

A Radio Station for the Rest of Us

By Greg Locke

Let's be honest here for a moment: Fort Wayne radio stations lack variety. They paint our fine city as a place stuck in the past, too conservative to take chances – the least hip big city in a country known for its progressive arts culture. If you're a fan of indie rock, you're just flat out not going to hear a band you like on the city's biggest stations, The Bear and Rock 104. The only modern music you'll hear on a big station in this town, really, is poppy hip-hop, cheesy modern country, tasteless pop and generic metal. Mostly, of course, you'll hear all those obvious classic rock songs you've already heard 10 million times.

Through the late 90s and the naughts, this was my experience. If I was to judge our city simply from what I heard on the radio, well, I'd have to call it a cultural wasteland, run by old dudes who stopped caring about new music long ago.

Eventually relocated in Seattle a few years ago, I started regularly listening to live broadcast radio for the first time in years. There were at least three stations that not only played music that mattered, they often even managed to put me – a big 'ol music nerd with all 10 fingers on the pulse – onto some new bands. The stations played local bands and had a huge impact on the city's arts culture. For the first time in my life I was excited to get in the car and see what came through the speakers. It was blissful.

When talking to Seattle natives about my hometown, the example I always gave was simple: "I've never once heard my all-time favorite band, Pavement, on the radio while living in Fort Wayne," I'd tell them. They were shocked; after all, this was the band that Rolling Stone, Spin and many others have called "The Best Band of the 90s." I'd also not heard a Radiohead song on the radio since the early 90s. Even obvious bands like Wilco and My Morning Jacket couldn't get a spin in Fort Wayne, save for maybe on NPR's Little Brother Radio program, a show that runs for only three hours each week. And so, like most big music fans in Fort Wayne, I'd forgotten all about the joys of listening to live radio.

Forced to move back to Fort Wayne after only a year away, I was greeted by something new and fresh. It happened because I found myself regularly driving a car with a broken CD player. I'd flip around, looking for anything tolerable, usually settling on a jazz station or listening to a Cubs game or some stuffy talk on NPR – anything but AC/DC. Then one day, out of nowhere, I heard this song called "Cut Your Hair" coming through my speakers. Pavement. *Pavement*, on the radio in Fort Wayne! Since that day, almost two years ago now, I've not changed the dial away from the station that played "Cut Your Hair": 91.1, WCYT.

For those not familiar with 91.1, it's Homestead High School's station. In addition to Pavement, they play countless other great bands – everything from Radiohead to Yuck to Bon Iver and more. New, obscure stuff that you maybe haven't even heard of yet. They play the kind of progressive new music that you'll hear in pretty much every other city the size of Fort Wayne or bigger but never heard in Fort Wayne until now.

After two years of faithfully listening to WCYT on my half-broken car stereo, I finally met the man behind the music, WCYT General Manager Adam Schenkel. After a tour of the station I also met Andy Dunn, one of the station's former music directors, who was hanging around for the summer, helping Schenkel to establish a social media presence. (Oddly enough, Andy and I used to work at a record store together some years ago.)

"I was hired in as the general manager the fall of 2004," Schenkel told me. "I'm from around this area, but I didn't go to Homestead. I knew a guy who worked here before, so I knew what I was getting into. The huge amount of student involvement amazed me right away, and the music they had around was great."

After going on the air in 1995, the station functioned loosely for years before going to 24 hours on February 2, 2002. They played this and that, mostly focusing on alternative music but not entirely committed to any one style.

"Two years before I was the music director the station was more of an adult alternative station," Dunn said, "but

have to let some people down, but you'll get these great kids who run with it, and then you just sit back and watch them do their thing. I love thinking about these kids learning all of these things so young, getting real experience. I mean, don't think they realize how much experience they're getting, how great their job is. To have this kind of experience as a 17- or 18-year-old kid is amazing."

At first hired in as the station's general manager, Schenkel soon enough found himself getting deeply involved with the students.

"I'm a teacher now, but I wasn't when I first started; I was just the station manager," he said. "Coming here, I was amazed by how good the station was here compared to other high school stations, or even compared to the student station at IU, where I went to school."

"That said, I have 120 kids every day, and 80 percent of them want our station to be all hip-hop, so not many of the kids really love the music we play," Schenkel laughed. "I mean, we could switch genres; it wouldn't be a huge deal, but we're not going to. We're going to stick with what we've been. There are already other stations playing that stuff in Fort Wayne; we're the only ones playing this indie and alternative stuff, so we're going to stick with it because we know it means a lot to a lot of people."

The main reason WCYT sticks with its format? Well, someone *has* to play this indie rock stuff, right? That, and the format does appeal to many of the students.

"Working here was the by-far highlight of my high school experience. Definitely," Dunn said about his time with WCYT. "By my senior year I was in the station three periods each day. I'd come here during lunch. I mean, this was it for me; this is what I loved. Opening up those promos – and we got a lot of them back in those days. We'd get full bins and tear into them."

