

Remembering when 'Super Soul 16' WWRL ruled the radio world



Bobby Jay, Jane Tillman Irving and George Flowers were a big part of WWRL-AM radio, an influential Black radio station during the 1960s and '70s. They spoke fondly on Sunday, Feb. 21, and Monday, Feb. 22, about the importance of what they did at the station. Credit: Bruce Gilbert, Sean Rayford; Photo credit: Curt Clemons, Fred Dukes, George Flowers

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Bobby Jay used to be a world-famous radio DJ, and still is in some parts of the world. On a recent February morning, he was taping his weekly radio show for listeners in England out of his home in Columbia, South Carolina. Over a lifetime in music and radio, he's never really stopped.

Born in Harlem, Jay joined the doo wop quartet, the Laddins, in the '50s, then came radio. As a DJ, he had stops in Newark, Memphis, and at WGLI in North Babylon.



Radio disc jockey Bobby Jay, poses for a photo in Columbia, South Carolina Monday, Feb. 22, 2021. Credit: Sean Rayford

Then to WWRL – the Big RL. "Super Soul 16" RL. At 1600, the very top of the AM dial.

Jay would later go on to WCBS-FM as host of like shows "Top 20 Countdown," but those 15 years at WWRL would be the place where he changed history.

"We were the top Black station in the country," he says, "and not just New York. We were the most copied Black radio station too [because] we identified with our listeners and our listeners identified with us."



WWRL's Soul 16 Survey of Top Hits pamphlet for the week of February 28, 1968. Credit: WWRL Archives

According to the dwindling core of WWRL superfans, Jay – born Robert Jeffers 76 years ago – remains the unofficial historian of the station's glory years, from around 1963 to 1975, when the Big RL was indeed a giant and Jay was too.

But there are others, albeit fewer. Longtime WWRL overnight host Imhotep Gary Byrd now fronts shows for WBAI ("GBE: The Global Black Experience, Fridays at 7 p.m.; "GBE Mindflight, Sundays, 6:30 p.m.) and WBLS (Sundays, 10-11 a.m.). In a recent phone interview, he explained that "RL was the pinnacle of performance for Black radio personalities in the United States [and] became a model for the best of what Black radio could be.

"For us on the air, that's how we were basically geared to present ourselves."



Gary Byrd of WWRL in the early 1970s. Credit: George Flowers

Then, there's Jeff Troy. He was an RL star from 1967 to 1979, then retired from radio and ended up selling cars (including, for a time, at a dealership in Roslyn). "You have to do what you have to do," he says.

But of those many years at RL, he says "listeners loved it, man [because] it was based on our personalities. My approach was more Top-40 radio, playing 20 minutes of music nonstop, but the nice thing about us is we were all different – all good but different."

It's reflexive now to dismiss AM radio as a media dinosaur, except that's not entirely true. Superseded by FM, then satellite, AM long ago embraced talk – largely conservative talk – as a way to survive. But from the '50s through to the early '70s, AM's influence rivaled TV's, while the influence in music was outsized along with the DJ's who played it. In New York, WMCA had its "Good Guys," like Harry Harrison, Gary Stevens and Jack Spector. At WABC, there was Dan Ingram, Ron Lundy, Scott

Muni and Bruce "Cousin Brucie" Morrow. And until WINS switched to all-news in 1965, Alan Freed and Murray "the K" Kaufman were the big names at 1010.



WWRL DJs Jeffy Troy (l) and Bobby Jay (r) pose with singer Sarah Dash of Labelle. Credit: WWRL Archives/unknown

Besides Byrd, Troy and Jay, WWRL's deejay lineup included Enoch Gregory, aka the Dixie Drifter, and Frankie "The Love Man" Crocker. The "Soul Server" Hank Spann was here, along with "Jerry B." Bledsoe, and Rocky "Whirlin' Rocky G" Groce. En route to a legendary career at WBLS, Hal Jackson made a brief stopover at RL and so did Chuck Leonard, WABC's first Black DJ.

Eddie O'Jay arrived in the early '60s after a run in Cleveland where he managed a local band – soon to become an international phenom – that would name itself after him in tribute. WWRL even had a distinguished news staff which included New York radio and TV pioneer Jane Tillman Irving. (She would meet her future husband, George Flowers, a New York radio news legend in his own right, at WWRL too.)

In time, this lineup came to be known as the "Temptations of Radio" — personalities so dominant and beloved in New York that they were influencers and lifestyle brands before anyone even knew what such things were.

Together they were an important part of African American history, too, especially music history, but are now largely forgotten. Many of the DJs died years ago, including Crocker who would turn WBLS into a radio powerhouse before his death in 2000.



