

WILLIAM BARLOW

VOICE

The Making of Black Radio

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Contents

Preface	vii
Introduction: Shifting Voices	1
Part I. "I'se Regusted": Blackface Radio	13
1. From the Jazz Age to Jim Crow	15
2. The Controversial Phenomenon of <i>Amos 'n' Andy</i>	35
Part II. "New World a-Coming": Black Pride Radio	47
3. Brown Bombers and Black Radio Pioneers	49
4. "Destination Freedom"	67
Part III. "Kappin' the Mike": Black Appeal Radio	91
5. Buying Time and Making Rhyme	93
6. The Rise of Black Appeal Radio	108
7. Spin Doctors of the Postwar Era	134

being contested. Nevertheless, the documentation indicates that these verbal masquerades, which I characterize in this book as "racial ventriloquy," have played a prominent and contradictory role in the history of black radio, especially during the early decades. As a cultural historian, I couldn't hide from these data; at the very least, I had to try to make sense of the phenomenon for the readers. Consequently, I included the material and theme in the larger historical framework, thus giving weight to the contradictions as well as the continuities in the making of black radio.

All the cross-cultural experiences I've described here have been invaluable to this project, as they have enriched my understanding and appreciation of African Americans and their culture. However, my long immersion in African American music and my long-term association with WFPW have ironically resulted in some confusion about my racial identity. It is not unusual for both black and white listeners who have heard me on the air to be surprised by my skin color when they meet me in person; this was especially true during my tenure as Doctor Blues. My affiliation with Howard University and published work on black music and culture undoubtedly contribute to the assumption that I am black, but being identified with WFPW seems to play a larger role. (To some degree, this assumption rests on the still widespread prejudice that a white person's interest and involvement in African American, Latino, or Asian American culture are insincere, illegitimate, and even irrational.) No doubt, some of the confusion stems from the music I play on my shows, but I suspect that how I sound on the air also influences how I am perceived racially—not that I try to "sound black" or to fool my listeners, but I do spend a lot of my time conversing with African Americans on a daily basis (and for that matter, listening to black radio stations). I also tend to incorporate the new jazz and hip-hop parlance of my colleagues and students into my conversational speech; in particular, this has proved an effective teaching technique.

At a recent party for WFPW staff and volunteer programmers, I was talking with the *Drive Time Jazz* crew, five veteran jazzologists whose collective wisdom defines the station's jazz canon. In the course of our conversation about white crossover jocks on black radio outlets, I confided in them that some listeners assume I am an African American and then asked them, quite earnestly, if I "sounded black" on the air. They all looked at me for a moment, then cracked up laughing. The verdict, so to speak, was unanimous.

Introduction: Shifting Voices

Language, for individual consciousness, lies on the borderline between oneself and the other. The word in language is half someone else's. It becomes "one's own" only when the speaker populates it with his own intentions, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention. Prior to this moment of appropriation, the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language (it is not, after all, out of a dictionary that the speaker gets his words!), but rather it exists in other people's mouths, in other people's context, serving other people's intentions: it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one's own.¹

—Mikhail Bakhtin

In his groundbreaking history of African American humor, *On the Real Side* (1994), Mel Watkins uses the term *racial ventriloquy* to characterize the mimicry of black speech patterns by white radio entertainers: "Following a pattern established by minstrelsy and blackface actors on stage and screen, whites played Negro roles in nearly all the early radio shows. In the beginning, when programs were not broadcast before a live audience, this new electronic medium made the pretense much easier. The deception depended entirely on mimicking black dialect and intonation. Thus radio had introduced a new phenomenon: racial ventriloquy."²

Radio certainly enhanced the possibilities and the practice of racial ventriloquy. As an invisible "theater of the mind," it was the ideal medium for such voice impersonations. But these verbal transgressions were hardly a new phenomenon in popular culture; that characteristic applied more

to radio broadcasting in the early twentieth century. The roots of racial ventriloquy go back to the antebellum era and are intertwined with the rise of slavery. Moreover, the verbal mimicry took place on both sides of the color line, usually as part of a more complex code of cultural crossover practices. In her recent book on the subject, Susan Gubar refers to this phenomenon as "racechange: The term is meant to suggest the traversing of race boundaries, racial imitation or impersonation, cross-racial mimicry or mutability, white posing as black or black passing as white, pan-racial mutuality."³ Gubar also uses the term *racial ventriloquism* in her discussion of the uses of black rhythms and dialect in the poetry and prose of modern literary figures such as Carl Sandburg, Carl Van Vechten, e. e. cummings, William Carlos Williams, and William Faulkner. Their indulgence in the practice of racial ventriloquism attests to its resilience and influence in American culture.

The Masks of Minstrelsy

It was during the antebellum period that racechanges and racial ventriloquy first became fashionable, in both white popular culture and black slave culture. In the beginning, white males in blackface mimicked the song, dance, dress, customs, and creolized speech patterns of African slaves for fun and financial gain; in the process, they created America's first culture industry—blackface minstrelsy. At the same time, black slaves were known to have enjoyed "puttin' on" the highfalutin airs of their white owners, parodying their dress, dance, and mannerisms as well as mimicking their English diction.⁴ This curious transgressing of the racial divide, played out in the white popular culture and the slave folk culture, would go through several reincarnations in the generations to come. But in terms of magnitude and impact, it was the white-initiated racechanges that carried the day, with few exceptions, they set the tone and defined the parameters of the discourse for the society as a whole.

The practice of "blacking up" began during the Elizabethan era in England. White actors applied burned cork to their faces in order to caricature African subjects; in most instances, they also parodied the slaves' creolized West Indian dialect to round out the impersonations. One of the earliest blackface characters to emerge on the American stage

was "Sambo," who appeared as a comic foil in Boston and New York theatrical productions in the late 1780s. A forerunner of the urban-dandy stereotype, Sambo's dress was gaudy, his manners pretentious, his intelligence lacking: "Sambo tinks himself a pretty fella. He sing well, he dance well. Can't tink so pretty well." Sambo's rudimentary West Indian dialect was in sharp contrast to the highbrow English used by the play's white characters.⁵ As with blackface parodies in general, racial ventriloquy was employed here to give voice to the caricature; it was, in effect, the audio dimension of the stereotype.

Blacking up and racial ventriloquy were integral to the rise of blackface minstrelsy in the early 1800s. The minstrel show, based in the urban North, was the nation's first homegrown performance tradition, and it would dominate American popular entertainment for the rest of the century. The first wave of blackface characters to capture the public's fancy were initially identified with popular minstrel songs—in particular, "Jim Crow" (1828) and "Zip Coon" (1834). As popularized by Thomas "Daddy" Rice, Jim Crow was a ragamuffin plantation "darker" who performed a song-and-dance routine that bordered on the grotesque. Rice's Crow was a servile simpleton. He wore dirty and tattered clothing; rags tied around his dilapidated shoes, his toes protruding; a battered straw hat over a coarse, black wig; and burned cork on his face. His dance routine, full of awkward gyrations and clumsy footwork, was accompanied by the following nonsense verse:

Weel about, turn about.
And do jis so
Eb'ry time I weel about
And jump Jim Crow.⁶

The stereotypical counterpart to this plantation buffoon was the urban dandy Zip Coon, popularized by George Washington Dixon in the mid-1830s. Dixon's Coon was a pompous blackface pretender who vainly tried to imitate the dress, deportment, and speech of the nation's white urban elite. His high opinion of himself even led to presidential aspirations:

I tell you what will happen den, now bery soon
De Nited States Bank will be blone to de moon

Dare General Jackson will him lampoon
 And de bery nex President will be Zip Coon.
 Now mind wat you arter, your tunel Kritter Crockett
 You shant go head without Zip, he is de boy to block it
 Zip shall be President, Crockett shall be vice
 An den dey two togedder will had de tings nice.⁷

By the 1830s, the West Indian dialect of the colonial-era Sambo had been replaced by the native dialects of Jim Crow and Zip Coon. The unprecedented popularity of these caricatures on the new and robust urban theater circuit gave birth to the antebellum blackface minstrelsy craze. At first, individual blackface acts such as Daddy Rice's Crow and G. W. Dixon's Coon were in great demand; but in the 1840s, a number of minstrel troupes were formed, and they soon eclipsed the solo acts in popularity. These troupes (Virginia Minstrels, Ethiopian Serenaders, Christy Minstrels) created the first blackface minstrel extravaganzas—full evenings of stage entertainment based on parodying black song, dance, speech, and behavior. The standard minstrel lineup included a couple of musicians on banjos and fiddles; two comic end men named Tambo and Bones; and eventually a middleman, the "Interlocutor," who served as master of ceremonies. The strait-laced and supercilious Interlocutor was routinely ridiculed by Tambo and Bones; these minstrel end men, who often resembled Jim Crow and Zip Coon, also played the tambourine and bones rhythm makers on the musical numbers.⁸

The standard minstrel show had three parts. The opening act featured minstrel songs and mockery performed primarily by blackface urban dandies. The second part highlighted blackface novelty acts, such as the cross-dressing "Negro wench" spectacles and comic monologues known as "stump speeches." The finale was usually a narrative skit with song and dance, set on a mythical Southern plantation populated by happy-go-lucky blackface slaves. The minstrel show, in effect, linked together the plantation buffoon and the urban dandy, presenting them as two sides of the same coin.

Blackface minstrelsy's penchant for racial ventriloquy was most evident in the stump speeches. This kind of lowbrow comic oratory customarily burlesqued the futile attempts of blackface characters to speak like educated and urbane whites on topics as varied as bankruptcy ("Def-

inition of the Bankrupt Laws"), the steam engine ("Locomotive Lecture"), and the blues ("A Brief Battering of the Blues"). "Lectures Darkly Colored" by the so-called Professor Julius Caesar Hannibal is a typical antebellum example: "Ihah come from way down in ole Warginna whar I studded edicashun an' siance all for myself, to gib a cose of lectures on siance ginerally, an' events promiscuously, as dey time to time occur. De letter ob invit I receibed from de comitee from dis unlitened city, was full ob flattery as a gemman ob my great discernment, edicashun, refinement and research could wish."⁹ Much of the humor in these monologues was based on crude malapropisms, tite puns, pomposities, non sequiturs, and slovenly pronunciation, but the blackface minstrels also went to the source when crafting their interpretations of black dialect. The most acclaimed practitioners, from Daddy Rice to Virginia Minstrels leader Dan Emmett, purposely sought out black people in order to learn their vernacular. Emmett, in particular, was known for his "close contact with the Negro" and reportedly spent countless hours rehearsing his dialect routines.¹⁰

During its antebellum heyday, blackface minstrelsy attracted a huge audience among young white working-class males in the North and Midwest. New York City was the mecca of blackface entertainment, but New Orleans and San Francisco were also important hubs of minstrel activity. Paradoxically, blackface minstrelsy did not have a large following in the antebellum South, and it was even banned in some Southern cities by the 1850s. Politically and ideologically, minstrelsy was closely aligned with Jacksonian democracy; hence it supported territorial expansion, white supremacy, and slavery. This final viewpoint was expressed in the blackface minstrels' propagation of the plantation myth, which reproduced the white slave owners' rationalization of slavery as benign, paternal, and racially desirable. In addition, minstrelsy's propensity for sarcastic blackface caricatures—from Sambo to Tambo and Bones—tended to justify race oppression. Historian Joseph Boskin has argued that these stereotypes enabled whites to keep black men in their place at the bottom of the social hierarchy: "To make the black male into an object of laughter, and conversely, to force him to devise laughter, was to strip him of masculinity, dignity, and self-possession. Sambo was, then, an illustration of humor as a device of oppression, and one of the most potent in American popular culture. The ultimate objection for whites was to effect mastery: to

render the black male powerless as a potential warrior, as a sexual competitor, and as an economic adversary."¹¹

The response to blackface minstrelsy by public figures is noteworthy. The nation's leading literary pundits—for instance, Walt Whitman and Mark Twain—touted minstrelsy as America's first native performing art. In his autobiography, Twain lamented: "If I could have the nigger show back again in its pristine purity and perfection I should have little further use for opera." He was particularly impressed by the quality of the racial ventriloquy: "The minstrel used a very broad negro dialect; he used it competently and with easy facility and it was funny—delightfully and satisfyingly funny." In stark contrast, Frederick Douglass considered blackface minstrel troupes "the filthy scum of white society, who have stolen from us a complexion denied to them by nature, in which to make money, and to pander to the corrupt taste of their white fellow citizens."¹² In Douglass's mind, blackface minstrelsy crassly commodified race, thereby furthering a process of degradation set in motion by slavery. From Twain's vantage point, the "nigger show" carnivalized race, transforming it into the funny bone of American culture.

