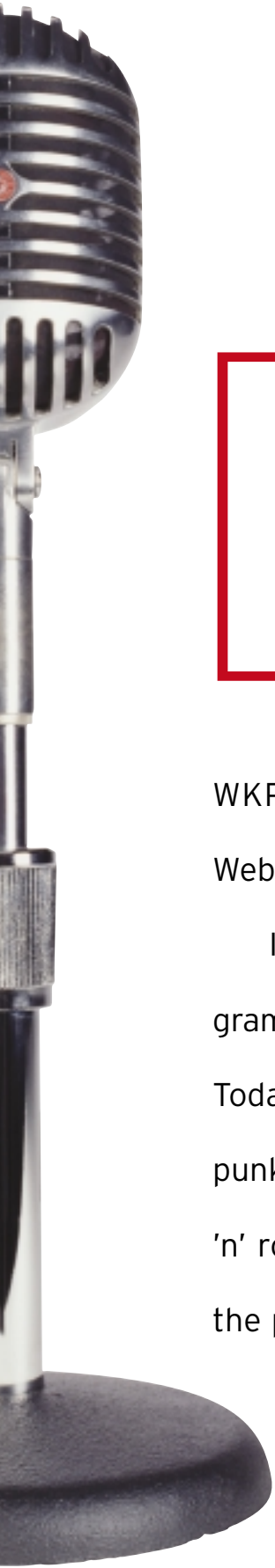


Radio

Fifty years ago, on the evening of Dec. 6, 1953, in a classroom-turned-studio in 304 Sparks Building, sophomore Sandy Greenspun opened the mic and said, "Good evening and welcome to WDFM." With that, the Pennsylvania State College's first student radio station was officially launched.

In the five decades that would follow, the station would change its name to WPSU (in 1984); move from the cramped studio in Sparks to the James Building on Burrowes Street downtown (in 1991); and, in 1995, split into two stations: a public radio station (WPSU) and an all-new student station called





Days

WKPS. Today WKPS, known as “The Lion,” broadcasts—and Webcasts—from brand-new, glassed-in studios in the HUB.

In its earliest days, WDFM aired classical music, lecture programs, and radio dramas like *The Adventures of Ludlow and Myrtle*. Today, WKPS carries everything from news and sports to rap and punk, including a call-in show “about relationships, sex, porn, rock ‘n’ roll, and whatever else we can dig up” dubbed *Booty Call*. In the pages that follow, a few of the people who have been a part of student radio from past to present tell their stories.

As told to Laura Wexler '93 Lib

Sandy Greenspun Thomas '56 Lib

Years at WDFM: 1953-56

Jobs held: Music librarian,
board operator trainer

Currently: Retired producer/director
with Penn State public broadcasting
(WPSU-FM and WPSX-TV)

I don't really know how we ended up with the call letters WDFM. We said it stood for "We Dig Fine Music" or "We'd Die for Mackey." We worshipped our adviser, David R. Mackey. When he did radio dramas, his voice would really give you chills.

When the station started, we wanted it to be an AM station, but **William Ulerich '31 Lib**, who owned the only AM station in town, WMAJ, wanted no competition. So that's why the college made the station FM. In those days, no students had FM radios—there weren't AM/FM radios yet. So, by making the station an FM station, the college guaranteed that no students would hear it. At the end of my freshman year, I went home for the summer and worked like a dog to buy an FM radio—it cost about \$50, which was a lot of money.

We had lots of great programs. The graduate student who helped supervise the station put together Greek and Shakespeare plays. Then there was *The Adventures of Ludlow and Myrtle*, a comedy about two Penn State student characters who got into all kinds of mischief. I produced *Music of the People*, which featured Professor **Philip Shelley '29 Lib** introducing German folk music.

The fact that I was allowed to broadcast on the air was unusual. In those days, you wouldn't hear women on commercial stations or national stations. But I soon discovered that my first love was the recording and editing process. In those days we didn't have cassettes or digital tapes—we had great big reel-to-reels. I loved it. It was the most rewarding, energizing, confidence-building experience. I did what I had to do in my courses, but it was the radio stuff I lived for.

