An informal poll of radio historians conducted during a meeting of the Society for Cinema and Media Studies found that the overwhelming majority had experience with college radio moving them into their current profession. Such a background should not surprise us, but given the poll results, the fact that there has not yet been a published history of college radio is surprising. *Live from the Underground: A History of College Radio* by Katherine Rye Jewell addresses this absence, but it is so much more than simply a radio history. The appearance in the opening pages of Ken Wissoker, the editor and chief of Duke University Press (and the only head of a scholarly press to have received the *New Yorker* [1925-] profile treatment), as well as Thomas Frank, one of the founders of *The Baffler* (1988-), signal early on that this book has a much broader scope, which demonstrates the significant cultural influence of college radio in the latter decades of the twentieth century. Other well-known figures, such as Chuck D, Tipper Gore, and Kevin Kruse, pop up in its pages, reflecting the wide-ranging influence of college radio on American culture writ large. Indeed, one of the strengths of this book is how it places college radio into conversation with much larger discussions around the role of higher education and how these debates have been politicized. As Jewell notes, “This is not merely a story of reflecting and channeling national political and cultural tensions. The stations were crossroads for shifting and often conflicting demands on the national media infrastructure which young people found themselves navigating among competing conceptions of universities’ role in politics, culture, and economics” (p. 12).

The book is organized roughly chronologically, looking at the dynamics of distinct decades within the history of college radio, but also horizontally, linking the emergence of specific scenes within the alternative music genres that were showcased on college radio during the 1980s and
the 1990s. This approach allows Jewell to trace the specific dynamics and institutional elements that contribute to how certain stations worked, an essential approach given the variations among different stations.

The narrative begins with a discussion of the soundscape of 1970s radio coming out of the free-form FM revolution of the late 1960s and subsequent co-optation of that movement via AOR (album-oriented radio) format, as well as the larger fragmentation of radio formats in the 1970s. At this point, college radio’s aesthetics and practices were not rigidly defined and embodied a range of programming approaches that varied from classical and jazz, to new wave, to merely reflecting the popularity of mainstream rock. However, as the music industry entered a recession in the wake of the implosion of disco, a new medium of promotion—video, and in particular MTV—entered the picture, and a range of bands that represented the do-it-yourself aesthetic of the early 1980s emerged. College radio stood poised to transform its role as cultural arbiter. The path to institutional and cultural legitimacy at times clashed with the ’60s era ideas of radio as a purely democratic medium, and the second part of the book addresses how college radio became more formally institutionalized as part of the music industry in the 1980s as well as how it got caught up in the culture wars of that decade. College radio and the music industry developed a symbiotic relationship, with the latter offering free records and tickets in return for serving as a sounding board and incubator of potential bands. This dynamic was not universally accepted. Some stations pushed back against the industry’s attempt to incorporate college radio, while political pressures from the right pushed against the relatively free-wheeling operations of college stations. The third part addresses the peak of college radio’s cultural influence in the 1990s, as well as its downfall as market logics made increasing inroads into higher education writ large and music discovery moved online. In the wake of the massive shifts in popular music aesthetics following the breakthrough of Nirvana and the “grunge” sound, college radio assumed an integral role in developing new artists. While some in the college radio community quickly turned their back on any band deemed “sell outs,” other stations, such as Long Island’s WBAI, confronted a racialized landscape that foreshadowed the neoliberal austerity politics that would come to dominate higher education in the twenty-first century.

Jewell well recognizes the tensions and paradoxes that structure college radio in terms of institutional structures (students versus administrators), regulations (broadcasters and the Federal Communications Commission), programming models (free-form, block, National Public Radio—including classical, jazz, and new foci), town/gown relations (community deejays and students), industrial positions (college radio’s relationship to the music industry), and political conflicts (college radio and the Parents Music Resource Coalition and questions of programming diversity). There is an almost Hegelian relationship of power and action between mainstreams and subalterns as mutually defining at each stage of this history. At its best, Live from the Underground illuminates how localized dynamics reflect much larger structural dynamics.

While there is much to recommend in this book, I have a few nits. While Jewell is to be commended for largely keeping many dynamics in play, at times the book’s structure feels somewhat repetitive, with similar dynamics playing out in different locations and time periods. Likewise, because Jewell examines a significant number of stations at different time periods, it is sometimes difficult to keep track of specific individuals and their role/significance. Finally, and somewhat inexplicably, my copy was missing an entire chapter of endnotes. Still, such quibbles are minor compared to the achievement in unearthing an important chapter in American broadcasting that this book ultimately represents.