In his recent study *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*, Eric Lott has characterized these two poles of the debate over antebellum minstrelsy as the "people's culture" position (Mark Twain) and the "racial domination" position (Frederick Douglass). He goes on to point out that both perspectives continued to resonate in the discourse on the subject throughout this century but that the racial domination, or "revisionist," position eventually became the "reigning view." In Lott's interpretation, however, blackface minstrelsy itself was not "univocal" but rather a site of conflicting and contradictory articulations of race, "blackness," and slavery. For example, he shows that the popular "Uncle Tom" minstrel shows in the 1850s articulated proslavery, moderate, and anti-slavery viewpoints, depending on who was involved in the productions. Lott summarizes his findings as follows: "My study documents in early blackface minstrelsy the dialectical flickering of racial insult and racial envy, moments of domination and moments of liberation, counterfeit and currency, a pattern at times amounting to no more than two faces of racism, at others gesturing toward a specific kind of political or sexual danger, and all constituting a peculiarly American structure of racial feeling."¹³

Blackface entertainment languished during the Civil War. The call to arms forced many troupes to disband, and while the conflict continued, blackface impersonators all but vanished from the minstrel stage. A few groups survived by leaving the country; the Christy Minstrels, for instance, relocated to Havana, Cuba. After the war, however, some of the veteran performers returned to the stage in blackface. Dan Emmett, perhaps the best-known minstrel to resume his stage career as a blackface specialist in Negro dialect, remained active through the 1880s. Yet, while the blackface tradition showed some continuity after the Civil War, it no longer dominated minstrelsy as it had during the antebellum period. There was now competition from other ethnic stereotypes, such as the Asian and the Native American. In addition, the minstrel productions were more lavish, their social commentary was much broader, and women were now included in the entertainment as dancers, singers, and comics.¹⁴

But while the blackface tradition was losing favor on the established minstrel theater circuit, it was finding a new home in the postbellum South. There, a revival of the antebellum minstrel show became linked to the rise of a "cult of the Confederacy," whose adherents no doubt found solace in the blackface stereotypes and the plantation myth. This convergence opened up a new circuit of venues for blackface acts: at veterans' halls, fraternal lodges, public parks, college campuses—wherever festivities honoring the Confederacy were held. As a result, the South helped spawn a new generation of blackface entertainers, who learned their trade performing at these grassroots venues. Born during Reconstruction, the cult of the Confederacy would continue to thrive well into the twentieth century, providing blackface minstrelsy with a solid base of support.¹⁵

Another important factor influencing the postbellum blackface tradition was the influx of African American entertainers into minstrelsy. During Reconstruction, black troupes (Georgia Minstrels, Callander's Colored Minstrels, Haverly's Colored Minstrels) and individual performers (James Bland, Sam Lucas, Billy Kersands) emerged as stars on the minstrel stage. White and black audiences flocked to the shows of these "genuine" Negro entertainers; the Georgia Minstrels initially billed themselves as the "Only Simon Pure Negro Troupe in the World." But paradoxically, the authenticity of the black minstrels was masked by burned cork, and their stage acts re-created the antebellum blackface stereotypes and plantation myths—in effect, giving them renewed credibility. To a large

degree, this recycling of plantation material was orchestrated by the white entrepreneurs who owned and managed the urban theaters, the music publishing firms, and even the black minstrel troupes; they were reluctant to part with successful blackface minstrel formulas. Furthermore, African American entertainers had little autonomy. Minstrelsy was the only venue open to them, and they lacked the power to negotiate for their artistic and racial integrity, because the white owners hired the talent and demanded compliance with the blackface legacy. Black performers had to fetishize their own race to gain access to the minstrel stage.¹⁶

The careers of black minstrelsy's most famous entertainers, from James Bland and Billy Kersands in the 1870s to Bert Williams in the early 1900s, offer clear, if disheartening, illustrations of this protracted dilemma. Bland, the most talented African American tunesmith of his generation, routinely wrote nostalgic "darky songs": "Carry Me Back to Old Virginia," for example, told the story of an elderly ex-slave longing for his former master and life on the plantation. Kersands, perhaps the greatest black minstrel showman of all, was best known for his ostentatious deportment, dialect jokes, and huge grinning mouth—all prominent features of the recycled Coon stereotype in the postbellum era. Williams, the most gifted humorist of his generation, also relied heavily on dialect jokes and continued to entertain white audiences in blackface long after other African Americans refused to do so. All three men found success in accommodating antebellum minstrel stereotypes and thereby became locked into demeaning performance styles. They also added a new twist to the racial ventriloquy cycle: black entertainers imitating white impersonations of African Americans.¹⁷

New Medium—New Voices

Radio came of age during the twilight of blackface minstrelsy and helped prolong its slow demise. The first racial ventriloquists to take to the airwaves in the 1920s were white entertainers such as Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll (*Amos 'n' Andy*) and Moran and Mack (*Two Black Crows*); they pioneered the showcasing of blackface dialect comedy on radio. During the next decade, these race impersonators, along with many more of their ilk, were major attractions on the national radio networks, and they

also proliferated on local outlets. Their radio shows recycled many of the previous century's most demeaning blackface stereotypes (Jim Crow, Zip Coon, Mammy), with little regard for the racial implications of their humor. (See Part 1.) For their part, the first African Americans to break the color line in radio broadcasting in the 1930s were announcers and disc jockeys who sounded white on the air. Black radio pioneers such as Jack Cooper (Chicago), Eddie Honesy (Hammond, Indiana), Ed Baker and Van Douglas (Detroit), and Bass Harris (Seattle) followed the lead of the industry's leading professional announcers with respect to their use of the English and their style of announcing. Their voice masking was motivated by a desire to achieve parity with their white counterparts in broadcasting, but in addition, they sought to distance themselves from the blackface dialect that was so pervasive on the airwaves at the time and to attract black and white middle-class listeners. (See Part 2.)

During the postwar era, changes in the radio industry sparked a second wave of racial ventriloquy on the nation's airwaves. In this instance, white disc jockeys who "crossed over" to play popular black music (jazz, R & B, soul) on their shows also tended to imitate the vernacular and speech patterns of the era's leading African American DJs. The new generation of black "personality jocks" was fashioning an innovative and playful style of radio announcing based on the use of common black urban street slang and folklore. (See Part 3.) White DJs from Alan Freed in the early 1950s to Wolfman Jack in the 1960s copied and, in most cases, exaggerated this style on the air in order to sound black and outrageous to their racially mixed teenage audience. In some respects, these impersonations were a form of flattery, but they also involved a good deal of parody. The numerous white DJs who crossed over to black vernacular and music formats were both cultural rebels and voyeurs; they transgressed the color line while indulging their racial fantasies. (See Part 4.)

For their part, the majority of African American disc jockeys in the postwar era sought to reverse and undermine the racial ventriloquy cycle by privileging contemporary black vernacular in their announcing styles. The exception to this trend occurred only when black announcers and DJs managed to secure employment at white radio outlets; in these instances, they were invariably expected to sound white. But given the lingering segregation in the radio industry during this period, only a small number of African Americans were hired by white stations. Then,

in the wake of the civil rights movement, segregation began to break down in both the radio industry and society at large. By the late 1960s, black disc jockeys who crossed over to white rock formats were no longer required to mask their voices (a prime example being Frankie Crocker in New York City). At this juncture, the youth counterculture was incorporating black urban slang into its own "hippie" vernacular; racial ventriloquy was, in effect, giving way to racial hybridity in the popular culture and on the airwaves.

While racial ventriloquy played a major role in the early portrayal of African Americans on radio, its importance has diminished considerably over the past few decades. Since World War II, the history of black radio has become increasingly woven into the fabric of the broader African American struggle for racial equality, political empowerment, economic prosperity, and cultural self-determination. In the postwar era, African Americans working in radio mounted their first sustained challenges to Jim Crow employment practices in the broadcast industry. They also produced the first black radio docudramas to counter the corrosive blackface stereotypes still featured on the networks, and black entrepreneurs purchased their first radio stations. During the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s, African American disc jockeys, talk-show hosts, and radio newscasters played a critical role in facilitating the flow of information about civil rights issues and activities. They helped mobilize people for demonstrations and marches, provided a forum for civil rights leaders such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and, in the case of the DJs, boosted the morale of listeners by playing "message music" on their shows. By this time, radio had become the omnipresent mass medium in the black community; a huge majority (over 90 percent) of African Americans owned radio receivers and listened to black-formatted stations on a daily basis.

During the urban riots in the mid-1960s, African American personality jocks stayed on the air around the clock in an effort to contain the civil unrest. They kept their listeners up to date on the latest news from the riot zones, opened up the microphones to community leaders, and urged people to exercise caution and restraint. After Dr. King's assassination, there was a movement among the more militant African Americans in the radio industry to extend the "Black Power" cultural agenda to broadcast programming, especially on the newly emerging FM stations. Although these efforts eventually collapsed, while in progress they accounted for some

groundbreaking programs and left their imprint on black radio formats nationwide. (See Part 5.)

Black Power militants also made station ownership a major issue for African Americans involved in the radio industry. By the mid-1970s, a coalition of black media activists and entrepreneurs was pressuring the broadcast industry and the federal government to open up more opportunities for people of color to purchase their own broadcast outlets. At the time, African Americans owned less than 1 percent of the nation's radio stations. As a result of this offensive, the number of minority-owned stations increased steadily in the late 1970s and continued to do so well into the 1980s. From the late 1980s to the end of the twentieth century, however, this trend has reversed, mostly due to ownership deregulation by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). In the 1990s, the number of black-owned stations has declined; overall, they make up less than 3 percent of the nation's total. (See Part 6.)

Voice Over chronicles the rise of black radio in the twentieth century, from its prewar roots in racial ventriloquy, to its postwar contributions to the African American freedom struggle, to its current status as the most popular mass medium in the black community, as well as that community's most vital source of information and culture. Along the way, the book documents the role black radio has played in extending the popularity and influence of black music nationwide, helping shape the always-changing urban black vernacular, mobilizing African Americans around political and cultural issues, and galvanizing a sense of community among African Americans—especially at the local level. But first and foremost, *Voice Over* is the untold story of the people involved in the making of black radio—the unheralded programmers, producers, entertainers, entrepreneurs, and activists who devoted their careers and much of their lives to creating an African American presence on the airwaves. The reconstruction of their collective history, told in their own words whenever possible, is the major objective of this study.

PART V

“Payin’ the Cost to Be the Boss”: Black-Owned Radio

In today's society most forces seem to pull people apart, marginalizing them and isolating them. Average citizens seem to have little real opportunity to speak directly to the officials who daily make critical decisions which affect thousands of people. This is the arena where “Community Focused Talk Radio” can play a major role. Community-focused talk radio can build a sense of family between individuals, thus enabling them to solve their own problems . . . provide valuable solace for the lonely and elderly, marshal resources to solve community problems, provide priceless business and entrepreneurial information . . . provide guidance in handling a difficult situation, alert the community as to how and when their active participation may be required, and become an electronic university to educate across the lines of age and class. Community-focused talk radio provides the necessary link between the public servant and those who are served. . . . [It] gives a voice, provides a platform and creates the marketplace where constructive community interchange can take place.

—Cathy Hughes, founder of Radio One



Bridging the Ownership Gap

Although industry insiders were well aware of the racial balance of power in radio station ownership, public discussion of the situation did not get underway until the 1970s. The first two black-owned stations in the country were established in 1949, but the number did not grow decisively or steadily over the next two decades. As we have seen in preceding chapters, African Americans in the radio industry were largely relegated to jobs as entertainers and then disc jockeys—and even those positions were not secure.

In a provocative essay, "The White Captivity of Black Radio," Fred Ferretti, who covered the radio industry for the *New York Times*, reported on the glaring disparities. One of the first mainstream media reporters to address these issues, Ferretti revealed that in 1970 only sixteen of the country's eight thousand radio outlets were black owned—.002 percent of the national total. Of that total, 310 stations targeted black listeners on a full-time basis. White ownership dominated the black appeal operations and garnered most of their advertising billings, which in 1969 amounted to \$35 million overall. White control over management and programming policies invariably meant that white owners hired white managers to run their operations. Ferretti could locate only one black station manager in a white-owned station. Moreover, the white-owned and -managed stations that catered to

African Americans eagerly adopted the new Top Forty soul music format in the 1960s, effectively ending the black disc jockeys' control over the musical content of their own shows. Top Forty formats also marginalized—and in many cases, eliminated—the local news and public-affairs programming that had been a hallmark of black appeal radio in earlier years.¹

Ferretti was especially critical of the five major white-owned soul radio chains that dominated the black appeal market: Rollins, Inc.; Rounsaville Radio Stations; Sounderling Broadcasting Corporation; Speidel Broadcasters, Inc.; and United Broadcasting Company. These radio chains all featured the Top Forty soul format, and Ferretti discovered that many of them were also "cooking" their personnel numbers to make it appear that their stations had black news and public-affairs staffs. One case that stood out was that of Charles Anthony, who hosted an afternoon drive-time show on Speidel's WSOK in Savannah, Georgia. In addition to his disc jockey position, Anthony was listed as being the station's program director, news director, and public-affairs director. Commenting on this arrangement, he told the reporter: "I wish I had the money to go with all my titles."² If Anthony was performing all those duties, he obviously wasn't being paid for it.

Ferretti also surveyed the nation's sixteen black-owned stations, finding that only nine of these outlets were wholly black owned; the other seven were controlled by African Americans but had some white investors. The ten AM stations were all located in the South (six) and the Midwest (four), and soul music superstar James Brown owned three of them. One AM/FM combo was owned by the Bell Broadcasting Company in Inkster, Michigan. Two of the FM stations were noncommercial outlets owned by black colleges: Hampton University's WHOU-FM in Hampton, Virginia, and Shaw University's WSHA-FM in Raleigh, North Carolina. Although Ferretti failed to include two other noncommercial FM outlets owned by black colleges, their inclusion would not have changed his bleak assessment of black-owned radio. The numbers spoke for themselves.³

The Ownership Issue up to 1970

In 1949, two African American entrepreneurs purchased radio stations. In the spring, businessman Andrew "Skip" Carter bought KPRS-AM in Olath, Kansas; that fall, he moved the station to Kansas City, Missouri.

