

## 50 YEARS OF LOCAL COLLEGE RADIO

### Bringing an independent voice to the airwaves

WHRW

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For the past 50 years, DJs at WHRW, Binghamton University's free-format radio station, have bragged on air that they've been "keepin' it lit since 1966."

Fitting, then, that at the very moment marking a half-century since WHRW's first FM transmitter hummed to life — 7:30 p.m. Feb. 4, to be exact — current station members were strategizing about the upcoming semester as part of a spring general interest meeting. A cheer went up among the students assembled, they shared slices of a small cookie cake — then they got back to the work at hand.

The heart and soul of WHRW always have been the voices who choose the music and share the news, and one burning question has driven those DJs onward: What's next?

Although hard to believe today, almost nobody listened to FM radio in the 1960s. Blame the behind-the-scenes business machinations of U.S. broadcast corporations, which made their fortunes on the AM dial, for condemning the better-quality format to simulcasts of AM stations or endless hours of "beautiful music" — orchestral versions of pop hits most commonly used as background music in department stores and

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**Longtime WHRW DJ Ferdinand Montalvo has been with the station for over 35 years in a number of roles. He now hosts a Latin music show that features a mix of salsa, bachata and Latin jazz, among others.**

ANDREW THAYER / STAFF PHOTO



**A CD copy of WHRW's 1972 interview with musician John Lennon.**

ANDREW THAYER / STAFF PHOTO

## Radio

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elevators.

When WHRW began transmitting a 10-watt signal at 90.5 megahertz from SUNY Binghamton's Vestal campus, it was only the third FM station in the region.

Programs generally aired between 5 p.m. and 1 a.m. Sundays through Thursdays. (Fridays and Saturdays, presumably, were reserved for partying.) Unlike commercial radio, WHRW embraced a free-format ethos, which imposed no restrictions on what could be said or played apart from a few basic FCC guidelines.

As the counterculture took hold on college campuses nationwide, the play-anything, do-anything vibe served as a blank canvas for DJs to paint their aural creations. The latest from Bob Dylan and the Beatles mingled with Mozart and Miles Davis. Psychedelic and soul music played side by side with Alan Lomax's field recordings and ethnic tunes from around the world. News shows reported the day's events from the Vietnam War and the civil rights movement, and public affairs programs debated marijuana legalization and the morality of pretty much everything.

A half-century later, FM radio is king and the AM dial is crowded with political talk shows. WHRW's 2,000-watt transmitter atop Binghamton University's Glenn G. Bartle Library Tower broadcasts 24 hours a day throughout Broome County, and the rest of the world can dial up a web stream to listen in.

Millennials have taken up the torch that passed down from baby boomers and Generation X, fashions from the Gap have replaced bell-bottom jeans, hip-hop and electronica have joined the music mix, and more students plug in an iPod to share their music rather than spinning vinyl or CDs — much to the distress of the station's old-school DJs.

About 200 students and community members are cleared to be DJs today, but over the years, thousands more have embraced the power of the mic. Some stayed for a semester or two, others for their entire college careers. A select few have remained for decades.

Through it all, the free format has remained intact. There's no faculty adviser, no mandatory playlist, no day-to-day meddling from BU's powers that be.

"It's easy when you're inside WHRW to forget that it's very unusual in the college radio landscape," said Charles Berman, who has hosted Mad Trivia Party on the station since 2008. "There are very few stations nationwide where you can sign up to do basically whatever you want, within broadcast limits, and there are very few universities that have an opportunity for that to exist."

### At the controls

A lot of colleges can proudly boast having an underground music scene — but WHRW is quite literally subterranean.

To find the radio station on campus, go to the shiny new food court at the University Union, then take the steps down to the basement and follow the music. Located across the hall from Pipe Dream, BU's student newspaper, WHRW's front door has an eclectic bunch of music stickers applied at all angles, like a touring

musician's guitar case showing off showing off various stops on the road.

That decor continues inside, where an eye-bending assortment of band logos, posters, bulletin boards and graffiti cover every wall in the lobby, main control room (dubbed CR-1), office, record library and Studio A, where four additional microphones allow for extra on-air guests.

