



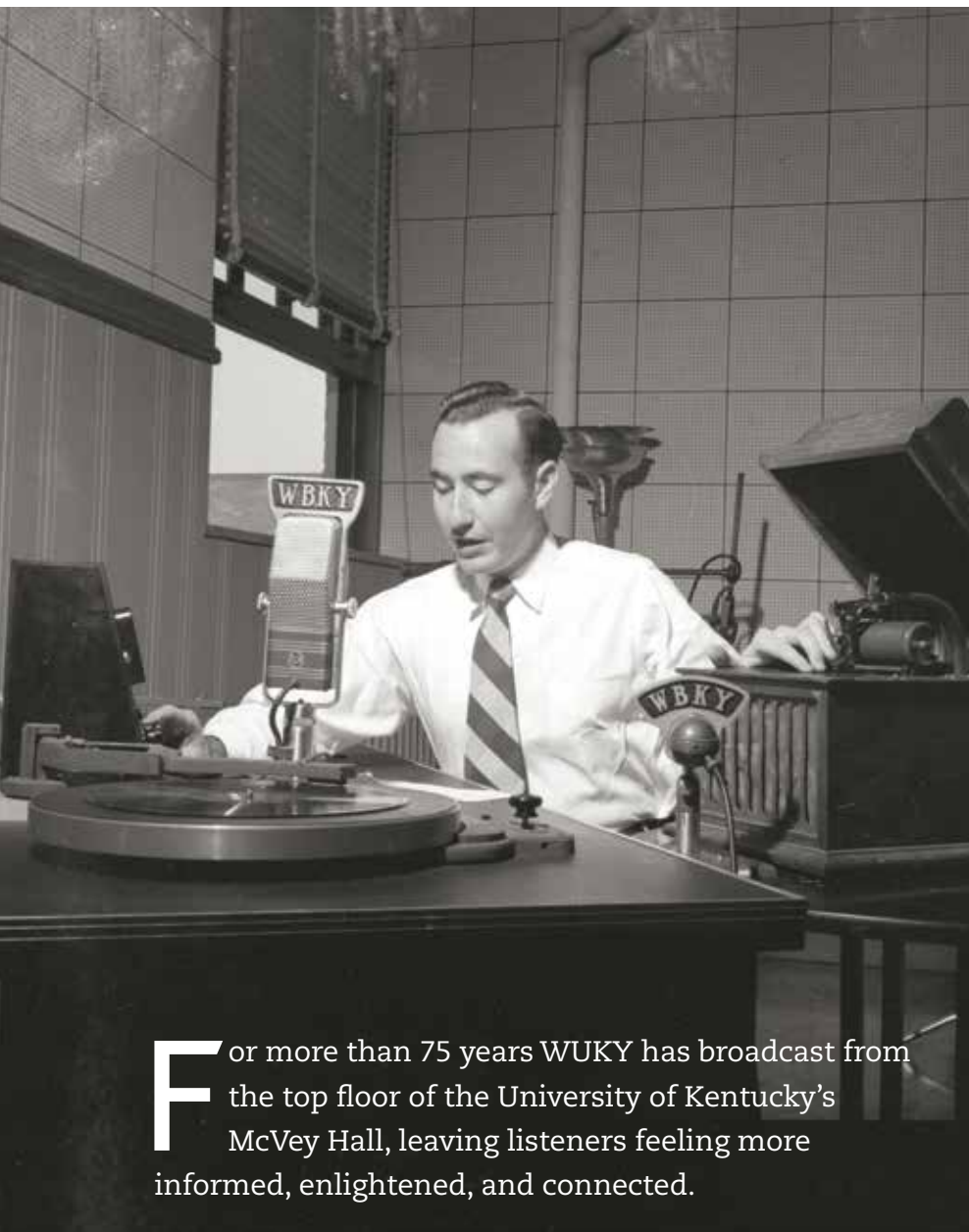


# TOP OF THE CHARTS

WUKY continues to enrich the community with an array of programming as it prepares for a big move

By Rena Baer / Photos by Mark Mahan

Left, general manager Tom Godell is excited about WUKY's future home in a former recording studio on Spurr Road, above.



