

WEBR rises again

Broadcast team breathes new life into radio station

STORY AND PHOTOS
BY KAREN CARR KEEFE
Contributor

Legendary radio station WEBR returned to the airwaves this month after a 27-year hiatus, thanks to a unique partnership between veteran

take it real serious and see what we could do to save it.”

“Our idea is, this is not a corporate-owned station, one of 1,000,” Angelo said. “This is one and one only, locally owned, locally operated, serving Niagara and Erie County and the people

I Think I’m Buying a Radio Station

Angelo remembers the day Yuhnke called about his possible purchase of WJLL. “Last Oct. 31, my wife and I were visiting our daughter and her husband down in Miami and I got a phone call. And it was my old pal, Bill Yuhnke. He said, ‘I’m just calling you to see what you’re doing, and I wanted to let you know that I put an offer in and I think I’m buying a radio station.’ I said, ‘Are you sure you want to do that? In this atmosphere today, with what’s going on in radio?’”

Yuhnke has a slightly different memory of that day. “I know when I first called Don and told him what I did – it’s kind of a joke but it’s really the truth – he said, ‘Are you out of your mind?’ He was in Florida, and he said, ‘Don’t do a thing until I get back.’ He got back and we sat down and talked and we laid out an idea of what we were going to do. We knew that the people in Niagara Falls really depended on this station, and when the pandemic happened, we really found out how important this radio station was” for disseminating health and safety information to the public.

Getting FCC approval for the WEBR call letters was a thrill for Angelo and Yuhnke. “When you go back to the history of WEBR, I mean, it was a gift from God,” Yuhnke said. “I never expected that. It became available, and once you do the research about WEBR being the second radio station in the Buffalo market, know-

be our last opportunity, so that’s motivating Don and I on this project.”

Angelo said when WJLL retired the WEBR call letters in 1993, the letters circulated to several different stations, then “they went into that big, empty pot at the FCC and were sitting there. And I put it on the list and called the attorney and said, ‘Check these out.’ About a week went by, and he came back and said: ‘WEBR is available.’ My heart stopped! I said, ‘Bill, get your checkbook out.’”

“There’s no way in the world we could have picked call letters and threw the switch on, and automatically out of the heavens, you have a radio station that’s a success,” Angelo said.



circle back to Buffalo and a come WEBR which Yuhnke standards.” travel- Buf-dream true in the format, he and call “Standards of Excellence.” Angelo’s eulogy

and personal history parallels his development of the skills to lead Buffalo’s newest “old” radio station.

While WBFO radio veteran Marc Scott recently retired after 39 years at one station, Angelo, himself, quipped that he has been in 39 different stations in 50 years. A native of Buffalo, Angelo said, “I’ve been in the business for 55 years. It’s the only thing I ever did in my life.”

Music, Journalism – or Both

But it wasn’t always so clear what his path would be. As a senior at Grover Cleveland High School, he had tough choice. “Two things I wanted to do in my life, I wanted to be a trumpet player, and I wanted to go to journalism school.”

A few years older than Angelo, his buddy, Don Menza, the world-renowned jazz tenor saxophone player, was a college student when he got a gig with the Maynard Ferguson Orchestra. Angelo asked him what it was like to be on the road. Menza’s answer: “Well, we get paid every Friday in a little brown envelope, \$400 cash. The only problem is, by the next Thursday, I’m broke.”

That hit Angelo hard. “It was that moment that I said, ‘I love music, but I’m going to journalism school.’” Fittingly, both the music and the broadcast journalism come together in Angelo’s newest venture, the new WEBR.

From No. 1 market to No. 220

Angelo enrolled in New York University’s broadcast school. “Then the Army called, and I lost my deferment and went into the Army during the Vietnam War.” He auditioned and was accepted into the 19th Army band as a trumpet player. Score one for music, but journalism was never far away. After his military service, he got a part-time job at a radio station writing news. “That evolved quickly into a weekend on-air shift at WNEW.” Marriage to the girl waiting back home motivated him to leave the Big Apple. “I found a job in radio, from the No. 1 market in America (WNEW) to the No. 220 market in America, which was Olean, New York, WMNS radio,” where he became a combination disc jockey and newsmen.

Station owner Jim Gleason was familiarizing Angelo with station policy when he said, ‘Oh, by the way, the guy you’re replacing is just leaving right now.’ They went down the corridor, and Gleason said, ‘Don, I want you to meet Barry Lillis.’ Lillis said, ‘Good luck to you, kid.’