WHRW has occupied this space only since 2002, when it moved from an above-ground location in Old Union Hall, the original building that's now just an appendage of the new union. Some old-timers and students still grumble about the move, and rightly so — considering all that's jammed into it, the station often seems cramped.

The sanctum sanctorum, of course, is the main library, where a five-decade collection of vinyl, CDs and 45s has been organized under categories such as rock, folk, new wave, country and world music. Thousands of albums offer an overwhelming amount of choices, and some of them probably haven't been played or even touched in years.

To get a slot on the radio schedule today, students or community members must apprentice for one semester with a DJ, learning a three-part catechism of station and FCC rules, how to correctly fill out station logs (still done with pen and paper), and how to properly use the control board and other equipment.

After passing a written test and hands-on exam in CR-1, cleared DJs can earn “station service” by helping out in ways such as checking incoming CDs for profanities, posting fliers or participating in group cleanups of the station itself. The more station service a DJ has, the better the placement on the schedule can be.

On a Saturday night in January, behind the control board in CR-1, longtime community DJ Ferdinand Montalvo — known to friends as Freddie — was spinning high-energy Latin jazz tunes on his program *Dimensiones*.

One of the beauties of WHRW's free format is that DJs can fill niches that are underserved in the community. In addition to Montalvo's Latin show — which has broadcast under several names over the years — local minister Kit White hosts the well-loved *Gospel Time*, WHRW's longest-running show, on Sunday mornings.

Before their deaths within weeks of each other in early 2012, two WHRW favorites had shows for more than two decades: Daniel Jan Walikis sought out the best polka and more on the *European Ethnic Melodies Show*, and Ras Charles Jones served as Binghamton's “ambassador of reggae” on *Iration Vibration*.

Growing up as part of the Puerto Rican community in the South Bronx, Montalvo gravitated more toward rock music, and his head was filled with the Philadelphia disco sound as he graduated from Bronx Community College in 1976 and moved to the Southern Tier.

He first came to WHRW in the summer of 1979, visiting a friend who hosted a Latin show — and that was the moment he became hooked on both radio and the sounds of his heritage: “I was engulfed by the vibes. All that I know about Latin music, I learned at WHRW — almost. I have my post-doctorate degree at WHRW!”

In 1981 and 1982, Montalvo became WHRW's first Latino program director and, later, general manager. There's not been another Latino in either role since.

As Montalvo guided listeners during his recent three-hour show, his fingers danced along the control board as he selected music from a large rolling CD case he balanced on a filing cabinet. He never arrives with a particular playlist, preferring to let what he calls “spontaneous combustion” inspire the evening's progression

from track to track.

When on air with his smooth and resonant voice, Montalvo not only says what he plays but also shares tidbits and trivia about the songs and performers he features. Those connections — and his careful curation of the selections he airs — offer the human touch that an algorithm on Pandora never can.

When asked about his tenure at WHRW and how the station has evolved over the past four decades he's been there, Montalvo preferred to keep things pragmatic.

“There have been various changes throughout the decades. Every administration has its own personality and head trip. I've seen it all — I've seen 'em come and go,” the 62-year-old Binghamton resident said. “But the show must go on, by any means necessary!”

### **In the beginning**

The roots of WHRW can be traced to the mid-1950s, when BU predecessor Harpur College — a branch campus for Syracuse University — had its home in Endicott. Students interested in broadcasting formed the Harpur Radio Workshop to form connections with local commercial stations and gain work experience.

In 1962, after Harpur College moved to Vestal, the radio workshop began broadcasting what its members called WRAF, a low-power station at 590 AM named for the Rafuse Residence Hall, where it originated. Because the signal was transmitted through the power lines of only two residence halls, however, its range was very limited.

Hoping to increase its range, WRAF management proposed moving the station to the FM band in 1965, and the Federal Communications Commission approved the construction of an educational station at 90.5 FM called WHRW, after the initials of the Harpur Radio Workshop.

