Seattle University

ScholarWorks @ SeattleU

2020

# A Word From Our Listeners: How Program Change Rocked KCMU

Dana Winter
*Seattle University*

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.seattleu.edu/kcmu-fm

**A Word From Our Listeners: How Program Change Rocked KCMU**

Dana Winter

Seattle University

Seattle Arts Ecosystem Research Project

March 21, 2020

**Abstract**

In the early 1990s, Seattle radio station KCMU was based at the University of Washington. A largely volunteer-run organization, it was known for its strong connection to its community through programming built around alternative music of the day, including such genres as new wave, jazz, grunge, and reggae. When in 1992, station management attempted to introduce syndicated programming, it opened a contentious rift in the KCMU community. DJs from the station banded together with dissatisfied listeners to form CURSE (Censorship Undermines Radio Station Ethics), an activist group opposed to the station's new programming and policies. Why change a winning format, and why did KCMU's listeners react so strongly? This case study seeks to examine how KCMU's decision affected its community support, and how it set the stage for future decisions by the organization. In 2001, KCMU became KEXP, a free-standing non-profit organization that owes its success to, and prides itself on, its strong relationship with its community. How did the station recover and reinvent itself?

**A Word From Our Listeners: How Program Change Rocked KCMU**

Seattle has long been known for its rich music history. In recent decades, it rose to the top of music-lovers' watchlists as the birthplace of the grunge movement, heralded by the rise of bands such as Soundgarden, Mudhoney, and others. Kurt Cobain himself dropped off the recorded version of Nirvana's single, "Love Buzz" at the University of Washington radio station, KCMU. The story goes that he then sat in his car, radio tuned to 90.3 FM, and when he didn't hear it play, he put in an anonymous request via pay phone… the rest is history (KEXP, 2018). According to historian Peter Blecha (2019), the rise of grunge in the left-hand corner of the United States was due in large part to KCMU.

Between its founding in 1972 and the early 1990s, KCMU grew from a communications lab for university students to an alternative music radio station with its own impassioned following (Blecha, 2019). In 1981, when KCMU was in danger of disappearing due to university budget cuts, its listeners came to the rescue (KEXP, n.d.). The Save KCMU Committee, launched a fundraising campaign that netted $28,000 and kept the station from blinking out of existence (Blecha, 2019). KCMU continued to strengthen that bond through the 1980s, calling on financial support from their audience to increase their wattage (and consequently, the number of listeners). They repaid the debt by playing steward to Seattle's local music. By the late 1980s, KCMU was the standard-bearer for Seattle's alternative music scene, cultivating "its image as the wild child of the FM dial, an aural first-aid station for the adventurers who were underserved by mainstream media" (Morris, 1994, para. 10).

**Dear KCMU: A Love Letter From the Listeners**

In the mid-1980s, KCMU made its mark on the local music landscape by incorporating a plethora of genres into its programs, "highlighting roots music (country, rockabilly, and blues),

reggae, jazz, contemporary global music, and, importantly, Northwest rock. The impact that its

support for the latter category had cannot be overstated" (Blecha, 2019, para. 14). Tom Mara,

current Executive Director of KEXP and long-time KCMU staff member recalls

> One way we [supported local music] was by playing lots of Seattle and Northwest artists.
>
> As a matter of fact, we had a rule back then that every hour, we would be required to play
>
> Seattle or Northwest artists…we've been doing that to this day actually. (personal
>
> communication, March 6, 2020)
>
> Former station manager Jon Kertzer recalls that the station's focus for their first on-air

fundraiser "was all about tying in local music. For me, the start of the station was all about

community support" (Blecha, 2019, para. 12). Community funding enabled KCMU to increase

its power to 182 watts in 1982, further extending its broadcast range. It helped them move to a

24-hour schedule in 1983. In the late 1980s, it funded yet another increase in power—this time to

404 watts, giving the station a 15-mile broadcast radius (Blecha, 2019).

