



FLASHBACK

BY HARRY KOLLATZ JR.

Days Of Future Past

Radio stations come and radio stations go, but few leave memories as long-lived or as rich as WGOE.

On Oct. 25, 1971, radio promoter Dave Dewitt wrote in his journal: "Snugly nestled between Dick Strauss Ford and the Bonanza Sirloin Pit lie the studios and offices of WGOE — in an incredibly small, glass-enclosed building which originally was the used car office for Ward Volkswagen. 'We've even thought of moving across the street into the vacant Hungry Penguin Fish and Chips building,' observes E. Michael Murray, station manager, 'I'll consider anything to get us out of this dump.'"

Dewitt had blown into Richmond after a stint selling radio bingo in the rural Deep South. The money had been good but the ranking of sales stood just above con man. Now he'd landed in the middle of rock and roll, at 1590 AM: "As high as you can get on your radio dial."

Dewitt wrote that he was allowed "more creative freedom than I expected ... The station is an incongruity — location, personnel, and past history."

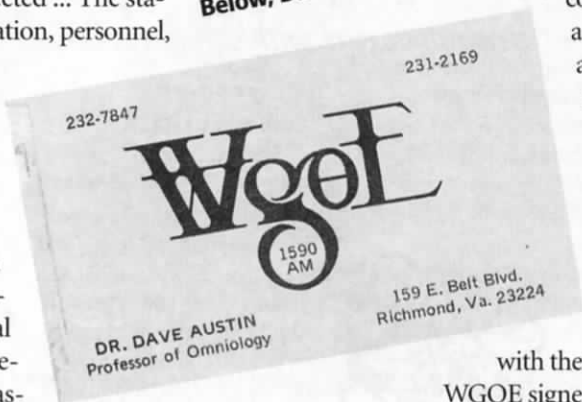
Then things started to get weird.

The station's on-air personalities, John Stevens, Jay August, Doug Stell, Jim Letizia, Les Smith, Ken Booton and others became voices directly plugged into a cultural revolution. It was a daytime-only AM aural psychedelic assault on conformity.

F.T. Rea, who was manager of the Biograph Theater which advertised exclusively on WGOE, recalls the effect the station had on listeners. He tells that he once stopped at a Fan traffic light and not only heard the station blaring from several nearby car radios



Clockwise from left: Sandra (last name unknown), Pat O'Neill, unidentified, engineer Jim Grainger, DJ Les Smith, salesman Steve Mahalik, DJ Jim Minard at WGOE. Below, David Dewitt's former business card.



but turned to see everybody laughing at the same wacky commercial. "It was a remarkable little episode in a strange time. The station gave the young people an odd, communal feeling. You turned on your radio and you never knew what was going to happen next, it was happening right there. It really was the last time an audience could be that connected to a radio station."

Dave Russlander, who did weekend shifts in 1973-74 at WGOE, says, "We had a pretty good listenership, depending on how long the day was. A lot of people weren't in touch

with the kids, and we were, because we were them."

WGOE signed on in 1964 as a traditional-style station with Jess Duboy and "Gentleman" Jim Granger at the mikes. They played Henry Mancini and The Beatles. But the times, they were a' changin'.

The late night "Ugly Show" on VCU's campus radio station, managed by Jerry Williams (who later became a local TV person-

ality), had begat Stevens, Smith, Stell and others who graduated to GOE. Stevens inaugurated "Saturday Subway," playing progressive music. When Murray took a weekend off in May 1971, the DJs, in his absence, whimsically decided to ditch Top 40 in favor of the music they liked. Thus, GOE became "One Station Under Ground."

"It was like a be-in," Stevens, now a popular daytime DJ for Philadelphia's top-rated FM music station, WMMR, recalls. "But the format change was very false. Ken Booton quit on the air. Jay August quit on the air. We'd play "Knock Three Times" by Dawn, or something real cheesy, and say, 'They're making us play this, we don't like it!'"

It made news. Belt Boulevard closed to traffic. Channel 12 sent a camera crew. Scores of hippies, trailing clouds of petitions, showed up to urge The Management to banish Top 40.

Dewitt was appalled. "It was a great publicity stunt but my clients were furious," he recalls. "I was selling advertising at what was a standard Top 40 radio station and, overnight, it wasn't anymore."

In a dizzyingly short time, however, the station rocketed from the bottom of a 13-station market to fourth in the ratings.

But Richmond remained a conservative business community. Eyebrows were raised at radio broadcaster functions when the GOE delegation arrived wearing sandals and tie-dyed shirts in a room of suits and ties. And they continued their antics.

"Ken Booton, [aka Melvin the Green Frog] the morning guy, would tape the other guys, like Alden Aaroe," Dewitt says, "and play it back and yell, 'You'll never hear this on GOE!'"

"Our slogan was, 'We Gross Out Everybody,'" Les Smith, then a weekend DJ, now with the Virginia Museum, tells. He says he played "strange stuff" during his tenure at GOE, October 1972-May 1975: 13th Floor Elevators, Mothers of Invention, Pink Floyd, Jefferson Airplane, Grateful Dead. They were all new, exciting, it was Richmond pre-FM, and nobody could believe it.

"There was a whole lot of music out there that they just weren't playing," Smith says. "It was a chance to educate the audience."

