

## RADIO

## Howell's at home in country

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**B**ig John Howell meant to stay six months max when he took his first part-time radio job in 1983 in the little town of Zeeland, Mich.

That was 17 years ago.

"I never wanted to be on the radio until I figured out it was an easy job where you could play music and pick up girls on the request line," he said. "Basically, there was no heavy lifting."

Since then, Howell, who lives in Lake Forest with his wife, Cindy Raymond, and their 1-year-old son William, has carved out a comfy niche for himself as one of country radio's most prominent deejays. He has been on the air continually since 1989 ("that's roughly 80 in radio years") as the popular afternoon drive man at country music powerhouse US99.

Before launching his radio career, the biggest strain Howell had placed on his lower back was lifting a trumpet to his lips. After growing up the slickest jazz trumpet player in Holland, Mich., he attended Boston's prestigious Berklee College of Music where he found it a little more intimidating to blow his own horn.

"I quickly learned that being the best in my Michigan high school wasn't quite good enough," he recalled. "It was kind of a cold, cruel slap in the face."

## Lonesome highways

Despite the skin bracer, Howell did well enough to land a job touring the country as a trumpet player for hire for two years after graduation. One night he was in Meridian, Miss., the next he was in Tuscaloosa, Ala.

"I saw most of America doing that," Howell said. The travel, coupled with a prodigious memory, is invaluable when he accepts requests from around the country for his syndicated "County Gold Saturday Night" oldies shows. If a lady calls from Bowling Green, Ky. or a gentleman from Jefferson City, Mo., Howell is usually able to make them feel right at home by saying something along the lines of, "Oh, yes, do they still have that motel with neon sign of the giant catfish out front on Route 28?"

As a kid, Howell loved the songs of Roger Miller ("King of the Road") and other pseudo-country hits that made their way onto Top 40 radio. The first song he learned how to sing all the way through was Johnny Cash's "A Boy Named Sue." But after picking up trumpet in the school band (if pep rallies featured steel guitars the story might be different), he became, in his own word, "a complete jazz snob."



Julie Fabiszak/Pioneer Press

"As far as I was concerned, if it wasn't Miles Davis or John Coltrane it wasn't worth listening to," Howell said. That all changed one day when he spent "the last three dollars that hadn't gone for pizza and beer" in the early '80s on three 99-cent country albums while at Berklee. Maybe it was the beer.

## Jazzed on country

In any case, listening to Charlie Daniels' "High Lonesome," an unknown Asleep at the Wheel album, and, especially, Waylon Jennings' "Honkey Tonk Heroes" ("I like him because he's surly") changed his attitude about music and, ultimately, his life.

After graduating from Berklee in 1982, and spending two years as a touring trumpet player, Howell decided to take a hiatus and figure out what to do with the rest of his life.

While he was thinking, he accepted a weekend job spinning records for the tiny country station in Zeeland. To make ends meet, more or less, he worked for a local promoter announcing wrestling matches and other events of cultural significance.

Much to his surprise, Howell discovered he had an affinity for broadcasting. He quickly moved up from WZND to a series of four stations in Grand Rapids, just one hour from his home town, ending with a number-one rated morning show at WGRD-FM. Every time Howell changed radio stations, he doubled his salary, a situation that made it difficult to go back to being an itinerant trumpet player.

Like Kevin Matthews, Jennifer

Stevens, Patty Hayes and Amy Scott, Howell moved from WGRD in Grand Rapids to the Chicago market, where he began with a morning show in 1988 at classic rock WKQX — during the undisputed reign of Jonathon Brandmeier. The show only lasted a year, but the management at WUSN was eager to give Howell a try as the afternoon drive deejay at US99. The transition from classic rock to country wasn't as strange as it might seem.

## Renaissance man

In his relatively brief career, Howell had already jumped from country to talk and oldies and contemporary hit radio. Plus, he had fallen so hard for country music back when he bought those bargain country LPs at Berklee in the early '80s that he had become a true fan and aficionado.

Today, Howell practices what he preaches. He has performed nearly 500 shows in the past decade with his Born to Boogie band — named after a number-one hit by Hank Williams, Jr.

"John's a musician at heart and he has a genuine appreciation for country music," said Steve Ennen of Riverwoods, vice-president and general manager of WUSN. "He approaches the music as a musician; that's kind of unique in this day and age. John's not a liner card reader. He's so well-informed. John's like an old-fashioned jazz deejay. He can tell people the backgrounds of the recordings and fill them in on the details — right down to who played on which tracks.

"What he does so well is he

**Born to boogie:**  
Country music deejay Big John Howell on the air at US99.

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enhances the listening experience to a song you may have heard 100 times. I think listeners have a real interest in going back and picking up the history of the genre after 10 years of modern country bringing a new audience to the format."

That expertise is most likely the reason Howell was chosen by worldwide radio syndicator Westwood One in September to take over the hosting duties at "Country Gold Saturday Night." The oldies show, which ranges from country music architects like Ernest Tubb and Hank Williams Sr. to such '90s icons as Garth Brooks and Shania Twain, airs in 125 markets around the country and has a peak audience of roughly a million listeners. The show has become increasingly popular since Howell took over — Ennen said its audience on US99 from 6 to 11 p.m. Saturdays has doubled — despite the fact that Howell doesn't fit the profile of the typical good-ol'-boy country music deejay.

Program directors in some out-of-the-way markets like the Okefenokee Swamp region of Florida — where a couple of listeners who could have worked as extras in "Deliverance," recently called in while out in the bog "hog hunting," worried that audiences would not accept him.

"When we first got started, a lot of program directors — especially in the Deep South — were concerned that their listeners might not be inclined to like me because I sound like, well, a Yankee, and I talk too fast," Howell said. "From the beginning, I dealt with that in an honest and straightforward manner. I told everyone, 'I am a Yankee and, I'm sorry but I just drank four cups of coffee.'"