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RADIOACTIVE:

Getting a Job and Progressing in Small-Market Radio

by

Howard Hughes

**PRESS  
CARD  
HERE**

Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements  
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Approved: Grace Gibson

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## Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this independent study project is to fulfill the required assignment for graduation in the Communicative Arts department as a contracted major by giving what I feel to be an in-depth account of the process of getting started in radio. To the best of my knowledge, this is a topic on which an adequate amount of material has not been published. This lack explains the minimal number of footnotes. Even though, of course, the paper is based only on my experiences, I feel that, in talking with other announcers over the years, that the process of getting into radio is basically the same wherever one goes. It is my purpose to write, in brief, something that other writers have not described, and perhaps enable other aspiring radio announcers to benefit from my experience.

In addition, in a rapidly changing field of communication, this first-hand account will provide a record of the process of achieving recognition in radio during the years 1976-1980.

## RADIOACTIVE:

### Getting a Job and Progressing in Small-Market Radio

Thesis sentence: After securing a job in radio, perhaps the hardest obstacle to overcome the aspiring announcer faces is an uphill battle for identity that I have achieved in three stages: first as a part-time employee, then as a beginning announcer with gradual additions of responsibility, and finally as a legitimate, full-time employee with increased responsibility and the status of a popular, small-market radio announcer.

- I. My interest in working in radio led to a job.
  - A. As a youth, I dreamed of working in radio.
  - B. A friend in radio provided me an opportunity to "get my foot in the door."
    1. I observed him work,
    2. I was offered a possible opportunity to work.
      - a. I practiced much during my spare time.
      - b. I was granted my first license.
      - c. I got on the air to do a special program.
    3. I was given my first regular shift.
- II. My first position was as a part-time employee.
  - A. I learned the ins and outs of my first airshift.
    1. I did very little else.
    2. I gained much experience.
    3. I changed my name.
  - B. I lost my job when my license expired.
    1. I feared taking the license examination.
    2. I kept my contacts at the station.
  - C. I obtained my permanent license.
  - D. I got back on at the station performing same duties.
  - E. With additional time, more work gradually came.
- III. Working as a beginning announcer led to gradual additions of responsibility.
  - A. I got my first "legitimate" airshift.
  - B. I learned more about the automation system.
  - C. I got further away from initial part-time role.
  - D. I became interested in programming music.
- IV. I became a legitimate, full-time employee at last.
  - A. I became music director.
    1. I thought it to be only temporary.
    2. It provided much needed greater responsibility.
  - B. Prime afternoon airshift opened temporarily.
    1. This meant more on-air exposure for me.

2. I now had the opportunity to do production.
  3. I became the only regular announcer left.
  4. My amount of production increased.
- C. The new staff arrived at the station.
1. I lost no duties.
  2. I received more respect.
    - a. When I quit doing afternoons, I lost very little.
    - b. I later returned to doing afternoons.
- D. Another turnover in airstaff took place.
1. A new program director arrives.
  2. Another chance at afternoons becomes almost permanent.

## RADIOACTIVE:

### Getting a Job and Progressing in Small-Market Radio

For various reasons, there are few jobs that can be as gratifying to a young individual as that of a radio announcer, more commonly referred to as a disc-jockey. Friends will not approach you and say, "Hey, you sounded great working in the serving line at McDonald's," or, "I heard that funny joke that you told last week when making that delivery on the warehouse truck." However, this can and does happen in radio.

Radio is an important part of the entertainment industry. "The average American listens to the radio for two-and-one-half hours a day. Having captured so much of our attention, broadcasting possesses enormous potential for good or for harm. What do American broadcasters do with this potential? They entertain."<sup>1</sup> And, of course, as in any other occupation, the job of entertaining is not for everybody. Obviously, the desire to work at this particular profession plays a vital role, but a great deal of talent development must occur. Yet, if the initial desire to develop is not there, one's chance of real success is virtually non-existent. Merely getting started in small-market (small-town) radio, and announcing has to start in a small market (as in basketball, where all the professional players played at least a couple of years of college ball), has its obstacles. Securing a job in radio is perhaps the first formidable one to overcome. At first, in the days of celebrity-type radio programs, the DJ had rather "low caste" in the radio talent hierarchy. But with

the full exploitation of recorded music, his ranking has been raised considerably, and his job much harder to acquire.<sup>2</sup> After securing a job in radio, perhaps the hardest obstacle to overcome the aspiring announcer faces is an uphill battle for identity that I have achieved in three stages: First as a part-time employee, then as a beginning announcer with gradual additions of responsibility, and finally as a legitimate, full-time employee with increased responsibility and the status of a popular, small-market radio announcer.