Angelo said Lillis went onto to work in TV. “I didn’t see Barry for many decades, and he was at Chan-



JAZZ MAN: Veteran broadcaster Al Wallack hosts “Jazz in the Afternoon” starting at 3 p.m. Sundays on the new WEBR-AM radio. Wallack began his career at WEBR-AM radio in 1972 as the all-night program host. He moved to mid-day and the position of production director shortly thereafter. When the station was sold to Western New York Public Broadcasting Association, Wallack stayed on to found “Jazz in the Nighttime,” a popular show that he hosted for the next 18 years.

broadcasters Bill Yuhnke and Don Angelo.

WEBR bursts onto the scene again with music from “The Great American Songbook,” consisting mainly of jazz and standards from the golden age of pop.

The station boasts a roster of familiar, seasoned on-air hosts and two hard-working radio executives, in Kenmore Broadcasting Communication Inc.’s president, Yuhnke, and general manager and program director, Angelo.

Yuhnke said the new radio venture is going very well. “It’s way beyond my expectations of where this was going to go and the community and the public has just reached out, put their arms around the station, and boy, that’s my payment.”

Also president of Liberty Yellow Cab Co., Yuhnke approached Hall of Fame radio and TV executive Angelo last October with his idea to purchase the flailing WJLL radio station of Niagara Falls. The two men agreed to partner in the venture. Yuhnke’s purchase offer of WJLL’s 1440 frequency was accepted, and Angelo and Yuhnke broke out the champagne when the Federal Communications Commission granted their request for the newly available call letters of WEBR.

“I knew the guys that owned the station when they first bought it,” Yuhnke said. “They’ve been going through a time, and their age caught up with them a little bit and it got time they couldn’t run it,” he said. “One of our last conversations we had before we purchased it was the fact that they were going to let the station go dark, which means that we would have lost the frequency” Yuhnke explained. “Niagara Falls, and Niagara County, would have lost their hometown advantage with the last radio station up there, and so that did motivate me to

in the community, and we want to touch the people. We want to make this their radio station. We want them to hear the music, learn the music, enjoy the music. Young people can start listening to this music and go, ‘Hey, I kind of like that.’”

‘The Sound of the City’

Pioneering station WEBR signed on the air in 1924, the creation of engineer Herbert Howell; it became renowned as “The Sound of the City,” with a music format and ownership by two successive local newspapers; it was reconfigured as an oldies station in 1971; then in 1976 it began a great 17-year run as Newsradio 970; until it was retired as a Buffalo station in 1993 by its parent, Western



WEBR General Manager and Program Director Don Angelo, left, is in studio with Jack Horohoe, current afternoon host on the new WEBR radio, 1440 AM. Horohoe worked at the station starting in 1968, when it was 970 on the AM radio dial. He returns to radio in the noon to 3 p.m. slot after a 49-year hiatus, during which he pursued a real estate career.

New York Public Broadcasting Association.

ing that ‘The Lone Ranger’ show that went across the country started here in Buffalo. We have such great talent here! Don and I felt that if we didn’t take the time now to at least set a standard for Buffalo radio, this could

Partners Then and Now

Angelo said that he and Yuhnke go way back, to the days when they worked together in Buffalo radio. “When I first moved back to Buffalo and was working at several radio stations, the first one being WWOL, my job there as sales manager was to hire, recruit and train advertising sales staff. And I hired this young guy at the time. His name was Bill Yuhnke. And he took off like a bolt of lightning with a minimum amount of training, and he just fell into it. Did a fabulous job of selling advertising for WWOL,” Angelo said.

“He’d keep coming up with promotions for us to do to sell more advertising. And that station was sold, we moved to another station, and every time we moved, I’d keep hiring him.”

When Angelo went to WUTV, Channel 29, he said Yuhnke left radio and eventually into the transportation/cab business, finding success as he built a new career.

Liberty Yellow Cab operates in both Niagara and Erie counties. “We started with somewhere around three cars roughly 40 years ago. We built the fleet up to over 375 vehicles,” Yuhnke said. “So, if it wasn’t for the cab business, it wouldn’t have been able fund this radio project. I’ve been blessed by a lot of people. I surrounded myself with Don’s experiences.”

And Angelo’s experiences are vast and varied. His life story has a lot of twists and turns that brought him from Buffalo to radio jobs around the county, then full



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