

On the AIR

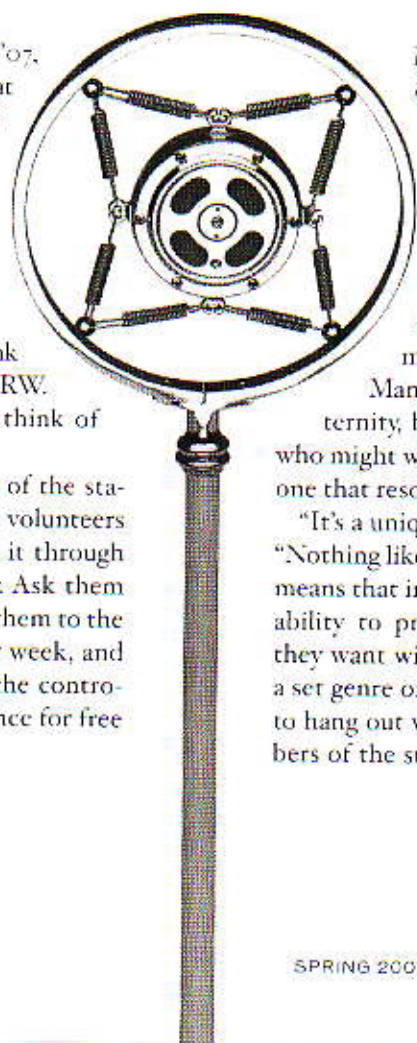
As the radio industry struggles to maintain listeners, WHRW-FM continues to fill richly earned niches.

BY KIM FERNANDEZ

Ask Rich Bellin, class of '07, history and biochemistry, what he enjoys about managing the Binghamton University radio station, and his normally rapid-fire speaking pace comes screeching to a halt. He pauses. Says, "Hmmm." Pauses some more.

It's not that Bellin can't think of anything he likes about WHRW. Quite the contrary. He can't think of much he *doesn't* enjoy.

The same seems to be true of the station's other directors, DJs and volunteers who have been involved with it through its more than 40-year history. Ask them what it is or was that brought them to the station for up to 20 hours per week, and they'll talk about the music, the controversies over the years, the chance for free self-expression.



Mostly, you'll hear about the camaraderie they've found in the station's studios, from its inception as a basement operation that transmitted directly to two dormitories, to the 2,000-watt relative giant of today that can be heard for at least a 25-mile radius around campus.

Many compare it to a sort of fraternity, but one that accepts anyone who might wander through the door, and one that resonates across decades.

"It's a unique opportunity," Bellin says. "Nothing like it exists anywhere else." He means that in several ways, from the DJs' ability to program just about anything they want without having to conform to a set genre or format, to the opportunity to hang out with students and the members of the surrounding community who

“We have an enormous music library. It’s expanding so much we don’t have room for it all.”

—STEPHANIE WOLF



make up a good portion of the station's staff.

Bellin, who estimates he spends 20 or more hours a week at the station outside of class time, doesn't know how many people are listening to his broadcasting baby. Neither does anyone else. Arbitron, the organization that keeps statistics on the radio industry, doesn't track college audiences, and there's no reliable way for the station to know who's tuning in. The thing is, it doesn't seem to matter. "Radio Free Binghamton," as WHRW likes to refer to itself, isn't about market share or annual revenue or becoming famous. Instead, it's about sharing passions, musical and otherwise, and learning from students, alumni and neighborhood friends who broadcast and spend spare time in its studios. It's about responsibility and respect.

It's a proud legacy, and one that current station managers are working hard to push into the future, even as more listeners across the nation are turning elsewhere to get the majority of their news and entertainment.

Considered one way, WHRW's history is a testament to the power of gizmos. The technology to broadcast signals was invented in 1893 by Heinrich Hertz; one year later, inventors in several countries came up with devices that would receive those signals. The first regular AM broadcast on record was spearheaded by San Francisco resident Charles Herrold in 1912. By 1918, congressional testimony notes that more than 8,500 Americans were regularly broadcasting to about 200,000 receivers. From there, it was a short hop to regulatory laws and establishment of the first regular AM stations.

