

A Galaxie of music goes mobile

BY BERNARD PERUSSE, GAZETTE MUSIC COLUMNIST AUGUST 30, 2011



Stingray Digital Group vice-presidents Gary Pelletier (left) and Rob Braide -- in the company's Old Montreal headquarters -- point out that the people who program Galaxie's playlists are music obsessives, much like the company's management. "I'm excited by almost anything I hear," Braide says.

Photograph by: John Kenney, The Gazette

MONTREAL - Satellite radio might have an actual Grateful Dead channel, but there's a new player in the subscription radio marketplace with a VP who's an admitted Deadhead.

Gary Pelletier, who has made 25 pilgrimages to see the Dead, is Stingray Digital Group's vice-president of marketing and strategy. Stingray, a Montreal-based company, owns the Galaxie music service.

Up to this point, [Galaxie](#) has been best known as the audio channels on your cable or satellite TV service. Recently, however, Stingray launched Galaxie Mobile, the first Canadian-owned commercial-free mobile streaming service. The new brand brings 45 Galaxie specialty stations, via a free downloadable app, to your iPhone, iPad, iPod Touch or Android device.

Pelletier has big dreams. "We want to be the primary source of music for Canadians. Any way people want to consume music, we want to be the relevant source of that music," he said during an interview

last week. Galaxie, he said, plans to get on more platforms, including BlackBerry, and intends to spice up its iPad application.

Also around the corner are specialty stations that go deeper. Right now, you can hear, let's say, Willie Lamothe on the Franco Country station, Boards of Canada on the Chill Lounge channel, Loreena McKennitt on the Celtic station or Frank Sinatra on Swinging Standards. Pelletier said bluegrass, gospel, a deep-cuts rock channel and a station focusing on music from the 2000s are among 50 additional channels that are already being programmed and should be available within the next two months for mobile subscribers. The timing of their addition to the TV roster depends on the distributors, Pelletier explained.

The No. 1 request Galaxie receives? "Metal and heavier rock," he said without hesitation. "So we'll have a heavy rock channel and two different kinds of metal channels."

Pelletier said he's trying to find time to program a jam-band channel himself, perhaps for a future wave of new stations.

Rob Braide, Stingray's vice-president of content and regulatory affairs, also defines himself largely as a music fan. "I knew I was going to be in radio the first time I heard the Beatles on CFCF Radio," he said last week. "And I worked my life accordingly."

Braide, known to Gazette readers mainly from his former job as the vice-president and general manager of CHOM, Mix 96 and CJAD, said he has digitized more than 85,000 songs from his personal collection of cylinders, 78s, 45s and LPs. Two years ago, Braide said, he hired a masters student in library sciences to archive it all. During a recent Gazette visit to the Stingray offices on Wellington St., he waxed triumphant over having finally snagged the salsa-driven album and film *Our Latin Thing* from 1972.

"I listen to everything. I'm excited by almost anything I hear," Braide said.

Both Pelletier and Braide pointed out more than once that the people who program and maintain the playlists for the Galaxie stations share the music obsession. Stony Plain Records president Holger Petersen, for example, programs the Blues channel. Others might be lower-profile, but many are "musicians, music students, radio guys in specific genres," Pelletier said. "They're all very passionate. They're career music people."

So far, Galaxie is not unlike satellite radio. But what sets it apart from what you might get on SiriusXM, Braide said, is that it's "programmed by Canadians for Canadians. We have people reacting to what Canadians are listening to, watching Canadian charts and watching Canadian sales." Even email messages from listeners – every one is answered, Braide said – are considered by programmers.

Galaxie is also semi-interactive. If you don't want to hear the Turtles' Happy Together again on the Jukebox Oldies channel, you can skip straight ahead to Candy Girl by the Four Seasons. And if you find yourself getting a charge out of Closer by Corinne Bailey Rae, you can buy the song from iTunes with one click. Pelletier said greater interactivity is planned, with more elaborate artist information,

among other changes.

Like satellite radio, Galaxie's edge over other services centres on discovery, Pelletier said. Playlist-based options from other companies might feed you selections based on what you already like or own, and the much-discussed cloud is simply your own collection in cyberspace, but Galaxie and its programmers are trying to turn you on to music that might not have been on your radar, he said. They're also listening to submissions by artists who want to get their music on Galaxie.

"We're offering the effort of sorting through all the available music out there, picking the best and putting it on," he said.

Stingray approached the daunting task of getting the Big Four labels – Warner, Sony, EMI and Universal – on board by striking a deal with Music Canada (formerly the Canadian Recording Industry Association), which represents the labels and provides membership benefits to some of the leading indies. The licensing agency AVLA was also involved.

"After years of the industry talking about doing this in Canada, we were the first company to do it," Braide said. "We were offering to break a logjam that had existed for years in monetizing digital content for their members. The labels are not selling CDs and fewer and fewer people want to own MP3s. Everybody's moving to the cloud. The labels understood that it was time to change their thinking and finally let somebody in who was willing to give the college try to open up this new spigot of money for them."

"We're already a very profitable business, and we're worldwide," said Pelletier, a former television-services marketer at Cogeco whose background is in TV production and distribution. "All we do is music. They recognized that."

Stingray also owns the Karaoke Channel; Music Choice Europe, a digital music service for television in Europe and Africa; Stingray 360, which provides music systems for businesses; the music-licensing arm Stingray Music; and Concert TV, a video-on-demand service distributed to 30 million homes in the United States.

The company says it is already in 10 million Canadian homes with its TV audio services. Another 10 million homes in 14 countries across Europe and Africa have access to Stingray music services through its Music Choice subsidiary. Deals have been inked with several U.S. cable and IPTV providers, and the company has also made inroads in the Caribbean.

But there's more than money to the story. Braide said he was drawn to Stingray in part by the youthful energy in its Montreal headquarters, where about 90 of the company's 140 employees work. (The rest are scattered in smaller offices in Toronto, Charlotte, N.C., and London, England.)

"I like the place. It's beautiful. It's post-and-beam. It's in Old Montreal and half the staff comes to work on skateboards," he said.

The Galaxie player can be downloaded via Apple's App store at www.galaxie.ca/galaxiemobile and via

the Android Market at www.galaxie.ca/android. After a seven-day free trial, the subscription fee is \$4.99 per month, \$9.99 for three months or \$39.99 for a year. For more details, go to www.galaxie.ca.

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