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A new Peak emerges amid the valley of rock radio

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Commercial FM radio has been a homogenized mess around here for some time. Anyone who listens to rock 'n' roll is aware of this frustrating fact.

Rock stations in the New York market are overprogrammed, hyper-researched and demographically distilled into a kind of universal, woefully limited playlist that would suggest that Neil Young never recorded anything after "Heart of Gold" and Eric Clapton's only worthwhile song was "Layla." It's so bad that it's really not a hyperbolic stretch to predict that at this writing, the well-worn grooves of "Stairway to Heaven" are getting worked out for the zillionth time somewhere on the radio airwaves.

But there is relief from the sameness.

I found it not long ago when I was driving in my car and stumbled onto an FM frequency that was playing the Rolling Stones' live version of "Can't You Hear Me Knocking" It was a long-playing cut of a classic Stones song, and a pleasure to listen to. More to the point, it was a surprise, totally against the common grain.

And yet this is the typical fare of WXPK-FM (107.1), known as "The Peak." They play the stuff you're not likely to hear anywhere else — except perhaps

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occasionally on WFUV-FM (90.7), the Fordham University station that is much more folk-oriented and sits at the opposite end of the dial.

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Started by a small band of veteran deejays, The Peak signed on in April out of a secluded suite of offices on Lafayette Street, just a block or so from George Washington's headquarters in North White Plains. During the past 10 months, the station's Triple A format, (i.e. adult album alternative music) has gradually built a loyal audience of about 80,000 listeners in the metro-suburban region, or "New York's back yard." Not bad for a crowded market.

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Peter Mutino, the station manager, told me that The Peak has generated a positive outpouring of e-mail from people who have been starving for better radio. There are three distinct messages coming through loud and clear, he said.

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"The first one is, 'Finally, finally someone has figured it out and is doing the kind of music we want to hear,' " he said. "The second, which we always get a chuckle out of, is 'Don't go changing it now that you've got it right.' And the third is, 'I'm telling all my friends.' "

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Mutino explained that FM rock lost its "renegade spirit," largely because of changes in federal law that allowed a handful of corporations to buy up most of the nation's radio stations. The consolidation of ownership cut local control, drove up the stakes and ultimately led to a no-risk, cookie-cutter approach to programming. While the typical radio station may have 400 titles in its library and perhaps only 250 in actual rotation, Mutino said, The Peak has more than 4,000 titles.

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Albany-based Pamal Broadcasting, not one of the mega-corporations, owns The Peak and other radio stations in midsized markets, mostly in the Northeast. The home office placed its faith in Mutino and his crew to develop a looser, more sophisticated Triple A format that saw success in other cities such as San Francisco and Chicago, but was missing in New York.

The Peak team includes program director Chris Hermann, music director Rob Arrow and Scarsdale's own Jimmy Fink, an on-air personality who listeners might

fondly remember as a deejay on WPLJ and WXRK in New York City. The music these guys play is based less on research and more on gut instinct and personal taste, as well as advice from a listeners advisory board.

This ain't no disco.

"We try to keep things that are quality, that haven't been overplayed to death," said Arrow, who serves as the morning deejay and puts together a popular feature of playing 10 songs from a particular year without commercial interruption called, "The Ten at Ten." A recent grouping was for 1986 and it included Jackson Browne's "Lives in the Balance" and "Strangers When We Meet" by The Smithereens.

"We play things with strong melodies, up-tempo stuff, rock-based — not something that would make you cringe or be embarrassed to listen to, nothing juvenile," Arrow said. "You're not going to hear Bon Jovi on this radio station."

But you will hear Big Head Todd and the Monsters, The Shins or possibly Death Cab for Cutie. Wait a minute, Death Cab for ... who?

Hermann, the program director, said he heard about Death Cab for Cutie from Fink, who, truth be told, was turned on to the music by, of all people, his 12-year-old daughter.

"They're like an acoustic version of Weezer," Hermann said, meaning he liked what he heard. So stay tuned.

Hermann said The Peak tries to stay long on music and short on talk. The longest cut they have is "Telegraph Road" by Dire Straits, which plays for more than 14 minutes. But they'll play whole CDs, which is the likely plan when Bruce Springsteen's new album is released April 26.

"It's a big event," Hermann said.

It was afternoon drive-time when I visited The Peak and Fink was cranking up "Mr. Brightside" by The Killers. Between sets I briefly talked to the familiar deejay, who stepped out of the business for about five years to help run the family business, Fink Baking Corp.,

which was eventually sold.

Radio had left him cynical and a little cold, he admitted, but The Peak has revived him. And it's awakened a lot of listeners, too.



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