Bob Zimmerman '58 Com

Years at WDFM: 1954-58

Jobs held: Announcer, program director
Currently: Retired broadcast owner and
operator; part-time teacher in the College
of Communications; member of the board
of advisers for WKPS

I did a request show, which turned into a rock 'n' roll show, because in 1958, what did everyone want to hear? I was the first at the station to play rock 'n' roll. Dr. Nelson [Harold Nelson, the adviser] called me and gave me hell for playing "Hound Dog." I said, "Well, someone requested it." Of course, I'd stacked the requests, had my friends call in.

I was a 24-7 guy. I was at the station every day, at every hour you could think of. I just loved it and lived it. We considered ourselves very professional. You had to go through training before you could get on the air. The adviser assigned to the station constantly called us in and critiqued us. If it hadn't have been for DFM, I wouldn't have gotten my job at a radio station after graduation.



Luanne Russell '63 Com

Years at station: 1961-65

Jobs held: News reporter, host/producer, acting news director

Currently: Traffic manager, WTAE-TV, Pittsburgh

I did a show called *Marquee Memories* where I played a Broadway show and introduced the cast and told the story in between the cuts of the music. As acting news director, I got to go to a news conference with Martin Luther King Jr. before his speech in Rec Hall [on January 21, 1965]. I was one of the few reporters who got in to talk with him while he ate his supper. Mostly we listened to him. It was a memorable moment. Here was this extremely exhausted gentleman who was taking time out to talk with reporters while he ate his supper.

Dick Harris '64 Eng

Years at WDFM: 1960-64

Job held: Technical director

Currently: Utilities system engineer for Penn State Physical Plant

I was standing in the studio at 304 Sparks the afternoon that the news of the assassination of President Kennedy came across the teletype machine. The machine had an alarm bell that went off for big events. This was a 10-bell message.

Steve Warren '64 Com

Years at station: 1961-64

Jobs held: Announcer, host, program director

Currently: Freelance writer and actor in Atlanta

When I was a freshman, there were open auditions for WDFM. I spoke in a total monotone and they said, "This guy has no future in radio." Yet I felt like this was where I belonged. Even though I wasn't selected, I started hanging around. I wound up as



Sandy Greenspun Thomas '56 Lib (opposite page) was one of the few female voices heard on radio in the mid-'50s. Stewart White '57 Lib (back left in above photo), WDFM sports editor, and program director Jim Barkley '58 Bus (at right), hosted an evening news and sports broadcast.

a broadcasting major.

I played rock 'n' roll and fought with a lot of the faculty about it. The station was very conservative—the rock 'n' roll thing scared them. I would sneak on something with a beat during an easy listening or jazz show and hear about it later. The programming was designed not to ruffle the feathers of Dr. Harold Nelson. We finally negotiated that I could play rock 'n' roll Saturday night, 9:00 to midnight.

I used the air name "Thinhead," so it was *The Offbeat Show Starring Thinhead*. I would do a singing opening each week. I would write new lyrics to some popular song and just sing it over the record, drowning out the original lyrics or on an instrumental version. I instituted "Offbeat Christmas" on the second Saturday in July. It was the only chance to play Christmas music because the station was off the air during the holidays.

One of the themes of the show was "It's Saturday night. If you're listening, you're a loser." Of course Thinhead was the biggest loser of all—he was stuck in a radio booth.

Stu Chamberlain '65 Com

Years at station: 1961-65

Job held: Board operator

Currently: Writer at ABC News Radio, New York City

One evening we looked out the window and saw the Blue Band was setting up on the Mall to do a concert. We said, "Let's broadcast it." The only way to do it was to run a microphone outside the window, scramble along the ledge, and trundle it down to the ground. Who knew that we risked our life to bring you the Blue Band?

I always thought the student station was much more classy than WMAJ, though I was also on the air at WMAJ. WDFM was on FM and no one could hear them. It was a very cool club. We would put on a contest at night on DFM, telling listeners to call in and get a free record. It would be 45 minutes before someone called.

Chris Wheeler '67 Com

Years at WDFM: 1965-67

Jobs held: Sports announcer, sports director

Currently: Broadcaster for the Philadelphia Phillies

I can remember covering the games at old Beaver Field when the baseball games were played there. We took a microphone and a mixer

and used alligator clips to plug into a phone jack and somehow got onto the air. One of my fellow students was the official scorer—he'd put his hand up for a hit and down for an error, and I'd report it on the air.

Nobody listened to us announcing the games. I know that because I remember asking for coffee on the air one cold day and none ever arrived.

