him or the NAACP. Holbrook headed to Mississippi and became the press secretary for the organization. It was the summer of '64, and students, African American and white, traveled the state to educate and register rural African

American voters before that fall's presidential election. Many volunteers were beaten by white mobs or racist police officers and three young participants were viciously murdered by the Ku Klux Klan. But attempts to frighten others away from the campaign failed and by late 1964

over 70,000 students had taken part in Freedom Summer.

So Holbrook earned political chops few other Utahns can claim. These experiences led him to begin to envision a place where many different voices could find a sympathetic audience. He articulates the need: "There was no place where a variety of progressive movements could find community, coalesce, and become knowledgeable about each other and their events. I learned from the movements I worked on that you have to have access to the media if you want to have an impact. You can't just stand on the corner and hand out leaflets."

Something else spurred him on: "People felt there was no participation and belonging; they

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had to go to the coasts to find that. A very personal motivation was I wanted to keep some of my friends here so that they wouldn't all leave." More than 25 years later, you only have to answer phones during a KRCL Radiothon for a few minutes before you find someone who says, "If KRCL weren't here, I would have left Utah a long time ago." Having the idea to put regular people on the radio is one thing, but making it a reality is a miracle. There was certainly no model for it in Utah. There were just a few community radio stations in the whole country.

Holbrook set about getting the station going. He says, "It took quite a while to pull it all together. We went through the whole procedure-you had to have a board of trustees, show how you would operate financially for the first three years, have a plan for your programming; it was quite a bit of work. Paul Wharton and Ethel Hale meticulously did all the FCC filings. Then our

application sat there for over a year." Then it all had to be redone.

That gave him plenty of time to work on funding. Holbrook says, "We heard that Lola Redford, who was then married to Robert Redford, might be interested in helping. We got a proposal into

her hands. Robert Redford called me, offering to help. He and I met in Washington, DC, with the Community Services Administration. We demonstrated that we had an association with the local Community Action Program; we already had a good plan."

As Redford and Holbrook walked to the elevator after the meeting, a woman ran out of her office and said, "Which one of you is Robert Redford?" Holbrook quips, "That's the last time I was really good looking; it's all been down hill since then."

Redford and Holbrook left Washington with hundreds of thousands of dollars to get KRCL on the air, more than Holbrook had asked for or even dreamed of.

Then another great thing happened. Diane Orr and Michael Urmann donated space in the Blue Mouse building [about 260 East 100 South]. The space was small, cold in winter and boiling hot in summer. But it was a home. With equipment cadged from KSL and others, and in a moment that no one thought of recording for posterity, the station signed on the air. It was December 3, 1979.

"I believe we started with being on the air 12 hours a day," Holbrook says. "And there was this training program for

minority people to enter the job market. That's how we got Bob Flores [now a U of U law professor] and Donna [Land Maldonado, now the general manager of KRCL]. We were getting on the air any way we could. When we did those first fundraisers people would call up live and say 'I've thrown some pots and if people will pledge to the station I'll give them one of my pots.' I remember this attorney calling and offering a no-fault divorce for a pledge of \$100. This was all live, of course. A listener called in and asked about the divorce. 'OK, well, I'm going to talk with the old lady about it,' he said. In a while, he called back and said, 'We've decided to go for it.'" So one couple's divorce provided a bit of KRCL's daily bread, and the no-fault divorce became a Radiothon tradition.

In the first year or so, the station moved to 208 West 800 South. Holbrook says, "Where we were before didn't really have room for volunteers. What we have now [KRCL's permanent home at 1971 West North Temple] is even much better of course, but the move to 208 gave us more room where volunteers could come in and produce, learn, meet, and do other things besides be on the air."

"I managed the station for three years," Holbrook says. "But my skills are more on the

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entrepreneurial side. Get something going, breathe life into it. I can't say I enjoy being an administrator. After I left, within about a year the station was on the ropes. Then John Greene picked up the pieces, getting us CPB [Corporation for Public Broadcasting] qualified. He did the first really serious work in improving the quality of the station besides putting it back on course financially."