It was like Christmas everyday. So here, in this station, is where I realized what I wanted to do. I'm still looking for a place like this to work. Not a corporate station run by people who don't know about new music. Something like this where the music is chosen by how good it is, not by what's in the mainstream."

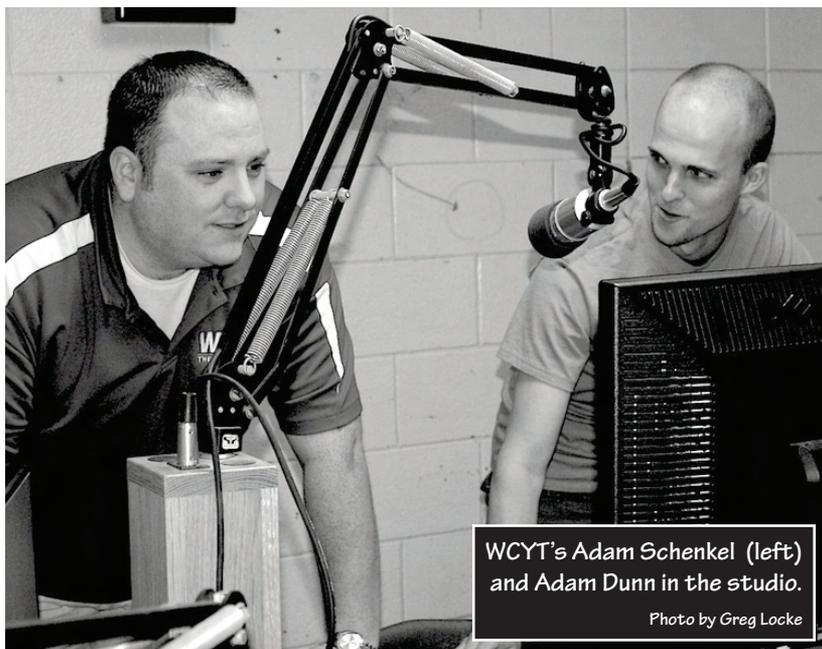
Though they've been playing the goods for a few years now, WCYT is still fighting to find its listeners. Unlike the corporate stations, they don't have an advertising budget. No billboards, no half-naked girls wearing their T-shirts.

"I mean, we have certain disadvantages because we're a non-profit station running out of a high school, operated by kids working for free. And even though we don't make money from it, we are still trying to compete with the big boys. And we have fun competing. So yeah, we want people to call us and we make it easy to get in touch with us."

Additionally, WCYT has a notably weak signal compared to, say, The Bear. Their tower, located near the GM plant, is only 125 watts. According to Dunn and Schenkel, it can reach as far north as the Dupont area while also hitting as far east as New Haven. So no, you might not always be able to tune in, due to the low-wattage signal.

When I asked Schenkel about these shortcomings, he was ready with an answer.

"First and foremost, this is all for the sake of education. That's what it's here for. That's why we have a station, so the kids at Homestead can learn how to work in broadcasting – how to do different things on the air, be it weather, music or sports. So that's how I approach my school day, as an education," he said. Fort Wayne will never be Seattle, but with guys like Schenkel around, we just may be on our way to better days.



WCYT's Adam Schenkel (left) and Adam Dunn in the studio.

Photo by Greg Locke

that changed by the time I graduated."

"I'm not sure how the whole indie thing started though, because at first we were more commercial. We played things you'd hear on the Bear," Schenkel explained. "Then we started adding bands you wouldn't hear elsewhere in Fort Wayne, and that's when we started hearing things back from listeners. So now we just consider ourselves to be alternative, indie and rock. We'll play big bands and bands you've never heard of. And some local bands."

Curious as to how the station morphed into the indie-focused unit it is today, I asked Schenkel about the involvement of the students. After all, how many high school kids out there are slamming to the new Yuck record, let alone all the early 90s grunge the station is also known for?

"I tell the kids every year that it's their station, but they have a few guidelines to follow," Schenkel said. "First and foremost, it's alternative rock or guitar-based music. Indie rock or whatever. There are a few bands that are staples that we're not going to get rid of. That starts with the 90s Seattle thing – Nirvana, Alice in Chains, Soundgarden. Those bands will always be on our station because I think that's kind of what started the whole genre we play."

At the beginning of each year Schenkel chooses a music director. It's a coveted job that has a big impact on the new music the station takes on through the school year.

"I consider myself to be a pretty big music person, but some of the kids I've inherited as a music director already know so much more stuff than I do," Schenkel explained. "My last director, Brady, for example, brought in a lot of new stuff, including this band Yuck. I was, like, 'Who is this? I love this stuff.' I don't know where these kids find this stuff. Choosing the director is a tough thing to do because you