

It Was A Simple Idea - By WNCW's Celtic Winds Host Richard Beard

In the 1980s, when the economy was stable and the state coffers robust, the Legislature decided to appropriate extra money to each community college. The catch? Each branch was required to come up with a single, specific, job related curriculum that the state would fund. Rockingham Community College, in Eden, NC, for example, implemented a fine woodworking program. Haywood Community College, in Clyde, NC, developed a nationally recognized sawmill operation to complement its Forest Management program. ICC chose Broadcasting Technology. I am not sure how that decision was made, but the need for people in the field, particularly for behind the scenes production work, was apparent from discussions with employers. Instructors were hired, equipment purchased, and the groundwork was laid. The fuse, we discovered later, had been lit.

The immediate emphasis was on video production, where the jobs beckoned. A small campus radio station was put on line, and students began to sign up for classes.

Because of my interest in local history, I was coerced by Burr Beard, who had been tapped to head the Broadcasting Department, into co-hosting a weekly television show on the local public access channel titled "Rutherford Reflections." Many people assume we are related, but I didn't meet Burr until he moved to Rutherford County, NC from Pittsburgh, PA. These were half hour productions which we would shoot on the fly in one day, editing in a flurry of activity, and then send to the cable folks to air. Fortunately for us, local premier historian and man-of-many-hats, Larry Cole, was the resource we used to suggest topics, locales, and field most

any question I could come up with on almost any historical topic. We did spots on the famous moonshiner Amos Owens, on the proposed birth of Abraham Lincoln along Puzzle Creek, and the renowned Bechtler Gold Mine and minting operation which ushered in the first gold rush in America in the 1830s.

Then came the thunderclap from Raleigh, and an NPR signal was up for grabs. As you might imagine, this plum was highly sought after by almost every educational institution in Western North Carolina. I do not have all the details, but considering the fact that ICC already had an established Broadcast Technology program, a new technology building was underway, and most importantly, the fact that ICC President Dr. Ben Fountain was a consummate arm twister, ICC scored the coveted license. All of us were way beyond astounded. An NPR station? In Spindale, NC? For real?

Burr Beard was asked to assume the position of Station Manager, and he began the process of hiring staff, purchasing equipment, and negotiating the paperwork with the state and the Federal Communication Commission... no small undertaking. A tentative goal date for the initial broadcast was set for in the following year. After the initial sense of dumb luck began to wear off, we realized that the true work lay ahead. How do we get the word out? Where can we get the money to survive? Can we make it all work?

Any issues with a proposed format was placed on a back burner. It was decided that a series of public information forums be conducted in various venues to gauge public support and gain public input. Right from the start, WNCW became a collective enterprise. The challenge was to

embrace the varied communities scattered in what was loosely thought to be the potential broadcast range, in an attempt to somehow promote and enhance the region. Once the call letters were announced, various acronyms were tossed around, with the leading candidate “Western North Carolina’s Window,” but the unofficial in-house version postured “Western North Carolina Wadio.” While we hoped “real” radio professionals were going to be hired, it was obvious that a team of volunteers would have to be enlisted to flesh out regular programming. I had done radio work in college, years before, but this was going to be the *big time*. My audience would no longer be just hippies in dorm rooms.

A lot of pertinent information was gleaned, preferences noted, and a groundswell of support took shape in earnest. Remember - all this was done in the vacuum of a single thought: We are gearing up for an enterprise that *doesn't exist yet*. *Will it really happen? Will it be a success?*

It didn't take long for people to get enthused, and the overall vibe was very, very positive. *Make it good*, folks told us. Not much pressure! People in Western North Carolina were fiercely proud of the region, and wanted us to reflect that with our on-air presence, a good place to start, and one that has been on the WNCW radar ever since.

I have always thought part of the success of WNCW is how we convey the thought of a wonderful place to live, certainly for the beauty of the mountains, but most importantly for the deep cultural roots that have shaped us as a people, and continue to be the ultimate strength we all rely on.