John Greene began his tenure at KRCL as a public affairs interviewer. He went on to become KRCL's general manager and is today manager of KUER, the NPR station at the University of Utah.

KRCL in the early 80s was characterized by a diversity of public affairs programs - Senior Sound-Off, Handi-capables, Concerning Gays and Lesbians, shows featuring ethnic groups from Greek to Hmong. Greene says, "It quickly became an alternative cultural form of expression. The volunteer base kept on coming, and, as hard as it was to manage, embodied in that workforce were the smartest collective minds on music ever, and then, voila! It was a pretty vibrant, happening atmosphere. When you're already on your way to an anti-war demonstration and you get a buzz that [counter-culture icon] Jerry Rubin is gonna show up and you get him live on air on the spur of the

moment, you know you're in the right place at the right time. That's what those days were like."

In another great moment, a listener came to the station during a Radiothon and peeled off a \$100 bill, handing it to Greene, saying, "This is for all the shows I really like." Then he peeled off a second hundred, handed it to Greene and said, "This is for all the shows I really hate." That was a guy who got what community radio is all about.

Meanwhile, there was sea change in the music world and KRCL's audience was growing. Greene says, "While the station may have started as protest radio, a musical explosion kept things going in the 80s. Punk, new wave, no commercials. The music, my God! We'd bring in reggae and new wave bands that had songs on the charts. People were up and dancing. It was a very cool time."

KRCL was desperate for money in the early days, and Greene once got a call from a well-known local concert promoter who had noticed KRCL's impact on the music scene. Greene says, "He invited me to come see him. He had his feet up on his desk, these shiny loafers with tassels, shirt open to the waist, gold chains. He wanted to buy KRCL's noon to 4 p.m. format

every day, give us a bunch of money - basically today's Clear Channel model. We would play the music and he'd bring the bands. It was a lot of money, but I told him, 'I don't think you understand community radio.'"

One of KRCL's landmark events was the live, gavel-to-gavel coverage of the Iran-Contra hearings in 1987. All regular programming was suspended to air the hearings, held in Washington, DC. Greene says, "When the hearings hit, [chief engineer and radio station miracle worker] Lewis Downey was touring the Balkans with his musical troupe. We went gavel-to-gavel with the hearings and we lost our signal [leaving only dead air] and Lewis was gone. I scrambled and found another engineer, but, for a day and a half- " Greene hesitates, then continues. "OK, I'll tell this story because the statute of limitations has probably run out: I brought a portable TV into the on-air studio and hooked a microphone up to the TV. We took their raw audio and put it right on the air. Stole it, basically. Every time they took a break we'd break. We were broadcasting a TV network's air for a day and a half while we got our problem fixed."

Greene says that KRCL endures today, "because diversity is good, because here's what you can't hear anywhere else. KRCL survives because it's good. It's

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the community service gold standard. The charm and the tragedy is that most Utahns then and maybe even now didn't even know about the station. The older I get, the more proud I am of my association there."

Donna Land Maldonado arrived at KRCL five months before the station ever signed on the air. She says, "My job was to go into the community and introduce the concept of community radio even though no one knew what it was." Including her. She says, "I had no idea what it was, nor did I care at that time, but I was like, Native American music, on the air? That's what intrigued me."

Born in Ft. Duchesne, Utah on the Northern Ute Reservation, Donna liked the idea that KRCL promised to air, as she says, "those unheard voices of people who were traditionally denied access to the media-women and people of color."

For years, Land Maldonado was the heir apparent for the general manager job, but she was the only person who didn't know it. She finally took the post in 1998. Now, in its 25th year, KRCL has a general manager who has been there since the very beginning, someone with perspective. "KRCL has been evolving throughout the years," she says. "We're not the same station we were when we started. Everything evolves over time."