I suppose the first time I ever thought about being a radio announcer was in the summer of 1970. When I was 11 years old, many of my friends and I were constantly listening to the radio, and we often discussed the current songs - the ones we liked, those we detested, and those to which we did not understand what the drug-oriented lyrics meant. Children must have an affection for radio. According to radio historian Jim Harmon, "Radio listening was infinitely more important than going to school. Radio listening was as much a part of life as running water, runny noses, and recesses. How could you do without it? If it sounds as though I had a love affair with radio, I did."<sup>3</sup>

During this period in my life, on days in which I did not particularly feel like listening to the radio, I would often sit in front of a record player and pretend I was an announcer, though abruptly stopping whenever footsteps would indicate someone was coming toward my room. Then, as most all childhood occupational plans diminish about as rapidly as they come, the idea of my working in radio got buried for about six years.

I had a friend who, in the spring of 1976, got a job at radio station WAGR in Lumberton. On Sundays, I would go there and visit Steve, not so much for the idea of being at the station, but we were rather close and we would sit and talk all afternoon, usually about very unimportant topics. We did this through the summer, and I really had no idea of working or desire to work in radio. Then, as fall came, Steve told me that the program director at the station said that if I was going to hang around the station so much, I should get a provisional license - with a very remote possibility of getting a limited amount of work. Now let me explain: a program director (P.D.) is the person at a radio station in charge of virtually all aspects of programming, and part of this job is hiring all air personnel (see Appendix I). A provisional license was (it is no longer in existence) a radio license, non-renewable and good for one year, that was given to a beginner by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) in the hopes that the beginner would take the test for his permanent license later. A license is required of all employees who operate the transmitter, saying they have a minimal knowledge of how it functions. All one had to do to get a provisional was to have the station's chief engineer (the person in charge of all broadcast equipment at the station) to sign a form stating that this person could read three meters on the transmitter. So I, excited at the chance of possibly one day working on the air, went and talked with the P.D. He was leaving in a few weeks to take a job elsewhere, but he told me to make an audition tape, to check such things as voice quality and to see if there was so much as

a shred of potential. (Many "careers" in radio have been brought to a halt at this preliminary stage because the person making the tape had absolutely no idea of what to do. I did, because I had Steve and another fellow who worked at the station to sit with me while I made it, thus giving me pointers as to what to do.) Then we could see about getting a license. The P.D. heard the tape I made (which I still have - hidden), said that it was fairly good for someone who had never worked in radio before, and that he would mention to the new P.D. that he might want to hire me for some part-time work in the future.

So, Danny Hester, who had already been working at the station for about eight years, took over as P.D. in November. He saw to it that I got a provisional license. I was now known as a "warm body," meaning that there was no work promised me, but if an emergency ever came and I was needed, they would call me. However, I was welcome to come out to the station anytime and ask questions, observe other announcers, and after hours, to make practice tapes. I spent eight to ten hours a week alone making tapes. Then, it was six weeks before I got on the air for the first time. My one-shot-only program came on New Year's Eve, 1976, on WAGR's FM "sister station", WJSK. When many of my friends were attending various parties, I was playing selections from the list of top 100 country songs for the past year. My segment of the program lasted from 11 p.m. until 2:30 a.m. I arrived at work that night an hour early. To say I was extremely nervous is a gross understatement. However, when it was over, I thought that I had done a good job - no, it was an excellent job.



Anyway, it was only a special, one-night event, and I still did not really have a job in radio. Then, toward the end of February, Steve decided that he was tired of playing gospel records on Sunday mornings, so he asked Danny if he could be let out of it. Danny remarked that there was no one to replace him and that is when he was reminded that I was available. Danny then told me to watch Steve work one Sunday and if I could handle it, the Sunday morning shift could be mine permanently.

While observing Steve work that morning, I took notes on almost everything that happened - on how to start the automation system in FM, how to activate the AM and FM transmitters, which music to play, how to start the taped and the live religious programs, and a variety of other routine duties that the Sunday sign-on man has to learn to perform. At the time, working Sunday mornings was really a big deal to me, for it was my first airshift, but, in retrospect, it was actually a nothing of a job. In fact, the only good thing that came of this weekly six-and-a-half-hour airshift was the invaluable experience for much better things that I did not realize were to come later. In the meantime, I was very happy to work Sundays, and on one or two rare occasions, I was privileged enough to substitute for someone on a "rock"- "top 40" shift. But I heartily kept the Sunday shift throughout the following summer and fall.