The radio boom hit Binghamton in 1954 with the establishment of "The Radio Workshop of Harpur College." Students began building their first transmitter in 1961. The next year, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) approved the application for call letters "WRAF," which stood for Rafuse Hall, the station's first campus home. By 1962, WRAF was transmitting for several hours, four days a week, with a "no rock 'n roll" policy. In 1965, the FCC allowed WRAF to build an FM station

for educational purposes at frequency 90.5. Christened "WHRW," for Harpur Radio, it began broadcasting on Feb. 4, 1966, as one of only three FM stations available in the greater Binghamton area. Then-General Manager David Cooper '67, now an orthopedic surgeon, calls the experience "interesting," and laughs, remembering how he stood on the roof of the campus administration building to supervise the installation of the new FM antenna.

"I [was] on top of the building watching the antenna go up, thinking, 'What in the hell am I doing up here?'" he says. "That was our topping-off ceremony."

Today, though, with new technologies capturing the public's attention, radio has been in decline for several years as an industry. Facing challenges from 24-hour news on television and the Internet and scads of entertainment programming on both, radio stations have had to find creative ways to maintain audiences not sitting in cars. Following the trend, many colleges have established television stations or Internet news sites of their own. But college radio remains a strong draw, both for listeners looking for something different and for participants who find it a perfect marriage of self-expression and anonymity.

WHRW is one of an estimated 1,400 college broadcasting stations in existence in the United States. More than 150 students and community members host shows and work behind the scenes to keep things moving. Its "no-rock" policy is long gone. In its place is what amounts to an open forum: DJs can play or do what they want when they want, so long as they stay in compliance with FCC regulations (each DJ must apprentice for a semester and pass a standard FCC exam before being allowed to broadcast a program).

Because DJs can determine their own programming, the station's management is divided up into many departments, including pop, jazz, folk, classical, heritage (defined as "music of black expression"), news, public affairs and radio theater. There's also the catch-all "specialty" department that handles shows that simply don't fit anywhere else.

Beyond being a hallmark of WHRW (not many broadcast stations are totally free-format)



Making waves for 40 YEARS

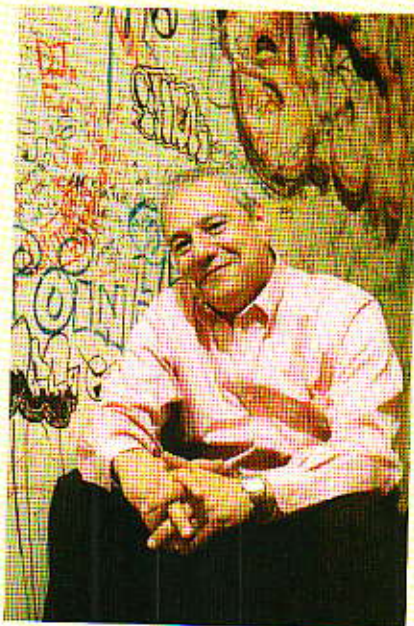
There's been a long tradition of WHRW DJs who believe they've affected community as deeply as Dan Walikis, MA '77, has.

David Cooper '67 was general manager of the station during its transition from AM to FM broadcasting in 1966. He arrived at Binghamton all of 16 years old and, three years later, had the opportunity to interview the Binghamton city mayor shortly before election time.

"The big topic at the time was drugs on campus," Cooper says. "I was interviewing the mayor, Joseph Esworthy, over the phone. I asked him whether he would ever stand for the legalization of marijuana. What he said was that if people ever got to the point where they used marijuana the same way they used alcohol, he would support legalizing it."

A local newspaper reporter caught the broadcast and published a story that said Mayor Esworthy supported legalizing pot. "The next day, reporters came in and requested our transcripts," Cooper remembers; Esworthy eventually lost the election. "It was big in the newspaper for a couple of days, and that was the first big impact that Harpur Radio had. I thought it was unfair to Esworthy to take his comments out of context like that, but I was kind of flattered that the story was picked up."

Cooper's protégé, Rich Alpern '69, a principal at Frederic W. Cook & Co. Inc., a law firm in New York



Eric Lobenfeld '71 credits his time as a DJ with fostering an ability to try cases confidently in front of juries.

City, was another station manager with a zeal for news. As sports director, Alpern traveled with the men's basketball team on away games so he could do play-by-play broadcasting. And in mid-1965, when the campus was evacuated because of a gas leak, Cooper and Alpern talked police into letting them go back up to the administration building so they could give radio listeners first-hand accounts.

