

TOP STORY

EDITOR'S PICK

## Tucson's KXCI puts emphasis on 'fun' in fundraising community event

Tucson community radio station's Rockin' Blues Review marks 13th year

**Cathalena E. Burch**

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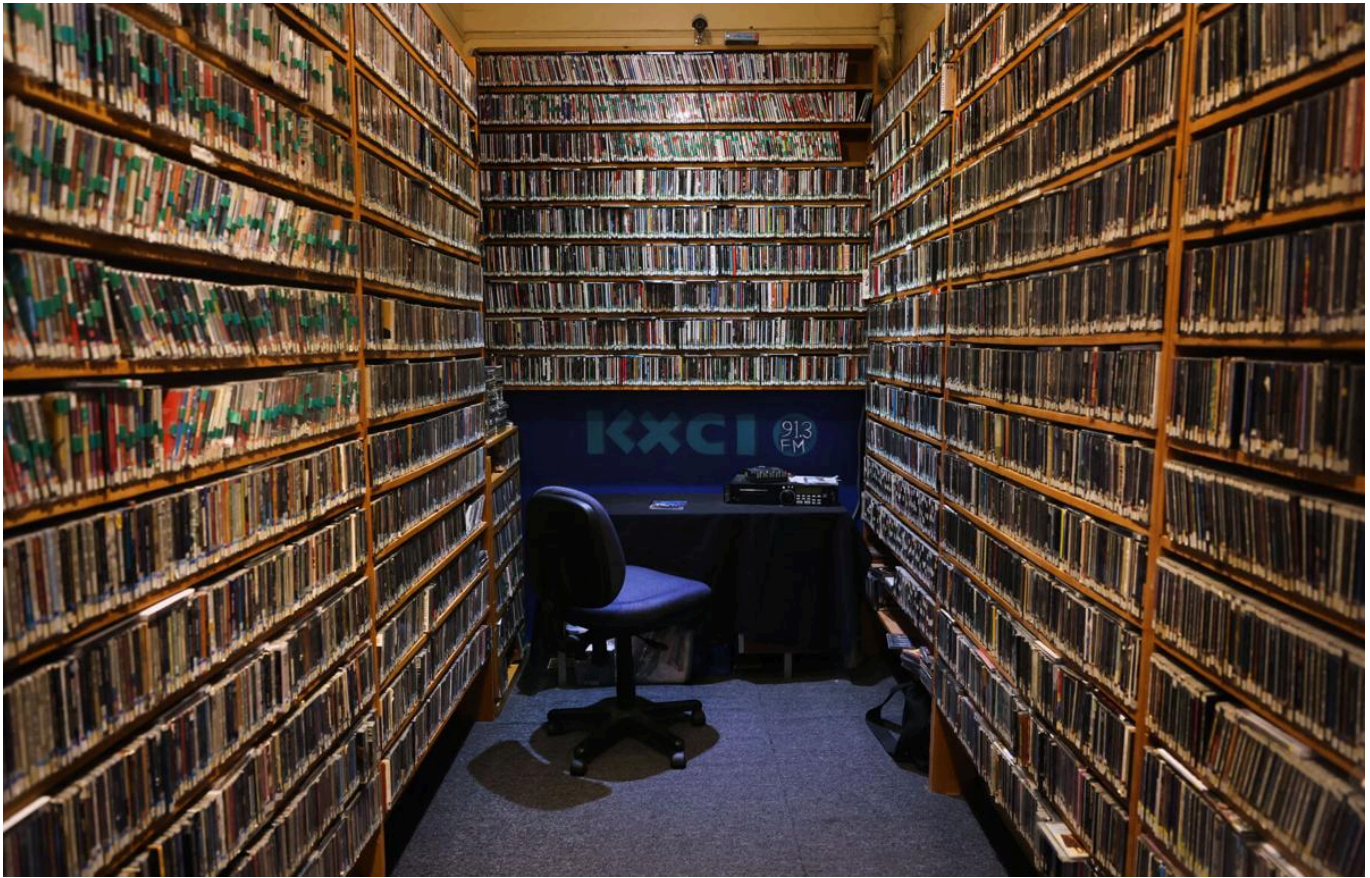


**K**XCI will host its 13th annual House Rockin' Blues Review this weekend, one of the station's two annual fundraising events.

But Executive Director Elva de la Torre said in the big scheme of things, the event does little to move the station's financial fortunes.

