

A JACK-OF-ALL-TRADES

MUSIC TECHNICIAN FILLS A VOID AT COAST COMMUNITY RADIO

Story and photos by
DWIGHT CASWELL

According to Graham Nystrom, his new job is actually, “five jobs in one: a mixture of IT, file management, audio engineering, electrical engineering and maintenance.” Nystrom has done all those jobs at one time or another, in one place or another, but he’s never before combined them into a single job like the one he now has: operations manager at Coast Community Radio.

If you’re a listener of KMUN 91.9 FM, KTCB 89.5 FM or KCPB 90.9 FM, you may have heard occasional requests for additional support to purchase new equipment, or heard about a “major upgrade” of “broadcast computer systems and software.” Nystrom is the guy who takes it all apart and puts it back together again. He began volunteering for the station a year ago, and it soon became apparent that more than a volunteer was needed; Nystrom became a part-time employee in April and was working full time by June.

For the past 16 years or so (“my whole working life”) he’s made his living as an independent contractor in what he describes as, “the music technology field.” From a foundation in studio and live recording for bands and venues, Nystrom moved to radio, becoming a technical director for Live Wire Radio and Oregon Public Broadcasting.

If you look for Nystrom at work, which might mean a remote antenna site but usually means Coast Community Radio’s Tillicum House in Astoria, you might find him repairing something on a pro-

grammer’s board, but you’re more likely to find him in deep in the bowels of the studio, in the server room. “That’s where the action is,” says Nystrom.

To the naked eye, though, nothing much seems to be going on. There are metal shelves stacked with boxes lit with small lights, and the web of wires connecting the boxes would confuse a spider. A cheap work light clamped to a shelf provides harsh lighting. All the action is by electrons zipping along those wires. Servers (the boxes) receive satellite feeds from public radio stations like NPR and BBC, and file servers send Coast Community Radio’s content to automation computers in the KMUN and KCPB studios. Switches flip from one source to another, and computers process the sound before sending it the Megler antenna.

Nystrom comments with considerable understatement, “It’s quite a matrix of wiring and signal paths, all of which require maintenance.”

If the server room wasn’t enough to keep him busy, Nystrom may be called on to engineer and/or record a program, or to produce a “spot” for an underwriter. “In the morning I think I have a full day, and then I discover that I have to fix a turntable and a microphone and record a spot, and that has to be added to the to-do list,” he says.

Not that Nystrom is some kind of technology geek. He has a broad range of interests, from sailing to music. He plays piano and guitar, and he pursued a music composition degree with the initial goal of composing for films. “But my friends were playing rock

music,” he explains, “and I spent some time playing in bands.” He also discovered “the consistent paycheck was in the technical work rather than the performing side.”

A few years ago, about the time Nystrom was growing tired of the independent contractor lifestyle, he made some friends in Astoria while engineering a remote broadcast for OPB. “I thought, what an amazing place to work. It has history and charm, and I love community radio.”

“When I was brought on, it was understood that all the computers had to be updated,” he says. “There were a lot of 12- to 14-hour days and calls in the middle of the night.” Nonetheless, “things are beginning to coalesce, and I love what I do here, and the staff, and the amazing volunteer programmers who make it possible.”



Above: You’ll often find Graham Nystrom, the new operations manager at Coast Community Radio, in the server room of the radio station’s homebase in Astoria. “That’s where the action is,” says Nystrom.

Left: As Coast Community Radio’s new operations manager, Graham Nystrom maintains the radio station’s servers and also engineers or records programs.