John Gingrich '69 Com

Years at WDFM: 1967-71

Jobs held: Classical music director, program director

Currently: Concert artist agent, New York City

I had an on-air name, Jonathan Rich, which I used for my popular music show, which was on Friday nights, midnight to 4:00 a.m. Dr. Nelson always did me a favor and went to bed before midnight on Fridays.

The Dells' "Wear it on Your Face" was our theme song and we kicked it on at 12:05. I "showed" slides of my trip to Israel on the air. We did card tricks. We feigned showing a pornographic movie in the studio. We had the first male striptease on radio—a fellow came in and got down to his undies. I will leave him nameless because he went on to have a big career. We sat up and waited for the Great Pumpkin on the Old Main lawn. We were naughty, but clean.

Eileen Carroll Stewart '78 Lib

Years involved: 1976-78

Job held: On-air announcer

Currently: Human resources manager, the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania

In the afternoons the station played classical music. None of the students working there knew anything about classical





music, and they used to massacre the composers' names. But the academic community did know about classical music, and we'd get complaints.

I used to do a morning show on Thursdays from 6:00 to 10:00 a.m. We could play whatever we wanted. It was just like playing our favorite albums at home—Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon*, Stevie Wonder's *Songs in the Key of Life*, a lot of classic rock—and doing it for the Penn State community. We were very into playing the “deep cuts” on an album—not the popular songs.

I felt like a bit of a local celebrity. I remember going to Weis Market one day and paying with a check and the girl saying, “You're Eileen Carroll?”

Lisa Posvar Rossi '82 Com

Years at station: 1979–82

Jobs held: Music director, station manager

Currently: Associate director of the news bureau, University of Pittsburgh Medical Center

There was classical music in the morning and a show called *Morning Glory*. There was a comedy show, a soul show—something for everybody.

I remember one fellow, **Dan Mushalko '81 Lib**, got locked out of the studio. He had a show and had to get in, so he climbed out the newsroom window and shimmied across the ledge and jumped in the window of the studio. His wedding ring got caught on the window latch and tore off part of his finger. That's how committed we were.

When the movement started on campus to make the station more of a public radio station, we felt threatened by it. As students we felt like, “You're not going to mess with our radio station.” I took it on as

my mission to keep the administration from pursuing that. I remember setting up meetings at which we said we wanted to maintain the independence. We did end up stalling the conversion to a public radio station, for a little while at least.

Jeff Ballou '90 Com

Years at station: 1987–90

Jobs held: Reporter, disc jockey, talk show host, student president

Currently: Planning editor at WTTG-TV in Washington, D.C.

I was the first African-American to hold the position of WPSU student president. Our news department covered elections and student protests. We were very focused on dealing with issues of the day on campus. I was host of *Perspectives*, a weekly minority public affairs talk show. My position gave me a chance to interact with newsmakers like Desmond Tutu and George Carlin.

The station served as a cultural soothing service and as something that helped retention. A cultural presence on campus.

Alyce Wilson '92 Com, '96 MFA Lib

Years at WPSU: 1988–92

Jobs held: News reporter; writer, producer

Currently: Freelance writer/editor in Philadelphia area

I became a writer on the *Rubber Chicken Comedy Closet*, a comedy show that aired late Sunday

Since WDFM hit the airwaves in 1953, student radio stations at other Penn State campuses have started up, gone off the air, and started up again. Most—such as those at Hazleton, Mont Alto, and Beaver—don't hold FCC licenses. So they "broadcast" via the Web, the campus TV station, or through a carrier-current system in which the station's signal is introduced into the electrical system of a residence or dining hall. The electrical system works as the antenna, and radios in and near the building can pick up the signal. (East Halls and West Halls radio at University Park work the same way.)

WPSH at Penn State Harrisburg began as a carrier-current station. But after the school instituted a student activities fee a few years ago, one of the first things bought was an FM radiating cable, which uses an actual antenna to broadcast WPSH's signal throughout campus. At Penn State McKeesport, the student-run station WMKP (formerly WPSM) occupies a central position in the campus' Student Community Center.

At Penn State Wilkes-Barre, student station WHAY started out in the late '60s or early '70s as a carrier-current station. When the school instituted a two-year program in mass communications/radio performance and production, faculty member Ralph Carmody obtained an FCC license and the station broadcast on- and off-campus under the call letters WPSU. When the degree program folded, the station's FCC license lapsed (after which the call letters WPSU were snatched up by University Park); today the station broadcasts in the student center only.

