

# 30 years of eclectic music

By Rachel Hurley, Special to The Commercial Appeal  
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Judy Dorsey first wandered into the former WEVL studios on Court Street in Midtown back in 1978 because she was interested in a guy.

But she stayed and offered clerical help (the station's call letters mean "WE VoLunteer") because she was intrigued by the idea of independent radio.

This week WEVL celebrates its 30th anniversary with a benefit show at the Hi-Tone, 1907 Poplar; Dorsey has been with the station for most of that time, including 20 years as station manager.

Originally more of a cult radio station, tiny 10-watt WEVL went off the air in 1983 after losing airwave space to a 100,000-watt station broadcasting out of Oxford, Miss. WEVL spent the next two years raising money to return as a higher-powered station, this time occupying the 89.9 frequency.

Since 1990, WEVL has operated out of studios at 518 S. Main in the historic South Main District. Now the station broadcasts a wide variety of music on 60 different programs hosted by locals well-versed in their areas of interest, including bluegrass, reggae, jazz, country, blues, soul, gospel, folk, rockabilly, ambient, techno, big band, world music and modern rock. The broadcast area covers a radius of about 50 miles and is heard in three states and worldwide via the Internet.

"There are a lot of independent stations celebrating their 30th anniversary right now. Some started for political reasons, some had very broad agendas to bring together the black community or the gay and lesbian communities," Dorsey says. "We made the decision some years back to be strictly a music station 'cause that's what we do best."

A roster of past and present WEVL disc jockeys (known as "programmers") would include the names of many local musicians and local legends, including Mark Stuart, Kevin Cubbins, Jim Spake, Joyce Cobb, Nancy Apple and Jeremy Scott. One of the most popular is blues programmer Dee "Cap'n Pete" Henderson, who first heard about WEVL in 1981.

According to Dorsey, Henderson read that WEVL was playing Mississippi blues and bought a rooftop antenna to hear it. "Then, when he was able to tune it in, he called up the deejay and started talking about seeing these musicians play," Dorsey says. "He called up the person on the air when he heard him playing Muddy Waters and the deejay invited him down to the station and we talked him into doing his own show. In 1992 he won a 'Keeping the Blues Alive' award from The Blues Foundation."



By Hayden Jackson

Robby Grant (left) and Vending Machine perform a live show at WEVL Tuesday. This week the independent radio station celebrates its 30th anniversary with a benefit show at the Hi-Tone, 1907 Poplar.

WEVL, which employs only three paid staffers, including Dorsey, programming director Brian Craig and a part-time administrative assistant, has won other awards, including the Premier Player award for community service from the Memphis chapter of the National Association of Recording Arts and Sciences. "And we got the first Keeping the Blues Alive award from The Blues Foundation before Cap got it," Dorsey says.

WEVL is possibly best appreciated for its unflagging enthusiasm for local music. "They've been nothing but good to me," says Memphis musician Harlan T. Bobo. "They've been very supportive."

Bobo was relatively unknown before WEVL played his highly acclaimed *Too Much Love* album, but Dorsey was not the one who discovered it.

"My daughter bothered me about it for weeks back in 2004," Dorsey says. "Finally one day we were in the car and she forced me to listen to it. After listening to three or four songs, I just thought it was really, really good. Every time we played it someone would call up and ask who it was."

With an eclectic lineup of programmers and music, it can be hard to entice the average listener to stay loyal.

"The blessing and the curse of WEVL is variety, the blessing being that you get exposed to a lot of different genres that you might not hear anywhere," Dorsey says. "But it's a curse because the average person wants to tune in and hear something fairly consistent across the board, and that we are not."

WEVL obtains most of its yearly revenue during spring and fall fund-raising pledge drives. Raising money for WEVL has been Dorsey's main purpose for the past two decades.

"When I took the job, it was to just get it on its feet after it had been off the air for awhile," Dorsey says. "I stayed and then a year or two went on to another year or two and now it's 20.

"Now I think I'm here to stay."