

# Prepare for ear raid: 'Big John' Howell attacks at dawn

*Editor's note: This is the second in a series about the people behind the voices on local radio stations.*

By MARC LONGSTREET

After a bitter taste of hard labor, a stint playing trumpet with a touring circus, and being fired from four radio stations, John Howell has achieved his lifelong ambition of getting paid for goofing off.

"It beats working for a living," Howell said about hosting the morning show on WGRD-FM. For the past year he has been treating listeners to a blend of irreverence and what he terms "body parts" humor.

"That's what everybody has to deal with every day. I hate sugar-coated radio. I think radio has to reflect the community — and that's the West Side, not Ramblewood," Howell said during an interview just after going off the air at 10 a.m.

He is yawning this morning, tired after staying up the night before to watch the Tigers in the playoffs and having to be out of bed by 3:30 a.m. to get ready for his show. Wearing black Reeboks, dark jeans, and a black shirt, he is a bit more subdued than his radio persona, but he still throws out a string of one-liners about his life as a radio DJ.

"I try very hard to

make jokes at four in the morning. Hopefully I'm in bed by nine o'clock at night. The only social life I have is walking my pet rock."

A part of his job that keeps him up after his bed time are public appearances. He said he had four the previous week, including a crime-prevention banquet. "I made fun of Chief Hegarty's eyebrows. I don't think he appreciated it, because after I left I found a pair of Denver boots on my car."

After graduating from Holland High School in 1978, he went to the Berklee College of Music, in Boston, to study trumpet. A summer factory job at Holland Ladder convinced him that he did not want to spend his life there. "I know what it's like to really work hard for a living. I always thought radio was an easy job."

Although he spent four years at Berklee, he decided against a career as a trumpeter but still uses his talent for his on-air routine, "Bust My Brass," and plays gigs with his band, "Fire Drill — Nobody Clears the Room Faster."

"I always wanted to play with the Buddy Rich band, but now he's dead," said Howell. "Radio is more lucrative and more fun. I can go out to the bars and enjoy listening



WGRD's John Howell with his trademark trumpet

## OFF the AIR

to the music. If I had a screamin' note I would be out on the road, but I'm better at screamin' through my mouth."

Howell literally walked into a radio career after being unable to find enough work as a mu-

### Local bar plans movies, music

An evening of movies and music has been planned for Halloween night at The Intersection Lounge.

The Intersection, 1520 Lake Drive SE, is hosting

sician. "I was driving home on the Gerald Ford after a day of trying to break into the tough Grand Rapids music business when I saw the radio tower for WZND (a small country station in Zeeland). I stopped in and

a "classic-trash" movie, along with two area bands.

At 10:30, p.m., The Pillar of Fire Society takes the stage.

Admission is \$2.

asked for a job; they had an opening and they hired me. They paid me minimum wage, \$3.35 an hour. I make a lot more now — \$3.75."

After being fired for making fun of the WZND's Baptist preachers, Howell went on to be fired from three Grand Rapids radio stations for things he said on the air. "One station fired me for 'comments not conducive to the format;' I think I made fun of Pink Floyd or something."

Howell said he has finally found a home at WGRD, where he is treated well by program director Matt Clenott and others on the staff: "They give me a parking space."

"Right now I'm having a lot of fun, and I plan to stay as long as the checks keep coming in every week," he said. "I'm

doing what I'd be doing anyway at home. Why not get paid to do it on the air? I love working here. People in Grand Rapids are generously nice people. I love the West Side, and I hate 28th Street."

I really appreciate all the people listening. The best material I have is from the sickos that call in on the phone," he said, searching for a better word than sickos but unable to come up with one.

"We have a very loyal core audience. If I'm having an off day, they'll say, 'Howell's not having such a good day, but we'll stick with him.'" Howell said he is covered on his off days by the morning show's slogan: "Big John Howell — Sometimes He's Funny; Sometimes He's Not."

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