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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

THE VOICE OF THE NEGRO:
AFRICAN AMERICAN RADIO, WVON, AND THE STRUGGLE
FOR CIVIL RIGHTS IN CHICAGO

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

PROGRAM IN AMERICAN HISTORY/PUBLIC HISTORY

BY

JENNIFER SEARCY

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

AUGUST 2013

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INTRODUCTION

According to WVON disc jockey Lucky Cordell, “You know a radio station is not the wires and the tubes and a transmitter. A radio station is people.”¹ Throughout the 1960s, many listeners on the south and west sides of Chicago wholeheartedly agreed with Cordell’s sentiments towards the local radio station WVON 1450AM, “The Voice of the Negro.” Created and managed by Chess Records founders Leonard and Phil Chess, WVON served not only as a lucrative marketing outlet for the company’s music and for the rhythm and blues and soul industry as a whole, but also as a driving media force that provoked collective thought and action among the Chicago black community during the station’s most relevant years spanning from 1963, the year of its creation, to 1969, with the unexpected death of Leonard Chess. WVON, the focus of this dissertation, provides an excellent opportunity to examine how radio served as an outlet for the concerns of Chicago African Americans, and this study can serve as a formative model for future investigations in how popular culture interacted with the Civil Rights Movement in urban areas.

¹ Moses “Lucky” Cordell. interview by Alexis Gillespie, transcript, June 14, 1995, Radio Smithsonian: Black Radio Project Collection, Archives of African American Music and Culture, Bloomington, Indiana

The model for radio analysis established by communications and media theorist Marshall McLuhan can be applied to WVON. In his best-selling 1964 study *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, McLuhan argued that for the first time in global history, “by means of fragmentary and mechanical technologies, the Western World is imploding” as electronic media such as radio and television brought its inhabitants closer together.² For McLuhan, electronic media unified societies by importing far-flung events into the daily lives of its consumers, thus created a shared consciousness about the world around them. Media also served as an “extension of man” and lengthened man’s ability to see, hear, feel, and touch the world around them by presenting information closer and quicker than ever before in human history. He contended that “It is the persistent theme of this book that all technologies are extensions of our physical and nervous systems to increase power and speed.”³ His mantra was “the medium is the message,” that is the medium, or the way and form in which a message is transmitted, is just as important as its content. The new forms of media introduced in the twentieth century, including telephone, radio, and television, inundated multiple senses with information simultaneously.

As a result of this implosion, McLuhan argued that “the globe is no more than a village. Its electric speed in bringing all social and political functions together in a sudden

²Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw Hill and Company, 1964), 3.

³ Ibid, 90.

implosion has heightened human awareness to an intense degree.”⁴ As a result of these new forms of electronic media that immediately transmitted information, “Any highway eatery with its TV set, newspaper and magazine is as cosmopolitan as New York or Paris.”⁵ Radio’s ability to quickly transmit content aided in the unification of its listeners. During the Civil Rights Movement and the burgeoning Black Nationalism movement of the 1960s, WVON served as unifying force for Chicago’s African American community. Through this medium, which broadcast a combination of racially conscious rhythm and blues and soul music, disc jockeys who identified with the composition of the African American community encouraged a pro-Civil Rights agenda; through journalistic offerings that discussed and featured prominent Civil Rights agendas and leaders, WVON became a rallying point for black Americans for demanding improved conditions not only locally in Chicago, but also across the nation.

On the surface, WVON fulfilled two goals, that of financial gain for the owners and the establishment of a black radio station in Chicago. This study, however, will focus on the progressive-mindedness of Leonard Chess and what role his mindset played in his decision to create WVON. As his son Marshall Chess remembers, “He had a real affinity and sensitivity to black people. I think in some way, all the Chesses were blacks in white bodies.” As previously explored by historian Lewis Erenberg, African Americans and Jews experienced a cultural connection because “both groups felt a deep woe, had

⁴ Ibid, 5.

⁵ Ibid, 12.

suffered at the hands of oppressors, and lived close to their pain.”⁶ Expressed in the music of Jews but also in that produced by African Americans, it made sense that Leonard Chess gravitated to the blues, a genre of music that expressed black pain and disappointment. An active participant in organizations such as the National Urban League, Chess sought out ways for his business to give back to the black community. Although originally intended as a financial enterprise, no one could have predicted the effect the radio station had in uniting Chicago’s African American community during the 1960s.

Key to the station’s unification of the Chicago African American community was its lineup of disc jockeys. McLuhan asserts that the power of radio lies in its ability to shape human interaction and association. Referring to it as a “tribal drum,” McLuhan believes that radio returns listeners to a pre-industrial oral folklore culture containing strong bonds of kinship.⁷ Leonard Chess carefully selected a core of Chicago black disc jockeys to serve as purveyors of the medium. Paying them on a salary system rather than through time brokerages, he recruited African American disc jockeys who would ultimately become a tight knit group whose feelings of camaraderie were reflected over the airwaves. Dubbed “The Good Guys,” the unit included notable Chicago disc jockeys such as Herb Kent, Lucky Cordell, Bill ‘Doc’ Lee, Purvis Spann, E. Rodney Jones, and

⁶ Lewis Erenberg, *Steppin’ Out: New York Nightlife and the Transformation of American Culture, 1890-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 195.

⁷ McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 297.

Bernadette Washington. According to WVON disc jockey Herb Kent, what was most striking was that the station adopted a style that Leonard Chess simply summarized as “I want you all to talk shit.”⁸ Using their magnetic personalities, “The Good Guys” appealed to the audience by pretending they were just like them. WVON followed McLuhan’s model of radio by appealing to its listeners through the use of the Black English vernacular, rhyming schemes, words with double meanings, and slang, thus creating an intimate bond between the listeners and the disc jockeys. This call and response style, with its historic roots in the African American church, transformed the disc jockeys into leaders in a community which held them responsible for not only listening to and addresses their ills, but for providing entertainment as well. Skits and characters like the Wahoo Man or The Grunchins, that embodied the ills of black urban life (pimps, prostitutes, and the homeless) were brought to life on the station, thus creating a shared oral community to which the black urban listener could simultaneously laugh at and lament. As argued by historian Lawrence Levine, this type of African American oral culture, which incorporated songs, tales, and proverbs, allowed for the community to preserve its values, but also to transcend momentarily the inevitable restrictions of a racist society and the urban environment.⁹

⁸ Herb Kent, interview by Michael McAlpin, transcript, ca. 1994, Michael McAlpin Collection, Archives of African American Music and Culture, Bloomington, Indiana.

⁹ Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought From Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 134.

Furthermore, these leadership positions granted to disc jockeys by the African American community also translated into duties that extended beyond the walls of the station. The community saw WVON disc jockeys as their representatives, and they were tapped into service as emcees for high school athletic contests, disc jockeys for Sadie Hawkins Day dances, auctioneers for fundraisers for local clubs and churches, and marchers and riders on floats for the Bud Billiken Day parade. As argued by historian Adam Green, this network of connections also allowed for radio personalities to achieve financial success in Bronzeville. Borrowing from the pioneering financial model of disc jockey Al Benson, dubbed “the mayor of Bronzeville,” outside of their work at the station WVON disc jockeys promoted musical acts, operated their own nightspots, and served as emcees for hire for community events such as talent shows and store openings.¹⁰

Arguably, most successful of the disc jockeys were Pervis Spann and E. Rodney Jones, who funneled their earnings into jointly owning the Burning Spear, a popular nightclub on the West Side of Chicago that featured emerging artists such as B.B. King.¹¹ In addition to their roles on the airwaves, these tangible connections that existed in the community created a strong bond between listeners and the disc jockeys they had catapulted to leadership positions.

¹⁰ Adam Green, *Selling the Race: Culture, Community, and Black Chicago, 1940- 1955*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 98.

¹¹ Pervis Spann and Linda C. Walker. *The Forty Year Spann of WVON*, (Chicago: National Academy of the Blues, 2003), 22-23.

WVON built upon this bond with listeners by creating what McLuhan termed a “classroom without walls.” According to his thesis, during the days of television, radio shifted from a mere entertainment device to “a central nervous system of news.”¹² Comfortable with the familiar voices on the radio, Chicago’s African Americans turned to WVON as a source of news and educational information about their local community in addition to musical entertainment. In addition to the programming of its disc jockeys, WVON provided news and educational information to its listeners through hourly bulletins, safety messages, editorials, and the daily show *Hotline*, which the station broadcasted daily from 11pm to midnight. According to disc jockey E. Rodney Jones, the station needed a strong news division that “was pertinent to the community you were serving.”¹³ For many African Americans, radio access to news while on the job was the only time they would have to learn about community issues.¹⁴ In its journalistic offerings, however, the station also encouraged positive direct action by its listeners. For example, the station directed all of its on-air editorials toward taking action against the white establishment and ended with the phrase “Now run and tell THAT!” Thus, WVON listeners were not only educated about the current events of the day, but also encouraged to relate those events to their lives and to take positive action.¹⁵

¹² McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 298.

¹³ E. Rodney Jones, interview by Lex Gillespie, cassette, March 19, 1995, Radio Smithsonian: Black Radio Project, Archives of African American Music and Culture, Bloomington, Indiana,

¹⁴ Natalie Cohodas, *Spinning Blues into Gold: The Chess Brothers and The Legendary Chess Records*, (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000), 219.

This conception of collective group action is crucial to this study and forms the basis of my dissent from McLuhan's theoretical model. McLuhan contended that radio is a "hot media," a form of audio data that the listener must mentally process, but demands less audience participation and interaction than a cool medium, such as the telephone.¹⁶ WVON listeners, however, were in no way apathetic and in this instance radio served as a more effective stimulus for direct action than other communication formats such as the telephone and television ever could. Radio was crucial to the Chicago Freedom Movement because it allowed participants to absorb a multifaceted egalitarian message through music, news, skits, and exhortations by WVON disc jockeys while also allowing them the freedom to envision how this message related to their lives and what they could personally do to support the movement, and then act upon that vision. Central to this argument is the theory of dimensional listening developed by radio historian Susan Douglas, in which she argues that by listening to the radio, the audience creates imaginary and individualized three-dimensional locales based on the aural content they absorb.¹⁷ It is this fictional but individualized world, which was rooted in the reality of the music and journalism broadcast by WVON, which served as another form of encouragement for listeners to become socially active in the struggle for equal rights in Chicago. Through various means, such as encouragement by WVON disc jockeys to

¹⁵ Roy Wood, *The Dawn of Urban Radio*, VHS, prod Mark Williams, CTV, 1990.

¹⁶ McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 22.

¹⁷ Douglas, Susan: *Listening In: Radio And The American Imagination From Amos n' Andy And Edward Murrow To Wolfman Jack and Howard Stern* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 33.

become educated about the movement, to donate money to Civil Rights organizations, or to attend community meetings, the station encouraged its listeners to actively imagine a more egalitarian society, a society of their own creation, and act for its well-being. In times of communal need, the station funneled this vision of a better world into tangible positive action, such as financial support for charitable organizations and for station-sponsored food drives. Additionally, the station encouraged direct mass actions such as school walkouts to protest the use of portable classrooms or “Willis Wagons” in African American neighborhoods.¹⁸ Thus, in their hands and consistent with McLuhan’s thesis, WVON simultaneously became a tool for making money, and a weapon in the struggle for African American equality in Chicago in the 1960s.

By no means were the African American listeners of WVON a passive bloc that merely followed the directives of Civil Rights Movement leaders. Similar to the historic “call and response” patterns originated in African American churches, listeners used the station to respond to the messages of action disseminated to them by movement leadership over the airwaves. Urban radio listeners used the station to develop a dialogue of problems facing the community. African American leadership also used the station to discover what issues concerned black Chicagoans and then partially shaped the focus and actions of the movement in response to the listeners’ needs. This system of give-and-take

¹⁸ “Willis Wagons,” named after Chicago Superintendent of Schools Benjamin Willis, was the term given to portable classrooms by white and black critics who were protesting school overcrowding and segregation in black Chicago neighborhoods from 1962 to 1966. Wesley South, Interview by Art Norman, February 18, 1994, *An Evening With Wesley South*. VHS, (Chicago, Illinois: Museum of Broadcast and Communications).

not only made the listeners believe they were an integral part of the movement's survival, but also increased the power of the Civil Rights leadership as they used the ideas and desires of the masses to aid in their rule.¹⁹

Despite its role as a powerhouse radio station during the 1960s, WVON has yet to be the subject of any serious historical inquiry by professionally trained historians. Traditionally, African Americans involved in black radio have referred to themselves as the proverbial “fly in the buttermilk.”²⁰ Not only an allusion to skin color, this analogy corresponds to the dearth of African American disc jockeys during the 1940s and 50s and also to the lack of attention paid to their efforts by the historical academy. Because traditionally they were considered insignificant by white radio, few primary sources exist that would encourage historical analysis. As is the case with WVON, most of the air checks and shows from 1963-1969 were either never recorded or the recordings were erased. The result is that most research on WVON must utilize oral histories and secondary literature for an analysis of the station.

Regardless of this lack of primary audio sources, WVON still merits closer academic attention. The only published scholarly study of the station was the journal article “Black Talk Radio: Defining Community Needs and Identity,” published in 2000 by Catherine Squires. Squires argues that black talk radio, as exemplified by WVON,

¹⁹ T.J. Jackson Lears, “The Concept of Cultural Hegemony: Problems and Possibilities,” *American Historical Review* (June 1985): 567 – 593.

²⁰ Norm Spaulding, “History of Black-Oriented Radio in Chicago” (M.A. Thesis, University of Illinois at Chicago, 1974), 11.

served as a vital institution for the contemporary African American public sphere. On the airwaves of WVON, African Americans could discuss federal, state, and local politics affecting the urban black community and also problems within the community itself. These discussions, conducted by disc jockeys who “talk their talk,” or the vernacular of the community, allow for greater awareness of the commonalities between black Chicagoans and were an essential first step for developing strategies needed for improving the societal position of black Chicagoans. Although Squires’ study only focused on the 1990s and the current state of contemporary black talk radio, her analysis of the role of African American radio and the public sphere will be crucial to my analysis of the station from 1963-1969.²¹ While her study is essential to providing a theoretical foundation for WVON as a subject of scholarly inquiry, much more work is needed on this subject.

Although little scholarly work exists regarding WVON, this absence does not mean that the station is erased from public memory. The year 2003 marked the fortieth anniversary of WVON’s creation. In recognition of this milestone and the station’s accomplishments, several African American organizations and the station itself organized events to celebrate this anniversary. From Chicago’s Black Ensemble Theatre 2004 production of *The WVON Radio Story*, a musical that celebrates the station’s “The Good Guys” disc jockeys and their antics during the 1960s, to the DuSable Museum of African

²¹ Catherine Squires, “Black Talk Radio: Community and Identity,” *The Harvard International Journal of Press and Politics* 5 (Spring 2000): 2.

American History's exhibition "The History of WVON," Chicago's African American community lavished commemorative activities upon the station. Although these productions were only presented to the public for a short time and were limited in historical depth, they nonetheless provide evidence of the important role that this radio station played in Chicago's African American community and how that role was codified into collective memory. Chicago African Americans served as their own public historians by passionately trying to add WVON to public memory. While these productions drew much needed public attention to WVON and serve as an essential starting point, this project will move past their hagiographical presentations.

In addition to the failure of historians to pay proper academic attention to WVON, it was only in the last thirty years that any attention was even granted to African American radio. As late as 1988, historian Mark Newman stated that "Basically the field is wide open, particularly regarding black appeal radio, for which no published books exist."²² In *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting 1922-1952*, Michelle Hilmes asserts that radio's neglect is tied not only to a lack of primary sources, but also to the value that American society placed on African Americans and radio.²³ Most existing historical studies of radio stations have focused on white-owned and programmed stations in urban areas that were typically part of the larger nationally syndicate system. Works falling into

²² Mark Newman, *Entrepreneurs of Pride and Profit: From Black Appeal Radio to Radio Soul* (New York: Praeger, 1988), x.

²³ Michelle Hilmes, *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922-1952* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997) xvi.

this category are Louis Cantor's examination of Memphis' WDIA or C. Joseph Pusateri's focus on New Orleans's station WWL.²⁴ Because of the high cost of purchasing a radio station, larger high wattage stations were typically white-owned and operated. In addition, these larger and more lucrative stations also owned the essential equipment needed for recordings, which compose the most essential primary sources for radio historians. Low wattage stations, typically occupied and under-staffed by African Americans and other ethnic groups from the 1930s to the 1960s, did not have the money or the time to record their productions. Therefore, one of the most obvious goals of this project is simply to document an area of history not previously included in the canon.

Beyond of a lack of sources or even interest in the subject matter, historians often ignored radio because of the difficult questions it poses. Radio is a mental activity that provides an audio product for the listener. In turn, a listener takes this product and applies mental imagery in correspondence to the disseminated information. Historians must grapple with questions such as "How did radio shape group identity?" or "How was radio conceived by different social, ethnic, and racial groups?" Questions like these are difficult to answer because radio leads to non-tangible idealized images, each one as distinct and unique as the listeners themselves.²⁵ A simple message broadcast by Herb

²⁴ Louis Cantor, *Wheelin' on Beale: How Memphis Became the Nation's First All-Black Radio Station and Created the Sound That Changed America* (New York: Pharos Books, 1992). C. Joseph Pusateri, *Enterprise in Radio: WWL and the Business of Broadcasting in America* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1980).

²⁵ Susan J. Douglas, *Listening In: Radio and the American Imagination: From Amos 'n Andy and Edward R. Murrow to Wolfman Jack and Howard Stern*. (New York: Times Books, 1999), 10.

Kent on a WVON show lends credence to this argument. In a 1963 station aircheck, Kent urged listeners to “buy white eggs because EVERYBODY [emphasis added] knows that white eggs are the best.”²⁶ On first listen, this advertisement might merely be only for eggs, but when directly broadcast to an African American listenership, the message becomes a sarcastic race-charged subversive cry. Lawrence Levine’s work *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Thought From Slavery to Freedom* details how African American subterfuge can be easily overlooked by naive researchers, most notably exemplified by Joel Chandler Harris’ documentation of the Uncle Remus tales.²⁷ In the case of WVON, Leonard Chess recognized this deeper layer of meaning and the potential financial possibilities of its appeal with African American listeners. WVON’s disc jockeys utilized these subtle messages with humorous double entendres, either through song choice or their spoken words, to make their point known without attracting too much attention from the larger white community. .

Despite the lack of primary and secondary sources in radio history, the field nonetheless has fundamental and revisionist works. Erik Barnouw’s influential three volume work *The History of Broadcasting in the United States* is considered to be the foundational work in radio history and emerged in the late 1960s, an age of civil unrest that prompted questions about a supposed national identity. While race relations were at

²⁶ Herb Kent, *The Herb Kent Show*, cassette, November 1963, Museum of Broadcast and Communications, Chicago, Illinois.

²⁷ Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Thought From Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 145.

the forefront of American society at the time of Barnouw's initial publication, the author awards no agency to African American disc jockeys or listenership. He fails to identify any existing African American part-time stations or disc jockeys in his work and instead contends that due to the popularity of lily-white radio dramas such as *The Burns and Allen Show*, minority participation plays no role in history. Instead, where African Americans do appear in such roles as Sapphire (*Amos 'n Andy*) or Rochester (*The Jack Benny Show*), Barnouw simply links them to the perceived social notions of whites. There is no mention of prominent broadcasters or black radio stations such as WVON or even the massive WDIA in Memphis.²⁸

Barnouw provides a detailed corporate history of radio that is essential to any radio historian's research. Later generations of historians have attempted to amend his oversights by addressing African American radio stations and disc jockeys. Yet mere inclusion is not enough. Often, histories that do include African American radio lump the subject matter into their own multidisciplinary works. In their exploration of blues, soul and doo-wop music, Robert Pruter, Paul Oliver, and Charles Keil utilize African Americans and radio for tangential purpose, awarding attention to the subject only when it supports their musical missions.²⁹ Keil's 1966 work *Urban Blues* challenges Barnouw's sterilized grand narrative of corporate radio history by analyzing the role of African

²⁸ Erik Barnouw, *The Golden Web: A History of Broadcasting in the United States, Vol. II 1933-1953* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968).

²⁹ Charles Keil, *Urban Blues* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1966). Robert Pruter, *Doo-Wop: The Chicago Scene* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996). Paul Oliver, *Screening the Blues: Aspects of the Blues Tradition* (New York, De Capo Press, 1989).

American disc jockeys and radio stations via the role of the contemporary bluesman. Also writing from the perspective of the 1960s, Keil stresses that African Americans created their own viable culture that is ignored by white American masses. In terms of radio production, their music is co-opted, sanitized and repackaged by white corporations for consuming audiences. Keil seeks to move past the cooption of blues music to uncover the value of blues as a cultural medium that preserves the traditions of the African American community. According to Keil, the black entertainer has “proved and preserved their [African American] humanity.”³⁰ By preserving a culture imbued with vestiges of West African orality, Keil presents the black entertainer as the supreme embodiment of African American culture.

Whereas Keil fails to explore the relationship between the disc jockey and West African culture, Gilbert Williams identifies this connection by using a multidisciplinary approach to include the role of the griot in radio history. Williams stresses that African American broadcasting was not only influenced by American social perceptions of blackness, but also contained West African roots that have persisted since slavery.³¹ Griots are West African storytellers who, although they are allowed a great deal of freedom of speech, are held responsible by the community for teaching morals, preserving history, and keeping traditions alive. Williams asserts that the griots are attuned not only to their own storytelling capabilities, but also to the need to express

³⁰ Keil, *Urban Blues*, 15.

³¹ Gilbert Williams, *Legendary Pioneers of Black Radio* (New York, Praeger, 1998), 3.

thoughts and opinions for their audiences who cannot fully articulate them. Williams' step is a crucial foundational work for the linkage of West African culture to radio history. Also argued by Lawrence Levine, slaves did not completely forget their African roots but most often forged a new synthetic culture that contained oral traditions from their past lives.

In addition to the need for further research into the West African links to black radio, more research is needed on the role radio played in the Civil Rights Movement. Perhaps Charles Keil's most important contribution to African American radio history is his initial indirect linkage of radio to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. The most notable expansion on the linkage between the rhythm and blues, the emergence of soul music, and the struggle for civil rights is Brian Ward's 1998 book *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness, and Race Relations*, in which Ward argues that there were direct links to the evolution of the Civil Rights Movement and the various transformations of African American music as art and as an economic product. While the station's music contained an empowering message via songs such as James Carr's "Freedom Train," it was African American disc jockeys and radio stations that communicated this message to audiences and shaped listeners' perceptions of group unity. J. Fred MacDonald's *Don't Touch That Dial: Radio Programming from 1920 to 1960* also raises the question of how radio might have served as a necessary precursor for the Civil Rights Movement. For MacDonald, African American radio helped create the

group consciousness needed among African Americans for the encouragement of the masses to openly protest their societal status.³²

Most noticeably lacking in these works is an analysis of radio stations in the northern United States and their work with the Civil Rights Movement. As of this date, no substantial scholarly research focuses on the Civil Rights Movement and oral communications in the urban centers of the North. Chicago served as a pivotal setting for 1960s civil rights organizations such as Operation PUSH, Nation of Islam, the Chicago Urban League, CORE, and Martin Luther King Jr.'s SCLC. While WVON's involvement with mainstream civil rights groups is well known, little historical research exists regarding the level of this support throughout the 1960s. As Suzanne Smith questions in her history of Motown, *Dancing in the Streets*, did the station's support have limits due to the movement's growing radicalism? Did it fear alienating listeners or sponsors?³³ Furthermore, little is known about the station's relationship with more radical movement groups such as the Nation of Islam and the Black Panther Party.

In addition to a monolithic treatment of the Civil Rights Movement, a majority of black radio histories adopt a nationwide approach, focusing on the larger stations and

³²Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness, and Race Relations* (Berkeley: University of California), 1998; J. Fred MacDonald, *Don't Touch That Dial: Radio Programming in American Life from 1920-1960* (Chicago: Nelson Hall, 1979).

³³ Suzanne Smith, *Dancing in the Street: Motown and the Cultural Politics of Detroit* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001).

pioneer disc jockeys.³⁴ It is hard to gauge the trends in radio history because none of the essential research has been performed on a station-by-station basis. Recently, historians such as Louis Cantor have begun to employ a revisionist methodological approach when studying African Americans and their impact on radio from the 1930s to the 1960s. In his work *Wheelin' on Beale*, Cantor focuses intently on the first twenty-four hour black appeal radio station, Memphis' WDIA, from its inception in the late 1940s to the 1990s. Due to the continued dearth of historical analysis regarding specific black radio stations, Cantor pleads for a micro-history approach to the subject.³⁵ By doing so, comparative studies can be done not only for geographical areas, but also nationwide, thus allowing for national trends in black radio to be discovered. This study of WVON therefore, will not only highlight the role of the station, but also will be an essential first step for future comparative studies. Cantor's work and other radio micro-histories create the essential groundwork for future comparative studies in the field and perhaps can be a model for examining the role radio played in gaining rights for other subgroups.

Where the historiography of radio is most lacking is its treatment of the individual broadcasters involved at each station. It has only been in the last two decades of radio historiography that the trend of looking at the disc jockey as an important facet of the station worth extra research has emerged. Norman Spaulding's 1981 dissertation "History

³⁴ Mark Newman, *Entrepreneurs of Profit and Pride: From Black Appeal Radio to Radio Soul* (New York: Praeger, 1988) or William Barlow, *Voice Over: The Making of Black Radio* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999).

³⁵ Louis Cantor, *Wheelin' on Beale: How Memphis Became the Nation's First All-Black Radio Station and Created the Sound That Changed America* (New York: Pharos Books, 1992), 237.

of Black-Oriented Radio in Chicago 1929-1963” is groundbreaking due to its identifications of the schools of disc jockeys in Chicago in the 1940s and description of their stylistic evolution in broadcasting manner. Utilizing Chicago as his geographic focus, Spaulding identifies the Great Migration of African Americans to Chicago from southern rural areas from the 1930s to the 1950s as key to this change in broadcasting style. In response to the more Southern and African American rural culture of these migrants, the disc jockeys of the 1940s and 1950s shifted their style to the African American vernacular in order to appeal to their listeners. A third group emerges in the late 1940s with a more urban style to their broadcasts. Speaking with northern accents, the urban sophisticate disc jockeys personified migrants who were acculturated to the city. With eyes and ears open for the next big thing, the refined urban disc jockey adopted a northern accent and promoted jazz music along with sophisticated rhythm and blues³⁶ Spaulding views Chicago black radio listenership as a monolithic block of transplanted migrants. Yet, as demonstrated by WVON’s programming, age and gender greatly shaped the radio station’s offerings. From women’s broadcasts to Friday night sock hops and high school dances for their teenagers, the language and message of the jocks changed to appeal to their audience, thus creating a station that was considerably more nuanced than simply one that catered to the “African American” listener.

³⁶ Norman Spaulding, “History of Black-Oriented Radio in Chicago, 1929-1963” (Ph.D. Diss., University of Illinois at Urbana, 1981); see also Norm Spaulding, “History of Black-Oriented Radio in Chicago” (M.A. Thesis, University of Illinois at Chicago, 1974).

Another area in African American radio history where major research is needed is in how people “listened in” to the stations. According to radio historian Susan Douglas “while radio has been a constant fact of twentieth century life, the way people listened to radio was profoundly shaped by the era in which they began to listen.”³⁷ Basing this study on her assumption that not only did audiences hear messages in different ways due to the time period in which they were listening, but individuals also absorbed radio broadcasts depended on their age and social, cultural, and racial background. How did WVON’s audience “listen in” to the station based on its nuanced historical components? While its listeners wholeheartedly turned to the broadcasts of WVON, especially in times of tragedy and in support of the Civil Rights Movement, letters to the station and local newspapers criticizing song selection or the often uncouth mannerisms of the disc jockeys suggest that the station was not without community reproach.

To best understand the role that WVON played in Chicago’s African American community during the 1960s this dissertation will use a chronological approach. Chapter One focuses on the first and second Great Migrations of African Americans to Chicago, and WVON’s creation as a product of and response to the vibrant culture created by southern migrants to the city. Building off these precursors to the formation of WVON, Chapters Two and Three focus on the start-up and daily operations of WVON, and provide an examination of the station’s on and off-air activities. The broadcasts and off-air activities of WVON’s Good Guy disc jockeys turned the station into a vanguard for

³⁷ Douglas, *Listening In*, 6.

news and educational information that was specific to the Chicago African American community. Additionally, the station became a trusted common space where Chicago African Americans could come together to debate issues that were relative to them and advocate for social change during the Chicago Freedom Movement. Chapter Four provides a closer examination of WVON's key teenage listener demographic and examines how the station served as an aural hangout for Chicago African American youth and aided in the development of a vibrant African American teenage subculture on the West and South sides of the city during the 1960s. Furthermore, the station became an ardent supporter of equal rights for African American youth and was the key form of media communication in Chicago's school boycott movement in the mid-1960s. Finally, Chapter Five investigates the role that WVON played in the music industry throughout the 1960s and early 1970s for the "breaking" or introduction of new music, particularly soul, to the public. For many record companies, including Motown, WVON was an essential testing ground for the introduction of new music to the public and the station provided African American recording artists with an opportunity to have their music receive vital airplay in a time when numerous white radio stations in Chicago still hesitated to play "race music." As such, WVON's listeners helped determine the overall national direction of the rhythm and blues and soul music industry. Furthermore, from songs by musical acts such as The Impressions to Sam Cooke to Aretha Franklin, the Good Guys' music selections served as soundtrack during the Chicago Freedom Movement and helped reinforce its egalitarian message. Disc jockey E. Rodney Jones,

“The Mad Lad,” stated to *Billboard* in 1966 that “WVON is the voice of equality in this area and we are 100 percent behind equal rights and equal opportunities.”³⁸ It is how as a radio station WVON used its voice to promote this message to its listeners and how they responded that is the focus of this dissertation.

³⁸ Claude Hall, “Five Broadcasters Talk It Up For Jobs,” *Billboard*, January 15, 1966, 64.

CHAPTER ONE

“WHERE A MAN CAN BE A MAN”: THE GREAT

MIGRATION AND THE CREATION OF BRONZEVILLE

I thought I would write you for advice, as where would be a good place for a composedly young man, that wants to better his standing, who has a very promising young family...I would like Chicago or Philadelphia, but I don't care where so long as I go where a man is a Man.¹

As evidenced by the thousands of letters to the *Chicago Defender* during the first wave of the Great Migration, Chicago served not only as a final destination but also as a jumping off point for African American migrants from the Southern United States who were eager to begin a new life. From 1910 to 1970, approximately seven million African Americans fled the American South for political, social, and economic freedom in other parts of the United States. By 1930, Chicago's burgeoning population reflected this rapid influx as the city's African American population jumped to 233,903 inhabitants from its previous level of 30,150 in 1900.² By 1960, African Americans fully comprised 23% of the entire Chicago population.

As a result of this massive migration, African American migrants to Chicago spearheaded an economic and cultural transformation in the Windy City. These new

¹ Emmett J. Scott, "Letters of Negro Migrants, 1916 – 1918," *The Journal of Negro History* 4, no. 3, (July 1919): 298.

² Allan Spear, *Black Chicago: The Making of the Negro Ghetto* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 12.

inhabitants brought with them a newly discovered earning power due to higher-paid industrial jobs and a desire to recreate their southern home life through entertainment and other consumer goods.³ One product of this economic and cultural transformation was the rise of African American radio in Chicago during the 1960s. It is remarkable that by 1963, the year of WVON's first broadcast, a radio station had yet to be created in Chicago that catered solely to this sizeable audience.⁴ Almost immediately after the station's first broadcast on April 1, 1963, however, WVON achieved immediate ratings success. According to the C.E Hooper Radio Ratings, after less than five months in operation, WVON was thrashing its closest competitor WYNR, with a 27.2 to 20.9 rating share during the crucial noon to 6 pm time slot.⁵

The key to WVON's success was that it reflected the political, social and culture needs of a racially defined and geographically constricted marginalized population on the South and West Sides of Chicago. The listeners' devotion, as evidenced through the station's ratings and economic success in the 1960s, was not merely the result of additional listeners due to a geographic migration, but the creation of a radio format that reflected and responded to a vibrant 1960s African American culture that was created decades before by southern African American migrants in Chicago. According to former WVON disc jockey Lucky Cordell the key to the station's ratings success was

³John Collis, *The Story of Chess Records* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1998), 14-15.

⁴ Robert Pruter, *Chicago Soul* (Urbana: University Of Illinois Press, 1991), 23.

⁵ "WVON New King of Radio Says Hooper," *Chicago Defender*, September 21, 1963, 13.

“community involvement. We were all over the place. We worked with everybody that was trying to do something positive.” Cordell also stressed that this involvement helped WVON because the audience “got a chance to see and touch and be close to our personalities.”⁶ In order to understand the reasons for WVON’s creation and subsequent popularity, an examination of the Great Migration and the subsequent creation of Bronzeville are needed.

The Great Migration and the Creation of Bronzeville

There was no single factor accounting for African Americans’ decision to leave the South in mass numbers. Each migrant’s personal decision to emigrate, however, was linked to the overarching theme of freedom. Ultimately, however, how migrants would define and interpret this freedom would serve as the root of their personal motivation for leaving the South. As argued by historian James Grossman, the Great Migration served as a “second emancipation.”⁷ In order to achieve a better life for themselves and their families, African Americans truly tested the limits of the freedom granted to them by the Emancipation Proclamation by abandoning the post-Civil War South. Defined by Rayford Logan, the period immediately following Reconstruction served as a “nadir” for

⁶ Moses “Lucky” Cordell, interview by Lex Gillespie, transcript, June 14, 1995 Radio Smithsonian: Black Radio Project, Archives of African American Music and Culture, Bloomington, Indiana.

⁷ James Grossman, *Land Of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1989), 14.

white and African American relations, and was highlighted with racial segregation and violence that lead to the mass exodus of African Americans from the South.⁸

From an economic standpoint, despite their newly granted liberated status, southern African Americans quickly learned that “freedom could make folks proud but it didn’t make ‘em rich.”⁹ With the failure of Reconstruction to establish financial stability for former slaves, Southern African Americans were immediately thrust into an endless cycle of financial rigging orchestrated by white landowners, as highlighted by sharecropping, tenant farming, and credit restrictions, thus resulting in *de facto* enslavement. In addition, the unpredictable nature of the agricultural industry compounded these hardships. With the rise of increased competition from foreign agricultural producers, soil erosion due to improper farming techniques, and the scourge of crop pests such as the boll weevil, financial solvency and independence for Southern African Americans became virtually impossible.¹⁰

Legal restrictions enforced by the threat of racial violence further molded the lives of Southern African Americans into virtual enslavement during the last two decades of the nineteenth century. As stated by a white former plantation owner, “Teach the Negro that if he goes to work, keeps his place, and behaves himself, he will be protected by our

⁸ Rayford Logan, *The Negro in American Life and Thought: The Nadir 1877 – 1901* (New York: Dial Press, 1954).

⁹ Leon Litwack, *Been In The Storm So Long: The Aftermath Of Slavery* (New York: Knopf, 1979), 449.

¹⁰ Grossman, *Land of Hope*, 28-30, 42.

white laws.”¹¹ These white laws, however, primarily consisted of a series of state-mandated paternalistic legal restrictions that curtailed African American civil and legal rights. The Black Codes sought to limit all aspects of African American life from cradle to grave, including regulations on the ability to enter non-agricultural occupations, the right to marry, own property, live where they wanted and to safely travel on one’s own accord.

The constant threat of physical violence underlay these economic and legal brutalities. During the post-Reconstruction era, the bodies of Southern African Americans became contested terrain as whites used acts of physical violence, lynching, and rape to continually strip blacks of their personal freedoms. Often gender defined the struggle for control over the physical bodies of African Americans and the rights to control those bodies. According to Gail Bederman, “gender, whether manhood or womanhood, is a historical ideological process. Through that process, individuals are positioned and position themselves as men and women.” Not only is the role of gender constantly being defined and redefined, but also different groups of people define gender in different ways. As a result, collectively these gendered definitions determine what an individual can do based upon their biological sex.¹² Thus, the physical violence inflicted on both African American men and women was not merely corporal punishment but a result of

¹¹ Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long*, 366.

¹² Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States 1880 – 1917* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press), 7.

the fact that whites refused to grant African American men and women the same gender attributes they awarded to members of their own race in the late nineteenth century.

Activist Ida B. Wells-Barnett pleaded to whites that “Nowhere in the civilized world save the United States of America do men, possessing all civil and political power, go out in bands of 50 and 5,000 to hunt down, shoot, hang or burn to death a single individual, unarmed and absolutely powerless.”¹³

Therefore, in the face of the economic, legal and physical restrictions placed upon African Americans in the post-Reconstruction South, the greatest act of resistance was to claim the right to ownership of their own bodies and to leave. In a letter to the *Chicago Defender*, J.M. Latham, of Jackson, Mississippi wrote “In the early days of our American civilization, Horace Greeley said to the young man, “Go West!” The white man has gone westward until he reached the east. I say to the young men of my race: Go West! Go East! Go North! Go everywhere the sun shines!”¹⁴

The first wave of migrants to leave the South was the “Talented Tenth.” Comprised of a small percentage of African Americans, these migrants were better educated, hailed from non-agrarian occupations, and were more economically advantaged than their counterparts. For the Talented Tenth, life under Southern rule was unbearable and in some cases given threats of white retaliation due to their societal

¹³ Ida B. Wells Barnett, quoted in Herbert Apethker, ed., *Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States*, vol. 2 (New York: Citadel Press, 1970), 798.

¹⁴ “Migration,” *Chicago Defender*, August 26, 1916, 12.

position, the decision to leave or stay was one with life or death consequences. For them, leaving was the only option for survival. Following the migration of the Talented Tenth and beginning in the World War I era to the 1930s, the Great Migration exploded as hundreds of thousands of African Americans moved to urban areas in the North and Midwest to escape the South.¹⁵ As a Chicago *Defender* editorial crowed in 1917, “You never miss the water till the well runs dry...The South thought they had a problem with the Negro, but their real problem will come when the Negro has gone, for there is no Southern industry without the Negro.”¹⁶

As more African American migrants left the South, the question arises why did Chicago become the final destination for so many migrants? While open western lands were an option, the sheer geographical distance of the west discouraged mass immigration.¹⁷ Chicago was an easily accessible industrial boomtown in the early twentieth century. Due to the massive Illinois Central Railroad and its sizeable system of connecting railway routes that stretched out like an open hand over the south, Chicago served as a direct and quick destination for African Americans from Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana once proper rail fare could be obtained.¹⁸

¹⁵ St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton, *Black Metropolis: A Study Of Life In A Northern City*, Vol. 2 (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 53.

¹⁶ “Our Part in the Exodus,” Chicago *Defender*, March 17, 1917, 9.

¹⁷ Peter Gottlieb, *Making Their Own Way: Southern Blacks' Migration to Pittsburgh 1916 – 1930* (Urbana: University Of Illinois Press, 1997), 1.

¹⁸ Grossman, *Land of Hope*, 99.

