

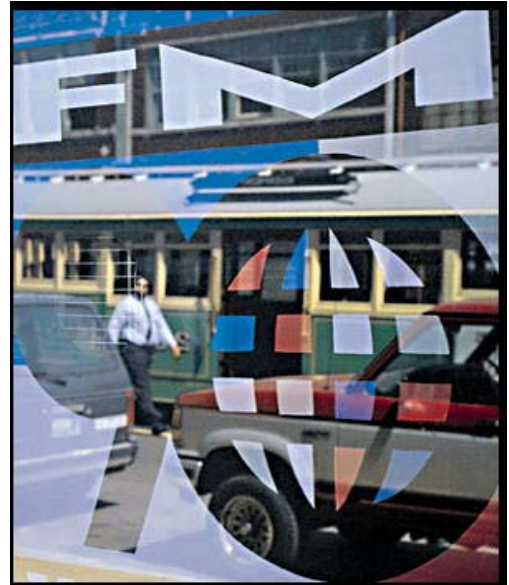
Bold WEVL

Independent, volunteer-run FM 90

Memphis

With a dedicated volunteer force behind the mikes broadcasting everything from blues to big band to country and more, WEVL gives listeners plenty of reasons to tune into public radio, as well as a great place to hear Memphis music.

by Mary Jane Adams



Imagine a car radio with one button, and every time you push the button you get some different type of music pouring out of your speakers. Zydeco, country, big band, Indian, soul, Celtic, electronica, folk, Latin, and, often, the blues. Push the button, enter a different musical domain. It's not much of a stretch to suggest that this is pretty much what it's like to listen to WEVL-FM 90 on a regular basis.

When I visited the station's South Main offices -- just up the street from the Arcade -- one recent Friday evening, I found Station Manager Judy Dorsey working late and speaking with Wayne Tregler, one of WEVL's 70-plus volunteer programmers. He had dropped in to say hello and to demonstrate some recent updates he had made to WEVL's Web site. Like his work as the host of WEVL's Wavelengths rock-and-roll program on Tuesday mornings, Tregler designed WEVL's Web site just for fun. "If you do it for money and take it too seriously," he says, "it stops being fun."

This statement -- along with the long, long days that are typical at WEVL -- might just serve as a slogan for the proudly eclectic community-sponsored, volunteer-run radio station. Each day the station is able to power up its 9,300-watt signal and broadcast another 20 hours of continuous programming is a day that could just as easily have been filled with dead air. "There have been a number of dark moments -- especially in the first 10 years of this station's life," says Dorsey. "A lot of times, when it was a 10-watt station, it only remained on the air because the board of directors would throw in \$50 checks to pay the utility bills. Once, there was some little piece of equipment they couldn't afford to get repaired, and the repair bill was only \$100! But we're a long way from those days now." Today, they can afford to take a deep breath, and let the work be fun.

While Memphis has four other nonprofit radio stations -- WYPL-FM, the Memphis/Shelby County Public Library's station; WUMR-FM, broadcasting from the University of Memphis; the WKNO family of stations, Memphis' National Public Radio affiliate; and WQOX-FM, the Memphis City Schools station -- WEVL is the only radio station that does not rely on an affiliation with an educational or religious institution, a public radio and/or television network, or any kind of government funding. As Program Director Brian Craig points out, "Other local radio stations have something behind them. WEVL was just a grassroots organization of people [when it started], not affiliated with colleges or public radio."

In fact, the overwhelming majority of the station's funding comes directly from the pocketbooks of its listeners. "In our last fiscal year, 78 percent of our budget came in from direct public support," says Dorsey. "And most of it was in the form of donations. I'm very proud of that."

WEVL's sole affiliation is with the Southern Communication Volunteers, Inc., a nonprofit corporation formed in 1975 -- the year the station was founded -- to support WEVL's activities and raise money to keep the station on the air. Nearly all music and programming heard on the station's frequency originates with the individual volunteer programmers (don't call them "disc jockeys," because they do much more than operate turntables and provide chatter), who contribute their time, talents, and extensive musical knowledge each

week to fill one-, two-, and three-hour slots for some 73 different programs.

Craig and Dorsey are the station's only full-time, paid employees; WEVL also has a part-time, paid office manager. The activities of the station are guided by its board of directors, which currently consists of seven members who are elected annually by the station's members. Volunteers provide needed skills during twice-a-year pledge drives and other station events in which listeners are asked to pledge financial support and join the ranks of the station's membership, which currently has surpassed the 1,700 mark. According to Dorsey, these drives form the bulk of the station's annual budget, with another 19.5 percent generated from a variety of WEVL-sponsored events, such as Blues on the Bluff concerts.

What's more, many local businesses support the station by trading services, such as printing and folding WEVL's bimonthly program guide, or donating other needed goods and services to the station's semiannual on-air auctions and pledge drives. Services are also donated by individuals, such as graphic artist Anthony Biggers, who won an ADDY award from the Memphis Advertising Federation for his 1997 Blues on the Bluff poster. Through it all, the station attempts to remain focused on its mission: "To entertain and inform its audience through diverse music programming with an emphasis on the culture of Memphis and the South."

Across the nation, few other community stations have been able to maintain complete autonomy and resist the temptation to join larger organizations or national broadcasting networks. The closest semblance to WEVL can be found in KDHX, a St. Louis-based community radio station that served as the inspiration for WEVL's founders more than 20 years ago. According to Craig and Dorsey, the early and mid-1970s were a special time in radio history, when FM frequencies were readily available and a number of other cities throughout the country had similar stations formed by a handful of volunteer citizens. "This sort of thing was blossoming around the United States at that time," says Dorsey. "These little 10-watt stations had the idea that average people could go on the air. I use the term 'average people,' but really, no one who goes into the control room and gets behind a microphone is average. In other words, they are not slick deejays and may never have thought they were going to do anything like this."