The station first powered up on Feb. 4, 1966, to cover a SUNY Binghamton Colonials basketball game.

Ron Drumm, who graduated from Hammondsport High School as part of the Class of '68, was first drawn to WHRW as a SUNY-B student in the summer of 1970, after he discovered that DJs had copies of early bootleg records.

The following July, two neighbors in his dorm who were WHRW DJs encouraged Drumm to get his own show. “There weren't a whole lot of people clamoring to be DJs,” the 65-year-old Binghamton resident recalled.

At the same time, WHRW needed a librarian to manage the influx of rock and pop records while someone else handled the classical releases, and Drumm volunteered.

Nearly 45 years later, he's still at it — and he's discovered literally thousands of hours of music to love along the way.

“It's been a gradual but steady evolution for me personally as a music listener and, I guess, as a person,” Drumm said of his tenure at the station, where he also has a weekly show and acts as a mentor to an ever-rotating band of student DJs.

“I was a really shy guy in high school, and I never really had many relationships or a lot of close friends. I certainly never would have imagined getting behind a microphone and going on the air. But WHRW helped

me to become more comfortable with myself, and it gave me a reason to share things I thought were worth sharing with other people.”

Also in the early '70s, a key figure became part of the WHRW mythology: Moe Loogham.

The origins of Moe at SUNY Binghamton are admittedly a bit hazy. Some students thought of him as a counterculture rebel and friendly neighborhood drug supplier. Various graffiti and stickers proclaimed that “Moe Loogham is Coming!” and a popular expression around campus promised “when Moe gets here, everything will be all right.”

At WHRW, Moe came to symbolize the joys of free-format radio. DJs of all ages invoke the “spirit of Moe” when their shows are firing on all cylinders.

The station’s unofficial motto became “Peace, Love and Moe.”

### **The 1980s**

Will Hermes knew about WHRW before he transferred from SUNY Oswego in 1980. He’d visited a friend at Binghamton and loved the station’s free-format ideal, which contrasted sharply with radio at Oswego, which was rigidly formatted and meant to sound professional at all times.

During his first week on campus, the Queens native signed up to become a WHRW apprentice, and he admitted with a laugh, “I don’t think I left for the four years I was up there!” Although he didn’t realize it at the time, Hermes’ tenure as a DJ laid the groundwork for a decades-long career as a music journalist, critic and broadcaster. He’s a longtime contributor to Rolling Stone and National Public Radio, and his work also has appeared in Spin, The New York Times, The Village Voice, GQ, Salon and Entertainment Weekly. His 2011 book “Love Goes to Buildings on Fire: Five Years in New York That Changed Music Forever” won critical praise for its exploration of the Talking Heads, the Ramones and other influential figures of the mid-1970s New York City scene. He’s currently at work on a biography of the Velvet Underground’s Lou Reed called “Lou: A New York Life.” Hermes, now 55 and based in New York City, said he feels like he came to WHRW with “a slightly broader- than-average musical knowledge — but it was a drop in the bucket compared to what I had at my fingertips in the radio station’s music library.

“I took it upon myself to educate myself about the history of recorded music, so far as it was represented there. I methodically went through the jazz section from A to Z, the 20th century classical collection from A to Z, the folk collection from A to Z, the rock collection, et cetera.” He recalled his style on-air as “pretty eclectic,” blending together genres based on mood or main instrument, like segueing from a piano song by Joni Mitchell to a piano song by Thelonious Monk. He served a stint as WHRW’s pop music director, and he described the station’s overall culture at that time as “chill.” The most important lesson he learned from his time at WHRW is how powerfully music com-

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**Longtime WHRW DJ Ferdinand Montalvo at the controls.**

ANDREW THAYER / STAFF PHOTO



**Jason Isaac served as WHRW's general manager from 1996 to '97, and used the skills he learned there to make a career in radio.**

PROVIDED PHOTO



PROVIDED BY NOA ESHKAR

**Ron Drumm became WHRW's music librarian in 1971, and he has held that volunteer role ever since.**

PROVIDED BY NOA ESHKAR



## Radio

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municates with people.