> KCMU's listener base was just as passionate, and made just as much noise about music

as the station itself. Among the archives in the Universityof Washington's Special Collections

library are files upon files of handwritten listener correspondence to DJs and staff members,

filled with everything from song requests and artist suggestions to complaints about "dirty song

warnings" interrupting one's enjoyment of a program, and hot takes on band interviews (KCMU,

1971-1992). Mara confirmed that, for an organization like KCMU, this is standard.

> I think whenever you build a community of music lovers, that audience is going to be just
>
> chock full of very very curious, insatiably curious people who have really well-
>
> developed, strong points of view about music….While people have points of view about
>
> music that they love, and also music that they don't care for, I think what really

strengthens the community is the willingness for people to champion music to others in

their circle. (personal communication, March 6, 2020)

Despite their outspoken opinions, listeners were quick to come to the station's defense, as

evidenced by letters to the editor of *The Daily*, the University of Washington student newspaper.

Letter-writers defended KCMU against criticism by other writers; championed the station as a

"valuable educational tool for its volunteers"; and hailed it as "the last refuge of airplay for

independent/alternative music" (KCMU, 1971-1992).

The passion listeners felt for KCMU could also be attributed to the organization's internal

culture. Mara recalls "being a radio station that took chances and that the way we would do it is

by having a large group of volunteer DJs that were encouraged to really experiment and explore

the boundaries of music" (personal communication, March 6, 2020). With only one-and-a-half

paid staff, the organization was largely run by volunteers. Programs were not curated for

"mainstream appeal." There was a sense of independence and pride that staff and listeners alike

took in the station (T. Mara, personal communication, March 6, 2020). Still, KCMU remained a

relatively small operation. Even with the progressive increases in broadcasting power, Mara

remembers only having about 25 to 30,000 listeners a week. While continuing to pursue their

mission to be "vigorous champions for music," the station could only do so much for their

listeners:

We didn't have the capabilities, the capacity, to invest a great deal further than

maintaining an on-air signal, managing about 70-80 volunteers…in a fairly small location

on the third floor of the communications building at the UW…. We just didn't have all

that much capability. (T. Mara, personal communication, March 6, 2020)

**A Change in the Airwaves: Who Controls the Playlist?**

In 1992, the station-community bond was threatened by a change from local to syndicated programming, instituted by station manager Chris Knab and program director Don Yates. This led to a tumultuous response from the station's listeners, a drop in donations, and formation of an activist group made up of former volunteer DJs and disgruntled listeners bent on returning KCMU to the way it had been.

Eric Boehlert (1992), reporting for *Billboard* on the conflict between station staff and management, mused on the delicate relationship a community radio station tries to maintain with its listeners. It "often teeters between a charitable democracy… and a fractious battleground in which those same people feel overlooked" (p. 63).

The power struggle that burst into the open in 1992 had actually been building for some time. In 1984, a 114-page organizational "constitution" was born out of a disagreement between the station manager and numerous volunteer staff. Whether or not it was actually meant to be a governing document for the station would prove a point of contention when station management began making programming changes. Chris Knab, KCMU station manager from 1985 until the early 1990s, was of the mindset that the constitution was adaptable. Having overseen KCMU's growth in the 1980s, including the increases in broadcasting power, he wanted to make sure the station kept growing its audience and donor contributions. In a 1992 interview, Knab said "One of the conditions for hiring me was that I abide by the constitution…and I did, and have. But as the station grew, the constitution had to grow and change with it" (Hirshberg, 1992).

With that attitude and the help of program director Don Yates, Knab began enacting major changes to the staff and programming. Debbie Letterman and Riz Rollins were hired as part-time DJs (Hirshberg, 1992). Letterman's hire alone displaced at least four volunteer DJs.

The station soon saw increases in audience and donations, which in turn funded an increase to three full-time staff  and ensured that daytime DJs were paid positions (T. Mara, personal communication, March 6, 2020). But success was short-lived (Blecha, 2019).

Hirshberg (1992) describes Riz Rollins, one of Knab's and Yates' hires, as "the definitive KCMU DJ of his era." His on-air personality worked perfectly in a community radio setting, and "his knowledge of and enthusiasm for alternative music is matched by his enthusiasm for tolerance, for building bridges between people and between peoples." Which is why disagreements between Rollins and station management came as a surprise.

