

Radio Days

by Allan Peng

I spent most of my childhood driving across LA, watching my mom run errands. My parents both worked and didn't believe in Chinese school, so they plopped me in the back of a minivan where I'd spend hours staring blankly at the brick walls lining the 60 freeway until everything became a beige blur — there were no people to watch, nowhere to escape to. I was bored out of my mind. And then I turned 8. I was finally allowed to sit in The Front Seat, and there I discovered the radio.

The radio gave me an escape from the dreariness of the suburbs and an introduction to a world that my parents couldn't show me. It showed me that LA was more than the concerned Asian parents on AM 1600 after all. There were sports fans from Culver City who'd call in to XTRA Sports and debate whether Kobe would re-sign with the Lakers, and classical musicians on KUSC who were constantly campaigning for public donations. By listening through the static of the radio to the conversations held

around town, I could piece together a patchwork understanding of the city and how it all worked. On early morning commutes down the 60 West, I listened in to sports talk radio and learned the machismo and bravado of hyper-masculinity. And on longer trips, I'd switch over to an FM station and listen to the tune of people calling in from all over town to banter with the DJs, talk about their weekends, and rock out to a mix of modern hits and 80s dance music. We got through the work day together.

Looking back, I realize that the shared culture and community space in Los Angeles were built through the radio. Because of its sprawl and car culture, LA never developed geographic social centers — we're too spread out to ever have a Central Park or Cafe Hawelka. But we do have the radio. In the hours spent driving around the city, we formed a community in the airspace we shared, and it connected us all.

Today I live in Berkeley and I've stopped listening to local radio. With Spotify and YouTube, I control what I listen to on my commute and no longer need to surf across different stations looking for something I like. But because

of this, I feel less connected with my community. I don't get to hear local residents calling in and talking about their weekend plans, or ads promoting whatever events are happening in the area. I don't have a feel for what type of music defines the Bay Area. I don't even know where Hayward is. I've given up an understanding of my neighborhood to live in a bubble of curated and personalized music, where I don't share anything with the people living in Elmwood, Richmond, or Chinatown. In a way, I'm stuck in the back seat again, trapped in the beige walls of my own mind, nothing new to see.

Once in a while, when I go back and visit the 626, I'll turn off my phone and take a long drive going nowhere on the freeway, listening to KOST 103.5. As night settles in and the street lights flicker on, the peppy dance music fades away, and I'll hear the familiar, four-part harmony intro to Love Songs on the KOST with Karen Sharp. I listen along as people from all over town call in to spill their hearts out, and share stories of love and anguish. Karen, in her infinite optimism and with a smile in her voice, reassures us that everything will turn out okay. I'm home again. ■



Sunday Morning – Maroon 5

I first discovered Maroon 5 one hot afternoon in third grade outside the dry cleaners on Colima and Nogales. They started off with “Songs About Jane”, a string of sunny jazz hits that cut through the bubblegum shit on KILS FM. “This Love”, “She Will Be Loved”, “Harder to Breathe,” and suddenly — “Sunday Morning”. As we grew up and matured, they did too — from “She Will Be Loved” to “Never Gonna Leave This Bed” to “Hands All Over”. But though time would pass, we always seemed to go back to “Sunday Morning,” the purest of love songs. It was the song we sang together at prom, at the local charity concert, and on lazy afternoons. - AP