

WRFG's History In Progress: an interview with Harlon Joye

By Heather Gray
Producer, WRFG's "Just Peace"
WRFG Board Member
July 1993
(edited February 2002)

From WRFG's Volunteer Manual: WRFG is opposed to those forces in our lives that dehumanize and oppress people, especially economic exploitation, racism, sexism, militarism, and anti-foreign/anti-immigrant chauvinism.

From WRFG's Articles of Incorporation: (WRFG provides a voice for) those who suffer oppression or exploitation based upon class, race, sex, age, creed, national origin or immigrant status.

General Programming Policy in WRFG's by-laws: WRFG is a community-oriented, educational, alternative medium and our programming must reflect this. We are for those alternatives that uplift human dignity and give people more control over their lives. WRFG is opposed to those forces in our lives that dehumanize and oppress people, especially economic exploitation, racism, sexism, militarism and anti-foreign/anti-immigrant chauvinism.

Note: In the mid-60's Harlon and Barbara Joye moved to Atlanta from New York. As political activists they began to explore radio as an outreach tool for social change and to utilize cultural expressions as a means to expand the movement for economic and social justice. The following is an interview I conducted with Harlon in 1993. As inferred in the title, it should be considered a "history in progress" as there is much in this interview that can and should be expounded upon. Here, thanks to Harlon, we are provided with an overall summary of the station's founding along with the early formulation of its mission. The station has a rich history and to understand where we are going, as the sages would tell us, I think we need to understand where we've been. This is but a part of that rich history.

WRFG: A Voice for Change

Heather: As a founding member of the station, tell us what the founding group was like? How did we end up with WRFG?

Harlon: In 1966, shortly after Barbara and I first came down here from New York, we talked about the possibility of a radio station. In fact, we had talked with somebody at WBAI in New York who knew of someone in Atlanta who was willing to give money to start a station here – but the person died when we were in the discussion stage. In the meantime, there was no worthwhile radio station in Atlanta. While our ideas were in the inception stage, Jeremy Landsman and Lorenzo Milam (radio activists) in St. Louis were concerned about the fact the universities and church groups around the country were taking virtually all the available frequencies. At that time, besides the three Pacifica stations in New York, Los Angeles and San Francisco, there were only about 4 other community (free form) stations in the country.

Jeremy and Lorenzo decided to grab frequencies in various cities and they sent out people to explore these possibilities from St. Louis to Birmingham, New Orleans, Miami and Atlanta. They had letters from a foundation in California that promised a limited amount of money to get stations started. They sent a guy to Atlanta named Tom, who set up a corporation and named it Radio Free Georgia. The corporation was Tom, his wife and a lawyer named Michael Padnos who did the papers for him.

Then Connors went to the "Great Speckled Bird" (a left-leaning grassroots paper in Atlanta at the time), met Barbara and she wrote the first article about Radio Free Georgia for the "Bird". After that, a lot of people came together to help develop WRFG – mostly "Bird" types and "left" people who we knew, including Reba Bolt, an attorney with the ACLU; Tim Hayes, who had just left the Black Panthers; Steve Wise, and others.

Page 2 - WRFG

Most of us knew about WBAI in New York which was a model for us. We explored various models, however. We thought at first WRFG should be like the "Great Speckled Bird" – free form – and we tried to set it up that way. We didn't have any idea that the FCC would have problems with that sort of thing so that idea soon fell apart. Then John and Beth Miller came down from St. Louis where they had been in a radio internship.

Barbara, John and Beth got together and started developing an infrastructure for WRFG. We got our construction permit...and then we had a permit for a 10 watt station and no money. We started having community meetings to discuss WRFG. Tom Connors wanted to open the station over in the Piedmont Park area which was still strongly identified as the "hippie" area, but we decided against that. Times were tense then. Tom would go over to John's while he was cooking dinner and start a row. John ended up in the hospital twice with stomach problems.

Our first engineer was Jim Trip and 'Lord' was he country...red haired, pot bellied, young. He did know engineering! Jim had never shaken hands with a Black person until he came to the station. He called women "chicks." But Jim got involved...started learning...and we started building the station.