The town meetings had the offshoot of curiosity in a proposed format. We all assumed that the bulk of the programming would be classical, since after all, it was to be a public radio station. Isn't that what you do - most of the time? Yes, back in that last century, it's what almost all NPR stations did across the board. Sure, you could throw in some local specialized programming on the weekends, but Bach and Offenbach would plow the headwinds with regularity. We would have to hammer out the details later. The people we talked to, however, had other ideas, and it became apparent that they wanted indigenous music, like bluegrass and old time music. They were receptive toward acoustic genres, including blues. We were pleased, but perplexed. How do you do that, in-house? There was no blueprint.

An odd thing happened one evening. A small brain trust had some informal meetings, some around my kitchen table, when Burr Beard threw out the idea of "Crossroads," the signature format, which would be the umbrella of free form, acoustic oriented music that has over the years come to define WNCW. Yes, we'd offer some classical at night, to appease those listeners, but during the day it was going to be wide open to anything that sounded good, with a heavy bent toward the regional musical identity, singer songwriters, and a few classic artists thrown in. *(psst... rock and roll, don't tell anybody, it is NPR, after all)*. As the idea sat hanging in the air, it became clear and even exciting: a very simple idea, music tied to the region, but rounded out with all the genres that didn't have a place on the daily radio dial. Maybe some jazz? Absolutely. Singer songwriters? You bet. Regional artists? Definitely.

I supposed the most surprising thing was that it was simple and straightforward, and by golly, it might just work! But on an *NPR* station? It had never been tried. Anywhere. And what if it flopped? Well, we'd just have to try something else. Gulp.

A list of potential specialty shows was concocted, which led to a general meeting of individuals interested in hosting programs. Playlists would not be mandatory. It was "anything you felt appropriate" that went on-air. There were some one hour shows and some two hour shows. There would be a series of training sessions on the equipment, with the main emphasis on the all - important control board, and some antique novelties like the Associated Press machine that continually spit out paper news updates and rang with alarm when something of import came across, just like in the movies. A single razor blade was supplied to slice the paper. You were not allowed to lose it - there wasn't enough money to replace it.

Back when I first did radio, all DJs were required to have an FCC license. By the time WNCW was coming on board, that requirement had been waived. At least nobody had to take a test to be a host. The only requirement: a willing spirit.

The fundraising. It had to be done. One of the best ideas anyone had was to go to Deep Gap to meet with Doc Watson and fill him in on what we were planning. Not only did Doc embrace the idea, he agreed to come do a benefit show, I think along with Jack Lawrence, in the ICC Gym, the only venue we had, since the Foundation was years away, and only in the planning stages. It was a sell-out. As Doc was leaving out the back door that night, people kept calling to him "Thanks for coming Doc! We appreciate you, Doc." Doc threw up one free hand, the other hanging

onto his companion, and hollered back to the crowd, “Y’all need to get this here thing going!” Doc was one of the foundations of the soon-to-be programming, and he exemplified the support we had from everyone in the area, and the ability of music to cut straight across socio-economic and ethnic lines.

Of the five full time staff members who were hired, none were more influential than Greg Hils, who assumed the responsibilities of Program Director. A man impervious to cold, he even wore shorts in the winter. Greg brought an encyclopedic knowledge of music, a razor sharp wit, and most importantly an immense excitement for the burgeoning enterprise. Gregarious, curly headed with a hefty smile always on his face, Greg was the spark plug that brought the station to life. He personally trained all the volunteers, reminding us that *‘you can do this’* and *‘we’re gonna make this work!’* His fingerprints are still evident in our playlists all these years later, defining the parameters that our sound would take. Greg eventually left for other career opportunities. He left behind an echo of commitment that remains with everyone who had the pleasure to work with him.

The broadcast deadline at times seemed light years away, but it arrived on October 13, 1989. Friday the 13th. WNCW DJ Bill Buchynski was fidgeting in the control room chair, shuffling papers and checking the cued LPs on the two new turntables with their marble understructures gleaming under the lights. CDs were just coming on the scene, and we had purchased one player, which had yet to be installed, and an immense reel-to-reel machine that looked like a WWII cipher apparatus. It sat directly behind Bill. There was an equally worn CART player. It was ensconced underneath a hand printed sign with the call letters and

frequency number. Looking back now, with some new equipment and some retreads, along with a sense that we could somehow pull it off, we were ready to be broadcast barnstormers, hanging on with our fingernails as we flew into some new uncharted musical territory.

