THE CIVIC SOUNDTRACK

How Public Radio Music Stations are Connecting Listeners, Strengthening Communities, and Forging a More Civil Society

A REPORT BY
Public Media Company & VuHaus Group

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FOREWORD

Thanks to the generous support of the Wyncote Foundation, Public Media Company and VuHaus Group conducted an in-depth exploration of how public radio music stations support and strengthen their communities. This work took place in the spring and early summer of 2025 and was inspired by the leadership of Brenda Barnes (CEO, Classical KING) and Bill Johnson (General Manager, WRTI), whose stations exemplify the civic and cultural impact public music stations can have.

More than 60 stations participated in our initial survey, with ten providing in-depth interviews that offered deeper insight into their community engagement and impact. These stations represent a diverse cross section in terms of size, revenue, geography, and music format. They shared how they collaborate with local businesses and organizations, create educational and economic opportunities, and offer listeners meaningful ways to connect.

With federal funding for public media stations now eliminated, this study underscores the essential civic and cultural role public music stations play—and the many ways they enrich the communities they serve. Most rely on a mix of listener memberships, local business sponsorships, and grants to sustain their work. For some, the loss of federal support could mean a reduction of up to 30% of their annual funding. Now more than ever, these stations need the financial backing of those who value their ability to connect neighbors, foster education, and strengthen the cultural fabric of their communities.

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- Executive Summary: How Public Radio Music Stations are Connecting Listeners, Strengthening Communities, and Forging a More Civil Society
- Orchestrating Community: How Classical Public Radio is Growing Audiences and Curating Authentic Local Connections
- Stewards of an American Legacy: Preserving the Past and Shaping the Future of Jazz in Public Media
- Champions of Local Culture: Triple A Radio as a Civic and Cultural Anchor
- Deep Cuts and Rarities: Innovation at the Edges of Public Radio
- Conclusion: A Future Tuned to Community
- 77 Appendix A: Methodology

i

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

How Public Radio Music Stations are Connecting Listeners, Strengthening Communities, and Forging a More Civil Society



Music is an opportunity to create a more civil society. It teaches us lessons that are important for a healthy democracy, like how to listen critically, how to support others' voices, and how some things can only be achieved by working together. Like a symphony, the melodies shift between instruments and sections, and there is a responsibility to support the soloist with your very best effort. Music, like our form of government, can only succeed if we work together. Public radio music stations are nurturing those experiences and values."

— BILL JOHNSON, GENERAL MANAGER, WRTI

Music is much more than entertainment. It is, as Bill Johnson of WRTI reminds us, very much a part of who we are as a people and embedded in much of what we do and value most as a society. In an era where media is all-too-often used to divide us, music is not only a refuge, but also an important way that communities are connected, neighborly bonds are built, and the civic spirit of our nation is renewed. There's no institution in the United States better suited to sustain this vision than our public media system.

Today, 780 public radio music stations serve communities across the country, collectively reaching over 200 million people each week. These stations—locally owned, operated, and governed—are far more than broadcast outlets. They are cultural anchors, community hubs, and engines of creative, economic, and civic engagement.

This report, produced by Public Media Company and the VuHaus Group with support from the Wyncote Foundation, explores the local impact of public radio music stations across a range of formats and communities. The research was conducted before the rescission of federal funding for the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, which has historically provided

critical support to public media music stations. While this report focuses on community impact, it's important to acknowledge that the loss of federal funding puts many of these stations at risk of scaling back—or shutting down entirely.

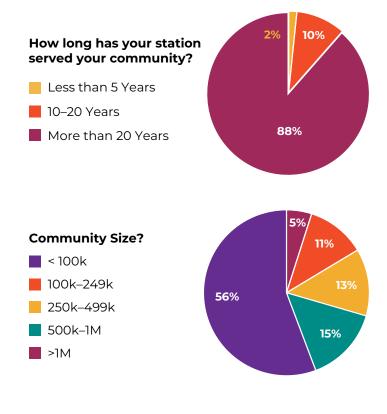
Even so, the findings offer hope. Across the country, stations continue to prove their ability to adapt, innovate, and strengthen their ties to the communities they serve. This report highlights those efforts and offers both inspiration and practical guidance for station leaders, partners, and supporters navigating a new era. Our goal is to celebrate what public radio music stations do best—and to help illuminate the path forward at a time when their role has never been more essential and funding has never been more critical.

Over 60 music stations participated in the survey, and we have summarized the top findings here.

FINDING #1

BASTIONS OF LOCAL CULTURE & ECONOMIES

Public radio music stations play a dynamic role in their communities. Many stations are hosting festivals and free concerts that generate millions in local spending, promoting nearby venues and businesses, and providing paid opportunities for musicians and arts professionals. Many support workforce development in underserved areas, elevate local nonprofits and entrepreneurs, and champion cultural tourism through on-air, digital, and community calendar offerings. As trusted cultural institutions, they preserve regional music and heritage, feature local artists, host live performances, and produce programming that amplifies community voices. By partnering with arts groups, co-sponsoring events, and filling the void left by shrinking local arts



coverage, stations help sustain vibrant cultural ecosystems. Stations report strong audience growth, sold-out shows, and deep listener connections—underscoring their role as vital hubs for creativity, connection, and local pride.