Eric Lobenfeld '71, now a partner with law-firm giant Hogan & Hartson in New York, took the station to the cutting edge with musical programming. He started a show called Radio London, devoted almost exclusively to music

by English rock bands. "I would buy records through the mail from England and get them before they were issued in the United States. A lot of famous rock bands were played for the first time in Binghamton — and maybe New York — on WHRW."

Lobenfeld also recalls sending a team of student reporters from WHRW to Washington, D.C., to cover an anti-war rally on the Washington Mall in 1969. "It was a very exciting time," he says. "We profoundly changed what the radio station was."

Both Cooper and Lobenfeld believe their stints on WHRW shaped them in ways they didn't recognize at the time — a sentiment that drives many WHRW alumni to reconnect regularly (their 40th reunion will take place at Homecoming in October 2006 [see <http://whrw40.com>]). "I'm embarrassed to say that I did okay in college but, really, my Binghamton experience revolved around the radio station," Lobenfeld says. He credits his time on-air with fostering his ability to try cases confidently before juries. "I'm relaxed talking to large groups of people I don't know," he says. "That's a function of being on the radio. My involvement in management there was very useful in terms of learning how to get along with people and reach consensus among groups who didn't necessarily agree. It was great for me."

"The station was like home for many of us," Alpern says. "It helped a lot of us grow up."

the programming diversity has led to one of the largest recordings collections of college stations anywhere. Program Director Stephanie Wolf estimates that the station owns about 65,000 recordings (40,000 on vinyl and 25,000 on CD). That includes one of the largest collections of jazz recordings in the country, she maintains. "We have an enor-

mous music library," Wolf says. "It's expanding so much we don't have room for it all. We're constantly getting new things in."

One of the thriving departments at WHRW is radio theater — plays, sketches, improv. It's an art form that's dying on commercial radio: Besides Garrison Keillor, there aren't

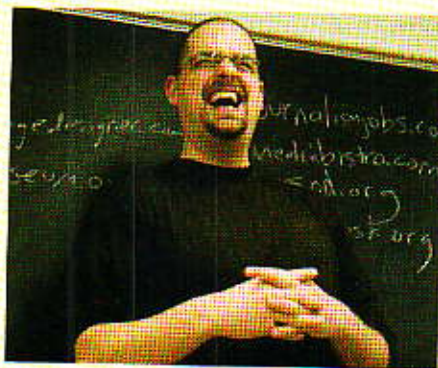
Free format Forever

"Shy and awkward" is how Laura Aswad '88 remembers feeling as a freshman walking into her first WHRW general meeting. Held in one of the old Union lounges, the meetings were packed with 75 to 100 students sitting wherever — on the backs of couches, on tables, cross-legged on the floor.

She wasn't a tenderfoot for long. "We were all drawn in by the eclectic music and the opportunity to be on the air," says Aswad, who became WHRW's general manager her senior year and is now the associate producer at the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts in New York City. "It wasn't just an ego-boost, either. Everyone was willing to give a lot to make the station work."

For Aswad, the personification of the station's altruism is Ron Drumm, WHRW's record librarian. For decades, Drumm's color-coded catalog has kept WHRW's huge music collection organized. He also refreshes it regularly with trips to New York City, where he trades bagfuls of donated records for music that meets the DJs' programming needs. "He's like the station's 'national treasure,'" Aswad says.

Another station touchstone for younger WHRW alumni is former general manager Paul Battaglia '00,



Seth Mates '00, a designer for *Newsday*, returned to campus in February to talk with students about journalism careers.

who died in 9/11, say Seth Mates '00 and Stephen Bendt '04. "When Paul talked with you, he made you feel special," Mates recalls. That quality made him "one of Binghamton's best student leaders," says Mates, now a designer for *Newsday* in Long Island, N.Y.

Bendt recalls that "Paul wanted everyone to have a good time," which gave sportscasters like him the confidence to be creative, even goofy. Now an emergency-room patient liaison in Troy, N.Y., Bendt

remembers crunching cookies on the air when games got out of hand. The practice caught on with fans, and So-dexho staff started handing out baked goodies at home games. Fans would chant "cookies" at key moments.