“I always knew my own love of music and how it touched me, but doing radio — even though for the most part you were sitting in an empty room by yourself with a microphone and a bunch of machines — people would call you up and say, ‘I loved that song!’” he said. “You would get into conversations and you’d connect with people, or you’d see people after your show and they’d say, ‘Oh, I heard you this morning!’ or ‘I heard you last night — it was totally great!’ ...

“In a way, what I wound up doing for a living was just trying to figure out what I did at WHRW in print. I’ve been working that angle ever since.”

## The 1990s

Like many students before him, Jason Isaac first felt the pull of WHRW’s gravity when he heard just how inclusive — or random — its DJs were allowed to be. While visiting BU for his freshman orientation in the summer of 1993, he sneaked away from his parents for a bit and sat on a staircase in the union near the old campus pub (since closed). From upstairs, he heard The Beatles’ “Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band” followed by Metallica’s “... And Justice for All.”

“WHRW was my first exposure to all the music I love now and perform — I’m a drummer playing almost every weekend — and I can’t imagine what my musical life would be like if I had not found WHRW,” he said. “That’s how I first got into jazz and funk, world music and the blues and Afrobeat.”

Throughout college, he worked his way up from DJ to jazz director to general manager, which he did during his senior year in 1996-97. He didn’t necessarily plan for a career in radio, but after leaving BU, he worked for one summer at WSKG and later took a job at a New Orleans station. Since 2002, Isaac has worked at WNYC, which at 1 million listeners each week is the largest public radio station in the U.S. As a senior broadcast engineer, he performs a variety of tasks such as recording, editing, mixing programs during live broadcasts and working as a master control operator.

During Isaac’s senior year at BU, one incoming freshman made a particularly strong impression: Paul J. Battaglia, who Isaac recalls as a “funny and quick” guy who looked a little nerdy in his wardrobe of blue shirts and khaki pants. As an apprentice, he seemed a little quiet at first.

“For the first few weeks, he laid back and observed what we were doing,” Isaac said. “As time went on, he started to get into the mix and goof around with us. It became obvious that he was smart as a whip. You couldn’t get anything past him. He always had the perfect line to crack the whole room up.”

Battaglia, known as a whiz with numbers, became WHRW’s general manager from 1998 to 2000, and although Isaac had graduated by then, “the consensus of everyone who was there was that he was very welcoming and wanted everyone to be a part of what was going on. He was a great manager — everyone loved him.”

After BU, Battaglia parlayed an internship with Marsh & McLennan Companies in New York City into a full-time job as a risk consultant. He was at his desk on the 100th floor of Tower 1 when terrorists flew jets into the World Trade Center on Sept. 11, 2001. For days afterward, students hosted vigils on air at WHRW but within a few weeks, the truth became painfully clear and his family held a funeral service.

Students honored Battaglia's memory by naming WHRW's new basement studios after him, and a picture of him still watches over everything in CR-1. The EXCELSior Award for Student Leadership, which Battaglia received while at BU, was renamed the Paul J. Battaglia Student Leadership Award. Also, a scholarship was established in Battaglia's name, with students raising money every spring with an onair marathon.

WHRW's motto was appended to "Peace, Love, Moe and Paul." "His influence lives on," Isaac said of Battaglia. "During the marathon, it's overt — the rest of the time, it's more subtle. He definitely was down with the spirit of Moe and the spirit of freeformat radio." Apart from attending events surrounding WHRW's 40th anniversary in 2006, Isaac considered his time at the station to be firmly in the past — until Walikis' funeral brought him back to campus in 2012. Ryan Naru, then WHRW's general manager, asked him to fill an open slot on the air later that night, and then — because he actually knew Battaglia — got him involved in the spring marathon.

Since then, the 40-yearold Brooklyn resident has made regular visits to Binghamton and helped students interested in radio careers to make connections in the industry.

"I love being involved and being able to mentor some of these kids in subtle ways," he said. "It's great to be the cool radio uncle to them, after doing everything I've done in this industry and go back to my roots —to live vicariously through them in that place where they're just starting out and exploring the creative expression that you can do there."