Penn State Erie, The Behrend College, had a carrier-current system until 1989, when Burbach Broadcasting donated the FCC license for AM 1450 to the school. That became the campus student radio station. In 1994 the station evolved into a professional station with some student staffers, WP\$E AM 1450, "Your Money Station." The 1,000-watt station, located in the Student Union Building, broadcasts business programming, CBS sports, and Penn State football throughout Erie County. —LW

nights. We did a thing called the "primal scream" in which we would tell people a few words or a phrase to scream out their windows. Sometimes you thought you heard somebody actually doing it.

Dave Dzikowski '01 MA Lib

Years at WPSU: 1986-97

Job held: Full-time, salaried station manager

Currently: Graduate student in speech communication

In '86, WPSU became an auxiliary member of NPR. I was hired as part of the agreement that the station would have a paid staff member. When I arrived, the studio walls were painted battleship gray and black—it was the tail end of the punk rock period. Pizza boxes had accumulated into a stack eight feet tall. The carpet had become so deteriorated that the students had pulled it up and left the red felt backing down—because that looked better. We painted the walls, got rid of the pizza boxes and the carpet, and did what we could to make the studio look better.

There have been very few stations that are a combination of NPR and student programming. The belief here was that there was enough in common to make it beneficial. What emerged, however, is that there is a disadvantage to a student organization trying to serve a 14-county area [as WPSU now does]. It's harder for students to appreciate what a 53-year-old mechanic in DuBois would find valuable programming. There's an advantage for student broadcasters to have a small, highly concentrated listening area.

It seemed sensible at some point to separate the two. So there was a commitment made to finding a frequency for a new student station, WKPS.

Ed Benks '97 Com

Years involved with WKPS: 1995-97

Job held: Operations director

Currently: General sales manager, Regent Communications, Fort Collins, Colo.

WKPS went on the air in October 1995 at 90.7 FM. When we started, the school gave us \$7,000 to oper-



Student DJs Dan Root (middle) and Anthony Miccio (right) host a show called “Indie 500,” featuring music from independent labels. At left is station adviser Chris Buchignani.

ate for the year. That barely paid our licensing fees—we really couldn’t survive. For **Jeff Ecker ’97 Com** [general manager] and me, the big project was to find money. We got hold of other Big Ten college radio budgets, took the info to the Student Organizations Budget Committee, and asked for \$35,000 as an annual budget. That included money to send our sportscasters to away games, equipment upgrades, going to conventions to learn about college radio. We also proposed \$17,000 for a new production studio.

We presented our \$52,000 proposal to the SOBC and went back to the station to wait. We sat there for hours. Finally we get the phone call, and Jeff picks it up. He says, “Thank you” and hangs up. He looks at me and says, “We got it all!” We ran around the station yelling. We had pre-emptively bought champagne and cigars, and we went back and drank and smoked on the porch of our house. That was by far my greatest memory of Penn State.

Mike Walsh '03 Com

Years involved with WKPS: 1998-2003

Jobs held: Vice president, treasurer, underwriting salesman, general manager

One of the things I’m most proud of is our broadcast on Sept. 11, 2001. I was staff head for a show called *State Your Face* and my shift started at 3:00 that afternoon. A friend of mine, **John Raynar '03 Com**, was in New York City for an internship, living one block from the World Trade Center. While I’m on the air, he calls me, and I put him and his roommate on the

air. His roommate is telling me how he escaped the World Trade Center, where he was working. Here we are, a 100-watt station. We were the only media outlet in State College who had someone on the scene that day. That was the high point of our professionalism.

Chris Buchignani

Years at WKPS: 1999-present

Jobs held: Sports staff, vice president

Currently: Full-time paid staff adviser to WKPS

Pretty much everything about WKPS—from getting the license to getting the hardware—was done through the hard work and ingenuity of students. With the move to the HUB, we now boast a technical facility that’s on par with any commercial station in State College.

It’s been a long-term goal to move to the HUB, and the chips fell into place for us this year. This is really an exciting time for the station. ▀

Laura Wexler is the author of Fire in a Canebrake: The Last Mass Lynching in America, to be issued in paperback by Scribner in January.

Have a WDEM, WPSU, or WKPS story to share? Write to us at pennstater@psu.edu.

WDEM, WPSU, and WKPS alumni will have a reunion at University Park March 19–21, 2004. Contact Kristen Fortney at klk104@psu.edu for information.