

WOLKY 79

Gone but not forgotten

If you have lived in Louisville, you have no doubt heard of a mythical radio station. You've likely heard that it played different types of music spun by disc jockeys who came alive through your radio. Those same DJs spun wild stories, perhaps not always true, but always hysterically funny.

Well, my friend, the myth is real and the station was called WAKY. In the 1970s it dominated the ratings. WAKY's former programming director, Johnny Randolph, believes those high ratings were deserved.

"We had all these folks that were different, worked at the same radio station, basically played the same music," Randolph explained. "But they were different in their approach and they just appealed to such a broad range of people that the station ended up being No. 1 among teens clear through death."

"You're writing history at the time and don't know it," remembered former WAKY News Director Reed Yadon. "The impact of the show was incredible."

Anybody who dreamed of being in radio, it was a bright spot on

your resume if WAKY was on it, Yadon said.

Many had that bright spot in their career: Yadon, Coyote Calhoun, Ralph Dix, Weird Beard, Gary Burbank, Ron Statzer, Woody Stiles, and, of course, Bill Bailey.

"It was just an exceptional radio station," said Bailey, WAKY's morning man, a.k.a. "The Duke of Louisville." "It makes an indelible impression on you and it's a pleasant memory."

Bailey's stories he on the air were later

repeated at water coolers in offices across the region.

Like the one where a General Electric worker wanted to dig out his own basement. Each day before he left for work, he'd take a shovel of dirt with him and dump it. As a result, residents in South Louisville were "blessed with

Iroquois Hill."

Speaking of Iroquois Park, Bailey's "twin," the Rev. William W. Bailey, was scheduled to hold a sunrise Easter Service so Bailey's listeners could "touch the hem of (his) robe." The service never happened, but that didn't stop the listeners from calling and writing the station for tickets. There was a lot of explaining after that skit.

Then there's the time Bailey tried to play a country ham on an album turntable. It came as a gift



Bill Bailey, the Duke of Louisville



Coyote Calhoun and Wolfman Jack at a Freedom Hall concert in 1977.

and he placed it on the turntable, stuck the needle in it and started spinning.

Then there's the one where Bailey admitted he had been married six times. Actually, it was only four times.

"I'm sorry people have been led to believe that lie because that would have made me a bigger fool," Bailey said.

It was all part of Bailey's strategy to entertain Louisville as it was getting ready for another 9-to-5 work day.

"You just take truth, push it over the line and make it absurd, and that's funny to people," he said.

"It was theater of the mind of the greatest form," Yadon recalled.

In all of that craziness, it's hard to believe there was structure. But Randolph established certain parameters.

"We had a format and that format was to play so many songs in an hour and you'd have to play your commercials at a certain time and your promo at a certain time," said former afternoon man Gary Burbank. "But outside of that, man, you could be a personality... You could basically do on the air what you wanted to as long as it was entertaining and didn't cross the line."

Coyote Calhoun, a hit with the younger crowd in WAKY's heyday, agreed. "Johnny Randolph believed in heavy personality," Calhoun said. He hired talented people and "he wanted you to go on the air and be creative."

All of these personalities might have clashed anywhere else. Not at WAKY.

"It was a fun radio station," Calhoun said.

"We always had a family-type atmosphere," Bailey said. "Everybody got along with everybody. We loved each other."

"Working there was never the same on any two days," Yadon said. "You could feel the energy. Everybody fed off everyone else."

"Everyone was very driven, very 'win' oriented," Randolph said. "They conveyed that on the air and I think that's what made the station the success it was."

Its success spanned three decades.

According to



Gary Burbank

Towers Over Kentucky, Francis Nash's anthology of Kentucky's radio history, WAKY was born in 1958 to a marathon of "Purple People Eater." By 1970, WAKY grossed nearly \$1 million in revenue. Its phenomenal rise in ratings continued for the next 10 years.

Then came FM.

At the time, Coyote Calhoun was among many who thought FM radio "was not a big deal." But over the course of a few years, FM took over and AM radio had to find a way to survive.

Yadon remembered when WAKY turned in its rock 'n' roll records for service-oriented programming.

"The station you've grown up with has grown up with you," Yadon said, quoting a promo that ran during the format change in the early 1980s.

But that growth left behind an empty nest.

"I did not want to be with WAKY



Program director Jim Brand

when the other music, the niche format stations would come and start taking our numbers," Randolph explained. "I didn't want to see the station go down. I wanted to leave when it was on top."

Randolph left WAKY for a station in Tulsa in 1977. Since then he has worked at stations in Memphis, Danville, Ky., and Nashville. He is now program director at a sta-



Bob Moody and Coyote Calhoun in 1978.

tion in Huntsville, Ala. However, he still keeps his legal residence in Danville, where he stays at least three weekends a month.

