

Hofstra's 'Jazz Cafe' radio show host traded news for music

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"Jazz Cafe" host John Bohannon in the studios of WRHU/88.7 FM at Hofstra University in Uniondale on Apr. 28, 2014. Bohannon, a Wantagh resident, got his start in New York-area radio as a morning man at WBAB in Babylon. (Credit: Heather Walsh)

Videos



Behind the scenes of Hofstra's 'Jazz Cafe' radio show with John Bohannon

After reporting some of the biggest stories of the 20th century during his more than 40 years in radio broadcasting, there's one standout accomplishment that fills John Bohannon with the most pride: He never lost his composure on the air.

"When I was doing news, they were always trying to break me up," says Bohannon, who lives in Wantagh. "One time, they tried stealing my copy [of stories to broadcast]. They tried undressing me one day when I was at WPIX-FM."

On another occasion, his co-workers even brought a naked woman into the studio who sat on Bohannon's lap while he was doing his newscast. His delivery never faltered, he says, though he didn't tell his wife, Barbara, about the incident until several years later. They've been married for 50 years.

By the time he retired from the news game in 1991, he had spent years as an anchor at major New York AM radio stations, including WABC, WCBS and WNBC. And he brings that same sense of cool and professionalism to the softer side of radio with his latest gig as host of "Jazz Cafe." The program airs Mondays from 1 to 4 p.m. on Hofstra University's radio station WRHU/88.7-FM and features recordings of jazz legends like Stan Kenton and Count Basie. There also are live performances and studio interviews. Past guests have included Regis Philbin, "Hollywood Squares" host Peter Marshall and comic Pat Cooper. Vocalist Barbara Cook, he says, is the dream guest he hopes to book one day.

Bohannon began doing "Jazz Cafe" 10 years ago, when he was contacted by one of the managers of WRHU, which can be heard throughout Nassau County and parts of eastern Queens and western Suffolk. He loved the prospect of doing a show that indulged his passion for jazz, but he had two conditions -- he wanted total freedom and he wanted to play songs from his 2,000-plus CD collection.

"All I knew about him was that he was a legendary newsman, and I'd heard he was a class act and he was a gentleman," says Len Triola, 49, executive producer of "Jazz Cafe," who also lives in Wantagh. "The first time I met him, I said people were right about this guy. He's an Abe Lincoln kind of guy, a man of the people."

Airing live performances

The two have since become close friends, thanks to their mutual love of jazz. Triola and Bohannon also put their heads together and realized that having special guests and performers would be a great addition to the show. Those segments have been a hit with listeners and entertainers.

"It's a good way to promote yourself," says crooner Jerry Costanzo, 53, of Glen Cove, who has been a guest on "Jazz Cafe" four times. "He gives us the opportunity to let the audience know where we're playing."

Noted pianist Stan Wiest, 69, of Fort Salonga, also is delighted to appear on Bohannon's show. "What an incredible musical knowledge he has," says Wiest. "He has a gift for making his guests feel relaxed. He's the ultimate professional. He asks very pertinent questions, and he's always prepared."

Another thing Bohannon always has ready is a snappy answer to any question thrown at him. When asked his age, rather than say "77," he responds, "I am so old, I remember the Dead Sea when it didn't feel well."

Asked what he studied in school in Tampa, Fla., where he was born and raised, he responds, "Girls." But even if he were asked to be serious, his answer would not be "journalism." He developed into a respected radio news anchor with more than four decades of broadcast experience, but, he says, "I learned at the expense of the public."

From the time he was 9, Bohannon knew he wanted to be on the radio. "I was a radio kid," he says. "I loved the fact that you could listen to a drama and see it in your mind. That fascinated me what people could do with words on radio."

When he finished high school in 1955, instead of going to college, he made a list of radio stations in the Tampa area and applied for a job at each one. "I didn't know a soul [in the business], and no one would pay attention because I had no experience," he says.

The last station on his list, one that specialized in country music, decided to give Bohannon a chance with its Sunday slot. The first part of his assignment was reading the news, sandwiched between broadcasts of religious groups. "Sundays were devoted to various churches and choirs," he says, "and I would do five-minute newscasts with the group in there. The preacher would be in there saying 'give us money and keep the ministry alive.' The next hour would be more of the same thing with a different group."