The one-hundred-watt daytime operation had been off the air for two years before Carter revived it as a black appeal station. Almost overnight, KPRS became the most listened-to African American outlet in the Kansas City market. That fall, in Atlanta, accountant J. B. Blayton purchased one thousand-watt WERD-AM for \$50,000 and made his son, J. B. Blayton Jr., the station manager. Young Blayton hired radio veteran Jack Gibson as his program director; together, they turned WERD into a black appeal outlet. Like KPRS, it was an instant hit with African American listeners, and both stations became important and profitable radio outlets in their respective locales. Yet seven years passed before another black-owned station signed on the air.⁴

When WCHB-AM was launched in 1956 in Inkster, Michigan, a black suburb of Detroit, it was the first African American-owned station built from the ground up. Dr. Haley Bell, a wealthy black dentist, founded the station as a family enterprise; he and his two sons-in-law co-owned the station's parent company, Bell Broadcasting; and one of them, Dr. Wendell Cox, also served as WCHB's first general manager. The black appeal AM operation was successful enough to bankroll an FM sister station, WCHD-FM, which went on the air in the early 1960s. But generally speaking, black ownership gains were minimal during this period, and the ratio of white to black owners was growing larger. Restaurateur Charles J. Pickard's acquisition of WMPP in Chicago in 1963 created the fifth African American-owned radio outlet in the country—out of approximately seven thousand stations overall.⁵

When "The White Captivity of Black Radio" was published in 1970, the storm brewing in the African American community over black radio was largely focused on employment and programming issues, rather than on ownership. The soul radio chains' marriage to the Top Forty format generated the most protest, and even some organized opposition. In Columbia, South Carolina, black citizen groups formally complained to the FCC about the employment practices of WOIC, owned by the Speidel group. Their major grievance was that African American DJs were given titles like public-affairs director, news director, and program director but not the appropriate duties, pay, or authority to make decisions. In Nashville, WVOL, a Rounsaville outlet, was involved in a long labor dispute with its black air staff; at issue were wages, playlist restrictions, and the station's refusal to hire African Americans in management positions.⁶

In Washington, D.C., United Broadcasting's WOOL was the target of local protests over hiring practices. When United ignored the protests, the SCLC launched a nationwide boycott of the company's radio stations—none of which had African Americans in management positions. About the same time, the Atlanta NAACP, allied with local black broadcasters, spearheaded efforts to open up employment opportunities for African Americans at the city's radio stations, all of which were under the control of white business interests after the Blaytons resold WERD in 1969.⁷

In addition to protests over employment practices were some grassroots outbursts against the lack of meaningful programming in the Top Forty soul formats. An ad hoc group in Kansas City, Kansas, picketed the local soul station in the summer of 1970, demanding that it upgrade its informational programming and become more responsive to the social needs of the local black community. The next year, in Newark, New Jersey, Black Power activists protested against WNIJ, part of the Rollins chain, for doing away with its community affairs shows. Their criticism of the station, published in a local newspaper, read in part:

Stations like this feed our communities and our children monotonous music, skimpy news, and very little relevant programming. The only thing our children can aspire to are songs about drugs, getting high, and abnormal love affairs, with nothing about what's going on and what needs to be done to better our community. We are protesting . . . against the pattern of paternalistic, mediocre broadcasting that has set in at the so-called soul stations around the country. Are the Black and Puerto Rican communities to be continually insulted by programming that imagines all we can do is wiggle our backsides and chug-a-lug brew?⁸

Within the broadcast industry, the NARTA was the first organization to raise the ownership issue on a national level. As early as 1964, the association's Legislative Committee began compiling figures on black-owned stations and passing them on to the NAB and the FCC. In 1967, the demand for more black ownership became a plank in the official NARTA agenda, and under the leadership of the New Breed, the organization began to seek ways to encourage the sale of radio stations to African Americans. A year later, the ownership question became even more relevant to

New Breed leaders after they participated in a retreat at the Center for the Study of Democracy, a liberal think tank located in Santa Barbara, California. Del Shields and his fellow NARTA activists spent a weekend there with a number of prominent media experts and scholars, discussing the plight of black radio. At the end of the retreat, the think-tank specialists recommended the obvious; as Shields recalled: "They sat there and they said—'The problem is that you don't own anything. So unless you own something, you can't change it . . . rather than you talking about conditions for the disc jockeys and for radio announcers, own the station.'"⁹

Among those in attendance at the Santa Barbara retreat was Nicholas Johnson, the maverick FCC commissioner who, in 1968, was one of the country's most outspoken advocates of broadcast reform. He volunteered to work with the New Breed on a campaign to increase black ownership in broadcasting. After returning to the nation's capital, Johnson began to raise the issue in government and industry policy-making circles; in addition, he helped coordinate NARTA's lobbying efforts at the FCC and the NAB. Del Shields and his associates, with aid from Nick Johnson, facilitated the sale of two AM radio stations to entertainer James Brown. But the discord and factional strife that eventually destroyed NARTA also undermined its push for black-owned broadcast outlets. Then Richard Nixon's election to the presidency in 1968 made Johnson a political outcast, and he soon left the FCC. With its leadership in disarray, the campaign for minority ownership stalled.¹⁰

The Decade of NABOB and NBMC

The 1970s would see the number of African American-owned stations soar, from 20 to 140 within ten years—an increase of over 700 percent. However, black-owned outlets still made up less than 2 percent of the nation's total. During this period, an informal network of new African American media advocacy groups, including the National Association of Black Owned Broadcasters (NABOB), the National Black Media Coalition (NBMC), and the Communications Brain Trust, which had been formed by the Congressional Black Caucus, was engaged in developing specific economic and political strategies to bolster African American ownership in the broadcast industry. Moreover, these groups were in the

forefront of the lobbying efforts to implement these new "affirmative action" proposals.

NABOB can be traced back to the first conference on minority ownership in broadcasting in 1973. Sponsored by the NAB and the brainchild of Patite Grace (its community affairs director) and a handful of black station owners, the conference committed the NAB to a policy of doubling the number of black-owned stations over the next three years. That goal, however, was never reached, and after three years of trying to implement it from within the association, a renegade group of black owners moved on to form NABOB in 1976. Among its founders were Skip Carter, longtime owner of KPRS in Kansas City, and Percy Sutton's son, Pierre Sutton, a vice president at Inner City Broadcasting. The first president of the association was Elliott Franks, the new owner of WOIC in Columbia, South Carolina. He characterized the NABOB mission as follows: "The black broadcaster faces some very real problems that are not addressed within the context of the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB). We look to NABOB to impact upon the solutions to the problems which restrict black entry into broadcast ownership and constrain financial growth once the property has been established."¹¹

The NBMC was an outgrowth of Black Efforts for Soul Television (BEST), a media pressure group founded in the nation's capital in 1969. The organization's founder and first coordinator, Bill Wright, was a strong advocate of using broadcast license challenges as a tactic to increase African Americans' access to the airwaves. Toward that end, he and his staff conducted a series of workshops for black media activists around the country, designed to show the participants how to file a "Petition of Denial" with the FCC during the obligatory license renewal of the targeted station. The petitions were based on racial discrimination in the workplace and in the programming. One of the workshops was held in Houston, and among those in attendance was Pluria Marshall, who at the time was the director of the city's Operation Bread Basket. Marshall, a native of Houston, was a former DJ with a history of media activism. In the mid-1960s, he helped organize a successful DJ strike for higher wages at KYOK, a local soul station; in addition, he was active in NARTAA for a few years and was a former chairman of Houston's Black Broadcasters' Coalition.¹²

Bill Wright's workshop had a profound effect on Pluria Marshall. It renewed his interest in grassroots broadcast reform, and he quickly became

one of Wright's most promising disciples. In 1971, Marshall organized Black Citizens for Media Access, for the purpose of challenging the licenses of Houston's two soul radio outlets: KYOK and KCOH. Under threat of these challenges, both stations signed agreements with the citizens' group, specifying that they would hire more African Americans, especially in management positions, and improve the quality of programming. Then, in 1972, Wright fell gravely ill, and in a matter of months BEST ceased to exist. Determined to carry on his mentor's work, Marshall moved up to Washington, D.C., and, with help from a network of former BEST supporters, founded the NBMC in the fall of 1973.¹³

Under Pluria Marshall's leadership, the NBMC quickly emerged as a formidable broadcast pressure group. It took over BEST's role as the key facilitator of license challenges by black media activists, lobbied the FCC for policy changes that would improve the lot of minority broadcasters, and worked to uncover and expose racial discrimination in the broadcast industry. Marshall was blunt about the NBMC's mission: "We got into the broadcast game to kick ass and take names. We're here to hold their feet to the fire." One of the fronts where the NBMC made some headway was at the FCC. With help from Ben Hooks, the first African American to serve as an FCC commissioner, the NBMC was able to arrange a meeting with FCC chairman Richard Wiley. At that meeting, Marshall made the case for increased minority ownership in broadcasting; in response, Wiley offered to arrange for an FCC-sponsored conference on the subject. But before the plans for the gathering could be finalized, there was a change in political administrations, and Wiley stepped down as the head of the FCC.¹⁴

With the Democrats in power, the political climate became more favorable for movement on the minority ownership issue. The Carter White House sent its own set of proposals for increasing the number of minority-owned broadcast outlets to the FCC for consideration. In response to the White House initiative, as well as to mounting pressure from the NBMC, NABOB, and the Congressional Black Caucus, the FCC held its long-awaited conference late in 1977. Tax certificates, distress sales, and new frequency allocations were proposed as a means of increasing opportunities for minorities.¹⁵

Of the three proposals, only the tax certificate plan, under which the FCC would issue tax credits to station owners who sold their stations to minorities, gained widespread support in the broadcast industry, including

a strong endorsement by the NAB. Moreover, White House policy supported the strategy. According to NABOB's executive director, James Winston: "It was viewed throughout the industry as a win-win proposition, benefiting 'minorities and sellers.'"¹⁶

The distress-sale proposal allowed station owners whose licenses were in jeopardy of not being renewed to sell to minority buyers at a price somewhat below market value. Otherwise, the owners would lose everything. Initiated by the Congressional Black Caucus and endorsed by the White House, the distress sale was opposed by the NAB, which feared that "unscrupulous minority groups" would use the policy to "blackmail" white station owners into selling with threats of costly license challenges.¹⁷

The plan to open up new radio frequencies for minority broadcasters divided the participants. While it was favored by the NBMC, NABOB, and the Congressional Black Caucus, it was not on the White House wish list, and it was strongly opposed by the NAB. The white station owners would support new frequency allocations only if they could also get a piece of the action, but minority broadcast advocates objected that the competition would undermine the purpose of the policy. The conference ended with a standoff on this issue.¹⁸

"Capital formation" emerged as a major concern during the conference deliberations. How could minority entrepreneurs get their hands on enough money to buy a station? In 1978, radio stations in the major urban markets, where most African Americans lived, were selling for big bucks; the market value of KDAY in Los Angeles was \$9 million, that of WVON in Chicago was \$10 million, and that of WBLI in New York City was \$17 million. Few black entrepreneurs could raise that amount of money, and minority entrepreneurs had nowhere to turn for financial backing. The private sector's minority lending record was abysmal, and the federal government had no record at all. At the time, the Small Business Administration (SBA) did not make loans to minority broadcasters. Black radio station owner Ragan Henry told the conference participants: "If you don't deal with the dollars, then there's no need to talk about policy."¹⁹

The FCC conference seems to have given the Carter administration the push to end the policy logjam. In February 1978, the White House reversed SBA policy, authorizing it to make loans to minority broadcasters who wished to purchase stations. Two months later, the FCC endorsed tax certificates and distress sales, but it tabled new frequency allocations for

minority broadcasters, rendering the option dead in the water. For the first time in its forty-five-year history, the FCC had adopted a policy to increase minority ownership in the broadcast industry. Over the next three years, close to one hundred new black-owned radio stations went on the air. A new era seemed to be at hand.²⁰

Networking Black Radio

Another major breakthrough in the ownership struggle during the 1970s was the launch of two black-owned radio networks: the National Black Network (NBN) in New York City and the Pittsburgh-based Sheridan Broadcasting Network (SBN). Their only predecessor, a black-owned and -operated network, had failed. Leonard Evans, an African American entrepreneur who published a black radio trade magazine called *Tuesday*, founded the National Negro Network in 1954, with syndicated program offerings including a newscast, two black soap operas (*The Story of Ruby Valentine* and *The Life of Anna Lewis*), and two variety shows, hosted by Cab Calloway and Ethel Waters, respectively. Evans's network attracted clientele by offering its program fare at bargain-basement prices to black appeal outlets around the country. Although Evans had about fifty regular subscribers, he lacked capital and operated in the red from day one; he had to fold about a year after he began.²¹

NBN: The Trailblazer

The country's first successful black-owned radio network, NBN, was launched in July 1973 by Eugene Jackson, Sidney Small, and Del Rayee, the owners of Unity Broadcasting Corporation. Small and Rayee were veterans of mainstream network radio, but Jackson was a newcomer to the industry. A native of Kansas City and a college graduate, Jackson had worked as an engineer for Colgate-Palmolive. After the King assassination, however, he turned to venture capitalism: "I felt the solution to black problems was not social, but economic." He moved to New York City, earned a master's degree in business from Columbia University, and worked as a fund-raiser for minority economic development ventures. One of the projects, a plan to start a black radio network, was being developed by a small

group of broadcasters that included Sid Small and Del Raye. Jackson raised an unprecedented \$1 million to bankroll the operation; then, together with Small and Raye, he founded the Unity Broadcasting Corporation, the network's parent company, in 1973. Jackson was the driving force behind the new network and would be its first president.²²

NBN started primarily as a black news service, producing five-minute newscasts on an hourly basis, a nightly sports report, a nightly business report, and a news commentary show. From the outset, NBN had an impressive roster. Radio journalist Roy Wood, who hosted the commentary show (*One Man's Opinion*), was famous for his award-winning coverage of the civil rights movement during the 1960s while working for WVON in Chicago. He taught for a year in Howard University's new journalism program before becoming a leading figure at NBN. Sportscaster Frank Banister, who held a doctorate in sports education and had played major-league baseball for the New York Mets, was well known and respected in black sports circles. Mal Goode, who was the first African American to work as a reporter on network television when he joined the ABC news team in 1962, had won numerous honors as a broadcast journalist. Goode was considered an expert on international affairs; his distinguished service as the president of the United Nations Correspondents Association gave him a unique edge in covering the United Nations for the network.²³

The NBN struggled for its first two years of operation. Although it quickly signed up affiliates, national advertisers were slow to come on board. By 1976, after having run up a deficit of \$2 million, Jackson and his associates managed to reverse their fortunes: NBN brought in \$2.5 million that year, and revenues exceeded expenditures. NBN's success seemed assured. With eighty-two affiliates, it reached an estimated 17 million listeners. The network had about fifty full-time employees, two-thirds of whom worked in the news operation, and close to two hundred black reporters, or "stringers," in the field on a part-time basis. The number and scope of its program offerings had expanded in impressive ways. The new public-affairs shows included *Black Issues and the Black Press*, a weekly half-hour review of the major stories featured in African American newspapers, and *Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow*, an educational series designed to highlight the relationship between black Americans and black Africans. On a weekly cultural program, *The Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee Story Hour*, the famous the-

atrical couple used folktales, poetry, music, and drama to tell stories by and for African Americans.²⁴

The NBN's growth and prosperity continued throughout the 1980s; by the end of the decade, the network had ninety-four affiliates, 20 million potential black listeners, and was grossing over \$10 million a year. Program additions included new consumer-oriented shows such as *Energy Insight* and *Short Cuts*, a women's series produced by Marie Haylock and titled *The Action Woman*, a feature on black entertainers called *Stage Door*, and a late-night call-in show, *Night Talk*, hosted by Bob Law from WWRL in New York City. Law's pioneering show quickly became the most popular black radio talk program in the country. In the meantime, the parent company, Unity Broadcasting, was working to diversify its holdings in the broadcast industry. As early as 1980, the company purchased its first two radio stations, the WDAS AM/FM combo in Philadelphia; a few years later, it bought into a cable franchise in New York City. By the 1990s, the Unity Broadcasting Corporation seemed to be positioning itself to become the nation's first major black media conglomerate.²⁵