Gary Burbank was hired at WAKY in the late 1960s and stayed for nearly five years. He left to work at a station in New Orleans, then Detroit. He came back to Louisville to work for 84WHAS Radio and then moved on to WLW in Cincinnati where he's been for the past 20 years.

Bill Bailey said goodbye to WAKY in 1980. From there he held various jobs across the country, finally retiring in 1993. He now lives with his daughter and granddaughter in Louisville.

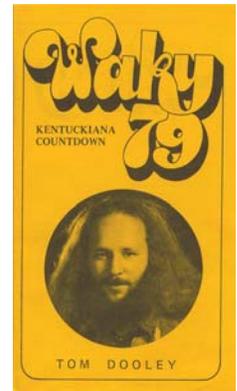
Some of the voices of WAKY have since been silenced. Weird Beard passed away. Woody Stiles died in a plane crash in the 1980s. Ron Statzer was killed in a hang gliding accident.

But part of WAKY still lives on in Louisville's airwaves.

Reed Yadon left WAKY in 1982. He's part of the WHAS-TV Storm Team and communications director for the Archdiocese of Louisville.

Former WAKY newsman Ralph Dix can still be heard delivering the news for WAMZ in Louisville along with Calhoun.

Calhoun, who left WAKY in 1979, may still be spinning the hits for a powerhouse radio station, but there will never be another WAKY. "We're never going to recreate those days again."



—JACKIE HOLLENKAMP

The WAKY wonderful days of radio

It used to be that when I told people I had worked at WAKY (wacky) Radio in Louisville, I got a big smile, and a “Wacky! That was my favorite station! You guys were really wild!”

Now, the generation that cruised in cars with dual tailpipes, even when they only needed one, and sat around drive-in restaurants and gas stations until all hours listening to what are now Golden Oldies, is in its golden years.

Most people now who remember when I was “Bob” Watson on WAKY are getting letters from AARP, just like me.

When I started at WAKY radio in 1961, the station was still owned by the old Scotsman, Gordon McLendon of Dallas.

When McLendon bought the Louisville station it was WGRC, which referred to George Rogers Clark, the Revolutionary War general.

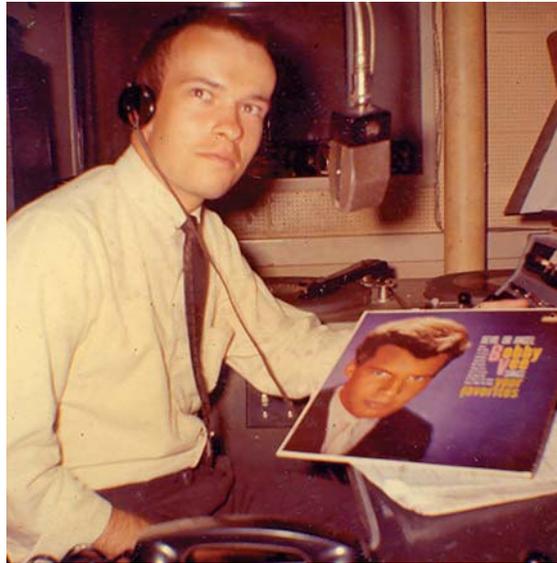
WAKY didn't refer to anything, but it gave McLendon letters he could play with. To prove his station was wacky, he began by playing Sheb Wooley's “Purple People Eater.” And he played it over and over again. That lasted for a couple of days until McLendon had the attention of the masses. Then he unveiled a Top 40 format and news presentation that Louisville, Lexington, and a wide area of Kentucky had never heard.

The disc jockeys were Bill Ward, Art Keller, Jack Sanders and Jack Grady. Tom Perry (whose actual name was Perryman) was news director and morning newscaster, and Jerry Wood did the afternoon news. I got the night news shift, being the new kid on the block.

I worked opposite Grady (whose real name was John K. Anderson) and took on the job with enthusiasm and gusto.

Those early jocks, and some who came along later, were eccentric both on and off the mike.

“Jumpin’ Jack” Sanders, (whose



Jack Grady, one of the original WAKY DJs.

real name was James D. Spence) was the wildest, funniest man I've ever been around.

Sanders was used for bizarre promotions like trying to break the world's record for going without sleep while running his radio show, broadcasting in a bubble underwater at a swimming pool, and an old gimmick, broadcasting from atop a flag pole (on a little platform) until something occurred (like the local baseball team breaking a losing streak).

Sanders also never allowed a little thing like a radio show to get in the way of his private life. He kept in constant contact with his bookie at a bar across the street from the WAKY studios. He booked numerous area rock bands and was busy getting them lined up for gigs while the records were spinning.

The Flintstones were big at the height of Sander's career at WAKY, and his rallying cry became “Yabba dabba doooooo!”