When Rollins played a Henry Rollins song during an afternoon set in August, 1992, Knab let Rollins know that the song was "harsh and abrasive and therefore inappropriate." Rollins, who felt a strong connection to his regular audience, retorted that maybe this kind of music is what people wanted to hear. "It seems like our audience not only comes to respect [a song of rage] but demands it. They find encouragement in it" (Morris, 1994). Rollins was not the only DJ being discouraged from playing similar music during daytime hours.  Knab couched these limitations in management's mission to give the station a more professional image and sound. Yates even discouraged Rollins from honoring listener requests (Morris, 1994).

### Break-Up at the *World Café*

Programming was not only being closely watched, but new programs were on the docket. Knab and Yates scrapped the locally produced morning news show in favor of the syndicated *Christian Science Monitor* radio newscast. But the straw that broke the camel's back, according to multiple sources, was World Café.

Hirshberg (1992) described World Café, a syndicated program produced by WXPN in Philadelphia, as a program that "combines music and music news with live in-studio

performances by various alternative acts." Mara explains the decision to add this non-local

program to KCMU's daily rotation: "We didn't have the staff, nor did we have any sort of studio

to be able to do live in-studios [performances]...I think that was the primary attraction to World

Café" (personal communication, March 6, 2020). Hirshberg (1992) sniped that the music played

on World Café "leans (OK—plummets) to the less abrasive end of the contemporary alternative

spectrum," which may explain Knab's and Yates' attraction to the program, as they aimed to

"'professionalize' the station's sound and refine its format" (Morris, 1994). Rollins had some

choice words regarding professionalizing.

> This whole situation is fucked….You're replacing some extremely talented local people
> with syndicated programming, and I think it's a real waste. I don't believe that this
> cultural diversity that you're constantly talking about is going to be better served by
> having less people working here. (Morris, 1994)

It was this sentiment that led Rollins to resign, saying he would return to KCMU "when

consensus was restored" (Hirshberg, 1992). In addition, a number of volunteer DJs were

displaced by the new programs. The conflict came to a head when a KCMU reporter criticized

the new programming and was then fired for violating the station's no-criticism policy. Knab

argued that "we have policies that personnel must adhere to, just like any organization on the

planet. If people refuse to work within the system, they can find another system" (Hirshberg,

1992). At the same time, KCMU's volunteers were angered by their perceived exclusion from

programming decisions. "The fact that none of them were consulted about it, is symbolic of

what's wrong with KCMU and where Yates and Knab want to take it" (Boehlert, 1992, p.63).

**Battle of the Bands: A CURSE on KCMU**

Feeling wronged by the organization to which they had devoted time and money, a group of outraged listeners and volunteer DJs (some of whom had access to KCMU's mailing lists) formed a nonprofit activist group that they named Censorship Undermines Radio Station Ethics (CURSE) (Boehlert, 1992). In their statement of purpose, CURSE alleged that station management's policies went against KCMU's constitution and "restricted community access to the airwaves by limiting station management accountability, effectively disempowering those who listened to and supported KCMU in word and deed." CURSE's objective was to have the volunteer staff take back control of KCMU and return it to what they saw as its intended purpose: an "alternative," "listener-powered" station "funded by staffed by, and directly accountable to its listening audience and to the various communities of Seattle at large" (Albright et al., 1992).

Over 400 people turned out for CURSE's  initial meeting at the Scottish Rite Temple on Capitol Hill on November 8, 1992. Listeners, supporters, and former volunteers were called upon to flood both KCMU's mailbox and the print media with phone calls and letters, encouraging others to withhold financial support from KCMU (Hirshberg, 1992). Such calls to action were met with aplomb: Kathleen Thompson stated in a published letter to the *The Stranger* that KCMU remained "the property of the community it serves;" the one station where "challenging music can be heard;" where education opportunities existed for those who were passionate about broadcasting and its production (n.d.). Frank Patten voiced similar sentiments in a letter to CURSE, copied to KCMU.

Challenging music is what KCMU is all about, and it's a sad state of affairs when

VIACOM's public access television is a more open format than listener-sponsored

radio….RETURN MUSIC CONTROL TO THE PROGRAMMERS AND VOLUNTEER

STAFF. (n.d.)