SBN: The Powerhouse

The other African American network, the Sheridan Broadcasting Network (SBN), enjoyed an even more rapid rise. SBN was an outgrowth of the Sheridan Broadcasting Corporation (SBC) and the Mutual Black Network (MBN), both founded in 1972. The SBC was the brainchild of Ronald Davenport, dean of the law school at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh. A native of Philadelphia, Davenport attended law school at Temple University in his hometown and went on to earn an advanced law degree from Yale. In the mid-1960s, he was involved in the civil rights struggle in the South, defending jailed activists in Mississippi during the 1964 Freedom Summer project and in Alabama during the volatile Selma marches. Later in the decade, Davenport was hired as a law professor at Duquesne and settled in Pittsburgh with his wife. Although successful in his new career, he had come to the conclusion that the gains of the civil rights movement could be enjoyed and sustained only if African Americans made economic progress, in particular, ownership and control of businesses and cultural institutions. On the lookout for a promising business venture even while serving as dean of the law school, Davenport

recognized an opportunity late in 1971: when a local soul radio chain, the Dynamic Broadcasting Corporation, put four of its stations up for sale (WAMO AM/FM in Pittsburgh, WUFO-AM in Buffalo, and WILD-AM in Boston), Davenport and his wife set up Sheridan Broadcasting, named after the street they lived on, and began to recruit black investors. Within a year, they raised the necessary capital and purchased the four stations for \$2 million.²⁶

The Mutual Broadcasting System (MBS), a low-budget and loose-knit radio network with some five hundred affiliates, set up the Mutual Black Network (MBN) in the spring of 1972—a few months before the NBN made its debut. Initially a black news service, with teams of journalists based in New York City and Washington, D.C., MBN produced a series of daily five-minute newscasts and sportscasts for distribution to Mutual's soul radio affiliates. Its news director in New York was Sheldon Lewis, a broadcast journalist from Charleston, South Carolina, where he had worked as a reporter for WPAL-AM and WUSN-TV. The Washington, D.C., office was headed by Ed Castleberry, a veteran newscaster from WEDR-AM in Birmingham, Alabama. Ron Davenport had become aware of MBN's news service in the course of overseeing the operation of WAMO-AM, a Mutual affiliate, and immediately saw its potential to reach and service a national black audience. Over the next few years, as the understaffed and underfinanced news network struggled to stay afloat, Davenport entered into negotiations to purchase MBN. Finally a deal was cut, and the buyout proceeded in two stages. In 1976, SBC purchased 49 percent of NBN and took over the management of the news service; less than two years later, it bought the remaining 51 percent, moved the network headquarters to Pittsburgh, and renamed it the Sheridan Broadcasting Network (SBN). The total cost of the buyout came to about \$5 million.²⁷

Even before the final transaction, Ron Davenport and his associates at Sheridan Broadcasting were broadening the scope and increasing the number of the syndicated programs produced by MBN. To produce and host *Straight Up*, its first daily news commentary show, the network hired Bev Smith, who would gain prominence for her outspoken editorials on race relations and her undercover reporting on prostitution, homelessness, and drug trafficking in the inner-city ghettos. Other new public-affairs offerings included a weekly update of business developments relevant to the black community, *Minority Business Report*, a daily health

feature, *To Your Health*; and a weekly spotlight on environmental news. Expanded sports coverage featured regular broadcasts of black college football games and the network's first weekly sports show, *The Black College Sports Review*.²⁸

When Sheridan Broadcasting gained complete control over MBN in 1978, the network had ninety-one affiliates and was bringing in about \$3 million a year in revenues, giving SBN a slight lead over its principal rival, NBN, which that year had eighty affiliates and grossed \$2.5 million. Over the next decade, the Sheridan radio network continued to expand its reach and beef up the syndicated program offerings. Journalist Bob Ellison was hired as SBN's first White House correspondent; in addition to his stories for the daily newscasts, he produced a thirty-minute public-affairs show called *White House Report*. The network also launched a series of short features, such as the ninety-second daily financial report *Money Smarts*, and a sixty-second movie review, *Coming Soon*. Three new sports shows—*Major League Baseball Notebook*, *NFL Playbook*, and *NBA Report*—were created to provide in-depth coverage of the nation's most popular professional athletes and teams. In addition, Sheridan continued to broaden its commitment to black college sports. It established a national poll for black college football teams and an annual awards banquet for black college athletes. The Sheridan network's support of black colleges reached well beyond its sports department. In 1985, SBN began to simulcast Lou Rawls's yearly *Parade of Stars* telethon, which raised money for the United Negro College Fund (UNCF). The simulcast turned the Rawls extravaganza into the most lucrative telethon fund-raiser in the country. In addition, Sheridan donated over \$1 million to UNCF in the 1980s and gave black college radio stations free use of its syndicated programming. By the end of the decade, the Sheridan radio network had over 150 affiliates and close to \$15 million in yearly revenues.²⁹

AURN: The Crowning Achievement

Late in 1991, the Sheridan Broadcasting Corporation consummated the biggest deal in the history of black radio, purchasing NBN from Eugene Jackson and merging it with SBN to create American Urban Radio Networks (AURN). Headquartered in Pittsburgh, the new network has signed up over 250 affiliate stations, with the potential of reaching 90

percent of the nation's African American population. It is the only black radio network on the airwaves in the 1990s and the third largest network in the radio industry. Its five divisions—news, public affairs, sports, entertainment, promotion and marketing—offer affiliates a variety of programs and services.³⁰

The news division offers affiliate stations a choice between two separate newscast services: the 3.5-minute newscast on the hour (from 6 A.M. to 10 P.M. on a daily basis) or the 5-minute newscast at half past the hour. The news operation has bureaus in New York City, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Atlanta, and in Washington, D.C. Its syndicated satellite newscasts reach an estimated 8 million listeners on a weekly basis. AURN's public-affairs division produces both regular and special-information programs. Many of its regular public-affairs shows are popular holdovers from the 1980s, including Bob Law's *Night Talk* and Bev Smith's *Straight Up*. The special programs focus on yearly events, such as Black History Month (*A Salute to Great Black Americans*), Mother's Day (*In Celebration of Black Mothers*), Father's Day (*Strong Men Getting Stronger*), Dr. Martin Luther King's Birthday (*King: A Man and His Dream*), and the national elections (*Election Day: Urban America*). The network also offers affiliates syndicated short features on health, money, consumer affairs, and minority business ventures.³¹

AURN's sports division features the same lineup of syndicated programming that the old Sheridan network had in place in the 1980s. In contrast, the entertainment division has created an entirely new line of syndicated cultural shows highlighting black music (*USA Music Magazine*), film (*Coming Soon*), media (*Inside Scoop*), comedy (*STRZ Funline*), and women (*Cameos of Black Women*). Also new, the promoting and marketing division provides AURN's affiliates and advertisers with a wide range of services—everything from sweepstake promotions to market research to direct mail campaigns.³²

Ron Davenport's American Urban Radio Networks is one of black radio's most important success stories of the 1990s, and his crowning achievement as a pioneering African American media entrepreneur. Over the past decade, AURN has been a major source of black radio's syndicated programming—in the process, becoming indispensable to its growth and prosperity. But perhaps even more impressive, Davenport's new radio network conglomerate is competitive with its white corporate counterparts on

a national level. This radio industry breakthrough culminates four decades of network-building ventures by black entrepreneurs.

The Tom Joyner Morning Show

Another significant breakthrough for black radio networking in the 1990s has been the emergence of *The Tom Joyner Morning Show* as a popular fixture in urban radio markets nationwide. Joyner's weekday broadcast is the most prominent black radio program in years to be syndicated nationally by a mainstream media corporation, ABC. It is currently heard on ninety-three stations by nearly 1.4 million daily listeners. The show is an outgrowth of the recently established "Urban Adult" format, which targets African American adults with a musical mix of classic soul and R & B hits from the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. But the show is far more than a disc-jockey driven operation. Tom Joyner has assembled a team of four comedians—J. Anthony Brown, Miss Dupree, George Wallace, and Myra J.—along with newscaster Sybil Wilkes and commentator Tavis Smiley; they produce an upbeat and fast-paced series of comedy routines, impersonations, satirical skits, news updates, interviews, and listener call-ins to blend with Joyner's musical selections. The more notable segments include a daily soap opera spoof titled "It's Your World"; a "Player Hall of Fame," which lampoons public figures involved in sex scandals; and Smiley's hard-hitting commentaries challenging a wide spectrum of racial injustices, from the auction of slave memorabilia at Christie's in New York City to discriminatory advertising policies in the radio industry. In addition to this full lineup, Joyner takes his show on the road, doing special broadcasts before large and enthusiastic audiences at host stations around the country.³³

Tom Joyner was born and raised in Tuskegee, Alabama, where he eventually graduated from Tuskegee Institute with a degree in sociology. He broke into radio in 1970 when a college friend offered him a job as a DJ on an AM station in nearby Montgomery. Over the next two decades, Joyner honed his skills as an "old-school" personality jock on a series of stations in Montgomery, Memphis, St. Louis, Chicago, and Dallas (which eventually became his home). In the late 1980s, he began to host both a morning drive-time show in Dallas and an evening drive-time show in Chicago; he accomplished this feat by commuting between the two loca-

tions on a commercial jet each weekday. The novelty attracted national media attention, and Joyner became known as the "Fly Jock." In 1994, the ABC Radio network offered to fund and syndicate a beefed-up version of his Dallas-based program. A few months later, *The Tom Joyner Morning Show* debuted nationally.³⁴

Since 1994, Joyner's show has been successful on several fronts: it has built up a large and influential audience among African American baby boomers throughout the country; it has helped rejuvenate the careers of such R & B acts as Kool and the Gang, the Manhattanians, and Jerry "Ice Man" Butler; and it has paved the way for other black radio syndication ventures by proving they can be profitable and competitive in urban markets. Yet the raucous style of comedy that Joyner and his cohorts perform has generated some controversy in black media circles. Critics charge that some of the material is offensive to African Americans; in particular, they cite the show's fake black history segments, which satirize the notion of a Black History Month. Some of the harshest critics even contend that the program is a throwback to the days of *Amos 'n' Andy*. Joyner concedes that some material may offend certain listeners, but he defends the concept of the show: "The formula is, if you can make people laugh, then you can get them to listen. And if you can get people to listen, you might be able to get them to make a difference."³⁵ Given the size and loyalty of the audience, Tom Joyner's old-school formula seems to be working.

Deregulation and the Downsizing of Diversity

During the 1990s, large media corporations with deep pockets have aggressively taken advantage of the FCC's deregulation of radio ownership, which took place in two stages between 1992 and 1996. In previous decades, a company could own only two stations (one AM, one FM) in a market and no more than seven nationwide. The rationale for this policy was that it would ensure diversity in radio ownership and programming. During the Reagan era, however, deregulation became the FCC's major preoccupation, superceding the goal of diversity. Stations were no longer required to meet public-interest standards in programming; license renewals were simplified, while renewal periods were lengthened; and the

door was left open for the rapid resale of licenses when the three-year minimum holding period for station ownership was eliminated.

The rising price tag for stations, coupled with the 1990 economic recession, created radio industry pressure for ownership consolidation in order to minimize losses. Such mergers would cut administrative costs and give owners more leverage with advertisers. The FCC caved in to industry pressure in 1992, adopting a new "duopoly" rule, which allowed broadcasters to own a combination of two AM and two FM stations in a market. Over the next four years, more than 50 percent of the country's ten thousand commercial stations were involved in duopoly mergers.³⁶

The landmark 1996 Telecommunications Act gave more momentum to radio ownership concentration. The new law allows a company to own up to eight stations (five FM, three AM) in a single market, and the national limit has been eliminated. These changes set off another frenzy of mergers and buyouts among radio group owners, leading to the rise of "superduopolies"—larger and larger radio groups with significant ownership blocs in local and regional markets. The two big winners to date are Westinghouse/CBS, with 175 stations and \$1.5 billion in yearly revenues, and Hicks, Muse, Tate and Furst Holdings, which owns 395 radio stations with \$1.46 billion in revenues.³⁷

Ownership consolidation is having an adverse effect on the prosperity and proliferation of black-owned stations. The decline in revenue and numbers is taking place because a majority of these stations are individually owned and operated, putting them at a big disadvantage when competing with the new duopolies and superduopolies for advertising dollars. Advertisers are much more likely to buy spots on a cluster of stations than on a single station in the same market, since the cluster gives them access to a larger pool of consumers. Recently, NABOB executive director James Winston warned his members: "The industry is consolidating rapidly. Small owners—particularly ours—are being squeezed out of the business by duopolies and superduopolies. The radio business is all about advertising. If you can't compete because you can't deliver the audience for the price that a group of stations can, you are going to get squeezed out of the business because the advertisers are going to stop coming to you. And that's what the new rules mean. And that's a major threat to African American ownership."³⁸

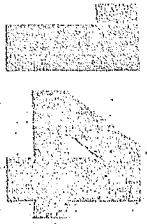
Ownership deregulation and consolidation, however, are not the only reasons for the current plight of black-owned radio. The two FCC policies

(distress sales and tax certificates) that facilitated the sale of stations to minority broadcasters in the 1970s and 1980s are no longer operational. The FCC's deregulation of public-service requirements in the 1980s virtually eliminated the need for distress sales; the last one took place in 1986. From 1978 to 1986, thirty-eight radio stations were sold to minority owners under the agency's distress sale program. The FCC's tax certificate policy was invoked in the sale of nearly 250 radio stations between 1978 and 1994. But a series of high-profile "fronting" scandals—white investors using minority figureheads to secure tax write-offs in station buyouts—gave the Republican-controlled Congress a reason to demand that the policy be rescinded, which in turn caused the FCC to terminate the tax certificate program in 1995. According to media activist Pluria Marshall: "Killing the tax certificate—it was just pure, unadulterated racism. And along with the elimination of the ownership caps on radio and television, you will probably see the demise of minority ownership, period. I'd say within the next ten years—we could lose eighty stations."³⁹

The recent decline in the number of black-owned stations lends credence to Marshall's gloomy forecast. African American ownership peaked in 1991 at 110 AM and seventy-one FM stations. The next year, with the duopoly policy in effect, there was an unprecedented loss of one AM and seven FM outlets. The FCC's 1996 superduopoly policy sparked another round of losses; that same year, five black-owned FM stations were sold to corporate radio groups. The lone African American FCC commissioner during this period, Andrew Barrett, who cast the only vote against doing away with station ownership limits, warned that "consolidation makes small independent black owned stations a harder sell to advertisers. It is used to establish local and regional pockets of concentration, thus having a negative impact on black radio stations." Echoing Barrett's concerns is Cathy Hughes, founder of Radio One and one of the few African American owners to take advantage of deregulation: "The allowing of multiple station ownerships in the same market pits the big guys against the little guys. In the world of broadcasting, all African American broadcasters are the little guys. So it's the big fish gobbling up the little fish, and over the past few years, the number of stations that we own has been declining. You either have to buy or you have to sell."⁴⁰

Current ownership trends in the radio industry have put African American broadcasters on the defensive for the first time in decades. The

gains made over the past twenty years are being rolled back. The situation may be grave at present, but that should not detract from the accomplishments of the many black radio entrepreneurs who have successfully bridged the ownership gap since the civil rights era. Their stories mark a major turning point in the history of black radio.