**F**or more than 75 years WUKY has broadcast from the top floor of the University of Kentucky's McVey Hall, leaving listeners feeling more informed, enlightened, and connected.

Even in its earlier formative years as WBKY, when the station reached out from the hills of Eastern Kentucky in Beattyville, the focus was educational programs (at least when the signal got through). Today, WUKY's programming and presence are much more dependable and ubiquitous, with technology constantly furthering its reach far past 91.3 FM.

Despite the changes in technology, the focus remains on opening up the world while also bringing it home with an emphasis on community, said Tom Godell, the station's general manager. National guests such as actor and activist Danny Glover, and more local guests, including U.S. Senator Rand Paul

(R-Kentucky) when he withdrew from the presidential race, are frequently invited on the air to provide context on news, culture, and music. Fundraisers benefit not only the station but also other organizations its audience deems important. Listeners are more involved in helping to guide content.

"Public radio used to be an ivory tower of information," said Godell. "It doesn't work that way anymore."

The community will be much better able to be part of WUKY when it moves next summer from its gridlocked mid-campus location to a plush former recording studio on Spurr Road. The building was donated to UK by Kentucky Eagle president Ann Bakhaus and her family. (See accompanying sidebar.)

"If we could move tomorrow, we would," said Godell.

Having occupied the top floor of the University of Kentucky's McVey Hall since the 1940s, the present quarters are cramped and overflowing. One UK administrator jokingly described the move as going from "the outhouse to the White House."

Godell, the general manager since 2004, chuckles over that characterization. He knows firsthand that if someone plugs a vacuum into an outlet in the current master control room, the station will go off the air. He also knows what it's like to deliver the news from a broadcast room heated by a radiator and cooled by a window unit, or conduct an interview in a closet turned recording room.

"We've adapted virtually every space here," he said, pointing out a box-filled conference room that doubles as storage space.

WUKY's new quarters will include a large sound-proof studio, a control room, interview room, isolation booths, and office and meeting space.

"The main thing, though, is the location," Godell said. "We will be easily accessible to the community. It is difficult right now being in the middle of campus where no one can get to us except those who are already at UK."

With a larger, more easily reached facility, WUKY can have not just one musician play because of space constraints but instead can invite the whole band. And rather than interview one guest at a

COURTESY OF WUKY



time, the station will be able to host a whole panel.

The 13-acre green lawn also beckons with communal promise. "People can bring their lawn chairs and their wine and come enjoy live music and the space," Godell said.

"Everyone is excited about the potential," he continued, adding one caveat. "The downside is that we are going to be away from campus where we work closely with the University of Kentucky. We constantly have guests on our shows from UK. We will work that out, though. We want to remain an intimate part of the university."

### Rural outreach

UK experimented with radio in the 1920s. But it wasn't until the 1930s that the college's programming became a regular fixture on WHAS in Louisville with a noontime show that was sent via phone line. UK's College of Agriculture often produced the shows, whose intended audience was Kentucky's farmers and housewives. Topics spanned from "Animal Friends and Enemies" to cesspools, a definite lunchtime appetite suppressant. Musical programs ranged across genres, offering a little bit for everyone: Hawaiian, hillbilly, and big band.

WUKY started as the AM station WBKY in Beattyville, when the FCC was granting licenses to small communities. The UK start-up barely sputtered along despite volunteers flocking over treacherous terrain to the poverty-stricken community to present daily newscasts, agricultural programs, radio dramas, and religious talks. The problem was the station had a very short range, and few had the means to listen. UK's Elmo Sulzer, the station's founder, had spent almost four years trekking through the rough country of Eastern Kentucky, setting up receivers known as "listening



Joe Conkwright, host of "Rock and Roots" and "Joe's Blues," broadcasts a selection of CDs.