However, B. Morris (1994), writing for *Rolling Stone*, played devil's advocate, asking,

"If you're reaching only a fraction of the percentage of your total potential audience, are you

really serving your community?" (para. 27).

In spite of this turmoil, station management remained confident that their constituents

would eventually accept the changes. "[Yates] feels [these changes] will resonate with the

listeners who choose sides every time they turn on the radio. 'Ultimately,' he says, 'they will

decide'" (Boehlert, 1992). But management and staff were feeling the effects of CURSE's

protests.

There was a dark cloud over the station in '92, around there, for a year or two, and that

had an effect on our ability to keep our operations going…The number of donors we had

started to drop…[it was] just a difficult time. (T. Mara, personal communication, March

6, 2020)

The buzz in the press had persuaded record labels such as Capitol Records, Sub Pop, C/Z,

and others to remove KCMU from their servicing lists. Protests and picket lines were common. A

civil-rights lawsuit filed by CURSE against the University, argued that Knab's no-criticism

policy was unconstitutional (Morris, 1994). Mara remembers fielding phone calls and reading

letters from angry listeners and trying to empathize. "Most people did it in a pretty respectful

way, but also there were people that didn't. I think that made things, the personal side of things,

difficult. But I think, for the most, part folks behaved respectfully" (T. Mara, personal

communication, March 6, 2020).

Mara divides KCMU's community of listeners at that time into three groups: those that continued to listen; those that were anxious that the station they'd grown to love and support was turning into something more commercialized; and still others angry enough to engage in protests. "I don't recall if the number of listeners dropped…I do know that our donations dropped quite a bit," he recalls, adding that the financial hit meant that the station had to lay off their paid daytime staff. Letting go of staff also meant making changes to the programming in order to stay on air

> I think there was a period of time we didn't do overnights, like at midnight 'til six in the morning or something like that. I don't recall how many months, but I remember there was a period of time that we just couldn't…get all that staffed with the volunteers. (T. Mara, personal communication, March 6, 2020)

> Feeling the pressure from CURSE in full force, KCMU seemed in danger of failing.

## Reconciliation and Reinvention

In April of 1993, the University of Washington stepped in to assure KCMU's survival with a $20,000 infusion of cash that "mandated that although the station should be more responsive to the community on the whole, its artistic control was not going to return to the volunteers" (Morris, 1994). The station reduced its operating budget in order to balance the books. The on-air staff pressed forward with their lawsuit; the no-criticism policy was eventually struck down in U.S. District Court (Morris, 1994). Perhaps the biggest thorn in everyone's side was finally removed.

> So, the programming decision to have World Café—we took it off the air…I think for a couple reasons: One was it didn't turn out to be the program we thought it was going to be. We thought it was going to be wider, deeper in its musical selections, but I think it

was becoming increasingly singer-songwriter-based during the time we had it on the air. I

think it increasingly didn't jive with our music sensibilities, and at some point we took it

off the air. (T. Mara, personal communication, March 6, 2020)

Within a year, KCMU was able to return to its regular on-air schedule. Mara replaced

Knab as station manager in December, 1993. By 1997, the last remaining volunteer DJ's were

replaced by paid on-air staff (Blecha, 2019).

Mara concedes that lessons were learned by those in leadership roles during that time,

himself included, and that some amends were made. At a 40$^{th}$ anniversary get-together for past

and current DJs, he recalls saying, "I was in my twenties, mid-twenties, so what the hell did I

know?" At the same time, he remarked, "I don't think people would have gotten so upset about

that particular time period unless they cared about the station. And that's important for us to

always realize" (personal communication, March 6, 2020).

So, did the relationship between KCMU and its audience withstand the storm? Mara, who

worked his way up from volunteer in 1987 to Executive Director in 2000, says it definitely did.

But the events of 1992 did not squash all thoughts of change. In the following decade, KCMU

went through an organizational and technological transformation and their loyal audience hung

on for the ride.