FINDING #2

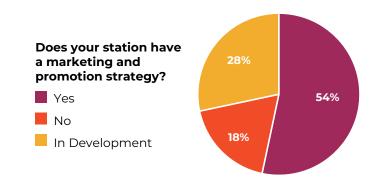
GROWING & BROADENING AUDIENCES

Stations are actively working to grow and broaden their audiences through innovative and inclusive playlists, heritage month programming, and live events that reflect the unique diversity of their communities. Across the country, stations are increasingly investing in multilingual content, recruiting hosts from backgrounds that reflect local populations, and exploring digital strategies to reach new listeners both within and outside their market. Only 2 stations surveyed noted that over 50% of their listening audience was under the age of 44. To better connect with Gen Z and Millennials, stations are launching YouTube channels, podcasts, and on-demand content, while expanding TikTok and Instagram engagement. Youth DJ camps, radio internships, and campus partnerships are common, along with programming shifts to reflect younger tastes and media habits.

FINDING #3

MARKETING BUDGETS & STRATEGIES

Most stations have marketing strategies, but budgets and structures vary. Larger stations may invest six figures annually with dedicated staff, while smaller ones rely on \$5,000–\$75,000 and grassroots tactics like event appearances and social media. Social media is central to station outreach.



No. Stations Using Social Media Platforms

Facebook	58%
Instagram	57%
X (formerly Twitter)	15%
YouTube	14%
Bluesky	13%
LinkedIn	12%
TikTok	10%
Threads	7%
Reddit	2
Spotify	
Meta	L

Platforms like Facebook,
Instagram, X (formerly Twitter),
YouTube, and others are used to
share video content, promote
events, spotlight hosts and
artists, and build community.
While formats and success vary,
nearly all stations see social
media as essential for visibility
and engagement. Many embed
marketing into broader staff
roles or leverage in-kind and
trade support.

FINDING #4

STRENGTH IN SOLIDARITY

Collaboration among public media organizations is widely seen as essential to station futures—offering opportunities to share resources, co-develop content, and amplify community voices while respecting each station's local identity. Respondents highlighted a range of collaborative strategies, including joint events, shared backend services (like HR, tech, or underwriting), cross-promotion of content, and regionally coordinated fundraising. Many emphasized the power of peer-to-peer learning—sharing success stories, templates, and marketing "playbooks"—as well as the importance of creating collective initiatives that serve broader audiences without diluting local character. While some acknowledged structural and cultural barriers to sustained collaboration, most respondents voiced strong support for a spirit of mutual aid, seeing collaboration as key to innovation, resilience, and a stronger public media system overall.

FINDING #5

ANTICIPATING CHALLENGES

Public radio music stations face a range of mounting challenges—from declining radio listenership and growing competition from streaming platforms to funding uncertainty and rising political polarization. Internally, many contend with aging staff, limited capacity, and the strain of executing ambitious goals with lean teams. To remain relevant and resilient, stations are innovating, expanding strategic outreach, developing sustainable revenue models, and engaging with younger, more diverse audiences. These stations know that success depends on striking a balance—preserving the authenticity that fosters loyalty while evolving to meet the expectations of a rapidly changing media environment.

CLASSICAL MUSIC



ORCHESTRATING COMMUNITY

How Classical Public Radio is Growing Audiences and Curating Authentic Local Connections

In 1784, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart did something quietly revolutionary: he rented a concert hall in Vienna, hired an orchestra, and promoted his own performance to the public. At a time when most classical music existed behind palace walls—composed for royalty, played in salons, and heard only by the elite—Mozart's public concerts broke the mold. He offered music not just for the aristocracy, but for the rising middle class, for merchants, students, and families. It was a bold step toward making classical music a public good, a shared experience open to all.

Today, public radio classical stations continue that legacy of cultural democratization. Across the country, these stations are proving that classical music is not just for connoisseurs—it's a dynamic cultural force embedded in the life of the communities they serve. These stations function as cultural anchors, artistic collaborators, and civic partners, expanding access to the arts, supporting local institutions, and working creatively to engage younger and more diverse audiences. Amid shifting demographics, technological transformation, and funding uncertainties, classical stations are finding imaginative ways to remain relevant, inclusive, and essential.

AMPLIFYING THE LOCAL CLASSICAL ECOSYSTEM

Classical stations are deeply committed to supporting local orchestras, ensembles, and musicians. Many serve as marketing partners, promoting concerts and events across on-air broadcasts, websites, email newsletters, and social media platforms. Most maintain online community calendars; **WRTI Philadelphia** even curates a weekly newsletter featuring live classical music events throughout the Philadelphia metro area. Beyond promotion, stations act as production partners—sponsoring live concerts, broadcasting local symphonies, and recording performances for future airplay. Some share performance spaces or board members with local arts organizations, reinforcing a tightly interwoven and mutually supportive cultural network.

A SOUNDTRACK FOR A DIVIDED AGE

In a time of deepening political polarization, many classical stations have positioned themselves as sanctuaries—offering calm and emotional relief from the relentless churn of the news cycle. **Colorado Public Radio** describes its role as a "peaceful, though invisible, meeting place for thousands of individuals with vastly differing viewpoints—all brought together through the universal language of music." Still, even as they aim to unite listeners across ideological divides, stations must contend with real political pressures—particularly around funding. Navigating these tensions while staying true to their public service mission remains an ongoing challenge.