Furthermore, Chicago's geographical location also greatly increased its attractiveness as a final destination for African Americans from the deep South. As a result of its location between the industrialized East Coast and the cusp of the Great Plains, the city was not only a transportation hub, but also a growing industrial metropolis that required a steady influx of workers for its steel mills, stockyards, and packinghouses. As raw materials from the West were transformed into processed goods for East Coast consumption, African American migrants and European immigrants helped fuel this machine of industrial progress. With the onset of World War I and the resulting decrease in foreign immigration, unskilled workers were desperately needed to keep the factories running. While migrants were greeted with greater occupational opportunities, they were nonetheless limited by their race to unskilled industrial positions and the service industry. For female migrants, their opportunities were even further limited as African American women "remained outside the expanding industrial economy and the few who gained a foothold in factory work remained in the lowest-paying jobs." Their wages, however, often helped serve as a buffer between survival and impoverishment.¹⁹ Whether it was factory work or the service industry, these new positions were a shocking departure from slower-paced agricultural work in the South. As WVON disc jockey Purvis Spann remembered, "8 hours a day was out of the question. When I was working in Mississippi – sun up, sun down. I now would sometimes stay up 14-15 hours. No sleep. Time meant

¹⁹ Jacqueline Jones, *Labor Of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work and the Family from Slavery to the Present* (New York City: Vintage Books, 1986), 154, 161.

nothing to me.²⁰ These hardships, however, were eased by increased wages. In Chicago, wages for African American migrants topped \$2.50 a day, compared to only forty-eight cents a day in the south.²¹ For many, the chance to earn a decent wage seemed almost like divine redemption. According to one female migrant “I work in Swifts Packing Co. in the sausage department... We get \$1.50 a day and we pack so many sausages we don’t have time to play, but it is a matter of a dollar with me and I feel that God made the path and I am walking therein.”²²

Beyond its booming economy, Chicago served as an inspirational beacon for Southern African Americans. According to historian William Cronon “Chicago came to recognize the triumph of the human will... If the city was unfamiliar and immoral and terrifying it was also a new life challenging its residents with dreams of worldly success.”²³ Most strikingly, for many African American migrants there was a sense of familiarity with the city before they had ever set foot in it. Chicago beckoned as a promised land that was concocted through the words and stories of other migrants who had moved to the city, returned from living there, or visited and enjoyed the city’s numerous activities. In a letter home to a friend, one migrant wrote “I wish you could

²⁰ Pervis Spann, interview by Sonja Williams, transcript, March 30, 1995, Radio Smithsonian, Black Radio History Project, Archives of African American Music and Culture, Bloomington, Indiana.

²¹ Grossman, *Land of Hope*, 15.

²² Emmett J. Scott, “More Letters of Negro Migrants, 1916-1918,” *The Journal of Negro History* 4, no. 4 (October 1919): 457.

²³ William Cronon, *Nature’s Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York City: W.W. Norton), 12-13.

have been here to see those games...Please tell J---that he will never see nothing as long as he stay down there behind the sun. There [sic] something to see up here all the time.”²⁴

According to bluesman Tampa Red, as a youth he remembered Pullman porters referring to Chicago as “God’s country.”²⁵

Chicago’s representation as “God’s Country” was further reinforced by its reputation that there were no limits on life in the Windy City. In terms of commerce, literally anything could be bought from companies such as Sears and Roebuck and Montgomery Ward. The cover of the 1908 Sears and Roebuck Company catalog, “The Great Price Maker,” encouraged customers to “please show this catalogue to your friends and neighbors,” thus subtly spreading the word of Chicago as a consumerist land of plenty.²⁶ Furthermore, Chicago was the former home of the 1893 Columbian Exposition, and the “White City” served as another example of Chicago as a place where anything was possible. Despite the fair’s obvious racist overtones as exemplified in its exclusion of African Americans in fair planning and the portrayal of people of color in fair exhibits, the White City nonetheless served as a “a big gaudy plaster of Paris dreamland...where grime was whitewashed away and as one visitor put it, there was no place for poverty.”²⁷

²⁴ Scott, “More Letters of Negro Migrants of 1916-1918,” 458.

²⁵ Grossman, *Land of Hope*, 74.

²⁶ Sears and Roebuck Company, *The Great Price Maker Annual Catalog*, (Chicago: Sears and Roebuck Company, 1908), Cover.

²⁷ Thomas Lee Philpott, *The Slum And The Ghetto: Immigrants, Blacks And Reformers In Chicago 1880 – 1930* (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1991), 21.

Yet it was an African American newspaper that truly brought Chicago into the homes of Southern African Americans on a regular basis. The *Chicago Defender*, under the editorship of fervent migration supporter Robert Abbott, fully adheres to Marshall McLuhan's concept of media transforming the larger world into a global village. Through the paper's coverage of Chicago's African American life, Bronzeville quite literally became an extended neighborhood to African American Southerners. From its coverage of African American life through gossip columns, such as "Says Jonesy" and "Coop's Chatter," club updates, announcements about church activities and the African American baseball team, the Chicago Giants, future migrants were imbued with a mixture of awe and later familiarity about African American life in Chicago. Thousands of letters flooded into the paper's office to ask for assistance, advice or to praise the paper's work. As one letter states, "Permit me to inform you that I have had the pleasure of reading the *Defender* for the first time in my life as I never dreamed that there was such a race paper published and I must say that it's some paper!"²⁸

Beyond its coverage of African American life in Chicago, the *Defender* also served as an agent for African American migration to the city. Under Robert Abbott's editorship, the paper frequently expounded the benefits of migration to Chicago and attempted to provide assistance to those migrants seeking exodus from the South. As the paper opined in 1919, "the white South may as well realize now as later that the day is past when it can with impunity and with safety murder colored men and brutalize our

²⁸Scott, "More Letters of Negro Migrants of 1916-1918," 417.

women. Migration will therefore continue to be one of the means employed to bring about the desired change.”²⁹ With circulation numbers of 50,000 copies by 1916, the *Chicago Defender* also served as the ultimate authority for all issues relating to possible Northern migration. Thousands of letters written by southern African Americans flooded into the paper, eager for advice on how to get to Chicago and what opportunities may lay waiting for them in the city. Often, African Americans secretly wrote the newspaper for help in obtaining a means of escape from the South. As one advice letter to the *Defender* pleaded, “Please don’t publish this because we have to whisper this around among ourselves because the white folks are angry now because the Negroes are going north.”³⁰

While Chicago might have seemed like “God’s Country” in the recollections of Tampa Red’s Pullman Porters, in actuality a different set of social and economic challenges based on race presented themselves to those Southern African Americans who migrated to the city. Most often, African Americans migrants who exited the Illinois Central train station in Chicago after 1900 found themselves relegated to dwellings in “Bronzeville,” the city’s predominantly Southside African American neighborhood. Beginning in the 1960s, this neighborhood would serve as the social heart of WVON’s community of listeners. Prior to the 1890s Chicago’s African American population was equally distributed throughout the neighborhoods on the north, south and west sides of the city. With the massive influx of African Americans due to the Great Migration,

²⁹ “Checking Migration,” *Chicago Defender*, 9 August 1919, 9.

³⁰ Scott, “More Letters of Negro Migrants of 1916-1918,” 327.

African American migrants flooded into the former predominantly black neighborhoods on the south side of the city. By 1910, this “Black Belt” stretched from the Loop to 39th Street to the south, and was bounded by the Illinois Central railroad tracks to the west and Wabash Avenue to the East. By 1930 over 230,000 African Americans lived on a thin strip of land, only three miles long and barely a quarter of a mile wide, that was located directly south of the Chicago Loop and running east until Cottage Grove Avenue.³¹ According to bluesman Willie Dixon, “Everybody was busier than hell, moving all the time. Every four or five minutes there was a streetcar and all of them would be full...everybody would be running up and down the main street selling fruit, vegetables or some gimmick, a doll or this barking dog.”³²

Facing resistance from middle class white neighborhood associations and immigrant groups attempting to preserve their ethnic enclaves, Chicago’s burgeoning African American population was forced to live on top of one another in Bronzeville, thus creating a housing crisis that was punctuated by overcrowding, increased rent, and slum-like conditions. Migrants typically resided in older buildings which contained only a few flats with each flat divided and subdivided to create miniscule kitchenette apartments to house more residents. According to the Chicago Commission on Race Relations’ post-1919 Chicago Race Riot report, “The Negro in Chicago” when asked what they would change about their lives, migrants unanimously agreed that if “they

³¹Philpott, *The Slum and the Ghetto*, 147.

³² Willie Dixon, *I Am The Blues* (New York: De Capo Press, 1989), 45.

could have their way, the most frequently expressed desire was for more and better housing.”³³ In relation to rents one migrant family complained that the “Houses are more modern, but not good enough for the rent paid. They had to pay \$2 more than the white family that moved out when they moved in.”³⁴ Restricted in their housing choices African Americans were “forced to pay higher rents for inferior dwellings and were frequently surrounded by prostitutes, panderers, and other undesirable elements.”³⁵

Throughout the late 1910s and 1920s, white organizations such as the Hyde Park-Kenwood Property Owners Association fought any black residential expansion, regardless of class, into the better-established white neighborhoods east of Cottage Grove Avenue. Essentially, African Americans faced a continuation of the same restrictions on their economic and social freedoms that they had experienced in the South. According to migrant Fred Smith “...there were certain parts of Chicago we just didn’t go in. I don’t think we went east of Cottage Grove. When I first came here in 1929, I got me a job at a hotel in Hyde Park...one day I got to work a little early, so I stopped at a sandwich shop that was nearby but they wouldn’t wait on me. They just looked at me and laughed.”

Socially and spatially restricted to the geographical boundaries of Bronzeville, African Americans carved out their own economic and cultural space on the South Side

³³ Chicago Commission on Race Relations, *The Negro in Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1922), 175.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 180.

³⁵ Spear, *Black Chicago*, 26.

of Chicago.³⁶ Acting as a historical bloc, Chicago African Americans transformed Bronzeville into an economic and cultural black nationalistic community that catered to and supported its black inhabitants. The restrictions of African Americans to the south and west sides of Chicago not only molded the development of an African American insular neighborhood economy, but also influenced the development of race-based self-help institutions devoted solely to the needs of Chicago African Americans. Institutions such as the Wabash Avenue YMCA, the Chicago Urban League, the Negro Fellowship League and the Phyllis Wheatley Association sought to ease the transition for newly arrived migrants to the city while also providing social services such as athletics, employment offices, and childcare cooperatives for Bronzeville residents that the government or white philanthropic organizations neglected or purposely ignored. Furthermore, this neglect by social services manifested itself in vibrant expressions of economic and cultural Black Nationalism, as most commonly exemplified by Marcus Garvey's UNIA organization. According to musician Milt Hinton, "Chicago was a hotbed for Marcus Garvey's Black Nationalism because you could solidify all these black people together and there were great marches with uniforms and 'let's go back to Africa.' The black people began to get this sense of "hey, we do need more than we're getting."³⁷

In addition to these groups, Bronzeville's inhabitants worked to promote African

³⁶ In accordance with Antonio Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony, a group of people that share a common worldview may cement into a historical bloc that "possesses both economic and cultural solidarity." T.J. Jackson Lears, "The Concept of Cultural Hegemony: Problems and Possibilities," *American Historical Review* 90 (June 1985): 571.

³⁷ Burton Peretti, *The Creation of Jazz: Music, Race and Culture in Urban America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 48.

American history, and thus self-worth, through scholarly groups such as Carter G. Woodson's Association for the Study of Negro Life and History. First organized in Chicago in 1915, the group pledged to "bring about harmony between the races by interpreting one to the other."³⁸ While often based upon black middle class notions of propriety and decorum, these institutions nonetheless reinforced the black nationalistic concept of self-support.

Within the boundaries of Bronzeville, African American capitalism also flourished due to the influx of migrants from the first wave of the Great Migration. Fueled by higher wages that translated into a greater disposable income, businesses that catered to all aspects of African Americans' lives boomed in Bronzeville. From local mom-and-pop corner stores, barbershops and funeral homes to larger enterprises such as the Overton Hygienic Company and the Binga Bank, these ventures filled a void that white business owners shunned. Furthermore, imbued in this black capitalistic model was a race-based level of cultural support for black entrepreneurs, which sociologists St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton termed "the Double Duty Dollar." For African Americans, "a business is more than a mere enterprise to make profit for the owner. From the standpoints of both the customer and the owner it becomes a symbol of racial progress."³⁹

³⁸ "\$50,000 Dollars Given To Promote Study Of Our History," *Chicago Defender*, June 17, 1922, 3.

³⁹ St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton, *Black Metropolis: A Study Of Life In A Northern City*, Vol. 2 (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 432.

As stated in one undertaker's advertisement, "We attend to all details, relieving you of all worry and saving you time and money. We serve ALL."⁴⁰

While the migration of African Americans to Chicago slowed due to the Great Depression, a second Great Migration began in 1942 with America's entry into World War II and the resulting need for wartime labor.⁴¹ Although this influx of migrants vastly expanded the boundaries of Bronzeville, the neighborhood continued to be the vibrant heart of the African American community in Chicago. Yet in addition to residing in Bronzeville, African Americans also expanded their residential boundaries to the West side of the city during this second population influx. The West side of Chicago was first settled in the 1830s and throughout the nineteenth century, the area was never dominated by a single ethnic group. Chicago's West side served as the entrance point for numerous European immigrants who arrived in waves, first led by German and Irish settlers and as the century progressed, Greeks, Italians, and Russian and Polish Jews moved into the area. Interspersed throughout the West side were small pockets of African American residents, who first moved into the area beginning in the mid-nineteenth century. After the Chicago Fire of 1871, the city's West side began to experience severe overcrowding and a deterioration of living conditions as thousands of refugees, primarily immigrants

⁴⁰ "Undertaker Fountain Opens New Establishment," *Chicago Defender*, July 27, 1918, 11.

⁴¹ John Collis, *The Story of Chess Records* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1998), 14-15.

who were displaced by the conflagration's destruction, flooded into the vicinity in search for affordable and accessible housing.⁴²

Beginning in the 1930s and early 1940s, the West side underwent a dramatic demographical transformation as first Mexican and then African American migrants moved into the district. Composing a second wave of the Great Migration, African Americans either relocated from the city's South side or upon their initial arrival in Chicago sought out the West side as a solution to Bronzeville's overcrowding and restricted housing opportunities. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, communities such as North Lawndale, Garfield Park and Austin transformed into their own latter-day versions of Horace Cayton and St. Clair Drake's "Black Metropolis." Illustrating this influx is the example of Garfield Park, which in 1940 had only twenty-four African American residents. By 1970, this population had exploded to 46,929.⁴³

The explosion in the population of Chicago's African American population exacerbated the city's housing crisis, yet paradoxically the migrants' nightmare of restricted housing slum proved to be an essential precursor to WVON's success. First, both Bronzeville and the West Side's dense population allowed for the station to reach numerous listeners without strong broadcasting wattage. When the station began broadcasting in 1963, its signal measured only 1000 watts during the day and a meek 250

⁴² Gerald Suttles, *The Social Order of the Slum: Ethnicity and Terror in the Inner City* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 15-16.

⁴³ Amanda Seligmann, *Block By Block: Neighborhoods and Public Policy on Chicago's West Side* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 19-21, 30.

watts at night. Although small, this wattage proved to be sufficient to reach African American listeners who were concentrated on the west and south sides of Chicago.⁴⁴ Furthermore, the African American urban experience as shaped by the first and second waves of the Great Migration would later be brought to life on the station through disc jockeys that not only listened to and addressed the housing situation, but poked fun at it as well. As argued by radio historians Michelle Hilmes and Jason Loviglio, radio provided an outlet for “unseen voices that challenged and locked conventional societal norms and allowed specialized areas of American culture to reach a wider audience.”⁴⁵ Skits and characters like the “Wahoo Man” or “The Grunchins,” that embodied the ills of black urban life (pimps, prostitutes, and the homeless), and that were never portrayed on mainstream radio, were brought to life on WVON, thus creating a shared oral community to which the black urban listener could simultaneously laugh at and lament. As historian Lawrence Levine argues, this type of African American oral culture, which incorporated songs, tales, and proverbs, allowed for the community to preserve its values but momentarily to transcend the inevitable restrictions of a racist society and the urban environment.

⁴⁴ Pruter, *Chicago Soul*, 14.

⁴⁵ *Radio Reader: Essays in the Cultural History of Radio*, eds. Michele Hilmes and Jason Loviglio (New York: Routledge, 2002), xiii.

The Emergence of “Race Music” In Chicago

One crucial result of the Great Migration that ultimately laid the foundation for the creation of Chess Records and WVON was the establishment of a vibrant African American entertainment scene in Bronzeville that blended vestiges of the migrants’ southern lifestyles with Chicago’s urban setting. During the first decades of the twentieth century, Chicago rivaled New York City as an entertainment center for African Americans and offered migrants a wide variety of pastimes and occupations for African Americans who were interested in becoming part of the entertainment world.⁴⁶ Furthermore, this musical subculture allowed for African Americans to share a dialogue about their experiences in Bronzeville, which often did not live up to the expectations they or their families may have had before their migration. While migrants often did not leave written recollections of their journeys north or their experiences in Bronzeville, their experiences could be found in the music of the blues and jazz.

According to radio historian Norm Spaulding, African Americans in Chicago had always played a prominent role in the entertainment world. While Chicago’s African American population only comprised 1.3% of the city’s general population in 1890, a disproportionate number of theatres, clubs, taverns and lounges featured black entertainers.⁴⁷ African American involvement with the entertainment industry increased after the Great Chicago Fire of 1871 with the move of the Chicago’s vice district toward

⁴⁶ Barlow, *Looking Up at Down*, 287.

⁴⁷ Spaulding, “History of Black-Oriented Radio in Chicago, 1929-1963,” 11.

to the Southside of the city. This involvement became even more pronounced during Prohibition as Chicago's underground bars and clubs were organized and controlled by Jewish and Sicilian racketeers who heavily utilized African American entertainers throughout their venues. Eager to escape middle class constraints and swept up in the hedonism of the Roaring Twenties, middle class whites in Chicago sought out nightclubs and cabarets along the State Street entertainment corridor that featured black entertainment. The entrepreneurial spirit amongst Bronzeville Chicagoans also extended to the entertainment world as the neighborhood was also the home to the nation's earliest African American owned entertainment venues enterprises such as gambling lord Robert Mott's New Pekin Theatre, which opened in 1907.⁴⁸ Typically owned and operated by whites, larger and more popular venues such as the Lincoln Gardens, and the New Deluxe Café, known as "black and tans," allowed for white customers from outside Bronzeville to have an opportunity to traipse the color line. These venues broke away from the "civilized" music of downtown mainstream venues to instead feature the more exotic music of African American culture such as cakewalks, rags and jazz.⁴⁹ Subliminally, these massive venues also worked to legitimize African American culture. As Burton Peretti notes "these musical emporia (at least the ones that admitted them) were symbols of their hopes and ambitions in the North. Black community and culture were preserved in elite looking surroundings that presented visions of the good life

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Barlow, *Looking Up at Down*, 290.

embodied in music, dance and elegant dress.”⁵⁰ For an emerging class of African American professionals, who were excluded from mainstream entertainment venues because of their race, these venues served as what historian Davarian Baldwin termed the “cultural foundation” of Bronzeville.⁵¹ Serving “the double-duty dollar,” the African American press triumphantly heralded Bronzeville’s entertainment centers’ latest acts, improvements, and additions.⁵²

Until the early 1940s, blues musicians were often relegated to smaller clubs or rent parties. For bluesman such as Muddy Waters, these rent parties were crucial to an artist’s survival as they provided not only audience exposure but also the staples of food and drink. According to Waters “I played mostly on weekends but I have played seven nights a week...plenty of food, whiskey, fried chicken and bootleg whiskey. I was making five dollars a night playing. That was good side money for me.”⁵³ In addition to larger venues and rent parties, numerous clubs, many without a name, existed in Bronzeville and were always options for those performers seeking an audience. Often serving a double-duty for entrepreneurs, these clubs were often used for normal business during operating hours and became musical venues only after dark. According to the

⁵⁰ Peretti, *The Creation of Jazz*, 53.

⁵¹ Davarian Baldwin, *Chicago’s New Negroes: Modernity, The Great Migration, and Black Urban Life* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 45.

⁵² “Lincoln Gardens,” *Chicago Defender*, 1 September 1 1923, 8.

⁵³ Robert Gordon, *Can’t Be Satisfied: The Life and Times of Muddy Waters* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2002), 72.

proprietor of Club Zanzibar, Hy Marzen, “The bandstand was in the back, a semicircular bar was in the middle, and at the front was a counter for delicatessen and liquor. We sold corned beef sandwiches by the ton, hard boiled eggs, pigs’ feet and cold slaw.”⁵⁴

However, with their intimate closeness between artist and audience “the black clubs in Chicago perpetuated the communal aspects of southern musical culture in modern commercial settings. The core of Southern music – vocal and instrumental blues was shared by audiences and performers.”⁵⁵ Furthermore, the popularity of these venues, no matter how large or how small and the promise of their acts being the next big thing, led to the increased commercial appeal of recording and promoting African American music as a viable economic investment opportunity for white entrepreneurs. With the relatively low capital needed to create a venue or, more lucratively, press recordings, white entrepreneurs such as the Chess Brothers would look to Bronzeville and its music as a chance to embark upon their own form of the Great Migration.

Prior to 1921, recordings of performances by African American were few and far between. This lack of recordings, however, does not mean that African Americans were invisible subjects in popular culture. Rather, as Eric Lott argues, the image of African Americans became a co-opted tool as white performers used stereotypical images of African Americans to navigate through increased urbanization and changing notions of

⁵⁴ Gordon, *The Life and Times of Muddy Waters*, 88.

⁵⁵ Peretti, *The Creation of Jazz*, 52.

race and manhood at the end of the nineteenth century.⁵⁶ While white working class males celebrated the performances and the propagation of the simple-minded “Jim Crow” and dandified “Zip Coon,” the music of these minstrel shows became some of the first recordings “about” African Americans in the late nineteenth century. Those few African Americans who successfully gained exposure to white audiences did so through recording minstrel-themed songs and skits such as George Johnson’s 1895 “The Laughing Song” and comedian Bert Williams’ “Elder Eatmore’s Sermon,” the latter of which by 1917 had sold over half a million copies for the Victor Talking Machine Company.⁵⁷

By 1921, the Great Migration had created the factors supporting a sizeable base of African American musical consumers. With concentrated urban black audiences that had increased spending money due to their improved economic condition, the African American recording market was poised for exponential growth. In 1921, blues singer Mamie Smith released “Crazy Blues,” which sold a million copies on the Okeh recording label. With its explosive vocals and brassy accompaniment, Smith’s recording attempted to make sense of a relationship gone wrong, and its message spoke to many migrants who were attempting to make sense of their post-migration lives.⁵⁸ For migrants, the blues

⁵⁶ Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

⁵⁷ William Barlow and Janette Lake Dates, *Split Image: African Americans in the Mass Media* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1990), 27.

⁵⁸ According to Charles Keil, “the blues artist, in telling his story, crystallizes and synthesizes not only his experience, but the experience of his listeners. It is the intensity and conviction with which the story is

helped them understand their roots, provide solace from the drudgery of hard work, and assistance in making sense of the disappointments of Bronzeville. By the late 1950s, African American disc jockeys would also be important in helping migrants comprehend and react to the world around them.

With the success of Mamie Smith's "Crazy Blues," recording companies such as Black Swan and Columbia rushed to issue race-based blues recordings. Because of its large black population and vibrant club scene, Chicago quickly became a recording capital with three major companies, Okeh, Paramount, and Brunswick/Vocalion dominating the musical recording scene. Out of fear of alienating their white listeners, who still made up the major of their customer base, recording labels separated their African American artists to special all-black labels or recording series. Termed the "race series" by Ralph Peer of Okeh Records, the concept of the segregated special race series would remain in use from 1921 until *Billboard's* introduction of the rhythm and blues chart in 1949. Since songs by African American artists did not receive frequent radio airplay nor were marketed to white consumers, the recording industry marketed race recordings directly to African American listeners through advertisements in local black newspapers. In relation to their sales, race recordings were sold through a diverse network of outlets not strictly confined to record shops such as hair salons, barbershops,

spelled out...rather than the story itself, which makes one bluesmen better than another." Charles Keil, *Urban Blues* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 161.

and even Pullman Porters.⁵⁹ Despite the strong sales of race-based recordings in the 1920s, the Great Depression and a two year ban on recording due to shellac rationing for the war effort, led to a dramatic downfall in record sales for the major labels.

With the end of World War II and the reintroduction of record production, the major recording companies instead chose to focus on the marketing of white artists to white audiences. This neglect of African American consumers, however, opened the door for the creation and success of smaller independent labels that often directly recorded black music such as gospel, jazz, and the blues. This shift was part of a larger trend in Bronzeville business which saw white entrepreneurs begin to actively tap into the African American consumer base, thus recognizing them as dynamic consumers. These small independent labels would serve as the model for the creation of Chess Records. The earliest independent label in Chicago, the Rhumboogie, which began operations in May of 1945, demonstrated the entrepreneurial opportunities that centered on the music of Bronzeville. Operated by Rhumboogie club owner Charley Glenn, the label existed merely to promote the black artists he featured in acts at his black and tan.⁶⁰ While the label ultimately failed, numerous club owners and promoters, record shop owners, and other entrepreneurs recognized that Bronzeville's blues, gospel and jazz represented an enormous financial opportunity. However, beyond the realm of independent labels and

⁵⁹ Spaulding, "History of Black-Oriented Radio in Chicago, 1929-1963," 19.

⁶⁰ Mike Rowe, *Chicago Blues: The City and the Music* (New York: Da Capo, 1975), 61.

record shops, one crucial financial opportunity lay virtually untapped in Bronzeville until the beginning of Chess Records, African American radio.

The Rise of African American Radio in Chicago

The historiography of African American radio has often focused on the portrayal of African Americans over the airwaves, rather than the actual emergence and development of the black orientated radio market. In Chicago, while nationally broadcasted shows that featured common African American stereotypes such as the incompetent duo of Amos and Andy or the subservient domestics Beulah and Rochester were widely popular, a much closer examination is needed of how black Chicagoans themselves helped transform radio in the city. Shaped by and a response to the Great Migration, the distinct roots of black radio in Chicago would serve as a crucial influence in the structure and design of WVON.

Although WVON first began broadcasting on April 1, 1963 as the city's first all-black twenty-four hour station, African Americans played a role in Chicago radio since the early local stations of the 1920s and early 1930s. The city's first radio station, 9CT, began in 1921 and throughout the 1920s, numerous stations called the city home. African Americans were limited to brief musical roles on the stations, most frequently appearing as players in jazz concerts from clubs during the 1920s and big band music in the 1930s and 1940s. As stations scrapped for survival, low wattage stations featured foreign language programming blocks that different ethnic groups could purchase under time brokerage systems. Operating under a time brokerage system, it was on ethnic stations

such as Chicago's WSBC and Hammond's WJOB that African American broadcasters made the most headway through religious shows or gospel hours.⁶¹

These early black radio shows, like the "black and tans" that abounded in Bronzeville, strictly adhered to the model of racial pride. Early black disc jockeys firmly followed what historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham termed the "politics of respectability" in which its proponents "felt certain that 'respectable behavior' in public would earn their people a measure of esteem from white America, and hence they strove to win the black lower class's psychological alliance to temperance, industriousness, thrift, refined manners and Victorian sexual mores."⁶² The first black disc jockeys and radio announcers sought to use the airwaves as a medium to promote the best of African American culture and often what the migrants themselves were not interested in hearing. The most prominent of these disc jockeys, Chicago's Jack L. Cooper, is considered to be the father of African American radio disc jockeys and firmly adhered to the politics of responsibility. A former vaudeville star, Cooper started his broadcasting career in 1924 on WCAP in Washington D.C. in 1924 and moved to Chicago in 1926. In 1929, Cooper began buying time under the brokerage system at WSBC and his shows featured African American news, music and interviews with race leaders.⁶³ Adhering to Bronzeville's code of self-help and entrepreneurship, he amassed a radio empire in Chicago. By 1935,

⁶¹ Barlow, *Voice Over*, 93.

⁶² Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880 – 1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 14.

⁶³ Spaulding, "History of Black-Oriented Radio in Chicago, 1929-1963," 71-72.

he emceed the Negro Hour show and also through the radio brokerage system, bought blocks of airtime from various radio stations. By 1947, Cooper generated forty-one hours of broadcasting a week from his home and grossed \$185,000 dollars that year alone.⁶⁴

When Cooper retired in the 1950s, he had created a system of satellite jocks underneath him such as Eddie Honesty and “Sir” Oliver Edwards; those integrationist middle class white sounding announcers would be the model for African American radio in Chicago before World War II.

Cooper was crucial in laying the foundation for radio through his advocacy of the early dominant style of on-air delivery that shunned Black English vernacular for impeccable grammar. According to WVON disc jockey Herb Kent, “his personal sound was white. Absolutely white. Very, very articulate but very white. He had a tendency to sound like the white announcers and he was the first one to do that.”⁶⁵ Cooper’s mission in radio was to “pave a better road, an easier road, for Negroes who came along behind him in radio.”⁶⁶ Over the airwaves he recreated Bronzeville through the reading of black newspapers, establishing a missing persons show, broadcasting African American religious services and even becoming the first black sports announcer, broadcasting the Chicago American Games from Comiskey Park. A powerful radio figure, he was the first black radio personality to have national sponsorship, through Ward’s Tip Top Bread

⁶⁴ Arnold Passman, *The Deejays* (New York: Macmillan, 1971), 78-79.

⁶⁵ Herb Kent, interview by Alexis Gillespie, transcript, September 25, 1995, “Black Radio: Telling It Like It Was” Collection, Archives of African American Music and Culture, Bloomington, Indiana.

⁶⁶ “Meet Jack L Cooper, Dynamo of Radio,” *Chicago Defender*, March 5, 1949, 26.

Company.⁶⁷ While Cooper's broadcasts were based firmly on African American middle class values of propriety, their tone contrasted greatly with the culture of working class Southern migrants pouring into Bronzeville during the second wave of the Great Migration. According to WVON disc jockey Lucky Cordell, although Cooper is considered the reigning pioneer, "Jack L. was the first on the scene, but he didn't fill it."⁶⁸

That role would be left to Al Benson, a powerful African American disc jockey who shrewdly recognized the cultural impact of the Great Migration. According to historian Adam Green, Benson was at the forefront of "a new wave of black broadcasters that were more egalitarian and expansive, particularly around race and style."⁶⁹ Benson's delivery and commercial success served as the model for Leonard Chess's WVON. Responding to the second wave of the Great Migration, Benson led a radio transformation to a more urban sound for disc jockeys that highlighted the Black English vernacular and a move away from the white announcing style of Cooper and his satellite disc jockeys. Rather than adhering to the politics of respectability for advancement of the race as demonstrated by Jack Cooper, Benson utilized radio as a direct and outspoken weapon for civil rights. In addition, Benson's success served as the essential precursor for WVON in two different ways. First, the enormous financial success of Al Benson, known

⁶⁷ Spaulding, "History of Black-Oriented Radio in Chicago, 1929-1963," 73.

⁶⁸ Moses "Lucky" Cordell. interview by Alexis Gillespie, transcript, June 14, 1995, Radio Smithsonian: Black Radio "Telling It Like It Was" Collection, Archives of African American Music and Culture, Bloomington, Indiana.

⁶⁹ Adam Green, *Selling the Race: Culture, Community, and Black Chicago, 1940-1956* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 84.

as the “Ole Swingmaster” to Chicago African Americans, served as the spark for Leonard Chess to create a radio station that catered entirely to African Americans in Chicago. Second, it was the Chess Records Corporation that built an empire upon the music of the migrants, thus providing the financial means to create an all-black radio station.

Born Arthur B. Leaner, Benson came to Chicago during the 1930s from Jackson, Mississippi and established a storefront church in Bronzeville. As a youth he attended Jackson Normal College in Mississippi, but it was not until his first fifteen-minute sermon on the air in 1945 on WGES that he had ever had any radio experience. With his down-home form of speaking, his show was immensely popular and quickly expanded to one hour. Open to any opportunity, Benson utilized the assistance of his nephews, Ernest and George Leaner, the owners of Bronzeville’s Groove Record Shop, to ascertain what music was popular amongst the residents of Bronzeville.⁷⁰ He also changed his name to Benson in order to separate his secular activities from that of his storefront church. By 1950, the radio industry considered Benson to be one of the most powerful African American disc jockeys, a remarkable achievement considering there were only roughly 100 black announcers out over 3,000 announcers in the country.⁷¹

Benson is crucial to understanding the style of the WVON disc jockeys because they based themselves on his 1940s and 1950s delivery. Entering radio in 1945, Benson’s enormous appeal to black Chicagoans lay in a down-home style of speaking similar to

⁷⁰ Spaulding, “History of Black-Oriented Radio in Chicago, 1929-1963,” 79.

⁷¹ “The Forgotten 15, 000, 000,” *Sponsor* (10 October 1949): 55.

that of southern African Americans. According to WVON disc jockey Herb Kent “Obviously he wasn’t white. He mispronounced words by the score. And he would eat and talk at the same time.”⁷² Through his use of Black English, Benson spoke in the migrants’ language while simultaneously instilling in them a sense of pride and self-respect. Benson’s on-air mannerisms, however, did draw some detractors. In a letter to the *Chicago Defender*, a Miss Wright begged “please inform Mr. Benson to conduct himself more intelligently than he did over at station WGES on Sunday night at 11 pm. Miss Mahalia Jackson’s singing was fine as were all of the spiritual recordings, but Mr. Benson offset everything,...he seemed to have forgotten each number she would sing or rather the record he had played. Oh, I think it was a disgrace to our race because we all know Mr. Benson has the ability to do a job well.”⁷³

Contrary to the image of *Amos n’ Andy*, Benson represented an African American who was folksy, but also financially successful. In reciprocation of their devotion, Benson was deeply protective of his listeners as he advised them of which places treated black patrons rudely or ripped them off. According to Benson, “That’s for real to let my audience know that what I was selling them was good merchandise and no crap. I would throw my sponsors off my show if I felt that they were selling shoddy merchandise or

⁷² Herb Kent, Radio Smithsonian interview.

⁷³ “What the People Say,” *Chicago Defender*, 21 February 1948, 14.

ripping off my listeners.”⁷⁴ During the 1950s, Benson’s popularity reached its peak and he utilized his skills as an entrepreneur to build a virtual monopoly on black radio programming in Chicago. With his earnings derived from lucrative advertising contracts such as Canadian Ace Beer and Italian Colony Wine, Benson broadcasted on three different radio stations for as much as ten hours a day. Furthermore, he would be the first African American to have a weekly television show broadcasted in Chicago.⁷⁵ To meet his multiple broadcasting demands, he leased time to apprentice-type “satellite jocks” during the 1950s. In relation to WVON, it is a majority of these young satellite jocks that would serve as the first generation of disc jockeys. Personally selected and trained by Benson, these disc jockeys included E. Rodney Jones, Lucky Cordell, and Herb Kent.⁷⁶ Therefore, the impetus for WVON’s close relationship with its listeners, or what McLuhan termed “tribal radio,” lay in Benson’s teachings.

Benson’s appeal went beyond a simple act that aped the sounds of African American migrants for financial gain. Rather, Benson’s charm lay in the fact that he was one of them. A migrant from Mississippi, Benson embodied the experiences and concerns of the migrants in Bronzeville. Herb Kent remembered “It was like an old friend and you didn’t mind the fact that he didn’t sound really smooth and really educated. But he made

⁷⁴ Al Benson, interviewer unknown, compact disc, n.d., Radio Smithsonian: Black Radio Project Collection, Archives of African American Music and Culture, Bloomington, Indiana.

⁷⁵ Spaulding, “History of Black-Oriented Radio in Chicago, 1929-1963,” 80.

⁷⁶ Herb Kent, interview by Gilbert Williams, cassette, February 17, 2000, *An Evening with the Legendary Pioneers of Black Radio*, Museum of Broadcast and Communications, Chicago, Illinois.

a ton of money.”⁷⁷ Although wealthy, Benson was not immune to the hardships of Bronzeville. In 1949, Benson’s daughter, Naomi Leaner, died at the age of eighteen from a narcotics overdose in the family home. Distraught over his daughter’s death, he begged “federal and city authorities to break up the dope traffic on the Southside lest more young men and women meet the same fate as his daughter.”⁷⁸

Because of his popularity, Benson found himself thrust into the spotlight as a spokesman for Bronzeville, and he continued Cooper’s model of utilizing the position of disc jockey as that of a community spokesperson. Instead of following the politics of respectability, Benson formulated the “politics of disrespectfulness,” which were more in line with the more direct and demanding tone that the Civil Rights Movement adopted in the post-World War II years of the late 1940s. Selected as the honorary mayor of the community in 1948, he utilized his position to become an advocate for youth causes, Benson pledged his loyalty to the citizens of Bronzeville and most notably its youth, stating, “I am grateful to my juvenile supporters, those boys and girls who hear my radio programs and attend my weekly dances. These are the children to whom I am indebted to and whom I shall never fail.”⁷⁹ In addition to directly lobbying Chicago City Hall for juvenile causes, Benson also dedicated his time to community events such as organizing and emceeing the Bud Billiken Day Parades and securing funding for Bronzeville’s

⁷⁷ Herb Kent, Radio Smithsonian interview.

⁷⁸ “Dope Party Death of Chicago Disc Jockey’s Daughter Stirs Up Probe,” *Chicago Defender* July 30, 1949, 3.

⁷⁹ “New Bronze Mayor Plans Fight on Your Crime,” *Chicago Defender*, December 11, 1948, 18.

Provident Hospital. In 1956, he hired a plane to drop 5,000 copies of the United States Constitution over Mississippi. In his own words, he designed the bombing mission “to penetrate the Iron Curtain of racial hatred and prejudice against Negroes in one of the forty-eight sovereign states of America.”⁸⁰

Al Benson inspired Leonard Chess’ vision of creating an all-black station by reinvigorating the Chicago music scene through prominent airplay of the music of the Southern migrants, the blues. Benson viewed the promotion of black music as essential to the advancement of the race. “People said I was partial to black music and I said well, shouldn’t I be? I wouldn’t have to if you had done the right thing.”⁸¹ Through his work with his nephews at the South side record shop and later United Record Distributors, Benson learned what records listeners, and most notably, the youth market, were buying. In addition to owning his own record label, Parrott Records, Benson not only reflected these tastes over the airwaves through his music selection, but also recorded artists he met in the studio or his club promotions. In addition, Benson controlled the making or breaking of records and drilled the importance of this power into his satellite jocks. According to one record company executive, “Benson totally revolutionized the whole radio industry...he was the main reason why so many independent black record companies featuring rhythm and blues and even gospel artists grew.”⁸²

⁸⁰ “Al Benson Sends Plane To Dixie,” *Chicago Defender*, February 23, 1956, 3.

⁸¹ Al Benson, Radio Smithsonian interview.

⁸² Spaulding, “History of Black-Oriented Radio in Chicago, 1929-1963,” 32.