In December 1999 the UW Computing and Communications department took over

KCMU and the station began serving as a platform for testing new digital technologies. In 2000

KCMU became the world's first station to stream its broadcasts online, offering CD-quality live

audio via the Internet, giving the station access to a global audience. In 2000, arts philanthropist

and avid local music enthusiast Paul Allen entered negotiations with KCMU and the University

of Washington resulting in $3 million in funding, a new off-campus state-of-the-art studio near

Seattle Center, and ongoing support for the station and the University's music programs. The station changed its call letters to KEXP in a nod to the Experience Music Project museum founded by Allen (now the Museum of Pop Culture (MoPOP)). In an article for *the Stranger*, Jeff deRoche (2001) summed up the implications.

> KEXP has just been handed the resources to transform Seattle's tiny, beloved non-commercial radio station into an international player in Internet broadcasting…the Internet is the future; and whether KEXP continues to serve Seattle's local music community or not, it will soon be international in terms of listenership. (para. 19)

KEXP, the reincarnation of KCMU, now averages around 230,000 listeners a week and as many as two million viewers of their live in-studio performances streamed online. Listener numbers translate to financial support. "A third of our donors live outside of our [broadcast] coverage area, but we continue to be strong, if not stronger, in our Seattle-centricity," Mara insists. He notes that both KEXP and KNKX, another Seattle-based public radio station, met their 2019 fundraising goals on the same day. Not only is Seattle a strong public radio market, but it remains a vital music scene. "This town has such a great interest in music, a curiosity in music, and a generosity to support that so…we're in the right place." He believes that it's through their community's generosity and investment that KEXP is able to "invest in new [technological] platform experiences, we're able to extend the curatorial efforts beyond our boundaries" (personal communication, March 6, 2020).

The groundwork, the values they laid as foundation for KCMU back in the 1980s, is what keeps KEXP thriving in the present: keeping true to the mission of finding music that needs to be heard; of championing emerging, local artists; and enriching people's lives through music. Today more than ever, the community expresses its love for music by sharing it.

The more we invest in our music discovery mission, the more that we uphold these

values, the more that we continue to grow a vibrant organizational culture, I think there's

gonna be a lot more work to do, and much more opportunity for the future, based on what

we laid down back in the 80s. (T. Mara, personal communication, March 6, 2020)

**Method note:**

This case study was developed by Dana Winter, MFA 2021, as part of Seattle University's MFA

in Arts Leadership applied research seminar focused on the Arts Ecosystem Research Project. A

phone interview was conducted with Tom Mara, KEXP Executive Director 2000-Present, who

has been on KCMU's, and now KEXP's, staff since 1987. Susan Kunimatsu provided editing.

**References**

Albright, B., Carston, K., Carter, J., Crowley, G., Fuller, M., Jewell, D., Jahns, J., Pearson, P.,

      Pollack, I., Ritter, R., Thornton, D., & Ward, S. (1992). C.U.R.S.E. Statement of Purpose

      [document]. Censorship Undermines Radio Station Ethics (CURSE) records. University

      of Washington Special Collections, Seattle, WA.

Blecha, P. (2019, July 12). KEXP (90.3-FM) - 'Planet Earth's Seattle-based listener-powered

      radio'. *HistoryLink.org Essay 20790*. https://www.historylink.org/File/20790

Boehlert, E. (1992, December 19). Seattle station staffers quit in p'gramming row. *Billboard*, 1,

      63, 67.

DeRoche, J. (2001, April 12). Radio ga-ga: With Paul Allen's money at its disposal, does

      KCMU—wait a minute—KEXP really need any more of your money?" *The Stranger*.

      https://www.thestranger.com/seattle/Content?oid=7007

Hirshberg, G. (1992, November 25). CURSE on KCMU radio: Has the UW's alternative

      music station really sold out? *Seattle Weekly*, 31-33.

KCMU. (1971-1992). [Correspondence/minutes/annual reports/financial records/grant

      files/newsletters/organizational features]. KCMU records, 1971-1992. University of

      Washington Special Collections, Seattle, WA.