CULTIVATING THE NEXT GENERATION

To secure the future of classical music, public radio stations are investing in meaningful outreach to younger and more diverse audiences through education, partnerships, and creative programming. One standout example is **WXXI Rochester's** "In the Key of Z: Classical," a digital-first series that showcases emerging Gen Z classical talent from the Rochester region. Meanwhile, as a station licensed to a fine arts summer camp in Michigan, **Blue Lake Public Radio** has unique opportunities at connecting with and cultivating the next generation of classical musicians and connoisseurs. Many stations also collaborate with schools, community organizations, and local venues to host events designed to reach children, families, and those who may not see themselves reflected in traditional classical music spaces. These include classical music fairs, youth competitions, and film screenings with live orchestral scores and post-show discussions.

Twenty Classical organizations

answered the survey with an even split between those licensed to Institutional and Community entities.

95%

of the stations have been serving their communities for more than 20 years.

70%

responded that their financial health is stable or very strong, with 30% feeling somewhat uncertain about their financial health

STAFF SIZE VARIES AT THE ORGANIZATIONS:

- 30% have more than 25 employees and 30% have less than five employees
- 15% have 16-25 employees and 25% have 5-15 employees

REVENUE VARIES AS WELL:

- · 55% have more than \$5M in revenue
- 20% have revenue between \$1.5M and \$4.99M
- · 10% have revenue between \$750k and \$1.49M
- 15% have revenue below \$749k

All stations devote more than

40% of their 18-hour schedule to airing

Classical music

90%
provide Classical
as their primary
format with 10%
having a mixed
format

50%
of the stations
highlight or feature
local music/musicians
in their programming
more than once a day

Classical listeners tend to skew towards older audiences, but most stations focus on educational outreach, families, and young artists

50%

of the stations have a marketing and promotion strategy with 30% in the process of developing their plans



ORCHESTRATING BELONGING ACROSS PUGET SOUND

Located in the heart of Seattle, Classical KING serves as a connective force for the region's rich arts ecosystem, leveraging the timeless power of classical music to bring communities together and cultivate the next generation of artists and listeners.

A Platform for Local and Emerging Artists

Classical KING is deeply committed to elevating local performers and nurturing the careers of young musicians. Through regular segments like "Local Lunch" and Friday evening

showcases, the station creates space for community-based talent to shine. Weekly features of young award winners have helped emerging musicians gain broader exposure and even secure scholarships. With a strong focus on accessibility, the station also serves as a gateway to music education—frequently cited by teachers, parents, and grandparents as a trusted, free resource for introducing children to classical music.

Expanding Reach Through Digital Engagement

Recognizing the shift away from traditional radio, Classical KING is proactively investing in digital platforms to meet audiences where they are. Informed by research showing that classical music appeals broadly across age and ethnic demographics, the station is expanding its presence on Spotify, YouTube, Apple, Google, and Meta to build awareness and grow listenership. Their goal is clear and consistent: remind people that Classical KING exists, and that there's something here for everyone.

Strengthening Seattle's Arts Ecosystem

Beyond the concert hall, Classical KING plays a vital role in amplifying the broader cultural landscape of the Seattle area. The station promotes more than 250 arts organizations—airing performances by the Seattle Symphony and Opera and broadcasting events that span the region from Mount Vernon to Port Townsend. Memorable collaborations, like a national anthem contest with the Seattle Kraken (won by a 12-year-old cellist), have earned international attention and broadened the appeal of classical music. By connecting audiences to the arts, Classical KING functions as a cultural bridge—bringing harmony to a diverse and vibrant region.



Broadcasting from Dallas, WRR serves as a cultural beacon—welcoming listeners of all ages, backgrounds, and musical experience into the world of classical music

A Texas Station, Through-and-Through

WRR infuses its classical programming with a distinctly Texan identity, regularly featuring recordings and live performances from local ensembles, including the Dallas and Fort Worth symphonies. The station maintains a diverse playlist and seeks to connect with Hispanic and Latino audiences and other underrepresented groups by spotlighting the many communities

that make up Texas. WRR offers an open-submission platform for licensed recordings and partners with schools, arts groups, and seasonal events like caroling in Dallas's arts district to showcase the vibrancy of North Texas' music scene.

A Safe Oasis, On Air and Online

WRR positions itself as an oasis—a comforting, joyful space where listeners can discover new music, unwind, and feel inspired. Hosts meet weekly to curate intentional playlists that highlight diverse artists and lesser-known works, weaving in their own personalities and passions to make classical music feel warm and relatable. Programs like the daily "March of the Day" and a Saturday children's show reflect WRR's welcoming spirit. Whether you're a lifelong classical enthusiast or a curious newcomer, WRR offers a refuge that meets you where you are.

Expanding Reach and Lifting Others

In Dallas and beyond, WRR is more than a radio station—it's a cultural connector. A new app and refreshed branding ensure audiences can connect anytime, anywhere. Collaborations with KERA TV extend WRR's arts coverage, while an upcoming event series and revived volunteer program promise new opportunities for engagement. Crucially, WRR provides a platform for a wide range of musical organizations—from the Greater Dallas Youth Orchestra to the Women's Chorus of Dallas—many of whom wouldn't otherwise receive broadcast coverage.



