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New at New Seasons: Now, you can shop for local foods to a local beat

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By Peter Ames Carlin, The Oregonian Follow

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Arve Overland (right) got the ball rolling, and Steve Berlin (center) of Los Lobos stepped in with his musical friends to rate thousands of songs, with the result being an all-Northwest soundtrack for New Seasons and its president, Lisa Sedlar (left).

The concept makes so much sense it's hard to imagine why it took so long for someone to figure it out.

Perhaps the New Seasons grocery store workers were preoccupied by their efforts to tune out the generic world beat music they'd been hearing in the stores for the last 10 years.

Or maybe the true revelations present themselves most readily to an outsider's ears.

No matter the process, it's the result that matters. And so the real news is that the sound systems at Portland's 10-link chain of largely local-sourced grocery stores now play nothing but Northwest music.

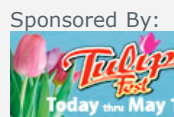
All kinds of music, from artists living in (or hailing from) towns from Oregon to Vancouver, B.C.

From Ray Charles (who lived in Seattle) to the Oregon Symphony's James DePreist, from the Screaming Trees to the Kingsmen, to Jimi Hendrix to the Decemberists.

"We had already been looking for something more in tune with our values," says New Seasons marketing director Helen Neville. "And this came from an organic process that was perfect for us."

Organic? Local? Can I get a sustainable, anybody? Oh, New Seasons. You had us at hello.

Now here's another friendly buzzword: fresh. Which fits perfectly, given that the music program soared from idea to reality in slightly more than three months.



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The process began in July, when Arve Overland, CEO and creative director of the **Overland Agency**, a Portland-based team of tech-based advertising and image design, started designing an iPhone app to allow customers to learn about, then purchase, the music they heard while shopping at New Seasons.

"They were talking about how much they hated the music playing in the stores," Overland recalls. "I was thinking, well, you're local. You have all kinds of local food. We should have all kinds of local music in the stores."

New Seasons was interested. In fact, New Seasons was super-enthusiastically interested. Green lights were lit. Go-aheads were issued. Design and programming work began immediately, and steadily gathered momentum.

Overland's first move was to invite a neighbor over for a glass of wine. Fortunately for Overland, his block is also home to Steve Berlin, best known as a multi-instrumentalist for **Los Lobos**. Oregon Public Broadcasting music host/producer, Jeremy Petersen, climbed onboard, and then the serious, if high-decibel, work began.

First they had to find, and listen to, thousands of tracks from hundreds of artists. The finding part wasn't nearly as easy as you might think. Berlin quizzed dozens of musician friends. He received a thick stream of recommendations from **Music Millennium** owner Terry Currier, who is a walking encyclopedia of Northwest musical history.

"That was the coolest part," Berlin says. "I had gaps in my Northwest musical knowledge; it was great to be able to expose myself to this stuff."

Berlin and friends rated the songs by genre, sound and mood, while Overland's chief tech guy, Ken Eucker, wrote the computer program that feeds the ratings into a logarithm that crafts original playlists each time a store manager requests music to fit the hour, day and general vibe in the store.

"It's like an iPod with even more control," Berlin says.

Better yet, the code-heavy system -- which runs off of "cheap laptops" networked into the chain's central system -- seems bug-free.

"I certainly tried to break it," Berlin says. "But it's built like a tank."

By mid-October the tank was armed with 2,500 songs -- about 150 hours worth of music -- ranging from classical to jazz to country, urban, electronic and straight-ahead rock'n'roll. The system soft-launched Oct. 13, serenading shoppers at the just-opened store on Southeast Hawthorne. Shoppers seemed to like the new sounds (nobody complained, anyway), while the staff thrived on the new, wide-ranging variety of songs.

"I think we were all pretty sick of the steel drums, every afternoon at 3 p.m.," said one staffer, who asked to not be identified because she didn't know she was being interviewed when she answered a reporter's questions. "And now we get to debate over the concept of local. Like, how local is **Sarah McLachlan** if she comes from Canada?"

Some debates can and will be resolved by Overland's iPhone app, which will give shoppers access to the stores' playlists, song credits and artist bios along with information about where and how the music can be purchased. Also don't be surprised if you see kiosks in the stores selling CDs.

And maybe you'll be able to find some intergenerational harmony along the way.

"I played some of the music for my dad and he said, 'Well, it's kinda loud!'" says New Seasons' Helen Neville. But once she explained that the band lived right here, along with every artist on the list, her 75-year-old father changed his tune.






"Well," he concluded. "That's kinda cool."

-- **Peter Ames Carlin**


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369963 November 10, 2010 at 4:44PM

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Just a correction in regard to the photo caption. That is MOST definitely Mr. Berlin in the center of the picture. I would confidently bet all my Los Lobos albums on it.

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Ken Eucker November 10, 2010 at 6:31PM

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This is a great thing that has only just begun it's start.

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PacificSon November 11, 2010 at 8:59AM

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Well, gosh, there is a big ol' world out there Portland, and it's a thin line between being proud and being bigoted. Personally, I like being exposed to music (and people) from other places.

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