KEXP. (2018, March 8). *Sub Pop & KEXP – 30 years of swingin' on the flippity-flop*.

      https://www.kexp.org/read/2018/3/8/sub-pop-kexp-30-years-swingin-flippity-flop/

KEXP. (n.d.). *History*. https://www.kexp.org/about/history/

Morris, B. (1994, March 24). Range wars. *Rolling Stone*, (678), 55-57.

Patten, F. (n.d.). [Personal communication]. Censorship Undermines Radio Station Ethics

      (CURSE) records. University of Washington Special Collections, Seattle, WA.

Thompson, K. (n.d.). [letter published in *The Stranger*]. Censorship Undermines Radio Station

Ethics (CURSE) records. University of Washington Special Collections, Seattle, WA.

**Additional Readings**

Azerrad, M. (1992, April 16). Grunge City. *Rolling Stone*, 628, 43.

Clark, B. (1993, August). CURSE carries on airwave struggle. *Urban Spelunker*.

Harvey, P. A. (1994, July 12-18). The courts, CURSE & KCMU. *The Stranger*.

Janow, G. (1992, November 1). [Personal communication]. Censorship Undermines Radio
    Station Ethics (CURSE) records. University of Washington Special Collections, Seattle,
    WA.

Phalen, T. (1992, November 10). Plenty of static at embattled KCMU. *The Seattle Times*, F3.

Pollack, I., & Howland, G. (1993). *Two left brains: Public radio commentaries from KCMU,
    Seattle, WA*. Littlebook Open Hand Publishing.

Yoo, P. (1993, January 7). Ex-KCMU staffers sue station, UW. *The Seattle Times*.

**Figures**



*Figure 1. 1991 KCMU promotional material, "broadcasting" their new broadcast range. Courtesy KEXP's website, About > History. Uncredited.*



*Figure 2: 1992 KCMU promotional logo, after the addition of World Café to the station's programming. Courtesy KEXP's website, About > History. Uncredited.*

*Figure 3. "KCMU: MENACE TO MY EARS." Courtesy University of Washington Special Collections, KCMU records.*
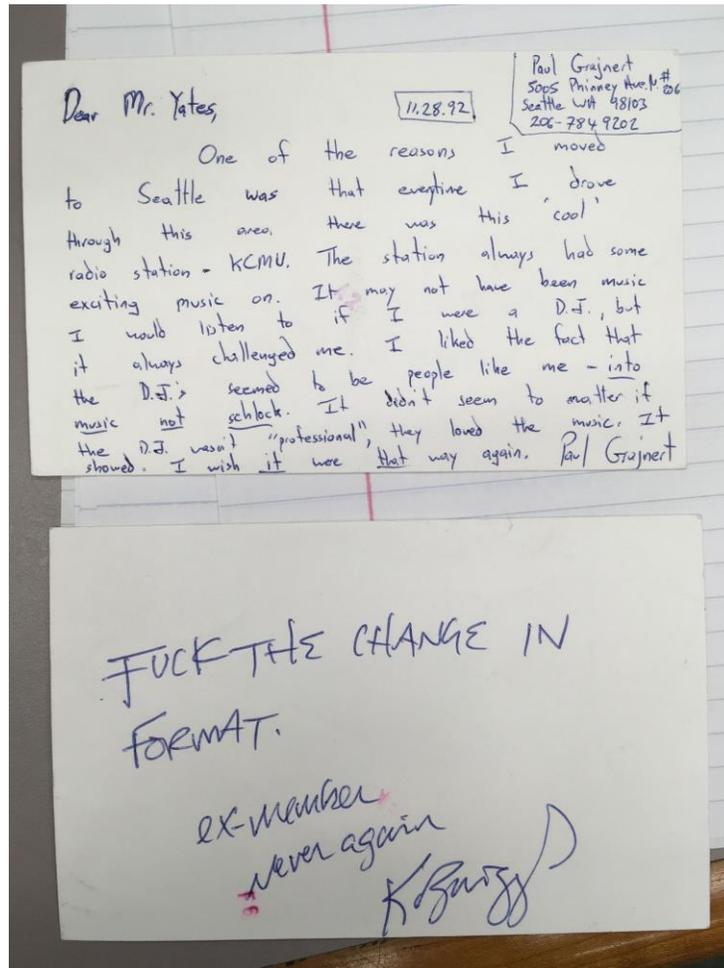