A small crowd was wedged into the hallway between the control room and the exit door. There was a table full of the bright red bumper stickers with a clever logo designed by Billie Jordan - Greg Hils, throwing his head back in an immense laugh, cracked jokes with original *Saturday Night House Party* Host Steve Govus. Operations Director George Slater and *It Don't Mean a Thing* Host and champion cheerleader Charles Benedict, along with his wife, stood discussing the microwave relay perched atop the building directly over our heads. A cadre of well-wishers, along with college and local dignitaries, stood with their fingers crossed.

The weather was warm and sunny, but the atmosphere inside was a stifling nervousness, like a racehorse jostling in front of the starting gate. There was jubilation... tempered with jitters. The big experiment was about to become a reality.

Then U.S. Senator Terry Sanford's staff had notified us he intended to kick start the festivities with an appearance, and the air of restless anticipation settled in while the minutes clicked by until the magic 11:00 am zero hour approached. We received a phone call from the Senator Sanford's people telling us he had been waylaid, so all eyes were focused on Bill Buchynski as he nervously adjusted the controls on the board. The broadcast tower at Clingman's Peak near Mt. Mitchell in NC had been fired up a couple of times in trial runs.

Note: WNCW's First News Director, Peggy Fry, was actually the *first person* to go "live" on the air. She read regional news during Morning Edition. Bill Buchynski was the first DJ to play a song after her shift ended.

The last thing anyone wanted was a technical glitch to put another delay into motion. Right on cue, the power came up; Bill turned around one final time to look through the glass at the sea of well-wishers, his face like an astronaut waiting for the rocket to send him to the moon; and the red "ON AIR" light in the hall flashed. "Good morning!" Bill intoned into the mic, "And welcome to a brand new Public Radio station called WNCW!" A round of applause broke out in the hall. It was real. So far, so good.

My own initial broadcast on Sunday, the 15th, was far from memorable, and the two hours on the air seemed more like eight hours. I had envisioned a one-hour program, but Burr Beard and Greg Hils were adamant it needed to be two hours, probably just to fill up the air time. I found myself alone in an empty building with the control board flashing in front of me. *Ok, which button is the mic? Somebody might be out there. Listening. By accident. At least I'm only a volunteer. They can't fire me. I think.*

The program that followed mine was *New Acoustics*, hosted by Polk County, NC native Jay Lichty. Jay was a fellow musician and had been intrigued by the innovative construct of WNCW. He stood and looked over my shoulder.

“Do I need to remember anything?” he asked me, as I rose out of the chair after giving the station ID. “Yeah,” I said, “Be sure and turn off the mic.” Important Lesson #1 in the land of DJs.

As the weeks progressed, so did the momentum. The station began to take on an identity, the listenership to grow, and the crew became more comfortable with day to day operations. Attention was shifted toward the future once more, especially the all-important fund raisers, but that is another story entirely. With the assuredness of people on a mission, we were off and running, sometimes at full tilt, with a sense of camaraderie that comes when you somehow *know* you are on to something BIG. Of course, none of knew just exactly how large an impact WNCW would have on our region and even on public radio programming. As with important milestones, sometimes the 25 years, and a previous century, seem far away, and at other times, it seemed like it was just the other day that Greg Hils assured me I would *finally* master the control board. Incredibly, no one would have dreamed the impact computers would have on the future of broadcasting, since when we started they *weren't* any computers. I just wanted to push the right button.

The strength of WNCW continues to be the cultural vitality of our region, which has had a symbiotic relationship with the station - both benefiting from the other, and a simple belief that there is a place for quality, other-than-mainstream, music on the radio dial. We are blessed to be in a place where not only is there a steady stream of good musicians of all stripes, but people who recognize and encourage well played music, as they have for centuries. I firmly believe that the best days of WNCW are yet to come, because by now we have more than just listeners, we are part of

the fabric of everyday life in Western North Carolina. And that's a good place to be.