One fairly minor, yet interesting point of my early days in radio - and a question that is often asked of me - concerns why I do not use my real name on the air. For obvious reasons, my real name would, to the listener, sound like something made-up. However, an alias, such as John Hughes, sounds totally genuine

to the audience. Even after explaining it though, many still find it difficult to understand.

With December came the time for my license to expire. Through all the summer I had not bothered to go to Norfolk, Virginia to take the test for my FCC Third Class Radiotelephone Operator's Permit with Broadcast Endorsement. This was something I had to have if I was to continue to work anywhere in radio. I could not go during the week my license expired due to final exams being given at the University. However, the solution turned out to be very simple: as of the moment my license expired, - so did my job at WAGR for which I had worked and waited so hard.

There was nothing for me to do at the station then, and I kept telling myself that "one day" I would go and try for it. It must be a hard test, because I knew several people that had taken the test and had failed it. "But I wouldn't fail it, and I'll get around to taking it," I kept saying.

Even though I could not work there, I constantly visited WAGR, and it still felt as though I had my job. Everyone treated me the same as before. At times, I thought that maybe most of them did not know I no longer worked there - that is how truly unimportant I was to the station at this time.

In March, a friend of mine who worked at a radio station in the mountains asked me to ride with him to Norfolk so he could take for the third time (he had twice failed) the FCC test, and he urged me to take the test also. We were to go during the week of spring break, so I obtained an FCC handbook and began studying for the three parts of the test. The entire examination consisted

of what I felt to be trivial material that for the most part did not tie in with what I did on the job, yet it still had to be passed. (A year later, the FCC eliminated the test for the Third Class License and began distributing a similar permit for the asking.) After four days of fairly hard studying, we left for Norfolk. The next day, we both returned, but only I had the ticket. But as before, having a license did not mean I had a job; my Sunday morning shift had long since been filled.

However, getting back on at the station was a simple matter. All I had to do was wait for an opening. Within a month, one came. This time, it was Sunday afternoons, which was basically the same as mornings. I had not been promoted, but I definitely had not lost any ground, and I now had a permanent license. Virtually starting over again, I prepared myself for the long wait.

The wait paid off. Available hours, which were a scarcity when I began (both times), started opening up quite rapidly, and whenever I was offered any, I gladly accepted them. In addition to the usual one-week fill-in substitution stints for vacationers I was given during the summer, an opportunity to work at night with the FM automation system came open. In this capacity, all I had to do was to sit and occasionally change a tape every few hours, but it did allow me to be at the station more, even though I was not getting any additional public exposure. The additional exposure came at the end of August, 1978.

At the end of the summer of 1978, Steve, who had been working the majority of the part-time hours due to the fact

he started before I did (part-timers at the station are on the seniority system), was leaving. This opened for me two important doors. One, the Saturday afternoon shift, which meant a good deal of exposure on a regular basis. Secondly, it meant that I now had first pick of anything else that might open up anytime in the future. The Saturday show was actually the first time in almost two years of working at WAGR that I had been assigned to a legitimate airshift on a continuing basis. (Sundays were, and still are not, considered "legitimate," mainly because the entire listenership is extremely low - thus, no one gets to hear you.)

Besides more hours, I also continued to operate (or babysit, as it is referred to at the station) the automation at night. One benefit of minding the automation, however, was that as I was with it more, I got to know how it operates probably better than anyone else at the station at that time. Though this was by no means any great achievement, it did show that I was learning more and more aspects of the station, showing that I was truly serious about wanting to work.

I was now working 32 hours weekly. And I was further complimented by having that now dreadful Sunday shift taken from me. It was a compliment in the aspect that the shift was used to train a new part-timer; showing that I no longer had to perform in a beginner's role. Also, I became interested as to how the music at the station was programmed, which later led to many arguments between myself and the music director. With this, I felt that I had by now reached my peak level at WAGR, being a 30-plus hour-a-week part-timer -which was not bad at all, considering

I was going to school and working at a job I liked. So I hung in there, not at all realizing what lay ahead within six months.