*Figure 4. Listener correspondence. Courtesy University of Washington Special Collections, Censorship Undermines Radio Station Ethics (CURSE) records. Photo by Dana Winter.*
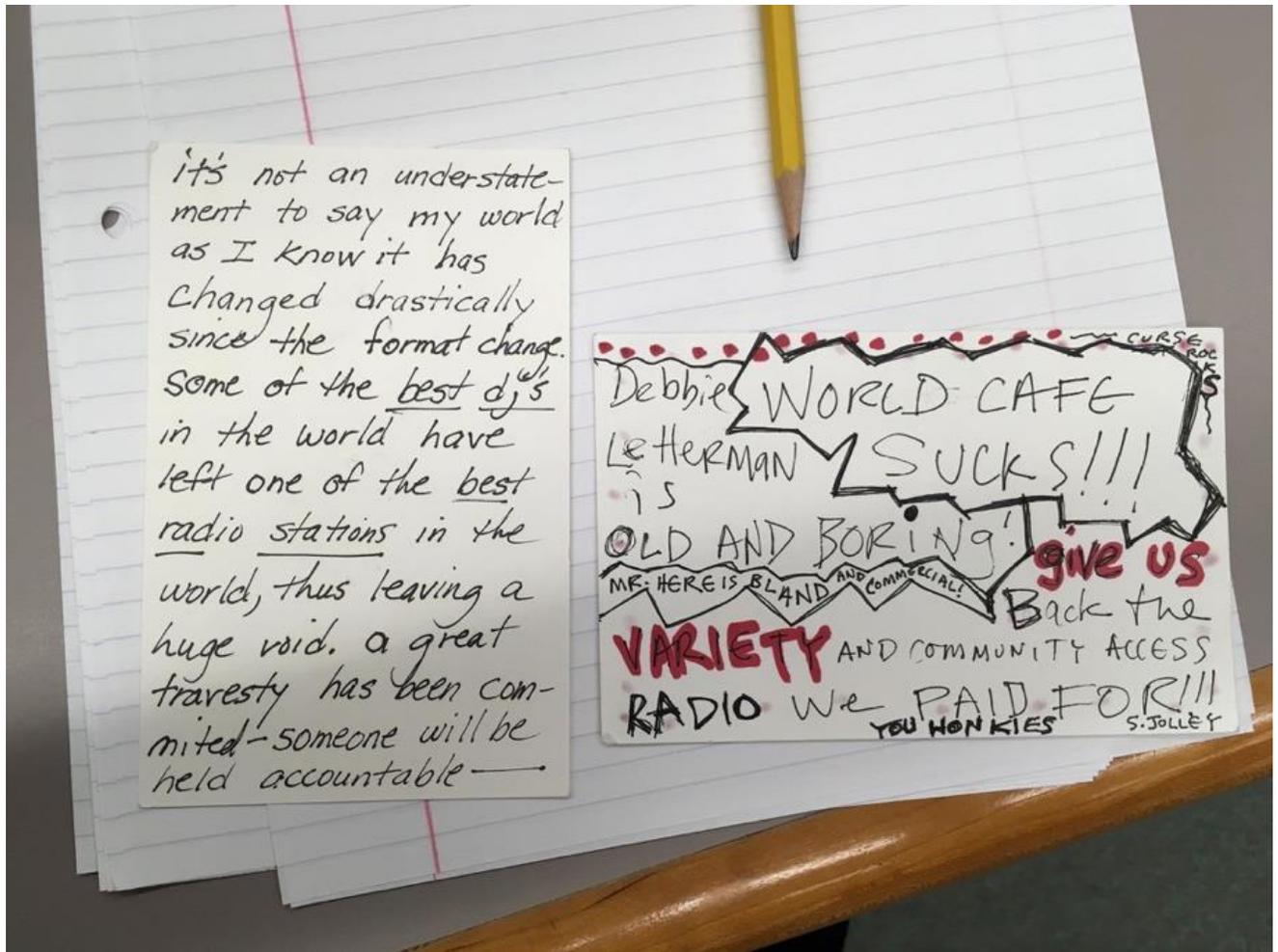
*Figure 4. Listener correspondence, 1992. Courtesy University of Washington Special Collections, Censorship