## **The 2000s**

From 10 p.m. to 6 a.m. daily, FCC rules and WHRW guidelines align for a "safe harbor" period when most children are presumed to be asleep. While cursing is never allowed, that eight-hour overnight stretch is a time when on-air content can get a little more ribald and rowdy. The show that takes best advantage of these extra freedoms is the Mad Trivia Party, which airs at 10 p.m. Tuesdays. A staple of the WHRW schedule since Mitch Berkley launched it in 1979, the call-in quiz show has been passed down from host to host in the intervening years.

Under current host Chris Played By Charles Berman, who has been at the helm since 2008, the Mad Trivia Party typically has a minimum panel of three — Berman himself and two other DJs, Twitch the Intern (John Inman) and Doc Sonic (Dan Davis) — although others sometimes show up and join in.

The show has a few loose rules, but Mad Trivia Party is mainly a framework for panelists and callers to riff off of each other and have fun.

"Who's on the show and who calls in really determine the tone of it," said Berman, a 31-year-old Binghamton resident. "We don't screen the calls at all; you could have the craziest person in town who would ramble entertainingly and we could make jokes about it."

Unlike many DJs, the Long Island native felt an attraction to WHRW not for the music but because of his love of old-time radio dramas, panel shows and comedies. As the head of the station's radio theater department, he has written, produced and starred in a number of scripted shows.

As an actor, he's appeared in productions at Cider Mill Playhouse and with Darkhorse Dramatists, and he also performs with local vaudeville collective Peaches and Crime.

"A lot of my friends are people I've met through the radio station, and I've brought friends into the radio station because they think it's something cool that I do," he said.

"WHRW is a place where you can hang out as long as you want, you can help people out with their shows, there's a shared activity where there's always something to do, but it leaves a lot of space in between for socializing."

## **The 2010s**

While preparing to run for general manager last spring, James Scott — then WHRW's business manager — realized he could be in charge of the station during the auspicious golden anniversary. He found that idea both amazing and daunting, perhaps even more so when he won the majority of votes from station members and gained the mantle of leadership. "Just to be able to represent everyone for the past 50 years is humbling," the Rockville Center native said. "When you think about 50 years — the Super Bowl is 50 years old — that's a long time. That's history, to look back on all the people who must have been part of WHRW from the time it started into the real organization we are now."

Scott and WHRW's executive board — which includes department heads for different musical genres as well as a secretary, a program director and other positions — control a \$40,000 budget, funded through activities fees and administered by BU's independently run Student Association. That number reflects a recent \$6,000-a-year bump for the station, which is still chartered as the Harpur Radio Workshop. For onetime expenditures, WHRW can apply for funds to the Binghamton University Foundation.

Now in his senior year, Scott balances his work at WHRW with classwork for his triple major in finance, economics and philosophy.

His own weekly radio show tends to reflect his personal taste in jazz and funk, but he appreciates how each DJ brings his or her own favorites to the table.

"That's the single greatest thing about the station — all of the diversity that we have, whether it be music taste, age, majors, everything," he said. "Everyone comes together and has this commonality. It wouldn't really be a college or free-format station without that kind of mix."

Chronicling five decades of WHRW's existence could never be an easy task. From the music and the culture to the thousands of people who have been DJs or served other roles at the station, the sheer enormity of stuff is nothing short of overwhelming.

## **Preserving the history**

Noa Eshkar, who hosts a WHRW show called "Across the Universe" (named, of course, after the Beatles song), has been collecting bits of the station's history almost from the moment she first found the place in the summer of 1995. As an international student from Israel, where the government strictly controlled all broadcasting, she'd learned about popular music through an offshore station called Voice of Peace. The idea of putting free-form radio into the hands of college students seemed like a revelation: "I said, 'Wow, I want to do that!' I really wanted to get involved, so I stayed there for hours when I saw Ron. He was wearing his red hat and he looked to me like Santa Claus!"

That's how Drumm became one of the first people she met from WHRW, and they struck up a friendship based on their mutual love for music.