And Smith wasn't above being educated himself. When assigned to interview KISS,

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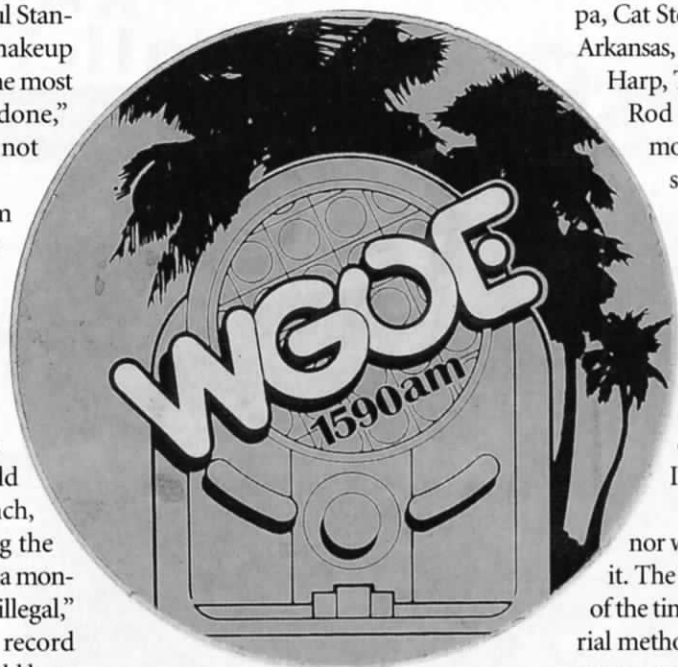
he admitted he didn't know much about the loud, over-the-top group, so he enlisted the aid of music enthusiast Buzzy Lawler. Together they met Peter Criss and Paul Stanley, both minus their trademark makeup and costumes. "And it was one of the most interesting interviews I'd ever done," Smith recalls. Engrossing enough not to run commercials or the news.

News broadcasts differed from the norm, too. J. Michael Graves based his 15-minute news programs on UPI wire reports, but he embroidered them with sound effects and sometimes broadcast from the studio's roof.

Since the steak house was next door, the entire station crew would occasionally adjourn there for lunch, leaving an album playing, locking the door and toting a transistor radio as a monitor. "This was, of course, terribly illegal," Stell admits. "And sometimes a record would get stuck and somebody would have to beat feet inside to correct the problem."

Also terribly illegal was the midnight firing-up parties where the DJs simply

turned on the transmitter to calibrate the transmission and, instead, played music and acted, well, like DJs. "Our wave would

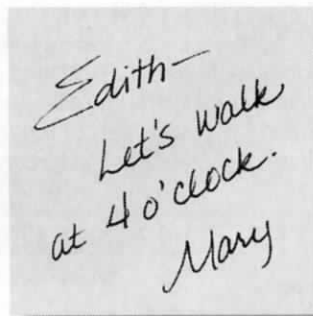


bounce off the ionosphere," Stevens remembers. "We got requests from Boston, Cleveland, Philly."

Among the many artists whose concerts the station promoted or who dropped by the studio for interviews were Frank Zappa, Cat Stevens, Alice Cooper, Black Oak Arkansas, Linda Ronstadt, Audience, Glass Harp, Traffic, J.J. Cale, Leon Redbone, Rod Stewart and Faces. The Richmond Arena frequently held GOE-sponsored concerts. There were no seats so people lay on blankets and the sound was mostly acoustic. A February 1972 concert included a young pop artist just on the brink of fame — Carly Simon. "Nobody knew her, really," Stell recalls. "She sang 'That's The Way I've Always Heard It Should Be.'"

WGOE didn't expect its success nor was the station fully prepared for it. The youth of its staff, and the tenor of the times, combined to form a mercurial method of conducting business. "We were scamming and jamming in those days," Dewitt says.

Dewitt recalls one day when he was taping a promotion and a flustered secretary



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WGOE's original Belt Boulevard studio, called "The Fishbowl."

knocked on the door, urging him to come out. He said he was busy. She insisted. When he angrily emerged, she said, "The FCC is here. I think you should talk to them."

FCC charges ranged from false power readings and rigged contests to graft and corruption. A series of investigations continued from the spring of 1972 to 1973. When Dewitt had to testify regarding double billings of advertisers, he told the court that nobody at the station really knew what

they were doing.

Meanwhile, GOE's studios moved to the lobby offices of downtown's Lexington Tower. The station's free-form, antic character continued, even as personnel shifted, but Dewitt says the mood had mellowed. "We'd been busted. It was like Nixon after Watergate."

About that time, Peter Coughter, now of Siddall Matus and Coughter advertising, arrived on the scene as the station's movie reviewer. Coughter "was into biker movies, B-Movies, anything with Pam Grier in it," he admits. "Couple of times we even made up movies that never existed, and I cast my friends in them — talked about them as if they were real."

Coughter also had the responsibility of making films that would later be shown at clubs where GOE DJs were in charge of music. Among his films is one of Bruce Springsteen, a skinny, wispy-bearded kid

in painter's pants, playing with the E-Street Band at Alpha Audio during an on-air acoustic session. "Unfortunately, there's no sound," Coughter says with a chuckle.

But every season turns, and the season which brought WGOE into prominence began fading. FM stereo arrived in force with WRXL and WRVQ. The brief hiatus of sensibility dissolved into corporate structures, demographics and narrow casting. During the late 1970s and early '80s WGOE switched owners and managers, tinkered with format and finally changed call letters.

Dewitt quit and moved to New Mexico, where he writes and does extensive voice and camera work. He lives in Albuquerque and edits the successful Chile Pepper magazine, devoted to fiery foods. Russlander is data processing coordinator for the Virginia Senate. Letizia and Booton have passed into the Mystic. And 1590 AM plays gospel music.

Of GOE, little remains besides T-shirts, memories, yellow adhesion signs and, on a few surviving mid-'70s cars lumbering around town, a bumper sticker: WGOE, DEATH OF AN OLD FRIEND. □

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