Undermines Radio Station Ethics (CURSE) records. Photo by Dana Winter.*
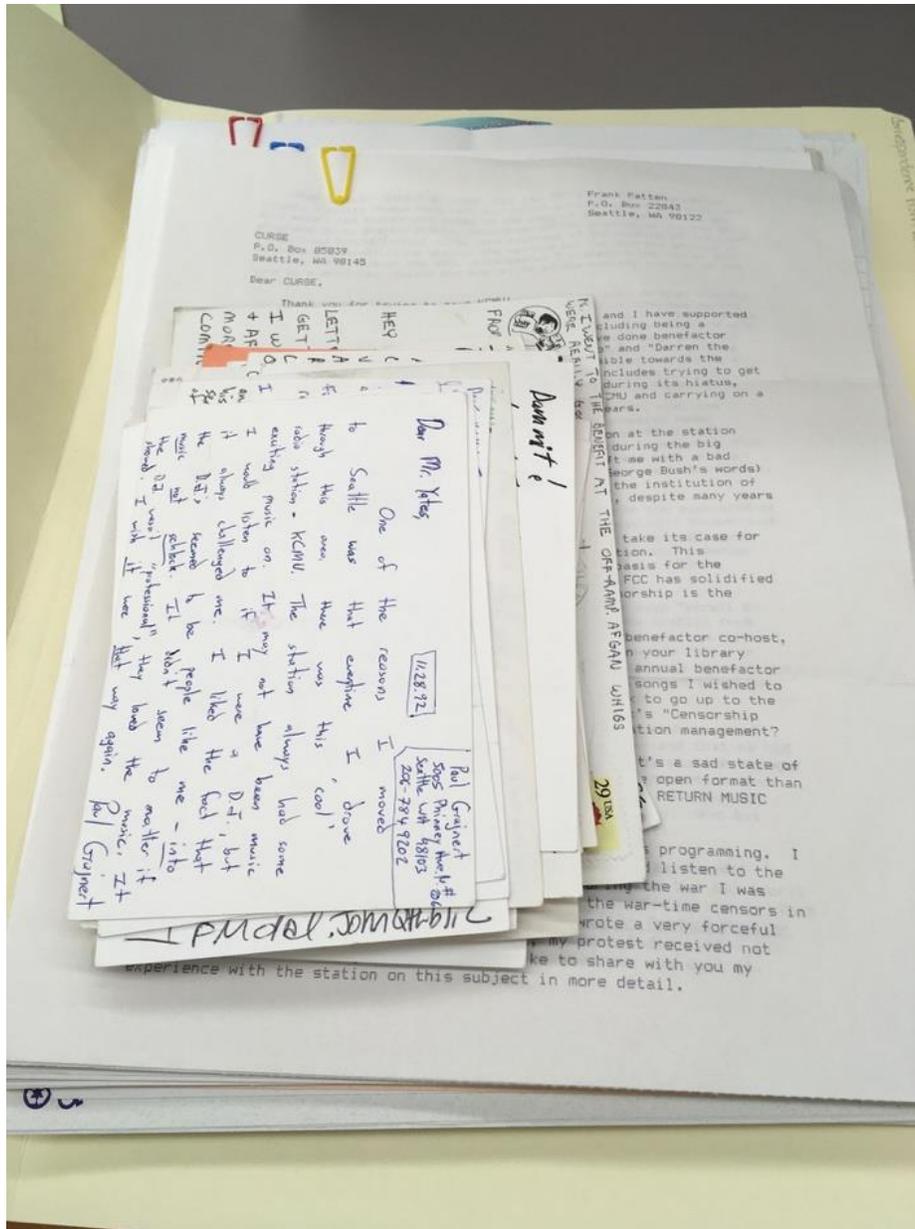
*Figure 5: One of two folders of listener correspondence, 1992. Courtesy University of Washington Special Collections, Censorship Undermines Radio Station Ethics (CURSE) records. Photo by Dana Winter.*