Entrepreneurs with Attitude

Before the civil rights era, the first black radio station owners, such as J. B. Blayton in Atlanta and Haley Bell in Detroit, were college-educated professionals from outside the broadcast industry

whose approach to the business centered on local markets, and whose political agendas were modest, at best. As described in earlier chapters, the civil rights struggle demonstrated black radio's unrivaled potential to engage and mobilize African Americans for a common cause, and it inspired the black political uprisings within the broadcast industry that eventually brought the ownership issue to a head. The next wave of black radio entrepreneurs showed more political motivation than the pioneers had. Although radio still attracted black professionals—for instance, law professor Ron Davenport, venture capitalist Eugene Jackson, and *Ebony* publisher Robert Johnson—the majority of the new entrepreneurs came from other sectors of the black community. Along with celebrated black entertainers like James Brown and Stevie Wonder and powerful black politicians like Percy Sutton and Willie Brown were people who had come up through the ranks of black radio—Cathy Hughes, Purvis Spann, and Roy Woods, among others. What distinguished them from their predecessors was the desire to advance an African American social agenda.

"The Hardest-Working Man in Show Business"

James Brown's brief career as a black radio entrepreneur in the late 1960s and early 1970s launched subsequent African American ventures into station ownership. Brown was not an exemplary businessman, but he brought public attention to black-owned stations. An unlikely candidate for stardom, he grew up in abject poverty, left school in the seventh grade, spent four years in prison for petty theft, and failed to catch on as a boxer or minor-league baseball player before finally embarking on a career as a performer in 1953. Over the next decade, James Brown built up a huge following on the "chitlin circuit," playing uniquely propelling, nonstop polyrhythmic R & B dance music and calling himself the "Hardest-Working Man in Show Business." In tune with the civil rights struggle, James Brown and his music came to represent black pride and empowerment in an era of social turmoil. His first top-ten hit, "Papa's Got a Brand New Bag" (1965), announced the arrival of a "New Breed" of African Americans:

Come here Sister, Papa's in the swing,
Ain't you hip about what that New Breed bring?
He ain't no drag, Papa's got a brand new bag.

He made racial themes even more explicit in "Say It Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud" (1968), which was adopted as an anthem by the Black Power movement. That year, his fans proclaimed Brown "Soul Brother #1" after he changed his hairstyle from a "process" to a "natural," completing his transformation from social misfit to militant black cultural icon.¹

James Brown purchased his first radio outlet, WRDW in Augusta, Georgia, largely to dramatize his rags-to-riches success story for the hometown folks—especially those who had doubted his talent and tenacity. Located in his hometown, the station had been his boyhood haunt; in the 1940s, he had shined shoes on its front steps and run errands for the staff. When he brought WRDW in 1967, it was already the top-rated black appeal station in the Augusta market. The only major change Brown made was to hire a black management team to run the outlet. A year later, Del Shields approached Brown's accountant, Greg Moses, who also worked with NART, about

buying another black appeal station—WJBE in Knoxville, Tennessee. Brown liked the idea, so Moses and the singer's business manager, Ben But, set up a company, James Brown Broadcasting, and purchased the Knoxville station. A few months later, the new company acquired WEBB in Baltimore and became the first black-owned radio chain in the country.²

During the late 1960s, James Brown's celebrity status among African Americans was comparable to Muhammad Ali's or even Martin Luther King Jr.'s. He was by now a wealthy man and an influential figure on the national political scene. In addition to the three radio stations and a music publishing firm, Brown owned a fleet of cars, a Lear jet, and two multimillion-dollar homes. Moreover, he was being courted by the Washington political elite, especially in crisis situations. In the aftermath of Dr. King's assassination, Brown's scheduled concert in Boston was broadcast live on local television so that he could make an appeal for calm. Afterward, he was flown to the nation's capital, where a riot was in progress, and repeated his calls for restraint and nonviolence on a number of local black radio outlets. During the 1968 presidential campaign, both major party candidates—Hubert Humphrey and Richard Nixon—sought out James Brown for an endorsement. Brown, an early supporter of the slain Bobby Kennedy, was initially contemptuous of Nixon's solicitation: "I don't want to be his bullet proof vest. I didn't want to protect him from my people—deceive them."³ His endorsement belatedly went to Humphrey.

Four years later, James Brown endorsed President Nixon for a second term. By then, he was also an honorary spokesman for "Black Capitalism," a Nixon administration program to revive the inner-city ghettos through private enterprise. Ironically, this new role as a model black capitalist came at a time when Brown's economic empire was starting to crumble. In the early 1970s, after his longtime manager Ben But died, Brown was unable to find someone he trusted enough to manage his various business interests. The radio stations faltered, and Brown's career as an entertainer slumped in the mid-1970s, causing a decline in profits from his live appearances and record sales. To avoid bankruptcy, he sold many of his prized possessions, including the Lear jet and two of the radio stations. He tried to hold onto WRDW in Augusta, but in 1980 the station was sold at a public auction, after Brown defaulted on a \$268,000 loan. By then, the James Brown Broadcasting enterprise was already out of business.⁴

While Brown seemed to recognize the critical role that black radio played in the day-to-day lives of African Americans, he proved to be ill equipped to manage his chain of stations—or even to hire a manager with appropriate experience. All three stations did well enough to generate profits for the parent company, but little of that money was reinvested in the radio chain. The profits supported Brown's lavish lifestyle, and when he ran out of money, he sold the stations to salvage his floundering career. In effect, Brown's radio stations were the accoutrements of his success as a showman, and ultimately expendable.

Percy Sutton Takes on the Inner City

Most of James Brown's successors assumed hands-on control of the day-to-day operation of their stations. Some, like Percy Sutton, had long dreamed of running their own radio station. Sutton was born and raised on a family farm just outside San Antonio, Texas; both his parents were college educated, and along with running the family farm, they worked for the local black school system—his father as a principal and his mother as a teacher. In his youth, Percy aspired to be a broadcast announcer, but segregation prevented him from even entering the city's only radio station. This experience sparked his early interest in owning a station. "I never wanted the mechanical side of radio, I wanted the ownership side. I wanted to talk on the radio about all the discriminatory things—about the injustices I saw all around me."⁵

As a high school graduate, Percy Sutton enlisted in the armed forces in 1941 and remained on active duty until the end of the war. Then he settled in Harlem and took advantage of the GI Bill to earn a bachelor of arts degree from Columbia University and a law degree from the Brooklyn Law School. In the late 1950s, Sutton set up a law practice in Harlem. Among his early clients was Malcolm X, whom he represented until the militant leader's assassination in 1965. (Sutton represents Malcolm's family today.) During this period, the young lawyer was also active in the NAACP. Moving up through the ranks to become the spokesman for the Harlem chapter in the early 1960s, he used this leadership position as a springboard to a career in politics. In 1965, Percy Sutton was elected to the New York State

Assembly from the Harlem district; two years later, he became the first African American to be elected president of the Borough of Manhattan, making him the most powerful black politician in New York City.⁶

During his years in Harlem, Sutton was so preoccupied with his law practice and political career that he neglected his search for a station to buy. By 1965, however, he had entered into informal discussions with Harry Novick, owner of WLIB-AM, about purchasing Novick's Harlem-based outlet. But seven years and "seventy-three visits to financial institutions" passed before Sutton secured the \$2.5 million loan he needed. During that time, Novick added an FM station, WLIB-FM, to his operation and became somewhat reluctant to sell. Sutton formed the Inner City Broadcasting Corporation and negotiated the purchase of WLIB-AM in 1972 for \$2.5 million. A few months later, Inner City brought WLIB-FM for an additional \$600,000. Sutton's forty-year-old dream had come true.⁷

Not surprising, Sutton had a political agenda for Inner City's radio operations. In a 1972 interview he stated: "Communication will form the substance of politics from now on. What we can bring to black people in America in terms of information will determine what black politics will be in the future. Image is part of it, but communicating facts to the electorate may soon be all of it. When you think of how differently the informed person will respond, the potential for change in this country becomes fascinating."⁸

Inner City immediately expanded the news and public-affairs offerings on WLIB-AM, which became "Your Total Black News and Information Station," offering more public-service programming than any other black appeal outlet in the country. Its informational shows focused on local, national, and international issues of concern to New York's black population—everything from housing in Harlem to Shirley Chisholm's presidential campaign to the freedom struggles in Zimbabwe, Angola, and South Africa. There were also special bilingual programs in Spanish and French for the city's Latino and Haitian populations. WLIB's four-hour weekday-morning talk show, hosted by Judy Simmons, was the highest-rated black program of its kind in the country.⁹

By the end of the 1970s, Inner City Broadcasting was the largest black business enterprise in Harlem, with a net worth of \$15 million. With radio stations in New York thriving, the company now also owned San Francisco outlet KBLX-FM and had national ambitions. As Pierre Sutton, Percy's son and the new president of the company, explained in 1978: "We want to get

into the top ten markets in the country. If we can do that, we would be talking to half the black folks in the United States." During the 1980s, Inner City Broadcasting made some progress toward this goal, purchasing stations in Miami, Detroit, and San Antonio. In the 1980s, it also purchased a local cable TV franchise and the dilapidated Apollo Theater, which was transformed into a state-of-the-art television soundstage and performance center. In less than two decades, the company evolved from a single-station operation, into a national radio chain, and then into the country's most prosperous black-owned media conglomerate. Inner City would continue to be a major player in the broadcast industry well into the 1990s.¹⁰

Stevie Wonder's Pride and Passion

Inner City Broadcasting's first attempt to buy a station outside the New York market targeted KJLH-FM in Los Angeles, a three thousand-watt outlet owned by black funeral-home magnate John Lamar Hill since 1970. In its earlier days, KJLH broadcast out of a storefront on Crenshaw Avenue, in the heart of L.A.'s inner city; in spite of its limited wattage, the station could be heard throughout Watts and Compton, the city's African American population centers. Its progressive FM music format showcased a lineup of renegade AM jocks, who controlled their own playlists. They mixed together contemporary jazz fusion, sophisticated soul balladry, and classic West Coast R & B from the 1950s and 1960s. The popular format had made KJLH the top-rated black FM station in the Los Angeles market by the time Hill decided to sell it in the late 1970s—but only to a black buyer. At first, Inner City had the inside track. But while the New York-based company was trying to raise the funds, Stevie Wonder entered the picture, checkbook in hand, and bought the station for \$2.2 million. Wonder lived in Los Angeles at the time, knew KJLH, and had a humanitarian vision for the station. According to his manager, Edward Abner: "Stevie is a communicator, a fantastic communicator, and he understood that radio could be used to serve the community. He thought that it had a larger duty to the community than playing records. He thought that it owed the community something; it should be speaking to the issues, it should be informing and educating its listeners. So he thought that if he owned the station, in addition to the music that he would play, that he

would be able to inform, communicate, enlighten, and participate with the community, and that's what he's done with KJLH."¹¹

By the time he purchased KJLH-FM in 1979, Stevie Wonder was an established star in the music industry and well known for his racial consciousness and activism. He was an early proponent of establishing Martin Luther King's birthday as a national holiday and an outspoken opponent of apartheid in South Africa, where his music was banned. These social concerns, as well as his commitment to the local black populace, became the centerpiece of the station's new format. Wonder's KJLH management team first expanded and upgraded the news and public-affairs programming; they added new informational and call-in shows, hired a team of reporters to cover local news events, and opened up their airwaves to black community groups. In addition, KJLH developed an innovative community outreach program, called "Survival in the Eighties," which provided a number of services such as helping to pay electric and utility bills for destitute families. The station also adopted a new motto: "We Are You." As KJLH's general manager Karen Slade explained: "We Are You" holds true for all of our talk shows and public-affairs shows. So if you feel it, if it affects you, it affects us. And that's our bond with the community."¹²

KJLH-FM's pivotal role in the Los Angeles inner-city ghetto became apparent to the whole country in the early 1990s after a white jury acquitted four white police officers of violating black motorist Rodney King's civil rights, in spite of viewing a videotape that had been nationally televised and clearly showed the officers beating King. Four days of violence plunged the city into turmoil. KJLH switched to an all-talk and information format, turning its microphones over to African American political leaders, celebrities, community activists, and reporters and providing on-the-scenes news updates from the riot zones, dialogue with listeners who called in to voice their concerns, and warnings that people should stay off the streets. Throughout the ordeal, the station served as the nerve center of the black community; and in the aftermath, it was widely praised, even in the mainstream media, for being an island of sanity.¹³

In addition to being the sole owner, Stevie Wonder is also an avid fan of KJLH and a high-profile promoter of the station's accomplishments. According to Karen Slade: "Stevie, being the creative artist that he is, the station tapped into his creative sense—and he loved it. He fell in love with KJLH, and everywhere he went in the world, he would talk about his radio

station."¹⁴ In many instances, this special passion for radio also has been a trademark of the African American station owners who came up through the ranks of the industry.

Dues for Cathy Hughes

One of the most successful and controversial black entrepreneurial trailblazers to come up through the ranks of the radio industry in the post-civil rights era is Cathy Liggins Hughes. During her remarkable career in radio broadcasting, she has managed to build, from the ground up, the largest African American-owned and -operated radio chain in the country. Hughes is a tenacious businesswoman, but she has also worked, at one time or another, as a media activist, a college instructor, and an outspoken radio talk-show host—all an outgrowth of her unwavering commitment to fostering racial progress in the broadcast industry.