In February of 1979, Steve Simmons, the morning-drive announcer (see appendix II), who also happened to be the music director (M.D.), left to take another job. This, of course, meant someone had to be in charge of making the weekly change in the playlist, the collection of current songs that are played on the air. Music directors choose music "based on statistics... The making of a playlist has always been an internal struggle for the program or music director. On one side, the love of novelty; on the other, fear of risk." So the job is not all that easy, for one badly chosen tune can hurt the station tremendously.<sup>4</sup> As soon as I discovered that Simmons was leaving, I approached Danny, who was still P.D., about the possibility of my becoming M.D. He said yes, but I feel that it was with the understanding that I was to relinquish that position as soon as another morning man was hired. At any rate, I thought that maybe if I did a decent job at it, I would be able to keep it - at least for a while.

So I "cleaned-up" the playlist, and by that I mean I proceeded to pull out a lot of songs that I thought were no longer suitable to be played because they had been in the playlist too long, or in some cases, should have never been played at all. I now had a truly important responsibility. I was no longer merely some part-timer who came in and worked six hours each week. Now, I was some part-timer that came in and worked over 30 hours a week and now determined what music was to be played.

This was a big climb, but I still had quite a distance to go. And as before, I did not know what was in store for me in a matter of a few short weeks.

With February also came a sizeable snowstorm. During the storm, Greg Barnes, chief engineer and afternoon-drive announcer (see appendix II), broke his leg on the ice - meaning time in the hospital for him. This also meant that someone had to temporarily work weekday afternoons. Working this shift was (and still is) hitting "the big-time", as far as I was concerned, because of the potentially great listenership. Now, situations were starting to get desperate at work. There was still no replacement in the morning shift, and now, I was filling in performing the afternoon-drive responsibilities. This left, for the time being, only Danny and me as regular on-the-air personalities. A beginning part-timer was secured to pull my nighttime automation shift, and a former radio announcer from a neighboring county was contacted to work Danny's shift, for he was now doing mornings. This was the biggest responsibility at the station I had had to that point, and with it came the task of production, which in essence means making commercials, or spots. Obviously, Danny could not do all the spots himself, so I was given about a 35 percent share of them, definitely a full-timer's load. This meant much more on-air exposure - I could now be heard on the radio various times of the day endorsing many different products. This, perhaps, is the best way to get a lot of exposure, because a given spot is broadcast so many times. I knew it was only temporary, yet I did not care. I was overjoyed

at these opportunities.

I realized that the situation of "just me and Danny" would soon change, and I was right, but it did not change as I had anticipated. Within two weeks, Danny submitted his resignation (He had been planning this move for some time, so it was not due to the pending situation). This meant that I was the only regular on-air employee left. The first substitute continued to work midday, and another former announcer was hired to work mornings until a permanent replacement could be found. Being the only regular left, my production load increased from about 35% per cent to 95 per cent of all spots. That's exposure! In fact, it is almost too much, but I knew this would last only for a short while, and it did.

Within three weeks, a new program director and morning man were hired. When they arrived, the thing that was to my advantage was that they did not understand that my temporary duties (production, music director) were temporary, and with Greg still in the hospital, I was in a comfortable position doing my designated responsibilities. With this complete turnover of air staff, no one knew me as a beginner, and the stigma of being a "rookie" in radio is one that can linger for a good deal of time. At this point I was almost home-free as far as being a full-fledged employee of WAGR. This was evidenced by the fact that when Greg returned to working weekday afternoons and I went back to working evenings, I still did production, meaning I was considered to be full-time.

Situations remained about the same until the first part of

July. Then, a new automation system arrived for the FM station. As far as I was concerned, the importance of this was that Greg, being chief engineer, had to have some time off from his airwork to assist installing the new equipment. This meant that I was to go back to working afternoons, and this was even better than before because afternoon listenership is higher during the summer months. I remained in this substitute position until the end of August. Then, it was back to normal - I returned to night work. I lost nothing, but gained much extra exposure.

In November, the P.D. quit, and George Gilpin was hired to take over that position. I was "in" rather securely by now, and when Greg quit near the end of the month, that called for someone to take his place - permanently. I was given the afternoon shift once again on a temporary basis, thus putting me on a 40-50 hour work week. However, I am presently continuing to work that shift, with negotiations in the works to get the job permanently, and there is an excellent chance that I will get it. After working there in excess of three years, it would be difficult for the management to say no.