Craig points out that while there is no written history of the station, staff members generally attribute WEVL's originating concept to Memphian Dennis Batson. The early years -- when WEVL occupied its first home at 1369 Court in Midtown -- were marked by a somewhat footloose approach to daily programming. "When I started on the air, I didn't know anything," Dorsey recalls. "I just hung around doing office work. One day, a programmer couldn't show up, and someone showed me how to operate the turntable and just threw me in there. It's a miracle that I could turn the mike on!"

(Since then, the station has formalized its approach to recruiting and training programmers, requiring each to submit a written proposal of a show's suggested format and to undergo scrutiny by the station's programming committee, which is an extension of WEVL's board of directors. Before new programmers can go on the air, they must train with an existing programmer to thoroughly learn the rules of the road.)

As a 10-watt station when it was founded, WEVL's signal was barely able to carry broadcasts beyond the station's point of origin in Midtown. Craig says this made raising money difficult, the obvious reason being that people who couldn't hear the station were not likely to support it with financial contributions. The result was a two-year period during the mid-1980s when WEVL went completely off the air. While some thought it might not come back, many of its faithful listeners and volunteers now look back upon this hiatus as a time of regrouping and rediscovering the station's original purpose.

"When the station went off the air, that's when it really got me," says Dorsey. "It jelled in my mind that this is something really precious, and it can go away. This is a little piece of the airwaves where you can get on and make this city understand what its heritage is." In 1988, the station was resurrected and began to broadcast a diverse but more structured schedule of programming.

"I think we're still pretty faithful to what the station's founders had in mind," says Paul Williams, who hosts Bebe's Berserkathon (eclectic music) on Tuesday evenings. Williams also has the longest tenure as a programmer, dating from just a few months after the station originally went on the air. "WEVL is different even from other community stations I've heard across the country," he says. "Ninety-nine percent of what you hear on commercial stations is someone wanting to sell you something, and WEVL is the antidote for

that. It's just people playing music because they love music."

Now heard within a 50-mile radius of Memphis, many of WEVL's programs focus on music that is ingrained in the culture of the Mid-South and that forms a rich part of its history: delta blues, gospel, rock and roll, soul, R&B, and a variety of other sounds that are homegrown in the Mid-South.

For instance, on Tuesdays from noon to 2 p.m., the Memphis Beat is hosted by J.D., who plays everything from local legends, such as Elvis Presley and Jerry Lee Lewis, to local bands and musicians who currently play in area clubs and venues, such as Professor Elixir's Southern Troubadors and Ruby Wilson. Following the Memphis Beat is Voices, hosted by Memphis diva Joyce Cobb, who plays a variety of vocal music from around the world. In addition to Voices, Cobb also hosts Songs for My Father on Wednesday evenings, and cohosts Friday afternoon's Beale Street Caravan, which is locally produced and syndicated (not by WEVL) for broadcast on more than 260 stations around the world.

Many of the station's programmers dig into private collections of rare and often out-of-print recordings. As much as possible, programmers are encouraged to rely on their own collections, which are supplemented by a broad array of recordings in the station's collection. Of course, it helps to have access to the entire contents of a used record store, as does Williams, who is proprietor of Audiomania Records. Other programmers are avid collectors, and many travel the country to expand their personal musical collections while simultaneously broadening the spectrum of what is heard on WEVL. Rebecca, host of Saturday afternoon's contemporary eclectic Pajama Party, likes to peruse local yard sales and thrift stores to obtain hard-to-find recordings. She estimates that 30 to 45 percent of what she plays is on vinyl. "The station emphasizes local music, and people get to hear artists they wouldn't hear anywhere else," she says.

Some of WEVL's programmers can be counted among the city's best music scholars and historians. Dr. David Evans is among them, as host of the Memphis Blues & Gospel Train, heard each Monday morning and featuring blues and gospel music dating from the 1920s through the present. Evans is a nationally noted musicologist and serves on the faculty of the University of Memphis' music department. In addition, Cap'n Pete, who plays what he calls "stone-cold blues" during his show, Cap'n Pete's Blues Cruise, every Friday, received the 1992 Handy Award for Keeping the Blues Alive. Dan Phillips, who is president of WEVL's board of directors, hosts New Orleans: Under the Influence, and is touted among his colleagues as one of the best historians on the music of southern Louisiana.

In addition to music shows, the station also features several interview and spoken-word programs devoted to increasing awareness of issues affecting the Memphis community. With listener polls providing much-needed feedback, Phillips notes that the goal, as always, is to "make our station more listener-friendly. We want to give our listeners a quality product when they listen, not just music that entertains them. We want people to learn something about music that they didn't know before and may not realize they are learning."

Not only have memberships and pledges grown in recent years to exceed the station's stated goals by more than 30 percent, attendance figures have increased for the semiannual Blues on the Bluff concerts to a total of 2,500 in 1997. In addition, there are public awareness booths at the annual Cooper-Young and Germantown festivals.

But perhaps the best, most direct feedback of all comes in over the phone; after all, there's an inherent loneliness in radio, no matter what the demographic studies or the membership figures say. Programmer Tom Claypool -- host of House Bayou and Blues Today -- sums it up well for himself and the other WEVL volunteers. "It's great when someone calls you to say they've never heard a certain piece of music [before] and it's the greatest thing they've ever heard," he says. "Those are the kinds of things that really make it all worthwhile."