Hughes's passion for radio began in her youth in Omaha, Nebraska: "I was a radio fanatic from a very early age . . . from the day my mother broke down and brought me a transistor radio. I took it everywhere. I even made a carrying case for it." Because Omaha lacked a black appeal outlet, Hughes listened to country music stations during the day: "I grew up with Conway Twitty and Willie Nelson." But late at night, she was able to pick up two legendary R & B shows: "I used to listen to Wolfman Jack and *Randy's Record Shack* . . . and it was just wonderful to hear Lloyd Price, the Coasters, and the Drifters. That was heaven. I would get up the next morning after only a couple hours of sleep because I had stayed up all night listening to the radio . . . pretty soon I got in trouble with my radio because at night my mother would come in and make certain I wasn't listening to my radio. I would hide it under my pillow."¹⁵

Hughes's middle-class family valued education and personal achievement. Her mother, a college-educated nurse and a professional musician, had played trombone for the popular all-female swing band the International Sweethearts of Rhythm. Her father was Omaha's most prominent black certified public accountant (CPA) and the first African American to earn an accounting degree at Creighton University. Hughes's parents sent her to an elite Catholic girls' school, hoping to prepare her for college, but she was a rebellious teenager: "I was fast at sixteen. I was having sex in

the back of cars and all of that." She became pregnant, married, and gave birth to her son at the age of seventeen; her marriage to the boy's father, Alfred Liggins, lasted less than three years.¹⁶

Cathy Liggins completed high school as a single mother. As a student enrolled at the University of Nebraska, she attended classes at the Omaha campus and volunteered at the city's first black appeal radio station, where she learned the advertising and sales side of the business. In 1969, Liggins left college to go to work full time for her father, who was expanding his accounting business. When he suddenly died a year later, she went to Washington, D.C., to close down his business office there. She liked the vitality of the large black community in the nation's capital and soon decided to stay.¹⁷

Late in 1971, Liggins was offered a job teaching radio advertising and sales in Howard University's newly opened School of Communications, whose founder and first dean was television journalist Tony Brown. Liggins had known Brown from Omaha, where she had helped set up a series of speaking engagements for him at the university. Nevertheless, she was surprised when he offered her the position, especially since she had no college degree.

Later, she learned about Brown's unique vision for the school:

He believed that to teach students communications you needed people who were communications practitioners—not a whole bunch of academic types . . . so Tony assembled a distinguished group. Quincy Jones was a visiting lecturer, Melvin Van Peebles, Stan Lathums, Ed Bradley—the list read like a Who's Who. We had a very exciting, although very nontraditional and unorthodox faculty. Howard University almost hyperventilated and keeled over sideways. There most have been at least eighteen of us, none of whom had degrees, but all actively involved in our professions.¹⁸

After a year in the classroom, Cathy Liggins became the sales manager at WHUR-FM. She recalled the period as one of difficult transition for the station: "The general manager and sales manager had revolving doors at WHUR. They were going through management and staff fast—it was like every other week there was somebody new. Tony Brown knew that I knew sales . . . he made me sales manager of the radio station. We were billing

only \$30,000 a year then." Once on the job, Liggins quickly discovered that WHUR's lackluster sales figures were partly due to the university's myopic billing system: "I never will forget, I was pitching the McDonald's account, and having the head buyer say to me—'Well Cathy, I really loved your presentation, you really worked hard at it, but the last time we did business at WHUR, Howard sent us bills for tuition.'" Liggins managed to streamline WHUR's billing procedure for the university's accounting office, even as she was creating a whole new series of sales packages for the station. As a result, sales gained momentum, and during 1974, her first full year on the job, the station grossed over \$1 million.¹⁹

Liggins's record as WHUR's sales manager impressed Howard University president James Cheek, and he promoted her to station manager late in 1975. (Liggins learned of her promotion in the *Washington Post*; apparently, the notification letter from President Cheek disappeared in the campus mail.) Liggins replaced Tom Jones at a time when the station was experiencing a good deal of internal strife. Students were still angry about their lack of access to the station's airwaves and cynical about the new internship program, which lacked hands-on studio experience. The staff had just organized a union, in part to resist the changeover from the original "360 Degrees: The Black Experience in Sound" format to the "Ebony Lifestyle" concept that Jones had initiated. And the faculty in the School of Communications who were still associated with WHUR resented President Cheek's dictatorial powers over the station. Liggins recalls that her promotion caused some animosity: "Here I am general manager, so I go to my office and the first thing I'm greeted with from some of the students and faculty and staff . . . instead of them sharing my joy, they were like—'You're not qualified to be general manager. You've never been a general manager before . . . you're an Uncle Tom.'"²⁰

Liggins embarked on an ambitious agenda as station manager. To bolster her management skills, she attended an intensive six-week broadcast management seminar at Harvard University in Massachusetts. Back at WHUR, she upgraded the internship program by paying the interns a stipend for their services and reserving the Sunday-evening time bloc for student programming. Her greatest challenge—and triumph—at WHUR, however, was the creation of the station's first commercially successful format, which achieved a major breakthrough in the ratings. When Cathy Liggins became WHUR's general manager, the recently created "Ebony

Lifestyle" format existed, for the most part, in name only. Staff cutbacks and defections had decimated the news and public-affairs operations; few of the station's programs that focused on local issues and concerns survived. The "jazz purists," as Liggins called them, now had a stronger presence and controlled most of the major airshifts: "I had no ratings because we were playing twenty-seven minutes of Pharoah Sanders holding a note!" she would later complain.²¹

The first new public-affairs program that Cathy Liggins put on the air at WHUR was *The Morning Sound*, a daily audio magazine featuring local news, weather, sports, and traffic updates, along with interviews and call-in segments. It was produced and hosted by an up-and-coming media activist named Jerry Phillips, whom Liggins had hired along with four staff members to work on the show. Over the next decade, *The Morning Sound* developed a loyal following among local black listeners, due to its community focus and accessibility. Liggins also extended the *Daily Drum* evening news show from thirty minutes to an hour and hired more reporters in order to get the news staff to cover a wider range of national and local news of interest to African Americans. These efforts to bolster the public-affairs and news offerings were generally supported by WHUR's staff, although they were leery of her motives.²²

Changing WHUR's music format, however, proved to be much more of a struggle. The station's entrenched jazz DJs were contemptuous of the newer trends in popular black music, especially in jazz, and they were unconcerned about their low ratings in the market. Initially, Liggins had no ideas for revamping the music format. Only after attending a seminar on "Psychographic Programming" at the University of Chicago in the summer of 1977 did she begin to develop the concept that evolved into the celebrated "Quiet Storm" format. Psychographic radio formats were, at the time, the latest programming trend in the industry; they were designed to blend into the lifestyles of a specific demographic target. Liggins took the idea and applied it to a group of her female friends—mostly single, black, upwardly mobile career women—and decided there was a need for an evening radio show in the local market that appealed to the musical sensibilities of professional black women.²³

Moving from theory to practice, Liggins developed a playlist of LPs that appealed to her female focus group and then talked one of her student interns into trying out the new musical format on the Sunday-

evening airshift. The intern, Melvin Lindsey, at the time was already hosting the Sunday-night student time slot. Liggins convinced him to drop his "Mister Magic" moniker and call the new show *The Quiet Storm*, in honor of the Smokey Robinson song: "I told Melvin, a good title would be *Quiet Storm*. It has subliminal seduction in it. Smokey's line—'Blow Baby Blow'—has all types of sex appeal." The premiere broadcast, which featured a playlist of romantic ballads and sensual love songs by contemporary R & B vocalists—especially black women—was an overnight sensation on the local airwaves: "The switchboard lit up that night and the next two days with calls from listeners asking about 'that different show.' They all wanted more." By the end of 1977, *The Quiet Storm* was the top-rated weekend music show in the Washington, D.C., market.²⁴

The surprising strength of *The Quiet Storm*'s Sunday-night ratings gave Cathy Liggins the leverage to move the show into the 7 to 11 P.M. week-night time bloc, replacing the evening jazz programming. Within a year, this format change transformed WHUR into the number two-rated FM outlet in the nation's capital; and the station was now billing over \$2 million in sales. But even as she was succeeding as station manager, Liggins was becoming disillusioned with Howard. By then, Tony Brown and most of his handpicked communications faculty had moved on, and the School of Communications was settling into a more conventional mode of instruction. Liggins's proposals for upgraded facilities and an expanded student internship program routinely fell on deaf ears in the president's office, where the major decisions about the station still were made. One of her pet projects, to franchise the *Quiet Storm* show, even got her in hot water: "I got Smokey Robinson to sign off on it. All the documentation was done. I applied for the papers—and I almost lost my job. I was told that the legal department at Howard handled that, I had stepped outside my bounds."²⁵

In the fall of 1978, Cathy Liggins resigned as WHUR's general manager in order to accept a similar position at double the salary with WYBC-AM, a new local gospel station. She also married television producer Dewey Hughes during this period, and together, they began to explore the possibility of buying a radio station in the area. An opportunity arose almost immediately, when WOL-AM, a former soul radio powerhouse that was the target of a federal payola probe, was put on the market as a distress sale. Cathy Hughes developed a business plan for the buyout and

began meeting with prospective lending institutions. After being turned down thirty-two times, she found a bank in New York City willing to fund the purchase. In 1980, Cathy and Dewey Hughes became the new owners of WOL.²⁶

Having worked as a general manager at both FM and AM stations, Cathy Hughes recognized FM radio's advantage in technology and ratings for music formats. Her solution was to abandon WOL's traditional soul music soundscape for a talk-radio format—a bold move at the time. There were numerous talk shows on the air but no black-owned stations with an all-talk format. Hughes's model for a community-based talk-show approach to programming was Philadelphia activist DJ George Woods: "We studied George Woods because George Woods did a more talk-oriented format for his show. Everybody else was doing music. But we liked George Woods's approach to the community." Hughes recruited a talented crew of broadcasters to host the talk-show strips and went on the air with great expectations: "We had Rudolf Brevington. We had a star-studded lineup. We had Bernie McCain, Dr. Charles Spellman. We had everything except the two critical Rs. R & R. We had no ratings and no revenue."²⁷

Within a year of going on the air with a talk-show format, the Hugheses were given an ultimatum by their New York bank; either go back to WOL's old soul music format, which was more cost-effective than the talk-show lineup, or lose the funding. Dewey Hughes was unwilling to go along with the bank's demands; he was quickly growing weary of the radio venture and anxious to get back into television production. Cathy Hughes, determined to stay the course, worked out a compromise with the bank: she could keep one daily talk show, but only if she hosted it herself. Dewey Hughes then gave her full control of the station and moved to Los Angeles to pursue a career in television. (A year later, the couple ended their marriage amicably.) Cathy Hughes remained in Washington, D.C., to launch her new careers as WOL's sole owner, general manager, and daily talk-show host.²⁸

Cathy Hughes's first order of business was to relocate WOL from the upscale white Georgetown section to the heart of the local black community. She bought an abandoned storefront residence on the H Street corridor, a moribund black business district that had been devastated in the 1968 riots, to house the station. As she recalled: "This building had been a shooting gallery for heroin addicts, and the community helped me build

it back up. That first year at Fourth and H, we didn't have much of a profit because most of what we made we used up renovating the facilities . . . and in the end, it was absolutely glorious." The relocated station became a hub of activity and the voice of local community concerns. Before long, the outlet was also attracting commercial sponsors from local African American businesses, and it was developing a sizable audience of loyal listeners, whom Hughes called the "WOL family."²⁹

Much of WOL's success in the 1980s can be attributed to Cathy Hughes's rise to prominence as a radio talk-show host. On her morning show, she developed and maintained a strong rapport with her listeners, even as she took on the most controversial issues of the day. First and foremost an outspoken crusader for her race, Hughes used her talk show to promote everything from the anti-apartheid protests at the South African Embassy to the maverick presidential campaigns of Jesse Jackson. When Washington, D.C., mayor Marion Barry was videotaped smoking crack cocaine in a downtown hotel during an FBI sting, Hughes called the incident a setup to embarrass the local black community and raised enough money over the airwaves to pay Barry's legal expenses. But after the born-again mayor returned from prison and won back his old job, the two had a falling out, and Hughes became one of Barry's most vocal critics.³⁰

Cathy Hughes's most celebrated radio campaign targeted the *Washington Post*. In 1986, the newspaper announced that it was launching a new Sunday magazine, and that the cover story in the first edition would profile an African American. Expectations were high in the WOL family; as Hughes recalled: "We got to speculating. John Thompson and the Georgetown Hoyas were hotter than a firecracker then. Everybody loves John Thompson, he's an incredible example of black manhood. He's helped so many young people. We speculated Colin Powell. We speculated a whole host of African and American dignitaries." As it turned out, the story was on a teenage hoodlum from New York who was accused of murdering a local Howard University student. Hughes mobilized her equally irate listeners for a "recall" campaign, aimed at returning copies of all subsequent issues of the *Post* magazine to the publisher. On the next thirteen Sundays, WOL supporters dumped close to a half-million copies of the publication on the front steps of the *Washington Post* headquarters. The widely covered recall campaign ended only when both the editor and the publisher of the newspaper agreed to appear on the WOL morning

show, where they apologized for their indiscretion. "For six months after the protest," quipped Hughes, "that magazine looked like *Ebony*."³¹

By 1987, WOL was back with the original all-talk format, and it was finally making a healthy profit. Hughes used this turnaround as leverage to purchase another station in the market, WMMJ-FM. But once again, the bank rejected her plan to change the format—in this case, from a satellite-based easy-listening service called "Evergreen" to an urban contemporary approach. "Asking me to do Evergreen was like asking Angela Davis to sell memberships in the Klan," recalled an irate Hughes. Nevertheless, she swallowed her pride and went along with the bankers, but only until she could dissuade them. It took eighteen months to do so. Under Hughes's direction, WMMJ finally switched over to an Urban Adult format in 1989, now calling itself "Magic 102.3." Within a year, the station was rated among the top ten in the market, and it was no longer losing money. Once again, Cathy Hughes had proved her bankers wrong when it came to format decisions.³²

During the early 1990s, Hughes founded her own company, Radio One, to oversee her broadcast properties, and she brought her son, Alfred Liggins Jr., into the business as her partner. In addition, she teamed her new company with a highly successful black investment firm, Syndicated Communication. Their first joint venture was to purchase the Baltimore AM/FM combo WWIN for \$7 million in 1991. Two years later, they bought another AM/FM combo in Baltimore, WERO, for \$9 million, giving Radio One control over 10 percent of the commercial stations operating in the city. Next came the Washington, D.C., FM powerhouse WKYS, purchased for a staggering \$35 million in 1995, and then both WHTA-FM in Atlanta (\$18 million) and WDRE-FM in Philadelphia (\$20 million) in 1996. At present, Radio One owns nine radio stations, making it the largest and most prosperous black-owned radio chain in the country.³³

15

Blackgrounding Public Radio

The post-civil rights era witnessed a growing African American presence in the public sector of the radio industry, but black colleges, rather than entrepreneurs, were the major owners and operators of the new stations. The FCC established this sector in 1946, when, during a reorganization of the FM spectrum, 20 percent of the new FM radio channels (88 to 92 MHz) were set aside for noncommercial broadcasters. Colleges and universities were virtually the only institutions in the country to show an interest in developing the new noncommercial radio channels. Between 1948 and 1966, the number of "educational" stations, as they were commonly referred to on the air, climbed from 46 to 292. Because these college stations had low power (ten watts) and low yearly budgets (under \$10,000) and preferred formats based on the instructional missions of the host institutions, their listenership was very limited, especially when compared to the popularity of the commercial stations.¹

This marginalization was reduced with the passage of the Public Broadcasting Act in 1967. Shifting the emphasis from educational to "public" radio, the legislation created the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) to disburse federal funds for upgrading noncommercial radio and television. Only "CPB-qualified" stations—those having at least five paid staff members, broadcasting at least eight hours a day all year, and

programming for the "general public"—could receive federal funds. During the first round of funding, only seventy-three stations, or 17 percent of the noncommercial outlets, qualified; in effect, CPB subsidized the wealthiest stations, while neglecting the smaller ones. These subsidized stations were further enhanced when National Public Radio (NPR) was established in 1970 to provide network programming for its FM affiliates.² Black college radio also benefited from this legislation, some stations becoming potent rivals of other public outlets and the dominant black commercial stations in their localities.

