

## ALTERNATIVE MUSIC OVERVIEW

Whether it emerged to satisfy baby boomers who are fed up with classic rock or to provide a musical platform for artists who fall somewhere between popular and underground, alternative music (also called modern rock and grunge) has flourished. The format is seen as a marketing "gold mine," and FM rock radio is currently undergoing a major transformation to capitalize on its appeal.

A number of early alternative acts, including Nirvana, Soundgarden, and Pearl Jam, got their starts playing clubs in Seattle, Washington. The new music format quickly spread across the country, though its roots are still firmly planted in Seattle. The new format brought with it a new image—a plaid, baggy, 70's retro mix of styles. However, some teens declare that the ripped jeans and tattered flannel of the early "grunge" era are now out of fashion, having been replaced by a restyled preppie look: short plaid skirts, tall socks, and work boots. The music genre has launched a number of festivals featuring alternative bands, including Lollapalooza, an alternative rock and cultural festival that tours the U.S. each summer.

Alternative rock is a term that people have trouble defining. It may be music that the rest of the radio world does not play or simply a name for "alternative" acts such as Pearl Jam, Offspring, Sheryl Crow, or Counting Crows, although these artists have long since hit the Top-40. Pearl Jam and Nirvana, two early pioneers in the alternative movement who were known for playing what was not on the radio or on MTV, began selling millions of albums in early 1992 and became household names on MTV soon after. Today, alternative is one of the fastest growing music formats in the country.

Some radio stations are changing their format to AAA (album adult alternative), an eclectic mix for adults. In this genre, Bonnie Raitt, Steely Dan, and Van Morrison may share the airwaves with Counting Crows and the Waterboys. The AAA format has flourished in big cities such as Boston, traditionally less-progressive areas such as Des Moines, Iowa, and once-isolated regions such as Taos, New Mexico. A positive result of radio's newest shift in format is that it is expanding choices for listeners and is offering exposure for new artists. "Without AAA, I might never have been heard," says Sheryl Crow, a popular female artist in the alternative radio genre. However, critics of the AAA format say that the stations program a "consistently suburban (i.e., largely white) sound."

Criticism is also emerging with respect to alternative rock radio stations. The problem is that for a music genre that has claimed uniqueness, many alternative rock stations are beginning to look the same. "Alternative" once referred to "alternative lifestyles," and early fans were presumably non-mainstream. Now the format is undeniably mainstream. Some modern rock radio programmers are using the classic Top-40 saturation techniques and are spinning the hottest songs 30, 40, or even 50 times a week. Research using focus groups indicates that a number of alternative listeners have become disenfranchised because of the new Top-40 slant to the modern rock format. " 'Alternative' radio has turned into this very cookie-cutter-type (format)...and the real alternative listeners are being left in the wake," says Russ Mottla of modern rock radio station WDRE in Long Island, New York.

Alternative rock's presence in the industry may seem tiny when compared to the established formats of AOR (album-oriented rock) and country music. According to the 1995 M Street radio

directory, 54 modern rock radio outlets and 94 AAA radio outlets exist across the nation, while AOR and country music radio outlets number 309 and 2,648, respectively. However, alternative rock's huge ratings gain in 1994 guarantees its future success.

(Note: The following sources were used for this topic discussion: Boehlert, E. (1995, February 9). Rock Radio Make-Over. Rolling Stone, p. 24; Knopper, S. (1995, February 11). What Does 'Alternative' Mean? Billboard.)

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