The biggest accomplishment of her era is the station's permanent home. Sandy Terry, an adorable fund raising dynamo, was given the task of raising \$1.3 million to buy a station for KRCL. The station was invited to join ArtSpace, but that didn't work out. Finally, the building on North Temple was deemed a perfect fit. The new-ish office building only required minor renovation to house a radio station. KRCL has added touches true to its personality-xeriscaping, wind power, a solar backup generator. Land Maldonado says, "I do have one complaint. There are no coffee shops. We really need coffee over here."

Another recent change is Radio Active. All the one-issue public affairs shows of yesterday have been whipped up into one Radio Active soufflé. Recent topics include the 9/11 Commission report, the targeting of ethnic and religious groups under the guise of homeland security, the role conservative Christian beliefs played in the electoral debates, and the economy. Land Maldonado says, "Radio Active is going to get better and stronger. It's gone through its baby steps. We're integrating the entire population. There are a lot of issues to explore."

"KRCL would be in a big hurt without volunteers," Land

Maldonado says. "It's absolutely phenomenal that we have people who have been here, some for 25 years; people who have stuck with the station, woven KRCL into their very being, their life. They arrange their life so that they can remain at KRCL. The median stay of a volunteer at KRCL is 12 to 15 years. It's astounding. It's amazing, it's absolutely amazing." She laughs and adds that some people do decide to go and they all seem to go to KUER. "A lot of our people are up at KUER. There's John Greene, Lewis Downey, Tristin Tabish, Mike Anderson. Steve Williams started with us, so did Kris Liszkowski. That's a lot!"

Summing up, Land Maldonado says, "There will always be changes at KRCL. I've observed over the years that the culture of KRCL is changing. We willingly said we were the hippie station, the groovy, oh-so-cool station. And now we're living in the real world and people don't care if we're super cool; they want information. And they want us to give the information that the other stations aren't or won't. I think we've always felt that responsibility, but for some reason it's heavier now. Maybe it's because so many stations are owned by one corporation. Things are even more homogenized now than they ever were."

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Two of those amazing volunteers Land Maldonado was mentioning, two of the life-rearranging kind, are Steve Connor and Dave Santivasi.

Steve Connor arrived at KRCL in 1986 with experience in college radio. He says, "I had enjoyed doing radio, the art of radio, so much. When I graduated, I thought, well, that's that. But when I moved here I heard Sunday Sage [brush Serenade]. I heard that KRCL was looking for people. Real quickly it became almost a family, home away from home. I've said a lot of times that it was one of the main things that has kept me in Salt Lake City. Indirectly I met my wife through KRCL. I remind her of that when she gets on my case for the time I spend at the station." What keeps Connor at KRCL for every Tuesday Drive Time after 18 years? "It's still fun. Every week there's a way to get better. You have to focus completely on it. It's the best kind of hobby, taking you away from your daily life. You don't do something for 18 years and not have it be important."

As for how KRCL has changed since he got there, Connor says, "It's established but not establishment. We're not hand to mouth. In the beginning we were working on this cause, and it was all very exciting and your effort really mattered with whether the

station was going to survive. We're past that now and that's allowing us to take some chances like Radio Active. I think it's a great step. I'm so psyched that it's been well received. The only thing I wish is that more people knew about it. I wonder if we've saturated our natural constituency. I don't know how you get beyond that."

Dave Santivasi has been at KRCL since the beginning and he has the stories to prove it. He and Steve Caras, two guys who came to Salt Lake for college and became roommates, went through a KRCL workshop and got a show. Santivasi says, "We had a voracious appetite for music. We could hear the soundtrack [from the Blue Mouse movie theater below] coming up the stairwell. That would influence our decisions. If we heard Tommy, it'd be, 'Steve, whatcha say we play the Who?' Occasionally, a bird would come into the studio. 'Hey Steve, let's play the Byrds.' We were easily influenced and easily distracted, but it seemed to work out. In about 1982 we moved to Wednesday nights and named our show Aural Decay." Caras ultimately moved out of state, but Santivasi stayed on.