Then, we started getting in some money. John Jacobs who was involved gave us some money from an inheritance. One of the lesbians in town, who also got an inheritance, gave us about \$3,000. We got some money from Stan Levinson - who was one of the folks red-baited with Martin Luther King, Jr. – and Carol Bernstein from New York gave us money.

I was the first station manager and at one point was 26 weeks without pay, which was \$50 a week.

At first, we had organizing meetings every week and ultimately had about 30 to 40 people at every Wednesday night meeting. All sorts of folks came. Larry Lee came because he was interested in Blue Grass. Soon we had Joe Shifalo attending along with Ebon Dooley, Linda Carlson and Bert Seigel, who was the Executive Director of the Georgia Branch of the American Jewish Congress.

We got our construction permit in the very beginning of 1972. Jim Tripp found out about a transmitter in Ohio. So, we sent a truck up there. The transmitter was in 2 pieces – each bigger than a refrigerator and each about 1,000 pounds. It was in an old barn stuffed with hay. We had to wipe the hay off the transmitter.

We brought the transmitter to Atlanta and unloaded it into the building where Tapitios is now (on Euclid across from Bass High School). Roger and Delores French were a part of WRFG then. Roger had been in the navy and had heard about WRFG from the "Bird". I remember when we were first wiring, Tripp said to Roger, "Cut them wires, there." Roger said, "They're not live are they?" And Tripp said, "No, they're not live." So, Roger cut through 220 volts of live wires. Luckily the insulation was good and Roger wasn't hurt but it sure burned a hole in the cutters.

We got carpeting they were throwing out from the old Marriott. We got paneling from West Lumber Company. We got the cheapest control board possible.

For the antennae, we were told by folks in St. Louis that we could actually make a transmitting antennae using equipment from Radio Shack and a pipe. So we built our own antennae – it was about 40 feet long. We managed to get a contract with WQXI (Channel 11) to place the antennae on their tower. We took the antennae over on the top of a car late at night to WQXI's tower. To install it we had to hire a company, which cost us about \$700 bucks.

Well, we finally got the antennae up and we were on the air and nobody could hear us. You practically had to be under the tower to hear us. Ten watts in a city doesn't mean anything. With ten watts in a flat rural area, however, you can be heard from some distance.

The station's first program guide was printed in the "Bird". I did the "Fox's Minstrel Show". We did "Inside Out" with Faye Bellamy. Larry did the "Bluegrass Special". Shifalo was doing a folk music program. Bert Seigel was doing a mixed program. Gene Ferguson had the first "blues" program. I was on from 12:00 AM to 4:00 AM in the morning on Fridays at that time. We also had a good number of gay women at the station at the very beginning.

Page 3 – WRFG

We put the production room in quickly and rented it out almost immediately to a guy who did a jazz program. We needed the money. We used to have back-yard benefits outside the back of Tapitios. That was when the Last Great Jive Ass Jug Band started.

Then, we found out we had to set up an advisory committee. When I went to New York to talk with people about WRFG – like those at WBAI, Stan Levinson, union people, Carol Bernstein - the only question they asked was “What does Julian Bond think about it?” So we set up an advisory committee including Julian Bond, John Lewis, Panke Bradley, George Esser (who was director of the Southern Regional Council at the time), folks from senior citizens groups, Quakers, Shelby Collum from the Gay Liberation Front, Andrew Young and Nan Pendergrast. Aside from the advisory committee, ultimately people like Jean Young and Michael Lomax were on the board and active members.

We were constantly told there was no way WRFG would succeed in Atlanta... every day I was told that for a year and sometimes 10 to 15 times a day. I recall that Tim and I went to speak at one of Clark/Atlanta’s communication classes and were told, “There’s no way that kind of station can succeed in Atlanta.”

Heather: Why did they say that?

Harlon: For two reasons – the same kind of thing you hear now. You have to do the same kind of thing all the time over the air or people won’t listen. The other reason was, and even more of an issue, that the people who were really interested and excited about the station were from San Francisco, Los Angeles, St. Louis and New York. They came from cities that already had a station like WRFG and understood the concept and the Atlanta community viewed them as outsiders.

