

The Washington Star

Portfolio

For the Record, Washington's Getting to Be Big-Time

IF THERE IS A KEY to a record selling well here, it is radio airplay. WOL-AM, WKYS-FM, WOOK-FM and WHUR-FM are important to the black market. DC101-FM and WMAL-FM, currently engaged in a ratings war, can do well by an album. No single station, however, is as important as WPGC-AM/FM, the area's last Top 40 station.

WPGC is a biggie, right up there with WNEW in New York and WRKO in Boston. Over the years, it has maintained a consistent hold on the attention of Top 40 listeners. The trade magazines, which document the rise and fall of an album or single, look to it for major input, and promotion men for all the major labels treat it with reverence.

Jim Elliot, the station's music director, says the key to WPGC's success is playing what people want to hear. His current formula is around 50 percent "current" material and 50 percent "recent" material, oldies and album cuts. He feels the mix works, in part, because "the people around here know their music."

The mix doesn't satisfy the record companies, though. As Elliot points out, record labels live by the newest product and "there are constant battles over what should be played. If you play a lot of album cuts and recent but not current material, your playlist of new records has to tighten up, and that makes the companies very unhappy."

ANOTHER KEY, Elliot says, is to avoid record company games. One WPGC has consistently avoided, he notes, is playing a single released from a major album when that cut is neither the strongest nor best for airplay.

"It's a little trick, really," Elliot says. "Take something like 'Songs In the Key of Life.' They knew that was going to sell, so they didn't play out the strongest single, which I thought was 'Sir Duke.' They saved the strongest one for when sales of the album were lagging."

"I know why they do that, but you can't be at the mercy of what a record company puts out. There's no point in restricting yourself to one song."



JIM ELLIOT, WPGC's Music Director

As a result of this resolve, WPGC programmed three "Songs" cuts — "Sir Duke," "Isn't She Lovely" and "I Wish," the first single released from the album. "Sir Duke" caught on locally, but "I Wish" didn't. By the time Wonder's label finally released "Sir Duke" as a single, it had come and gone as a local hit.

Wonder isn't the only example. At the moment, Elliot says WPGC is not programming the single off Peter Frampton's new album, the title cut, "I'm In You." Instead, they're airing Frampton's cover of "Signed, Sealed, Delivered."

ELLIOT BASES his playlist decisions on a number of factors. While he says he has no interest in the national charts, he does pay attention to the "adds" (records that have been added to playlist) of certain stations in other cities. In particular, he pays attention to what black records have been added to Top 40 lists in cities like Detroit and Cleveland where, as in Washington, there is a mix of black and white populations.

Elliot also calls local record stores to see what singles and albums are selling, what might be an underground hit. "Black singles sell like crazy, especially around here. Only the top eight or 10 white singles sell anywhere near as well," Elliot notes. "A hot single does lead to big album sales, though, so we try to keep track of both."

And then there is the old "gut reaction" — the instinct that something sounds good. Elliot cites occurrences like WPGC's decision to pull Hall and Oates' "Rich Girl" off the duo's last album instead of continuing to play the single, "Do What You Want to Do." WPGC's success with the song led to its release as a single, and "Rich Girl" became a No. 1 song.

Another example: "Afternoon Delight," the Starland Vocal Band hit of last summer. Explains Elliot: "We checked around and found that it was doing some business. Not great, but all right. And it was a nice sounding record. So we added it."

The result, the music director says with pride, was that sales of "Afternoon Delight" tripled.

OF COURSE, what affects sales is a bit more complicated than just that, Elliot admits. A record may die locally despite airplay, big national sales, record company advertising and even a local concert date. ("I Never Cried," an Alice Cooper single, is one recent example.) A combination of those things is what usually pushes a record, though.

Around the date of a concert, for example, the performing group's albums usually jump in sales. That's why groups go out on the road. It's not to make money on the concert itself — only the biggest acts can do that; it's to boost album sales. As a result, companies try to coordinate album promotions with live appearances. If a band is playing locally, there will probably be sales on all their releases and a heavy dose of advertising.

That makes the music business a very integrated one. Concerts affect record sales. Record sales affect airplay. Airplay affects concerts. It all goes 'round and 'round. And in the star-maker machinery, Washington has become a major cog.

MUSICRADIO
WPGC

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