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"We were creating these radically new formats, and I thought, let's go all the way and shake things up in every respect," says "Little Steven" Van Zandt, longtime guitarist in Bruce Springsteen's E Street Band, who also starred on "The Sopranos." "That meant, 'Wouldn't it be nice if we had some of the guys who are actually making the music tell stories firsthand? It would be a nice way of connecting with the fans.' "

Van Zandt created Sirius's "Outlaw Country" as well as "Underground Garage," both of which trace six decades of fringe and forgotten artists and songs. On "Underground Garage," a listener might hear the Chesterfield Kings followed by Dusty Springfield followed by the White Stripes. "Outlaw Country" boasts that it plays "three generations of Hanks," as in Williams.

XM and Sirius are vying for a merger that is at present awaiting approval by the Federal Communications Commission and the Justice Department. Van Zandt supports the idea because it seems likely to widen the audience for such shows.

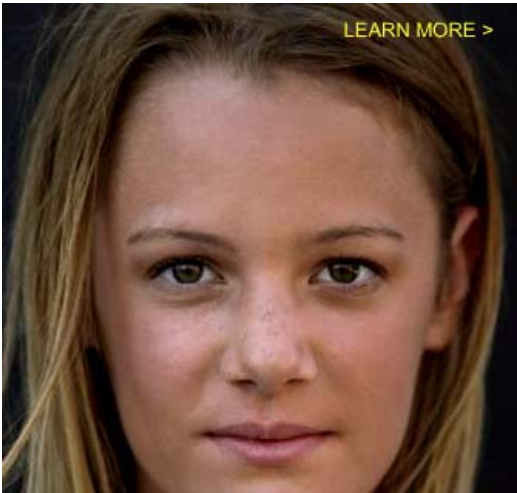
Virtually all the deejays on Van Zandt's channels are musicians, and they follow every fourth song or so with anecdotes. "We're trying to be educational without being educational, you know what I mean?" says Van Zandt. "It's an organic, conversational style" of deejaying.

The same philosophy is shared at XM, where amateur jock Dylan hosts "Theme Time Radio Hour." "He has such a deep personal playlist and such a wide-spanning appreciation of different musical genres," Abrams says, and XM "gives him a chance to do a show that he'd like to hear."

Nash, who had a hand in such timeless touchstones as "Teach Your Children," "Our House" and "Woodstock," approached XM about doing a show last year. He now hosts an interview-with-music program called "SongStories" on "The Loft," XM's channel 50. The show is an extension of his 2002 book "Off the Record: Songwriters on Songwriting," a collection of interviews that delve into the creation of 25 significant songs.

"We thought, 'Hey, maybe this is a radio program,' " Nash says from

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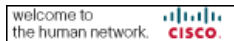


Mojo Nixon hosts "Outlaw Country" on Sirius from his San Diego bungalow. (By Fred Greaves For The Washington Post)

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his home in Hawaii. He delivered 12 half-hour shows at one time, freeing him to travel to concerts without worrying about deadlines. XM paid him a fee, but, he says, "I'm lucky enough to be rather well off so I wasn't particularly interested in getting fortunes for this."

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Nash and others find their reward in explaining how music is made, exposing the audience to new and old artists and providing historical insights. For John McEuen, a founding member of the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band and a respected multi-instrumentalist, one goal is showing "how everything's connected with what's come out in the past."

"I want to give the story behind the song, to show how Steve Goodman is connected not just to Arlo Guthrie by 'City of New Orleans' but also to the Dirt Band and then John Denver and then to Steve Martin," says McEuen, host of "Acoustic Traveler" on XM's "The Loft."

McEuen, who records his weekly show in his home studio in Hollywood, says he prefers not to be paid for his work. "I don't think they could afford to pay me what I think it's worth," he says. "It's a situation where I appreciate the airtime and love doing it."

So, clearly, does Mojo Nixon. "This is where it all happens," he says, indicating a small desk near the front door of what he calls his "shack by the sea." He shares the knickknack-filled shrine to all things Elvis and NASCAR with his wife of "25 years or something," Adiare, a nurse, and their 13-year-old son, Rafe "Cannonball" McMillan (he's named after Rafe Hollister, the moonshiner from Griffith's Mayberry).

By 9 a.m. Nixon is in cutoff jeans and a gimme T-shirt; his hair is an unruly tangle of salt and pepper, with bushy sideburns one day from connecting to his three-day beard.

He's just printed out an e-mailed list of songs from format manager Jeremy Tepper in New York that will air this afternoon. "I only change one or two songs a day," Nixon says. "I'm busy putting the 'hoo haa' together."

The "hoo haa" includes lots of "yee-haw's" and off-the-cuff mischievousness in the manner of his idol, cartoon rooster Foghorn Leghorn. (Nixon's house is also adorned with Foghorn paraphernalia.)

Tepper says the playlist is suggested by a computer program "of the coolest songs in all these different categories, but sometimes you have to outsmart the computer a little bit by changing the lineup."

Nixon found the liberty afforded by subscription-driven radio -- including freedom from FCC indecency regulation -- too good to be true.

"I said, 'I can't turn this down,' " he says, his voice rising like a Foghorn rant. "They're going to let me say what I want to, play what I want to? I asked [Tepper] flat out, 'Can I say Rascal Flatts?'" -- and here erupts a profane string of nouns, verbs and adjectives -- "and he said on 'Outlaw Country' you can. And I said, 'I'm in!' "

Like his singing career, Nixon knows that "Outlaw Country" "is never going to be a giant market, but it's a group of people who aren't being served, and we're serving them."

Even if it means getting up early and working two hours a day.

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