



**Mainstream radio is slowly being washed out by music lovers setting up their own bedroom studios. Kirsty Charles asks whether this could be the end for the playlist DJ?**

LIKE SO many other brilliant ideas, Fleet FM started after a drunken conversation between friends. Alcohol-fuelled excitement revealed an undying passion for music and an enthusiasm to create a radio station.

It's a story that many other inner-city, low-frequency radio stations will relate to, and because of accessibility their dream can now become a reality. Auckland has more radio stations per capita than any other city in the world, and in the last few years, the city has seen a proliferation of new low-frequency stations.

There are at least 12 in the inner city, with others being broadcast from bedrooms all over the region.

The New Zealand Low Power FM Radio Station Network website lists 15 registered in Auckland, ranging from Christian music, hip hop, dance, country classics and political speeches.

A Research International radio audience survey shows the "others" category, including low-frequency stations, has secured 17 per cent (just under 247,000 people) of the Auckland listenership.

So, what is commercial radio not doing that causes so many locally run stations to pop up all over the city?

Jamie Connor, who set up Fleet FM in 2003, says commercial radio is inaccessible and relies too much on playlists.

There is no general playlist at Fleet, and the station's content is entirely determined by the DJ. The ethos of Fleet is for people to "have a go" and it aims to give keen broadcasters a jump start into the world of radio.

Fleet is funded by donations and fundraising gigs and Connor says it provides an alternative to the glut of commercialised music in Auckland while also creating a sense of family.

"Auckland is a wasteland when it comes to community compared to Wellington so the whole concept is about community and culture and to get the posse together, like a marae feeling.

"Fleet's succeeding in creating a fresh inner city community, but the community feel is not where the money's at."

Base FM DJ Otis Frizell says small stations can fulfil the niche tastes of their listeners and provide an alternative to hours of repetitive tunes, chosen in accordance with the advertisers' wishes.

"It's a backlash to the shite rained upon us by commercial stations 24 hours a day. There's lots of good music you just can't get on commercial stations."

Low-powered Base FM is an offshoot of George FM and plays mainly hip-hop, funk and soul.

Frizell describes its role as a musical educator.

"We show where the new stuff came from, reminding people that Snoop Dogg's good, but wouldn't have been there without Funkadelic.

"We're not trying to make people feel stupid for not knowing, there are just DJs that have spent years honing their skill and sharing their records. The commercial stations aren't sharing, they're forcing," he explains.

John Greet, owner of KFM based in Auckland's Karangahape Rd, says the market exploded because of the sudden possibility to make radio.

KFM was also established in 2003 when the Government deregulated the airwaves and opened the guardband to low power radio that had previously been reserved for aircraft control, police, army and fire services.

Most of the DJs that play on KFM are involved in the music industry and many of them are musicians. Greet says the people involved are passionate about music and their target audience is more "musically mature".

Station manager Gene Rivers says there is a family feel to the station and people volunteer because of the music rather than for personal gratification.

"A solid love of music and a want to put it out there overrides the need for fame or money," he says.

Matt Mollgaard, radio lecturer at AUT, says the growth of small stations threatens commercial stations. Because most low-frequency stations have little or no advertising, the commercial stations are slowly losing listeners to them, therefore advertisers lose interest.

"The commercial stations worry about the other stations nibbling little bits away at the edges. That's money not going to the big guys," he says.

For these three stations the prospect of growth runs hand in hand with a shift towards commercialisation, but they all want to retain their integrity.

Aaron Carson, station manager at Auckland University's BFM, believes commercialisation is a reality that means a station's future can be secured. He says some believe it is a cop out, but radio "can't live in a vacuum".

"Some point the finger and say BFM is a huge commercial giant. It's easy to do that. But that's not true," says Carson.

Frizell, who used to work at BFM, agrees commercial input becomes necessary for financial security. He would like to see Base FM grow commercially but not "whore" itself. He says Base FM is selective with its sponsors as a way to remain loyal to the audience.

"[Becoming commercial] is not so much a sellout, but an evolution and growth. You either take it on the chin and grow with it, or strip down to your roots."

The boys of low frequency radio: (from left) KFM's DJ Exile, Fleet FM's Jamie Connor and Base FM DJ Otis Frizell.



PHOTOS: SARAH KACI AND KIRSTY CHARLES