Once they pay the musicians and support staff, from the sound and light guys to the photographer, there's not a whole lot left.

Making money is not the main point of Friday's concert with The Paladins at El Casino Ballroom.



A wall of CDs lines a room outside of one of the studios at KXCI at its Armory Park studios, 220 S. Fourth Ave.  
Mamta Popat

“It's a big part of the fundraising. It's also a big part of the fun raising, and for us, we want to bring community together,” de la Torre explained. “For us, those types of gatherings and community are really, really important.”

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Community has been central to everything KXCI does, a testament to its tagline, “Tucson’s Community Radio,” which has been its guiding light since the station went on air in 1983.

“It really is about connecting with community and making a better place through music,” said Duncan Hudson, who has been with the station since 1999. “It’s really being an integral part of the community, reflecting the community. I think in this day and age, it’s even more important for people to feel part of a local community and the localism that KXCI provides.”

That sense of localism is evident in the Armory Park studio where Stephanie Engs, aka DJ Wesley Rae, hosts her weekly “Wednesday Afternoon Music Mix” show from 1-3 p.m.

Shelves filled with hundreds of CDs frame the small space. There’s a room at the back with even more CDs and vinyl records, all organized alphabetically.

Music is ever-present in nearly every room of the upstairs studios at the century-old house that KXCI has called home since 1984. One listener donated their jazz collection that looks to number in the hundreds, all neatly packed into shelves along a hallway not far from Hudson’s office. Shelves along one wall of that office are loosely filled with even more CDs.



Stephanie Engs, aka DJ Wesley Rae, talks on the radio during the Wednesday afternoon music mix show on KXCI at its Armory Park studios, 220 S. Fourth Ave.

Mamta Popat

In Engs' studio, the albums are color coded: A yellow dot is for music that has a history with the station "so I can pick something from here and know that it's been part of the KXCI sound for a really long time," Engs explained.

Red dots are for featured new releases, which have their own separate shelf. Once the new releases are put into steady rotation, they are migrated into the section of CDs with blue dots.

"That's how we keep all of our sound kind of consistent to the KXCI sound," said Engs, who started listening to KXCI as a kid growing up in Tucson and joined as a volunteer in 2013 after spending a decade working at Rialto Theatre. In 2021, the Salpointe High School and University of Arizona alum was named KXCI's director of education and community engagement.

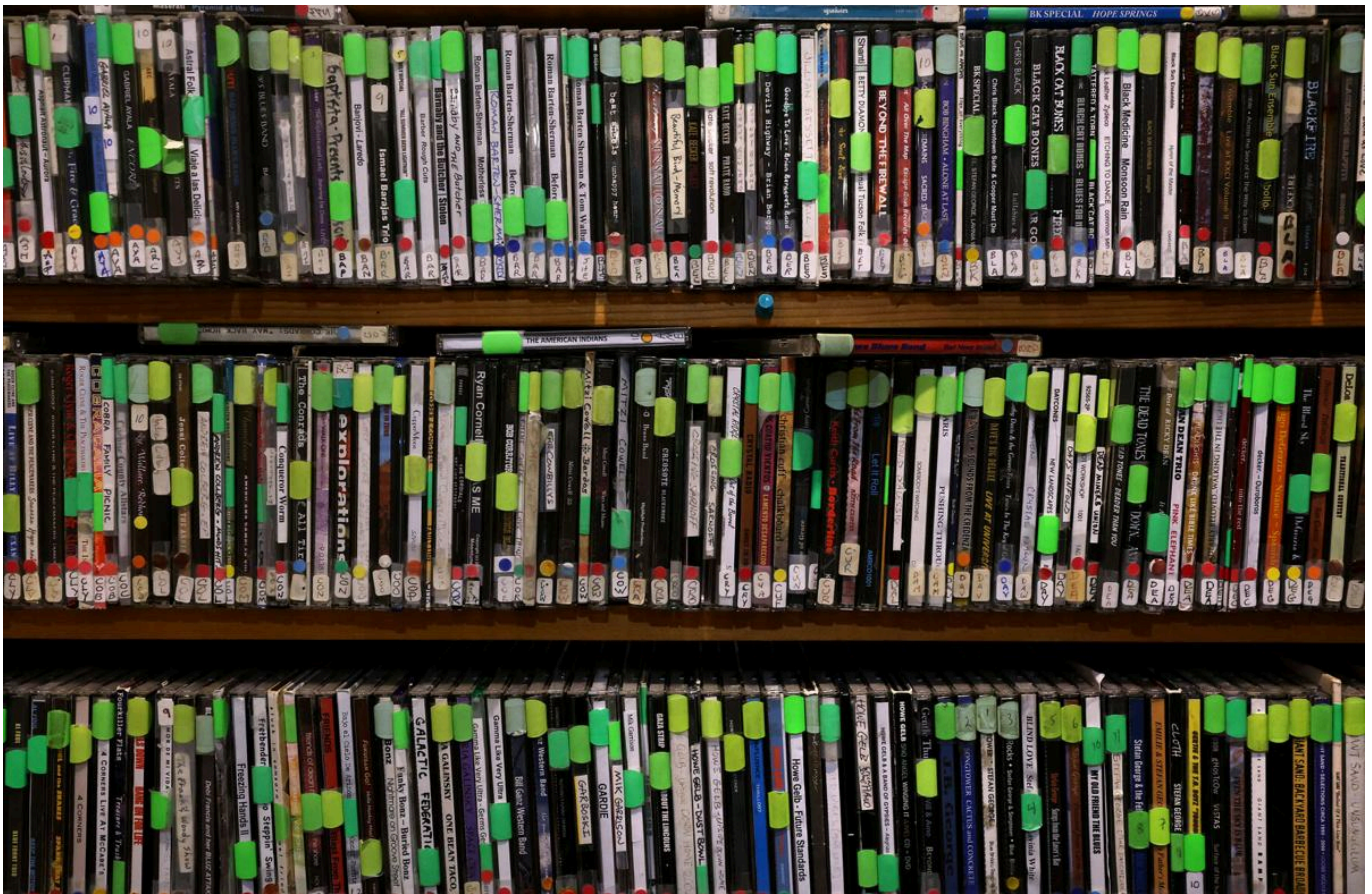
Sprinkled among the red and blue dot CDs are green dotted albums. The green dot identifies local musicians, whose independently produced records stand little to no chance of getting played on any of Tucson's commercial radio stations.