It is no coincidence that the earliest successful black oriented radio stations were all founded in cities with insular African American urban communities that embodied Benson's belief in the duty to one's race. Radio stations such as Atlanta's WAOK, helmed by white disc jockey Zenas "Daddy" Sears or Memphis' WDIA shared WVON's ingredients for success by possessing compact areas of listenership and well-established local African American organizations and businesses that supported and utilized the station. Furthermore, all three stations used their airwaves to play music that spoke to the African American experience. The blues of Bronzeville, with roots in Southern African American culture and later infused with the experience of urban life in the Black Belt, would serve as the essential cultural milieu and foundation for Leonard and Phil Chess and their recording company, Chess Records. In recalling Bronzeville, poet Langston Hughes remarked "South State Street was in its glory then, a teeming Negro street with crowded theaters, restaurants, and cabarets. And excitement from noon to night! Midnight was like day. The street was full of workers and gamblers, prostitutes and pimps, church folk and sinners."⁸³ The soundtrack to this urban environment would be recorded by Chess Records and later broadcast over WVON. Radio would become the public forum in which African Americans could argue about this world, laugh at this world, celebrate this world and then collectively discuss ways in which to change it.

⁸³ Grossman, *Land of Hope*, 117.

Blacks in White Bodies: The Creation of Chess Records

For all of the money and power that Al Benson accumulated, he failed to secure the financing needed to fulfill his dream of buying a station and its operating license during his time. It was the Chess Record Company, most notably run by the Polish-Jewish immigrants Leonard and Phil Chess, which responded to the promise of the migrants' musical taste and their leader Al Benson. Significantly, although Leonard Chess created WVON to serve as an outlet for his records, his interest in radio also had non-financial roots. For Chess, not only was WVON a viable financial opportunity, but it was simultaneously a medium free of racism and discrimination where he could promote the music he loved. Raised in Bronzeville, Leonard Chess was not only comfortable with African American culture, but he also recognized the enormous economic opportunities that could be made by tapping into the entertainment world of Black Belt.

Lejzor "Leonard" Chess and his brother Fiszal "Phil" Chess highlight the typical European immigrant's dreams of the potential of America. Born in 1917 on the Polish-Russian border in Motele, Poland, Leonard Chess' family migrated to Chicago on the cusp of the Great Depression in late 1928. Changing their name from Czyz to the Americanized "Chess", the family chose to settle in the growing Russian Jewish neighborhood of Lawndale which closely bordered Bronzeville, rather than the city's large Jewish enclave surrounding Maxwell and Halsted Streets.⁸⁴ Despite their improved

⁸⁴ Rich Cohen, *Machers and Rockers: Chess Records and the Business of Rock and Roll*, (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2004), 23-25.

economic status in Lawndale, the family struggled to keep afloat economically during the Great Depression. Embracing the entrepreneurial spirit that was apparent in immigrant and black communities and a constant presence throughout his entire life, Leonard sought ways to help his family through the difficult times. The dominant child in the family and a fiercely competitive one, he got a paper route to help ends meet. Known for his successful route, it was not discovered until later that he surreptitiously made up the names of fictitious customers in order to get ahead. As their father was a junk dealer for whom African Americans were his main clientele, both Chess brothers developed a familiarity with the black migrants' culture. In 1940, Chess' father's business partner in the junk shop operation was killed in an accident, thus leaving the junk shop operation perilously in danger of failing. As Leonard's younger brother Phil was away at college on a football scholarship at Bowling Green University, Leonard made the decision to settle down and join his father in the family business. Phil eventually dropped out of college and joined the family in running their junk shop in Lawndale.⁸⁵

Tired of working for his father in a dead-end job, Leonard recognized the vast economic opportunities available to businessmen who catered to the area's predominantly African American customers. Between 1942 and 1950, Leonard and Phil owned and operated a series of liquor stores (Cut-Rate Liquor and 708 Liquor Store) and then the Macomba Lounge, all of which were within the boundaries of the Black Belt and catered

⁸⁵Nadine Cohodas, *Spinning Blues Into Gold: The Chess Brothers and the Legendary Chess Records* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 11.

to an African American clientele. Located in the 3900 block of South Cottage Grove Avenue, the Macomba was a nondescript and small lounge compared to others in Bronzeville. However, with little advertising and through word of mouth the club became noted for the quality of music it featured and developed a reputation as a spot where other musicians and performers would stop by after their performances at the larger “black and tans” for after-hours shows. The lounge was a simple no-frills affair that sought to feature “continuous entertainment,” “jumping all night.”⁸⁶ Langston Hughes recalled that the club was one of his favorite places in the city, where “Hindu (drummer Robert “Hendu” Henderson), drumming like mad, at the Macomba with a good little group who raise a boppish fog.”⁸⁷ Leonard’s son Marshall Chess recalls the club “as a rough place – as a kid I was in there I think once and somebody got stabbed or something.”⁸⁸

Here, in an effusive environment of liquor and music, Chess recruited future Chess Record musicians and singers such as Etta James, Muddy Waters, and Sonny Boy Williamson for his clubs.⁸⁹ He and Phil Chess also teamed up with local record distributors Charles and Evelyn Aron in early 1947 to form Aristocrat Records. As the company grew, Leonard Chess’ interest in the company strengthened. Always on the lookout for the next big thing, Chess frequently walked the streets of Chicago with a

⁸⁶ Macomba Lounge Advertisement, *Chicago Bee*, 8 June 1947, 11.

⁸⁷ Langston Hughes, “Things I Like About Chicago, I Like, And The Things I Don’t, I Don’t,” *Chicago Defender*, June 18, 1949, 6.

⁸⁸ Clarence Peterson, “The Chicago Sound,” *Chicago Tribune*, May 11, 1969, K48.

⁸⁹ John Collis, *The Story Of Chess Records*, (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing Company, 1998), 24-25.

microphone and tape recorder, on the hunt for talent among the local blues singers that the migrants adored. It was through this exploration and also through the performance of musicians at the Macomba Lounge that Leonard Chess discovered talent such as Sunnyland Slim and Howlin' Wolf. Chess's apparent success and love for the recording industry prompted him to buy out the Arons' shares and establish the company as the Chess Record Corporation in June of 1950.

While the Chess' brothers' attraction to the Chicago blues most certainly had a financial aspect, this attraction was also personal. Phil Chess readily admitted that their attraction to African American music was rooted in their youth. He stated that:

We had a feel for it because before we got in the bar business my dad had a junk yard and we used to go down there and help sort out of the stuff and across was the Baptist Church and on a Sunday, man they'd get, they'd get going with that groove and you couldn't help but stand there and dance. Really, that's, that's how good it was."⁹⁰

Furthermore, as the Chess brothers were raised and worked on the South side of Chicago, interactions with African American culture were a daily part of their lives. Phil Chess reminisced that after living there for so long "you can get a feel of what's going on...I used to have people say to me, man are you white or you colored? I'd say why? He'd say, man, you sound like you're colored."⁹¹ Marshall Chess also recalled that as a child he witnessed that "growing up with it that they really loved the music...there was a definite

⁹⁰“Phil and Marshall Chess: 30 Days of Rock and Roll,” *Open Vault*, last modified January 28, 2013, <http://openvault.wgbh.org/catalog/b4061c-interview-with-phil-chess-and-marshall-chess-part-2-of-4> (accessed 16 February 2013).

⁹¹ Ibid.

love for the music and an understanding of it.”⁹² He also attributed the Chess family’s close relationship with Chicago African Americans as one based on their shared experiences as immigrants. Marshall Chess stated that:

I always felt that my family were immigrants. They came from Poland and the blacks that came to Chicago from the South were immigrants. They both came to, to the big city, to, to do what? To make some money, to get a better, to make a better life for themselves. So, you know, my family and the blacks they worked with it was a, it was a great marriage, you know, because for both of them it was a way to better their lives.⁹³

Throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, Chess Records expanded on the early success of Aristocrat records by flooding the market with a string of successful hits by artists such as Chuck Berry and Bo Diddley, and through their subsidiary jazz label Argo, Leonard and Phil Chess marketed the music of the Ahmad Jamal Trio and the Ramsey Lewis Trio. With an ear for music, Leonard Chess also proved himself adaptable to African American’s changing tastes and the emergence of soul music with the signing of acts such as Etta James in the early 1960s.⁹⁴ Regardless of the caliber of the artists he signed, it soon became obvious to Leonard Chess that he needed a better method for marketing songs to consumers.

First and foremost, mainstream white radio stations and large corporate labels generally ignored African American music. As a result, African American migrants

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Marshall Chess, *Sweet Home Chicago*, VHS, producer. Nina Rosenstein, directors Alan Raymond and Susan Raymond. MCA, 1993.

turned to clubs, recordings, or limited black radio broadcasts for the blues music that independent labels such as Chess produced. For Leonard Chess, an all-black radio station meant tapping into a viable market that was desperate for consumer goods. According to Marshall Chess, “It was a hot market. You could put a record out on Friday, and have sold thousands by Monday. They weren’t million sellers, but a couple of thousand meant a hit for the blues.”⁹⁵ Not only did Leonard Chess reckon that owning an all-black formatted station meant increased exposure for Chess hits, but it was also the difference between creating a local Chicago hit and a nationwide one. In an age of tightly controlled mainstream radio stations, a local hit in a large metropolis was an essential first step to national airplay.⁹⁶ While Chess Records pushed for national exposure for its black artists, Phil Chess remembers that racist stations presented problems. “My brother went into a station in Boston with a disc by a black artist. Although the jockey thought it was the next big thing, he wouldn’t add it to the list because “no nigger music was played in this town.”⁹⁷ By having an all-black station in a city with a large black population, Chess Records would possess the opportunity for unrestricted airplay for their label’s offerings.

In addition to breaking through the walls of racism, Chess’ ownership of a radio station was an effective way of circumventing the crackdown on payola in the 1950s.

⁹⁵ Marshall Chess, *Sweet Home Chicago*.

⁹⁶ Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness, and Race Relations* (Berkeley: University of California, 1998), 182.

⁹⁷ Phil Chess, interview by Michael McAlpin, transcript, ca. 1994, Michael McAlpin Collection, Archives of African American Music and Culture, Bloomington, Indiana.

Like just about all other record companies, Chess Records practiced payola throughout the earliest years of its existence and the company used bribes of gifts and cash to encourage the play of their records with disc jockeys and the selling of their products in record shops. Most notably, as the Federal Trade Commission discovered, Chess Records paid prominent disc jockey Allan Freed approximately a hundred dollars a week for pushing Chess artists on his radio shows and granted Freed numerous “songwriting” credits on songs such as Chuck Berry’s “Maybellene.”⁹⁸ Their relationship was so close, that rumors circulated that after Freed’s downfall, he was a possible candidate for a disc jockey position at WVON.⁹⁹ While the company never publicly admitted to payola, Leonard stated “We were the only company to refuse to sign a cease and desist order...Payola was standard practice in the industry and I told them I wouldn’t stop unless everybody else did. At least I was doing it honestly – make a deal and send ‘em a check, and at the end of the year report it on a 1099 form.”¹⁰⁰ While the station escaped prosecution due to tougher payola monitoring standards passed by Congress in 1960, the ownership of a radio station nonetheless was a powerful tool that could be used to bypass the restrictions of payola legislation.

In addition to economic motives, there was the progressive-mindedness of Leonard Chess and his friendly rivalry with Al Benson that influenced his decision to

⁹⁸ Cohodas, *Spinning Blues into Gold*, 119.

⁹⁹ Herb Lyon, “Tower Ticker,” *Chicago Tribune*, December 14, 1962, 16.

¹⁰⁰ “The Chicago Sound,” K48.

create WVON. Marshall Chess remembers, “He had a real affinity and sensitivity to black people. I think in some way, all the Chesses were blacks in white bodies.” As previously explored by historian Lewis Erenberg, African Americans and Jews experienced a cultural connection because “both groups felt a deep woe, had suffered at the hands of oppressors, and lived close to their pain.”¹⁰¹ As Leonard Chess was reared in a black environment, he experienced the common connection of discrimination and a hope for better times that united both groups. At their first real job at their father’s junkyard in Lawndale, a small black storefront church was located directly across the street. As Phil Chess remembered, he thought of “the congregation as ‘the hand clappers’ and he and Leonard loved listening to the vibrant music that came out of the building ‘when they would get into a groove.’”¹⁰² It makes sense that Leonard Chess would be drawn to African American culture and most notably the blues, a genre of music that expressed black pain and disappointment while offering an emotional means to transcend them.

Building upon a traditional past involvement of Jewish business participation in the entertainment world, Chess was not only motivated by financial goals. An active participant in organizations such as the National Urban League, the station also served a way to give back to the black community. Furthermore, Chess wholeheartedly ran and

¹⁰¹ Lewis Erenberg, *Steppin’ Out: New York Nightlife and the Transformation of American Culture, 1890-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 195.

¹⁰² Cohodas, *Spinning Blues into Gold*, 14.

operated the station in accordance with the black economic model established under the premise of the Double Duty Dollar in Bronzeville. Throughout the planning and marketing of the station, no attempts were made to market the station to white listeners or to use the station as an outright tool for audio integration on the airwaves. The station, like many of the businesses in the Black Belt, sought solely to cater to its black clientele. Although Chess was a white-owned company, the *Chicago Tribune* shrewdly noted, “But all these years-before Motown, and before Ray Charles and before Aretha Franklin and before soul food was being served in Winnetka and Highland Park to anyone but the servants - Leonard and Phil Chess with young Marshall tagging along since the age of 8, were doing the real thing down on the south side of Chicago.”

Conclusion

In the spring of 1962, Leonard Chess purchased WHFC 1450 AM, which he renamed WVON, the “Voice of the Negro.” The station was purchased from Richard Hoffman, a former Illinois congressman who owned WHFC and a corresponding FM station on South Kedzie Avenue in Cicero, just a few miles away from the Chess Recording Studios on Michigan Avenue. With its call letters standing for “Where Happy Folks Congregate,” WHFC had been owned by Hoffman since 1932 and served as a diverse but small station that broadcasted to a wide range of ethnic groups. By 1959, WHFC focused its specialty programming on Spanish and Polish listeners, but also provided twenty-four hours of weekly programming for African Americans as well.¹⁰³

¹⁰³ 1959 *Broadcasting Yearbook Issue* (New York: Broadcasting Publications Incorporated, 1959), A-276.

What was most daunting about the station was its small wattage power, which measured only 1000 watts during the day and a meek 250 watts at night. Despite its diminutive broadcasting strength, this wattage size proved to be enough to reach African American listeners who were concentrated on the west and south sides of Chicago.¹⁰⁴ Thus, this wattage direction focused on the exact audience that Leonard Chess sought to reach.

Leonard Chess purchased the station and its licensing rights from Hoffman for one million dollars, which proved to be an excellent deal since Hoffman was eager to get out of the business.¹⁰⁵ According to Herb Kent, “one million dollars is even more amazing when you think that the station grossed roughly five million dollars in its first year.”¹⁰⁶ WVON began its broadcast at midnight of April 1, 1963 with the playing of the national anthem followed by the Purvis Spann “The Blues Man” Show. Throughout the station’s existence, WVON sought to generate earnings for Leonard Chess. This goal was achieved by creating a diverse musical format that would appeal to black listeners and thus bring in advertising dollars. WVON was almost destined for success because it was a product of the Great Migration and the unique cultural and economic environment rooted in the Black Belt in Chicago. The *Chicago Defender* noted that “there is any number of reasons that WVON has outstripped its closest rival, WYNR, but perhaps the

¹⁰⁴ Robert Pruter, *Chicago Soul* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 14.

¹⁰⁵ *1962 Broadcasting Yearbook Issue* (New York: Broadcasting Publications Incorporated, 1962), A- 311.

¹⁰⁶ Herb Kent, interview by Richard Steele, October 11, 1995, *An Evening With Herb Kent*, cassette, (Chicago, Illinois: Museum of Broadcast Communications).

largest has to do with the station's personalities."¹⁰⁷ As the next chapter will examine, it was the introduction of carefully selected group of disc jockeys whose on-air personalities and off-air antics that echoed the sociopolitical realities of African Americans in Chicago and helped transform WVON into an instant success story in 1960s Chicago radio.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ "WVON New King Of Radio," 10.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

CHAPTER TWO

CREATING THE “CHESS BABY:” THE BIRTH OF WVON

The rise of WVON and its subsequent growth stemmed from the station’s ability to create an aural community which highlighted and reflected the concerns of the residents of Bronzeville in the 1960s. For its listeners, the station served as an extension of the public sphere. As stated by *Chicago Sun-Times* columnist Laura Washington, “WVON was a place where people can come and have honest conversations. That’s very difficult for (African-Americans) to do, even in our own community — to talk about race, politics and shortcomings.”¹ The station’s success as an aural community was not only due to its financial nurturing by its creators, the brothers Leonard and Phil Chess, but a key core of African American disc jockeys, many of whom were residents of Bronzeville, and who had proved themselves in both the professional world of radio and as emerging political, social, and cultural leaders in Chicago’s growing black community. Many of the jocks were protégées of the groundbreaking African American disc jockey Al Benson, whose folksy approach appealed to Southern migrants yet aggravated middle class African Americans who embraced an assimilationist approach to civil rights. The jocks built upon Benson’s personality-based style of broadcasting, and through improvisational comedy that was rooted in the African American urban experience in post-World War II

¹ Julie Johnsson, “25th Anniversary,” *Crain’s Chicago Business*, http://www.chicagobusiness.com/cgi-bin/article.pl?portal_id=176&mpid=176&page_id=1367 (accessed June 30, 2009).

Chicago, created a potpourri of characters and sketches to create an aural extension of the Chicago African American community during the 1960s and early 1970s. This chapter focuses on the start-up and daily operations of WVON, and provides an examination of the station's on-air formatting and off-air promotions and special events. Through a careful blend of musical programming and personalities that echoed the sociopolitical realities of Bronzeville, WVON, "The Chess Baby," was an instant success in Chicago's 1960s world of radio.²

Where Happy Folks Congregate: Transforming "WHFC" Into "WVON"

A degree of the later success of WVON lay in the programming and listenership of its frequency predecessor, WHFC 1450AM. For the Chess brothers, the first key to a successful black radio station was the selection of a broadcasting frequency that reached the heart of Chicago's black community. For WVON, this broadcasting signal would be 1450AM, with the station call letters of WHFC. With its call letters standing for "Where Happy Folks Congregate," WHFC was owned and operated by Illinois Republican Congressman Richard Hoffman since 1932. In addition to WHFC, Hoffman also owned several newspapers and the FM station WEHS, which currently operates as rock station WLUP 97.9 FM (The Loop). Located in a modest one-story building at 3350 South

² Bob Hunter, "WVON New King of Chicago Radio Says Hooper," *Chicago Defender*, September 21, 1963, 10.

Kedzie Avenue in Cicero, the station was conveniently only a few miles away from the Chess Recording Studios at 2120 South Michigan Avenue.³

While under Hoffman's direction, WHFC remained a small but successful station with a brokerage format that provided a multitude of diverse "blocks" of programming directed towards Chicago's numerous South and West Side ethnic populations. With a reputation as a modest family station, listeners eagerly tuned to WHFC at certain times to hear "their" block of music. By 1959, WHFC focused its specialty programming on Spanish, Polish and Lithuanian listeners, but also provided twenty-four hours of weekly programming for African Americans.⁴ The home of the refined disc jockey Jack L. Cooper since 1938, WHFC's African American programming took a decidedly black middle class slant.⁵ Typical of WHFC black shows were "Society," which highlighted "society and theatrical news of primary interest."⁶ Furthermore, the keystone of WHFC's African American programming was the station's immensely popular broadcasts of Sunday services by local Southside churches.⁷

³ Wesley South, interview by Julieanna Richardson, videocassette, July 18, 2000, The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, IL.

⁴ *1959 Broadcasting Yearbook Issue* (New York: Broadcasting Publications Incorporated, 1959), A-276.

⁵ Bob Hunter, "74 and Blind, Jack L. Cooper, First Negro Deejay, Still Airs Radio Show," *Chicago Defender*, May 14, 1963, 9.

⁶ "WHFC Airing Series on Theatrical News," *Chicago Tribune*, April 10, 1955, N9.

⁷ Herb Kent and David Smallwood, *The Cool Gent: The Nine Lives of Radio Legend Herb Kent* (New York: Lawrence Hill Books, 2009), 82.

According to future WVON “Good Guy” disc jockey Herb Kent, however, it was not the station’s African American middle class focus that first attracted the Chess Brothers’ attention. Instead, Kent argued that his success as a nightly broadcaster on WHFC during the late 1950s was the factor that initially drew the Chess brothers to that particular frequency. With a built-in black listenership drawn to his popular nightly radio show during which he featured rhythm and blues music and a youth-oriented focus, Kent adamantly stated that his success created an instance audience for the Chess brothers’ new business venture:

As soon as I started there, I took off like a skyrocket...the whole city started listening to me. WGES was the dominant station that black people listened to in Chicago at that time, but I kicked their ass! I mean, I kicked their ass! This rich entrepreneur was considering getting into the radio game based on the strength of what I was doing.⁸

Beyond WHFC’s African American audience, technological factors also played into the purchase of WVON. Radio historians often ignored technological factors that led to a station’s success. While programming is a crucial concern, intangible factors such as a station’s ability to direct or even amplify the power of their signal to broadcast to their intended listener demographic is worth an examination in micro-histories of radio stations in the twentieth century. For example, large mega-stations such as Helena, Arkansas’ KFFA 1360 AM (home of the “King Biscuit Time” blues show) required and possessed strong wattage power to reach rural African American listeners far flung throughout the Mississippi Delta. Likewise, smaller urban stations such as WHFC could

⁸ Kent and Smallwood, *The Cool Gent*, 81.

afford to broadcast at weaker signals to reach smaller yet more compact groups of urban listeners. Attractive to advertisers, these urban listeners also wielded more discretionary spending than their rural counterparts, thus diminishing the need for amplified widespread broadcasting frequencies.

At first glance, what was most daunting for WHFC was its small wattage power. A Class Four station, WHFC was in the lowest wattage level that a radio station could be granted by the Federal Communications Commission. Not surprisingly, Class Four stations, which only transmitted a frequency of 250-1000 watts, often comprised the bulk of African American-focused radio stations. For potential African American station owners, Class Four stations were virtually the only options available for purchase, and the number of black-owned radio station remained minute throughout the mid-twentieth century. While the first two black-owned radio stations were purchased in 1949, by the early 1960s, African Americans owned fewer than five out of 10,000 American radio stations, and all were Class Four stations.⁹ By 1970, the number rose to a dismal sixteen black owners, out of eight thousand stations.¹⁰ For black disc jockeys, this relegation to Class Four broadcasting frequencies served as a bitter reminder of the racist nature of the government's administration of the radio industry.¹¹

⁹ William Barlow, *Voice Over: The Making of Black Radio* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press), 245.

¹⁰ Fred Feretti, "The White Captivity of Black Radio," *Columbia Journalism Review*, Summer 1970, 35-39.

¹¹ Pervis Spann and Linda Walker, *The 40 Year Spann of WVON*, (Chicago: National Academy of the Blues, 2003), 20-21.

With the cards stacked against them, the Class Four frequency station owners and operators resorted to the careful tweaking and amplifying of their signals to reach their intended audiences. Despite its miniscule wattage, WHFC greatly benefited from the racial geography of Chicago as its frequency proved strong enough to reach African American listeners concentrated on the west and south sides of the city.¹² As a result of the expanded broadcasting range of AM stations after sundown, the station could reach the outlying yet predominantly African American Chicago suburbs of Robbins, Harvey, and Gary, Indiana.¹³ Thus despite its Class Four status, WHFC's meek wattage focused on the exact audience that Leonard Chess sought.

Throughout the 1960s, WVON employed its own team of crackpot engineers who amplified the station's Class Four signal and improved its sound. While the station hired two white engineers in the early years, Pat Sarone and Walter Childress, the disc jockeys relied upon a neighborhood African American teenager named Larry Langford to serve as the station's main electronic whiz. Langford, who was arrested by the Federal Communications Commission for operating an illegal radio station built out of scrap parts in his parents' attic, was crucial to improving and amplifying the station's sound and would later become a broadcaster at the station during the 1970s. Another future hire, disc jockey Bill "Butterball" Crane, was one of the first African Americans in the country to hold a first class radio engineering license. According to Pervis Spann, Crane and

¹² Robert Pruter, *Chicago Soul* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 14.

¹³ Spann and Walker, *40 Year Spann*, 13.

Langford were crucial in coaxing a stronger “Class Two station out of a Class Four.”¹⁴

Based on its targeted frequency and the machinations of its engineers, by 1969 the WVON signal covered almost all of Black Chicago.

With Richard Hoffman in declining health and eager to get out of the radio business, WHFC disc jockey Herb Kent arranged a meeting between the Chess brothers and Hoffman in the spring of 1962. Leonard and Phil Chess secured a loan and purchased WHFC 1450 AM and its licensing rights through their L&P Broadcasting Corporation for an estimated one million dollars.¹⁵ In addition to the AM station, Hoffman threw the corresponding FM station WEHS into the deal at the additional cost of one dollar.¹⁶ In the wake of the Payola Scandal and increased scrutiny on the relationship between record labels and radio stations, Leonard Chess hired an experienced Washington D.C. legal insider and former radio executive, Vincent Pepper, to negotiate a deal with the Federal Communications Commission for the station’s licensing rights. Pepper arranged for a special Federal Communications Commission restriction for the station by allowing only ten percent of Chess music to be on the play list at any given time.¹⁷ Despite the intense negotiations and the proposed broadcasting limitations, in December 1962, the FCC

¹⁴ Pervis Spann, interview by Sonja Williams, transcript, March 30, 1995, “Black Radio: Telling It Like It Was” Collection, Archives of African American Music and Culture, Bloomington, Indiana.

¹⁵ *1962 Broadcasting Yearbook Issue* (New York: Broadcasting Publications Incorporated, 1962), A-311.

¹⁶ “New Station WVON Aimed at Negro Market Debuts Monday,” *Chicago Defender*, March 30, 1963, 10.

¹⁷ Pervis Spann, Radio Smithsonian interview.

barely approved WHFC's sale after a 4-3 vote.¹⁸ Yet in later years, Lucky Cordell maintained that although the FCC's playlist policy was usually followed, if "Leonard Chess pushed it, then we played it."¹⁹

Let's Go To Work: The Formatting and Programming of WVON

As previously discussed, WVON's future success lay in focusing its broadcasting solely on Chicago's African American listeners on the South and West sides of the city. As the first twenty-four hour station in Chicago that catered solely to African American musical tastes, the station focused on a sizeable segment of the city's population. According to 1960 United States Census figures, African Americans comprised approximately twenty-three percent of the entire Chicago population with the bulk of the population residing primarily on the south and west sides of the city. Given this demographic structure, it was remarkable that a radio station did not yet exist that targeted that audience. Deadlocked into neighborhoods of ghettos and substandard housing due to restrictive real estate covenants, the African American population of Chicago was squeezed into a small urban block, which proved invaluable for WVON. With a listenership that was compacted into one area and frustrated at their social status and surroundings, the musical format of WVON served as popular diversion from the

¹⁸ Nadine Cohodas, *Spinning Blues into Gold: The Chess Brothers and the Legendary Chess Brothers* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 215.

¹⁹ Moses "Lucky" Cordell, interview by Michael McAlpin, transcript, ca. 1994, Michael McAlpin Collection, Archives of African American Music and Culture, Bloomington, Indiana.

tediousness of daily life.²⁰ Additionally, as no station in Chicago had yet to fully direct all of their programming towards the city's African Americans, a potential lucrative advertising niche existed in the city that other Chicago radio stations (which featured only blocks of black programming) had yet to fully tap. In terms of the strength of this fiscal power, nationally African American buying power was estimated to be \$27 billion dollars in 1963, a number which many advertisers had yet still failed to capitalize upon by the early 1960s.²¹

Immediately after the purchase of WHFC in 1962, Leonard Chess made clear to the public that the new station's main audience was solely African American listeners and it was to serve as Chicago's "Voice of the Negro." Prior to the station's first broadcast, he announced that foreign language shows would be eliminated and all future programming would be designed for African American listeners.²² The mainstream white media paid little attention to this announcement, with the *Chicago Tribune* merely noting "it'll be yet another station directed to Chicago's big Negro market. The call letters stand for Voice of the Negro. Others in part geared in that direction: WYNR, WAAF, and WSBC."²³ While these latter stations featured some degree of African

²⁰ Robert Pruter, *Chicago Soul*, 23.

²¹ "Negro Radio," *Sponsor*, October 22, 1962, 7-8.

²² "New Station WVON Aimed At Negro Market Debuts Monday," *Chicago Defender*, March 30, 1963, 10.

²³ Herb Lyon, "Tower Ticker," *Chicago Tribune*, March 31, 1963, A4.

American programming, WVON would be the station's first station to solely dedicate itself to that demographic.

According to disc jockey Lucky Cordell, from the outset of the station's operations, Leonard Chess was the driving force behind WVON, "the chairman of the board. He would tell the manager basically what to do or come out and have fun with us. Phil was absentee...he had no real interest in running the radio station."²⁴ With no large-scale advertising campaign planned before the station's launch, Leonard was confident that word-of-mouth would bring listeners to the station, and he banked the station's success on assembling a "dream team" of proven Chicago black radio personalities. Not only did the initial roster briefly include Al Benson, but also many of his protégées, former satellite jocks whose previous home stations included WHFC and WGES. New hires included Herb Kent, Pervis Spann, E. Rodney Jones, Stan "Ric" Ricardo, and Franklin McCarthy. Also of note was the hiring of Bernadine Washington, a Bronzeville socialite and "distinguished fashion consultant."²⁵ Chess' WVON was groundbreaking because it maintained an all-black broadcasting staff and a black program director at the radio station during his ownership. Yet as will be discussed in further detail later, even for all of Leonard Chess' liberal business practices, he adamantly employed white

²⁴ Spann, Radio Smithsonian interview.

²⁵ "New Station WVON Aimed at Negro Market," 10.

advertising salesmen to work with record companies, constantly fearing that a black face would be threatening to potential sponsors.²⁶

WVON began its broadcast at midnight of April 1, 1963 with the playing of the National Anthem and the Pervis Spann “The Blues Man” Show. Spann recalls that the first words uttered on the station’s airwaves were “We’re here, this is WVON, let’s go to work!”²⁷ Key to WVON’s broadcasts was recognition of the nuanced tastes of its African American listenership. As the *Chicago Defender* stated, “the Negro audience is as diversified in its tastes and needs as any other.”²⁸ WVON attempted to cater to black tastes by providing a wide range of music and show offers that appealed to both genders and varying class and age groups amongst its listenership. Musically, WVON’s day began with the Bill ‘Doc’ Lee show, featuring gospel and spiritual music from performers such as the Staple Singers and Mahalia Jackson at 4:30 am. Initially, this gospel block was hosted by the Reverend Bud Riley. Riley, a former radio announcer from WTAQ 1300 AM, in LaGrange, Illinois, did not stay at the station long due to a supposed run-in with management over formatting.²⁹ Beginning with the morning commute and throughout the day, blues music from artists such as Muddy Waters was mixed with the emerging soul music of Stevie Wonder and Smokey Robinson and the

²⁶ Marshall Chess, interview by Michael McAlpin, transcript, ca. 1994, Michael McAlpin Collection, Archives of African American Music and Culture, Bloomington, Indiana.

²⁷ Spann, Radio Smithsonian interview.

²⁸ Bob Hunter, “Radio Stations War For Negro Market,” *Chicago Defender*, January 12, 1963, 6.

²⁹ Spann, Radio Smithsonian interview.

Miracles. After the evening news hour, the station broadcasted the Herb Kent and Pervis Spann shows. Their format ranged from doo-wop music, rhythm and blues, and soul to deep southern blues, respectively. Kent, whose show was geared towards teenagers, was on the air from seven to eleven o'clock each night Monday through Friday. On Saturday night he focused on the oldies, which he affectionately called the "dusties." Wesley South was on from 11 pm to 12 am for an hour with the local news show *Hotline*.³⁰ Spann took the graveyard shift, from midnight to 4:30 am, and held that position throughout the 1960s, recalling that he "he had job security" because "disc jockeys would rather quit than work midnights."³¹ The only day WVON's format varied was on Sundays, when (in a throwback to WHFC) gospel shows and live broadcasts from local churches were aired.³² This familiar format which presented a diverse range of music was patronized by Chicago African Americans who grew to depend on its stability.

In addition, the music of Chess Records and its outlet through WVON appealed to the emerging baby boomer generation. With few outlets for rhythm and blues and rock and roll music, black radio stations served as the only sources for listeners, white or black, to hear the restricted material.³³ WVON must certainly have appealed to a

³⁰Herb Kent, interview by Sonja Williams, transcript, September 25, 1995, "Black Radio: Telling It Like It Was" Collection, Archives of African American Music and Culture, Bloomington, Indiana.

³¹Spann, Radio Smithsonian interview.

³²Jones, E. Rodney, interview by Alexis Gillespie, audiocassette, March 14, 1995, Radio Smithsonian: Black Radio Project Collection, Archives of African American Music and Culture, Bloomington, Indiana.

³³ J. Fred MacDonald, *Don't Touch That Dial: Radio Programming in American Life from 1920-1960* (Chicago: Nelson Hall, 1979), 367.

younger generation of listeners who longed to hear its pulsating rhythms and suggestive lyrics. As will be examined more fully later, WVON played a pivotal role in the music industry and its listeners provided a litmus test for the introduction of new rhythm and blues and soul music in the 1960s and early 1970s. According to Herb Kent, “it was the music plus the personalities that blended so well in the old days.”³⁴ WVON walked a fine line between the emerging Top 40 format and the personality-based style of African American broadcasting in which the disc jockey retained ultimate control over song selection, skits, and dialogue. Created and perfected by radio executives Todd Storz and Gordon McLendon in the late 1950s, the “Top 40” format worked to put radio programming power in the hands of station management. Prior to Top 40 programming, disc jockeys possessed musical autonomy over the airwaves, choosing music based on factors such as discs brought to them by record promoters, informal listener surveys, and the sales metrics from local record shops to determine what records received airplay. Adding to the musical selections were their personalities, which often became the true highlights of the shows. Talking over songs, repeating parts of songs for emphasis or fiddling with volume, added to each show’s personality and depended upon the disc jockey’s brand of flair. With the emergence of Top 40 formatting, station managers created standardized playlists of music to be aired, regardless of which disc jockey was manning the airwaves. The aim of the playlist was to constantly play the listeners’ favorite songs and repeat them all day long, thus ensuring the widest possible audience

³⁴ Kent, Radio Smithsonian interview.

for the station's music. In addition, standardized short station jingles and news updates were quickly interspersed with the music to keep the listener informed. By early 1963, the Top 40 style was the dominant radio format for American radio listeners.³⁵

Two California disc jockeys, Gene Chenault and Bill Drake, created a variation of the Top Forty format called U.S. Boss Radio. Emerging in the early 1960s, the Boss Radio format streamlined the Top Forty style through the utilization of advanced statistical methods and professionalized market research to ascertain the number of listeners, their demographics, and their musical preferences. In response to the musical trends discovered during listener statistical analysis, program directors developed musical playlists and radio programming in tandem with the musical likes and loves of their listenership. The Boss Radio system cultivated a tightly controlled system of airplay in which station programming management strictly regulated the amount and length of music played, thus decreasing individualized disc jockey chatter. Furthermore, the Boss Radio format worked to extend a station's presence off the air, in which slogans, branding, contests, and promotions were used to enhance the visibility of the station. Disc jockeys hired at Boss Radio-formatted stations were discouraged from using their personalities as crutches and instead were encouraged to focus on creating a smooth-

³⁵ David MacFarland, *The Development of the Top 40 Radio Format*, (New York: Arno Press, 1979), 15-16.

running show that blended from commercials to songs to banter without the audience noticing discrepancies.³⁶

At WVON, the Good Guys carved out a narrow stylistic space as they were forced to mediate between the familiar personality-based style former WHFC listeners were used to listening to and the emerging Boss Radio system of the early 1960s that radio station managers across the nation were starting to embrace. As Herb Kent recalled, now “Instead of going on the air and saying, ‘I’m Herb Kent on WVON, you have to say WVON, I’m Herb Kent.’” Through regularly scheduled meetings with station management and Leonard Chess, the disc jockeys’ musical selections and messages were crafted in response to the wishes of the listening audience. The station also included listeners in its market research meetings. According to Kent, for example, during one station meeting “People were calling in to say what they liked, what they disliked about WVON and this little boy was on the speakers and he said ‘Hi! My name is Pee Wee. Know what? You just talk too motherfucking much and need to play more damn music!’ It was so funny. He was only about eight years old.”³⁷ By 1966, the station combined listener metrics with contests and promotions through the creation of the Good Guy Identification Card. In exchange for demographic information, listeners received an identification card and if the station announced their membership number on air during a

³⁶Ben Fong-Torres, *The Hits Just Keep Coming: The History of Top 40 Radio*, (San Francisco: Backbeat Books, 1998), 24-27. William Grimes, “Bill Drake, 71, Dies, Created a Winning Radio Style,” *New York Times*, December 1, 2008.

³⁷ Kent, Radio Smithsonian interview.

daily contest, they would receive \$1,450 if they called.³⁸ The pay-off for such detailed formatting was increased ratings, thus allowing for higher advertising purchasing costs for slots of airtime by advertising companies.

Furthermore, WVON statistically tracked the tastes of its listeners and lured its advertisers through its crucial weekly published play list, the “Soul 45.” This sheet, which listed the forty-five bestselling soul and blues music records in Chicago, was compiled from sales at local record stores and also from which records received air time on WVON. Primarily, the station used the “Soul 45” to demonstrate to national advertisers that WVON was in touch with its audience. For instance, during the week of July 12-18, 1968, WVON ranked “Grazing in the Grass” by Hugh Masekela and “Stone Soul Picnic” by the Fifth Dimension as the top two songs of the week. As a result, these songs received the most play on WVON.³⁹ From listener demographics to song popularity rankings, WVON used this statistical data to win over advertisers. Nationally known products such as Pepsi, Lucky Strike cigarettes, and Campbell Soup bought time on Herb Kent and Pervis Spann’s shows. Nevertheless, local establishments such as the South Side restaurant “Rib Supreme” also bought time on WVON shows, usually through the cheaper form of announcements read by disc jockeys.⁴⁰ Leonard Chess capitalized upon the success of the station by regularly reaching out to both local and national

³⁸ “Lucky Winner,” *Chicago Defender*, May 17, 1966, 20.

³⁹ Michael Haralambos, *Right On: From Blues to Soul in Black America* (London: Eddison Press, 1974), 14.

⁴⁰ Herb Kent, *The Herb Kent Show*, November 1963, Museum of Broadcast and Communications, Chicago, Illinois.

advertisers and luring them in with ratings, listener demographics, and detailed analysis of the station's programs, all wrapped up in "a glossy brochure that was put together for potential advertisers with a pointed message: There is a large black consumer market in Chicago, and WVON can help you reach it."⁴¹

Due in part to WVON's formatting, in less than a year the station had trounced its closest competition, Gordon McClendon's WYNR 1390 AM, and quickly became known as the dominant radio force in Chicago's African American radio market. Prior to WVON's creation, the station which featured the largest amount of content directed towards Chicago African Americans was WYNR, nicknamed the "Winner." According to Lucky Cordell, the format at WYNR was "fast paced, a pop-type format with black music...They were playing initially maybe seventy percent black, thirty percent white. And the white music they played was kind of acceptable in both areas." With the rapid rise of WVON in 1963, the two stations dueled over the airwaves in an attempt to capture the ears of African American listeners. For WYNR, this attempt meant increased use of lucrative contests and promotions such as mystery phone calls and a \$4,000 "treasure hunt" for listeners."⁴² In addition, the station also shifted their musical programming in an effort to capture what they considered to be more lucrative white listeners. According to Cordell, WYNR's management also "got greedy...instead of the 70/30, let's go 60/40" and ratcheted up their white musical programming. This style of "polka dot" radio failed

⁴¹ Cohodas, *Spinning Blues into Gold*, 220.

