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BORN TO BOOGIE?

Maybe so, but deejay Big John Howell got into country radio almost by accident

By Dan Kening (1991)

It's not uncommon for a radio personality to blow his own horn, and John Howell, the WUSN-FM 99.5 afternoon drive deejay, is no exception. In fact, he does it as often as he can, wielding his trumpet on stage as the leader of Big John and the US★99 Born to Boogie Band.

Howell, 30, isn't just another radio personality with a band. He's a serious musician who received a degree at the prestigious, jazz-oriented Berklee College of Music in Boston. He has played in a touring circus band, backed up Tiny Tim and led the house band on Dan Hampton's weekly SportsChannel cable TV show.

Now the 6-foot-4 baby-faced deejay wears a Stetson and sings songs by Hank Williams, Jr. and Garth Brooks, while fronting a rocked-up country band featuring some of the city's top musicians.

"If there's a weak link in the band, I'm it," said Howell, whose group plays area clubs several times a month and opens for major country stars at WUSN-sponsored concerts. "I have no illusions about being a great singer. I just love playing music."

Just as his musical career has been varied, so has Howell's radio history.

After leaving the low-budget International All-Star Circus, where, among other things, he played in the band, drove a truck and sold popcorn, Howell returned to his native Michigan.

He spent a short time managing an arena in Grand Rapids—where he doubled as a pro wrestler whenever a scheduled bout was short a man—before getting a job at a local country music station.

"By that time, I knew I didn't have it in me to be a tremendous trumpet player," said Howell of his career switch. "But I remembered listening to Larry Lujack on WLS while I was in high school and thinking, 'Man, that must be the greatest job in the world.'"

Howell worked his way up through the radio ranks in Grand Rapids. When a slot opened up in Chicago for a morning duo at classic rock WCKG-FM in 1987, Howell was teamed up with comedian Stephanie Miller. It proved to be an ill-fated union, lasting a year and a half before both were fired.

"It was a great radio station with fine management, but the chemistry on the morning show just wasn't there," said Howell diplomatically. Just two weeks after leaving WCKG, he was hired at WUSN to do the afternoon drive. It was a transition that initially posed a problem.

"I had worked in rock radio and had always admired jocks like Lujack and Steve Dahl, who were sarcastic personalities," Howell said. "It took me a while to be able to just say things like, 'Thank you for listening.' In rock radio, that would be considered kind of comball.

"I also realized that it was important to get to know the listeners. I went out to country nightclubs three or four nights a week and introduced myself to people. When listeners started calling me by my first name on the request line, I knew I had turned the corner with them."

Don't be surprised if you see Big John pressing the flesh at a Born to Boogie Band gig as well.

"Country radio listeners are the nicest people I've ever met," he said. "I feel like I owe these people something for listening to me."