CONNECTING COMMUNITIES THROUGH MUSIC AND INNOVATION

From Davidson to the greater Charlotte region, WDAV goes beyond broadcasting—enriching lives and building community through inclusive, diverse classical experiences that bridge tradition and innovation across multiple platforms

Classical Music as a Bridge—Not a Barrier

From breweries to film screenings, community engagement takes center stage at WDAV. Its Small Batch concert series—hosted at a Charlotte brewery—brings together audiences for intimate performances by local artists, with accessible "pay what you can" ticketing.

Concerts have ranged from solo harp recitals to 18-piece orchestras featuring works by Black composers. Meanwhile, the Reel Music film series, produced in partnership with a local art house cinema, has broadened classical's cultural reach—pairing films about composers like Mozart or Chevalier de Saint-Georges with live performances and post-screening panels. Strategic collaborations, such as a local influencer and Davidson alum organically promoting Small Batch, have helped draw younger and more diverse audiences.

Programming for the Present—and the Future

WDAV is redefining classical storytelling for modern audiences through original content and digital-first initiatives. Its "NoteWorthy" project, a virtual concert series pairing classical musicians with pop artists of color, has since evolved into nationally distributed broadcast modules and podcasts that feature underrepresented artists. The station also participated in the Recording Inclusivity Initiative to record and share music by underrepresented composers. Its deployment of Multiplatform Producers (MPPs) exemplifies a shift toward digital fluency—contributing to blogs, social media, and innovative projects like Musical Mind Games, a livestream podcast where host Christen Crumpler explores video game soundtracks and the emotional power of interactive music.

A Local Station with a National and Cross-Format Perspective

WDAV looks outward while keeping its roots deep in local soil. Even as it builds contingency plans for funding shifts, WDAV remains committed to local service—retaining staff, supporting local artists, and sharing music with students through initiatives like donating recorders and music books during donor campaigns. The station's app accounts for around 10–15% of its listenership, drawing not just from the Charlotte region but also from places as far afield as Japan, Texas, California, and New York. As a member of PMCC and PMDMC, WDAV stays closely connected to the broader public media ecosystem—exchanging best practices regularly with stations nationwide through Zoom, Slack, and quarterly underwriting calls. However, WDAV is learning not just from its classical peers, but also from Triple A stations redefining local radio for the digital age.

JAZZ MUSIC



LOCAL STEWARDS OF AN AMERICAN GENRE

Preserving the Past and Shaping the Future of Jazz in Public Media

In the annals of jazz history, few myths loom as large as the story that Miles Davis recorded his iconic 1959 album, *Kind of Blue*, in a single take. While not entirely true, it's a legend grounded in the impressive fact that Davis and his sextet completed the entire album over the course of just two sessions. The result was not only a landmark in jazz music but a masterclass in creative vision and improvisational trust. While Davis offered his players little more than modal sketches—no chord charts, no rehearsals, no written melodies—his visionary sense of purpose, grounded leadership, and openness to experimentation heralded a moment of collective brilliance that produced what is now hailed as one of the greatest albums in all of recorded music.

That same spirit—visionary, improvisational, deeply rooted yet open to evolution—animates the work of jazz stations across the public media system today. These organizations are far more than music broadcasters; they are local stewards of a national art form. From coast to coast, public radio jazz outlets honor the genre's roots in American culture while expanding its reach to new generations and global audiences. Whether through locally curated programs, community education, or innovative blends of tradition and genre-bending experimentation, they continue to build vital bridges—between past and future, heritage and innovation, community and creativity.

Stewards of a Living Genre

Stations see themselves as guardians of a uniquely American and, often, local art form. **WDCB Chicago** called its programming a "high-quality presentation of jazz and blues music freely accessible to the entire Chicagoland region, where jazz & blues has a rich history and a still vibrant local scene." Many stations spoke to the challenge—and opportunity—of expanding jazz's boundaries while honoring its roots, incorporating jazz styles from around the globe and across genres like Hip-Hop, Funk, Soul, and more.

Educational Outreach & Youth Engagement

Many jazz stations nurture young listeners and performers through music education. **KCCK Cedar Rapids/lowa City** works with over 20 high school jazz bands, providing professional studio sessions and inviting students to act as on-air guest DJs. **KNKX Seattle** features a monthly student DJ as part of its School of Jazz program, offering hands-on experience in radio broadcasting. These programs not only teach music appreciation—they empower students to be cultural participants.

Global Reach from Local Roots

Stations with distinctive jazz programming often punch above their geographic weight. **KCCK**, serving a modestly sized lowa community, has more than 30,000 Facebook followers from around the world, drawn to its unique, artist-centered content. Several stations also noted that jazz's global influence helps drive digital engagement well beyond their local markets, gaining listeners from Brazil, Saudi Arabia, and beyond.

Twelve Jazz organizations

answered the survey with 9 of the stations being licensed to Institutional entities and 3 licensed to Community groups.

