



Live from the underground: a history of college radio

by Katherine Rye Jewell, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2023, 480 pp., \$48.90 (Hardback), \$25.50 (Paperback), ISBN: 9781469677255

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BOOK REVIEW

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Katherine Rye Jewell opens *Live from the Underground* with this provocative reflection: “Most college radio stories remain in the diaries and memories of DJs and listeners, or perhaps on cassette tapes stored in shoeboxes in attics” (p. xiv). Jewell’s book, a finalist for the 2024 Book of the Year Award by the American Journalism Historians Association and the Association for Recorded Sound Collections, explores college radio’s collective history, fragmented across institutions with varying degrees of organization. *Live from the Underground: A History of College Radio* stands as an essential contribution, highlighting college radio’s impact within local cultural ecosystems.

A professor of history at Fitchburg State University in Massachusetts, Jewell is also the co-director of the College, Community, and Educational Radio Caucus within the Library of Congress Radio Preservation Task Force. Her book is dedicated, among others, to the DJs of 91.1 FM in Nashville at WRVU—Radio Vanderbilt University—where she began her radio adventure in 1997. This significant work on the history of college radio is based on interviews with over 75 people who have been active in the field (including volunteer producers, radio station employees, and record label staff) as well as research conducted in archival collections across more than 40 American cities, from Seattle to San Diego and from Athens to Ithaca. The journey across America to which Jewell invites us takes us through the contemporary history of the soundscape supported by college radio.


The book is organized both chronologically and thematically, with 15 chapters in three main sections: “Out of Alternatives: 1970s,” “National Connections: 1983–1989,” and “The College Radio Paradox: 1989–2003.” Jewell traces the early days of college radio stations and student-led radio clubs, which initially resembled boys’ clubs—often mirroring a predominantly white public space. Over time, however, these stations evolved into key sites of cultural connection across ethnic, gender, queer, and other identities, reflecting the diversity of their audience.

Throughout the book, Jewell pays careful attention to the different functions and missions of university radio stations. Most important, they provide hands-on learning experiences and professional training grounds, while also serving as incubators for DJs, journalists, and artists. As described in Chapter 5 and subsequent chapters, the most emblematic function of college radio within a city’s ecosystem is undoubtedly that of a cultural node. Being involved in the intersecting communities of a local countercultural scene—such as college radio stations, independent labels, record stores, fanzine networks, bars, and music venues—often generated a feeling of connection and community. Jewell highlights the participatory nature of these spaces, while also noting how this type of involvement cultivated a sense of belonging embedded in grassroots media institutions. As Jewell explains, “looking for records, discovering new music through zines, calling up to request a song, and recording it took work; it was a participatory culture that built a sense of belonging” (p. 96). With a myriad of examples, Jewell pieces together the puzzle of this decentralized cultural network, illustrating the role of fanzines and major publications such as *Billboard*, *College Media Journal*, *Spin*, and *Rolling Stone*.

As a local, bohemian, indie, underground, and countercultural scene, college radio stations were truly democratic spaces for diversity; they were also, at times, “the site of negotiations regarding the boundaries between mainstream and alternative, pop and underground, commercial and freedom from market demands” (p. 244). Jewell emphasizes that college radio stations exist to provide a community service, acting “as conduits between universities and communities” (p. 282) and “bringing community interest into the campus and visa versa [*sic*]” (p. 291). This close connection between stations and communities is particularly evident in cultural communities (such as Haitian, Polish-American, and Black communities) and musical communities (including hardcore and indie rock, the rawest punk, new wave, polka, and hip-hop).

For a generation of students who have come to know music through online streaming platforms, this book brings back the materiality of music and broadcasting—to a time not so long ago when radio institutions, deeply rooted in their local communities, played an important role. In contrast to the digital world in which music now circulates, *Live from the Underground: A History of College Radio* grounds the material reality of radio—its call letters, the diverse physical mediums that sustain music circulation, and the personal taste of DJs who shape the sonic freeform identity of their stations beyond algorithms. The book’s central theme is the cultural contribution of college radio to local ecosystems, explored through multiple lenses and firmly situated within the institutional reality of college radio. Jewell presents a layered argument for recognizing college radio as an institution and rightly asserts that “institutions matter in the process of cultural production, exploration, and dissemination” (p. 365).

The book is not without its limitations. As the author acknowledges in the liner notes: “What this book can’t do is tell every DJ’s story or chronicle each station’s history” (p. xiv). However, rather than a shortcoming, this limitation feels like an invitation to write local stories of the global design that is college radio—histories shaped by issues of visibility, institutional fragilities, culture wars, censorship, and the inherent tensions of democratic and autonomous spaces like community and college radio. While reading, I found myself imagining how we might write additional chapters, adapting the book’s themes to stations in places like Kingston (CFRC), Montréal (CHOQ, CISM, CJLO, CKUT), Québec City (CHYZ, CKRL), Sherbrooke (CFAK), or Trois-Rivières (CFOU). The current state of the archives of these Canadian radio stations—except perhaps for CFRC, a centenary station whose archive preservation is nearly exemplary—makes this task challenging, as the archives must first be properly constituted in order to be exploited. *Live from the Underground* is a work that materializes radiophonically imagined communities from coast to coast in the United States and encourages us to recognize the value of college radio archives and oral histories in the places where we live and belong—even if, for now, they remain unarchived, orphaned, or archives in formation.

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