⁴² Bob Hunter, "Radio Stations War For Negro Market," *Chicago Defender*, January 12, 1963, 6.

to fully capitalize upon Chicago's lucrative African American radio listenership market and alienated listeners who were attracted to WVON's clear-cut promotion of itself as a station solely devoted to Chicago African Americans. As a result, WVON took WYNR by storm. As Cordell recalled, once the Pulse ratings were released it was "BOOM! WYNR was never able to catch up."⁴³ In September 1964, WYNR changed to WNUS and became an all-news station.⁴⁴

In a May 1964 multi-county survey of Chicago radio listenership, WVON, a small 1000 watt station which could only reach parts of the south and west sides of Chicago, came in second place for all of Cook County, beating out stations whose wattage was more than double their own. An independent Chicago radio rating service, The Pulse Ratings, recorded that in May of 1964 the station captured somewhere between 44% to 48% of black radio listeners daily.⁴⁵ By 1967, four years after its introduction, 64% of African American households selected WVON as their favorite station, and 90% of the black households in Chicago listened to the station weekly at some point.⁴⁶ Unsure of whether or not the station would last, a female listener told disc jockey Pervis Spann she

⁴³ Cordell, Radio Smithsonian interview.

⁴⁴ "Radio Station WYNR Switches to Straight News," *Jet*, September 3, 1964, 55.

⁴⁵ Phil Chess, Interview by Michael McAlpin, transcript, ca. 1994, Michael McAlpin Collection, Archives of African American Music and Culture, Bloomington, Indiana.

⁴⁶ Haralambos, *Right On*, 94.

thought the station's first broadcast was "some sort of cruel April Fool's joke, a haunting one night stand that is magnificent at first, then turning cold blooded the morning after."⁴⁷

The Good Guys: WVON's Disc Jockeys

While the station's ratings were impressive, these metrics were the result of a core group of all-black Chicago disc jockeys carefully selected by Leonard Chess to serve as purveyors of the medium. With the assistance of the station's African American manager and disc jockey, E. Rodney Jones, Chess assembled a handpicked staff. Paying them on a salary system, Chess recruited the right people to create a tight knit group whose feelings of camaraderie were reflected over the airwaves. Dubbed "The Good Guys," they were initially composed of the core group of Ed Cook, Lucky Cordell, Bill 'Butterball' Crane, E. Rodney Jones, Herb Kent, Bill 'Doc' Lee, Franklin McCarthy, Stan 'Ric' Ricardo, Pervis Spann, Wesley South, Bernadine Washington, and Roy Wood. Throughout the 1960s, new disc jockeys such as Richard Pegue and future *Soul Train* host Don Cornelius joined the station. According to WVON disc jockey Herb Kent, what was most striking was that the station adopted a style that Leonard Chess summed up as "I want you all to talk shit."⁴⁸ As Cordell recalled, WVON had "one of the best on air staffs in the country. Each person was a different personality. No two people were alike, and each was good in his own right. And each had their own following, and the family atmosphere that we

⁴⁷ Spann and Walker, *40 Year Spann*, 15.

⁴⁸ Herb Kent, interview by Michael McAlpin, transcript, ca. 1994, Michael McAlpin Collection, Archives of African American Music and Culture, Bloomington, Indiana.

had...I can't even remember conflict with the guys."⁴⁹ Combined with Leonard's hands-off managerial approach, the disc jockeys were encouraged to fully use their personalities to appeal to their audiences.

In addition to their magnetic personalities, The Good Guys charmed their audience because they shared so many similarities with them. A majority of the Good Guys were either migrants or the children of migrants who came to Chicago during the Great Migration and were raised in the Chicago area. Typical of the Good Guys' experiences were those of Franklin McCarthy and Pervis Spann. McCarthy, a native of rural Belsumpter, Alabama, moved to Chicago when he was seventeen in hopes of securing a better future for himself. He drove a cab while putting himself through Columbia College, where he received a degree in speech communication.⁵⁰ Pervis Spann left his home in Itta Bena, Mississippi at the age of seventeen for Chicago. Familiar with hard work at a young age, Spann recalled that his early life in Mississippi was one of labor. He stated that, "I used to chop cotton. I used to pick cotton. I worked with the gas line. I worked with a construction company. Anybody wanted a worker had me."⁵¹ This work prepared Spann for his first job at a steel mill in Gary, Indiana. He recalled that

⁴⁹ Cordell, Radio Smithsonian interview.

⁵⁰ "Franklin McCarthy, 64, A Pioneer in Black Radio," *Chicago Sun-Times*, September 15, 1992, 60.

⁵¹ Spann, Radio Smithsonian interview.

because of his earlier occupations he was used to the long hours. He recalled that, “If they wanted somebody to work 16 hours, it was me.”⁵²

For other Good Guys such as Bernadine Washington, Herb Kent, Lucky Cordell, and Richard Pegue, they were the children of migrants and were raised in Chicago’s predominantly African American neighborhoods on the south and west sides of the city. As Pegue joked later in life, he was the “Original Westsider.” As children of Black Chicago, the Good Guys forged tangible connections to the community and reaped these connections throughout their WVON broadcasting careers. In the case of Kent and Pegue, as graduates of Hyde Park and Hirsch High Schools, respectively, both were intimately familiar with Chicago’s African American high school world, which they would later promote and even broadcast from during their time at the station, thus making them beloved figures by Chicago’s African American teenagers during the 1960s.⁵³

In addition to sharing the common theme of migration, the Good Guys also shared the common dream of creating a better life for themselves. Almost all of the Good Guys possessed a high school degree and many attended or graduated from college. Bernadine Washington and Ed Cook attended Fisk University while Wesley South and Roy Wood graduated from Northwestern University and Columbia University. Enamored with a career in radio broadcasting, Herb Kent, Franklin McCarthy and Pegue all took

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ “Mr. Richard Pegue,” <http://www.tributes.com/show/Richard-Pegue-91958129> (accessed 13 February 2013); Kent, Radio Smithsonian interview.

broadcasting classes at various Chicago colleges. Several of the Good Guys also served in the military and through their service learned about the science of radio broadcasting. Wesley South, Bill ‘Doc’ Lee, Pervis Spann, and E. Rodney Jones all served in the military during either World War II or the Korean War. Stan ‘Ric’ Riccardo, the oldest of the Good Guys, served in the European theatre during World War II, was awarded the Purple Heart, and exited the Army with the rank of Captain after the conflict.⁵⁴

When they began work at the station in 1963, the Good Guys were primarily in their late twenties and thirties in age. Notable exceptions to this age span were those members employed by the station’s news department, Wesley South and Roy Wood, who were forty-seven and forty-eight years old when they began work at WVON. Both were already seasoned print and media journalists in Chicago’s African American community. Given the age of the Good Guys, most already possessed some degree of broadcasting experience, but they were not so far advanced in age that they were out of touch with the important youth demographic. As will be explored later, younger listeners played a crucial role in the station’s success, and WVON’s owners and staff recognized their importance. The station’s oldest disc jockey, Stan ‘Ric’ Ricardo left the station’s airwaves in 1965 to become WVON’s local sales manager. As Bernadine Washington recalled, “He left broadcasting because they wanted younger disc jockeys who could relate to the 18-to-34-year-old group.”⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Kenan Heise, “Ex-WVON Disc Jockey Ric Ricardo,” *Chicago Tribune*, March 16, 1985, 8.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

With the exception of E. Rodney Jones, who Leonard Chess recruited based on his radio success in St. Louis, almost all of the Good Guys worked via time brokerage arrangements at local Chicago radio stations such as WHFC and WGES prior to their tenure at WVON. Combined with their previous years of residence in Chicago and their occupational experience in the city's radio industry, the Good Guys were intimately familiar with Chicago's African American inhabitants, their businesses and cultural institutions. Additionally, the station's listeners were also familiar with the Good Guys before they ever began their first broadcasts. For many listeners, WVON was the assemblage of Chicago African American neighbors neatly gathered into one radio station. In addition to their shared similarities with their fans, WVON disc jockeys also appealed to their listeners because they were established community leaders. Numerous Good Guys such as Bernadine Washington, Wesley South, Lucky Cordell, and Roy Wood were members of the NAACP and the National Urban League and participated in numerous events for the organizations in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Several Good Guys were also Democratic Party activists, including Wesley South, who ran numerous times for the position of ward committeeman from Chicago's 29th ward in the late 1950s and 1960s. Roy Wood was also a leader in the 1960 campaign to open a south side branch of the Cook County Hospital that would serve Bronzeville's residents.⁵⁶ This activist stance demonstrated to the station's listeners that not only could the Good Guys

⁵⁶ "Plan Petition for Hospital Branch," *Chicago Defender*, March 7, 1960, 7; "Daley Denies Knowledge of Demo Official-Hoodlum Link," *Chicago Defender*, April 2, 1964, 1.

“talk the talk” of equal rights, but that they also possessed a track record of “walking the walk” when it came to fighting for equal rights for Chicago’s African Americans.

Combined with Leonard’s hands-off managerial approach, the disc jockeys were encouraged to fully use their personalities to appeal to their audiences. In relation to Marshall McLuhan’s thesis that “radio served as a tribal drum,” WVON disc jockeys harnessed the “tribal power” of radio through their use of Black English vernacular, rhyming, and the recreation of stereotypical African American community figures with which listeners identified. Considered to be a hybrid of the plantation dialect of African and Creole slaves in the American South, the Black English vernacular came to prominence in Chicago during the height of the Great Migration in the early 1940s.⁵⁷ The most notable defining features of the Black English vernacular are the changing of the verb tense, and the consonant and vowel sounds. Borrowed from the teachings of Al Benson, disc jockeys appealed to their audiences by speaking like Southern migrants. For instance, in a 1963 air check of Herb Kent’s show when he is giving a brief weather report, he jovially tells the listeners in a warm and inviting tone “I ain’t no weatha man, but since you axed me, the weatha today will be mild as a child.”⁵⁸ In this phrase, Kent employed a double negative and changed the ending stress and pronunciation of the words. Pervis Spann, who served as the late evening disc jockey for the blues show, was

⁵⁷ Nancy Bonvillian, *Language, Culture and Communication: The Meaning of Messages* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1997), 151.

⁵⁸ In attempting to recreate the Black English vernacular through the written word, phonetic spelling will be used. Herb Kent, *The Herb Kent Show*, November 1963, audiocassette, Museum of Broadcast and Communications, Chicago, Illinois.

also known for his diction. Every night he began his show with the phrase “Evenin’ pretty ladies, Aye’s Pervis Spann de’ Blues Man and I’m here to spin a few.”⁵⁹ This laid back style of talking earned scorn from some, but appealed to a majority of listeners. According to E. Rodney Jones, “A lot of people have talked about his slurring of words and his diction, but he was talking to the people on the South Side who really loved the blues. All night in Chicago belonged to Pervis Spann.”⁶⁰ Though grammatically incorrect, Kent and Spann’s ability to speak similarly to their listeners won them a great deal of popularity.

Along with the use of the Black English vernacular, WVON disc jockeys also appealed to their audience through the use of rhyming. Impromptu rhythmic rhyming that was a predecessor to today’s modern rap music ran rampant among all of the WVON disc jockeys. First, a majority of the Good Guys employed a radio persona that employed either rhyming or alliteration. Not only did it make them easier to remember, but it was similar to nicknames that friends would give one another. For instance, the Good Guys were individually known as Herb Kent ‘the Cool Gent,’ Pervis Spann ‘The Blues Man,’ E. Rodney Jones ‘The Mad Lad,’ or Lucky Cordell ‘The Baron of Bounce.’ In relation to rhyming, personalities such as Curtis Mayfield and Muhammad Ali admired disc jockey Bill “Butterball” Crane for his skill with words. Rhyming off the top of his head, phrases

⁵⁹ Spann, Radio Smithsonian, interview.

⁶⁰ E. Rodney Jones, interview by Alexis Gillespie, audiocassette, March 14, 1995, Radio Smithsonian: Black Radio Project Collection, Archives of African American Music and Culture, Bloomington, Indiana.

such as “This is Butterball Crane and I’m in your brain with some ditties for you Motor City Kitties” glibly floated off of his tongue and made the simple introduction of a Motown song something to be admired by audiences.⁶¹

Beyond merely promoting the music featured on the station, WVON’s disc jockeys were also avid fans of the rhythm and blues and soul music they played and sought to educate their listeners about the finer points of the music. Good Guy Ed Cook stated that “I’ve been in it for eighteen years and I don’t think I could be really truthful with myself and my audience if I really didn’t like the music.”⁶² Serving as teachers on the air, they encouraged listeners to connect with the deeper meanings of songs and urged for introspection. Radio historian Susan Douglass refers to this type of listening as “breakout listening,” in which the listener concentrates on the music, its message and identifies with its meanings.”⁶³ The disc jockeys also connected listeners with the music by asking introspective questions. Bill “Butterball” Crane demonstrated this technique when he played Jerry Butler’s “Are You Happy” during a 1968 show. Before starting the song, Crane stated “You’re in Butterball’s wide wonderful musical world and when one record ends the other begins...but what I want to know honey is...are you truly happy?” Throughout the song, Crane solemnly echoed the lyrics, while repeating “Are you really

⁶¹ Bill “Butterball Crane,” in *The Dawn of Urban Radio*, producer and director Mark Williams, CTV, 1990, videocassette.

⁶² Haralambos, *Soul Music*, 13.

⁶³ Douglas, *Listening In*, 222.

happy?”⁶⁴ In a spoken introduction to another song, Richard Pegue stated “Good loving ain’t easy to come by...and when it do everybody act the fool and just throw it away. Don’t mistake weakness for stupidity. Which would you rather be – weak or stupid?”⁶⁵ In addition to questioning, the disc jockeys also encouraged introspection by constructing and playing thematic blocks of songs. In an Ed Cook show, Cook declared “This is what happens when you start putting those rules down” before bouncing between a series of make-up and break-up songs including “She’s Gone” by Nolan Chance and “Let’s Get Together” by Mitty Collier.⁶⁶ Other topics for discussion included the science of radio, as evidenced by a 1965 Herb Kent show in which Kent instructed listeners about how long-range AM radio worked and why “in some cases you’ll hear us in New Zealand.”⁶⁷

In addition to insightful questions that related to the themes of the songs being played, the disc jockeys encouraged listeners to connect to the lyrics. According to Gilbert Williams, “Black disc jockeys anticipate the lyrics by saying a line before the song is played and confirm them by repeating and paraphrasing it afterwards.”⁶⁸ WVON disc jockeys such as Herb Kent and E. Rodney Jones initiated a call and response pattern during songs that appealed to the African American listener. In call and response patterns

⁶⁴ “Bill ‘Butterball’ Crane Show,” WVON, Chicago, IL, December 15, 1968, compact disc.

⁶⁵ “Richard Pegue Show,” WVON, Chicago, IL, June 9, 1975, compact disc.

⁶⁶ “Ed Cook Show,” WVON, Chicago, IL, February 1, 1965, compact disc.

⁶⁷ “Herb Kent Show,” WVON, Chicago, IL, January 29, 1965, compact disc.

⁶⁸ Williams, *Legendary Pioneers of Black Radio*, 6.

in traditional black churches, African American pastors often repeat a catch phrase with time in between, thus allowing for the audience to participate by repeating the phrase, thus emphasizing the message of the sermon. According to Herb Kent, both he and E. Rodney Jones depended on this approach to guide listeners into understanding the deeper layers of the music and increasing their appreciation for the songs.⁶⁹ During a 1963 air check when Kent is playing a song by Little Eva, he explains before the song begins “This is beat music. Hear the beat-beat-beat? Now y’all got to listen to it...” Later in the song, he cries “It’s so nice, we got to keep it goin,’ but a doo-wop dusty is coming up next!” At this point, Kent proceeds to stop the record and replay it from an earlier point in the song, thus driving home the message of the song. At the end of the tune and while the prelude of the next is playing, Kent states “This is one of the sensitive kind. Brings back memories. Records make you cry sometimes, the sensitive kind. Brings back memories in a rush. Memories you can see, feel, hear, touch...”⁷⁰ Thus, through the use of speaking over the record and emphasizing certain points, Kent took the time to make a connection with his audience.

Both Herb Kent and Richard Pegue introduced WVON listeners to a rich heritage of older music by African American artists, lovingly referred to by Kent as “the dusties,” a phrase which he created during the 1950s while on WBEE. Kent’s listeners

⁶⁹ Herb Kent, interview by Richard Steele, October 11, 1995, *An Evening With Herb Kent*, videocassette, Museum of Broadcast and Communications, Chicago, Illinois.

⁷⁰ “Herb Kent Show” WVON, Chicago, IL, November, 1963, audiocassette. Museum of Broadcast and Communications, Chicago, Illinois.

affectionately referred to him as “The King of the Dusties,”⁷¹ The embracing of these older songs and artists by the jocks provided listeners with a tie to their community’s past and instilled a sense of belonging.⁷² Each Saturday night beginning at 7:00 pm, both Kent and Pegue featured these older songs on their shows and demonstrated their appreciation and encyclopedic knowledge of older music. In reference to Richard Pegue, Lucky Cordell recalled

And one of the things that Richard has in his favor is he has a phenomenal memory. He's one of these persons who can say, that was Screaming Jay Hawkins. That was made in 19 blah blah blah. Recorded in Muscle Shoals--you know what I mean...The amazing thing is he was able to maintain all that information.⁷³

Before playing “I Wonder” by Cecil Gant, Kent dramatically told the audience

Our next record we take out of tissue paper (paper rustling) from the most secret hiding place. It came out either during or right after WWII, which would date it back to right around 1945 to 1947. It was one of the first big blues records to walk all over the United States of America. A man singing and a piano but you get such a feeling, such a thing, and its outstanding... enough said, I cannot tell you where I got it but I can play it for you and incidentally you’re not allowed to tape record it!⁷⁴

Kent and Pegue’s emphasis on dusties derived from a desire to have new generations of listeners recognize the rich musical heritage that came before them. As Pegue recalled “It

⁷¹ Kent and Smallwood, *The Cool Gent*, xvi.

⁷² Douglas, *Listening In*, 232.

⁷³ Cordell, The HistoryMakers interview.

⁷⁴ “Herb Kent Show,” WVON, Chicago, IL, February 26, 1965, compact disc.

wasn't a battle. This is not what it was about...It was the fact that we both--I feel we both loved those dusties.”⁷⁵

WVON disc jockeys also appealed to African American listeners through their use of characters and gimmicks that recreated the urban world of Chicago's south and west side over the airwaves. As Herb Kent recalled, “Everyone on there had a gimmick. I know Joe Young, he was just an on-fire disc jockey. They called him ‘Young Blood.’ He'd say stuff like ‘I'm having more fun than a one-legged man in a football kicking contest. Ed Cook used to be lying on his white rug talking about ‘he looked like a rich man's front porch.’”⁷⁶ The key in developing the personalities and gimmicks was creating an act that resonated with listeners. For the WVON disc jockeys, this skill lay in recreating Chicago's Black Belt on the airwaves through a cast of stereotypical characters that ranged from pimps, drug dealers, and impoverished old men. These characters provided black Chicago residents with not only a chance to laugh, but also to reflect upon the situation discrimination created.⁷⁷ While a public setting, the airwaves of WVON served as a private sphere in which black Chicagoans could express their frustrations through humor at the Bronzeville urban environment. Similar to the acts of emerging comedians such as Richard Pryor, Dick Gregory, and Flip Wilson, the Good Guys used

⁷⁵ Pegue, The HistoryMakers interview.

⁷⁶ Kent and Smallwood, *The Cool Gent*, 15.

⁷⁷ Mary Lou Finley, “The Open Housing Marches, Chicago 1966,” *Chicago 1966: Open Housing Marches, Summit Negotiations, and Operation Breadbasket* ed. David Garrow (New York: Carlson Publishing Company, 1989), 4-6.

the language of the streets and subversive humor in their acts to transcend the depressing slums and harsh realities of Bronzeville life.⁷⁸ Therefore in acting out these roles over the airwaves, WVON disc jockeys truly became modern age storytellers.

The most famous characters created at WVON were those done by Herb Kent and collectively called the Electric Crazy Psychedelic People, or as Kent referred to them “the little people that lived in my head.” “I would take stuff that happened in the street and would make it. I had a show about roaches – called it ‘Rodney the Roach.’”⁷⁹ One character, the Wahoo Man, emerged after Kent had a scary encounter at a restaurant with a homeless old man:

...about ‘65 we went to eat at a chili parlor one day and we saw this old man chasing these women...so we went inside to eat and that man came in. He was ferocious. He had like sores in his face, an old beat up hat, and a stick. A broomstick! He came over to me and looked in my chili and I said “don’t drip in my chili!” Upon leaving the restaurant, the man “Threatened to hit my new Cadillac (which used to belong to Muhammad Ali) with a stick. As I was pulling out, I flipped on the car alarm and it went ‘Wahoo! Wahoo!’ The old man yelled “No Wahoo like that is going to scare me!”⁸⁰

Kent, after describing this hilarious encounter to friends who claimed to have seen the man, based the on-air Wahoo Man character after him. Kent went so far as to also bring along the Wahoo Man, usually a friend dressed as a scary homeless man in a rubber mask, to clubs such as the Regal when he did live broadcasts. Thus, WVON’s listeners

⁷⁸ Mel Watkins, *On the Real Side: Laughing, Lying, and Signifying* (New York: Simon and Schuster 1994), 179-181.

⁷⁹ Kent, Radio Smithsonian interview.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

truly believed that the Wahoo Man was real. “I carried him around in a real casket that I got from a funeral home and placed this box in front of the stage and he would raise from the dead.”⁸¹ In addition to the Wahoo Man, Kent also created the Orange and Yellow Grunchins, a group of people who were divided by skin color, “Somehow, the Orange Grunchins would always get the best of the Yellow Grunchins, getting the last loaf of bread, cutting in line that sort of thing.”⁸² A thinly veiled reference to skin color, characters like these united African Americans together in their own subversive mocking of whites.

WVON disc jockeys such as Pervis Spann and E. Rodney Jones also used acts and gimmicks to give their audience something to talk about. Spann’s act became entrenched around his refusal to talk to males on his shows. “Late at night, when a man’s all alone, he wants to hear something soft and sweet, and not ‘Hey man, play me this!’” While humorous, his message was also a social commentary on the rights of women and their matriarchal position in African American society. “These men that call a lot of times had been nipping the bottle. But the women, they’re alone, they’re working, they’re supporting kids...I’ve got all the time in the world for them.”⁸³

While the humor of the “Good Guys” was defined by a raucous improvisational style, there nonetheless was a distinctive feminine slant to WVON’s broadcasting,

⁸¹Herb Kent, Radio Smithsonian interview.

⁸²*An Evening with Herb Kent.*

⁸³ Pervis Spann, *The Dawn of Urban Radio.*

highlighted most notably by the station's female disc jockey, Bernadine "On the Scene" Washington. The roots of African American female radio broadcasters can be traced to the 1940s. Prior to this time period, both white and black women's first roles on radio were as entertainers. For white women who were not vocalists, roles in soap operas and family comedies were standard fare, as exemplified by Gracie Allen's "The Burns and Allen Show" and Lucille Ball's "My Favorite Husband." For African American women who longed for radio stardom, the dual barriers of both gender and race further limited their options. Scarce opportunities existed beyond occasional vocalist positions and roles defined by racial stereotypes such as Beulah or Sapphire.⁸⁴

Beginning in the 1940s, African American women gained a foothold in the radio industry through the rise of black appeal radio and carved out space for themselves by hosting "homemaker shows." Targeting middle class female listeners, these weekday shows created an intimate setting in which a trusted female figure provided information on topics of interest to women including recipes, fashion tips, society news, and occasional soft ballads from artists such as Sarah Vaughan. Nationally, the most prominent show in the genre was Memphis radio station WDIA's "Tan Town Homemaker Show."⁸⁵ In Chicago, Gertrude Cooper, the wife of radio broadcaster Jack Cooper, hosted a series of homemaker shows for local stations that her husband helped

⁸⁴ Barlow, *Voice Over*, 147.

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 121.

produce and was praised by the *Chicago Defender* for her fine voice and “having the knowhow for presenting her program.”⁸⁶

While homemaker shows prescribed to middle class notions of womanhood, they nonetheless served as the foundation for African American women’s expanding role in the radio industry throughout the 1950s. Based on their popularity, stations often tapped the female hosts of these homemaker shows to fill positions such as the “Director of Women’s Programming,” as was the case with WVON’s Bernadine Washington. In addition, although opportunities in station ownership, management and sales were still barred to women, female-focused shows on black appeal radio stations also provided African American women with an opportunity to transition into disc jockey roles. Exemplifying this transition was WDIA’s Martha Jean “The Queen” Steinberg. A host on The “Tan Town Homemaker Show”, Steinberg quickly won the popularity of female listeners who viewed her as a savvy and trusted confidante. She parlayed this popularity with listeners into other female-focused broadcasting opportunities at the station and in the late 1950s, WDIA gave Steinberg her own rhythm and blues show, *Premium Stuff*. In 1963, she moved to Detroit, Michigan to work at WCHB and became one of the most popular African American female disc jockeys in the country.⁸⁷

In the Chicago area, the most prominent African American female disc jockey during the 1950s was Vivian Carter. A protégé of Al Benson’s, Carter won one of his

⁸⁶ “Wife of Jack. L. Cooper Tops Radio Announcer,” *Chicago Defender*, January 21, 1959, 17.

⁸⁷ Barlow, *Voice Over*, 123.

disc jockey contests in 1948 and became one of his satellite jocks on WGES. In 1950, Carter moved to Gary, Indiana to work on WGRY where she was given her own show. In 1953, Carter and her husband, Jimmy Bracken, founded Vee-Jay Records, known for signing acts such as The Spaniels, Jerry Butler, and Gene Chandler. As Vee-Jay grew into one of the largest independent labels in the country in the 1950s, Carter's role on the radio diminished, thus creating a vacuum for an African American female broadcaster such as Bernadine Washington to fill in the Chicago area.⁸⁸

Seen as bringing a degree of decorum and respectability to the station, WVON's key female disc jockey, Bernadine Washington, highlighted African American middle class values and served as a female role model for the Bronzeville community. Her activities both at the station and in the community at large also fully demonstrate the link between the disc jockeys' roles as community spokesmen both on the airwaves and in the public sphere. Like so many of Chicago's African American residents, Bernadine Washington came to the Windy City via the Great Migration. Washington moved from New Orleans to Chicago with her mother during the 1930s. A high academic achiever and viewed as a natural leader by her peers, she graduated fourth in her class from DuSable High School and attended Fisk University. After college, she returned to Chicago with her husband, Eugene Washington, and became a fashion buyer at a Fuller's

⁸⁸ Ibid, 149-150.

department store on the south side of Chicago.⁸⁹ Not only did this position establish Washington as a member of Bronzeville's fashionable elite, but it allowed her access to prominent members of Chicago society. Through her annual Women's Wear fashion shows, charitable and political work with organizations such as the Democratic Party, Pilgrim Baptist Church, the NAACP, the National Urban League, and regular appearances in Bronzeville's society columns, Washington developed key connections with Chicago's cultural and political elites, thus setting the stage for her later success at WVON and influence in the city's struggle for civil rights. One key contact who helped Washington get her start in radio was the "Ol' Swingmaster" himself, Al Benson. By the late 1940s, Washington had parlayed her popularity into her own bi-weekly quiz show on Al Benson's radio show, the "Country Fair," on WGES.⁹⁰

Working part-time throughout the 1950s as a satellite jock with a broadcasting focus on fashion and etiquette, Washington attracted the attention of Leonard Chess, who sought a female figure who could serve as a foil to the masculine hi-jinks of the Good Guys while also reaching out to female African American listeners. Her show "On the Scene with Bernadine" intermixed fashion and shopping tips with local political news. Immensely popular, Washington built off her popularity to create the "Bern Club," a ladies' organization with membership composed solely of female fans of her show. In a

⁸⁹ Cameron McWhirter, "WVON Radio Exec Bernadine C. Washington," *Chicago Tribune*, September 26, 1993, 6.

⁹⁰ "Mostly About Women," *Chicago Defender*, July 2, 1949, 10.

throwback to the earlier African American women's club movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the Bern Club carved out a respectable means for African American working class women, many of whom were migrants or children of migrants, on the south and west sides of Chicago to become acquainted with black middle class ideals. While it focused on etiquette, personal beauty, and genteel cultural outings, the Bern Club also allowed its members a space in which to assert their agency and promote the development of African American women in Chicago during the 1960s.⁹¹

In February 1965, the club's launch was mainly a modest affair, highlighted by a ladies' luncheon held at the Southmoor Hotel in Bronzeville in which two fellow Good Guys, E. Rodney "Mad Lad" Jones, and Bern's future husband, Ed "Nassau Daddy" Cook, served as guest speakers.⁹² By July 1965, the club had expanded its activities, hosting a beauty pageant to crown the "WVON Bern Club Cotton Queen." Not only did the event take place at the stately Trianon Ballroom on Sixty-Second Street and Cottage Grove Avenue in Woodlawn, but also netted additional advertising revenues for WVON through corporate sponsorship by Butternut Bread and May Sons department stores.⁹³ While the station measured Washington's success in corporate dollars, the African American community also saw her as their success as well. By 1967, Washington lured

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Theresa Fambro Hooks, "Teesee's Topics," *Chicago Defender*, February 10, 1965, 16.

⁹³ "Beauty, Regalia, Mark Crowning," *Chicago Defender*, July 10, 1965, 24.

national advertisers to her activities, the largest of which was Coca-Cola, in which she became the radio voice of the company in the Chicago area. As columnist Doris Saunders noted “Bernadine...will bring all kinds of prestige to Coca-Cola, and the kind of identification they must be seeking for their product. When Bern tells you to put toothpaste in the wall where the plaster is cracked, what do you do? Put toothpaste in the cracks, of course.”⁹⁴

In addition to beauty pageants and fashion and etiquette advice, the activities of the Bern Club also focused upon “lifting up” teenage African American girls on the South Side of Chicago. By late 1965, WVON’s Bern Club was actively involved with promoting wholesome cultural activities for young ladies. In addition to lectures, beauty pageants, college scholarship drives, and dance and music recitals, the Bern Club attempted to show the girls the world beyond the boundaries of Bronzeville. One event for the young ladies of the Bern Club was a Swedish smorgasbord luncheon at the renowned Kungsholm restaurant, which was located in the stately former McCormick Mansion on the city’s Near North Side. In addition to the luncheon, the teenage girls attended a performance of a puppet opera performance of *Madame Butterfly* by the Chicago Miniature Opera theatre, which took place in one of the rooms of the restaurant. As subtly hinted by Chicago *Defender* social columnist Thelma Hunt Shirley, this refined experience was most likely a new experience for the young members of the Bern Club who were unaccustomed to these types of middle class luxuries. She wrote “The girls are

⁹⁴ Doris Saunders, “Confetti,” Chicago *Defender*, May 17, 1967, 14.

still talking about the sumptuous smorgasbord luncheon and entertaining puppet opera that they enjoyed, many for the first time.”⁹⁵

As the Bern Club’s membership continued to grow through the 1960s, its structure and activities expanded. By 1967, the club organized its membership and leadership into distinct groups representing the south and west sides of the city. In addition to standard officer positions in the club, a charm instructor also occupied a central leadership position. With its increased membership base and well-defined organizational hierarchy, the Bern Club moved to geographically expand the political world for Chicago African American females through its successful travel program.⁹⁶ The goals of the club transcended merely showing its membership the popular tourist sites of the locales it visited, but to introduce the ladies to the prominent white and black political and cultural “movers and shakers” of the day. For a 1966 whirlwind weekend trip to Washington, D.C., the events for the ladies of the Bern Club included a luncheon with Congressman William Dawson, a reception with the wife of Illinois Senator Paul Douglas, and a tour of the White House with Lyndon Johnson’s social secretary, Bess Abell.⁹⁷ Additional trips included Bermuda and the Bahamas, where at the latter the club’s members met with the Acting Premier of the country, Arthur D. Hanna. Despite the costliness of international travel, Bern Club members remained undaunted and

⁹⁵ Thelma Hunt Shirley, “Confetti,” *Chicago Defender*, May 25, 1966, 14.

⁹⁶ “A Bahamian Visit,” *Chicago Defender*, September 11, 1967, 18.

⁹⁷ Bernadine Washington, “Social Whirl,” *Chicago Defender*, July 16, 1966, 18.

flocked to sign up for the trips. In terms of sheer size, eighty-one of its members made the trip from Chicago to the Bahamas while ninety-one of its members made the trip to Bermuda. In a postcard from Washington to social life columnist Doug Akins, Bernadine wrote “The WVON Bern Club invaded this beautiful isle and it opened its heart to 91 of our members. Bermuda will never be the same.” Akins expressed shock over the size of the delegation, writing “Ninety-one...Wow...Bern, I believe you!”⁹⁸ As Pervis Spann recalled,

Part of the WVON frenzy was to be affiliated with the station in some way and this ultimately led to the development of her club. One thousand Chicago women did charitable work, traveled, and exchanged ideas and style. Where they’d learn how to walk, how a lady got in and out of the car, and other socially enhancing skills in a lady-like manner. Ms. Washington was supreme elegance. She touched the women listeners in a way no good guy could and the men loved her.⁹⁹

In addition to Washington’s off-air leadership of the Bern Club, she also worked to promote a respectable image of the Good Guys and WVON in the Chicago African American community at large. While the on-air personas of the Good Guys were well-known in the community, what were not so well known to the public were the disc jockeys’ off-air antics. Their increasing popularity with their listeners, most notably expressed in gangs of female groupies, combined with their off-air promotional activities at local clubs and bars, created a hedonistic lifestyle for the jocks. As Herb Kent recalled, “The deejays at WVON were having sex all over that radio station...You could get away

⁹⁸ Doug Akins, “The Club Set,” *Chicago Defender*, September 13, 1969, 20.

⁹⁹ Spann and Walker, *40 Year Spann*, 95.

with doing this on air because the engineers cooperated with us. They gave us little breaks. We'd give the engineers some records and they'd say 'go head on' and they'd sit up and play them for you for half an hour or so while you did what you needed to do."¹⁰⁰

According to Spann, Bernadine tempered their behavior. He stated that

Her mere presence seemed to demand respect. With craft expertise and a grand sense of style, she was able to speak her mind in a remarkable way as to not offend, but to enlighten. Nobody took affront if she suggested to one of the on air personalities a change of clothing might be in order for an appearance later that evening. She kept all of the Good Guys together and was definitely the lady in charge, the matriarch.¹⁰¹

In the later 1960s, as the station's involvement with the Chicago Freedom Movement expanded, so did Washington's role as the public face of the station. As Lucky Cordell recalled "Bernadine was like a representative for the station...I wouldn't be able to separate her involvement from the station's involvement...because when she went to Operation Push, she was going there as a representative of WVON. If she went to a meeting, it was as a representative of WVON. That was her basic function...and she was a good representative. She was a good-looking woman, and she handled herself beautifully."¹⁰² Washington would parlay this role as the public representative of the station into professional and political success. In 1967, she became the first ever African American female vice president of a radio station and Mayor Richard J. Daley appointed her to the city's Commission on Human Relations. In 1970, WVON promoted

¹⁰⁰Kent and Smallwood, *The Cool Gent*, 201.

¹⁰¹Spann and Walker, *Forty-Year Spann*, 16.

¹⁰² Cordell, Radio Smithsonian interview.

Washington to the station's general manager, and she also became a founding member of Operation PUSH.¹⁰³

For the Good Guys, the development of their public personas through appearances outside of the station was crucial to WVON's financial success. Additionally, these appearances also served to further cement WVON's personnel into positions of community leadership throughout the 1960s. Adhering to the Boss Radio format, physical appearances with contest winners, at store openings, dances, and other community events helped establish WVON's place in the community's cultural lexicon. Contests and promotions for prizes such as a Cadillac, furs and electronics equipment, luxuries that would often be out of the reach of working class listeners, served as lures to continue pushing WVON to the top of the radio ratings in Chicago.

From its earliest days, WVON, conducted contests in partnership with local and national advertisers. In the summer of 1963, the station encouraged listeners to collect Coca-Cola bottle caps and petitions listing the name of WVON listeners. The contest's lucky winner, Sharon Warner, received a pastel mink stole while runners-up received bicycles and clock radios.¹⁰⁴ Often to the delight of listeners, the contests bordered on the edge of ludicrous. A later 1967 contest involved listeners having to guess the total weight of eighteen of the Good Guys and a Cadillac car with two gifts of unknown size stored in the trunk of the car. With his lucky guess of 7,906 pounds, teenager Gerald Mangun not

¹⁰³ "Mrs. Bernadine Washington Human Relations Appointee," *Chicago Defender*, August 17, 1967, 4.

¹⁰⁴ "WVON Contest," *Chicago Defender*, August 12, 1963, A14.

only won the Cadillac, but like many of the station's contest winners, was featured in a photographic pictorial with Leonard Chess and several of the Good Guys in the Chicago *Defender*, further emphasizing the importance of the station and its activities in community life.¹⁰⁵

In addition to contests, the Good Guys also utilized the popularity they had gained on WVON to secure appearances as local celebrities at events taking place on the South and West sides of the city. Beyond group appearances at station-promoted events, such as the massive Bud Billiken Day parade, lucrative individual appearances were prized by the disc jockeys as an additional source of pay. Many appearances took place at local stores throughout Chicago's black community. For the December 1963 opening of "Big Bear Foods" on the city's West Side, which was less than a year after WVON's first broadcast, customers not only had a chance to meet players such as Willie Galimore and Roosevelt Taylor of the Chicago Bears, but the store's opening weekend activities also included meet-and-greets with Franklin McCarthy, Ric Ricardo, and Herb Kent of WVON.¹⁰⁶ Master of ceremony duties also presented another opportunity for the Good Guys to make the presence they had established over the air known tangibly throughout the community. Through emceeing events such as community beauty pageants, club galas, and high school dances, the Good Guys truly became the spokesmen for Chicago's African American community. As evidenced by the Good Guys' emceeing duties at

¹⁰⁵ "Westside Teenager Wins Cadillac," Chicago *Defender*, August 12, 1967, 33.