74%

of the stations have been serving their communities for more than 20 years, with the remaining five serving their communities for at least 10 years or more 89%

responded that their financial health is stable or very strong, with 11% feeling somewhat uncertain about their financial health

STAFF SIZE VARIES AT THE ORGANIZATIONS:

- 16% have more than 25 employees and 32% have between 16-25 employees
- 47% have 5-15 employees and 5% have less than 5 employees

REVENUE VARIES AS WELL:

- · 26% have revenue greater than \$5M
- 42% have revenue between \$1.5M and \$4.99M
- · 26% have revenue between \$750k and \$1.49M
- 5% have revenue below \$749k

89%

stations devote more than **40% of their 18-hour schedule to airing Jazz music**

75%

provide Jazz as their primary format with 25% having a mixed format

50%

of the stations have a marketing and promotion strategy

with 25% in the process of developing their plans

58%

of the stations
highlight or feature
local music/musicians
in their programming
more than once a day



LOCAL DEPTH, GLOBAL REACH

Denver's KUVO is a model of community-focused jazz radio with both local depth and global reach.

Engaging Younger Audiences

Through late-night programs like *Jazz Odyssey*, genre-adjacent Soul and Urban Alternative programming on HD1 and 2, Traditional and Alternative Latin programming, as well a strategic collaborations with Denver's historic Cervantes' Masterpiece Ballroom, KUVO brings in younger, more diverse listeners. The station mobilizes empathy interviews, text lines, and email feedback as tools to engage younger audiences while maintaining authenticity to the genre and the station.

Audience Diversity

KUVO's audience reflects Denver's diversity and then some. While the Denver metro area is about 7% Black and 25% Hispanic, KUVO's listenership is approximately 22% Black and 30% Hispanic. Their success stems from a deliberate focus on local content—88% of programming is locally produced—and a commitment to serving underrepresented audiences through authentic musical storytelling.

National & International Reach

Despite being locally grounded, KUVO has attracted listeners from around the country and the world. On average the station's dedicated app has seen 200 downloads monthly from all U.S. states except Alaska. While 78% of web traffic is U.S.-based, the station sees growing international interest in its content. Recent analytics, for example, show strong engagement from Spain, Brazil, London, and Saudi Arabia.



JAZZ RENEGADES

With its tagline "Jazz without Boundaries," KMHD has positioned itself as a cultural force in Portland and beyond.

Intergenerational Boogie

KMHD's format blends traditional jazz with Hip Hop and global sounds, attracting an audience that spans generations and cultures. "We're a jazz station for people who don't think they like jazz," Program Director Matt Fleeger explained. KMHD's listeners reflect the station's cross-generational appeal. Nielsen data shows strong ratings among the 55+ demographic, but the station also draws a significant 35–45 crowd to its live events. Fleeger says that younger audiences—especially those raised on Hip Hop—easily connect with the station's more eclectic sound, describing the result as "intergenerational boogie."

From Portland to the Big Apple

Though rooted in Portland, KMHD has found creative ways to grow its national audience. One notable success: a guerrilla marketing campaign in New York City that mimicked MTA subway signage. The team plastered thousands of jazz-themed stickers across the city, resulting in a monthly listenership of roughly 40,000 in the NYC area—making it their second-largest market outside Oregon. The campaign's success reflects KMHD's marketing ethos: low-budget, high-impact, and culturally savvy.

Cultural Advocacy Through Music

While KMHD doesn't operate a formal educational program for children—citing concerns that academic approaches can fuel rigid jazz "purist" thinking—the station takes its cultural role seriously. The team intentionally stays apolitical on air, choosing instead to model inclusivity through artistic expression. "Multiculturalism makes America great," Fleeger noted. "Jazz is multiculturalism at its finest."

TRIPLEA

CHAMPIONS OF LOCAL CULTURE

Triple A Radio as a Civic and Cultural Anchor

Before she was a Grammy-winning artist, Brandi Carlile was a Seattle-area musician whose songs—rich with personal storytelling and emotional grit—were too sincere for commercial radio and too complex for easy categorization. But Triple A and public radio stations across the Pacific Northwest embraced her early work, playing her songs, hosting in-studio sessions, and championing her as a local voice worth hearing. Stations like KEXP and KBCS helped Carlile build a loyal following—one rooted in regional identity, community connection, and artistic authenticity. Over time, that local foundation gave rise to a national career that has never lost its sense of place or purpose.

That same ethos defines Triple A radio today. These stations are not just platforms for eclectic playlists—they are civic and cultural institutions. They shape local economies, nurture artistic talent, preserve cultural heritage, and foster inclusive conversation. In a rapidly changing media environment, Triple A stations remain grounded in their communities—champions of local culture, connectors of people, and stewards of stories that might otherwise go unheard.

Significant Economic & Community Impacts

Triple A stations are major economic contributors to their local areas. For instance, **KAXE's**Grand Rapids Riverfest annually contributes over \$1 million to the local economy through ticket sales, tourism, and on-site commerce. Similarly, **WTMD Baltimore's** First Thursday Festival series draws more than 50,000 attendees to its summer concerts, driving commerce for local businesses and offering platforms for vendors and nonprofits.