Black College Radio

Prior to the 1967 Public Broadcasting Act, only two black college stations were on the air: WESU-FM at Central State University in Wilberforce, Ohio (1962), and KUCA-FM at the University of Central Arkansas (1966). Both were low-budget ten-watt and unqualified for CPB funding. However, the availability of funds sparked an upsurge in the number of black colleges applying for noncommercial licenses. In 1969, both WSHA-FM at Shaw University in Raleigh, North Carolina, and WHOV-FM at Hampton University in Virginia signed on the air. They were joined in the 1970s by eighteen new black college outlets, including WCLK-FM at Clark College in Atlanta, KGRM-FM at Grambling College in Louisiana, WHCF-FM at Savannah State College in Georgia, WEAJ-FM at Morgan State University in Baltimore, and WAMF-FM at Florida A & M University in Tallahassee. As this list indicates, most of these stations were located in the southeastern part of the country, where the historically black colleges (HBCs) were concentrated.³

Most of the black college stations, however, were low-budget and low-power operations that did not initially qualify for CPB's radio grants and were funded by the colleges' academic budgets. As each station was under the stewardship of the academic program at its institution specializing in broadcast communications, organizational structures and program formats varied widely. Generally, the academic program hired the paid staff and shaped the operation as a training laboratory for students. With no shared model or mission among the HBC stations during this period, and often with continually shifting management strategies at individual stations, they evolved in quite dissimilar ways.

WSHA-FM in Raleigh exemplifies a fairly typical search for a mission and an audience beyond academia's walls. The Shaw University station was launched in 1969 as a ten-watt outlet with one paid staff member—the general manager. Most of the on-air staff were drawn from the ranks of student volunteers, who modeled their programming on the top-rated black commercial stations in the market. Predictably, they created a music format that targeted their peers by featuring the popular soul music and dance tracks of the day. The student DJs also tended to emulate the mannerisms of the market's top black personality jocks. In these early days of its development, little news or public affairs aired on WSHA. With minimal faculty involvement, it was largely a student-oriented and -operated station.⁴

Boosting its power to twelve thousand watts in the mid-1970s, and to twenty-five thousand watts in the early 1980s, WSHA implemented a series of upgrades to make the station CPB qualified. By hiring additional staff and setting up a more structured, faculty-supervised student internship program, the station was in a position to revamp the format. At this point, WSHA expanded the news and public-affairs offerings; everything from local talk shows to SBN's syndicated newscasts was added to the information mix. Then, as jazz was belatedly enshrined as the new centerpiece of music programming, student DJs were relegated to the late-night and weekend airshifts, and experienced jazz programmers were recruited to host the drive-time shows. These changes not only secured CPB funding for the station but also greatly increased its listening audience. In less than a decade, WSHA evolved from a low-power student-oriented outlet into the top-rated black public station in the market.⁵

The HBCs characteristically adopted a jazz and information format as an alternative to the classical music and information format favored by NPR's flagship stations. Clark College's WCLK-FM in Atlanta pioneered the use of this noncommercial format in the late 1970s. Under the direction of the Department of Mass Communication, the fledgling twenty-five-hundred-watt station was given a mandate to create a format that was "distinctly different from other stations in the market . . . to duplicate other stations' programming is to waste scarce radio spectrum and misuse public money provided to non-commercial stations." WCLK's musical philosophy was "based on a bedrock of commitment to America's premier contribution to world culture: Jazz." Hence the station would pursue a

"proactive role with respect to the nurturing, promotion and development of jazz as a vital and authentic American classical music," a policy that led to a music format that devoted 90 percent of its schedule to jazz programming.⁶

WCLK's news and public-affairs mission was to "promote cultural, artistic, educational and economic linkages" with the city's African American population. The director of news operations was responsible primarily for the production of a series of daily five-minute local news updates. In addition, the station broadcast regular national and international news updates, provided by NBN in the 1980s and, more recently, by AURN. The public-affairs department also had a paid director, who coordinated the production of a series of weekly programs on health (*Health Break*), travel (*Travel Line*), the arts (*Friday File*), and the city's black colleges (*Atlanta University Center Forum*). WCLK also broadcast Bob Law's syndicated *Night Talk* show on a regular basis and employed a gospel coordinator to produce a strip of Sunday-morning programs devoted to gospel music and local church news. In addition to the paid staff, student interns, faculty supervisors, and community volunteers worked in the news and public-affairs department on a part-time basis.⁷

By the 1980s, many of the more powerful HBC stations located in the larger urban markets had adopted a jazz and information format: Morgan State University's WEA-FM (fifty thousand watts) in Baltimore, the University of the District of Columbia's WDCU-FM (twenty-five thousand watts) in Washington, D.C.; Norfolk State University's WNVB-FM (twelve thousand watts) in Norfolk, Virginia; and Alabama State University's WVAS-FM (twenty-five thousand watts) in Montgomery. With a mission and orientation typical of these black public outlets, WVAS signed on the air in 1984 with five paid staff members and a broadcast signal that covered eleven counties in central Alabama, including the city of Montgomery. The station's musical format was jazz, and it had an active news and public-affairs department, which was also used as a radio journalism lab by students majoring in the field. Faculty from the School of Journalism supervised the local news and public-affairs programs produced by ASU students. The audience was made up mostly of well-educated, middle-class African American professionals from twenty-five to fifty-four years old. After only a year on the air, WVAS was ranked seventh in the Montgomery market in competition with the commercial outlets and sec-

ond among noncommercial stations. Since the mid-1980s, WVAS-FM has maintained its position as the premier black public radio station in central Alabama.⁸

In contrast to this elite group of HBC stations with public radio credentials are the more common student-oriented outlets. These low-budget operations still make up a majority of the black college stations on the air; they include twenty low-power FM stations, five low-power AM stations, and twelve cable radio outlets. Most of these stations are staffed and managed by students whose programming targets the black youth market (sixteen to twenty-five years old). Over the past decade, they have become the underground radio voice of the hip-hop generation. In these student-run stations, hip-hop DJs who control their playlists and promote their youth culture over the airwaves showcase "fresh" rap, alternative R & B, house, and dancehall releases. They also "flava" (flavor) their on-air announcing with hip-hop vernacular and adopt such hip-hop monikers as "Lady Lush," "X-Man," "Johnny B Badd," "Buck Wild," "DJ Terminator," "MC Erotic," "Tiger Shark," and "Ayatollah Slim." In addition, they "chill" with the audience by opening up the phone lines so listeners can "rap the mike" or give "shoutouts" to a local "posse" or "crew." This grassroots approach to deejaying, grounded in the emerging hip-hop subculture, recalls the free-form DJ formats on progressive black FM stations in the 1970s.⁹

KPVU-FM at Prairie View A & M University in Texas typifies the student-run station. Located in Prairie View, a small, rural town about sixty miles northwest of Houston, the university is the oldest HBC in the state; its approximately three thousand students largely come from Houston. All of the station's staff positions, from general manager down, are held by students, who receive internship credits or work/study stipends for their work at the station. The format includes a brief daily newscast, produced by broadcast journalism students, and occasional sports specials, but most of the programming is music driven. As many as fifty student DJs host weekly shows of two to four hours in length, and while there are a few gospel and reggae programs on the weekends, the vast majority of the shows are hip-hop oriented—both musically and culturally.¹⁰

A similar hip-hop format is in place at WHBC-AM, the cable radio outlet at Howard University in the nation's capital. The station broadcasts fourteen hours a day and can be heard in the campus dorms and the

Blackburn Cultural Center. (About one-third of Howard's eleven thousand students live on campus.) WHBC has been a student-run operation for the past twenty years; at present, about eighty student volunteers work at the station. A news staff produces a daily five-minute newscast, and a sports staff broadcasts the Howard Bison's athletic events. But the large majority of the student volunteers are DJs who host their own two-hour shows once a week. They go by names like "Q45," "DJ Exclusive," "B-Boy J," "DJ Deuce," "AK Schmoove," "DJ Maad Nice," "T-Dub," and "DJ Vengeance," and they call their shows *Planet Black*, *B-Boyz in a Cypher*, *Radiactive*, *Girlfriend*, *Sonnet Echipse*, *Mo' Butta fo' Yo' Biscuit*, *The Queen's Throne*, *Hip Hop Happy Hour*, *The Joint II*, *Southern Fried Flava*, *Straight Up Philly*, *Keepin' It Real*, *2 Dope Boyz in a Cadillac*, and so forth. WHBC's lineup of hip-hop DJs and shows is the trademark format of the student-oriented black college stations, which collectively play an important role in the reproduction of hip-hop culture within their respective student communities. It is interesting to note that in the past decade, hip-hop formats have sprung up on commercial FM radio in key markets around the country. These new formats are commonly referred to as "Urban Hits" or "Urban Rap."¹¹

Since 1979, a yearly Black College Radio Convention (BCRC), held in Atlanta, has been a student-oriented gathering, funded for the most part by donations from the record industry. Founded by educator Lo Jelski, who continues to be the driving force behind the convention, the two-day conference features panels and workshops on such subjects as fundraising for noncommercial stations, careers in radio broadcasting, audience research, station relations with record companies, public radio grants, FCC policies, and the future of HBC radio. A prominent African American from the radio industry is always the keynote speaker. The major social events are an awards banquet and a series of parties sponsored by the record labels. On average, some 150 to 200 people, mostly students from the participating stations, attend the annual BCRC. Some faculty attend as chaperons or panelists, but they are rarely involved in the planning of the convention; they have no influence over its agenda. Conspicuously absent from these conferences are the paid staff members from the larger black college stations with jazz and information formats, who tend to identify with the public radio sector and attend public radio conventions. The BCRC has not managed to bridge the chasm between the student-run outlets and their professionally operated counterparts. Hence it falls short of

being a cohesive national organization that represents the interests of HBC stations.¹²

African Americans in NPR

In the public radio sector as in commercial radio, African Americans slowly gained access to employment opportunities, but it was an uphill struggle. NPR's operations began in 1971, with the organization professing lofty goals that implicitly spoke to the special informational needs of minorities. The mission statement promised to "promote personal growth rather than corporate gain" and to "not only call attention to the problems, but be an active agent in seeking solutions." Yet, in its first two decades of spectacular growth—from a marginal, college-based educational radio network with ninety affiliates in thirty-two states and a weekly audience of just over 1 million listeners, to a national public radio network with 438 outlets in all the major urban markets and a listening audience of 7.3 million—NPR failed to incorporate African Americans into its master plan. NPR's own research indicated that the network's listeners were white, college-educated professionals and white-collar workers between the ages of thirty-five and fifty-six. Only seven of forty HBC stations were CPB qualified and NPR affiliated by the end of the 1980s. According to NPR's first black news director, Adam Clayton Powell III: "When I walked in here in July 1987, NPR had no—zero—minority hosts, correspondents, newscasters, directors, executive producers or senior editors."¹³

From the late 1980s through the 1990s, NPR's record has improved significantly, beginning with Powell initiating the network's first affirmative action program in the late 1980s. More recently, NPR's first black chief executive, Delano Lewis, has been the driving force behind increasing the number of minority employees to 30 percent of the network's total workforce. Lewis has also launched a new program called the "Initiative on Audience Development," which targets minorities and college students, and he has urged the CPB to channel more funds into non-commercial minority stations. But these initiatives come at a time when a hostile Congress is deeply cutting public broadcasting funds, reducing them from \$312 million in 1995 to \$260 million in 1997. Such major reductions may doom Lewis's new agenda for minorities in public radio.¹⁴

Black Community Radio

In addition to the forty-odd noncommercial HBC outlets in the public radio sector, a handful of nonprofit "community" radio stations on the air are run by and for African Americans. These mostly low-power and low-budget operations emerged as part of an alternative radio movement pioneered by the Pacifica network in the 1950s and institutionalized with the formation of the National Federation of Community Broadcasters (NFCB) in 1974. Community radio stations are owned and operated by nonprofit foundations, which, in turn, are controlled by a local board of directors. These outlets rely almost exclusively on listener donations for their economic livelihood and have tailored their organizational structures and program formats to meet the particular social and cultural needs of their communities. In spite of their structural differences, all NFCB stations are unified in striving to provide a vital alternative to commercial radio through encouraging innovative programming and grassroots community participation in their day-to-day operations. By the 1990s, 125 stations were affiliated with the NFCB; of that number, ten were controlled by African Americans.¹⁵

