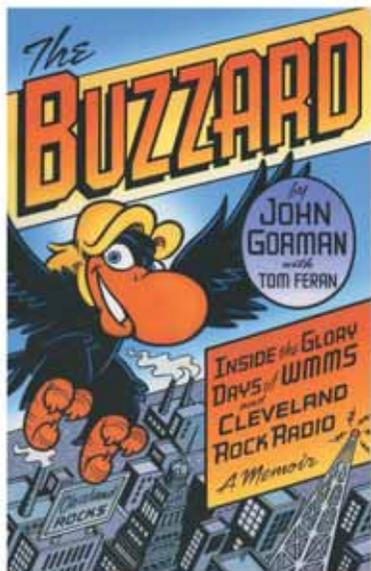


WMMS The Buzzard!

By Helen Marketti



The Buzzard by John Gorman. \$24.95 / Hardcover / 256 pages. For promotional use. Provided by Gray & Company, Publishers: 1-800-913-3600.

The sinister grin of "The Buzzard" peering over billboards, splashed on t-shirts and painted on walls of buildings served as the rock and roll mascot for WMMS radio station in Cleveland, Ohio. Creative energy, ambition and unique approaches to entice a loyal listening audience is what made WMMS the most popular rock and roll radio station in the country.

At the helm of the station's hey day was John Gorman who served as the music and program director from 1973-1986. He had been living in Boston when he received a call from his friend, Denny Sanders, asking him to come to Cleveland to help revive a radio station that was in dire straits.

"The city was in decline and companies were closing. But Cleveland was a competitive market for radio and we had to fight to get money. You need to advertise to make money," remembers John.

The motto at WMMS was, "We are at war!" as John Gorman once put this very statement on the subject line on a memo to his staff with nothing else on the paper. This summed up what was going on at the time as financially surviving in a city that was crumbling posed many challenges.

The idea of a buzzard came to John as he was driving through Cleveland not long after he took the position at WMMS. The city appeared to be dying which made him think of a buzzard circling around.

Finding an artist for the buzzard was by chance. David Helton was working for American Greetings in Cleveland. He was a regular WMMS listener and became upset over one of the station's programs being shortened. In protest he sent them a "creative complaint" in the form of a cartoon strip. WMMS staff liked what they saw and tracked him down. David became the artist for creating the look of the buzzard.

"The Buzzard: Inside the Glory Days of WMMS and Cleveland Rock

Radio" (Gray & Company) is a memoir that John decided to write to reminisce over the pioneering of a rock and roll radio station that began with a shaky foundation and was transformed into the best. Fortunately those working under his guidance shared the same vision as he did. "We all had the same goal. We believed we could deliver a great radio station. I compare it to being a coach of an incredible team," said John.

Creative ideas that WMMS put into practice were "Coffee Break Concerts" and the "World Series of Rock" which barely scratch the surface of what was made available to listeners. From contests to rockin' events throughout the Cleveland area WMMS continued its reign that kept fans tuned in and their radio dial set.

"It was a very creative environment," recalls John. "Its like Google or You Tube. Its built on an idea. We would have meetings at the spur of the moment when we passed each other in the hallway. When others build on an idea with you it turns into something unique. Ideas came from a show someone had watched or an article that someone read. You never know where inspiration will come from."

Another bonus that made WMMS a fan favorite were the exclusives. "Sometimes the bands gave us the clips on a new album as was the case with Brian Ferry from Roxy Music. WMMS had enough freedom to play a band's new material. They knew there were loyal listeners in Cleveland," John recalls. "Bands enjoyed coming to Cleveland and staying at Swingos which was a hot rock and roll hotel at the time. They would stop by the station for an interview and sometimes bring their new album that wasn't released yet." Being privy to the new material early on gave WMMS its edge over other radio stations. Listeners were able to hear an entire album by their favorite artist before its official release date hit the record stores.

Capturing exclusives that record company executives had their hands on was a bit more tricky, however. Often a record executive would arrive at the WMMS station with the latest album of Pink Floyd or the Rolling Stones in tow and play it as a preview for the staff only. This used to aggravate John who wanted to get the exclusive music on the air until one day he said half jokingly to a coworker that he thought it would be great to have something rigged up so that when executives were playing the exclusives WMMS could also be getting their own copy at the same time, hence "The Switch" was born.

"The Switch" was a little device that was hooked up by a station technician and placed underneath John's desk. "When an exclusive was being played I casually pressed the switch

which began recording the tracks in another room of the station. We would wait a day or two and then play the songs on the air. Executives wondered how we were getting the new music on the air so fast and finally figured that we must be "doing something" though they could never figure it out. We had to stay one step ahead of them," John fondly remembers. "Eventually they started coming to the station in pairs and while one would play the newest album for us the other guy would roam the halls trying to "catch us" but no on ever did!"

Another way to get exclusives were through contacts in other cities. A cassette tape of Fleetwood Mac's "Tusk" album was put on a plane from a contact in New York. "We had to purchase a plane ticket for it. I remember waiting at the airport to pick it up. It was an archaic time for technology," John laughs.

Readers will enjoy stories like these throughout the book which detail the rise of WMMS, incidents among staff members and certainly the tales of the rock and rollers who found their way (Bruce Springsteen) or had lost their way (Dennis Wilson) while in Cleveland.

Radio stations have definitely changed over the years. When asked what his current thoughts are about radio John said, "Radio has gotten away from being local and has stopped serving the community. Creativity is being stripped. Companies who were buying radio stations weren't looking at the competitive environment and ignored the impact of the internet or MP3 players. Radio has become drunk on its own power."

John currently has a media consultant business (Gorman Media) and when asked if a radio station now could ever be like WMMS was then he had this to say, "Radio can be brought back. It can have success but it has to be different in that it needs to be involved with the internet and become more interactive with what is going on now. If



John Gorman, author of 'The Buzzard' inside the Glory Days of WMMS and Cleveland Rock Radio - A Memoir. \$24.95 / Hardcover / 256 pages. Photo © American Pastime. Provided by Gray & Company, Publishers: 1-800-913-3600.

something might steal my audience then I want to be friends with it and work together. WMMS had joined forces with MTV because when you join forces then both products are enhanced. I do feel that radio can come back. Radio is the social network of its time."

John Gorman won the Radio Consultant of the Year award at the 1985 annual Pop Music Convention and was awarded Operations Director of the Year in 1995 by Billboard Magazine. He was inducted into the Ohio Radio-TV Hall of Fame in 2000. He lives in Bay Village, OH.

For more WMMS stories you can check out: buzzardbook.wordpress.com

For further information: gormanmediablog.blogspot.com

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