Programming Local Diversity

Many stations integrate local music directly into their primary playlists, not just specialty shows. **KXCI Tucson** emphasizes its mission to uplift local arts and culture for over four decades, incorporating a wide array of local music, including from the local Tohono O'odham Nation and regional Mexicano music. HYFIN, an HD2 Urban Alternative service from **Radio Milwaukee**, explicitly focuses on Black voices, small business culture, and systemic issues, elevating the city's unique Black and Hispanic cultures with local shows and boasting a majority-minority on-air staff. Volunteer DJs play a major role in reflecting and representing community diversity.

Going the Extra Mile for Local Musicians

Beyond programming, Triple A stations go the extra mile for local musicians. Some provide crucial in-studio performances and digital content creation, often filming, mixing, and

publishing these sessions on platforms like YouTube and NPR Live Sessions. **KUTX Austin** specifically noted that their sessions offer professional-quality performance footage to artists who might otherwise lack access, helping them book gigs and build portfolios. **WYSO's Novaphonic in Dayton** sends freelance photographers to local shows to ensure contemporary artists are included in the region's cultural record. Many communities rely on these stations as one of the only platforms reliably spotlighting musicians and cultural events.

Nineteen Triple A organizations

answered the survey with 12 of the stations being licensed to Institutional entities and 7 licensed to Community groups.

All

of the stations have been serving their communities for more than 20 years.

66%

responded that their financial health is stable or very strong, with 33% feeling somewhat uncertain about their financial health

STAFF SIZE VARIES AT THE ORGANIZATIONS:

- 25% have more than 25 employees and 17% have less than five employees
- 25% have 16-25 employees and 33% have 5-15 employees

REVENUE VARIES AS WELL:

- · 33% have revenue greater than \$5M
- · 25% have revenue between \$1.5M and \$4.99M
- · 25% have revenue between \$750k and \$1.49M
- · 17% have revenue below \$749k

89%

stations devote more than 40% of their 18-hour schedule to airing Triple A music

79%

provide Triple A as their primary format with 21% having a mixed format

74%

of the stations
highlight or feature
local music/musicians
in their programming
more than once a day

47%

of the stations have a marketing and promotion strategy with 47% in the process of developing their plans



CREATING A COMMUNITY OF CARE

Kansas City's 90.9 FM The Bridge exemplifies what it means to be a music station rooted in service, culture, and civic life.

Partnerships: Expected and Unexpected

Whether broadcasting live from the Boulevardia Festival or becoming the official media partner for the KC Current (the city's professional women's soccer team), The Bridge engages in partnerships that reflect—and help shape—Kansas City's cultural landscape. The team's ethos of showing up in both obvious and surprising places reinforces their status as a culturally embedded institution.

Generosity in Action

The Bridge's community-first ethos translates into tangible support for local causes through a range of hands-on, mission-aligned initiatives. During pledge drives, their Community Partnership Days match listener donations with contributions to local nonprofits—often accompanied by station staff volunteering at these organizations. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the station donated around \$50k worth of free underwriting to small businesses, with a focus on supporting Black and women-owned businesses.

Music as Healing

In response to the Kansas City Chiefs parade shooting, the station cleared its programming and aired three hours of listener-submitted requests, using music to facilitate collective mourning and expression. Their annual Sound Minds initiative further deepens this connection to community by inviting listeners to share how music has supported their mental health, while also highlighting local resources and organizations that provide mental health support.



MASTERS OF LOGISTICS

With careful financial planning, detailed audience research, and thoughtful digital strategy, Philadelphia's WXPN demonstrates how disciplined logistics can support both creative and community ambitions.

Strategic Financial Planning

Faced with the loss of CPB support, WXPN is proactively shifting its funding model. Leadership is increasing reliance on membership and major gifts, focusing on reinforcing the station's core strengths and its longstanding commitment to hosting live events. As station General Manager Roger LaMay described, the plan is about "doubling down on what we're already doing" and growing the community through deepened engagement, not mission drift or chasing novelty.

Data-Driven Decision Making

WXPN takes a rigorous, metrics-based approach to nearly every facet of its operation. From audience share and time spent listening to detailed engagement and video retention analytics, staff continuously evaluate performance across platforms. Membership behavior is also closely analyzed, with patterns in giving, loyalty, and event participation informing ongoing strategy. Research plays a significant role in marketing and programming decisions, with in-house surveys and focus groups used regularly.

Digital Strategy and Platform Use

WXPN approaches the digital landscape with both intention and clarity. Mobile access now dominates, with most users tuning in via the station's app or mobile web. Rather than competing with other streaming services, the station seeks to understand its role within listeners' broader musical ecosystems and highlight what makes public radio distinctive. Social media engagement is strongest on Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, and recent marketing efforts include paid social media campaigns designed to reach musically curious adults aged 35–55, along with strategic "lead magnet" tactics to build email lists and drive overall engagement.

ADDITIONAL FORMATS



DEEP CUTS & RARITIES

Innovation at the Edges of Public Radio

In 1971, Gil Scott-Heron released his searing anthem, "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised," a track that was revolutionary in itself. Musically daring and politically charged, Scott-Heron delivered his lyrics with an innovative, rapid-fire spoken-word style. Coupled with the thunderous grooves of jazz bassist Ron Carter, the razor-sharp flute of musical polymath Hubert Laws, and the tightly syncopated funk of drummer Bernard "Pretty" Purdie, the song was a collaborative tour de force—fusing genres and laying the groundwork for Hip-Hop and Rap in the decades to come.

