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## WHUR-FM: A New Black Voice

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By Patricia A. Spaulding



"96.3, Washington, D. C.," has become one of the most popular spots on the FM radio dial in the Washington Metropolitan area since WHUR-FM went on the air about two years ago. It is the spot that promises a "360 degree total Black experience in sound," a special sound that has become the trademark of the Howard University radio station.

WHUR is a new and different venture in radio broadcasting that combines entertainment with education. Although in operation only since December 10, 1971, WHUR has now become a household word to many radio listeners in the Metropolitan area. The station's popularity has sky-rocketed to success in its first year of service, with fan mail coming in from as far south as Richmond, Virginia, and as far north as New Jersey. Its signals have been picked up far beyond the limits of its frequency level which is equivalent to 50,000 kilowatts.

While no official survey has been taken, the station is most popular with listeners in the age group between 20 and 49, according to John Paul Simpkins, acting general manager since April, 1973.

College students on summer intern programs with government agencies in Washington, D. C., seem to be the fastest group to become devout listeners of the station. As one student from Northwestern University (Illinois) assigned to Capitol Hill put it, "It's the best thing that D. C. has to offer."

Even some inmates at Lorton Reformatory, the D. C. correctional complex in Virginia, have found comfort by listening to the station's contemporary music selections. Their feelings were perhaps echoed in a letter one inmate wrote to the station a few months ago, in which he described how listening to the station made prison life bearable for him. "I wish every Black prisoner had a WHUR to help him keep up with what's going on in the world outside," the inmate wrote.

Just what accounts for the phenomenal success of a university radio station? Perhaps it is just that "Total Black Experience" and its commitment to serve the community that is so appealing. WHUR is not just a disc-spinning rhythm and blues, Black radio station. Nor, is it merely a soft-sounding public information FM station. It combines music—all kinds of Black music, from field songs to blues, jazz, rock n' roll, Latin, African and Caribbean music—with Black history and background information on Black recording artists.

WHUR's news and information programs are tailored for the Black community, with news taking the "Pan-African approach." Its special information programming on subjects such as consumer problems, health care and children's stories are designed to inform, educate and entertain the audience.

Regardless of the music or of the time of day, the WHUR sound is always smooth and the mood is always easy. It may be the lonely and blue sound of Bessie Smith or Billie Holiday, or the jazzy sound of Duke Ellington, Count Basie or John Luciene, or the newer and contrasting sound of popular artists like Aretha Franklin, Roberta Flack, Marvin Gaye or Bill Withers.

Jim Watkins, the station's chief engineer, attributes the smooth and easy sound of WHUR partly to the quality of the stereo equipment that was installed several months ago.

"The University could have settled for just a radio station," he said, "but instead it went the Cadillac route and the result is just one fantastic sound. The announcers have more versatility because with this quality of equipment they can try new things."

Like the music selections, the station's news program emphasizes events affecting Blacks in the United States, in Africa and in the Caribbean and WHUR takes time to make this clear to its listeners. For example, Robert Taylor, news director, reads a short message daily in which he points out WHUR's commitment to concentrate on four fundamental areas of concern to Black people in its news coverage: racial segrega-

tion, cultural degradation, economic exploitation, and political subjugation.

Although most people seem to agree with the station's approach to news, Taylor says he is sometimes asked if the emphasis on Black news is not limiting. "To one extent," he says, "it is a limiting approach, because everything that happens in the world today seems to affect us all. But to the other extent, I feel that we are justified in our approach, because we provide a balance to the news on white-owned stations and because we provide to the Black community information and news that Blacks could not get anywhere else. This is our primary objective."

WHUR has provided live and complete coverage of special Congressional Hearings conducted by the Congressional Black Caucus in Washington—hearings that were not carried live by other stations. Recently, the station carried significant speeches made at the Caucus's annual fund-raising dinner. It sent reporters to such events as the "Black Expo" in Chicago, and the mayoral election in Atlanta which gave that city its first Black mayor.

On a local scale, the station airs important cultural, educational and informative programs presented at Howard University and elsewhere in the Washington area. In addition, it broadcasts live most campus sports events.

The station's special information programming provides listeners with such diverse topics as: book reviews, discussions on key subjects of concern to the Black community, a program on health care moderated by guest physicians, a program on Spanish music, news and information about the Spanish-speaking communities, and a program that combines news, public affairs and music of the Caribbean.

A new Black voice on the airwaves, WHUR transmitted its first broadcast from a temporary studio in a trailer parked outside the structure that now houses its modern broadcasting facilities. The initial FM equipment, including the transmitter, was a gift to the University from the Post-Newsweek Company.

The station has had its growing pains, too. Phil Watson, the first general manager, left in April, 1973. Likewise, some of the early announcers who helped in the development of the station have moved on to other jobs.

Charlene Watts, who left the station in November, 1973, feels WHUR is a "model" station that is setting new trends in radio.

Spaulding: WHUR-FM: A New Black Voice  
At the same time, she says the station is going through changes.

"When the station first started, I think it was very, very Black," she said. "The programming was centered around things like 'how to eat to live' and 'Black law.' Now the station is changing; I don't know if it's because of personnel changes—there's been almost a 100 percent turnover—or if it's because things are settling down now that the novelty has worn off. But it does seem to be going a little more commercial. I mean, there is a marked difference in the number of commercials an announcer puts on now. I don't think that's bad though, because that's survival," she explained.

There is a reason why WHUR airs more commercials now than it did a year or so ago, according to Simpkins. He says more businesses are now willing to buy air time because the station is more settled in the advertising market.

"Buyers of advertising time had to wait and measure the audience of WHUR before they could buy any time," he said. "Although our rates are cheaper than most other radio stations, a buyer who is aiming his product at teenagers, for example, would not advertise on WHUR."