Before he turned WBLS into a radio powerhouse, Frankie "The Love Man" Crocker was a mainstay at WWRL.
Credit: Getty Images/Michael Ochs Archives

Byrd adds that "the biggest issue Black radio faces is its invisible history. We don't necessarily have the video archival footage that TV does."

Nevertheless, he and other observers also say this history was being buried even as it was made. Racism, either subtle or overt, impacted everything from playlists to hiring. Advertisers periodically visited the WABC studios to make certain the disc jockeys were white — a practice that ended after Leonard joined in '65. Major

advertisers and broadcasters also largely shunned Black audiences through the '50s and '60s, or as Ellis Feaster, [a radio archivist](#) and veteran DJ with Orlando-based Z88.3 FM, puts it, "owners weren't really interested in going after that segment of the community. They figured, no money there so why waste our money?"

Irving – an anchor for RL from the late '60s until 1972 when she joined WCBS/880 as its first Black female reporter – says that "when Frankie Crocker first went to WMCA [in 1969], the MCA listeners didn't know he was Black even though the WWRL listeners obviously did. For a while [at CBS/880], they didn't know I was Black either." Crocker lasted barely a year at WMCA.

Irving says WABC's Ingram (who died in 2018) had told her and others about those surreptitious studio visits by advertisers who "wanted to make sure all those jocks the kids were listening to were white."



George Flowers and Jane Tillman Irving were major newscasters at WWRL. Credit: Bruce Gilbert

Advertisers "weren't going after the Black audience because I don't think they understood just how substantial the market was then," she says. "They knew there was music and money in the music, but it was 'race' music."

That would change because the Big RL and the "Temptations" were about to revolutionize radio and the very culture itself.

RL and its superstar jocks in fact came out of a unique radio culture that stretched back to at least 1949, when Joseph Deighton Gibson Jr. founded Atlanta's WERD, where he filled the playlist with R&B, while his DJs – who included Gibson himself as "Jack the Rapper" – each spoke in a rapid-fire patter pattern meant to mimic Bebop.

The rappin' style, which quickly spread to other prominent Black DJs like LA's Nathaniel "Magnificent" Montague and Baltimore DJ Maurice "Hot Rod" Hulbert, arrived in New York City in the early '50s when Jocko Henderson launched "Jocko's Rocket Ship" on WOV (now WADO/1280 AM).

1. STAR WARS/CANTINA BAND	Meco
2. IT'S ECSTASY WHEN YOU LAY DOWN NEXT TO ME	Barry White
3. IF YOU'RE NOT BACK IN LOVE BY MONDAY	Millie Jackson
4. DO YOUR DANCE	Rose Royce
5. BOOGIE NIGHTS	Heatwave
6. YOU CAN'T TURN ME OFF	High Inergy
7. WE NEVER DANCED TO A LOVE SONG	Manhattans
8. BACK IN LOVE AGAIN	L.T.D.
9. RUNNING AWAY	Roy Ayers Ubiquity
10. DOCTOR LOVE	First Choice
11. JUST LET ME HOLD YOU FOR A NIGHT	David Ruffin
12. BRICK HOUSE	Commodores
13. JUST FOR YOUR LOVE	Memphis Horns
14. KEEP IT COMIN' LOVE	KC & The Sunshine Band
15. DON'T BE AFRAID	Ronnie Dyson
16. I'M HERE AGAIN	Thelma Houston
17. THE QUIET VILLAGE	The Ritchie Family

Those spoken DJ breaks between the songs were almost as important as the music. The jocks often rhymed them but each had a distinct rhythm, beat and velocity. The jocks at RL would eventually have the most distinctive styles of all.

WWRL was founded in 1926 at 41-30 58th St., Woodside, and in a living room, no less – Bill Reuman's, a ham radio operator who would build an adjoining studio. Even for radio, WWRL (for Woodside Radio Laboratory) had a breezily quirky history. Ethel Merman, a next-door neighbor, performed on its air, while most of the shows over the years were in Italian, German, French, Hungarian, Slovak, Czech and Yiddish.

In 1964, Reuman sold out to Egmont Sonderling, a German Jewish immigrant who had launched a string of Black-oriented radio stations. WWRL was to be his flagship and one of his first hires was Jerry Boulding, a Washington, D.C. jock familiar with Jack the Rapper, Jocko Henderson and Hot Rod Hulbert. As program director, Boulding quickly snared Eddie O'Jay, a big star in Cleveland, then others soon followed, including a handful of emerging Black stars in Buffalo radio – Crocker, Bledsoe and Byrd.