After two hours, he would sign off as newscaster and then take over as host of the station's "Hillbilly Hit Parade," though Bohannon disliked country music. He was paid out of petty cash, but Bohannon discovered after leaving that 7-Up, the show's sponsor, had allocated a \$5 weekly talent fee that was pocketed by the general manager.

Soon after, he landed a Monday-through-Saturday stint at a Tampa Muzak station, where he was given a regular salary. His break came the next year, when he was hired by CBS' Tampa affiliate WDAE as a control engineer. His mentor there was Pat Chamburs, the area's top-rated morning-drive personality. "He was my idol," says Bohannon. "He put me on the air doing news and weather, even though that wasn't the job I was hired for."

It was a great learning experience, Bohannon says, one that served as a steppingstone to his numerous other radio spots. By 1959, he was ready to see if he could make it in New York. "WBAB had just signed on the air," he says of the Babylon radio station, "and they were looking for a morning man. They said, 'You'd have to play big band music, tell jokes and do news.' I said 'I'm your man,' " Bohannon recalls. Over the next seven years, he was a DJ at WGBB/1240-AM in Freeport and WGSM/740-AM in Huntington, but he still yearned to be a news anchor on a New York City station. In 1967, he was hired by ABC radio, where he worked until 1972. Eventually, he also landed radio anchoring jobs at NBC (1972-1977), CBS (1977-1982) and NBC, again, (1982-1989).

Witness to history

During those years, he reported several history-making news stories such as the plight of Apollo 13 and the shooting of John Lennon. Bohannon was at ABC when Apollo 13 astronaut Jack Swigert informed NASA flight controllers, "Houston, we've had a problem." Upon hearing the ominous announcement, April 13, 1970, Bohannon informed his producer that this was a story worth watching, and he was soon on the air reporting it.

On Dec. 8, 1980, he was at CBS radio when a desk assistant handed him a bulletin about Lennon's murder. A producer then asked Bohannon to report the story on television, which meant going to a different studio immediately. "We were in the CBS Broadcast Center, which is like a maze, and she was running so fast," Bohannon says. "I said to her, 'Don't run, I can't keep up with you. . . . By the time I got on the air, I was out of breath. I was told after the announcement that the switchboard was swamped with calls from people saying, 'That poor man sounded so upset.' "

Bohannon left NBC in 1989 after General Electric acquired the network and dismantled its news radio operation. His last job in journalism was on camera as a news anchor for PBS station WLIW/21 in Plainview, from 1990 to 1991. "We were journalists back then," Bohannon says. "We didn't let opinion get in the way. We didn't do sports, we didn't do entertainment unless it was a major story. I don't like the sound of news today. It's too much opinion."

Enchanted by magic

Bohannon appreciates the magic of radio, but he's also had a fascination with prestidigitation since he was a child. A magician invited him to be a part of his act and "turned him into a dog."

After that, he says he pored over magic books and became entranced with learning tricks. When he moved from Florida to New York, he joined the Society of American Magicians and became friendly with the masters of illusions. His signature trick is a classic done with a twist -- he uses an electric handsaw to cut a woman in half, but she's out in the open, rather than in a box. When asked how he does the trick, he replies, "very carefully." He has performed at Hunter College and the TriBeCa Performing Arts Center, among other venues, and in 1998 he was named magician of the year by the magicians' society.

Magic worked its way into his 2003 book, "Abracadabra, You're Dead: A Magical Murder Mystery." He previously penned the short story collection "Kickers: All the News That Didn't Fit" in 1988.

Though Bohannon says he doesn't perform magic anymore, he still belongs to the magicians' society. But he usually still has a few "tricks" for listeners on "Jazz Cafe," whether it's digging up bits of trivia about the tunes he's playing or finding an obscure track by the likes of Soupy Sales.

So even though he doesn't get a salary, having total creative freedom and sharing his favorite songs with an audience have been the ultimate payoff, he says. "I just love that I get to play what I like."