In time, her relationship with Drumm blossomed into love, and they got married a few years later. The apartment that the couple now shares in downtown Binghamton is packed with CDs, albums, art projects and other signs of creative chaos.

A corner of space is devoted to shelves stacked with photos, campus newspapers, program guides, transcripts, tapes and other WHRW memorabilia. Eshkar, 47, has a plan for how she'd like to use it all, if only she can get all of it digitized and cataloged. "I was thinking a lot about how I would put it together, and then I started writing ideas for scripts and developing it," she said. "Each year has a story and each decade has a story, so I'm making it into a movie/computer game." She wants to call it "Blossoming of Buds," and she's inspired by the massive open online courses from somewhere like Khan Academy, which promote learning through free access to teachers and materials.

That definitely sounds like the spirit of Moe brought forward to the 21st century.

### **College radio today**

When WHRW went on the air in 1966, the options for hearing music were obviously much more limited than today.

Thanks to the Internet revolution, there are thousands — if not millions — of different ways to find music, from Spotify, Pandora and streaming radio apps to Bandcamp, podcasts and social media. Where does that leave an old-school radio station? Are students still listening?

Over the past decade, cash-strapped colleges have sold off frequencies to other non-commercial broadcasters, forcing their stations to go online or die. Other stations stress the curation aspect of what DJs do — music chosen by humans, for humans — or seek listeners outside of their geographic areas to boost relevancy.

CMJ, which publishes weekly charts of noncommercial and college radio airplay, connects about 450 stations throughout North America (including WHRW) with the resources and industry contacts so college DJs can get music outside of the usual corporate hype machine. "What college radio can do, better than any other radio format and even online stations and online streaming, is that it has the ability to be completely free-form," said David DeKeyser, the general manager of CMJ's College Radio Network.

"The idea of having free-form radio that isn't beholden to a playlist or to listeners is incredibly valuable to people starting in the industry and to the DJs and staff members at the stations, who are mostly students. I also think it's really cool for listeners, whether they're in that area or on any sort of streaming service."

DeKeyser, now 28, spent his undergraduate years at Boston College's WZBC, a 1,000-watt station that prides itself on playing music you won't hear anywhere else. While most college stations have a free format in theory, DeKeyser pointed out that student or faculty management often places internal restrictions on what is broadcast. One station could choose to focus on classical or jazz music, while another prefers news and public affairs programming.

"What college radio does and will always do is to provide a starting place for people and their musical journeys," DeKeyser said. "They'll look at music as something beyond

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**A DJ auditions music for his show in WHRW's original music library.**

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**WHRW DJ Noa Eshkar looks at a logo from an old radio station T-shirt at her Binghamton apartment. She has been collecting historical items from WHRW in the hopes of making a film.**

CHRIS KOCHER / STAFF PHOTO

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just a hobby.”

## 50 years and beyond

The observance of WHRW's golden anniversary earlier this month may have been muted, but plans are in the works for a larger celebration this fall, coinciding with BU's Homecoming Weekend from Sept. 23 to 25. Current station management hopes that as many WHRW alumni can attend a formal dinner or a separate informal mixer. One cool idea would let former DJs back on the air (under the guiding hand of current ones) to relive a bit of the past.

Hermes sees and keeps in touch with many former WHRW colleagues during his musical travels through New York City — so better than old memories, he also has new ones connected to the station almost every week.

“It’s fantastic that the station is still around to celebrate this anniversary, at a time when radio would seem to be less important with the rise of the Internet — but WHRW is always more than just a radio station,” he said. “There’s always this community of people — a think tank hot-pot of people brewing up interesting ideas and swapping them.”

Drumm, who hopes to continue cataloging WHRW's music library for many years to come, thinks that his love for music and finding likeminded souls have kept him young: “I have a circle of friends, both close friends and occasional friends, that’s beyond compare. I wouldn’t trade these people for anyone else in the world, and I’m really happy that the station in one way or another made it possible for our paths to cross.”

*Follow Chris Kocher on Twitter @RealChris-Kocher*