¹⁰⁶ "Grand Opening of Big Bear Foods," Chicago *Defender*, December 12, 1963, 28.

events sponsored by the Chicago City Department of Public Aid and the Lawndale Association of Block Clubs, formal organizations recognized the jocks as established community spokesmen whose presence would be a welcome addition at civic events.¹⁰⁷

Conclusion

In the front page story of the January 30, 1964 Chicago *Defender*, the headline ran in oversized dramatic font “E. Rodney Jones is Found!” For five and a half days, the popular WVON disc jockey was missing and his absence left the station’s listeners buzzing. The station offered a \$1,450 reward for the first person to find him. Unsure of whether or not his absence was a reality or a hoax, WVON received over 4,000 phone calls from listeners inquiring about his absence and providing spotting information and tips. While the bizarre contest ended up being a staged promotional event for the station, it nonetheless demonstrated the effect that WVON had on its listeners. The promotional “Mad Lad” kidnapping not only stirred its listeners, but authorities as well. Jones, whose hallmark was his on-air fights with fellow disc jockey Herb Kent, later recalled, “Man, the FBI got called in and the listeners all thought Kent had killed me. I can tell you that Chess wouldn’t let us do anything like that again!”¹⁰⁸ After contest winner Willa Johnson

¹⁰⁷ “100 Foster Kids in Fourth ‘Spotlight on Talent,’” Chicago *Defender*, May 11, 1968, 31; “Lawndale Groups Plan Annual Fete,” Chicago *Defender*, September 9, 1967, 18.

¹⁰⁸ E. Rodney Jones, Radio Smithsonian interview.

spotted him in a local drugstore, she exclaimed to him “Why don’t you go back to the radio station? Don’t you know that the whole Southside is worrying about you?”¹⁰⁹

Johnson’s exclamation is indicative of Chicago African Americans’ emotional investment in WVON. Through gimmicks such as the Jones’ kidnapping and characters such as the Grunchins and the Wahoo Man, WVON recreated the urban experience of African Americans on the south and west sides of the city over the airwaves, thus giving blacks something to talk about together and setting the foundation for group consciousness in the 1960s. The Good Guys’ personalities made WVON, the first station in Chicago to totally devote its entire broadcasting format to African American listeners, a resounding ratings success in Chicago. While WVON’s disc jockeys were depended upon to bring music and humor into the homes of Chicago African Americans during the 1960s, the station would move beyond being a mere form of entertainment to become an educational resource for its listeners.

¹⁰⁹ “E. Rodney Jones is Found!” *Chicago Defender*, January 30, 1964, 1.

CHAPTER THREE

“NOW RUN AND TELL THAT!”

WVON, RADIO JOURNALISM, AND THE CHICAGO FREEDOM MOVEMENT

Known as a community station for Chicago African Americans who resided on the south and west sides of the city, WVON carved a space out of the black programming vacuum in Chicago during the 1960s and early 1970s to become an influential communications medium not only for local black citizens, but for the Civil Rights Movement as a whole. Built upon its deep bond with its listeners, the station created what media theorist Marshall McLuhan's would term a “classroom without walls.” Comfortable with the familiar voices of the station's disc jockeys, nicknamed the Good Guys, Chicago African Americans turned to WVON as a source of news and educational information about their local community. Turning the station into an extension of the public sphere, Chicago African Americans used this space to create a new collective group identity that would advocate for social change during the Chicago Freedom Movement.

Beginning in mid-1965, the Chicago Freedom Movement emerged as an alliance forged between the larger, more powerful Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the locally-based Coordinating Council of Community Organizations (CCCCO), an umbrella association which coordinated the activity of numerous smaller

civil rights groups within the city. The CCCO gained early successes in its Chicago school desegregation campaign beginning in 1962 in which the organization executed a series of boycott and marches aimed at highlighting segregation in the city's educational facilities. As part of SCLC's strategy included annually choosing a city in which to focus their attentions, Chicago served as an ideal locale for the organization to highlight racism as a national problem, not just a regional one that afflicted the southern United States. States.¹

Throughout 1966, the CCCO and SCLC highlighted the plight of African Americans in Chicago and mobilized community support. That year, the SCLC established a branch of its Operation Breadbasket department in the city. Under the leadership of Jesse Jackson, Operation Breadbasket targeted racist employment practices by white-owned businesses located in the black community. Despite this business-related activism, the true focus of the movement's attention was on the right to open housing for African Americans. Throughout the summer of 1966, the SCLC and CCCO organized demonstrations, rallies and marches, many of which were in white residential enclaves. Indicative of the movement's power was a July 1966 rally at Soldier Field in which over 50,000 people turned out to hear Martin Luther King, Jr. speak. The activities of the Chicago Freedom Movement reached a crescendo on August 5, 1966 with the Marquette Park Riot, in which King himself was injured after thousands of whites turned out to

¹ James Ralph, *Northern Protest: Martin Luther King, Chicago and the Civil Rights Movement* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 2-3.

protest the SCLC's mass march in the West side neighborhood. Faced with negative publicity and anger from the city's white residents, Mayor Richard J. Daley and other city leaders requested meetings with high-level SCLC and CCCO leaders in order to negotiate an end to the movement. On August 26, 1966, less than a month after the Marquette Park Riot, a "Summit Agreement" was reached in which SCLC agreed not to undertake a planned march in the white neighborhood of Cicero in exchange for the city's support of additional housing opportunities for African Americans. While the city's support of these measures fizzled over the next year, by the beginning of 1967, the movement had lost momentum and the SCLC shifted its focus to other projects.²

Both during the campaign and the years immediately preceding it, WVON disc jockeys encouraged the station's audience to actively participate in community betterment campaigns and the Civil Rights movement. WVON, Good Guy disc jockey Pervis Spann noted that "WVON was known as the Voice of the Negro so therefore if you were black and you want to get your message out you more or less had to come to WVON because the white station just wasn't gonna put your message out."³ WVON was a unique radio station due to its bond between broadcaster and listener. Through fundraisers, educational programs, and the radio talk show *Hotline*, the station presented its listeners with a non-militant message of self-betterment, community policing, and

² Ralph, *Northern Protest*, 14-16.

³Pervis Spann, interview by Sonja Williams, transcript, March 30, 1995, "Black Radio: Telling It Like It Was" Collection, Archives of African American Music and Culture, Bloomington, Indiana.

organized collective community action. In addition to the *Chicago Defender*, the station was one of the few places where diverse black opinion could be aired. Thus, in the hands of black Chicagoans, WVON was not only a successful business venture for Leonard and Phil Chess, but also a weapon in the fight for Civil Rights.

The Journalism of WVON

While Chicago African Americans depended upon WVON's disc jockeys to bring music and humor into their homes during the 1960s, the station also served as a vital source of news and educational information. In addition to the programming of its disc jockeys, the station also provided listeners with bulletins, safety messages, editorials, and the daily show *Hotline*, which WVON broadcasted nightly from 11pm to midnight. According to E. Rodney Jones, it was imperative that the station have a strong news division that "was pertinent to the community you were serving." Not only was it essential, but for many impoverished African Americans it was one of the few ways to acquire in-depth information about the community around them.⁴

The station approached educating the public in a variety of ways. The overall goal according to Lucky Cordell was "...to make it short enough that it won't be a turn-off. I used to refer to it as this is what they want, this is what they need, and we'll put it in between."⁵ At its most basic level, WVON's informal journalism was community-

⁴ Nadine Cohodas, *The Chess Brothers and the Legendary Chess Records*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 219.

⁵ Moses "Lucky" Cordell. interview by Alexis Gillespie, transcript, June 14, 1995, Radio Smithsonian: Black Radio Project Collection, Archives of African American Music and Culture, Bloomington, Indiana.

generated and consisted of allowing local organizations a venue to spread the word about their current events. The Good Guys regularly kept their listeners updated on the latest community events during their shows. For example, as Lucky Cordell recalled during the show *On the Scene with Bernadine*, “She would go in every two or three days and do this calendar of events of what was happening in Chicago. And anybody could get on that--this is like free airtime on the biggest station in town for African-Americans--and have their events heard.”⁶ In addition to its musical selections, the station peppered the time between songs with educational information such as health tips, legal tips, and crime bulletins. At one point, the station broadcast a local services exchange in which entrepreneurs such as babysitters advertised their skills. These tidbits of extra information drew older listeners who perhaps were not always interested in the latest rhythm and blues selections that the station offered. As Lucky Cordell recalled, there was “an older group of people who didn’t care for the music, all the music, but they wanted that information.”⁷

In addition to community news, WVON also used its news breaks to educate its listeners through writing and recording its own black history series. Running several times a week for roughly two and a half minutes, WVON featured profiles on historic African Americans such as Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass, and W.E.B. Du Bois.

⁶Moses “Lucky” Cordell, interview by Julieanna Richardson, videocassette A2001.017, January 16, 2002, The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, IL.

⁷Cordell, Radio Smithsonian interview.

With a shoestring budget, the producer of the series, Lucky Cordell, recalled that “Some college students did the research...I got the actors together, the actresses. I had everybody at that radio station on this production.”⁸ For many of the migrants, with little education and from the South, this series was the first time they learned about these historical figures. These vignettes were also marketed for use by other radio stations and in local schools to teach youth about black history. In tandem with the series, the station also sponsored a Negro Heritage Essay Contest for students and awarded its winner a set of African American history books.⁹ This focus on the importance of education in the community was a precursor to the station’s later education battles with the Chicago Public Schools and Herb Kent’s “Stay in School” radio campaign.

Beyond community-generated news, WVON also maintained a journalism department that provided African American focused local, national and global news. The individual responsible for crafting WVON’s journalism was Roy Wood, the station’s editorialist and news director from 1963 to 1972. Wood ardently believed in the role that communications could play in diminishing racial strife. In one of his poems, which he called “Wood Shavings,” he remarked “If I know you and you know me/And each of us our faults can see/ Soon there will be no cause for strife/Between me and thee.”¹⁰

⁸ Cordell, The HistoryMakers interview.

⁹ “First Negro Heritage Award Presented,” *Chicago Defender*, March 29, 1966, 4.

¹⁰ Shawn Ryan, “Roy Wood Poses in a Radio Broadcast Studio, the Place Where He Has Spent More Time than Just About Any Other,” *Birmingham News*, September 5, 1993, 101.

Throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, the news and editorials of WVON advocated for change through education and self-empowerment. However, it would be Wesley South's call-in news show *Hotline* that addressed the more radical components of the Civil Rights Movement. Together, Roy Wood and Wesley South created a journalistic approach that addressed the numerous ills of the Chicago African American community, and as a result incited discussion amongst and demanded change for WVON's listeners.

WVON's news reports and editorials adopted a far more serious tone than the jovial sketches and raucous banter of the Good Guys. Much of this seriousness can be attributed to Wood. Born in 1915 in Atlanta, Wood was the child of educated middle-class parents. His father was a physician and his mother was one of the nation's earliest African American female certified public accountants. Wood himself graduated from Morehouse College.¹¹ However, after being struck by a car at the age of twenty-three, Wood was left partially crippled and subsequently was diagnosed as clinically depressed. He recalled thinking, "I'm black. I'm ugly and crippled. What chance am I going to have in this world?"¹² As a confidence booster, a psychiatrist treating Wood complimented his voice and urged him to return to school to become a broadcaster. After the suggestion, Wood replied smartly "They don't have any need for Negro radio announcers." The psychiatrist replied "I didn't say be a Negro announcer, I said be a radio announcer."¹³

¹¹ "Rites Held for Mrs. Wood," Chicago *Defender* March 16, 1959, a9.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Gilbert Williams, *Legendary Pioneers of Black Radio* (New York: Praeger, 2008), 174.

With this suggestion in mind, Wood enrolled in journalism school at Columbia University in New York.

After graduation from Columbia, Wood utilized a family friendship with disc jockey Jack L. Cooper to move to Chicago where he polished his skills as an announcer by working unpaid jobs funneled to him by the veteran broadcaster. Cooper's sophisticated "King's English" style of announcing undoubtedly influenced Wood and combined with additional phonetic lessons, his vocal style made him "sound raceless, or perhaps nonracial is a better way of putting it," as he recalled. "Some people think I'm white...They see me as big, fat and Caucasoid-looking."¹⁴ Wood's advanced education combined with his Caucasian-sounding style of announcing stood in stark contrast to that of many of the other WVON "Good Guys" who followed Al Benson's more informal style of announcing. Wood's delivery was intense and naturally lent itself to the station's news and editorial broadcasts. As Lucky Cordell recollected, "He could say 'and the man walked across the street and everybody [trails off]'...his delivery was dramatic."¹⁵

Throughout the 1940s, Wood's announcing style benefited him as he was able to vocally "pass" as a white radio announcer. In 1950, WIBC in Indianapolis hired him as their first black staff announcer, and there he honed his skills by announcing the news

¹⁴ Ryan, "Roy Wood Poses."

¹⁵Cordell, Radio Smithsonian Collection.

and providing introductions and conclusions for radio serials.¹⁶ Once again utilizing his connections with veteran broadcaster Jack Cooper, WHFC, WVON's predecessor, hired Wood as an announcer and disc jockey. His education and vocal style benefited him once again as Wood began doing foreign language broadcasts. As he recalled "WHFC was this foreign language station where you'd have to introduce a Lithuanian hour, a Ukrainian hour, and so on, all in their native language. I did all of that."¹⁷ Wood's identification as a Civil Rights activist did not begin until the late 1950s. In 1959, he left WHFC for Chicago's WGES, telling his former supervisor Congressman Richard Hoffman that he "wanted to be involved in a black station."¹⁸ In addition to his disc jockey duties at WGES, Wood branched into news production and editorials. In the public sphere, he also emerged as a leader in the black Chicago community, and in 1960 he spearheaded a petition movement in Bronzeville for Cook County Hospital to establish a south side branch of hospital.¹⁹

In March 1963, Leonard Chess hired Roy Wood to direct WVON's news bureau. Throughout the 1960s, Wood crafted an around-the-clock news approach as the station offered its listeners hourly news bulletins and daily editorials, many of which he

¹⁶ Williams, 176 – 177; "Top Black Newscaster To Speak at BNL," *Brookhaven Bulletin: Brookhaven National Laboratory*, 31: 27 (July 15, 1977): 1.

¹⁷ Williams, *Legendary Pioneers*, 184; "Roy Wood, Chicagoan, Named Head of Jocks, *Chicago Defender*, October 21, 1958, A18.

¹⁸ Williams, *Legendary Pioneers*, 185.

¹⁹ "Plan Petition for Hospital Branch," *Chicago Defender*, March 7, 1960, 7.

personally researched and then read on-air. Running for approximately five minutes at the top of every hour with headlines briefly announced every thirty minutes, the WVON “news while it is still new” bulletins focused on a hybrid of national, local, and black-oriented news. According to E. Rodney Jones, the first story of the news bulletin tended to focus on international affairs, especially those pertaining to Africa. Following the headlines would then be local news and community affairs, such as the current activities and programs of the National Urban League or NAACP.²⁰

Usually following the bulletins were brief, thought-provoking two to three minute editorials that Wood read in his dramatic voice. Typically locally focused, these editorials covered numerous subjects from local politicians and businesses to gang warfare in the black Chicago community. According to Lucky Cordell “he went after the bus companies because at some point they were going to increase the fares...Any politician he felt was not performing... he’d stay smart enough to stay away from being liable for suit but he would put his finger on something that wasn’t right, that he felt was unfair or wrong.”²¹ Wood used these editorials to voice the concerns of black Chicagoans and to incite thought-provoking discussions. In one editorial, which played eight days in a row on the station, he boldly declared he was a bigot, stating “As a bigot, I dislike all people who do not have the same skin color as mine because they are not as intelligent as I am...I feel

²⁰E. Rodney Jones, interview by Alexis Gillespie, audiocassette, March 14, 1995. Radio Smithsonian: Black Radio Project Collection, Archives of African American Music and Culture, Bloomington, Indiana.

²¹ Cordell, Radio Smithsonian interview.

that brotherhood would take my freedom away from me. I want the freedom of hating anybody, anytime, without any interference from the government.”²²

Wood’s editorials also turned a critical eye toward the African American community. Rather than stressing militant change, these editorials embraced the non-violent beliefs of civil rights organizations such as the NAACP, and advocated for demonstrating flawless public behavior through individual self-improvement and community self-policing. In stark contrast to the Good Guy’s bawdy humor, WVON’s news and editorials featured the concept of “lifting the race” through middle-class means.²³ As Lucky Cordell recalled, “Our editorials are the soul of the station. And we take a stand. And if this means chastising listeners, we chastise them.”²⁴ In one editorial Wood stated

We here at WVON feel that first class citizenship includes equal rights, but also requires the assumption of equal citizenship responsibilities. Negroes now have the opportunity and the duty of fulfilling these responsibilities which have come with their long delayed equal rights. We sincerely hope that they will not continue to be indifferent to the opportunities or duties before them. It is a sad, but nevertheless true indictment that Negroes are woefully lacking when it comes to respecting the rights and privileges of their neighbors.²⁵

²² “WVON Takes Rap at Bias,” *Billboard*, June 20, 1964, 36.

²³ As coined by historian Elizabeth Brooks Higginbotham, this “politics of respectability,” which was utilized during the Victorian era by middle-class African Americans, emphasized qualities such as cleanliness and orderliness. In their view, respectable behavior in public was another path to equality and would result in winning esteem from white America.” Elizabeth Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 14.

²⁴ Earl Paige, “Beginning of New NATRA Era – E. Rodney Jones,” *Billboard*, August 16, 1969, s-12.

²⁵ Thelma Hunt Shirley, “Confetti,” *Chicago Defender*, April 14, 1966, 20.

Wood continued his sermon-like editorial by chastising both parents and youth on the somewhat mundane tasks of littering and local youth wreaking havoc upon flower pots. These simple acts, however, were tied directly to the crusade for civil rights, with Wood declaring “Now would be a good time to begin your own personal crusade against grime, grit and garbage. To really enjoy first class citizenship, you must act like a first class citizen!”²⁶ The station expounded upon the theme of cleanliness numerous times as WVON broadcasted public safety announcements that were intended to instill pride in African Americans about their south and west side neighborhoods. In one such example, disc jockey Lucky Cordell preached in an authoritative voice to “Help prevent accidents by cleaning sidewalks of snow and rubbish at home or your place of business. If sidewalks are icy, please add abrasive material such as sand...”²⁷ Beyond the airwaves, WVON’s took its message of cleanliness to the streets as the station sponsored a Good Guys-manned float in the Bud Billiken parade urging 500,000 spectators to ‘Keep Chicago Clean!’²⁸ Although hemmed in by overcrowded, slum-like living conditions created by white-controlled real estate racial covenants, Chicago African Americans were encouraged to take pride in their urban setting and respect their neighbors by policing their own backyards.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Moses “Lucky” Cordell, in *The Dawn of Urban Radio*, producer and director Mark Williams, 1 hr 30 min, CTV, 1990, videocassette.

²⁸ “On the Air,” *Chicago Defender*, August 14, 1963, 20.

While the station interacted more with Black Nationalist leaders via Wesley South's *Hotline*, Wood's editorials adopted a critical stance towards gang activity. In one editorial, Wood lambasted the Blackstone Rangers, an African American gang with links to drug trafficking and money laundering that was originally organized by a group of Hyde Park High School students in Woodlawn in the late 1950s. With as many as 8,000 members by 1969, the Blackstone Rangers had provided security to Martin Luther King Jr. and CORE activists during the Chicago Freedom Marches. These marches were also supported by WVON as the station broadcast organizational meetings held at local churches.²⁹ According to Lucky Cordell, Wood used the station's airwaves to speak out against gang activity and gang-related violence. He recalled that Wood "went on the air and blasted them and they threatened to kill his son, and he went back on the next day and blasted them again. And against the wishes of the station and his wife called and asked that he please stop... his attitude was 'if my son or I have to go in this fight to save the rest of our community, so be it.'"³⁰ In 1967, Wood would bring his often controversial editorials and news reporting to television as he led WCIU-TV's *A Black's View of the News*, the first local African-American focused news show where five nights a week he and his WVON reporter, Don Cornelius, provided news and a commentary on issues of concern to black Chicagoans. Just as hard-hitting as his radio editorials, his first

²⁹ James Ralph, *Northern Protest*, 136-137.

³⁰ Cordell, Radio Smithsonian interview.

commentary on the television show discussed police brutality by the Chicago Police Department.³¹

Regardless of the topic, Wood's editorials were imbued with anger and they paralleled the growing frustration in Chicago's black community at the pace of change during the Civil Rights Movement. In one editorial, Woods practically yells "We here at WVON feel that so much of the black disillusionment is being caused by a misunderstanding of words such as democracy, power, and authority. If they don't get it, they'll never know the meaning of words like democracy, power, and authority." As with all of his editorials, they were directed toward taking action against the white establishment as Wood would dramatically yell the phrase "Now run and tell THAT!"³² Now part of the black Chicago lexicon, WVON disc jockey Lucky Cordell recalled, "the essence was I know you are going to run and tell the boss, run and tell the white man, so run and tell that, it's used still today."³³ In addition to their undercurrent of emotion, Wood's editorials also took aim at African American males and linked weaknesses in their masculinity to the current state of racial affairs in American. Wood "urged the black male to assume his proper role as head of families....and if this had been done in years gone by there would have been no necessity for the civil rights bill. Black people are the

³¹ "A Black's View of the News Featured on WCIU-TV," *Chicago Defender*, May 6, 1969, 10.

³² Roy Wood, in *The Dawn of Urban Radio*, producer and director Mark Williams, 1 hr 30 min, CTV, 1990, videocassette.

³³ Cordell, Radio Smithsonian interview.

only ethnic group in this country who had to have a special bill passed in order for them to be treated halfway like citizens and human beings.”³⁴

WVON’s listeners viewed Roy Wood’s editorials as a form of aural release from the simmering tensions growing in Chicago’s black community during the 1960s and early 1970s. Similar to the role that the station would play in the wake of traumatic events such as assassinations, Wood’s editorials served not just a forum for his opinions, but spoke to the concerns of many listeners. As argued by radio historian Susan Douglass, listening to the radio “imparts a strong sense of belonging and creates connections between inner selves and voices.”³⁵ For the station’s listeners, Wood’s editorials served as a communal mouthpiece and articulated the frustration they experienced as black Chicagoans. This vocalization worked as a release valve, as noted by newspaper reporter Thelma Hunt Shirley upon returning from a trip to Los Angeles:

T’was a memorable trip, but even with all of the problems in Chicago, it was good to drive down the Kennedy expressway early Tuesday morning and hear WVON’s Roy Wood giving hell to city politicians who have not been doing their job here. You don’t get that kind of “sound” on L.A. radio...Perhaps that is the reason for the Watts situation after all...³⁶

Advertisers bought into the power of Roy Wood’s editorials and like the other Good Guys, Wood secured lucrative endorsement agreements from local and national businesses. Although he was not a disc jockey and hence unable to tap into the musical

³⁴ “International Masons and Eastern Stars Meet Here,” *Chicago Defender*, October 5, 1970, 14.

³⁵ Susan Douglas, *Listening In: Radio and American Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 19.

³⁶ Thelma Hunt Shirley, “Confetti,” *Chicago Defender*, July 19, 1966, 12.

promotional market naturally, advertisers played to Wood's role as a trusted community voice. In one advertisement for Hamm's Beer, Wood's headshot is featured with the caption "Roy Wood talks. Chicago listens and gets the word on Hamm's." Striking in this advertisement is that above his headshot, the Hamm's new aluminum beer can is described as "bright and modern," thus drawing parallels to Wood's role as a modern spokesman for the community.³⁷ As argued by historian William Van Deburg, in tandem with the Black Power Movement, businesses utilized the black community's creation of new symbols that were in line with black folk expression and the idea of "living black."³⁸ In the same vein as Booker T. Washington, Wood became a powerful proponent of the potential of African American industry and commerce. He was utilized as a spokesmen by local African American businesses such as the Associated Brokers, Incorporated insurance agency which urged listeners to "hold tight and listen to Roy Wood on WVON" because he was "telling it like it is." The advertisement also promoted the owners of the business, which was "organized by black men who know what has been going on in ghetto insurance."³⁹ The national Prudential Insurance Company also sponsored Wood's "Citizen of the Week" campaign in which Wood selected and lauded local black Chicagoans for their work for the community.⁴⁰

³⁷ Advertisement, *Chicago Defender*, February 17, 1965, 29.

³⁸ William Van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965-1975* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 193.

³⁹ Advertisement, *Chicago Defender*, February 15, 1969, 5.

⁴⁰ Advertisement, *Chicago Defender*, June 21, 1969, 9.

Beyond Roy Wood's editorials, the WVON news bureau also worked diligently to bring live reports from the civil rights struggle directly to its listeners via mobile units. The geographical scope of WVON's live news reporting was unprecedented for an African America radio station. As a result of the Chess' financial backing, the station possessed the ability to purchase the newest equipment and travel to non-local sites to capture a story. By 1965, Wood directed a news department with three staff members and two mobile units.⁴¹ In August 1963, less than four months in operation, the station was already noted as "WVON is sending its own mobile unit down to the capital" for the March on Washington in August 1963.⁴² *Billboard* praised the station, declaring that "WVON represents modern Negro radio, broadcasting with the latest equipment, articulate and knowledgeable deejays, and aware news set ups."⁴³ The station's numerous remote broadcasts included a live "Church of the Week" sermon broadcast each Sunday, Mahalia Jackson's benefit concerts for Martin Luther King, Jr., NAACP conventions, direct reports from the school desegregation battles at the University of Mississippi, and coverage of the events in Birmingham and Selma.⁴⁴ According to disc jockey Pervis Spann, "when there was a march in Virginia, Mississippi or Alabama,

⁴¹ "Stations by Format," *Billboard*, October 16, 1963, 40.

⁴² Lillian S. Calhoun, "Confetti," *Chicago Defender*, August 27, 1963, 8.

⁴³ "Negro Radio: An Ever Increasing Influence," *Billboard*, March 27, 1965, 52.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

wherever... we were there.”⁴⁵ For Chicago African Americans, the geographic boundaries of the nationwide Civil Rights Struggle were dramatically decreased as the station, a trusted source in the community, brought them live updates from the scene as the events were unfolding.

This commitment to African American issues was further demonstrated by Roy Wood’s Vietnam tour in 1966. Sponsored by the Sears and Roebuck Company, Wood traveled to Vietnam for a month to interview Chicago African American soldiers on the frontlines.⁴⁶ Prior to the trip, the station publicized the journey and invited listeners to contact them with the names of servicemen who were stationed in Vietnam, and Wood would attempt to locate and interview them.⁴⁷ As a result of this campaign, the station was overwhelmed with more than 10,000 calls from family members. Attempting to reassure listeners, Leonard Chess noted that Wood “at first will try to concentrate on soldiers who have been in Viet Nam the longest...after all, these soldiers are the ones who are missed by their loved ones the most.”⁴⁸

During his month-long journey, Wood interviewed over 150 soldiers and excerpts of these interviews were played by the station. In addition, the station also played

⁴⁵ Pervis Spann, interview by Sonja Williams, transcript, March 30, 1995, Radio Smithsonian, Black Radio History Project, Collection, Archives of African American Music and Culture, Bloomington, Indiana.

⁴⁶ Herb Lyon, “Tower Ticker,” *Chicago Tribune*, April 29, 1966, 18.

⁴⁷ “WVON to Air Viet Interviews,” *Chicago Defender*, April 21, 1966, 19.

⁴⁸ “WVON Awaits Tapes from Editor in Viet,” *Chicago Defender*, May 12, 1966, 16.

recorded greetings from the soldiers to their families and friends back home.⁴⁹ Interested in the African American view of the Vietnam War, Wood noted that the soldiers were eager for American intervention, and the “Negro soldier does feel that it is necessary for America to do something about the situation over there. Their only grief, however, is that they are not allowed to shoot until they are shot at first. And not knowing who is the enemy or where he is, the GI’s find it a pretty rough game.” Embedded with the soldiers, Wood himself was trapped for eight days at the Marine Press Center in Da Nang during a Buddhist monk uprising. While Wood escaped with his life, Sam Castan, a fellow traveling journalist from *Look* magazine who was standing next to Wood, was killed by shrapnel.⁵⁰

Wesley South’s *Hotline*

WVON’s dedication to cutting-edge African American journalism was also apparent in *Hotline*, a nightly news and talk show hosted by journalist Wesley South. Due to its one hour running time each night from 11:00 pm to midnight, the show was able to present a more in-depth look at the current issues of concern to Chicago’s African American community than Wood’s editorials. In measuring Wood and South’s impact on the civil rights struggle, Lucky Cordell mused that while “Roy Wood was our editorialist and head of our news department...I would have to give Wesley first place because Roy

⁴⁹ Uncaptioned Photograph, Chicago *Defender*, June 21, 1966, 11.

⁵⁰ Thelma Hunt Shirley, “Confetti,” Chicago *Defender*, June 22, 1966, 14.

could only do so much with an editorial.”⁵¹ A former reporter for *Ebony* and *Jet* magazines, it was South’s intention to educate his listeners while also providing them with a venue to interact with their fellow citizens over the air. Through its hosting of numerous Civil Rights leaders, WVON’s *Hotline* further demonstrated the station’s continued commitment to being the “Voice of the Negro” for black Chicagoans.

Like Wood, Wesley South also stood in sharp contrast to the other Good Guys based on his middle-class background and education. Born in 1914 in Muskogee, Oklahoma, South was the son of a physician. In 1924, his family moved to Chicago, where South ultimately graduated from Englewood High School. Upon his graduation, South served in the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers for two years during World War II. After leaving the Army, he became one of the first African American graduates from Northwestern University’s Medill School of Journalism.⁵² In 1951, he became a reporter with the *Chicago Defender*, and during the 1950s he was a reporter and editor for *Ebony*, *Jet* and the *Chicago American*.⁵³

Hints of South’s natural abilities as a radio talk show host became apparent in the late 1950s and 1960s. Familiar with community issues, he was a civil rights activist and an enthusiastic member of the NAACP and the Chicago Urban League. An outspoken

⁵¹ Cordell, Radio Smithsonian interview.

⁵² Kim Janssen, “WVON Co-Owner A Talk Show Pioneer,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, January 11, 2010, 34.

⁵³ Wesley South, interview by Alexis Gillespie, transcript, January 6, 1995, Radio Smithsonian, Black Radio History Project, Collection, Archives of African American Music and Culture, Bloomington, Indiana.; “Masthead,” *Jet*, January 7, 1954; 66.

critic of the Daley Democratic machine, South ran multiple times to be the ward committeeman from Chicago's 29th ward in the late 1950s and 1960s. Despite losing each election, he continued to fire shots at the Daley administration, declaring "The people of this community are tired of bossism and plantation activities for the Negro voters. They like all other good citizens of Chicago deserve good government and equal opportunities in education, housing and employment, regardless of race, color or national origin."⁵⁴

South's introduction to radio was the byproduct of legal action by the Federal Communications Commission's enforcement of the 1949 Fairness Doctrine which mandated equal time for opposing viewpoints in relation to controversial issues presented on television and radio stations. In 1961, South, who was volunteering his services as a press officer for the Chicago branch of the NAACP, became familiar with the NAACP's litigation against television stations WLBT and WJTV in Jackson, Mississippi for barring African Americans from the air.⁵⁵ When WLBT's license was due for renewal, the FCC stripped the station of its ownership based on its discriminatory actions. As a pre-emptive move, television and radio stations across the country hustled to ensure that some degree of minority programming was included on their schedules. As South recalled, Congressman Richard Hoffman, the owner of WHFC, contacted the NAACP's Chicago office and offered to give anyone airtime on the station to fulfill this obligation. As a

⁵⁴ "Daley Denies Knowledge of Demo Official-Hoodlum Link," *Chicago Defender*, April 2, 1964, 1.

⁵⁵ Steven Classen, *Watching Jim Crow: The Struggles Over Mississippi TV, 1955-1969* (Chapel Hill: Duke University Press, 2004), 50-51.

station broadcasting to the south and west sides of Chicago, for WHFC this move was crucial. South stated “...if you have a significant number of minorities, particularly blacks, in your listening area, it is imperative that you give them some sort of air time in order to fulfill what the FCC says is equal time.” WHFC management referred Hoffman to South as a potential candidate and already familiar with his newspaper columns, Hoffman offered him a thirty-minute time slot.⁵⁶

Wesley South’s WHFC show, called *South’s Sidelights*, served as a precursor to *Hotline*, and tackled a diverse range of issues through guest appearances, interviews, and panel discussions. As South recalled, “schools, housing, jobs, crime...you name it and we discussed it.”⁵⁷ Setting the tone for the show, *South’s Sidelight’s* first guest was Roy Wilkins, the executive secretary of the NAACP.⁵⁸ In addition to topics of local concern, the show adopted a global perspective and examined issues such as the racial situation in South Africa, including an in-studio interview of Revered Ambrose Reeves, the banished Episcopal bishop of South Africa who spearheaded an investigation into the Sharpesville Massacre.⁵⁹ *South’s Sidelights* provided South with an opportunity to refine his interview techniques and vocal delivery, and South recalled being embarrassed over the quality of

⁵⁶ Wesley South, interview by Julieanna Richardson, videocassette, July 18, 2000, interview A2000.037, The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, IL.

⁵⁷ South, Radio Smithsonian interview.

⁵⁸ “Newsman Joins Station WHFC,” *Chicago Defender*, April 12, 1961, 3.

⁵⁹ “Bishop to Discuss S. Africa’s Racism,” *Chicago Defender*, May 2, 1961, 7.

his delivery on these early shows. With a style that was rough and stutter-filled, he stated that upon listening to his early tapes, he was shocked at their quality and once questioned Hoffman as to why he kept his show at WHFC. “They were the worst things I'd ever heard. And I said, ‘Mr. Hoffman...why didn't you tell me so?’” Hoffman’s response was “Well, I knew you'd--you'd catch on. What you were saying was all right.”⁶⁰

In 1963, when Leonard and Phil Chess bought WHFC, they also hired Wesley South to continue his show, which the station renamed as *Hotline*. The program was expanded to one hour in length and given an audience call-in format as well. Considered to be one of the pioneers of black talk radio, Wesley South was a keen proponent of listener participation, and like Wood’s editorials, through the show’s use of the call line or “hot line,” listeners created an extension of the public sphere. A virtual town hall on the air, the show became a place for black Chicagoans to discuss and debate issues of local, national, and international concern. South recognized this sphere, and noted that people “become frustrated when they can't talk, and it's one of the vehicles for releasing the emotions that are within them if they have it...To hear someone else talk, and to talk himself it sort of keeps, I think, the community in contact with itself and I think that's good.”⁶¹ As a moderator, not only did South welcome phone calls from listeners, but he maintained an open atmosphere that welcomed calls from people on both sides of the issue.

⁶⁰ South, The HistoryMakers interview.

⁶¹ Ibid.

WVON's *Hotline* was a ratings success and despite some of Leonard Chess' hesitancy, the show was to become a hallmark of the station. South recalls that in 1965, two years after the show's start, station management told him that they "didn't like it, but... it was one of the main-stays of WVON."⁶² Covering a wide range of topics of concern to African Americans, *Hotline* sought to keep its listeners informed about every aspect of political, social and cultural life in Chicago and nationwide. As a testament to the show's diversity, in one week in October 1964, *Hotline* covered topics from the impact of bankruptcy on minorities, to the crime conditions in Chicago and how African Americans were affected, a question and answer session with Chicago Board of Education Member Mrs. Wendell Green, and sex education for children.⁶³

The show also served as a catalyst for African American social action. For activist Father George Clements, the show served as the impetus for his involvement in Renault Robinson's African American Patrolmen's League, an activist group which served as advocates for African Americans who had experienced police brutality. In the aftermath of rioting that broke out in city after Martin Luther King Jr.'s death in 1968, Clements appeared as a guest on *Hotline*. On the program he noted that "It's just unfortunate that we don't have a group of black police with the guts to come out and really say that they serve and protect, as the motto says of Chicago police, but they serve black people and protect black people, instead of the way it was there, which was we serve and protect

⁶² South, Radio Smithsonian interview.

⁶³ "Hot Line Eyes Hottest Week," *Chicago Defender*, October 5, 1964, 4.

white people from black people.” Renault Robinson, who later became head of the Chicago Housing Authority, was listening to the show and contacted Clements with ideas about organizing the group, and Clements offered his church as a meeting place for the newly-formed organization.⁶⁴

Similar to Roy Wood’s editorials, *Hotline* strongly adhered to the concept of self-improvement and community-policing, and the very first *Hotline* show set the stage for this theme. As South recalled, “The first show we were talking with the head of the welfare department of Illinois. He and the state were advocating a program that gave women on welfare contraceptives so they wouldn’t have quite so many children. Let me tell you, that raised quite a ruckus....”⁶⁵ South’s show would continue its commitment to issues of African American health as demonstrated by his first anniversary show in 1964 when he featured Reverend Don Shaw of Planned Parenthood, who answered listeners’ questions on birth control and family planning.⁶⁶ *Hotline* also featured numerous shows on smoking and its impact on African Americans and the community.⁶⁷

Above all else though, South’s show focused on the burgeoning Civil Rights Movement. Guests such as Jackie Robinson, Malcolm X, and Sammy Davis Jr. made

⁶⁴ Renault Robinson, interview by Larry Crowe, videocassette, July 3, 2002, interview A2002.107, The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, IL.

⁶⁵ South, Radio Smithsonian interview.

⁶⁶ “Family Control Expert to Talk on ‘Hot Line,’” *Chicago Defender*, March 28, 1964, 7.

⁶⁷ “Orchid for the Day,” *Chicago Defender*, January 21, 1964, 3; Thelma Shirley Hunt, “Confetti,” *Chicago Defender*, July 27, 1966; 12.

frequent visits to the program, thus giving listeners a chance to question African American leaders and social and political activists and learn more about the viewpoints of leaders in the African American world. A frequent guest and supporter of the show was activist/comedian Dick Gregory, who also appeared in WVON fundraisers. In one show, Gregory tested material from his club act for listeners. A boon for South, he stated that, “If Gregory were going on television, he’d received at least \$15,000 for the same performance.”⁶⁸ *Hotline* was a must-do on the list for Civil Rights leaders visiting Chicago during the 1960s. South’s more well-known contacts included Medgar Evers, Martin Luther King Jr., and Jesse Jackson Jr. For Evers and King, South served as their ambassador and guide to the city of Chicago. “I took them around the city, to the Urban League and the NAACP. All the community organizations wanted to talk to them.”⁶⁹ According to South, both King and Evers each appeared on his show four to five times to talk about the current issues facing the Movement. King also utilized the program, appearing on it multiple times during the two months he resided in a run-down apartment on the West side of Chicago, to attract attention to the issue of fair housing for African Americans.⁷⁰ As South recalled, “After the shows, the parking lots would be jammed with listeners who wanted to meet, to see, the voices they had been hearing. I can remember one time that the people wanted him to keep talking so bad that Martin jumped

⁶⁸“Gregory Set for ‘Hot Line’ Gigs, *Chicago Defender*, June 7, 1965, 4.

⁶⁹ South, Radio Smithsonian interview.