Like public radio music, "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised" defied commercial formulas while remaining rooted in the musical traditions of the American landscape. More than five decades later, its message still resonates: the real work of transformation isn't prepackaged, sanitized, or delivered between ad breaks. "The revolution," Scott-Heron reminds us, "will not be brought to you by Xerox in four parts without commercial interruptions." "The revolution," he ends with abrupt and sober clarity, "will be live."

That same insistence on authenticity, live connection, civic engagement, and the power of noncommercial art finds a powerful echo at the edges of the public radio system, where mixed-format, Americana, and Urban Alternative stations are redefining both the mission and sound of public service radio. Whether contemplatively blending Classical and Jazz as an expression of civic values, reimagining Americana as a more inclusive cultural expression, or channeling youth energy into community participation through Urban Alternative formats, these stations represent some of the boldest experiments in public media today. Their work reveals how music can build identity, foster equity, and bridge generational divides—reminding us that public service isn't just about what gets played, but how and why it's shared.



MIXING FORMATS, BUILDING BRIDGES

WRTI's Philosophy of Musical Citizenship

WRTI's rare 50/50 blend of jazz and classical music is more than a programming choice—it's the expression of a deeply held philosophy about the enduring cultural power of music,

the civic responsibility of public media, and the shared foundations of musical expression. Guided by its mission to "champion music as a vital cultural resource," WRTI sees jazz and classical not as opposites, but as parallel traditions—rooted in the same twelve notes, shaped by similar melodic and harmonic logics, and sustained by generations of artistic relevance. General Manager Bill Johnson frames this connection in civic terms, describing both genres as living models of a healthy democracy. Music, in this vision, teaches us how to listen, support other voices, collaborate, and exercise discipline—habits essential to civil society. This belief in music as cultural citizenship informs every facet of the station's identity, from staffing and education to curation and community outreach. WRTI treats music not merely as entertainment, but as a moral force, a social good, and a shared inheritance—an art form capable of bridging difference and fostering collective well-being.



DEEP ROOTS & NEW SHOOTS

WMOT and the Reimagining of Americana

WMOT has carved out a bold identity within the public radio landscape by reimagining what Americana music can mean—and who it can serve. WMOT has used its 100,000-watt signal not only to broadcast across Nashville and 40 surrounding communities—many of which have no other music services—but to amplify underrepresented voices and cultivate a more inclusive roots music culture. WMOT champions music not just as entertainment, but as a conduit for empathy, emotional expression, and cultural connection. Through shows like The Old Fashioned (featuring bluegrass and regional folk), Local Brew (which spotlights over 800 Nashville artists annually), and a growing portfolio of live music events such as Finally Friday and the Roots on the River festival, WMOT offers listeners both a deep appreciation of heritage and a continuous stream of new discoveries. Its commitment to gender equity and racial representation—evident in its weekly programming and festival bookings—marks WMOT as a leader in reshaping Americana as a genre that reflects the full diversity of American musical life.



YOUTH CULTURE & CIVIC VOICE IN "THE SIPP"

Urban Alternative for Jackson, Mississippi

Since its 2022 launch, The Sipp—an Urban Alternative station housed under WJSU at Jackson State University—has emerged as a vibrant force in public media, reflecting the pulse of a younger, culturally engaged Black audience in Jackson, Mississippi. With a format rooted in Hip-Hop, R&B, and local artistry, The Sipp has built its identity on more than just music programming; it's a platform for representation, civic connection, and youth empowerment. Targeting primarily 18-44-year-old African American listeners—with a special focus on the 18-24 demographic—The Sipp fosters community trust through authenticity. Its onair personalities are not distant voices—they are relatable locals, deeply embedded in the social and cultural fabric of Jackson, regularly showing up at events, volunteering, and leading public service initiatives. The station's belief that "music is the most prolific form of communication" drives its commitment to uplifting artists, sharing good news, and using its platform to connect people across social, generational, and geographic lines. As a student training hub, it offers internships and practical experience to Jackson State media students while expanding outreach to high schools through DJ workshops and educational partnerships. With a majority of its audience tuning in via digital platforms—its mobile app, website, and social media channels—The Sipp is also experimenting with new formats and technologies, from curated playlists and SMS engagement to upcoming marketing campaigns on TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram. As it enters its third year, The Sipp continues to refine a model for youth-oriented public radio that is local, expressive, and civic-minded one where community and culture move in rhythm.

CONCLUSION: A FUTURE TUNED TO COMMUNITY

Public radio music stations remain among the most dynamic and community-anchored institutions in American media. Through interviews, data, and case studies, we've seen how these stations amplify local culture, drive economic activity, and cultivate the next generation of listeners and creators. They are evolving—embracing digital tools, deepening partnerships, and expanding their reach—while holding fast to the public service values that have always defined them.

Our findings align closely with the Researching Unmet Needs (RUN2024) study conducted by public radio's Station Resource Group, Greater Public, and Public Media Content Collective. Drawing on responses from more than 30,000 listeners, RUN2024 surfaced a widespread desire for local connection—especially through live events and curated community calendars. Our research echoes this finding: music stations report strong engagement with festivals, concerts, and collaborations that foster civic pride and cultural vitality. Investments in hyperlocal storytelling, artist development, and arts promotion are helping to fill the very gaps RUN identified as most pressing.