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stations." Built by high school and college students during World War II as part of the National Youth Administration, the receivers were part of an effort to bring educational broadcasts to rural communities.

"It was the original form of distance learning," said Godell.

Unfortunately, the technology was not reliable enough to fulfill Sulzer's vision, and many of the broadcasts went unheard (though Sulzer did win a Peabody Award for a series on venereal disease). So, in 1944 WBKY relocated to the UK campus with a \$5,000 blessing from the university's board of trustees (the equivalent of \$70,000 today), began broadcasting over the new FM band, and became one of seven non-commercial affiliates of the Mutual Broadcasting Service. The university continued to supply programming, adding 30 minutes here and there when they could find the money and student volunteers to do it.

Other historical highlights included a 1953 series focusing on weaknesses in Kentucky's education system that led to amending the state's constitution. And into the early 1960s WBKY was airing university courses, including Thomas D. Clark's "Kentucky History."

### Aligning forces, changing names

WBKY, which took on the call letters WUKY in 1989 to reflect better its affiliation, joined forces and helped create NPR when in 1971 it aired the inaugural "All Things Considered," now the most listened-to afternoon-drive news program in the country. Today, WUKY consists of an eclectic schedule of NPR and award-winning local news, music, humor, and sports.

"Covering sports is unusual for a public radio station, but we surveyed our listeners and 95 percent of them followed sports," said Godell. "We like our shows to have variety and personality."



Station founder Elmo Sulzer

COURTESY OF WUKY



WUKY is hosting its fourth annual Vintage Vinyl Sale, beginning Wednesday, April 20 at the Habitat for Humanity ReStore at 451 Southland Drive with a preview party from 5:30 to 7:30. Tickets will be available at the door for \$20. Ten dollars of that will go toward a voucher to purchase items during the sale. The public portion of the sale begins April 21-23 from 10 a.m.-7 p.m. each day. Anyone looking to give away their vinyl records for a good cause can donate them to WUKY for the sale.



Contact [robert.hansel@uky.edu](mailto:robert.hansel@uky.edu)  
for more information.



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WUKY also covers Kentucky's full legislative session, along with Lexington-Fayette Urban County Government, Fayette County Public Schools Board, and other area news. Though the local news is aired only in the morning and the afternoon, more around-the-clock coverage can be found on its Twitter feed and at WUKY.org. In addition, "HD-2," a 24-hour NPR news and talk channel featuring the "Diane Rehm Show" and "Fresh Air," and "HD-3," a 24-hour jazz fest, can be streamed both through WUKY's website and through free iPhone and Android apps.

The station also prides itself on its music selection and depth, said Joe Conkwright, who hosts "Rock and Roots" from noon to 3 p.m. every weekday. "People still send us their CDs; we are one of the last stations in the world to still play them," he said. Whereas, the average album-oriented rock station usually has a library of 500 songs on its playlist, WUKY has 5,000 and includes rock, jazz, and blues.



Anne Deck, host of "Girl's Night Out" and "Solo Shots," poses with a collection of old radios.

"We feature a lot of new music and local music," said Conkwright, who also produces "Joe's Blues." "But not only that, we also play old music and good music."

Conkwright is one of 13 full-time and seven part-time employees who work at WUKY. The station is funded by grants, corporations, individual donations, fundraising drives, and UK, which provides one-third of WUKY's funding.

"UK owns WUKY and signs our paychecks," said Godell.

But the community and businesses also play a huge part with their support. It's with pride that Godell holds up a unique blue-glazed ceramic coffee cup with his name etched into it. In a recent fundraising drive, Tater Knob Pottery offered 100 individualized mugs for every \$150 donation. The mugs were gone well before the campaign ended, earning \$1,500 in the process.

"It was one of the best donations we've ever had," said Robert Hansel, WUKY's membership manager.

The station makes sure that fundraising efforts tie in closely with other causes that listeners care about. For example, during one fundraiser, for every \$1,000 raised, WUKY teamed with the Lexington Farmers Market and Green Bean Delivery to supply \$100 worth of food products to God's Pantry.