⁷⁰ Christopher Lehman, *A Critical History of Soul Train on Television*, (New York: McFarland, 2008), 18.

up on a flower bed outside of the station and gave a fifteen minute sermon. People turned their headlights on so he could be seen.” For Chicago African Americans, WVON served as a vital connection to leaders of the Civil Rights movement and also to its varied messages. Through *Hotline* Chicago African Americans could directly interact with movement leaders. On the show, the leaders directly addressed listener concerns and needs. This intimate focus underlined the point that all individuals, who although they might feel insignificant by themselves, now had a role to play in the larger movement. Similar to the historical call-and-response format of the black church, South’s shows gave agency to the listeners by allowing them to question and interact with leaders like King and Evers. According to disc jockey Cecil Hale, “Wesley was out there digging up anybody, you know, who had something going on that was worth talking about and bringing ‘em in so they could talk about it. And they’d talk back with the audience in terms of this live interview program.”⁷¹ The station’s ability to allow its listeners to “talk back” further demonstrated that WVON “was a Black station that cared about what was happening to black folks in Chicago.”⁷² Furthermore, it also propelled South into a legitimate leadership role in the Civil Rights Movement as Chicago African Americans viewed him as a crusader. When asked in a *Defender* column who they thought had achieved the most for the Civil Rights cause, musician Clarence Wheeler stated that, in

⁷¹ Wesley South, Interview by Art Norman, February 18, 1994, *An Evening with Wesley South*, videocassette, Museum of Broadcast and Communications, Chicago, Illinois.

⁷² Cecil Hale, interview by Julieanna Richardson, videocassette, February 22, 2002, interview A2002.008, The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, IL.

addition to Martin Luther King, Jr. and Dick Gregory, “Wesley South’s *Hotline* is playing a very important part in this cause.”⁷³

For Jesse Jackson, WVON served as his communications mainstay and a source of financial support. As Pervis Spann recalled “We made Jesse Jackson. Jesse Jackson was a young man in town with lots of ambition but he didn’t have the voice. This [WVON] became the voice.”⁷⁴ Edwin Carlos “Bill” Berry, the executive director of the Chicago Urban League, first introduced South to Jackson in 1965. A frequent last-minute guest on *Hotline*, Berry suggested Jackson, then a student at the Chicago Theological Seminary, as a potential substitute for the show. South remembered that Jackson’s first appearance was unimpressive and that the future Civil Rights leader was half an hour late to the taping. South recalled later telling Berry “Man, what do you mean this man's going to be a leader? He lisps and the way he talks...”⁷⁵ For the other WVON Good Guys, however, whose entire careers were based on their personalities, they were immediately struck by his persona and hands-on activism. Lucky Cordell stated that “We were all impressed with him....Because he wasn't talking totally about going to heaven. He was talking about helping out now....And he really was a country preacher when he came to us. He didn't have a church....So we got behind him. And helped whatever movement he

⁷³ “Inquiring Photographer,” *Chicago Defender*, November 6, 1963, 9.

⁷⁴ Spann, Radio Smithsonian interview.

⁷⁵ South, The HistoryMakers interview.

was working with.”⁷⁶ According to Herb Kent, it was fellow Good Guy E. Rodney Jones who pointed Jackson out to Kent. As Kent recalled, Jones said “You see that young guy? He's gonna be the biggest thing you have ever seen.”⁷⁷

From 1966 to 1970, Jackson increased his public persona in Chicago by appearing as a regular guest on *Hotline*. According to South “Whatever was in the news he would talk about, but his main thing was getting up support for Operation Breadbasket and their weekly meetings.”⁷⁸ Jackson utilized South’s show and free broadcasting time on Sundays to promote the activities of the organization and to air their meetings. As part of a movement by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference to improve the quality of life for urban blacks, the Chicago branch worked towards securing more and better jobs for African Americans from white-owned companies. If a strategy of nonviolent direct action failed, then Jackson and the organization would urge black consumers to boycott the place of business or the company’s goods. If this final step then failed, vocal demonstrations against the business were then organized.⁷⁹ From 1966 to 1970, there was rarely a Friday night that Jackson was not involved with the program. In order to ensure his appearance, WVON had a special telephone line installed so if needed Jackson could

⁷⁶Cordell, The HistoryMakers interview

⁷⁷Herb Kent, interview by Julieanna Richardson, videocassette, February 15, 2000, interview A2000_26, The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, IL.

⁷⁸ South, Radio Smithsonian interview.

⁷⁹ Gary Massoni, “Perspectives on Operation Breadbasket,” *Chicago 1966*, ed. David Garrow (New York: Carlson Publishing Company, 1989), 197.

call in from remote on Friday nights to discuss that week's Operation Breadbasket Agenda. As South recalled, the organization noticed that "if he didn't call, his crowd wasn't as large as it was if he did call."⁸⁰ Without WVON's crucial exposure, noted South, the program most certainly would have failed. He noted "we just happened to be the conduit between the community and them and then it gave most people out there who were angry and excited a chance to learn about the issues and let off steam."⁸¹

In addition to their support of Jackson, Operation Breadbasket and Operation PUSH, WVON also provided additional support to other Jackson initiatives, such as 1971's Black Expo, a five day business conference promoting African American entrepreneurs. As disc jockey Cecil Hale recalled "The way we drove people to the Black Expo was to broadcast from the Expo 24 hours....We really pushed Jesse. You know before anybody else would pay attention to him [W]VON was there to make sure that his message was heard."⁸² As will be later explored in this dissertation, as a testament to Jackson's relationship with the station and his role in promoting black businesses, in 1971 he and representatives from Operation PUSH were invited to be involved with negotiations with WVON's new owners Globetrotter Communications. As a result of Jackson's negotiations, the Good Guys netted a \$20,000 salary raise and became the highest paid African American disc jockeys in the country. WVON's new owners also

⁸⁰ South, The HistoryMakers interview.

⁸¹ South, Radio Smithsonian interview.

⁸² Cecil Hale, The HistoryMakers interview.

agreed to “plans to program special salutes to high school students, the incorporation of gospel vignettes and a 24 hour program of sacred music and speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr. on his birthday and anniversary of his assassination.”⁸³

In regards to the more radical aspects of the Civil Rights Movement, Wesley South’s *Hotline* was one of the few venues for black Chicagoans to learn about and interact with the Nation of Islam, particularly Malcolm X and Elijah Muhammad. The jazz pianist Ahmad Jamal first introduced South to the Nation of Islam during an interview he did with the musician in 1958 for the *Chicago American*. Intrigued by the topic, South pitched a story about the group to *Time* and secured an interview with Elijah Muhammad. When he submitted the story, however, the magazine’s editor told South that, “This magazine will never as long as I’m here print a story like this” and then threw the article in the trash.⁸⁴ A year later with the increased media interest associated with Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X’s return trip from Mecca, *Time* brought the story back to life and printed it in 1959. South bristled at editorial changes in the printed version, including a new focus on Muhammad and Malcolm X’s criminal records. He most notably took offense at the magazine’s reference to Muhammad’s “contributing to the delinquency of a minor.”⁸⁵ As South recalled, “they said it in such a way that it sounded

⁸³ “Pact Makes WVON Jockeys ‘Highest Paid,’” *Chicago Defender*, February 16, 1971, 2.

⁸⁴ South, The HistoryMakers interview.

⁸⁵ “Races: The Black Supremacists,” *Time*, August 10, 1959, 24-25.

as though it was sexual.” Angry over the racist slant, South informed the magazine that he would never write for them again.⁸⁶

In the wake of the *Time* magazine debacle, South struck up a friendship with Elijah Muhammad and was one of the few non-Nation of Islam members to have access to the organization. Through monthly dinners with Muhammad, South became familiar with the organization and its members, including Malcolm X. Muhammad and the NOI’s friendship with South was demonstrated by the organization’s support of South’s Second Congressional District campaign in 1968. Despite their non-voting stance, the organization made its first political endorsement and provided major financial contributions to the campaign.⁸⁷ As South recalled “when I announced that I was running for Congress, he [Muhammad] sent for me. I’m not telling you how much he gave, but he gave me enough money in hundred dollar bills to run for Congress, enough to burn a wet mule if I’d set him on fire.”⁸⁸

Through *Hotline*, South provided Elijah Muhammad with airtime on the show and allowed listeners to ask questions of the leader. These interviews were quite possibly one of the few ways to find out basic information about the Nation of Islam, and shows featuring the organization were highly popular due to the intrigue surrounding the group. Callers from as far away as Peoria, which was completely beyond the station’s

⁸⁶ South, The HistoryMakers interview.

⁸⁷ “Muslims Back Candidacy of Wesley South,” *Chicago Defender*, May 25, 1968, 2.

⁸⁸ South, The HistoryMakers interview.

broadcasting range, called the station with questions they wanted Muhammad to be asked on air.⁸⁹ During these interviews, South adopted a friendly conversational tone and no questions appeared to be off-limits from both him and callers. In one *Hotline* call, Muhammad answered questions about the NASA space program, which he labeled an “unnecessary waste of money” as people were “trying to enter heaven through the sky.”⁹⁰ He also answered mundane business questions, such as promising a caller he would check on a cake order that she had placed with the NOI’s bakery.⁹¹ Callers to the show were unafraid to openly debate with the leader, as evidenced by one female caller who questioned whether or not Allah was a man or a spirit and what role Allah played in the Holy Trinity.⁹² He also addressed differences between his viewpoints and Civil Rights leaders, such as Martin Luther King, Jr. and Roy Wilkins, stating that “They have the wrong idea on how to achieve a good future for our people because their ideas are based on begging the white man for a chance to be his equal without going to the base... I don’t think we should do a thing like that and I don’t think we should look forward to try to force ourselves on them when the Earth is so large and we are such a great number of people... we outnumber them about 11 to 1.”⁹³

⁸⁹ “Hotline,” WVON, Chicago, IL, December 27, 1965, compact disc.

⁹⁰ “Hotline,” WVON, Chicago, IL, December 23, 1965, compact disc.

⁹¹ “Hotline,” December 27, 1965.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ “Hotline,” December 23, 1965.

WVON's *Hotline* provided Elijah Muhammad with a platform to educate listeners about the Nation of Islam and to relate the organization not just to the African American experience, but the specific circumstances faced by black Chicagoans. In explaining the NOI's economic model of self-reliance he preached

It will work here! We can start here on the South Side where there is nearly a million people of our kind...that if we work and save twenty five cents a week, a dollar a week, whatever we can save and fill up and build homes for our people here instead of waiting for the government to build them up to pay high rent for that same little small...where it's hard to get in and out. We could do these things ourselves if we were intelligent enough to try and do something for ourselves instead of trying to have the white man from the North Side come down to the South Side and build all of our businesses for us and take the profit back to the North Side and live like a king.⁹⁴

Furthermore, lessons that he preached shared commonalities with that of WVON's editorials, thus making the Nation of Islam appear to not be that radical. In regards to how Chicago African Americans presented themselves, Muhammad stated "I wanted to show my people that if they would live peacefully and quiet and not be loud...and keep their homes clean and not live like a savage that they can live anywhere either in the neighborhood of white people or the neighborhood of any other people."⁹⁵

Malcolm X appeared on the show four to five times before his death in 1965. Typically appearing before the annual meeting of the Nation of Islam, Malcolm X never appeared in the WVON studios and instead was always a call-in guest. As South recalled, even these telephone appearances were heated affairs. "There were detractors, the same

⁹⁴ "Hotline," December 27, 1965.

⁹⁵ "Hotline," December 23, 1965.

as there are now....people threatened to kill him.”⁹⁶ On *Hotline*, Muhammad also addressed common issues revolving around stereotypical views of the Black Muslims, including their responsibility for Malcolm X’s death and their view on brandishing weapons. Muhammad bluntly stated “The Muslims don’t carry arms. That would be suicide. We don’t have weapons. We don’t want them. We can’t use them.”⁹⁷

Beyond Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X’s appearances on South’s show, scant evidence exists that the station wholeheartedly supported the Nation of Islam or other more radical groups in the same manner as it did the SCLC, Operation Breadbasket or Operation PUSH. In the wake of Malcolm X’s assassination in 1965, WVON did simulcast his funeral services, including a special message to WVON listeners from his widow, Betty Shabazz.⁹⁸ Yet the station had limits to its support of radical causes. As recalled by Bernadine Washington, disc jockey Ed “Nassau Daddy” Cook “once told listeners to listen the next day, but didn’t tell them what he would be doing. Instead of following the format, he played an album by Malcolm X. He was suspended for a week, but they didn’t dare fire him because the phones were ringing off the hook wanting to know where he was.”⁹⁹ Pervis Spann recalled that amongst the disc jockeys and the Chess brothers, the topic did strike up hostilities. Spann stated that “There was a time even as

⁹⁶ South, Radio Smithsonian interview.

⁹⁷ “Elijah Tells Radio Audience He Doesn’t Fear Death,” *Jet*, March 11, 1965, 56.

⁹⁸ “Likens Malcolm X, Christ,” *Chicago Defender*, February 27, 1965, 1.

⁹⁹ Jerry Thornton, “WVON’s ‘Nassau Daddy’ Edward Cook,” *Chicago Tribune*, April 7, 1993.

liberal as this station was—when it was under white ownership they was real hesitant doing spots for the black Muslims...there were some announcers here that didn't want to put their voice on the stop [the introduction] for example...The station at that time their policies were that—they would do the spot but yet find some voice to put on there to do it.”¹⁰⁰

For Leonard Chess in particular, there were limits to the degree of the station's support for political causes. While jockey Herb Kent attested that the Good Guys collected money and raised support for radical activists such as H. Rap Brown and Angela Davis, the station's official editorial policy was to cover individuals such as Adam Clayton Powell and Stokely Carmichael and organizations such as the Black Panthers in news updates only. In a 1967 interview with the *Chicago Daily News*, Chess stated “Carmichael's a phony and putting him on the air gives him dignity.”¹⁰¹ In regards to the support of Black Nationalism at WVON, the attitudes of the station management were tepid at best.

A Classroom without Walls: WVON and the Education of Chicago's Black Community

WVON adopted a holistic approach to its outreach activities beyond the walls of the station. Credit must be given to the station's off-air activities and the role they played in uniting the Chicago African American community and soliciting their support. For

¹⁰⁰Spann, Radio Smithsonian interview.

¹⁰¹ Kent and Smallwood, *The Cool Gent*, 114; Cohodas, *Spinning Blues into Gold*, 277.

Lucky Cordell, WVON's success hinged upon this community involvement: "We were all over the place. We worked with everybody that was trying to do something positive...the Urban League, we raised funds for Operation PUSH, and the NAACP, just any of the organizations, the adoption agencies, anybody that was trying to do something positive we worked with them."¹⁰²

Financially, WVON was a major donor to numerous local and national civil rights organizations and could be counted on by community groups for assistance in rounding up donations. Through fundraising events, the station actively encouraged its listeners to donate money to causes such as the National Urban League and its own food drives that occurred annually during the Chess' ownership. The station's 1964 NAACP radio-thon in which the Good Guys dueled with one another on the air for who could sell the most memberships netted the organization's office over 2,000 memberships in a twelve-hour window.¹⁰³ For every holiday, WVON disc jockeys would canvas neighborhoods in the station van, soliciting food donations for holiday baskets that were distributed to the needy in a big celebration at South Side DuSable High School. According to Herb Kent, "We would broadcast from there live and encourage people to come on down to give what they could or take what they needed. Every holiday, we usually gave out like 1,500 baskets."¹⁰⁴ One of the more famous contests of WVON involved an annual camp-out at

¹⁰² Cordell, Radio Smithsonian interview.

¹⁰³ "Chicago's NAACP Still Reaching For 1964 Goal," *Chicago Defender*, December 16, 1964, 8.

¹⁰⁴ Kent, *An Evening With Herb Kent*.

Lake Meadows Shopping Center. According to E. Rodney Jones, “We would pull out this dinky trailer and all of us Good Guys- Pervis, Herb, me, Butterball, and so on...would be crammed in this trailer and the goal was to see how we could stay inside of it awake. The winner would get a trip anywhere in the country or Hawaii, but people came by to drop off food or to donations to bet on who would make it. One time, Pervis made it 3 ½ days.”¹⁰⁵ Lucky Cordell stated that people crowded into the parking lot for “a chance to see this guy in the window working, you know just to drive by and see.”¹⁰⁶ Events such as these removed the Good Guys from the WVON studio and served as tangible reminders of the disc jockeys’ connection to the community. While the trailer fundraisers were comical, listeners turned out in droves not only for a hearty laugh, but also to donate food and money. In the end, the donations of the listeners plus that of the station usually totaled around one hundred and fifty thousand dollars for the Chicago Urban League each year, funds that were poured back into Chicago’s African American community for social welfare services.¹⁰⁷ As Pervis Spann noted, these funds were crucial for the movement beyond Chicago as well. “We raised money whenever we could to send to the workers, the field workers we called them, during the actual battle.”¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵ Jones, Radio Smithsonian interview.

¹⁰⁶ Cordell, Radio Smithsonian interview.

¹⁰⁷ Phil Chess, interview by Michael McAlpin, transcript, ca. 1994, Michael McAlpin Collection, Archives of African American Music and Culture, Bloomington, Indiana.

¹⁰⁸ Spann, Radio Smithsonian interview.

Despite the good will created by the station during these charitable events, at their very core remains the question of whether WVON's Civil Rights fundraisers and other promotional events were marketing tools that were shrewdly designed to generate good public relations for the station. In reference to a radio give-away, disc jockey Richard Pegue noted, "Now the free radios, you might think 'Oh I'm gonna get a free radio...I can listen to everybody up and down the dial.' No sir, buddy....it had one station on it. Guess which one it was! 1450!"¹⁰⁹ However, Leonard Chess in particular went beyond the range of merely using the Civil Rights Movement as a promotional vehicle to actively investing his time in activities that aided its cause. An active member of the Chicago Urban League and the NAACP, Chess not only donated considerable funds to the projects, but also gave freely of his time to organizing activities for the group such as the Chicago Urban League's fellowship dinners and dinner dances.¹¹⁰ Roy Wood recalled

The top "Mother" of them all was in reality the world's best humanitarian. Proof of that fact is to be found in his many gifts and services to civic organizations such as: the Urban League (he was its top money raiser and contributor), the S.C.L.C (he not only talked equality... he put his time, effort and money where his mouth was). Dr. King and S.C.L.C. was the recipient of many large cash contributions from Leonard and his broadcast facilities have always been open to them. He supported the Poor People's Campaign ... the March to Montgomery ... the Birmingham Demonstration. Leonard Chess was a Jew . . . but he was too universal to notice it, and I don't think that fact made any difference to anyone else.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ Richard Pegue, interview by Julieanna Richardson, videocassette, January 24, 2002, interview A2002.011, The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, IL.

¹¹⁰ "Golden People Gather at Urban League's Dinner-Dance," *Chicago Defender*, October 31, 1967, 17.

¹¹¹ Various Artists, *WVON Good Guys Album*, WVON 1450, 1969, Vinyl LP.

Despite the show's controversial nature, South believed that Chess retained *Hotline* because he "wanted to keep a good rapport with leaders of black community."¹¹² Cecil Hale also concurred with the notion that Chess supported equal rights. "He first of all had the good sense that most owners and managers really didn't have. And that is, if you have an organization and there's a winning chemistry in the organization and the organization is doing great things...then it's a good idea not to play around with that....you'll make even more money and have more good will."¹¹³ Lucky Cordell also stated that he believed that Chess' motivations went beyond maintaining the good will of the community:

He was a hands-on person. Like when we worked in Lake Meadows raising funds for NAACP, Urban League or PUSH. And we were putting like bumper stickers on cars. You drive in get a bumper sticker, 'VON bumper sticker and make your contribution. Here's this millionaire out there putting bumper stickers on. Leonard Chess! He's out there with the rest of us, stopping cars putting bumper stickers on. He didn't have to come to the radio station at all. Because he was making the money...But he was out there every week. At least once a week he was out there. And I admired that about him.¹¹⁴

Beyond financial support, WVON listeners were also encouraged to take active roles in the Chicago community through the forms of demonstrations and walk-outs. As Herb Kent recalled, "We could tell folks to go sit on the steps of City Hall. There'd be five thousand of them there."¹¹⁵ Wesley South and the topics covered on his nightly show spurred on most of this activity. As will be examined further in Chapter Four, of

¹¹² South, Radio Smithsonian interview.

¹¹³ Hale, The HistoryMakers interview.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Kent, The HistoryMakers interview.

particular notice is WVON's reaction against the Chicago Board of Education's use of the "Willis Wagon" in the early 1960s. Resulting from the high concentration of African Americans on the south and west sides of the city due to restrictive housing, schools for African American youth were extremely overcrowded. Subsequently WVON and especially *Hotline* received many complaints in 1963 and 1964 about the increasing use of portable trailers or the "Willis Wagon" at black schools. After the Chicago Board of Education rebuffed repeated petitions to redirect the students to less crowded white high schools, the Coordinating Council of Community Organizations (CCCCO), an umbrella group of Chicago civil rights organizations spearheaded a one-day walkout on October 22, 1963 for black students in Chicago schools to protest the wagons. On the day of the boycott, 225,000 students were absent. WVON's disc jockeys spread key information about the movement on their shows and boycott leaders appeared on *Hotline* to raise awareness of the protest.¹¹⁶ Therefore, assisted by the station's ability to "get the word out," African Americans were able to use collective action to send a direct message about their concerns of the educational system in Chicago for black youth.

WVON's active involvement with the African American community was not always met with open arms. As South recalled, some Chicago politicians, including Mayor Richard J. Daley, treated the station with contempt. During *Hotline's* run, Daley never agreed to be on the show as a guest or to make a call-in appearance. In an on-air interview Alabama Governor George Wallace hung up on South after discovering that the

¹¹⁶ South, *An Evening With Wesley South*.

show's host was an African American. In November of 1968, Illinois Governor Sam Shapiro incurred the wrath of WVON listeners when he stood up South after agreeing to be a guest on his show. As noted by Chicago *Defender* columnist Doris Saunders, "He needn't be afraid. He can tell it like it is. But when you don't show up...people begin to wonder."¹¹⁷ The Good Guys also faced instances of physical resistance and harassment from local law officials. Police beat disc jockey Franklin McCarthy upon his returning home from a fan club event in 1963.¹¹⁸ Another disc jockey, Cecil Hale recalled being assaulted and held at gunpoint by two plainclothes policeman whom he had noticed parked in front of his house. Hale stated that "It turns out that these were two plainclothes policemen and once the gun was moved, I was like, 'What's that about?' 'Well we thought you may have stolen your car.' It's like, 'No you didn't. Because I saw you when I drove up in my car...So that's not what's goin' on.'"¹¹⁹

What is perhaps most remarkable about the role of WVON is that although it served as a form of media that entertained and educated its audience, the station held such sway over its listeners that it could single-handedly use its power not only to call for collective action during the Civil Rights movement, but also to influence its listeners and its actions after traumatic events such as the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. and Medgar Evers. Radio became a weapon for the Chicago African American community in

¹¹⁷ Doris Saunders, "Confetti," Chicago *Defender*, November 4, 1968, 14.

¹¹⁸ "2 Motorists Ask Probe of Police Brutality Here," Chicago *Defender*, June 13, 1963, 2.

¹¹⁹ Hale, The HistoryMakers interview.

the battle against discrimination. Consistent with McLuhan's general thesis concerning radio, the listeners of WVON were inspired by the station to take an active role alongside it in this battle. Therefore, in times of communal need, the station channeled this unity into positive action.

In times of need, WVON served as a calming force for its listeners, encouraging them to think rationally and to think of themselves as a united community. Most memorable and perhaps of greatest impact was WVON's role after the June 1963 assassination of Medgar Evers. A personal friend of Wesley South's, Evers had recently appeared on *Hotline* in one of his last interviews of his life, only three nights before his assassination on June 10. During the show, Evers discussed the resistance from whites that he faced in Mississippi, and, aware of the danger he faced, stated "If they hurt me, they just hurt me." Upon learning of Evers' death, South immediately came to the station and along with other disc jockeys, organized a broadcast that included a mix of religious music, audio clips of previous Evers WVON appearances, and callers' remembrances of the fallen Civil Rights leader. Myrlie Evers-Williams, Medgar's widow, also called into the station. With the memory of Evers' last show fresh in listeners' minds, South located the most recent interview tape which was not yet erased. "When I found out that we had the tape, and we announced it and when we came on the air, all of the lights--all eight of them were flicking which meant we had people who wanted to talk."¹²⁰ According to South, a later letter from Illinois Bell indicated that over 50,000 people called into the

¹²⁰ South, The HistoryMakers interview.

station, thus disrupting phone service for the entire city, and leading to future changes in the way telephone stations handled mass calls.¹²¹

While this number of calls is large Evers' death was a precursor to the role WVON played after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. According to E. Rodney Jones, "All of the Good Guys not at the station, we just turned around and went back to work. They didn't have to call and they didn't have to ask. We knew that we were needed."¹²² WVON switched to twenty-four hour coverage of the aftermath and sent Roy Wood to Atlanta to provide on-the-scene coverage of the funeral for its listeners.¹²³ For the next several days, the station abandoned its standard formatting and instead played King's speeches, gospel music, and the latest news bulletins about the investigation into the assassination. In addition to comments from over twenty-five community ministers, the entire disc jockey roster of the station recorded messages about King to be played on the air. As a tangible act, the Good Guys encouraged listeners to keep their car headlights burning in King's honor.¹²⁴ Perhaps most importantly, through its jocks, WVON took the time to talk to the listeners and take the grief-stricken calls. Lucky Cordell recalled "We just tried to calm the people down and stop the West side rioting. Our message was to live our lives in his name, through peace. By tearing and burning stuff down, we were

¹²¹ South, *An Evening With Wesley South*.

¹²² Jones, Radio Smithsonian interview.

¹²³ "Vox Jox," *Billboard*, April 27, 1968, 32.

¹²⁴ Earl Paige and Ron Schlacter, "Chicago Rioting Took Big Toll of Business," *Billboard*, April 20, 1968, 74.

being disrespectful to him and to us. This is hurting us.”¹²⁵ What was most remarkable was that WVON listeners turned to the station and not to the Chicago police, to report current and potential riot activity. “One woman called in to tell us about a house full of stuff for Molotov cocktails. She was trusting us, someone she probably had never seen.”¹²⁶

Physically, those WVON disc jockeys not on the air moved into the community in an attempt to calm listeners and mingle with them as they grieved. Realistic about his efforts, Pervis Spann recalled that “I did for a couple of days whether it did any good or not...I would go in and talk with folks – even on the air we had programs that violence was not the way. That we should refrain from the violent confrontation and just try to calm the city down.”¹²⁷ Similarly realistic, Lucky Cordell nonetheless believes that the station’s efforts made an impact on the community. Cordell stated that “I really think the decent people we quelled...a group that used this as a way to break in some shops, we couldn’t reach them. But I think there were people on the borderline, on the edge of just anger, who could have been easily caught up in this thing, and been breaking windows and setting fires, out of just sheer frustration and anger.”¹²⁸ The tactics used by the station in quelling the nerves of the community in the aftermath of the King assassination were

¹²⁵ Cordell, Radio Smithsonian interview.

¹²⁶ Kent, *An Evening With the Legendary Pioneers of Black Radio*.

¹²⁷ Spann, Radio Smithsonian interview.

¹²⁸ Cordell, Radio Smithsonian interview.

also used two months later for Robert Kennedy's untimely death. As Pervis Spann recalled "We were having a meeting in the production room over there...we were just sitting around talking when the news came around that he had got killed. Mr. Kennedy had been on this station here more than one time. And we immediately went to a religious style format."¹²⁹ Through these attempts at solacing listeners, McLuhan's idea of radio as being a tribal community was fully reached. As the success of WVON fundraising, mass protests and its efforts during the assassinations reflect, the community turned inwardly upon itself in times of good and bad, a result of the common bond between the listeners and the station.

Conclusion

In a 1972 Chicago *Defender* column, Reverend Curtis E. Burrell, Jr. drew parallels between historic epic poets and community spokesmen such as Joshua, Homer, and David, whom he called "Bards," and WVON. In remarking on the role that WVON played in bringing together Chicago's African American community, he stated

The Bards bring people together (Harambee). This is the reason WVON, "The Black Giant," is number one among Chicago radio stations. They are a channel in which the Black Bards can 'do their thing.' And the people who are the recipient of their message, identify with that message. Whatever brings people together is a very significant instrument in our present struggle to get it together. For where there is free social interaction, a number of socially needed things can happen.¹³⁰

¹²⁹ Spann, Radio Smithsonian interview.

¹³⁰ Reverend Curtis Burrell, Jr., "Music Messengers: The Old New Bards," Chicago *Defender*, July 13, 1972, 12.

Throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, WVON embodied Burrell's concept of a "significant instrument." Under the journalistic guidance of Roy Wood, WVON became a trusted venue where listeners could find news and educational information about the local and national African American experience. Additionally, the station's disc jockeys, or Bards, encouraged their listeners to seize their own agency and through community betterment campaigns and becoming involved with the Civil Rights Movement, to change the world around them. WVON was a unique radio station due to its bond between broadcaster and listener. Furthermore, through its keynote talk show, Wesley South's *Hotline*, the station presented its listeners with a decidedly non-militant view of improvement through self- betterment, community policing, and organized collective community action. As a result of these actions, for its listeners WVON became a trusted voice for the community and in times of turmoil and strife, the station became a salve for calming down the community.

While WVON's bond with its listeners was deep, for one particular demographic group, African American teenagers, the station was extremely popular. In line with demographic changes in radio in the 1950s, the station wholeheartedly devoted itself not only providing unique content for the city's black youth, but also promoting social awareness and activism for issues of concern to them, including school dropout rates and the quality of education in Chicago Public Schools. Furthermore, WVON provided not only the latest in rhythm and blues and soul music, but served as a trusted venue where they could exchange information about the world around them. With disc jockeys that

spread the latest information about African American teen fashion, dance, language, and music and influenced its creation, WVON helped create a vibrant culture for Chicago African American teenagers in the 1960s.

CHAPTER FOUR

FERNS, FEZNECKIES, IVY LEAGUERS AND GOUSTERS:

WVON AND AFRICAN AMERICAN TEEN RADIO IN

CHICAGO DURING THE 1960s

Throughout the 1960s, the African American radio station WVON was an omnipresent force in Chicago radio broadcasting. As former listener James Miller recalled “Everywhere you’d go, if you went to the beach, if you went down to the lakefront, I don’t care where you went in Chicago, you were going to hear WVON.”¹ Radio ratings verified the station’s popularity with Chicago listeners. According to February 1966 The Pulse, Inc. radio ratings, WVON drew 54% of all Chicago listeners from 6:00am to noon and 49% from noon until 6:00 pm on Mondays through Fridays.² By April 1967, The Pulse, Inc. listed WVON as the most listened to African American-oriented station in the country.³

When asked about the reasons for WVON’s success during the 1960s, WVON disc jockey Herb “The Cool Gent” Kent pondered “It’s hard to say why anything is number one or takes over. It’s just really hard to disseminate it, you know. It just

¹ Pervis Spann and Linda C. Walker, *The 40 Year Spann of WVON* (Chicago: National Academy of Blues, 2003), 26.

² “Wvon, Chess Giants Overnight,” *Chicago Daily Defender*, February 24, 1966, 26.

³ Herb Lyon, “Tower Ticker,” *Chicago Tribune*, April 19, 1967, 10.

happened. It was family-oriented. The whole family listened. We had stuff for everybody...The station was just whatever you wanted a radio station to be.”⁴ As discussed in earlier chapters, part of the station’s success was due to its ability to provide around-the-clock consistent local African American radio programming in Chicago. Until 1963 with the creation of WVON, the city did not have a twenty-four hour African American station.⁵ However, beyond its impressive ratings, WVON had a much larger impact on African American culture in Chicago. According to radio historian William Barlow, “black radio played a tremendous role in the shaping of urban black culture and popular culture as a whole, and has been the ‘coming together site’ for issues and concerns of black culture: language, music, politics, fashion, gossip, race relations, personality and community are all part of the mix.”⁶ In regards to African American radio, “urban black culture” is a blanket term and obfuscates the ways in which specific groups of listeners related to and utilized radio. One specific group of listeners which has received little historiographical attention is that of African American teenagers, and further work is needed to understand how and why they listened to radio in the 1950s and 1960s.

⁴ Herb Kent, interview by Julieanna Richardson, videocassette, February 15, 2000, interview A2000_26, The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, IL.

⁵ Robert Pruter, *Chicago Soul* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 14.

⁶ William Barlow, *Voice Over: The Making of Black Radio* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press), xi.

For WVON, one of their largest listener groups was composed of African American youth. As evidence of this group's sway, the station devoted its important 7 pm – 11 pm listening block to young people via the popular "Herb Kent Show." For Chicago African American teenagers in the 1960s WVON served as their "coming together site." In catering to teenagers, WVON followed a nationwide trend in the radio industry which saw a shift away from a national "one size fits all" broadcasting focus to one that was more locally-driven and that divided listeners into key groups, or segments, in the post-World War II era. One such group that rose to prominence by the late 1950s was that of the American teenager.⁷ Building on the national rise of the teenage radio listener demographic, WVON became an aural hangout for Chicago African American youth, and aided in the development of a vibrant African American teenage subculture on the West and South sides of the city during the 1960s. The station provided an arena for teenagers to discuss topics such as fashion, language, music, and dance. While broadcasting to African American teens was a fiscally sound business move for Leonard Chess and WVON, the station demonstrated that its commitment to youth was more than a mere financial decision. WVON not only educated its younger listeners but it also diligently fought for their rights. The station was a key communications tool in the Chicago Freedom Movement's fight for equality in education for African American

⁷ Grace Palladino, *Teenagers: An American History* (New York, New York: Basic Books, 1996), 123-125.

youth during the 1960s.⁸ Furthermore, as a key corps of listeners for one of the largest black radio stations in the nation, African American youth in Chicago molded the musical direction of rhythm and blues and soul in the United States in the 1960s and early 1970s. Through the act of “breaking” records (playing records that would become big hits) and charting the tastes of its listeners, WVON’s African American listeners possessed a tremendous degree of power in deciding what music would have nationwide success.

The Rise of Teen Radio

A prerequisite for understanding WVON’s appeal to African American youth is an examination of the radio broadcasting trends during the years immediately following World War II. At first glance, radio in the late 1940s and early 1950s appeared to be a dying industry, seemingly fatally wounded by the emergence of television. Several developments, however, in the late 1950s and early 1960s helped radio recover and find new audiences. These developments served as a necessary precursor to WVON’s success with Chicago African American teenagers in the 1960s. First, with the emergence of television broadcasting in the post-World War II era and the introduction of televised broadcasts of national news programs, radio stations began to offer their listeners more local programming as a way to survive the nationalizing onslaught. From local news shows to broadcasts of community events, radio stations in late 1940s and 1950s provided their listeners with pertinent information that national radio broadcasts ignored.

⁸ John Collis, *The Story of Chess Records* (New York, New York: Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 1998), 149.

Also aiding the rising dominance of the teenage listener demographic in the 1950s was the increased focus on localized broadcasts as stations began segmenting their markets in an effort to find new groups of local listeners. Radio for teenagers quickly became a driving force in the industry, and a lucrative market which both stations and advertisers sought to tap.⁹ This emergence of the teenage listener was the result of greater economic prosperity in the late 1940s and 1950s and the subsequent rise of the baby boomer generation. Quite simply, by the late 1950s, there were more teenage listeners, including African American youth, which the radio industry could not ignore. By the late 1950s this generation of American youth also had increased amounts of discretionary time and additional spending money that parents gave their children in the post-war era. These factors translated into greater radio ownership by American youth. According to a 1949 NBC market analysis of the teenage radio market, 64% of American boys and girls owned personal radios.¹⁰ In regards to overall African American radio ownership, *Sponsor*, a trade publication for the radio industry, 87% of African Americans owned radios, a figure only slightly smaller than the national average of 90%.¹¹ Therefore, by the early 1960s, personal radio ownership for teenagers and also African Americans was no longer a luxury but a commonplace occurrence.

⁹ Susan Douglas, *Listening In: Radio and the American Imagination: From Amos 'n' Andy and Edward R. Murrow to Wolfman Jack and Howard Stern* (New York, New York, Times Books, 1999), 220.

¹⁰ Eric Rothenbuhler and Tom McCourt, "Radio Redefines Itself, 1947-1962," in *Radio Reader: Essays in the Cultural History of Radio*, eds. Michelle Hilmes and Jason Loviglio (New York: Routledge, 2002), 379.

¹¹ "The Forgotten 15, 000, 000," *Sponsor* (10 October 1949): 25.

The 1947 invention of the transistor also made radios portable and more affordable. As a result of this innovation, greater numbers of radio listeners could now afford to own their own radios and listen to them whenever and wherever they wanted, including their automobiles, as well as next to their blankets at the beach, in parks, or in the woods. This higher degree of freedom allowed by the invention of the transistor was crucial for the emergence of the teenage radio demographic. As noted by radio historian Susan Douglas, radio ownership allows the owner to define when and how they wanted to listen. Rather than group listening with one's family, which was the norm during the World War II era and before, teenagers in the 1950s and early 1960s listened to the radio alone in the privacy of selected venues, such as a car or bedroom.¹² Radio ownership also allowed for choice in listening. As noted by historian Michael Bertrand in his work *Race, Rock and Elvis*, for white teenagers in the 1950s, listening to black radio transmissions and rhythm and blues artists allowed for a favorable cultural impression to be formed of African American culture.¹³ Portable radio aided these interactions, and clandestine listening became a commonplace occurrence as teenagers could now secretly listen to music such as rock n' roll and rhythm and blues and their accompanying disc jockeys whenever they wanted to, often in the later hours of the day after school, or during those long and lonely nights.

¹² Douglas. *Listening In*, 222.

¹³ Michael Bertrand, *Race, Rock and Elvis* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 173.

The emergence of rock and roll music in the mid-1950s fueled the rise in youth radio listenership and pushed teenagers to listen to their radios without the knowledge of their parents. As noted by Thomas Hines, “it became possible for young people glued to radios in their bedrooms to pull in music that wasn’t professional pasteurized pop.”¹⁴ While network television broadcasting hampered national radio broadcasting, and caused record sales to adults to diminish, the rise of rock music allowed for a robust teenage music market to develop. From doo-wop groups such as The Moonglows to rock and roll artists such as Chuck Berry and Bo Diddley, teenagers fervently snapped up their music, and by 1958 accounted for 80% of record sales in the United States.¹⁵ While focusing on teenagers, at the very same time the radio industry’s market segmentation also targeted the lucrative African American market. At the time of WVON’s creation in 1963, the national African American family’s median income was over \$5,260 a year. With roughly 289,000 black families in Chicago, there was over \$1,244,471,000 of available buying income in the city alone.¹⁶ Combined with the emergence of the youth market, it was only natural for radio stations to recognize that African American youth were a lucrative group of listeners that could lead to both increased listener ratings and advertising profits. The combination of the invention of the transistor, the emergence of

¹⁴ Thomas Hine, *The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager* (New York, New York: Harper Perennial, 2000), 236.

¹⁵ Palladino, *Teenagers: An American History*, 124.