One Saturday, Sanders had to be in Alabama with one of his bands while they

were cutting a record. He prerecorded bunches of ad libs like “Yabba dabba doooooo!,” “It's the Jumper,” and “This is Jumper, squeezin' the trigger on a few high caliber 45s.”

A fan that Jack allowed to run the control board for him on days when he felt particularly lazy played the prerecorded ad libs between records while Jack was in Alabama. The manager called to congratulate Jack on running such a tight show. The groupie told him Jack was in the bathroom and couldn't talk, but he'd pass the message along.

Manager Joel Thorpe was a prince of a fellow who always had his hands full dealing with mega-ego jocks. Once Joel had me bail three of them out of jail. They had, after a few drinks at a nightspot, joined a civil rights march without being invited. I brought them back to Thorpe's office where he read them the riot act.

After some great years at WAKY, Sanders moved to St. Louis, where he operated a successful advertising agency.

There were other talented DJs back then, including perky Tim Tyler. George Williams, another lanky Texan with a smooth voice, along with Louisville native. Jerry Barr, with his blonde, flat-top and powerful voice, wooed the young ladies.

The competition then was WKLO, a station that was laid back in comparison to WAKY, but when the teen-agers started flipping back and forth between stations to find the record they wanted to hear, WAKY's ratings suffered. By the mid-to-late 1960s, it was tooth-and-nail for No. 1 between the two.

John Sharfenberger, who used the name “John Sharp” on WKLO, was a steady, intelligent reporter and newscaster. I remember this teen-age guy coming to the WAKY newsroom one day after we moved to the Fourth Street Mall. He asked if we could record him reading news and critique him. I didn't feel as if I had time and I suggested he just keep practicing and maybe someday we could do something for him.

So, the youngster went over to WKLO and pitched the same story to Sharfenberger. John took the lad under his wing and nurtured him. The youngster turned out to be Bob Edwards of National Public Radio.



DJ Jack Sanders with engineer Todd Kurk.

The day Kennedy was shot WAKY happened to be running a Thanksgiving turkey giveaway promotion. Listeners had to count the number of "Gobble, gobble, gobble" noises, preceded by a gunshot, that played throughout the day. I won't say who was working (it wasn't me) when the bulletin was put out on the radio that Kennedy had been shot. The DJ was so stunned he pressed the first button his finger touched which was a cartridge with the promotion pre-loaded.

It went like this:

Newsman: "Once again repeating...President Kennedy has been shot in Dallas."

Followed by: "Bang! Gobble, gobble, gobble."

Our newsroom read like a who's who. We had Byron Crawford, the current *Courier-Journal* columnist, Tom Maxedon; Mike Summers (Cunningham) and Len King, who work for CNN. We also had Irene Nolan, who became managing editor of *The Courier-Journal*.

Ralph Dix, the straight man for Coyote Calhoun on WAMZ, was the first black newscaster on an all-white station in Louisville when he was hired by WAKY.

Randy Jones left WAKY news to pursue coal mining and heavy equip-

ment driving. He's back on the air in Pikeville. Network quality newsman Don Sheridan wanted to get out of news and return to Morganfield so he could play country music and be home.

Stan Cook was there sometimes with his deep resonate tones.

Newsman-jock, Woody Stiles was energetic to the point of wired. The two radio newsmen whose voice were heard on WAKY are both dead, struck down in the prime of their careers. Statzer was shooting television footage for WLW in Cincinnati from a hang-glider that crashed. Stiles was a pilot, killed when his plane crashed in Bullitt County.

Weird Beard (Bert Market) was a wonderful fellow, a flower child.

Reed Yadon was another pilot who worked news at WKLO and later for WAKY.

One morning when Bailey was late, I opened his show and played bluegrass music for 30 minutes. I never heard the end of it.



Bert "Weird Beard" Market

Mason Lee Dixon (David Bratcher) and Gene Snyder were good friends and outstanding air personalities.

Dud Walker was a straight man with a big voice, but Skinny Bobby Harper was different. He was in the mold of WHAS' Terry Meiners.

Most people remember Gary Burbank, but few know how he got that name? When the talented jock went to work at WAKY, the TV show *Laugh-In* was big. Everyone in radio knew about the powerful-voiced announcer "Gary Owen in beautiful downtown Burbank." Bill Purcer became "Gary Burbank in beautiful downtown Louisville."

And by the way, my name isn't Bob. With Tom Perryman reading news and a couple of other Toms having been in news at WAKY, it was decided I should use another first name. I had always like UK guard Bobby Watson, so why not?

The WAKY call letters now belong to a Springfield radio station.

—THOMAS S. WATSON

WKYU

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- Edmonton 10
- Franklin 6
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