Atlanta’s Police Department Red-Baits WRFG

(Note: When WRFG was given permission to go up to 3,000 watts early in 1977, the Subversive Control Unit of the Atlanta Police Department, headed by John Inman, went to Channel 11 and essentially told them to revoke the contract with WRFG. Channel 11 did exactly that. The police claimed that the station was filled with Trotskyites, Communist Party members, Weathermen, homosexuals, Black Panthers and dopesmokers. Larry Lee, WRFG’s lawyer at the time, said Channel 11’s action was illegal and in clear violation of the contract. WRFG’s board sued Channel 11 and won, receiving about \$30,000 of which the station secured approximately \$12,000 after legal fees.

Harlon Joye was particularly targeted by the police during this period.)

Heather: How were you targeted by the police in the late 70’s, Harlon?

Harlon: This was the time when the Atlanta Police Department had a list of the 10 most dangerous radical “hives of activity” in the city and one of them was the “Peoples Place” in Little Five Points. The Red Squad called their attorney who happened to be in the same firm as our attorney. Because of that we knew what the Red Squad was saying about WRFG as well. We taped what our attorney said about this. The tape later disappeared. Larry (our attorney) will tell you that at one point he was at an Episcopal Charity and the guard was a former member of the Red Squad. In the conversation, WRFG came up and he said, “Ya’ll wouldn’t have any trouble if you got rid of Harlon Joye.” He said they had an affidavit from Tom Connors saying that I was a known dope dealer on the strip and carried a pistol at all times. That scared the ‘shit’ out of me. We had a robbery at our house one time that I knew was related to this. What the fellow was looking for by going through my desk drawers indicated it was not a normal theft. There were some strange things going on then.

Some Early Fundraising

Harlon: We did the egg roll booth during the Piedmont Arts Festival. It was one of our major fundraisers. The last year we did that we brought in a net of \$11,000.

Heather: And then ultimately the Arts Festival stopped allowing non-profits to raise money. Outrageous!

Harlon: The Egg Roll Booth at the Piedmont Arts Festival started small. At first we had frozen egg rolls and by the time we finished doing this, after about 7 or 8 years, we had professional cooks. We probably had the cheesiest looking booth out there but we had a booth – it could be put together, taken apart, and put up again the next year. We had people out there selling egg rolls for the whole festival.

Overview of WRFG's Role In Atlanta

Heather: Does the history of WRFG reflect the progressive history of Atlanta?

Harlon: Yes, I think it does. There was an active left community at the time that was directly involved.

Heather: Were a lot of the early WRFG folks from the anti-war and civil rights movement?

Harlon: Yes.

Heather: Why did Julian Bond or John Lewis have an interest in WRFG?

Harlon: Because they saw it as a voice that would be giving a political slant that other radio stations were not providing – we went to folks with that concept. When any political person was in town we'd interview them. We had all kinds of community programs...the Kirkwood Community Program, the Cabbagetown Program, the Pittsburgh Community Program. We had old age programming. We had a lot more political programming earlier than we have today.

We made a definite attempt to have each of these residential and basically poor communities on the radio once a month. We sent people out with equipment for interviews or to record community meetings or we brought people into the station for interviews. We'd interview leaders like Louise Watley and Ethel Mae Matthews. If we'd had resources, our goal would have been to have these programs on the air once a day and from 30 or 25 different communities.

Heather: Is it still important to do that kind of programming? To go out to various communities and record meetings? This model could and should be used today?

Harlon: Yes, I think it is important. We're doing some of that today but a lot less.

WRFG has had an impact on Atlanta's radio because it encouraged opening up the airways for music. We served as a catalyst for a variety of music on other radio stations such as WREK and WCLK which were not airing a diversity of music.