"We try to keep local music as a huge part of our music collection and supporting local artists, supporting independent artists and artists that you might not hear on other stations," Engs said.

"That's been a part of KXCI since the beginning of really focusing on the local community and local artists," Hudson said.

Local artists also played a role in KXCI's House Rockin' concert series, launched in the mid-1980s by Jeb Schoonover, the station's first promotions manager. Tucson musicians were brought in to open for big-name national acts that included English blues rocker John Mayall, singer-songwriter Delbert McClinton, zydeco legend Queen Ida and the Cajun band BeauSoleil.





CDs with a green sticker indicate that the band is local at the KXCI studios.

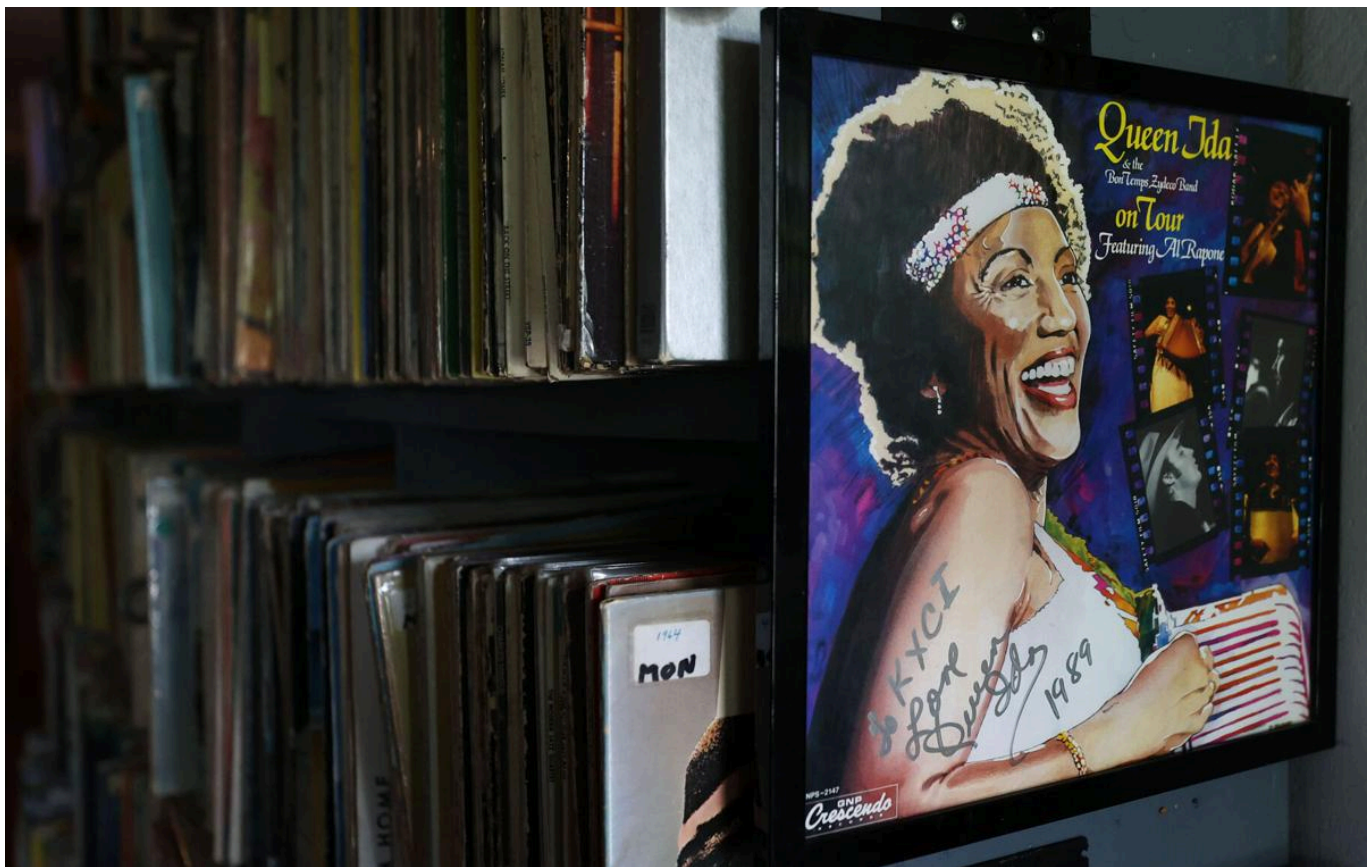
Mamta Popat

“We were always trying to involve local bands as opening acts,” said Schoonover, who with KXCI’s co-founder Paul Bear bought and restored the Rialto Theatre downtown in 1995. The pair ran the venue for a decade, putting on 750 shows before selling the historic theater to Rio Nuevo.

The series also helped little-known independent artists like The Paladins, the SoCal roots rock and rockabilly band that was just starting to make a regional name for itself when it played the series at El Casino Ballroom in 1986.

“It was through KXCI that we got to Tucson and why I think Tucson has had such a great music reputation,” said the band’s co-founder Dave Gonzalez. “Bands always talk about Austin or they talk about Tucson or Athens, Georgia. Tucson’s in the top five.”

The House Rockin’ series led to KXCI’s House Rockin’ All-Star Blues Review in 1989 with some of the biggest names in the genre.



