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You Know That Voice

TempoLake Section

A radio personality working in visual anonymity may be the person down the block

By Jim Muller

That voice. Where have you heard that voice?

The gent ahead of you in line at the Deerpath Theater in Lake Forest seems so familiar, buy why? He chats with his wife, idle thoughts on the weather. You listen, trying not to seem nosy. Why do you know him? How do you know him?

The answer smacks you between the ears a couple of hours later while driving home.

That guy was "Big John" Howell, the deejay who spins country hits every afternoon on US99 (WUSN-FM 99.5).

But that's goofy. What would Big John Howell be doing in Lake Forest?

Oh, gosh, probably going to a movie?

But with just his wife? Without any radio stooges?

Amazing as it sounds, not every Chicago broadcaster retains a personal flunky. Few voices earn in the high six figures, and fewer still travel with an entourage. Mancow rates the celebrity bit — for now. Bob Collins collects exotic motorcycles. Steve Dahl writes songs with former Beach Boy Brian Wilson, and Kevin Matthews goes target shooting trailed by a "Wild Chicago" film crew.

But John Howell?

Nothing so glamorous there. Howell and his wife, Cindy, are on their third Lake Forest home. "I buy the dog house on the block and fix it up," said Howell, who recently marked his 10th anniversary with US99, "and I mow my own lawn. I'm the only guy on the block with a lawnmower. The lawn service crews look at me sideways, like I'm taking their business away."

"We used to live at Belmont and Lake Shore Drive, until we both had our cars stolen and I got tired of chasing people off the back porch. Here it's quiet and safer, I think.

We chose Lake Forest because, given the volatility of radio, you never know when you'll need to sell and move quickly, and homes in Lake Forest do sell like that."

(An interesting point about Howell: He's an accomplished trumpet player, a graduate of Boston's Berklee College of Music, where classmates included Bruce Hornsby, Melissa Ethridge and Branford Marsalis.



When he isn't on the air on WUSN-FM, "Big John" Howell is most likely relaxing at his Lake Forest home.

Said Howell: "Jazz and country are the two great American music forms. Too often people hear 'country music' and think of 'Hee-Haw'. If they instead pictured William Faulkner set to music, they might feel differently."

WXCD-FM 94.7 news anchor Jennifer Stephens took old pal Howell's advice when she and her husband, John, settled in Lake Forest last year after relocating from Philadelphia. (Howell and Stephens worked together early in their radio careers in Grand Rapids, Mich.)

"We're about three blocks from John and Cindy, in an area of older homes that's walking distance to the lake," Stephens explained. "We have big dogs, a Newfoundland and an old English sheepdog, so we wanted a big yard, something similar to what we had in Philly."