Dave goes on, "I got run over [in a car-bicycle accident] and I was in the hospital, but I never missed a show. Steve gave me public service announcements to

read over the phone from my hospital bed."

One night, Dave stayed after his show chatting with Otis, the next host on the air. Then the host who followed Otis arrived for his show. Dave says, "Suddenly these bounty hunters come in and put handcuffs on the guy, preparing to take him away. Otis goes, 'Let me see some paperwork.' I thought, oh, good thinking. But they produced paperwork and took the guy. Otis and I filled in on the guy's heavy metal show. We didn't really know what we were doing, but we played him a song called 'I Shall be Released.'"

A tireless raconteur, Santivasi continues, "I also liked the night in '85 when we all camped outside the studios for the first KRCL yard sale [see November's "Catalyst," page 10 for a photo]. We stayed there all night guarding the merchandise. There was a console TV in a giant fruitwood cabinet that someone donated. It actually worked. We plugged it in and watched it all night long on the grass in front of the station."

KRCL has had a few slumber parties besides that one. Once, volunteers slept overnight in Liberty Park before Day in the Park, the station's listener appreciation day. Another time, KRCL volunteers had a slumber party at Camp Kostopolous, and

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on more than one occasion, the hosts of Women Aloud (special programming "by, for, and about women") bunked in together so that no woman had to endure the creepiness of being at the station alone.

Another lasting impression for Santivasi was doing a show on Sept. 12, 2001. "It was hard to broadcast during those days and weeks after 9/11. I was crying during the sets of music. I was playing these songs about New York: 'Jungleland,' 'Bridge Over Troubled Water.'"

"I think I've grown up at KRCL. I don't know what I would have done without KRCL these last 25 years either as a listener or behind the scenes. I've never stuck with anything in my life as long as my tenure at KRCL. For good or ill, those are the facts."

KRCL's future challenges include competing technology (satellite radio, internet streaming audio, i-pod), and figuring out how to stay relevant in a changing world. Stephen Holbrook, former Freedom Rider, Vietnam war protester, and Salt Lake's original community radio ideologue, says, "For this generation there will always be a desire to carry forward some of the thinking of the '60s, but that will eventually wane and KRCL will have to look around and ask what is the need. Hopefully that will always be thought through freshly."

Holbrook, who will retire as executive director of Envision Utah this month, says, "It's a great pleasure to see that KRCL's been a success. It's way beyond anything I can take responsibility for. It has taken on a life of its own; it lives, it breathes, it walks. I played a little role in the new building by setting up some meetings [with major funders]. Now I'm sort of an honorary KRCL board member. If I can get to some serious retirement, I might like to do volunteer work down there-maybe some news and public affairs work. There are schools in Salt Lake City now where over 100 languages are spoken. I think there must be a way to find all those people with all those stories."

Barb Guy is a regular contributor to Catalyst .

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Only at KRCL . . .

One night years ago, Lynne McCue Hamilton and her husband Tom were getting ready for dinner when their daughters, Shawn, 4, and Erin, 7, suggested using some posters for placemats. They were specially-made posters for KRCL's Women Aloud, an entire week of special programming "by, for, and about women." The girls were being raised at KRCL, mixing and mingling with all the constituencies of people who hosted radio shows there. Their mom did public affairs programming at the station and the family's social circle was to a large extent made up of the people of KRCL. At dinner, the girls had fun with the poster, looking for names of friends among the list of show hosts. Suddenly, little Erin blurted out one of the show titles, "Lesbian nuns – breaking the silence."

A silence of its own ensued around the dinner table. Lynne thought with a sigh, 'alright, I guess this is the day we deal with what homosexuality is.' The silence continued until Erin finally asked, "Mom, what's a nun?"

It's like that at KRCL. The unconventional becomes ordinary. The marginalized finds a home.