By the mid-'60s, much of Top 40 radio had been cosseted by something called the "Drake Format" – more music, less talk – but Boulding decided to give both equal billing. Byrd says Boulding (who died in 2013) gave "jocks the freedom to express themselves," and express themselves any way they liked. Audiences followed. By 1965, the station was a hit – a fast-growing one.

Feaster, who listened to the station as a Hofstra student living in Hempstead, says the DJs "were all part of your family and they knew the pulse of New York too. When Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated [in 1968] RL cleared schedules, played his speeches over and over again, and tried to sooth the community.

"If you wanted to find out what was going on with your community, your people,,"

he says, "you couldn't find that any place else."

Audiences were largely African American but a growing number of white listeners began to arrive as well. One of them was Rob Frankel, a veteran radio producer who now preserves and [posts vintage airchecks on MixCloud](#). "As a kid growing up in Levittown, I thought I was the only one who listened to RL but years later would run into white friends who told me they were big fans too."

Frankel says RL was "the voice" of Black New Yorkers through the '60s and early '70s but it was the playlist that most influenced rivals, which typically cycled through the same dozen-or-so songs each day. RL's "Super Soul 16" survey – filled with established and emerging R&B stars – was closely studied by them, and "if you wanted to know what the hit song would be on MCA two months down the road, you'd hear it on RL [first.]"

The DJs meanwhile bonded themselves to listeners. Eddie O'Jay went to barber shops, bars, pools halls where he collected the names of patrons that he'd later read on the air. The station accessorized a flatbed truck with a hot mic and station logo which then traveled to various neighborhoods as the "Soul Mobile."



A program cover depicts several WWRL Disc Jockeys as they acted as the Master of Ceremonies for the Apollo Theatre. Circa 1970s. Credit: WWRL Archives

Listeners gravitated to favorite DJs, each of whom became stars in their own right. Some, like Crocker and Jay, opened for musical stars at the Apollo and they were the ones to receive top billing.

"At that time people had transistor radios, and I remember hanging out at friend's houses, or my cousins' house in Roosevelt, and the radio was always playing and it was always WWRL," says Dr. Teresa Taylor Williams, a Manhasset-based psychologist, and owner/publisher of the Great Neck-based New York Trend, a weekly newspaper for Black Long Islanders.

"You just grew up with it," she says, "and you grew up with these people."

RL also had robust public affairs programming, much of that anchored by Bob Law, then known on the air as "The Preacher." (Law, who lives in Westbury, went on to become a prominent political activist and still works on the radio, as host of "From

the Streets with Bob Law" on WBAI.)

Then there was news, much of that largely ignored by the white media, says Irving.



WWRL 1600 AM news reporter Jane Tillman Irving, near their Woodside Queens station, circa 1970. Credit: WWRL Archives

"We had a five-minute newscast at top and bottom of the hour, and it wasn't rip-and-read, but independent reporting, with a sharp focus on the Black community," she says. "If a story, for example, was about the city budget, you'd tell listeners how good or bad it would be for them."

For the Big RL, change came quickly if not unexpectedly. The station had always been hampered by a weak signal which barely reached the Suffolk/Nassau line. That made it particularly vulnerable to the advent of FM radio by the early '70s. By 1972, Crocker, who had become a huge and flamboyant figure on the New York music scene, began to program WBLS with what the station called "The Total Black Experience in Sound." It soon became the new king on New York radio.

RL's listener base started to decline, but not its influence, most notably its overnight show, "The GBE: The Gary Byrd Experience." Byrd says that one night after reading the lyrics to Curtis Mayfield's 1969 hit, "Choice of Colors," on the air, his callboard lit up. Soon he started to read his own words – and not just spoken-word performances, but his own songs, like "Every Brother Ain't a Brother" and "The Crown."

Frankel and others say Byrd had a major impact on early hip-hop and some its biggest stars, like Afrika Bambaataa as well as a couple of young Long Islanders, Carlton Ridenhour and William Drayton, who would go on to form Public Enemy as Chuck D and Flavor Flav.

"I was trying to express a new level of freedom as a DJ," says Byrd, and Mayfield's song was "at the absolute apex of the magic of what could be done with music and lyrics." Before leaving in 1981, he would write the lyrics for a couple of songs on the landmark R&B album from 1976, "Songs in the Key of Life."

Stevie Wonder was an RL fan too.

Nevertheless, with Byrd's departure, the great run – the glory years, "Super Soul 16," everything and everyone – came to an abrupt end. RL was finally sold a year later, and the new owner went with a gospel lineup. (Since last November, the station – now based on 7th Avenue in Manhattan – has been airing the all-news Black Information Network.)

Offering his own post-mortem, Bobby Jay says "it was all about the music."

But, he adds, "we couldn't help but think that we had the better radio personalities too."