When Mates and Battaglia decided to turn the February 1999 Radiothon into a "blow-away event," Mates remembers making it "my full-time job" for weeks. He even "failed *Al Vols*' British literature class to make time" for the Radiothon. But covering the women's basketball season victory and drawing in two bands for a first-ever sold-out Party at the Pub made it worthwhile, Mates says.

"Every time we were on the air, it was a rush. Every time, it was different," Mates says.

many radio dramatists around anymore. But here, a group of students writes, acts and broadcasts dramas, mysteries and comedies, just like in the old days.

Graduate student Jordan White, who heads up the radio theater department and makes MP3 files available for download off the Internet, says the website gets regular hits, in part, he figures, because "it doesn't just sound like a book read out loud." White estimates that he's written and worked on about 27 hours of radio drama over three semesters. "I want to do something original, [something] done just for radio and written just for radio."

The station's website also offers hints that WHRW's diversity has attracted a relatively large listening audience for unusual shows. Bellin says the station's phone lines light up like Christmas trees when certain DJs take to

the airwaves. The station also draws in members of the surrounding community, most of whom have no other ties to the University. Local professionals, students and retirees often come in to begin apprenticeships, then take over their own shows, often staying for a decade or more.

The draw among the community — nearly half of the station's staff are neighborhood residents — makes WHRW unique among college radio stations. Students who work on the station say that the opportunity to interact with everyone from young professionals to retirees means they can develop peer relationships with working adults and establish mentor-like relationships.

"We become friends, we're a community," Bellin says. "There have been people who've stayed here for 28 or 35 years." One of those who has stayed at WHRW is "DJ Dan Jan" — Jan Walikis, a retired schoolteacher, Ellis Island tour guide and self-taught music historian. Walikis, who hosts the Tuesday night "European Ethnic Melodies Show," earned

his MA in history from Binghamton in 1977. He didn't wander into the station until 1988, though. His son was a DJ, and Walikis drove him to his shift one night when the youngster's car broke down. Dan Jan is now celebrating his 18th year as a DJ.

"Two young men took me under their wing [in an apprenticeship], and it was the most astounding and fascinating and interesting experience," he says. "They taught me radio, and I thought, 'You know, I could kind of groove on this.' I asked them if they ever played any ethnic music — polkas and music from Europe. Shortly after, I got a call asking if I'd like to do the show."

While Walikis, like other DJs, doesn't know how big his audience is, he gets a lot of calls and notes from elderly listeners who enjoy hearing the music they remember from their childhoods. Bellin, who says Walikis has become something of a father figure to student station members, thinks he enjoys a "huge listenership," both on the air and over the Web, nationwide. "People listen because you just don't hear this stuff anywhere else," Bellin says.

"I go into the community and I know people are listening," Walikis says. "We're making a difference in their life, one song selection at a time."

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— JAN WALIKIS, MA '77



"That platform allows radio stations to do multicasting," says Kris Jones, spokesperson for the National Association of Broadcasters. "A rock station, for example, would be able to send out Latin and rock simultaneously, and listeners with proper equipment could pick up both stations. It's a big boom for radio."

Even though WHRW usually adopts technology quickly, the station directors are being cautious with the newer trends. "There's a great fear that if we update to these things too fast and too soon, the free-format nature of WHRW will go away forever," Bellin says. "That's what people value more than anything else. We don't want to become a corporate commercial station and lose our soul."

And although WHRW has webcast its shows for several years already, things like HD radio or podcasting — a new technology that's just beginning to take mainstream stations by storm — are only on the horizon. "It can take a while for us to clear money for things like that, and we don't want to do anything to dis-enhance the atmosphere and free format of the station," Bellin says. "We just don't know enough about podcasting to make an informed decision right now."

If nothing else, radio is a technology constantly in flux. The AM to FM revolution of the 1960s was followed by tape to LP to CD revolutions. Many radio stations have automated their broadcasts to allow DJs to pre-record their time on the air and let it run during their time slots. And now, HD radio, which broadcasts digitally and allows stations to send out more than one signal on a single bandwidth, is the talk of the industry.

That fierce loyalty to the station's identity is one reason staff members are committed to keeping it alive and welcoming newcomers with open arms. "The students now are 18 to 22 years of age," says 65-year-old Walikis. "I'm old enough to be their grandfather. I was doing this when they were in diapers. But I like to meet the new students and help them learn. This radio station is important, and if we don't teach new people, it won't continue." 