¹⁶ Nadine Cohodas, *Spinning Blues into Gold: The Chess Brothers and the Legendary Chess Brothers* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000), 220.

localized “narrowcasting” in the radio industry, and the rise of rock and roll music proved essential ingredients for creating a boom in African American teenage radio listenership during the 1950s.¹⁷ As Chicago teen Pamela Drake wrote in her weekly Chicago *Defender* record review column for teenagers, “We are the ones who do the dances, buy the records and support our entertainers. It’s our music and we like it.”¹⁸

Chicago’s Second Ghetto

In an apartment at 340 West 34th Street in Chicago in 1964, African American residents staged a rent strike to protest the building’s horrid living conditions. They pasted bold handmade signs to the windows advertising to those who passed by that “This Building Is Full of Bugs, Rats, Ants” and “No Hot Water in This Building – Slums Must Go.” When questioned about the landlord, one tenant stated “She pulls her Cadillac with a French poodle on the front seat, right up in front of the place. She takes our money but doesn’t spend a dime for as much as a light bulb or some disinfectant.”¹⁹ To understand the role that WVON played in the lives of Chicago African American teenagers, one has to understand life on the West and South sides of the city during the 1960s. As the Second Great Migration brought a second wave of African Americans from the South to cities in the North, Midwest, and West, Chicago’s African American population once again boomed, and between 1940 and 1960, it increased by 137

¹⁷ Douglas, *Listening In*, 220.

¹⁸ Pamela Drake, “Platters by Pam,” Chicago *Defender*, May 2, 1964, 16.

¹⁹ Betty Washington, “Negroes in Slums Charged \$125 a Mo. for Filthiest Housing,” Chicago *Defender* September 26, 1964, 1.

percent.²⁰ In 1963, the year of WVON's creation, almost 900,000 African Americans called Chicago home.²¹ By 1970, Chicago was now only second to New York City in the size of its black population.²² Key to this demographic shift, however, was the fact that as Chicago's African American population was growing, the average age of its residents had dropped and communities such as Bronzeville saw their population grow younger in comparison to the working class populace.²³ As a result of these demographic shifts, the Second Great Migration brought not only a larger influx of African Americans to Chicago, but it also created a younger Black Belt and thus a larger listener base for the station.

For Chicago African American teenagers, life in the 1950s and 1960s was one of fighting boundaries, particularly regarding access to education, housing, and entertainment venues. As Chicago's predominantly African American neighborhoods grew south and west, battles erupted with residents in former white enclaves over access to housing and resources such as schools. While Chicago's African American population grew by leaps and bounds, white Chicagoans mirrored demographic trends occurring across the North as they fled to the suburbs. Whereas in 1940, 90% of the city's

²⁰ Raymond Mohl, "Race and Housing in the Postwar City: An Explosive History." *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 94, no. 1(Spring 2001): 11.

²¹ Cohodas, *Spinning Blues into Gold*, 216.

²² Collis, *The Chess Records Story*, 15.

²³ Clovis Semmes, *The Regal Theatre and Black Culture* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), 173.

population was white, by 1960, this percentage had fallen to 70%.²⁴ Within this overfilling metropolis, a “second ghetto,” a phrase coined by historian Arnold Hirsch, emerged.²⁵ For most African American teenagers and their families in 1960s Chicago, life was restricted to the area south of the Loop, from approximately 22nd Street to 95th Street. The city’s West side was also largely populated by African Americans and on the city’s Near North side, a small pocket of African Americans resided in the Cabrini-Green housing project.²⁶

Squeezed into geographically restricted areas of the city, one of the greatest challenges facing African American families in Chicago in the 1950s and 1960s was housing. Bronzeville in particular suffered from an extreme shortage which led to overcrowded conditions and inflated rents that ranged from fifteen to fifty percent higher than for comparable dwellings in white neighborhoods.²⁷ To keep up with demand and to increase their profits, aggressive landlords illegally subdivided apartment buildings and single or two-family dwellings into kitchenettes. Overcrowded and undermanaged by their landlords, these overpriced apartments quickly became slums. As one tenant in a slum building bitterly stated, “Imagine having to spend that kind of money to live with

²⁴ John Rury, “Race, Space and the Politics of Chicago’s Public Schools: Benjamin Willis and the Tragedy of Urban Education.” *History of Education Quarterly* 39, no. 2 (Summer 1999): 121.

²⁵ Arnold Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940-1960* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

²⁶ Pruter, *Chicago Soul*, 2.

²⁷ Cohodas, *Spinning Blues into Gold*, 20.

roaches and rats.”²⁸ Overcrowded apartments were not the only form of slum housing in Chicago, however. As a result of the National Housing Act of 1949, throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, Chicago saw the sweeping clearance of slums and creation of public housing, capped off by the construction of the massive 27,000 resident capacity Robert Taylor Homes in 1962. Disproportionately occupied by single mothers, Chicago African American youth in these facilities dealt with substandard housing and little to no access to outdoor recreational facilities such as playgrounds.²⁹

In addition to a second wave of migration and the continued persistence of slum housing in African American neighborhoods, hints of economic turbulence that would affect African Americans in disproportionate numbers began to emerge in Chicago in the mid-1960s. From 1957-1961, the Chicago metropolitan area lost over 90,000 jobs with most of these losses concentrated on the South and West Sides of the city as manufacturers and slaughterhouses closed. Chicago African American unemployment ranged from 10 to 15% in the early 1960s.³⁰ Manufacturing in Chicago began to decline as steel plants in South Chicago and Gary experienced problems due to competition from lower priced foreign imports. While the full magnitude of factory closures would not be felt until the 1970s and 1980s, working class African Americans, who already suffered

²⁸ Washington, “Negroes in Slums,” 1.

²⁹ D. Bradford Hunt, “What Went Wrong with Public Housing in Chicago? A History of the Robert Taylor Homes.” *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 94. no.1 (Spring 2001): 96.

³⁰ Will Cooley, “Moving Up, Moving Out: Race and Social Mobility in Chicago, 1914-1972.” (PhD diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2008), 306.

from inflated housing costs, began to feel the pinch from rising unemployment rates. For Chicago's African American teenagers, who already faced compromised occupational and educational futures after high school because of their race, this economic downturn worsened an already desperate situation.³¹

Nevertheless, the quality of their education most directly impacted the lives of Chicago African Americans in the 1960s. Paralleling the decline in quality of housing for African Americans in Chicago, education for African American youth in Chicago also suffered in the 1950s and 1960s. In a 1963 study of Chicago's schools, one third of the city's schools scored below average in academic achievement and had high dropout rates. Of these failing schools, three quarters were located in African American enclaves on the south and west sides of city and had student bodies that were at least 80% African American.³² The demographic shifts caused by the Second Great Migration led to overcrowded schools. On the west side of city, where some schools had enrollments of over 2,000 students, students were placed on double shifts to help ease overcrowding.³³ As noted by one student, "The first week of school I stood in every class I had. There were no seats." He also recalled that "in economics class for the first five weeks he had no textbooks and for first month of economics he had no teacher."³⁴ It was these

³¹ John Hagedorn, "Race Not Space: A Revisionist History of Gangs in Chicago." *Journal of African American History* 91. no. 2 (Spring 2006): 201.

³² Rury, "Race, Space, and the Politics of Chicago's Public Schools," 127.

³³ *Ibid*, 129.

³⁴ "Student Criticizes School, Applauded," *Chicago Tribune*, December 14, 1965, 3.

educational conditions in particular which WVON would work to fight throughout the 1960s.

In spite of these conditions, Chicago's African American teenagers lived in a vibrant musical environment in which both the creation of music and its physical recording were a key part of their immediate community. Through a lively scene of youth clubs, dances and record hops, and concerts, Chicago's African American youth could hear and see the latest rhythm and blues and soul acts perform in their communities. In terms of production, the city's music industry, known as "Record Row," was located on South Michigan Avenue. Stretching from 12th Street to 24th Street, "Record Row" had formerly served as "Automobile Row" during the 1920s. By the 1940s, low rents and its physical proximity to the Loop made the area a prime target for the relocation of the city's music industry. Throughout the 1950s, the South side continued to be the heart of the city's music industry, but was now a center for independent record companies such as Chess and Vee-jay, which seized control of the black market from major labels. Further interspersed throughout the south side were numerous recording industry supporting businesses such as record distributors and record shops, the latter of which were heavily patronized by teenagers eager to buy the latest releases.

The city's south side also served as a launching pad for new talent in the recording industry, and it was in its entertainment venues and high schools where recording companies discovered talent.³⁵ The biggest entertainment venue on the city's

³⁵Pruter, *Chicago Soul*, 9.

south side was the Regal Theatre at Forty-Seventh Street and South Parkway. Throughout the early 1960s, the Regal was a vital “must-play” stop for African American entertainers who had records targeted to black audiences, and during school holidays African American youth packed the venue.³⁶ Other large African American musical venues in the city included the Capitol and the Trianon Ballroom. Alongside the large theatres on Chicago’s south side was a rich club tradition that included locales such as the Burning Spear, High Chaparral and Lonnie’s Skyway. On the west side, patrons could hear the latest musicians at the popular Barbara’s Peppermint Lounge and the Golden Peacock.³⁷ In recalling the Chicago of his youth, WVON disc jockey Herb Kent reminisced “It was prejudiced, of course. There were areas you would--you couldn't go into...but musically it was great. We had a lot of dance halls, and the guys went out on Saturday night, and really dressed, got their shoes shined and wore suits and went to these parties and met girls. It was interesting.”³⁸

It was in the second ghetto that Chicago African American teenagers in the 1960s had to navigate not only the process of becoming an adult, but also the trials of growing up black in the United States. In Chicago, these trials meant overcrowded housing conditions, high school dropout rates, and inferior educational facilities. There was also an emotional component to being a Chicago African American teenager. As a

³⁶ Semmes, *The Regal Theater*, 176-177.

³⁷ Pruter, *Chicago Soul*, 11.

³⁸ Kent, The HistoryMakers interview.

demographic group, many believed that the odds for success later in life were stacked against them. As argued by historian Dianne Dannels, “teachers, administrators, and the society at large had discounted these high school students and labeled them as ‘uneducable, disadvantaged and culturally deprived.’”³⁹ Yet at WVON, Chicago’s African American teenagers were treated as a respected group and not only did the station provide them with programming that spoke to their lifestyles, but it also fought for their rights in the community at large.

The World’s Oldest Teenagers: Herb Kent and the Good Guys

Key to WVON’s popularity with teenagers was the station’s most popular disc jockey, Herb Kent. A Radio Hall of Fame inductee, Kent was nicknamed the “Pied Piper of Teens” and the “World’s Oldest Teenager” because of his fanatical teenage following at WVON.⁴⁰ In a nod to his popularity, the *Chicago Defender* referred in print to Chicago African American teenagers as a group as the “Pied Piper following.”⁴¹ In the contemporary world, Kent’s prominent influence helped to mold the stereotype of the African American disc jockey, and he (along with New York disc jockey Frankie Crocker) served as inspiration for the “Venus Flytrap” character on the television show

³⁹ Dionne Dannels, “Chicago High School Students’ Movement for Quality Public Education, 1966-1971.” *Journal of African American History* 88, no. 2 (Spring 2003): 141.

⁴⁰ Lucky Cordell, interview by Julieanna Richardson, videocassette, January 16, 2002, interview A2001.017, The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, IL.

⁴¹ Cohodas, *Spinning Blues into Gold*, 217.

“WKRP in Cincinnati.”⁴² During the 1960s and early 1970s, Kent’s show played Monday through Saturday during prime teenage listening hours and on weekends he was a prominent fixture at high school dances and other social events for teenagers.⁴³ Tall, debonair, and stylishly dressed with a “cognac smooth voice,” Kent embodied urban coolness and as such was referred to as “The Cool Gent” both on air and throughout the community.

One reason for Kent’s popularity was that he could identify with the experience of Chicago’s African American youth. A native Chicagoan, he was born in 1928 and his parents, who never married, separated when he was a young child. A single mother, Kent’s mother raised him on her own. Moreover, like many black Chicagoans, the family resided in public housing, in their case the Ida B. Wells Housing Project. As a child, Kent became interested in radio and tinkered with crystal sets and dreamed of becoming an announcer. He reminisced that “while my friends might have been in their bathrooms secretly reading something scandalous, I spent my time in the bathroom reading announcing books.”⁴⁴

Frustrated by the quality of education in Bronzeville, Kent’s mother sent him to primary and secondary schools that were predominantly attended by white students, including Hyde Park High School. At Hyde Park, Kent became involved with the Radio

⁴² Herb Kent and David Smallwood, *The Cool Gent: The Nine Lives of Radio Legend Herb Kent* (New York: Lawrence Hill Books, 2009), 147.

⁴³ Kent and Smallwood, *The Cool Gent*, 83.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 23.

Club, and in 1944 was one of two students at his school who were selected to participate in the Chicago Board of Education's station WBEZ's Radio Workshop Series for students.⁴⁵ After graduating from high school, Kent worked in the mailroom at WMAQ, an NBC radio station in Chicago. The station also paid for Kent to take several broadcasting classes at Northwestern University, where he excelled. His optimism was tempered, however, when his radio professor, who had praised his work, also said to him, "but you're a Negro, and you'll never get anywhere." Undeterred, Kent replied "Just give me my damn grade, and let me out of here."⁴⁶ Although he did not earn a degree in broadcasting, Kent's education at Northwestern, his experience in the radio club and his internship at WBEZ introduced him to the fundamental skills of announcing.

In 1949 Kent landed his first job, a brief stint as an announcer on WGRY in Gary, Indiana, before returning to WMAQ the following year. It was during his time on WGRY that he attracted the attention of prominent Chicago African American disc jockey Sam Evans. As Kent recalled, Evans told him "You can stay here for the rest of your life, and you might get a little executive position, but you ain't gonna get [a management position] in radio because, you know, there's a color line."⁴⁷ As a result of this advice, Kent quit WMAQ and throughout the 1950s, worked as a disc jockey at a series of radio stations such as Harvey's WBEE 1570 and WVON's signal predecessor, Cicero's WHFC 1450,

⁴⁵ Gilbert Williams, *Legendary Pioneers of Black Radio* (New York: Praeger), 14.

⁴⁶ Kent, The HistoryMakers interview.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

where he started doing remote broadcasts of teen dances from the stately Trianon Ballroom.

Beginning his career at the same time as the rise of rhythm and blues music in the late 1940s, Kent was a breath of broadcasting fresh air for Chicago African American teenagers. As previously discussed, Al Benson dominated Chicago African American radio in the late 1940s and 1950s. Kent's hip, sophisticated, and essentially urbane style of announcing, however, led to his rising popularity, attributable to a stylistic and generational shift away from Benson's Southern-influenced migrant announcing style. While Kent incorporated the latest teenage lingo into his presentations, and began to build a reputation for himself on the teen dance circuit, Benson's focus on his satellite jocks and maximizing his profits through the brokerage system distracted him from the rising teen demographic of the late 1950s.⁴⁸ As Kent recalled "I was more contemporary than Benson with what was happening in music and the kids and closer to it than he. He was more into selling radio time and doing other things. I played everything the kids wanted. I was just dead on it."⁴⁹ By the early 1960s, the only thing really limiting Kent's popularity was the lack of a twenty-four hour African American radio station in Chicago, which was soon to be filled by WVON.

WVON also consistently provided its listeners with the latest in rhythm and blues and soul music. While the station's ability to play the newest music was certainly a draw,

⁴⁸Pruter, *Chicago Soul*, 223.

⁴⁹Ibid, 229.

WVON also actively recruited teenage listeners by providing them with an aural space of their own. As noted by historian Susan Douglas, in the 1950s and 1960s disc jockeys directly appealed to young people's need to be assertive while also providing cues for how others their age behaved and spoke. Furthermore, occurring at a time in their lives when it was natural to feel isolated and unsure of one's place in society, radio allowed teenagers to feel that they belonged to part of a large community.⁵⁰ WVON disc jockeys addressed their listeners in familial terms and provided them with a sense of belonging in a chaotic world. Within this context, listeners became part of a larger on-air family, and the station promoted local events such as dances and concerts as a chance for a teenage reunion. In a promotional spot for his weekly teen dances, Kent announced in one show "Of course we'll see you tomorrow for our big family get-together... all for one and one for all!"⁵¹

For WVON listeners, determining where exactly they fit into Chicago's African American teenage community was through the high school they attended. For 1960s American teenagers, high school served as the center of their social universes and, in the post-World War II era, where one went to receive a secondary education shifted to become not just a place of learning but as "primarily as a place where their friends were."⁵² WVON provided its teenage listeners with in-depth knowledge about the high

⁵⁰ Douglas, *Listening In*, 245.

⁵¹ "Herb Kent Show," WVON, Chicago, IL, February 26, 1965, compact disc.

⁵² Hine, *The Rise and Fall*, 257.

schools in Chicago's African American community. Furthermore, the listeners themselves generated this knowledge. WVON broadcasts frequently made references to Chicago's main black high schools, including Phillips, DuSable, Dunbar and Hyde Park on the south side and Marshall, Crane, Farragut and St. Phillip's on the west side.⁵³ For example, when stating the time, Herb Kent utilized high school identifiers such as "sixteen Harper High School minutes past nine"⁵⁴ or "Proviso Pirate minutes past ten o'clock."⁵⁵ In addition, Kent's nightly show also regularly featured a "High School of the Night" during which the station spotlighted an area high school. Students from that night's featured school were encouraged to call the station to be interviewed regarding their opinions about their school including topics such as classes, sports teams, extracurricular activities, and the student body's school spirit and general attractiveness. Kent's laid-back conversational manner encouraged teens to treat these interviews not as the third degree by an adult, but rather as an intimate discussion with a friend. More importantly, however, these questions allowed African American teenagers to learn about their peers in the community around them. In one 1965 show Kent stated "Tonight it's Proviso East High School! Where is Proviso East? What do they do? How many people?

⁵³Pruter, *Chicago Soul*, 12.

⁵⁴ "Herb Kent Show," WVON, Chicago, IL, May 19, 1971, compact disc.

⁵⁵"Herb Kent Show," January 29, 1965.

What do the people look like that go there? What! What! What! What! If you're from Proviso East you may call tonight and answer these burning questions."⁵⁶

In addition to building this sense of community, Kent shrewdly promoted himself as the leader of African American teenagers in Chicago and capitalized upon stereotypical teenage feelings of "us" versus "them" to cement his popularity. During a station contest where listeners were encouraged to collect Pet Milk labels to use as ballots in an election to select WVON listeners' favorite disc jockeys, Kent drummed up support by capitalizing upon the perception of the teenage community under attack. He claimed that other older disc jockeys at WVON such as E. Rodney Jones ripped off his words, and exclaimed, they "stole my words 'zot' and 'fezneckie.' So now not so much 'zot' and 'fezneckie'...Instead now it's 'flame on baby' which is cool. Instead of a 'fezneckie' you are a hammer. By the time they catch up with me I'll be on to something else!"⁵⁷ He further stressed that "you should vote for me in the Pet Milk contest! I play consistently more mellow jams than any other disc jockey on WVON. I fight for it! I'm sincere, true and genuine. I'm for the teenagers! I'm for everybody who's for good! I'm not going to hide my light under a bushel, and you know in your heart I'm right!"⁵⁸

While appealing to a sense of teenage group unity, WVON also reached out to teenagers as individuals and spoke to their feelings of isolation. Of particular concern was

⁵⁶Ibid.

⁵⁷"Herb Kent Show," February 26, 1965.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

the teenage listener's sense of alienation during the turbulent mid-1960s. Since the late 1940s, disc jockeys sought a sense of intimacy with the teenage listener by translating the listening experience to a relationship between "you" (the listener) and "me" (the disc jockey).⁵⁹ Kent assuaged these feelings of loneliness by paying rapt attention to listeners and identifying with their alienation. In describing himself to listeners, he repeatedly referred to himself as "the ugliest disc jockey in all of Chicago."⁶⁰ He also described himself as being "8 feet tall, 132 ½ lbs., very slender and not very good looking." Kent's musings most certainly provided moral support for the maturing young listener. In dedicating Ruby and the Romantics "Our Day Will Come," Kent proclaimed

I want to play this for a lady that's the most ruined lady I ever saw in my life in Chicago...she's about five feet even and she weighs about three hundred pounds if she weighs an ounce. And she buys all her clothes from the big man's shop and goes to her seamstress and has 'em made into dresses and things like that. Awww...she's so horrible and her hair goes every which way and she's real good with a razor, real good. But the thing about it is when you behave yourself and talk to her there's something about her that's compelling, that's magnetic, and you go for her... this is a record for her cause I'm pretty ugly myself and we do realize our day will come.⁶¹

Advertisers during Kent's teen show also built upon these feelings of isolation and physical inadequacy. In a commercial for Ultra Sheen hair dressing repeatedly played during Kent's nightly show, the lure of being someone other than oneself is touted as the

⁵⁹ Douglas, *Listening In*, 230.

⁶⁰ "Herb Kent Show," January 29, 1965.

⁶¹ "Herb Kent Show," January 30, 1965.

announcer declares it can allow for one to “become someone else forever...the real you!”⁶²

WVON also highlighted the concept of Chicago’s African American youth as a community by creating special contests and activities devoted to younger listeners. These contests included high school popularity contests, special WVON notebook stickers, and prizes to those who collected the longest list of WVON listeners.⁶³ Furthermore, other promotional activities at the station adopted a youthful bent, such as station-sponsored mass bicycle rides that traveled from 34th Street and Martin Luther King, Jr. Drive on the South Side up Michigan Avenue to the white enclave of Lincoln Park.⁶⁴ Numbering up to 20,000 riders, Kent recalled that “thousands of black people riding around on bikes together during the 1960s caught the attention of the TV stations and a lot of other concerned white people...”⁶⁵ According to Richard Pegue, “the station embraced with Herb being the focal point, his bike rides from wherever they went. But I mean thousands of people with bikes just following Herb down the street.”⁶⁶

One of WVON’ strongest ties to the African American teenage community came through high school and community dances. Throughout the 1960s, the WVON Good

⁶² “Bill ‘Butterball’ Crane Show,” WVON, Chicago, IL, August 27, 1967, compact disc.

⁶³ “WVON Coca-Cola Contest,” *Chicago Defender*, August 12, 1963, a14.

⁶⁴ “Pedal Party a Summer Success,” *Chicago Defender*, September 3, 1974, 2.

⁶⁵ Kent and Smallwood, *The Cool Gent*, 111-112.

⁶⁶ Richard Pegue, interview by Julieanna Richardson, videocassette, January 24, 2002, interview A2002.011, The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, IL.

Guys regularly served as emcees or special guests at hundreds of high school dances and entertainment venues throughout Chicago. The dances were advertised both on the station and also through a variety of teenage societal variety columns such as “Teen Town Chatter,” the “Crane Coolgars,” and “Harrison Hornets.”⁶⁷ In addition to advertising these events, the teen society columns were also a primer for students regarding dance attendees and who was the most fashionable or best looking. While Herb Kent served as the disc jockey at numerous secular high school dances, he also hosted events at local parishes such as St. Bernard and St. Phillip. The largest of these dances were the weekly fetes held by Kent at Our Lady of Sorrows Catholic Church on the city’s west side. Beginning in 1964, the dances quickly expanded to becoming not just entertainment for teenage parishioners, but quickly became must-attend events for Chicago teenagers, with over 700 youth attending each week.”⁶⁸ Not just available for African American students, Kent also occasionally served as the emcee for dances for Hispanic listeners on the West side of the city.⁶⁹ At these dances, he recalled being warmly greeted by his teenage fans and stated “I just had fans that just came through the door and brought me hot dogs, pizza and would just hang around when I was doing this thing.”⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Joyce Anderson, “Crane Coolgars;” *Chicago Defender*, June 19, 1965, 30; “Harrison Hornets,” *Chicago Defender*, January 4 1964, 6; “Teen Town Chatter,” *Chicago Defender*, Sept 12, 1964, 16.

⁶⁸ “Fights Curb Lawndale Teen Events,” *Chicago Tribune*, November 27, 1966, U1.

⁶⁹ Kent and Smallwood, *The Cool Gent*, 188.

⁷⁰ Kent, The HistoryMakers interview.

Despite Kent's friendly fans, the dances did not occur in an insulated environment and the harsh realities of life in the Second Ghetto manifested themselves at these events. He recalled that fisticuffs broke out at the dances between rival teenage gangs, which were often the result of simmering tensions and resentments that occurred away from the dance floor. Recalling one fight that broke out during "Gouster Night" at the Pershing Ballroom he stated, "I kept playing records, you know, but I was ducking down." Although the fight did not involve weapons and ultimately dissipated, Kent reminisced that the battle was so heated that the participants fought outside of the ballroom entrance and up and down the street with the conflict ultimately spilling into other neighboring clubs.⁷¹

Throughout the 1960s as gang warfare continued to increase on Chicago's South and West Sides, the battles between teenagers became more violent. Beginning in 1966, Kent's dances at Our Lady of Sorrows were temporarily suspended numerous times due to fistfights and gang gunfights occurring outside of the venue.⁷² In January 1967, a fourteen-year-old girl, Althea Harris, was shot and killed by an eighteen-year-old gang member outside of the Times Square club after leaving a dance hosted by Kent. Harris was an innocent bystander who happened to get caught up in a fight between rival gangs that started inside the club, spilled out into the street, and then escalated into gunfire. Even though Kent widely promoted dances on his show, in the aftermath of the shooting

⁷¹*Blues Speak: The Best of the Original Chicago Blues Annual*, edited by Lincoln T. Beauchamp, Jr (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 113.

⁷²"Fights Curb Lawndale Teen Events," U1.

WVON quickly issued a statement declaring that they had nothing to do with the dances although the disc jockey was an employee there.”⁷³ While the murderer was quickly apprehended, Chicago’s Second District police chief, Robert Harness, threatened to stop all of Kent’s dances if the violence did not cease. Kent quickly worked to assure the public that youth that attended his events were indeed safe, stressing that his dances were closely supervised and that he employed nine off-duty policemen to help to prevent trouble.⁷⁴ In regards to the death of Althea Harris he commented, “no one can feel as badly about this as I do” and that he “would do anything humanly possible to prevent a thing like this occurring.”⁷⁵ Shrewdly, Kent also contended that the dances were a safe pastime for Chicago African Americans teenagers. He argued that “there are some pretty rowdy kids around, whether they are attending a dance or not... the time they spend at the dances involves clean fun that keeps them off the streets. The dances have a distinctly positive aspect.”⁷⁶ In the aftermath of Harris’ death, local parents also voiced their supported for the events. In a letter to the editor of the *Chicago Defender* a few days after Harris’ death, parent Betty Gray wrote “I am a mother of a teenager and I feel that Herb Kent is trying to help the youth of Chicago, not kill them. Herb Kent was giving the

⁷³ Donald Mosby, “Girl, 14, Killed after Herb Kent Dance, Police Hit WVON Star’s Record Hops as Too Unruly,” *Chicago Defender*, January 17, 1967, 1.

⁷⁴ “Chicago Girl, 17, Killed at Teen Record Hop,” *Jet*, February 2, 1967, 51

⁷⁵ Mosby, “Girl, 14, Killed After Herb Kent Dance,” 1.

⁷⁶ Donald Mosby, “Youth Admits Slaying Girl 14, After Dance: Cops Charge Southsider With Murder,” *Chicago Defender*, January 18, 1967, 1.

dance to keep peace amongst the youngsters and he did as long as they were at the dance.”⁷⁷

Despite the violence tied to these events, these dances helped to shape the musical landscape of America throughout the 1960s and early 1970s. In *Chicago Soul*, Robert Pruter argues that it was the “nameless black school-kids who created the dances that shaped the rhythms on records that sold across America.” On a cultural level, African American teenagers in Chicago were a vital demographic when it came to the production and consumption of music. WVON not only provided a medium for listening to the latest dance music over the airwaves, but the station also created real-life arenas for Chicago African American teenagers to come together and invent, refine, and popularize their own moves. Disc jockeys such as Herb Kent served as an influential piece of the puzzle by serving as hosts for these events and assisting in the dissemination and popularization of the latest dance trends for black teenagers. Furthermore, these trends often served as inspiration for new dance records, as evidenced by Tom and Jerrio’s song “Boo-Ga-Loo” and Alvin Cash and the Crawlers “Twine Time,” both recorded by artists who were inspired by dances they witnessed at record hops that Herb Kent hosted.⁷⁸ Even outside of the dance halls and over the airwaves, Kent demonstrated his familiarity with the Chicago dance scene by recommending dances for listeners to do during specific songs. During one show, he labeled one song as “47th Street Strut stuff” and while playing Doris

⁷⁷ Betty Gray, “Article Unfair,” *Chicago Defender*, February 6, 1967, 12.

⁷⁸ Pruter, *Chicago Soul*, 203-204.

Troy's "Just One Look" he exuberantly told listeners that the song was perfect for a "gouster dance."⁷⁹ The gouster dance was a modified slowed down version of the Chicago Bop, a popular style of dancing amongst Chicago African Americans during the late 1950s and early 1960s which featured smooth gliding steps, dips, and strides.⁸⁰

More than just social occasions for Chicago's African American teenagers, dances hosted by the Good Guys became key promotional opportunities for recording artists and groups in the 1960s and early 1970s. WVON also played an influential role in the shaping of music in the 1960s by providing record labels with the ever-so-important first plays for the latest rhythm and blues and soul music. At these dances, prominent artists such as The Temptations and Jan Bradley performed and used the events both to refine their acts and promote their latest recordings. Furthermore, attendees also often received promotional items, including free records, from that week's featured performer.⁸¹ These WVON-hosted dances provided initial exposure for a new song or artist, and whether or not teen attendees embraced a specific song helped to determine its degree of its success in Chicago and perhaps even nationwide.

WVON also increased its popularity with African American teenage listeners through its adoption of local teenage language. Throughout the 1960s, the Good Guys as a whole both borrowed the language of Chicago's African American youth and used their

⁷⁹ "Herb Kent Show," WVON, Chicago, IL, January 30, 1965, compact disc.

⁸⁰ Dan Land, "The Evolution of a Chicago Dance," Steppers Express, last modified 2009, <http://steppersexpress.com/theculture.html> (accessed 13 December 2012).

⁸¹ "Herb Kent Show," January 29, 1965.

creativity and influence to invent and popularize words and phrases that made their way into the local lexicon. In the on-air world of WVON, women became fezneckies, hammers, and foxes, and men became dickneckies, nails and ferns. As the noted leader of the station's teenage demographic, Kent consciously modeled the language of his listeners and provided a primer for the use of new slang that he incorporated into his broadcasts. In one broadcast in which he described a new term for unattractive girls he stated "Don't forget about our new expression...no, not fezneckie, but hammers!"⁸² You hip to that? She's what you call a dog or a canine hammer." Beyond picking up words and phrases through their interactions with the community, new terms were invented by the disc jockeys or borrowed from unrelated lexicons. For example, Kent borrowed citizen band radio terms such as "YL" for young lady and "20" for location and popularized these terms for Chicago African American youth in the 1960s.⁸³

Good Guy E. Rodney Jones also explained that WVON's language was the language of the street. He stated "I am not an announcer. I talk to people...the slang and the clichés you pick up from the street and say 'hell this is funny.'"⁸⁴

Words and phrases used by WVON's disc jockeys managed to interweave themselves into the language of Chicago's African American youth and became commonplace on the street. Disc jockey Richard Pegue stated

⁸² "Herb Kent Show," January 29, 1965.

⁸³ Kent and Smallwood, *The Cool Gent*, 124.

⁸⁴ E. Rodney Jones, interview by Sonia Williamson, audiocassette, Radio Smithsonian: Black Radio Project Collection, Archives of African American Music and Culture, Bloomington, Indiana.

The people who were in the clubs started to emulate the disc jockeys that they heard on the air. [Bill] ‘Butterball’ [Crane] was a great disc jockey at WVON here in Chicago. There were 300 Butterballs out there in the street, who were talking and sounding like Butterball sounded on the radio... You know, you've made it, when you got over a hundred people sounding like you. So the people in the streets followed the style of radio.⁸⁵

As part of the daily lexicon, these words then became fodder for musical recordings.

Musically, works such as J.C. Davis’ 1964 song “Feznecky” and The Dukays 1965 song “Mellow Feznecky” reflected WVON’s influence on language. Further linking their song to the originator of the word as well, The Dukays appeared at Herb Kent teen record hops to promote their record.⁸⁶ In addition, the language of WVON’s younger listeners also influenced advertising for businesses that sought to tap into the lucrative teen consumer market. In an advertising spot for Sears department store’s “Fezneckie Socks,” E. Rodney Jones exhorted listeners to “go get your mystery fezneckie socks before Sears runs out of them!”⁸⁷

While influencing teenage culture through language, WVON also helped disseminate African American teenage fashion trends over the airwaves. As argued by Grace Palladino, tensions between adults and teenagers escalated in the mid-1960s over teenage fashion and appearance, and, as she stated, teen fashion “challenged traditional standards and values and weakened the ties between age and authority, experience and

⁸⁵Pegue, The HistoryMakers interview.

⁸⁶Pruter, *Chicago Soul*, 198, 203.

⁸⁷ “E. Rodney Jones Show,” WVON, Chicago, IL, September 9, 1966, compact disc.

wisdom.”⁸⁸ Another way that Chicago African American teenagers demonstrated their growing independence, both from their parents and as social group, was through dress. Primarily, WVON tapped into the Chicago African American teen experience by promoting two trends that were popular in the mid-1960s, the “gousters” and the “Ivy Leaguers,” on its airwaves. Originally based on class divisions amongst Chicago African Americans, Ivy Leaguers and gousters were seen as stereotypically comprised of “nice” kids and “rebellious” kids, respectively. “Ivy Leaguers” were seen as copying fashions of white middle class teenagers. Adopting a preppy style, teenage boys had short haircuts and wore chinos, Brooks Brothers-style button down shirts, V-neck sweaters, and loafers.⁸⁹

Gouster fashion, on the other hand, was a reaction to the straight-laced nature of the Ivy Leaguer, and became known as the fashion of 1960s street gangs such as the Blackstone Rangers and the Black Gangster Disciples. With increased pressures on the African American community caused by exploding populations, inflated housing costs and shortages, and rising unemployment, Chicago’s African American street gangs exploded during the 1960s with membership estimated at more than 50,000 people. Furthermore, gangs such as the Blackstone Rangers transformed from single group entities to multi-neighborhood conglomerations. By the mid-1960s, the Blackstone

⁸⁸ Palladino, *The American Teenager*, 230.

⁸⁹ “Lesser-Known Youth Culture: Chicago Gousters,” *Voices of East Anglia*, last modified February 2, 2012, <http://www.voicesofeastanglia.com/2012/02/lesser-known-youth-culture-chicago.html> (accessed 22 March 2012).

Rangers had become a unified group of twenty-one gangs on the South side of the city.⁹⁰ Even if they were not a direct member of a street gang, for Chicago African American teenagers, simply dressing like this group displayed a sense of rebelliousness against the status quo. Inspired by 1940s gangster fashion, gouster clothing featured exaggerated details such as baggy pants and long coats, wide-brimmed beaver hats, long key chains, and pointed tip shoes. Beyond fashion, the gousters created their own dances, including the Gouster Bop, the Gouster Walk, and Dip, which some observers see as the foundation for the modern dance style of steppin.⁹¹ As a reflection of the culture, songs such as 1962's song "Gouster Bop" by the Joy Rockers and the 1964 song by the Five Du-Tones, "The Gouster," became local hits with teenagers in Chicago.⁹²

WVON demonstrated its familiarity with teenage tastes by highlighting the Gouster versus Ivy Leaguer debate. On afternoon and evening shows, callers were encouraged to identify themselves as Gousters or Ivy Leaguers, why they belonged to a certain group, and which group was better.⁹³ Girls were also encouraged to call in and discuss whether they found the Gouster or Ivy Leaguer male more attractive. As Kent reminisced, "Ivy league girls always fell real hard for those big rough, tough smooth-talking gousters." At WVON's high school dances, the Ivy Leaguer versus gouster debate

⁹⁰ Hagedorn, "*Race Not Space*," 201-202.

⁹¹ "Lesser Known Youth Culture: Chicago Gousters."

⁹² Pruter, *Chicago Soul*, 174.

⁹³ Spann and Walker, *40 Year Spann*, 67.

manifested itself into physical conflict as fights routinely broke out between representatives of the two groups.⁹⁴ By speaking to their lifestyles and self-identities, WVON reaped loyalty and increased ratings from teenage listeners while simultaneously providing them with agency and legitimacy.

Another reason for the appeal of WVON to its younger listeners lay in the simple fact that the station's disc jockeys often did not act like adults; in fact they stylized themselves as older teenagers. From outlandish on-air anecdotes to crazy skits, the behavior of the Good Guys was anything but adult-like and their rowdy demeanors often sharply conflicted with the ideal behavior as prescribed by adults. From hooting and hollering on air to ribbing each other publicly, the behavior of WVON's disc jockeys was infectious and appealed to youth. The delivery style of WVON's disc jockeys, which included rapid-fire banter, improvisational dialogue, rhymes and slang, made for lively listening. In promoting a record hop, Bill "Butterball" Crane rapped

Attention all my West Side ditty boppers and stone finger poppers: Don't you forget the Glamorteens present their first annual West Side high school queen's mini hop. Oohh them miniskirts are gonna get hurt...Where's square? McHenry Hall! Of course yours truly the greasy fat one Butterball will stand tall!⁹⁵

The Good Guys also displayed a friendly gang-like sense of camaraderie and were not above jovially insulting each other on the air. For example, on E. Rodney Jones' show, when he referred to fellow disc jockey Ed Cook, he exclaimed "Beauty is only skin

⁹⁴ Kent and Smallwood, *The Cool Gent*, 122.

⁹⁵"Bill 'Butterball' Crane Show," WVON, Chicago, IL, August 25, 1967, compact disc.

deep and Ed Cook just scratched the surface!” After making the pun, he laughed riotously at his own joke for an extended period of time.⁹⁶ Additionally, bodily humor was not out of the question. While playing the song “Too Weak to Fight” by Clarence Carter, disc jockey Bill “Butterball” Crane let out a series of well-timed belches and quipped “I better reach for an Alka-Seltzer!” after Carter sang the lyrics “I got a little taste of your love.”⁹⁷ For Herb Kent, this outlandish and unpredictable behavior was used as a marketing device for his show. In one commercial promoting his “Teen King and Teen Queen show,” an imaginary delegate to the United Nations spoke in Spanish in the background while his translator simultaneously translated that “Never in my life have I witnessed such an exciting thing as the Herb Kent King and Queen Show! It makes me want to go north of the border and stay!”⁹⁸

As noted earlier, the original comedic sketches and skits on WVON provided a reflection on the Chicago African American urban community during the 1960s. These comedic bits also found themselves played out at Chicago’s high school dances, and for African American teenagers these comedic episodes were extremely popular because although they had their roots in social reality, they were still incidents of comedic juvenile behavior. Kent’s outlandish antics also served as promotional material for local businesses. For the Ideals song “The Gorilla,” Kent brought the group around to his high

⁹⁶ “E. Rodney Jones Show,” September 9, 1966.

⁹⁷ “Bill ‘Butterball’ Crane Show,” WVON, Chicago, IL, December 15, 1968, compact disc.