Politically, we've also had an impact, but it's hard to gauge that. In the 1980's, the work we did around the Atlanta Federal Prison riots had quite an impact – we received national recognition for that. The Cuban prisoners would talk to us because they knew the station. Ernesto was from Cuba and the Cuban inmates would listen to his Latin program on WRFG. But you'd have to talk with both sides. Some thought that the role we played was too conservative. *(Note: When the Cuban "boat" prisoners at the Atlanta Federal Penitentiary rioted because of prison conditions and their "limbo" political status in the United States, they informed the officials that WRFG was one of the only [if not the single most] community organization they trusted. As a result, major media and other groups often needed to work through WRFG to negotiate with the inmates. Also, under the auspices of WRFG we provided the opportunity for family members and the Cuban prisoners to talk with each other. We received national attention for our critical role in the crisis. Virtually every evening during this crisis, WRFG's Gary Washington went to the prison area and interviewed people in the community – often doing a live feed.)*

The "Living Atlanta Series" had an impact. The National Endowment for the Humanities called it a prototype in two of its yearly reports. *(Note: This remarkable series of interviews documenting Atlanta's racial and economic history is now held by libraries across the country. It was also published as a book by the University of Georgia Press. Harlon took the lead in this important project.)*

WRFG's Mission

Heather: Harlon, how did the early founders conceptualize the station's mission?

Harlon: We were of the opinion that the station should be a political entity with music, which means innovation. It means imagination. It's the way information and music are presented along with the type of message that's critical in order to break the commercial mode and rigidity of thinking that comes out of public radio and public TV, certainly in today's market.

Heather: When the station first started, I'm sure the early organizers had lengthy discussions about what they hoped the station would accomplish.

Harlon: Oh, yes! A lot of our early discussions about the station were political. We talked about whether the station would be like a "soap box" – open to everyone - but we decided it shouldn't be "that" open. We decided that not only would we not be there for the Klan, we would not be there for Georgia Power or the corporations. We decided we would be there for people...and not just those who were denied access to the airways...but for those who are denied access to the airways from a left perspective. For example, we didn't want white supremacists on the air – and we didn't let them on WRFG. A lot of people participated in these discussions and ultimately we developed a position paper.

Heather: How would you characterize your program, the "Fox's Minstrel Show", and how it is in keeping with the station's mission?

Harlon: I attempt to do several things. First of all, I think mixed music is important. I think radio stations and programs shouldn't be all the same type music.

Heather: Do you think hearing different kinds of music is more stimulating?

Harlon: I think it's more stimulating. I think it's more interesting. There are very few types of music I can listen to for a whole hour...the same type of music coming into my face... without getting bored.

One of the best ways to get people to pay attention to political things is through music. With music incorporated into political programs listeners are not hearing a long heavy narrative without something cultural to go along with it. I try every week to have 2 or 3 sections on political issues through music.

Heather: What are some of the other roles the station plays?

Harlon: We provide community information. Right now if you needed to know what was happening this week you can find out at WRFG. You could find out something about protests against the Olympics, pickets going on in terms of labor. What other protests are going on here and there and what they're about. The station is a sounding board in that sense.

Plus, we bring to the air "left" opinions of all types, as well as a diversity of cultural information you wouldn't hear anywhere else.

Heather: What we're talking about really is a genuine alternative.

Harlon: Yes.

Page 6 - WRFG

Heather: Harlon, the movement for justice in the country and the world continues to change, and the issues become more diffuse and not as clear cut as they used to be – i.e. the civil rights movement and Jim Crow laws, the anti-war movement. Some would say the problems today might be considered even worse than before. Some say that given US economic or capitalist expansion that the station should get in line with the times. Given those varied opinions, do you think the mission of the station should remain the same? We should still provide a progressive voice for social change?

Harlon: Yes, otherwise what's the use of WRFG?

Also, if we lost WRFG, it could never happen again. I think regardless of whatever anybody's agenda is at WRFG they're aware of that. "The Great Speckled Bird" could start again tomorrow. All you need is a press and some money. That's all you need – it might not work but you can try it. If WRFG disappears you can't try it again because the frequency would be gone and there are no other frequencies.

Acknowledgements: I consider this to be but a start of WRFG's remarkable history and documentation of its contribution to the Atlanta community. In addition to Harlon, I want to thank Joe Shifalo, Boyd Lewis, Roger French, Ebon Dooley, Abdul Mannon and Faye Bellamy for always providing information about the station's history.