The recent decision to eliminate federal support for public broadcasting underscores the urgency of this work. Even amid that challenge, local music stations continue to adapt with purpose and vision—expanding platforms, cultivating new talent, and deepening community ties. Both our study and RUN2024 highlight the same essential truth: in an algorithm-driven world, audiences still crave the human touch. Local hosts, thoughtfully curated playlists, and intimate performance programming offer more than entertainment; they provide belonging, discovery, and joy.

At the same time, stations recognize the need to reach younger and more diverse audiences through digital storytelling, streaming, and social media. Many are already leading the way—launching podcasts, youth DJ programs, and innovative video content that meet audiences where they are. As RUN2024 makes clear, public media's future depends on this evolution.

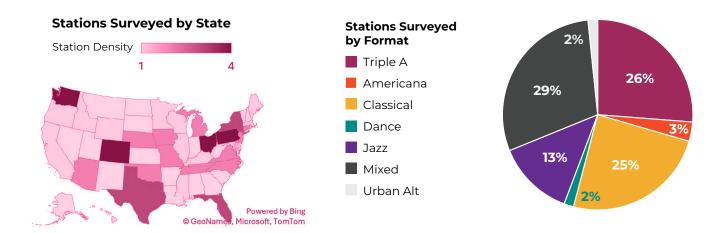
The needs are evident, and the moment is decisive. Communities across the country are hungry for connection, authenticity, and shared experience—and public radio music stations are uniquely equipped to deliver. To meet that potential, the system must continue to move forward: fundraising creatively, investing boldly, collaborating deeply, and evolving strategically. The work ahead is demanding, but the promise is clear—local public media remains one of the most trusted, human, and hopeful forces in American life.

APPENDIX A: METHODOLOGY

To better understand the evolving role of public radio music stations as cultural, civic, and community institutions, Public Media Company and VuHaus Group conducted a mixed-methods study combining a national survey with in-depth station interviews. This approach provided both breadth and depth, allowing us to capture overarching trends as well as the unique experiences and insights of individual stations.

SURVEY

In the spring of 2025, we distributed a 35-question survey to public radio music stations across the country. More than 60 stations responded, representing a diverse mix of formats, market sizes, and geographic regions. The survey explored topics such as community engagement, local partnerships, funding models, audience demographics, and the role of music programming in public service.



INTERVIEWS

To complement the survey data, we conducted in-depth interviews with leaders from ten public radio music stations across the continental United States. These conversations provided rich qualitative insights into how stations define and fulfill their public service missions. The participating stations represented a range of formats and regional contexts.

STATIONS INTERVIEWED

CLASSICAL

- · Classical KING (Seattle, WA)
- · WDAV (Charlotte, NC)
- · WRR (Dallas, TX)

JAZZ

- · KMHD (Portland, OR)
- · KUVO (Denver, CO)

MIXED FORMAT (JAZZ/CLASSICAL)

· WRTI (Philadelphia, PA)

TRIPLE A

- · The Bridge (Kansas City, MO)
- · WXPN (Philadelphia, PA)

AMERICANA

WMOT (Nashville, TN)

URBAN ALTERNATIVE

· The Sipp FM (Jackson, MS)

A NOTE ON THE USE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI)

Artificial intelligence tools were used in the preparation of this report to assist in identifying trends within our data and to support general editorial tasks. Specifically, we deployed ChatGPT and NotebookLM. These tools supported the synthesis, organization, and presentation of complex information. All Al-generated insights were reviewed, verified, and edited by the report's authors and contributors to ensure accuracy, relevance, and integrity. The use of these tools helped streamline analysis while maintaining a commitment to editorial rigor and human oversight.

PUBLIC MEDIA CO. **Public Media Company** is a mission-driven nonprofit dedicated to strengthening local public media as a vital force in community life. Since 2001, they've partnered with nearly 400 nonprofit media organizations across all 50 states, D.C., and Puerto Rico—helping them expand their impact, deepen community connections, and build sustainable business models. With expertise in media, finance, strategy, and leadership, the Public Media Company team provides trusted guidance and practical resources to ensure that every community, regardless of size or wealth, can be served by strong, local, nonprofit media.



VuHaus Group creates transformative partnerships to connect public radio's music discovery stations with artists and audiences across the country. In addition to curating station-produced live performance video to NPR Music Live Sessions, affiliate services include Content, Editorial and Marketing Collaborations, and Revenue. VuHaus Group includes public radio stations KUTX Austin, WFUV New York City, WXPN Philadelphia, WRTI Philadelphia, KXT Dallas/Ft. Worth, KALW San Francisco, KING FM Seattle, WMOT Nashville, TMD Baltimore, KTBG The Bridge Kansas City, WNRN Virginia, KKSO Studio One Des Moines, and Mountain Stage in West Virginia.



The Wyncote Foundation was founded in 2009 with funds from the Otto and Phoebe Haas Charitable Trusts, at the direction of John C. Haas. It's mission is to support efforts that strengthen and enrich culture, community, and the natural environment.



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