

# University radio station celebrates its first birthday

By Gayle Forman

For the Oregon Daily Emerald

KWVA is having a birthday party, and everyone is invited.

The University's campus radio station celebrates its first year of operation this month. In honor of this auspicious event, the station has organized a birthday-blowout concert on May 27 at 8 p.m.

Of course, it is a birthday party, so you're expected to bring a present.

Entertainment for the evening will include The Meat Puppets, Arizona's chieftains of independent rock, who will bring their own unique brand of "hillbilly punk" to Eugene. Joining them will be Portland's Svlt and local favorites Oswald Five-0. The show is in Condon School, at 18th Avenue and Agate Street.

KWVA began broadcasting May 27, 1993. Hitting the one-year mark has been quite a challenge for the radio station. Until KWVA's debut on the FM dial, the idea of a campus radio station broadcasting alternative rock had been but a dream, said the station's general manager, James Pierson. The University's other radio station, KWAX, broadcasts classical music.

Pierson said it was a little help from a friend, Sen. Bob Packwood, that finally got them on the air in the first place. Pierson said Packwood leaned on the Federal Communications Commission to get the budding station a license grant, a process that normally takes five to 10 years.

KWVA started as a "self-invented radio station created by students who had no experience as station operators," Pierson said. The spirit was there, but the organization was lacking.

When Pierson, 25, joined the station in October 1993, bringing with him 11 years of radio experience, he believed the station's format "made no sense." He believed the station needed strong leadership and a push toward the kind of programming that has traditionally defined college radio stations, the kind of programming that conventional, commercial radio stations don't see as commercially viable.

Pierson turned out to be the leader that the station needed. With Pierson at the reins, the station has gone, as one student puts it, "from a radio station broadcasting crap in the EMU to a successful radio station."

Pierson said he understood the special



KWVA's general manager, James Pierson (left) jams his way through the lunch hour with disc jockey, Chris Scholz.

niche of a college radio station and worked to attain a format to meld students' tastes with the philosophy of college rock.

"College radio pursues a musical direction and format the commercial radio stations don't find lucrative because the music is abrasive, political and confrontational," he said.

Pierson believes KWVA's programming is pretty consistent with this philosophy but said he'd "like to see it further along." With more funding, more space and a greater focus, Pierson believes KWVA could be "the biggest radio station in town."

Pierson and radio station personnel aren't the only ones in town who benefit from KWVA's success. Local independent bands had no forum in which to broadcast in Eugene.

KWVA's arrival on the scene has been a big help to small independent bands. Nick Tucker of Eugene's Oswald Five-0 said KWVA serves as a launching pad for young bands.

"I think when kids hear a band on college radio, it solidifies the band. It makes them real," Tucker said.

Tucker also said that college radio sta-

tions, unlike other stations, tend to be egalitarian. "It's an opportunity for any band to get played," he said.

Baxter believes the bands on her label have benefited from having the station in town. She said many of the live shows in town aren't open to underage people, and without a radio station, many of those underage kids never have the opportunity to hear non-mainstream bands. KWVA has changed that, she said. "It has brought new interest to the local music scene," she said.

Pierson agrees with that sentiment. For all of KWVA's accomplishments, Pierson believes its most significant effect has been to solidify the local music scene.

"I think it brought a music scene to life," he said.

To many at the radio station, this birthday party means more than seeing a few great bands and blowing out some candles. For them, the success of KWVA marks the realization of a 10-year dream: a college radio station at the University.

College radio stations have always occupied their own unique niche in the music industry. They have been a distant cousin, at best, to the big commercial stations. Ignoring the commercial charts,

college radio stations have opted to be the safe haven for the new, the obscure, or the "unmarketable."

They have also traditionally been a venue for small local bands, said Colleen Baxter, a former college radio DJ and owner of the local record label Grinning Idiot Records.

Baxter said the commercial success of bands originally played on college radio stations — bands such as R.E.M. and The Cure — catapulted the college radio station out of its quiet little nest on the fringe and into the limelight.

And now in that limelight, college radio stations have a new power.

"When I deejayed 10 years ago, it was nothing like it is now," Baxter said. "The power has shifted. Now college radio stations are taken very seriously by the industry."

The new power gives these once small, obscure stations "huge influence" over the music scene in general, she said. The major labels started to notice the success of bands who were not in the mainstream.

"People didn't realize they sold records," Baxter said. "The major labels realized that these bands were not on a major label or on MTV but were selling records."

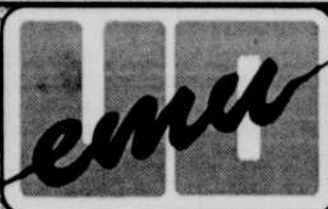
The major labels caught on and started paying attention. "The major labels are always the last to spot a trend," Baxter said.

And thus the status of college radio stations has exploded in the past five years. They now have their own top-20 music lists, featured in industry publications such as *Billboard* magazine and a magazine devoted to college radio station bands: the *College Music Journal*. Major labels now employ "alternative music promoters" whose job it is to farm college radio bands for major label contracts.

While college radio stations all over the country were becoming the up-and-coming big players in the music scene, a handful of students at the University struggled to give birth to a station of their own.

The birthday celebration will begin promptly at 8 p.m. There is no need to R.S.V.P. Come as you like, but don't forget the present. The folks at KWVA are suggesting a present of \$8. You can buy your present at the EMU desk as well as many music stores around town. Call KWVA for more information at 346-4091.

## THIS WEEK



## MAY 23-29

### EMU

346-4362

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**15% Off all**  
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5/30  
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5/24  
KOREANA NIGHT  
5/26  
RANT 'N RAVE  
6/3  
LEON RUSSELL  
6/12

GET INTERACTIVE! GET INVOLVED!  
The EMU Cultural Forum is throwing the blowout event of  
the year!!!

**RANT 'N RAVE**

is a multi-media, interactive exhibition and  
we want you to be part of it!

**FRIDAY June 3** in the EMU Ballroom you  
can have the opportunity to show your stuff  
There will be outlets for slides, films,  
hanging displays, rappin' on the mic,  
struttin' 'cross the stage and speakin'  
your minds!!! What are you waiting for?  
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EMU) or call 346-4373 for more  
information. This is one event you can't  
miss!!!

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