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Linda Howell, an attorney in Holland, isn't too surprised that her older brother, John, pursued a career as a radio DJ.

"When we were kids he would crank the stereo up loud enough to crack the window. Somebody could have broken into the house and carted off everything in the house, and he wouldn't have known," Linda said.

Howell, make that "Big" John Howell, can be heard on the 3 p.m. to 7 p.m. afternoon drive on Chicago's WUSN-FM — one of the most popular music stations in the Windy City with 1 million listeners, and the Academy of Country Music's Station of the Year for 1998.

When John's not doing DJ duty, his band, Big John Howell and the Born to Boogie Band, opens for such big-name country music acts as Martina McBride, Travis Tritt and Alabama.

Finishing a 10th year with US99, and embarking on a new two-year contract, Howell's career has come a long way from Zeeland's WZND-FM.

"I told Craig Rich, the boss, that I had more experience than I actually did," the 38-year-old Howell recalled. "I got it though, and the starting pay was \$3.15 an hour."

"I worked on Sundays, starting from midnight to 8 a.m. and then from 4 p.m. to midnight. You did everything then. You called the police, you made sure the transmitter stayed on. You got the religious services off the phone lines and you had to be the booth announcer."

Howell worked the combination graveyard/split shift at SuperZND for 1 1/2 years before jumping to the Grand Rapids market, where he DJ'd at rock station WLAV and WJFM before landing the morning spot at WGRD. From 1986 to 1988 he worked alongside morning co-host Jennifer Stevens.

"GR is one of the best preparatory radio markets in the country," Howell said. "I still enjoy listening to radio there when I'm in West Michigan."

The morning show at WGRD was popular with listeners, but a headhunter approached Howell and told him about an opening at WCKG-FM, a classic rock station.

"It paid three times more what I was making. It was too hard to turn down," Howell said. He stayed at WCKG for a year, co-hosting the morning show. Then he moved to WUSN in the fall of 1989.

He doesn't look back on his career moves, but he does look back with fondness at his hometown, Holland.

"When I used to listen to the radio I would listen to WHTC and Ken Showers. I thought he was great. I still have my dad sent me tapes of Juke Van Oss. These guys are great, but chose to stay in the smaller markets."

Howell's interest in music began when he took up the trumpet in elementary school. By the time he was in junior high at the former E.E. Fell School on River Avenue (now the administration building for Holland Public Schools), he and a group of students from area schools formed their own stage band, playing such songs as "Woodchopper's Ball" and "St. Louis Blues."

Howell's music teacher at the time, Mike Leary, still remembers the aspiring trumpet player. "You could just look at John and see how playing music made him happy," said Leary, who retired from Holland Public Schools last year.

After junior high, Howell and a group of his friends formed a jazz band and performed at VFW halls and Elks lodges throughout the Holland and Muskegon areas. One of his friends, Joe Macicak, a bass player, still performs with Howell in the Born to Boogie Band.

After graduating from Holland High in 1978, Howell attended Berklee College of Music in Boston, Mass. For four years.

While there he attended classes along with pop music star Melissa Ethridge and Bruce Hornsby.

A first-chair trumpet player at Holland High and a member of Blue Lake Fine Arts Camp's International Band, Howell was faced with stiff competition at Berklee.

"Being the best in Holland didn't quite cut it at Berklee," Howell said. "That's when I realized I had to develop other talents."

Howell said he's found his niche on radio. In addition to his on-air duties, he also hosts "The Country Buzz" feature on WBBM AM Newsradio and is in the process of formulating a live nationwide call-in show, that may debut in July of 1999.

"Who knows, maybe a station in West Michigan will pick it up," he said.