

Public Radio Music Under Attack

Right-wingers' "Defund NPR" campaign threatens the local music scene (among other things)

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published: February 03, 2011

It's 8:30 a.m. in Santa Monica, and KCRW general manager Jennifer Ferro is cleaning up the jumbled mess of papers in her office in preparation for a long day. Soon, however, she'll have a far bigger mess to deal with: Congress may cut off key federal subsidies to public radio programming.

Late last week, the Republican Study Committee, a conservative group chaired by Ohio Rep. Jim Jordan, filed a resolution that would eliminate all public support for the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, the funding institution that allows public radio stations to purchase NPR programming.

"It's reasonable to ask why Congress is spending taxpayers' money to support a left-wing radio network," Speaker of the House John Boehner told the *National Review*. "And in the wake of Juan Williams' firing, it's clearer than ever that's what NPR is," he added, referring to the former public radio analyst's dismissal after making Islamophobic statements as a guest on Fox News' *The O'Reilly Factor*.

If the proposed resolution goes through, the impact on local NPR member station KCRW will be significant, Ferro says. And that puts KCRW's music programming — a crucial piece in the L.A. scene puzzle — in financial jeopardy.

"The political movement that was inspired by the Juan Williams firing, coupled with the idea of deficit reduction, puts public media in a really vulnerable position," Ferro explains. "We would have to make cuts across the board at KCRW — [we would have to] contract right when we want to expand. What they're talking about now is really serious."

This is not the first time that Republicans have attempted to strip NPR of its funding: Last fall, Colorado Rep. Doug Lamborn introduced a proposal that would prohibit public radio stations from using money given to them by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting to purchase NPR programming. Despite support from several conservative groups, the bill went nowhere in the Democratic-controlled Congress.

Now, however, with the Tea Party in charge (at least rhetorically), things could be different: On Jan. 24 the conservative Web-based publication Townhall began circulating a petition titled "Defund NPR," and shortly thereafter, Michael F. Cannon, the Cato Institute's director of health policy studies, suggested on the institute's website that the name of the petition be changed to "Liberate NPR." Lamborn himself addressed this issue

with the Daily Caller: "I believe removing federal funding from NPR would give the news organization greater, not less, editorial freedom than they currently enjoy."

What does all this political grandstanding mean for L.A. music? What's at stake locally is no less than KCRW's ability to provide its current musical programming — credited by sources across the industry for breaking L.A. bands and taking indie acts to national prominence. "Florence [and the Machine], Phoenix, Miike Snow ... pick a band that's a hot commodity, your best of 2010 — they all started here," KCRW music director and *Morning Becomes Eclectic* host Jason Bentley recently told *The Hollywood Reporter*. "Whether it's getting their earliest airplay or first radio performance, we take chances."

Public radio support is as essential to musicians as music fans. With record sales no longer a reliable source of support, KCRW airplay helps musicians stay funded and functional.

KCRW librarian Eric J. Lawrence estimates that 20 percent of KCRW's music programming is devoted to local bands.

Courtney Knopf, who manages Los Angeles bands and musicians for Los Feliz label Everloving Records, says KCRW is an important venue for local artists: "So many of KCRW's on-air personalities do double duty as music supervisors for both film and TV that if a certain DJ picks up on a local band, under the right circumstances it can mean much more than airplay."

"We have the ability to grab bands and showcase them in prime time and talk about them, and play them in prime time," Ferro says. "We talk about them to an audience of people who really pay attention and put music in commercials and films. That's part of the thing we provide: exposure. "

Example: Bentley remixed Los Angeles' own Silversun Pickups' song "Lazy Eye" for a car commercial. He told *Billboard* magazine back in 2009 that this placement alone brought the band a six-figure fee. Indeed, *Billboard* also noted in January that more than half of NPR listeners consider themselves active fans of music, 68 percent are more likely to attend a concert and 83 percent more likely to purchase "alternative" music than their non-NPR listening peers. "People who support public radio are responsible, they're engaged," Ferro says. "People who listen to us participate. And we have such a great audience that will go to shows we suggest, buy the music we play."

But the rights for all of that music — from the "bumpers" between shows to the bands that appear on *Morning Becomes Eclectic* — cost money. Right now that money is covered by a blanket license negotiated by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. This license allows KCRW to play its trademark "eclectic" music at an affordable rate. But if the CPB was zeroed out, Ferro says, KCRW would lose its licensing deal, putting up to half of its programming in jeopardy.

"L.A. is the most important city in the world for popular music, and it's home to world-class classical music institutions, jazz musicians and the like," says Bill Davis, founder of Southern California Public Radio, best known to listeners as KPCC. Like KCRW, KPCC is gearing up to meet the challenges of these potential cuts. "It's also an important segment of the local economy. Music coverage is an important part of *Off-Ramp*, *The Madeleine Brand Show* and other KPCC programs."

Davis is projecting that KPCC will receive approximately \$900,000 in support from CPB in the current fiscal year — about 6 percent of its budget. "That's a lot," he says. In order to make up the difference, he would have to consider not only new fundraising strategies but potential adjustments in programming.

KCRW also is looking for ways to reach out to the community. "I get great joy out of donating to organizations," Ferro says. "There are a lot of people who are interested in doing that and never had the opportunity. That's what we have to do — go to the audience. We would have to put more energy into getting more people to support us, and a little bit more money from people to make up that difference."

So, does that mean more fundraising drives in our future? "That's the threat!" she jokes.