

TELEVISION

THE BROADCAST BEAT

BY DENNIS JOHN LEWIS

Divorce for Dude Walker And WPGC

Warm, lovable, more than a little bit hip, older — and always ladylike. These are the adjectives for Dustin Hoffman's impersonation of Dorothy Michaels in the big movie hit "Tootsie." And they also describe the weird and wonderfully witty observations of Dude Walker's impersonations of "Miss Lily" on mornings at musically mixed-up WPGC-AM (1580) and FM (95.5).

But, as of Feb. 8, those days are over. The clever morning personality left the station that day after less than a year on WPGC. And his departure may well signal the dangers immediately facing the once popular pop music outlet.

"When a ship starts to sink," Walker quotes a radio programmer as saying, "it usually goes all the way to the bottom." After years as the Washington area's radio station on the cutting edge of today's rock music, WPGC has slid from a solid No. 3 in Arbitron rankings into a four-way tie for 10th place. Behind Q107, WLIT, WAVA and WASH, WPGC only edges last place rocker DC101 among area FM rock outlets.

Fourteen months ago, WPGC was locked in a head-to-head rock rivalry with Q107 — with neither really able to gain an advantage on the other. And the same kind of tie existed in the mornings between Q107's breezy team of Walker and Doug Limerick and WPGC's Jim Elliott and Scott Woodside. Suddenly, in December 1981, Q107 fired Walker, placed newsman Limerick in airwaves limbo — and hired WPGC's personable pair by offering them sky-high salaries.

As Q107 trumpeted the arrival of Elliott and Woodside, WPGC wondered what to do. As an



D.C. radio personality Dude Walker quit his morning show at WPGC-AM.

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Dude Walker Jumps Ship

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interim measure, the station attempted to react by enticing Redskins quarterback Joe Theismann to WPGC airwaves with veteran deejay Dave-Foxx. (Ironically, Foxx and Theismann are rejoined as the new morning team since Walker's departure.) WPGC announced a year ago they were looking nationally for "a new morning team" to fill the Elliott and Woodside chairs. Soon thereafter, the hot hits station hired Walker — but for an afternoon slot. Then WPGC decided to give Walker the morning slot and a chance to wreak vengeance on Elliott and Woodside. Yet it never happened.

One reason that Walker's revenge and WPGC's revenge got sidetracked was WPGC's choice of a sidekick for Walker — novice newsman J. Robert Howe. A veteran of small-market radio, Howe doesn't sound like a radio voice that would be found in a nation-wide search for a new top-notch radio morning team. In fact, he's merely a transfer from the Marriott-owned sister station of WPGC in Provo, Utah.

Walker looks back on the Q107-WPGC rock wars in recent years and notes, "I guess I know when to jump ship. When I left Q107, they had just experienced their lowest ratings. And now WPGC has its lowest ratings."

But there's a key difference, says Walker.

Whereas Q107 fought long and hard to win top-of-the-hill rock turf for its kingdom, WPGC management had trouble making up its mind on critical matters in the past year. "It always seemed to me that they didn't really know what they wanted to do. I mean did they really want to win? Or did they just want to save money?"

"There were several conflicting viewpoints. Lots of chiefs and not enough Indians. I was reminded of what was wrong at PGC by this year's Dolphins-Jets game. The

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announcer was saying he knew of no better way to lose a game than for a team to play not to lose. And that's what is wrong with PGC these days. Q107 stays bullish as it always has been. But PGC loses because they're playing not to lose."

Some WPGC decisions struck Walker as simply wrong-headed. "One day they told me they wanted me to appeal mostly to 18-to-34 year-old females. And they pulled back on sports reports because they said it offends females. I felt as if I was being

asked to alienate some of my listeners — and I just couldn't believe it!"

A 13-year radio veteran, Walker says that disc jockeys don't usually listen to the music they play. Nevertheless, he noticed a radical change in the WPGC playlist. Instead of 35 new songs getting airplay, the number dwindled to a mere 15. "All of a sudden we were an oldies station. It was hard for me to get excited about playing Neil Diamond's 'Song Sung Blue' or some hit by Smokey Robinson and the Miracles. I felt older — and out of place since my comedy was pointed toward being topical. Playing all those oldies made me think I was playing music for people trying to escape today. That's not where it's at! And oldies isn't the only good music available. I'm very into new music. Listen to artists like Men at Work or Culture Club. That's where it's at!"

And there's some satisfaction to being able to tell WPGC I-told-you-so. "Thank God the ratings were terrible. I would have had to believe that everything I believe about radio is wrong — if this new format had worked. They're out of it now and they're not coming back. At least I knew I was right."

Walker, 31, says he may be ready to hang up his deejay ear phones for good. "The big trend in radio today is toward safe formulas. Unfortunately, radio is a business and there seems less and less room for what has been known as personality radio. I hate to say radio is a dead medium. But it's truly very sad that people are asked to not be creative anymore." Currently, Walker is scouting work in television.