An autographed album cover by Queen Ida is on display where vinyls are kept at the KXCI studios.

Mamta Popat

“It was a six-hour show with Buddy Guy, Luther Tucker, Pinetop Perkins, the Muddy Waters rhythm section, Chris Thomas, Denny Freeman and Kim Wilson” of the Fabulous Thunderbirds, Schoonover said. “It was the greatest blues show ever put on in Tucson.”

Schoonover helped resurrect the House Rockin’ Blues Review in 2012 when Tucson filmmaker and culture critic Dan Buckley released a documentary on El Casino Ballroom. That first show featured an all-local lineup and every year since has paired local acts as openers for national headliners.





Mark Hummel's Blues Allstars with Anson Funderburgh and Jr. Watson at KXCI House Rockin' Blues Review in 2025.

Mamta Popat

Forty years after the band's Tucson debut, The Paladins are headlining this year's event on Friday, Aug. 7, with special guest, Tucson blues saxophonist Alex Flores. Tucson's rising blues band The Xcelerators featuring Ken Saydak will open the show at El Casino Ballroom, 437 E. 26th St.

Next spring, KXCI will host its third annual **"Baila el Pueblo – A Desert Music Festival."**

The station also is presenting several upcoming concerts at La Rosa, 800 N. Country Club Road, including the Southern soul band St. Paul & the Broken Bones from Alabama on Aug. 26; the funk band Lettuce's "Cook Tour" Sept. 9; and Iron & Wine Oct. 21. For tickets and more information, visit **larosatucson.org**.

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By Cathalena E. Burch  
Reporter

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