"It's about bringing together community, and donations not just hitting the radio station but also benefitting others," said Hansel.

Among employees, there's a refreshing reverence for the support WUKY receives to perform its mission. No matter what their job title is, WUKY employees seem driven by service and reaching their audience, whether it's through comprehensive news, music, or involvement.

"I've always been proud to work for the university and WUKY,"



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said Anne Deck, host and producer of “Girls’ Night Out” and “Solo Shots.” “... It’s the music itself that ensures each show keeps evolving, most often thematically, which always keeps things interesting. No doubt I love what I do for WUKY and, most importantly, our listeners.”

John Lumagui, director of operations, said they offer the same depth with their music that they do with their news. Rather than commercials, WUKY provides context, he said.

“It’s about being able to do radio without having to sell soap,” he added. “It’s about community and true radio.” **KM**

### FORMER RECORDING STUDIO TO BE WUKY’S NEW HOME

The building at the corner of Greendale and Spurr roads in northern Fayette County is hard to identify. A seeming cross between a contemporary church and an oversized residence, the structure’s architecture doesn’t give it away. The only telltale sign is a neatly cut silhouette of a microphone inlaid on the solitary iron gates that open onto the expansive property.

Interestingly, the microphone fits both the business that once occupied the structure and the organization that soon will. Built as a high-end recording studio in 2005 that included plush temporary living quarters, the building will become home to Lexington’s flagship National Public Radio station, WUKY. The station is moving in next summer after renovations are completed.

WUKY’s pending relocation to Spurr Road is the result of a generous donation to the University of Kentucky Opera Theatre department. Ann Bakhaus initially purchased the former St. Clair Recording Company for its 13 acres, which sit next to her beverage distribution business, Kentucky Eagle, Inc. But after exploring its potential for other uses with a friend in real estate, Robert McGoodwin, Bakhaus decided she wanted the property to go to the UK’s Opera Theatre program, directed by Everett McCorvey.

“I had been introduced to Everett and had been attending many of his programs and was so impressed with what he has



achieved at the University of Kentucky with the music program and our students,” said Bakhaus. “I discussed it with my children, and they thought it was a terrific idea.”

They invited an unsuspecting McCorvey to Kentucky Eagle in December 2014 and took him for a ride that literally ended right next door, where a banner hung from the gate, announcing his new office.

“I was speechless, literally speechless,” McCorvey said, still in awe of that day.

After McCorvey went back and spoke with his dean, the dean met with UK’s provost. With the property’s distance from the UK campus and the challenge students would have getting out there, UK administration came up with a proposal — one that would benefit not only the opera department but also WUKY.

Given its increasingly cramped quarters, WUKY had been looking for a new home since the early 2000s. The former recording studio Bakhaus was offering would be a perfect fit, especially because the station staff is mostly full-time employees rather than students. In return, the intended recipient of Bakhaus’ gener-

ous gift, the UK opera department, would receive increased operating support equivalent to annual earnings from a \$1.3 million endowment, the appraised value of the donated building.

In addition, the opera department would also have use of the recording studio and equipment.

With the details hammered out, Bakhaus agreed to the arrangement.

“I am a huge supporter of the arts because I feel it is imperative for a strong, vibrant, and well-rounded community,” she said.

McCorvey was thrilled with both his department and WUKY’s being able to benefit from the donation.

“You talk about a win-win situation,” he said. “This worked out in so many ways. I am just so humbled by Ann’s generosity.”

And McCorvey is not the only one. The excitement at WUKY is palpable, and the university’s administration is excited about what it means to their programs.

“This thoughtful gift from Ann Bakhaus and her family provides a tremendous boost to our UK Opera Theatre program, WUKY, and public radio in Central Kentucky,” said Mike Richey, UK vice president for philanthropy. “We are deeply grateful to Ann for her generosity and willingness to work with us to structure this special gift that will benefit multiple areas of the university. Her philanthropy will make a wonderful impact on the university and the commonwealth for decades to come.”