

Carroll Brought Luster, Listeners to KROQ-FM

By CLAUDIA PUIG, *Times Staff Writer*

Less than a month ago, rock radio programming wiz Rick Carroll stood inconspicuously in the back corner of the Roxy in West Hollywood, waiting to see David Bowie and his new band, Tin Machine, in concert.

It was a rare outing for Carroll since he had decided to remove himself from the club scene, to avoid the temptations of alcohol and drugs that had gripped him through much of his career.

Word got around and Carroll found himself nearly mobbed by well-wishers, record industry executives and appreciative fans.

"People heard he was there and searched him out," said Carroll's friend and former colleague, Mike Jacobs. "The line was like a parade coming up to him. They said things like: 'Hey, you're back at KROQ. Glad to see you back.' People felt that Rick was the one that brought the station to its greatest heights and he would be the person who could return it to those heights. They knew that Rick coming back was an important thing."

Carroll's importance to the world of rock 'n' roll radio had been widely felt since he transformed KROQ-FM (106.7) in the early '80s from a struggling station with dismal ratings to a new-music flagship in less than five years.

Carroll died Monday, after a 10-day hospitalization.

Not many even knew that he was ill. The cause of Carroll's death was reported as complications arising from pneumonia. He was 42.

Particularly in the early '80s, his keen sense of what young rock fans wanted to hear, combined with his savvy knowledge of the radio industry, conferred on him the status of programming *wunderkind*.

"What he did with KROQ was brilliant," said Scott Shannon, program director and morning deejay at KQLZ-FM (100.3). "I think Rick created a radio station that was successful without doing that much damage to the other radio stations, because it was so clearly defined. It was so radically different from other things that were available on the radio dial."

And Carroll's sphere was not limited to Southern California. His formula of New Wave pop, played by deejays who seemed approachable and non-traditional (if a bit adolescent), clicked so well that he formed an independent consulting business and began to peddle his programming ideas. Stations with the Carroll imprint sprang up in places such as San Diego (XTRA-FM), Seattle and Dallas and as far away as Sydney, Australia.

The formula never worked as well in other places as it did in Los Angeles, however.

"His KROQ was uniquely Los Angeles," Shannon said. "I wouldn't call him a programming genius, because he really didn't program a lot of different stations effectively, but when it comes to the job that he did in that particular instance, it was brilliant."

Besides taking on Los Angeles' radio marketplace, Carroll had battled personal

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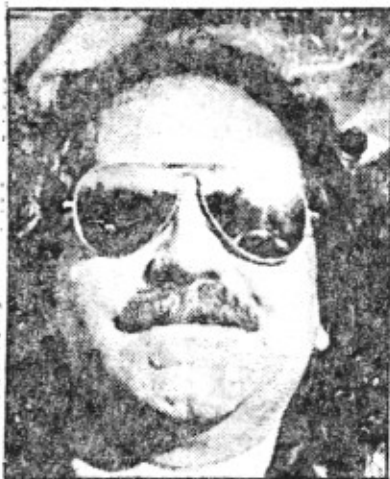
demons. The world of rock 'n' roll was at once seductive and pressure-inducing, and he, like others, had succumbed to the temptations of drugs. He openly admitted to having developed a cocaine addiction, and last year he made two separate attempts at rehabilitation. The second one seemed to have worked, and Carroll, drug-free for almost a year, returned to KROQ as a consultant in May.

"I'd seen him in some real heavy times, but this time he was straight," said KROQ deejay Richard Blade. "He'd said, 'I'm ready to get serious again. From now on I'm going to get my life together,' then—bam!—it was like a wicked laugh from above saying, 'Think again.'"

"There were times in the past that I thought he was going to die, but not now," Blade said.

More than anything, Carroll was hooked on radio.

"He was a radio addict," said Scott Mason, operations manager at KROQ and a friend of Carroll's. "He



Rick Carroll's programming works best in Los Angeles.

could sit and talk about radio and different markets and different formats for hours."

Even while he was in the hospital, he would call up KROQ disc jockeys and offer suggestions, Blade said.

Unlike other programming executives whose expertise lies mainly in business strategy, Carroll's formula was based on a passion for music, his colleagues said.

"He produced a station for music lovers," said British pop star Adam Ant, whose real name is Stuart Godard.

Carroll is credited with introducing dozens of New Wave acts—Adam Ant among them—to the Los Angeles marketplace. Other British artists whom Carroll was one of the few to play in the late '70s and early '80s were Elvis Costello, the Police, Duran Duran and Depeche Mode, as well as local bands such as X, Lone Justice, the Go Go's and Oingo Boingo.

"We owe Rick a lot. . . . It's just too bad there aren't more Rick Carrolls out there," said Danny Elfman, lead singer of Oingo Boingo. "I really don't know what would have happened if we'd only just played the little clubs without the support of KROQ. Rick recognized that there were bands out there that were very popular [in local clubs] and if they played a little bit of it, kids responded in a big way."

"I only met him a few times, but I was very well aware of his presence and his affect on my life," Elfman said.

"A lot of groups might have just ended up in a cult oblivion had it not been for Rick jumping up and playing their work early," Godard said. Carroll's colleagues invariably point to his ear for hits as the key to his programming strategy.

"He was born with an ear for what worked musically," deejay Jim (Poor Man) Trenton said. "He never did any research or anything like that."

"He would hear a piece of music and say, 'This was good. We should play this,' without paying attention to who else was playing it," said current KROQ program director Van Johnson.

And often, nobody else was.

Carroll got his start in radio at 14 as an intern at a San Jose station. He was program director at two San Francisco radio stations in 1970 and later held the same post at KEZY-FM in Anaheim.

When Carroll came to KROQ in 1979—after serving a stint at KKDJ-FM, the Top 40 precursor to KIIS-FM (102.7)—the station played an oddball mix of music, from AC/DC to Creedence Clearwater Revival to Led Zeppelin. The station did not seem to be drawing listeners, and Carroll attributed the low ratings to the play list.

"We started with a .6 in ratings,"

said Larry Groves, KROQ music director. "[The station owners] allowed us to experiment with the radio station because they had nothing to lose. The format just evolved. Rick was very much the leader. He's what made it happen."

Rick began by slowly spoon-feeding the audience more New Wave music and phasing out less innovative, mainstream bands.

"He was able to take that Top 40 presentation and inject a whole bunch of unique, good music that wasn't being played any place else and captured a lot of kids' imaginations," said KROQ vice president and general manager Tony Berardini.

He brought in deejays who didn't

sound like broadcasters, but were more like "the guy down the block," Mason said.

"He was really into bringing radio to the people, making radio be your friend," Mason said. "He felt that people on the radio should sound like your next-door neighbor. They shouldn't be the guy with the big booming voice and untouchable."

By 1983, KROQ had climbed into the ratings Top 10 and, in August, 1986, it was sold for \$45 million to Infinity Broadcasting, among the highest prices ever paid for a radio station.

Carroll left between 1983 and 1985 to introduce KROQ's "Rock of the '80s" format to other stations,

then returned as a consultant, where he remained until last September. He took some time off, then came back to the station in May.

Blade paid tribute to Carroll on the air Tuesday.

"Yesterday I lost a friend," he said, his voice breaking. "In fact, yesterday everyone who loves music lost a friend. You might not have known his name, but you surely felt his influence."