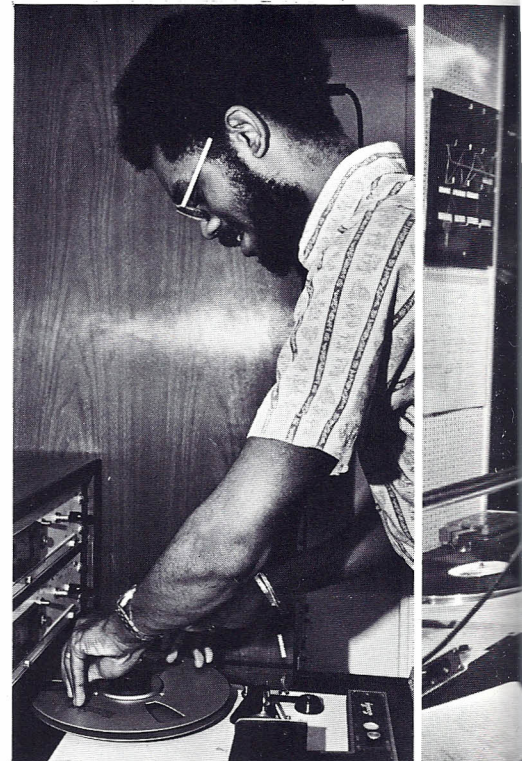
Although most commercial stations rely solely on revenues derived from commercials, with most stations advertising almost anything, WHUR does not belong in this category. Its advertising policy does not allow, for example, for the station to advertise dipping snuff, bleaching cream or businesses that are not reputable.

The station's advertising guidelines, as well as its overall policy, are set by the Board of Trustees of Howard University. The Board has appointed—on the recommendation of the President of the University—the WHUR Commission which governs the management and operation of the station.

Besides being a commercial station, one important function of WHUR—as dictated by the Board of Trustees—is to serve as a training laboratory for students majoring in radio broadcasting in the School of Communications.

Although all communications majors have access to the station's facilities, the station has a formal relationship with only the Department of Radio, whereby students in this department are granted access to the radio laboratory on weekdays from 8 a.m. until 12 p.m. However, no students are employed either as announcers or reporters while in training. They are given preference in hiring upon graduation. But the station does, from time to time, broadcast programs developed

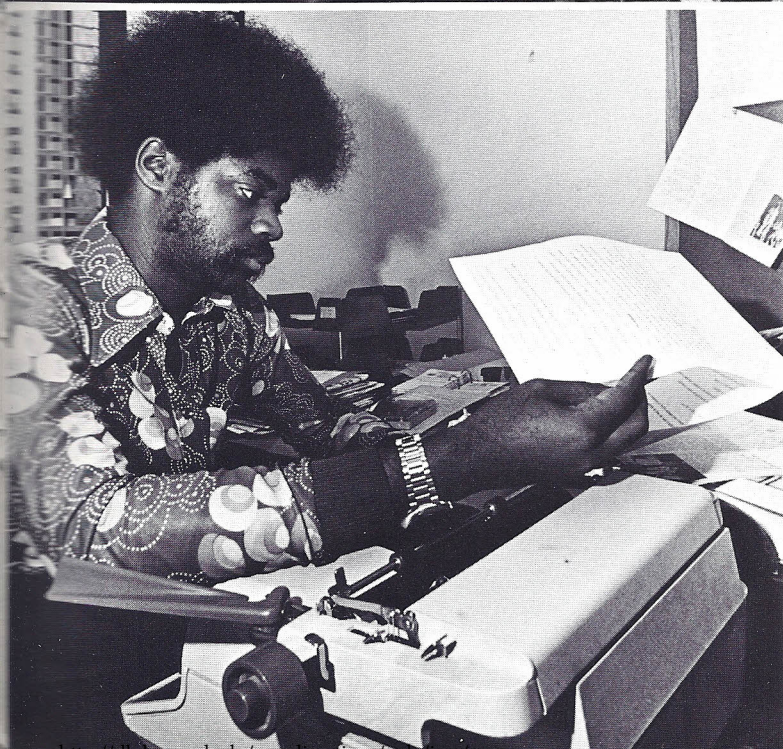
Jim Watkins, engineer



Charlene Watts,  
former announcer



**Bob Terry**, operations manager



**Robert Taylor**, news director

by students as part of their class assignments.

Bob Terry, operations manager and the station's veteran announcer, says WHUR provides an invaluable service to Howard graduates as a first work experience that is often difficult to obtain at other stations.

"The days are over," according to Terry, "when Black radio announcers have to go through the kind of stuff that I had to go through. It's great that our graduates can become announcers here, and after they have really learned the business, move on to other stations. They should infiltrate the radio industry. There's always more talent here to replace them."

Terry, who came to WHUR from WOL Radio, a Black oriented rhythm and blues AM station in Washington, feels WHUR has brought changes to the FM airwaves.

"WHUR has had a fantastic impact on the total radio industry," he said. "FM radio has traditionally been so staid and so highbrow and stuffed-shirted. But WHUR is changing that, especially in this area. D. C. listeners have never before had so much good jazz and other Black music on radio. Oh, they had some jazz, but never to the extent that they are having it now, because most of the stations that played jazz in this area were owned by whites and their emphasis was naturally on white jazz artists."

"The really fantastic thing is that Black jazz artists who visit the city now, find out about WHUR right away and they are just flipped out about it. One day Dizzie Gillespie just walked in playing his trumpet. That's how free he said he felt about the station. It was really something."

WHUR is making its impact on radio. It has provided a freshness to a business that needed new ideas. And it is indeed, as one observer and fond listener put it, "making a very healthy impression on the lives of those Black people that it touches." □