More than three years. When I was 11 years old and playing DJ, I never imagined that I would have been working for three years in radio. When, at 17, I first began at WAGR, I never thought I would have been programming the music or working the afternoon shift - much less both. My future in radio looked pretty limited at first. Then, when I lost my license, it looked to be finished. But I tried at the job again and walked blindly into many of the responsibilities I was eventually granted. In other words, I was



overly ambitious, but I did show patience and performed well the duties that gradually came my way. This is the only way that I have seen anyone successfully progress in radio - because many of those I have seen fail (and I have seen quite a few) did so because they wanted to be a "Superjock" overnight. Being a great talent at anything is not possible in one or two tries. I have been at it for over three years, and I am not nearly as good at radio announcing as I would like to be. Radio is like any other job in that to be good at it, in addition to having an amount of potential, an individual must have a great deal of patience and a desire to succeed. If I remain in radio for a while longer, this understanding should serve me quite well, but if I do not, I have still learned a valuable lesson that I learned in no previous job. So, if I do not eventually make my career in radio, I have definitely not wasted three years of time working in it.

## Evaluation

It is always difficult to evaluate one's own work, and this instance is not excepted. However, as best as I can tell, I have covered the steps in the process of succeeding in radio. Although I have not taken notes during my three-plus years in radio, my memory of these years is recharged daily, for even though a workweek is normally six days, an individual dedicated to radio is occupied with it 365 days a year, if not working in it or listening to it, then very often thinking about it. And with this knowledge and pre-occupation with the craft, I have attempted to provide an accurate, comprehensive account of actual, and I believe, typical experience.

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## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>Peter M. Sandman, David M. Rubin, and David B. Sachsman, eds. Media Casebook: An Introductory Reader In American Mass Communications, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1977), p. 156.

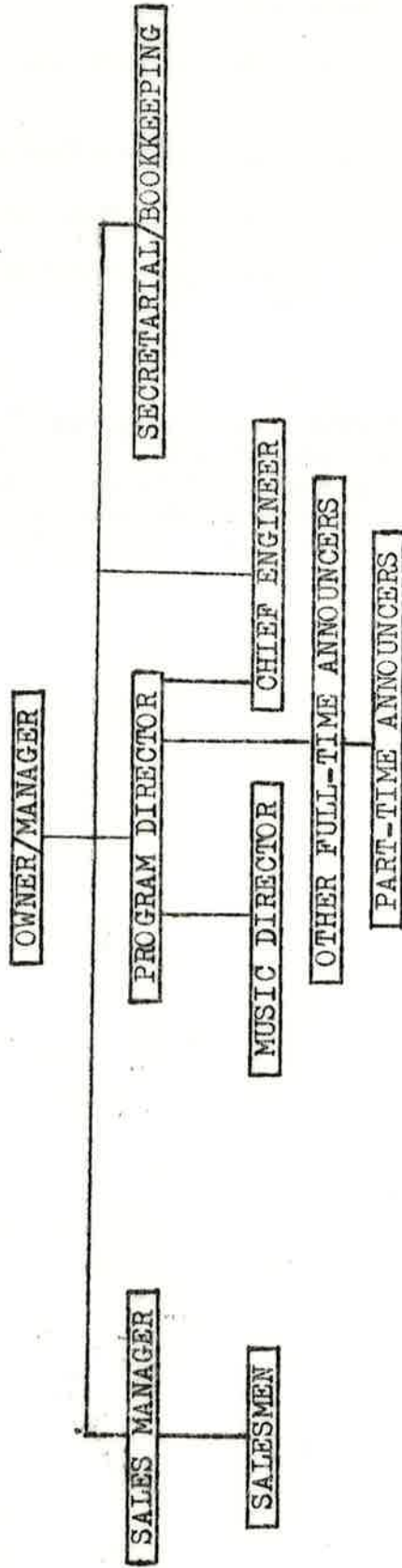
<sup>2</sup>Sydney W. Head. Broadcasting in America, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1976), p. 147.

<sup>3</sup>Jim Harmon. "What Did You Listen to Everyday at Five O'Clock?," Readings in the Mass Media. (New York: Odyssey Press, 1971), p. 197.

<sup>4</sup>Peter McCabe. "Radio: Where Has All the Music Gone?," Argosy, (December/January, 1975-6), p.37.

Appendix I

The Breakdown of the Staff at WAGR Lumberton



Appendix II

Full-time Airshifts at WAGR Lumberton

6:00 a.m. (SIGN-ON)-10:00 a.m. .... MORNING DRIVE  
10:00 a.m.-2:00 p.m. .... MIDDAY  
2:00 p.m.-SIGN-OFF\*..... AFTERNOON DRIVE

\*SIGN-OFF time changes from month-to-month. It is the time of sunset, according to the Federal Communications Commission. In the winter, when daylight hours are shorter, it can fall as early as 5:00 p.m. During the months of June and July, SIGN-OFF comes as late as 8:30 p.m.