The first noncommercial black station to use a community radio model was WAFFR-FM, a three thousand-watt outlet in Durham, North Carolina, that signed on the air in the summer of 1971. Its founders, an enterprising group of students from North Carolina Central University (NCCU) who had no previous experience in radio broadcasting, set up a nonprofit corporation—the Community Radio Workshop, Inc.—to apply for the broadcast license and solicit federal funds for the operation. WAFFR, standing for "Wave Africa," took an Afrocentric stance long before the concept became popular. The NCCU student founders, who also formed the core of the original staff, assumed African names for their airshifts as DJs: "Shango" (Donald Baker), "Brother Hussan" (Robert Spruill), "Baba" (Adewela Babafine), "Oba" (Obataye Adinwole). The programming they created foregrounded the cultural and historical connections between African Americans and "the mother continent" by creating a progressive, free-form FM format that mixed the avant-garde jazz of John Coltrane, Miles Davis, Albert Ayler, and Sun Ra with the African sounds of Miriam Makeba, Olatunji, Fela Ransome Kuti, and Hugh

Masakela. Also in the mix was the militant jazz poetry of the Last Poets and short, drop-in "messages" from Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr., and Dick Gregory, as well as Frantz Fanon, Leopold Senghor, and Kwame Nkrumah. Nothing else sounded remotely like WAFFR on the airwaves in the Durham radio market.¹⁶

In its first year, WAFFR broadcast only twelve hours a day, with volunteer DJs hosting all of the station's airshifts. There were no news or public-affairs programming, but the DJs frequently varied their music shows with interviews of local black newsmakers and call-in listener commentary on current events. By 1973, the station's cadre of youthful leaders made some headway in recruiting local black activists and educators to help produce public-affairs shows. One new program, *Children's Radio Workshop*, which featured a group of youngsters and their instructors from a local black day-care center, was produced by childhood education specialist Mary McDonald and won a CPB award for innovative children's programming in 1974. A weekly roundup of African news called *Wave Africa* and a new series on African American history, *To Build a Nation*, hosted by NCCU history professor Earl Thorpe, expanded the public-affairs programming.¹⁷

A fall 1973 *Ebony* article praised WAFFR-FM as a pioneering black community radio venture and spotlighted the young activists who had created it. The national publicity brought into the station a flood of inquiries and even visitors—some of whom, like soul superstar Stevie Wonder, jazz saxophonist Julian "Cannonball" Adderley, and DJ Frankie Crocker, were well-known celebrities. Stevie Wonder was so impressed by what he heard on WAFFR that he agreed to do a benefit for the station. However, a car accident on the way prevented Wonder from appearing at the benefit, and the cancellation dashed the station's hopes for developing a major fundraising drive among its listeners. From the day that it signed on the air, WAFFR had been dependent on CPB for a special yearly grant covering operating expenses. By 1974, CPB was becoming impatient with WAFFR's failure to establish financial accountability or a local funding base. When CPB decided against renewing the public grant earmarked for WAFFR for the 1975–76 fiscal year, the station could not survive. It went off the air in June 1975.¹⁸

The West Coast's first black-controlled community radio station, KPFO-FM, a ten-watt outlet in San Francisco, came to be known as "Poor People's Radio." White media activist Lorenzo Milam—the legendary

"Johnny Appleseed" of the community radio movement—and a small group of like-minded associates had launched several community-based public radio stations, mostly on the West Coast. They founded KPOO in 1972 to serve San Francisco's inner-city black population in the Fillmore District, but the station started out with a staff of white community radio activists allied with Milam. The conflicts that arose between the white staff and black volunteers came to a head in the mid-1970s. Protests by African American volunteers and listeners forced Milam and his allies to turn the station over to a board of directors controlled by the local black community. During the transition, most of the white staff was replaced. In the 1980s, KPOO broadened its target audience to include San Francisco's Latino, Asian, and Native American populations, in effect becoming the country's first multicultural public radio station. In the late 1990s, KPOO features music, news, public affairs, and cultural programs for the ethnic groups involved in the station, some of them in foreign languages. This diversity in the programming and workforce has created a broader base of community support for KPOO, which manages to survive on funds donated to the station by local listeners and benefactors.¹⁹

WRFG-FM, "Radio Free Georgia," a low-power and shoestring-budget operation, began broadcasting in Atlanta in the summer of 1973. Its evolution from a biracial community station to a black-controlled station was much like that of KPOO. The station was initially staffed by black and white activists who, as students, had been affiliated with SNCC and SDS (Students for a Democratic Society). Its location in the integrated low-income neighborhood of Little Five Points was well suited to its original format, which was created to appeal to a mixed local audience. The music shows featured jazz, blues, country, bluegrass, and both black and white gospel. The news and public-affairs programs emphasized issues of concern to Little Five Points residents. Having worked for the *Great Speckled Bird*, Atlanta's radical "underground" newspaper in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the core of the volunteer news staff were seasoned reporters, whose coverage of local politics and the city's police force translated into insightful investigative reporting. But WRFG's foothold in Little Five Points was still tenuous when the station's internal racial divisions, exacerbated by an undercover agent provocateur, drove it from the airwaves for a short period of time in the mid-1970s. When the station resumed its broadcasts, its programming was entirely oriented toward Atlanta's black

community. Although the new focus pitted the station against the more powerful and better-endowed Clark College station, WCLK-FM, WRFG has survived as a listener-supported black community station with a progressive political and cultural format.²⁰

In one of the rare instances of a rural black community radio venture, in Warren County, North Carolina, a nonprofit organization called Sound and Print United put WVSP-FM on the air in 1977, after four years of planning and fundraising. Broadcasting from the hamlet of Warrenton, with six paid staff members, the station used a format that emphasized jazz, blues, local news, and public affairs to target the county's large African American population, the most poverty-stricken group in the state. By 1982, crucial aid from the federal government enabled WVSP to expand its paid staff to sixteen. By this time, it had also developed a cadre of nearly fifty volunteers and had a sizable rural black audience. The audience and the volunteers were especially attracted to the station's cultural orientation and its active involvement in community issues, such as a grassroots campaign to prevent the dumping of toxic waste in the county. When the Reagan administration cut back funding, WVSP sharply reduced its paid staff; its survival now depended on the community. But the low income levels among African Americans in Warren County and the novelty of a rural black station trying to operate noncommercially were obstacles to building a listener funding base. As a result, in 1984, WVSP moved to the more populous city of Rocky Mount in adjacent Nash County, desperately hoping to attract new listeners and financial support from the middle-class African Americans living in that locale while retaining its Warren County audience. Factions developed among the staff, and several leadership changes failed to improve the management of the station's finances. Within two years of the move, WVSP went off the air permanently.²¹

The demise of stations like WVSP and WAFR largely resulted from the structural limitations of black-controlled community radio ventures in the public sector. Community stations rely not only on local volunteer programmers but also on local funding, usually listener donations. Black community stations that target low-income African American populations like the rural poor or inner-city youth enter a no-win situation. Because they seek to engage and empower an audience that lacks the means to offer them financial support, their livelihood must come from other sources. The CPB had provided both WVSP and WAFR with seed money and

annual funds to help with operating expenses, but when the grants dried up, neither station could develop alternative sources of funding. Since the 1970s, black community stations generally have found themselves in the same financial cul de sac, with no visible route to increasing their numbers or individual strength.

The country's largest black community radio station is WPFW-FM, a fifty thousand-watt outlet launched in the nation's capital in 1977 by the Pacifica network after a ten-year legal battle for the market's last non-commercial frequency. Pacifica pioneered the community radio movement with the founding of KPFA-FM in Berkeley, California, in 1949. The nonprofit foundation gradually broadened its reach, establishing stations in Los Angeles (KPFK-FM, 1959), New York City (WBAL-FM, 1960), and Houston (KPFT-FM, 1970). While Pacifica has always sought to involve African Americans and other minorities in its programming and operations, WPFW was the first station in the nonprofit radio network to be built and controlled from the ground up by African Americans. The station's mandate to serve the majority (70 percent) black population in Washington, D.C., focused its recruitment of leadership and on-air talent on the local citizenry. WPFW's board of directors also drew on African American community and media activists living in the area.²²

WPFW signed on the air with hometown composer Duke Ellington's classic "Take the A Train," performed live from a downtown jazz club. Its music format, "Jazz and Jazz Extensions," filled the void created in the mid-1970s when WHUR-FM abandoned its jazz format in pursuit of higher ratings. In addition to in-depth excursions into jazz history and promotion of the local jazz scene, the station also featured regular blues, oldies, salsa, Caribbean, Brazilian, and African musical shows. WPFW's news and public-affairs format stressed local, national, and international issues of concern to the black community. Weekly programs with a political focus on the criminal justice system, the city government, the local labor movement, the Congressional Black Caucus, Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean combined with cultural shows for children, teens, women, and senior citizens, as well as a poetry and a comedy program. Moreover, in the station's broad selection of offerings, WPFW devoted special days of programming to in-depth explorations of the music of such jazz greats as Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, Billie Holiday, and Charlie Parker or to the significance of such black leaders as Martin Luther King Jr. and Mal-

colm X. The same day-long, in-depth approach was used to explore social issues ranging from local drug abuse to apartheid in South Africa.²³

During the 1980s, WPFW's innovative format attracted the largest black public radio audience in the country, but listener financial support developed only slowly. The station, being CPB qualified, received about 20 percent of its \$400,000 annual budget from the federal government; the rest came from listener donations and the Pacifica network, which kept WPFW out of debt with a critical yearly infusion of money. Organizational instability was an ongoing problem. In the 1980s, WPFW weathered five leadership changes, three changes of address, and a license challenge by a right-wing media watchdog group. It also managed to survive the competition from a new jazz-formatted noncommercial FM station, the University of the District of Columbia's WDCU-FM, which signed on the air in 1983. The cadre of one hundred volunteers, who have remained fairly stable over the years, has given WPFW and its sound a measure of continuity that, more than anything else, has enabled it to endure.²⁴

WPFW has gone through four more leadership changes and another change of address during the late 1980s and early 1990s. At one point, it was about to shut down because of its mounting debts. Currently, however, the station seems to be on the rise again; its streamlined format and fundraising drives have boosted listener ratings and contributions to the station. After two decades of struggle, WPFW has entered a period of financial and organizational equilibrium.²⁵ As we have seen, however, the environment for such stations is unstable, and none can become complacent about its long-term survival.

Sold to the Highest Bidder

From the 1970s through the 1990s, African Americans have made noticeable gains in the public radio sector of the broadcast industry. In 1967, only two small black-owned noncommercial stations existed. Both were located outside the major urban markets, and their audience was minuscule. By the mid-1990s, more than fifty noncommercial black college and community stations (about 2.5 percent of the total number of noncommercial outlets on the air) are reaching millions of listeners in numerous urban markets, especially in the South. In addition, from the late 1980s

into the 1990s, the number of African Americans employed by NPR has grown significantly, as have the number of NPR-funded programs and series devoted to black subjects; and NPR has recently hired Delano Lewis as its first black chief executive officer.

Nevertheless, the outlook for African Americans in public radio is far from rosy. Recent federal cuts in public radio's annual funding levels have reduced its ability to meet commitments to minority broadcasters and audiences. If the federal cutbacks continue, CPB-qualified stations could lose their annual government subsidies. This would be particularly difficult for the black-owned stations receiving CPB grants, given their history of financial struggles. Moreover, the fallout from the FCC's deregulation of commercial radio ownership is beginning to have an impact on the sale of noncommercial stations. This troublesome new development recently came to light in the furor surrounding the sale of WDCU-FM in the nation's capital.

The station was put up for sale in 1997 because its owner, the University of the District of Columbia (UDC)—a predominantly black public college, governed by Washington's recently appointed financial control board—was ordered to close a \$10.1 million budget deficit. At the time, WDCU-FM's jazz format was attracting the fourth-largest black audience in public radio, and the station was close to being financially self-sufficient; it was put on the market only when its value was found to be much higher than expected. There were seven first-round bids for the station, beginning at \$1 million. Among those bidding were religious broadcasters, public interest groups, C-SPAN (the cable TV public-affairs service), and a coalition of local public stations (WETA-FM, WAMU-FM) and NPR. A second and final round of bidding began at \$10 million. The winning bid of \$13 million was made by Salem Communications, a religious broadcasting corporation.²⁶

Salem Communications is a relatively new enterprise that owns a chain of forty-two (mostly commercial) stations nationwide. Its assets also include a syndicated news service, Salem Radio News (SRN), and *The Oliver North Show*, hosted by the former marine colonel of Iran-Contra notoriety. Salem's corporate format mixes evangelical preachers, who pay for their airtime, with conservative talk-show hosts like North and SRN's decidedly right-wing Christian slant on the news. This format is used on its commercial and noncommercial outlets; the only difference between them is

that the commercial outlets also run advertising spots. Salem's nonprofit arm, the Community Resource Education Association, was set up to run its noncommercial stations. It was to become the legal owner of WDCU's license once the sale was approved by the FCC.²⁷

WDCU-FM's \$13 million price tag sent shock waves throughout the public radio sector. In an urgent memo to public radio executives, WETA-FM program director Craig Curtis predicted: "[This sale dramatically changes life below 92 FM [the noncommercial frequency band]. It represents the loss of a major public radio frequency in a large and important market, allows a commercial business to operate de facto in the non-commercial band, and it establishes a benchmark price that may tempt other non-commercial license holders, especially in times of financial crisis." Public broadcasting leaders loudly protested the sale. Robert Conrad, CPB's chief operating officer, made public a letter to the city's financial control board, condemning the transaction and demanding that CPB be reimbursed the \$1 million it had invested in WDCU. NPR president Delano Lewis urged the control board to reconsider selling the station and filed a petition with the FCC to block the approval of the license transfer, as did a listener support group called "Save Jazz 90."²⁸

The public outcry, the local press coverage, and the public radio establishment's threat to hold up the purchase of the station at the FCC ultimately forced Salem Communications to back out of the deal. At the last minute, Salem turned the contract over to C-SPAN, which then proceeded to purchase WDCU-FM for the agreed-upon \$13 million. The sale was approved by the FCC in September; there was much gloom but little opposition to the takeover by this more "neutral" public broadcasting entity. "Jazz 90" signed off the air at midnight on September 26, 1997. Two weeks later, WCSP-FM signed on in its place, with a public-affairs format based on C-SPAN's congressional coverage.²⁹