⁹⁸ “Pervis Spann Show,” WVON, Chicago, IL, January 29, 1965, compact disc.

school dances with a dancing guy wearing a gorilla suit. Under his promotion, the record sold 90,000 copies in Chicago alone.⁹⁹ In one famous incident mentioned earlier, Kent's Wahoo Man character was transformed into a real-life costumed person who traveled to high school dances in a coffin. As Kent recalled,

One time we set it up at Marshall High School. Someone pointed up in the balcony. We got the prettiest girl there, and he was beating her with a cane, with this stick, so the football team took out after him. It was just pretending like he was beating her...for years the Marshall football team was looking for the Wahoo Man.¹⁰⁰

There were boundaries, however, to the Good Guys' behavior, most notably seen when parents stepped in to demand control of the disc jockeys after they believed lines were crossed. In response to the Wahoo Man sketches and Kent telling scary stories about the character's activities on the air, WVON received numerous calls and complaints from older listeners who complained that "he made little kids pee on themselves" from fright.¹⁰¹ Due to the uproar, Leonard Chess finally intervened and the Wahoo Man was terminated after Kent received a terse memorandum from station management demanding an immediate end to the sketches.¹⁰²

While the Good Guys cultivated a sense of family with their teenage listeners, they also adopted an openly aggressive masculine persona in which their female listeners,

⁹⁹Pruter, *Doowop: The Chicago Scene*, 198.

¹⁰⁰ Kent, The HistoryMakers interview.

¹⁰¹ Herb Kent interview, William Barlow Collection.

¹⁰² Kent, The HistoryMakers interview.

regardless of their age, became virtual conquests that needed to be wooed. Beginning in the early 1950s, radio listeners began to develop intensely personal bonds with disc jockeys, and male disc jockeys, such as Alan Freed, became teen idols in their own right.¹⁰³ As noted by historian Christopher Booker, throughout the 1960s, an assertive black masculinity developed. With roots in the southern-based Civil Rights Movement, this masculinity transformed into an aggressive patriarchal expression of manhood as expressed by groups such as the Black Panther Party.¹⁰⁴ These uniquely personal bonds of the disc jockey with the listener combined with the emerging aggressive masculinity of the African American male in the 1960s to express themselves in WVON's disc jockeys that openly treated the female listener as an object of lust. Building off these intense personal relationships, WVON's Good Guys openly engaged in flirtatious relationships with their younger female listeners. In essence, the jocks became on-air boyfriends who begged and pleaded for their love. For example, the jocks interjected romantic banter during love songs, as evidenced by Bill "Butterball" Crane spontaneously crooning and pleading "I need love, you need love, and we could buy a license at city hall if you really dig your Butterball" while playing Gladys Knight and the Pips "Everybody Needs Love."¹⁰⁵ In another example, the sultry voices of young females became a part of the show. During one Butterball Crane show, for example, to simulate a girl sitting in the

¹⁰³ Douglas, *Listening In*, 225.

¹⁰⁴ Christopher Booker, *I Will Wear No Chain: A Social History of African American Males* (New York: Praeger, 2000), 187.

¹⁰⁵ "Bill 'Butterball' Crane Show," August 25, 1967.

studio with him, the disc jockey broadcast a recording of a young girl both giggling and then moaning “You’re so nice” and “I like you” over songs that he played.¹⁰⁶

WVON’s disc jockeys also encouraged young female listeners to call the station to express their love and admiration for the disc jockeys. Kent in particular reveled in the female attention. In one break on his show he enthused to the listener “It’s a lot of fun being a disc jockey! You get to talk to so many fezneckies!”¹⁰⁷ He also enthusiastically encouraged his young female listeners to view him as a boyfriend. During one show he stated that “There’s one [a girl] I talked to that just sounds wonderful. She’s never seen me and I’ve never seen her but we’re up tight! I love her so much because every time we rap she says ‘My name is Lavergne and I listen to the Herb Kent show and I go to St. Phillips every single Sunday!’”¹⁰⁸ During the latter part of this announcement, the part of the girl is actually a recording of a breathless young female Kent fan. In another recorded promotional spot, a chorus comprised of the Vaughn Occupational High School Pom-Pom Squad cheered and declared their love to Kent, exclaiming “Right On to Herb Kent!”¹⁰⁹ By incorporating these real-life recordings, Kent further intensified the relationship of the male disc jockey to the young female listener and made it seem that such a relationship could be possible.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ “Herb Kent Show,” January 29, 1965.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ “Herb Kent Show,” May 19, 1971.

Good Guy disc jockey and WVON program manager Moses “Lucky” Cordell also presented himself as a hopeless romantic during his daily afternoon show. In addition to writing his own love poems, Cordell recited and dedicated his works to listeners during his show’s regular feature, the “Poetry Corner.” He also encouraged listeners to send their own poems to the station.¹¹⁰ Recited over soft organ and string instrumental music, works such “I’ll Follow You” and “We Were Young Lovers” spoke directly to listeners about common topics such as one’s first love and recovering from unrequited loves. Cordell also specifically matched poems with music selected to reinforce the poem’s themes. For example, Cordell’s 1965 recitation of “We Were Young Lovers,” a poem about failed love, immediately followed the playing of Gene Chandler’s “You Can’t Hurt Me No More.”¹¹¹ Cordell’s poetry was so successful that in a 1965 Valentine’s Day promotion, WVON sold over 3,000 copies of a specially printed book entitled “Lucky Cordell’s Favorite Poems of Love” to listeners. The following year in 1966, Cordell recorded his poem “My Love” on the independent Happiness record label. Simply his own recitation of the poem set to background instrumental music, the song made the WVON Soul Top Ten charts and national record distributors picked up the tune.¹¹² As Cordell stated, his poems were an expression of love for the listeners. “It’s the

¹¹⁰ “Lucky Cordell Show,” WVON, Chicago, IL, 1963, mp3.

¹¹¹ “Lucky Cordell Show,” WVON, Chicago, IL, January 29, 1965, compact disc.

¹¹² Topy Malagaris, “The Sound: Music and Radio: For Young Listeners,” *Chicago Tribune*, December 4 1967, D19.

Good Guys way of saying we love you. What else better could you give than a book filled with love?"¹¹³

Beyond expressing romantic sentiments to their listeners, WVON's disc jockeys also suggested their desire for physical relationships with female listeners. Throughout numerous shows, for instance, their dialogue was rampant with sexual double entendres and sly jokes. As declared by Good Guy Joe Cobb, "If loving you is a sin this morning, girl" he bellowed, "I want [WVON gospel director and early-morning gospel DJ] Doc Lee to pray for me, 'cause I'm sho' 'nuff gonna sin!"¹¹⁴ In one show, Bill "Butterball" Crane referred to himself as Santa Claus, stating "They call me Santa Claus, honey, because I carry such a big bag....of goodies all the time!"¹¹⁵ Other Good Guys such as Ed Cook were even more emboldened and openly leered at female listeners. During Junior Walker and the All Stars' song "Shotgun" Cook drawled "Sugar... if you want to do the shotgun tonight you better have your red dress and high heels on and I'll have my shotgun to protect ya!"¹¹⁶ This open aggressive admiration of the female listener continued in his buildup to playing Alvin Cash and the Crawler's "Twine Time" as Cook

¹¹³ "Lucky Cordell Show," January 29, 1965.

¹¹⁴ "Joe Cobb Show," WVON, Chicago, IL, May 31, 1972, compact disc.

¹¹⁵ "Bill 'Butterball' Crane Show," August 25, 1967.

¹¹⁶ "Ed Cook Show," WVON, Chicago, IL, February 1, 1965.

boldly stated “It’s going to be you and me this evening, Sugar. So you stand there and look like a rich man’s front porch and let me admire you!”¹¹⁷

As noted by Thomas Hine, “no part of the teenage mystique is more alluring and perplexing than sexuality...adults envy teens for their energy, their freshness, their passion and they seek to imitate them.”¹¹⁸ For the Good Guys, teenage sexuality was an open topic, and on their airwaves, the disc jockeys alluded to their libidos and desires for physical intimacy with younger listeners. During one Herb Kent show, prior to playing the song “I’m a King Bee” by Slim Harpo, in which Harpo sings about his ability to “buzz all night long,” Kent reminisced “This conjures something up that really happened to me...there was a record girl that was really in love with me and all I had to do to get her to kiss me was play this record and she would just jump in my lap.” Kent accompanied his story with a recording of slapping and a female flirtatiously giggling.¹¹⁹ Before playing Andre Williams’s song “Jailbait,” a record that warned men about the dangers of sex with underage girls, Herb Kent enthusiastically declared that he understood the song’s meaning and stated he wanted to “dedicate our next song to Ed Cook, Franklin McCarthy, Pervis Spann and Lucky Cordell!”¹²⁰

¹¹⁷ “Ed Cook Show,” WVON, Chicago, IL, January 29, 1966.

¹¹⁸ Hine, 21.

¹¹⁹ “Herb Kent Show,” WVON, Chicago, IL, July 14, 1966, compact disc.

¹²⁰ “Herb Kent Show,” February 26, 1965.

During late evening hours when younger listeners slept, WVON's broadcasts adopted their raciest tones. Guided by Pervis Spann and broadcast under the cover of night, the station's musical offerings consisted of "basement" blues and racy jokes. At the beginning of one set of music, Spann stated "Let's go down to the basement again" and then played a series of suggestive songs such as Lightnin' Slim's "My Starter Won't Work," Muddy Waters' "Got My Mojo Working," and Bo Diddley's "I'm a Man." Throughout the set, Spann howls and tells the listeners, "Honey child, let's you and me get together!" He also loudly huffs and puffs into the microphone, threatening "I'll blow your house down" to the listener, with emphasis placed on the word "blow." Even station promotions during the overnight stretch were more suggestive, as evidenced by one in which a breathless panting female voice seductively suggests that WVON was "trying to do a little good in your neighborhood" while giggling flirtatiously.¹²¹ While cultivating a close bond between listener and disc jockey, the Good Guys sexualized the airwaves and became not just trusted friends and community spokesmen for their station's fans, but also lovers. This behavior, however, also spoke to the station's conservative view of gender roles. While the station advocated for African American civil rights, the ease at which the Good Guys simultaneously slipped into rowdy characters that objectified their female listeners combined with the WVON's acceptance of this behavior demonstrated that there were limits to the station's definition of equality.

¹²¹ "Pervis Spann Show," January 29, 1965.

Don't Cut Your Own Throat: WVON and Youth-Focused Social Activism

While WVON participated in a myriad of both local and national civil rights causes throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, one particular area of concern for the station centered on the education of Chicago's African American youth. Beyond appealing to African American youth through the music it played and the behavior of its disc jockeys, WVON worked to provide a better world for them through its outspoken support of educational equality. From working to lower the school dropout rate to supporting the Coordinating Council of Community Organizations' (CCCCO) fight for equality in Chicago Public Schools, the station both actively promoted racial equality for youth while also serving as a sounding board for concerned citizens.

Throughout the 1960s, WVON was an outspoken advocate of the importance that education played in the lives of African American youth. The station did not just merely view its young listeners as a lucrative demographic, but as a group whose rights needed to be protected and defended. One significant area of WVON's on-air activism on behalf of African American youth in Chicago focused on high school graduation rates and the plight of the high school dropout. According to Thomas Hines, in the postwar era "perhaps no character was more reviled than the dropout, that misguided, usually lower-class boy (or pregnant girl) who had decided that staying in high school wasn't worth it."¹²² WVON heavily promoted the importance of a high school education to its younger listeners via station editorials and broadcasted promotional messages. The station's most

¹²² Hine, *The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager*, 257.

direct action was the “Teen King and Queen Program,” a fifteen minute segment sponsored by Lever Brothers that played nightly during Herb Kent’s show in the mid-1960s.¹²³ As Kent recalled the segment was “dedicated to the proposition that if you’re in school you should stay there.” Kent grounded the segments in practicality and emphasized how having a high school degree could improve one’s future job opportunities and income earning potential. Segments featured interviews with teachers, business leaders and successful high school graduates that served as inspirational role models for younger listeners. For example, in a 1965 show, Kent interviewed Rosanita Whiting, a recent high school graduate who was employed by an insurance agency after graduation. Adopting an easygoing conversational manner and peppering his language with teen slang throughout the interview, Kent questioned Whiting about how a high school degree had better prepared her for the job market, and argued to his listeners that Whiting’s financial and occupational successes, including her three rapid job promotions, were due to her high school education and degree. From questioning Whiting about the types of classes she had taken during high school to emphasizing how quickly she secured a job after graduation, Kent stressed throughout the interview the importance of a high school degree. Notable is that while Kent stressed the essential value of a high school degree for both males and females, he structured his argument around traditional gender lines as he exhorted youth to “stay in school, especially the guys because the guys are the ones that have to go out and earn a living for the family and it’s almost harder for

¹²³ Kent and Smallwood, *The Cool Gent*, 85.

the guys to find a job so stay in school... and girls also if they would like to make good mothers.”¹²⁴

WVON’s concerns about educational quality for Chicago African American students also extended to college and occupational choice. As Herb Kent stated “I’d really like kids to try to find out who they are and what they want to be as early as possible and go after that.”¹²⁵ The station financially sponsored numerous college and career fairs for African American youth and the Good Guys often served as Masters of Ceremonies or keynote speakers at these events.¹²⁶ For example, in 1966 the station and the Henry Booth Neighborhood House jointly sponsored a “Concern about Careers for Black Youth” conference that focused on providing youth living in Chicago Housing Authority facilities with information and insight into careers in fields such as health, law enforcement, education, and skilled trades. The conference also provided youth with an opportunity to meet with business and professional representatives from these fields.¹²⁷ WVON’s devotion to educational opportunities for youth also extended to college. In addition to numerous station-sponsored scholarship contests, some of WVON’s largest annual events were its organized tours of Southern Illinois University. Taking place during the Kappa Karnival, an annual social gathering hosted each spring by the

¹²⁴ “Herb Kent Show,” January 29, 1965.

¹²⁵ Kent, The HistoryMakers interview.

¹²⁶ Topy Malagaris, “The Sound: Music and Radio: For Young Listeners,” *Chicago Tribune*, August 31, 1967, c19.

¹²⁷ “Conference on Careers is Planned,” *Chicago Tribune*, April 21, 1966, p. h13.

predominantly African American Kappa Alpha Psi fraternity, beginning in 1967 the station organized campus tours and meet-and-greets between Chicago high school students and college students. Beginning in 1968, the station began broadcasting live annually from the event.¹²⁸ As a result of their actions, WVON brought the realities of college life to Chicago African American youth who may not have otherwise had a chance to be exposed to this type of education.

The station also focused on promoting career opportunities for African American students in the media. For example, the station and Chicago State College sponsored a conference entitled the “Fourth Estate 1969” which featured careers in radio and Wesley South and Roy Wood as speakers.¹²⁹ Beginning in 1964, this degree of transparency about the radio profession also occurred in summers as the station invited community groups to bring busloads of students to the facility during the work week so that they could witness its operations. Disc jockeys and technicians also answered questions from the kids about the station’s operations and its equipment. As noted by Lucky Cordell in a *Billboard* interview, “We would try to divide the groups of 100 into smaller groups of usually twenty-five...It’s a really big thing for these kids to see the personalities behind the microphone or be able to chat with us informally.”¹³⁰ In an interview with the *Chicago Defender*, WVON Operations Manager Frank Ward also emphasized the

¹²⁸ Kent and Smallwood, *The Cool Gent*, 107.

¹²⁹ *Chicago Defender*, June 21, 1969, 36.

¹³⁰ Earl Paige, “Beginning of New NATRA Era- E. Rodney Jones,” *Billboard*, August 16, 1969, S-12.

professionalism of the station's employees and touted their credentials, stating that the personnel were "key radio people" as exemplified by Ed "Nassau Daddy" Cook, "a Chicago boy with a degree from Fisk University."¹³¹

More informally, the jocks themselves promoted radio as a career for African American youth in Chicago by serving as talent scouts and identifying and mentoring a younger generation of disc jockeys. Beginning in 1966, Herb Kent put teen disc jockeys on the air for half an hour on Saturday evenings.¹³² One such disc jockey Kent discovered was Richard Pegue, who joined WVON in 1968. As Pegue recalled "Herb asked me to come work at his record shop on 49th and Wabash. And so I did. Not knowing that a year and-a-half later, I would be working at the radio station...I was music director for the radio station, which meant that I chose the music that was to go on the air." Pegue identified the Good Guys as occupational role models, stating that "they were role models for a lot of the people in the streets who had not gotten into or would never get into the industry."¹³³

WVON also answered the larger black nationalistic call for the inclusion of African American studies into primary and secondary school curriculums, and the station created products to aid this cause. Activities such as station researched and produced biographical sketches of important figures in African American history were distributed

¹³¹ "WVON Celebrates 1st Birthday on April 1," *Chicago Defender*, March 31, 1964, 17.

¹³² Spann and Walker, *40 Year Spann*, 40.

¹³³ Pegue, The HistoryMakers interview.

to local schools for use as teaching aids.¹³⁴ The station also sponsored African American history essay contests for local school children.¹³⁵ Music appreciation was also an essential part of these heritage-based events, as evidenced by a 1971 WVON-sponsored Unity Day Celebration for over 4,000 Chicago vocational school students who partook in a concert and African American history presentations by WVON disc jockeys.¹³⁶ In addition to providing career resources and curriculum aids, the station also honored Chicago Public School teachers themselves. In 1968, Leonard Chess and the Good Guys of WVON presented Jim Brown, the basketball coach at DuSable High School for twenty years, with a special plaque and reception in honor of his service to the community.¹³⁷

Outside of the classroom, one of the largest programs the station organized for Chicago schoolchildren was the Summer Basketball Clinic, a program co-sponsored with the Chicago Parks District in which over 5,000 youth enrolled in the summer basketball camp. In addition to keeping thousands of children occupied during the summer months, the station also wove academic considerations into the program as selected camp finalists had to write an essay on why they should attend the college of their choice. Five winners, selected by a judging committee that included Mayor Richard J. Daley, won college

¹³⁴ Lucky Cordell, The HistoryMakers interview.

¹³⁵ "First Negro Heritage Award Presented," *Chicago Defender*, March 29, 1966, 4.

¹³⁶ Walter Kale and Arthur Walker, "Students Swing At Rock Fest," *Chicago Tribune*, May 27, 1971, c 22.

¹³⁷ Connie Seals, "Dusable's Jim Brown Feted as He Moves On Up," *Chicago Defender*, September 12, 1968, 24.

scholarships.¹³⁸ By 1970, this program had expanded into the creation of the Summer Basketball League. During the summer of 1970, over 2,400 boys from the ages of twelve to seventeen from across the city took part in a basketball league that include team coaches such as Leon Hilliard of the Harlem Globetrotters and Bob Love of the Chicago Bulls.¹³⁹

The myriad of activities and programs sponsored and staged by WVON on behalf of African American youth in Chicago provide context for understanding the station's support of the Chicago school desegregation campaign during the early 1960s. As the Second Great Migration further increased Chicago's African American population in the postwar era, changes in Chicago's public and parochial school systems also reflected this demographic shift.¹⁴⁰ Chicago's African American population expanded throughout the south and west sides of the city throughout the 1950s, and whites aggressively fought their expansion and access to both housing and educational facilities. Appeasing segregationist sentiments of the late 1950s, the city's Democratic Party, under Mayor Richard J. Daley, forged a voting coalition comprised of whites situated on the city's northwest and southwest sides. As historian and activist Timuel Black recalled "Daley began to cater to the white ethnic community by using thinly veiled racial things like

¹³⁸ Topy Malagaris, "The Sound: Music and Radio: For Young Listeners," *Chicago Tribune*, October 11, 1967, D11.

¹³⁹ Jerry Shnay, "Tribune Will Co-Sponsor New Summer Basketball Program: Plan Summer Cage Program for City," *Chicago Tribune*, June, 23 1970, b1.

¹⁴⁰ Rury, "Race Not Space," 123.

“welfare queens”...and fought very vigorously against open housing or integration of the public schools along with his appointed person, Benjamin Willis...to keep Chicago segregated.”¹⁴¹

For WVON, Willis became the symbol of segregation and inadequate educational facilities for African American students in the Chicago Public School system during the mid-1960s. Willis, a former school superintendent from Buffalo, became superintendent of Chicago Public Schools in 1953. Willis’ concept of the “neighborhood school,” in which residential location inflexibly determined where a student attended school, was crucial to this policy of *de facto* segregation. As schools with predominantly African American student bodies descended into worsening overcrowded conditions in the 1950s and early 1960s due to the massive influx in population from the Second Great Migration, under Willis’ tenure Chicago Public Schools refused to relocate black students to schools in predominantly white neighborhoods that were not as crowded. Furthermore, the condition of education facilities in predominantly African American schools was notably worse than those attended by whites. The construction of the Robert Taylor Homes in 1962 fully demonstrates this overcrowding crisis. While the CHA expected over 10,583 elementary students to be enrolled in area schools with the facilities’ opening, CPS only planned to accommodate 7,765 students. By 1962, CPS projected

¹⁴¹ Timuel Black, interview by Julieanna Richardson, videocassette, June 19, 2000, interview A2000.007, The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, IL.

enrollment at forty students per class.¹⁴² Faced with an onslaught of overcrowded schools, in the early 1960s CPS began using temporary metal classroom structures to reduce the number of double-shift school days rather than allowing black students to attend less-crowded majority white schools in other areas of the city. By 1962, 150 of these temporary structures, derisively called “Willis Wagons” by Chicago’s African American community, were utilized. By the end of 1964, African American students occupied 70% of the Willis Wagons.¹⁴³ When asked about a set of these mobile classrooms installed at Jackson Park to ease overcrowded conditions in predominantly African American schools, Reverend William Baird of the Woodlawn Organization stated, “Even if these mobile classrooms were gold-plated and the interiors were lined with ermine, they would still be evil because of the use made of them. They are an evil instrument to maintain a segregated school system.”¹⁴⁴ Furor regarding overcrowding and deteriorating conditions in Chicago’s public schools led to calls for action from civil rights organizations such as the Chicago NAACP and Chicago Urban League. In 1962, these calls for change manifested themselves into a coalition of civil rights organizations in Chicago, the Coordinating Council of Community Organizations, which managed efforts directed at school integration and Willis’ removal.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴² Hunt, “What Went Wrong,” 113.

¹⁴³ Rury, “Race Not Space,” 131.

¹⁴⁴ “50 Picket Chicago’s Mobile Classrooms,” *Jet Magazine*, June 7, 1962, 52.

¹⁴⁵ James Ralph, *Northern Protest, Martin Luther King, Jr. Chicago, and the Civil Rights Movement* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 14-25.

To advocate for action, the CCCO's member organizations coordinated numerous boycotts, marches, meetings, and sit-ins throughout Chicago from 1962 to 1967. The city's only twenty-four hour African American radio station, WVON, became an active proponent in the fight against Benjamin Willis. As a media outlet, WVON broadcasted information and announcements about meeting locations and scheduled boycotts.¹⁴⁶ Its hourly news bulletins also provided information about the latest events in the struggle against Willis and attempts to force the city to remove him from office. Furthermore, disc jockeys such as E. Rodney Jones served as speakers and emcees for organizational meetings and rallies.¹⁴⁷

Wesley South's *Hotline* was a key venue for spreading information about the boycott movement, and leaders of the school boycott movement used the show as an essential platform for explaining their strategies and operations. Wesley South, himself an impassioned supporter of integration and close friend and ally of many CCCO leaders, ran for office in 1964 as a Democratic candidate for 29th Ward Committeeman in Chicago.¹⁴⁸ In June 1963, Dick Gregory, a leader in the boycott movement, appeared on *Hotline* to explain the school boycott plans and his personal support of the movement.¹⁴⁹ By August 1963, tensions had reached a boiling point in the community, and, in August

¹⁴⁶ Herb Kent Show, January 29, 1965.

¹⁴⁷ Peggy Robinson, "Benjamin Willis: Symbol of Segregation: School Chief Key Target of Rights Groups," *Chicago Defender*, February 18, 1964, 4.

¹⁴⁸ "Supporters of School Integration," *Chicago Defender*, January 4, 1964, 4.

¹⁴⁹ Herb Lyon, "Tower Ticker," *Chicago Tribune*, June 6, 1963, p. 14.

of that year, arsonists set fire to a “Willis Wagon” at 69th Street and Harvard Avenue. Additionally, picketers holding signs such as “Willis = Wallace” protested outside of Willis’ home in the Edgewater Beach neighborhood.¹⁵⁰

The CCCO funneled these tensions into mass action through its organization of the first mass boycott of Chicago schools on October 22. Throughout the late summer of 1963, the station sponsored news bulletins about the boycott and disc jockeys encouraged families to keep their children out of school. White civil rights activist George O’Hare recalled that the CCCO utilized WVON’s facility on Cicero Avenue as a planning center for the boycott. On the night before the boycott, O’Hare stated that Dick Gregory telephoned him and told to go to WVON’s studio. Upon his arrival he noticed that “Mahalia Jackson was there and everybody that was anybody politically Black was in this building...the whole subject was tomorrow there would be no school. Tomorrow they urged ‘Stay Home.’”¹⁵¹ The October 22 one day boycott yielded 224,770 students absent from school, and in some schools, such as DuSable and Farragut High Schools, almost 100% of the student body was not in attendance.¹⁵² In regards to the boycott and its high rate of absentee students, Wesley South stated “we knew we had the grabbed brass rings on the audience.”¹⁵³

¹⁵⁰ James Rich, “Home of Willis Picketed,” *Chicago Tribune*, August 16, 1963, 1.

¹⁵¹ Spann and Walker, *40 Year Spann*, 63-64.

¹⁵² “School by School Story of Boycott,” *Chicago Defender*, October 23, 1963, 4.

¹⁵³ Wesley South, interview by Art Norman, *An Evening With Wesley South*, February 18, 1994, VHS. (Chicago, Illinois: Museum of Broadcast and Communications).

After the October 1963 boycott, WVON continued to support the CCCO's calls for Willis' resignation. The station garnered support from listeners for the February 1964 boycott and supported CCCO President Al Raby's campaign of leading marches to Chicago City Hall to draw attention to the desegregation of Chicago's school. As Herb Kent recalled, "We could tell folks to go sit on the steps of City Hall. There'd be five thousand of them there."¹⁵⁴ On *Hotline*, the CCCO's campaign became a popular topic of discussion for any guest on South's show. In a December 1965 show, South even pressed Elijah Muhammad of the Nation of Islam, which as an organization did not support integrated schools for African Americans, regarding his views on Benjamin Willis and the current state of schools in Chicago.¹⁵⁵ Finally in March 1965, Willis himself appeared on *Hotline* and took questions from irate callers, thus allowing listeners a chance to engage with the leader on a personal level.¹⁵⁶ Following Willis' resignation in 1966, his successor James Redmond, also utilized WVON's *Hotline* to explain his policies of desegregation through voluntary student transfers. Due to the show's popularity, the station replayed the show and South stated that most African American and civil rights groups were "favorably impressed with his answers and wanted tapes of the show."¹⁵⁷

Hotline also provided an arena for Chicago African American youth to discuss the boycott movement as well. Throughout the CCCO's campaign, Wesley South took calls

¹⁵⁴ Kent, The HistoryMakers interview.

¹⁵⁵ Wesley South, *Hotline*, WVON, Chicago, IL, December 23, 1965, compact disc.

¹⁵⁶ Herb Lyon, "Tower Ticker," *Chicago Tribune*, March 18, 1965, p. a3.

¹⁵⁷ Herb Lyon, "Tower Ticker," *Chicago Tribune*, May 15, 1966, p. 12.

from listeners of all ages and encouraged their involvement in the show. In one 1963 show, local activists Jeanne Dago and Katie Ellis appeared as guests on *Hotline* to discuss the Chicago school dropout rate and Willis Wagon debate. According to the *Chicago Defender*, “both of the women, who stated that the queries came from the young people of the city, were pleased that Chicago’s youth are vitally interested in and are questioning the direction of our leadership and intent to take an active participation in affairs of the city and the nation.”¹⁵⁸ Beyond the school boycott issue, South encouraged youth to call into the show. Listeners discussed a myriad of topics relating to African American youth as demonstrated by one January 1965 show in which school dress codes, a United States Air Force Academy student cheating scandal and the role cheating played in schools, and the importance of standardized tests were all issues debated by listeners. As a moderator, South carefully toed the line between remaining impartial during arguments between dissenting adults and youth and stating his opinions. To one listener who argued that student clothing should be left up to the individual child, South retorted “But what about these girls that come there in tight stretch pants and sweaters?” He also respected the opinions of his younger listeners and treated their comments with dignity and respect. In a January 1965 show, he encouraged students to call in to discuss if they had ever seen anyone cheat and also at what age they believed they should be allowed to date. In another show he sympathized and agreed with a young male caller who lamented

¹⁵⁸ Theresa Fambro, “This Weekend,” *Chicago Defender*, July 20, 1963, p. 12.

the lack of playground space in his neighborhood and complained about abandoned condemned buildings that occupied valuable neighborhood space.

In addition to providing a venue for Chicago African Americans to discuss and debate issues concerning the community's youth, South also demonstrated his willingness to strongly defend the city's black children when he believed they were slighted. In a 1965 show, a presumably white caller blasted South's criticism of the cheating scandal at the United States Air Force Academy, declaring "it would seem to me that your listeners should first be concerned about slugging teachers, stabbing each other, tearing up lunch rooms and the vulgarity that goes on in the Negro schools before you begin criticizing those clean cut boys out at the Air Force Academy!" South departed from his usual calm demeanor, angrily cut the caller off, and demanded "Are you angry at the world? I'd like to see what you look like!" After the caller hung up after refusing to answer South's questions, South stated

I have to apologize to you for that and we have no control whatsoever over the calls that we get in...he has so much hate in his heart and the only way he can get his frustration off is to get up here and say what he thinks about these little colored kids in these schools. And unfortunately we have a lot to learn. We have to learn to live with them, and I'm sure eventually we will emancipate him too.¹⁵⁹

This dedication won South and WVON accolades from listeners for their efforts on behalf of Chicago's African American youth. In a letter to the *Chicago Defender* supporting African American youth, Chicago citizen Alice Love wrote "we all know most teenagers are going forward regardless what happens to Supt. Ben Willis and his

¹⁵⁹ "Hotline," January 29, 1965.

power control supporters...many thanks to station WVON and Wesley South's *Hot Line!*"¹⁶⁰

Conclusion

During the 1960s and early 1970s, WVON's broadcasting focus on Chicago's African American youth and the station's activism on their behalf, particularly on efforts related to education, served to carve out a space for this age group on Chicago's radio scene. Exemplifying this focus on communication was a 1970 promotional contest in which nineteen year old Bernard Smith won a "Teen DeeJay Contest" contest sponsored by WVON and White Castle restaurants. In their coverage of the story, the Chicago *Defender* included a photograph of the young winner smiling proudly and receiving a plaque from Good Guy Herb Kent in honor of his hard work. Selected finalists received a thirty-minute test slot on Saturday mornings at the station, and as the winner Smith received a scholarship to a local broadcasting school. In explaining the purpose of the contest, WVON's sales manager Don Jackson noted that "the objectives of the contest were to provide an opportunity for young people to communicate."¹⁶¹ Throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, WVON worked to provide Chicago African American youth with that opportunity to communicate with each other. From discussions of Chicago high school life to the latest in teenage dance and fashion in the African American community, WVON and its disc jockeys both influenced this teen subculture and served as a

¹⁶⁰ "Letter to the Editor," Chicago *Defender*, May 31, 1965, 13.

¹⁶¹ "South Sider Wins Radio Contest," Chicago *Defender*, January 10, 1970, 3.

reflection of it. Additionally, the station's support of the Chicago Freedom Movement and issues of civil rights concern that affected the city's African American youth, such as the school dropout rate and the CCCO's school boycott movement, further defined WVON's pro-youth stance. Yet for all its activism, WVON's musical offerings and the role that it played in providing a rhythm and blues and soul music soundtrack for Chicago African American listeners during the 1960s and early 1970s not only made it one of the most popular radio stations in the city, but a major station that was crucial to the recording industry and the development of black recording artists.

CHAPTER FIVE

“MUSIC IS THE BACKBONE”: THE MUSIC OF WVON

In a 1968 interview with *Billboard* magazine, WVON disc jockey and Program Director Lucky Cordell declared “Music is the backbone of most radio stations. Music, therefore, must be right for what you do. I, for one, am against waiting for someone else to make the hits. For aside from taking some of the excitement out of the business, you aren’t really kidding the audience. They know when you’re a follower instead of a leader.”¹ As argued in previous chapters, the personalities of the disc jockeys at Chicago radio station WVON during the 1960s and early 1970s helped endear them to their listeners. As one former listener stated,

The station was characterized by the jocks having almost unlimited freedom to do whatever because they were so in tune with the listening public. The on air sound ranged from the most high energy jock imaginable (Joe Cobb) to one of the smoothest, most laid back one (Herb Kent). Pervis Spann was allowed to play as much blues as he wanted. Ed Cook was allowed to make derogatory remarks about Chicago, which he did constantly... Boy did it ever have a loyal following!²

In addition to its disc jockeys’ personalities, WVON’s social activism, especially on behalf of young African American Chicagoans during the Chicago Freedom Movement, also inspired listeners’ devotion to the station. Yet in addition to the station’s charismatic

¹Lucky Cordell, “A Person Has to Love Radio,” *Billboard*, April 6, 1968, 19.

² J. Alex Bowab, “Herb Kent May 1971 Aircheck,” Reel Radio (Blog), April 11, 2009, <http://www.reelradio.com/comment/comment.cgi?hkwvon051971~Herb+Kent+WVON+Chicago,+May+19+1971~../gb/wvon.html#hkwvon051971>

personalities and Civil Rights activism, WVON's rhythm and blues and soul broadcasts which it played at all hours of the day and night, comprised its "backbone." The national radio industry recognized WVON as a leader due to its "breaking" or introduction of new rhythm and blues and soul music to the general public. For many African American recording artists, who because of their race faced difficulty in receiving airplay on radio stations formatted primarily for white listeners, WVON served as an essential outlet for their work. Recording labels such as Motown used WVON to gauge the popularity of songs with listeners, most notably those who were younger, to determine what records had a chance of becoming a nationwide hit. Supported by its weekly published song popularity chart, the "Soul 45," WVON served as a litmus test for determining which songs and artists had potential for nationwide success. Therefore, the musical tastes of WVON's disc jockeys and listeners and the records they deemed to be hits or misses helped determine the overall national direction of the rhythm and blues and soul music industry the 1960s and early 1970s.

In his work *Doowop: The Chicago Scene* historian Robert Pruter examines doowop music in the 1950s and "the symbiotic relationship between record companies, musical groups and disc jockeys that helped develop soul music." This symbiotic relationship continued into the 1960s and early 1970s as WVON's disc jockeys did not just break records, but served as catalysts in the music industry by discovering new musical talent, operating their own Chicago entertainment venues which featured the latest recording artists and musical groups, and providing key promotional support to

artists.³ When not broadcasting on WVON, the station disc jockeys fully enmeshed themselves in Chicago's African American music and entertainment scene on both the South and West Sides of the city. From Fitzhugh McKie's Southside hotspot, the Disc Jockey Lounge, to Pervis Spann and E. Rodney Jones organizing of stage shows at the Regal Theatre for some of the earliest commercial public performances by Aretha Franklin, WVON's disc jockeys served as a vital link between performers, record labels, and radio stations, and they worked to make a seamless world in which all of these groups operated in tandem to maximize profits. Furthermore, beyond providing mere entertainment for its listeners, the music of WVON helped to reinforce the egalitarian message of the Chicago Freedom Movement and the pro-Civil Rights Movement activities of the station. WVON was crucial to the popularization of the soul music genre, a musical genre with roots in rhythm and blues and gospel, which radio historian William Barlow argued was the "race-coded soundtrack for the assault on Jim Crow." As noted by Maurice White of the musical group Earth, Wind, and Fire "What a tremendous contribution WVON made to the public by allowing a variety of our music to be heard, from blues to jazz to R&B and to the development of new artists on the block."⁴

"NY Didn't Break Records – They Came Here"

While the personalities of WVON's disc jockeys and their social activism vaulted the Good Guys to social prominence in Chicago's African American community during

³ Robert Pruter, *Doowop: The Chicago Scene* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 82.

⁴ Pervis Spann and Linda C. Walker, *The Forty-Year Spann of WVON* (Chicago: National Academy of the Blues, 2003), 22.

the mid-1960s and early 1970s, another major factor leading to the radio station's success was its simultaneous rise at the same time that soul music emerged in the United States. Disc jockey Herb Kent credits part of the station's success to that timing, arguing that "It came at a time that music kept getting—it's hard to say better but technically easier to listen to...Black people really got into radio. Motown Records came along. We had the Chicago sounds. The Philadelphia Sound and this thing was really growing until it got to the 70s and the 70s was absolutely an explosion of black music."⁵ From its start in April of 1963, WVON wholeheartedly dedicated itself to featuring the latest in rhythm and blues music and the emerging soul music genre. While the station marketed itself as Chicago's "Home of the Soul Sound," it still featured other genres of music, such as gospel on Sunday and blues each night after midnight.⁶ In addition to serving as an outlet for the playing of records on the Chess Records label, WVON's emphasis on broadcasting rhythm and blues and soul music was a financially sound decision and closely tied to the station's focus on younger listeners. As discussed previously, this move paralleled the national radio industry's recognition of the lucrative teen listener demographic, a shift which began in the 1950s. By the late 1950s, American teenagers bought more records than adults. In 1958, the purchasing power of American teenagers was \$9.5 billion dollars, which were ten times the total receipts of the movie industry. Even more telling,

⁵ Herb Kent interview, Interview by Alexis Gillespie, transcript, September 25, 1995. "Black Radio: Telling It Like It Was" Collection, Archives of African American Music and Culture, Bloomington, Indiana.

⁶ "Free Soul Advertisement," *Chicago Defender*, October 31, 1968, 17.

of this aggregated teen buying power, two-thirds of the money came from their parents and one-third came from their own earnings, thus demonstrating the potential disposable incomes which youth in America possessed.⁷ Herb Kent recalled singer and songwriter Curtis Mayfield of The Impressions once stating to him that the music industry is a “young people’s game...the majority of records are sold to young people, that the whole thing is centered around youth.”⁸ As young people were the main consumers of rhythm and blues and soul records, it made practical business sense for WVON to feature a large portion of its broadcasts comprised of this musical genre.

Prior to WVON’s start in 1963, most early time-brokered Chicago radio broadcasts intended for African American listeners in Chicago featured rhythm and blues, rock ‘n’ roll, and gospel music. Throughout the 1960s, WVON actively marketed itself as Chicago’s “Home of the Soul Sound” and as a genre, soul peaked at exactly the same time that the station hit its stride. Soul music first emerged on the national scene around 1954 with the music of Ray Charles. The mainstream success of Charles combined with those of rhythm and blues singers such as Chuck Berry led gospel singers and groups, particularly in the Southern United States, to flock to soul with dreams of stardom. Soul achieved its greatest popularity at the height of the Civil Rights Movement, and its development paralleled the movement’s growing nationalistic stance that demanded

⁷Susan Douglas, *Listening In: Radio and the American Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 227; Thomas Hine, *The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2000), 238.

⁸ Herb Kent and David Smallwood, *The Cool Gent: The Nine Lives of Radio Legend Herb Kent* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2009) 171.

immediate racial equality. Listeners embraced vocal powerhouses such as Aretha Franklin and James Brown, whose intense and emotional songs not only provided comfort and entertainment, but also served to inspire and support listeners during the movement's turbulent times.⁹ In the wake of jail beatings, lynching, assassinations, and church bombings, songs such as The Impressions' 1964 "Keep On Pushing," whose lyrics exhorted listeners to "Move up a little higher / Some way, somehow" took on a greater meaning and served as a source of strength for those trying to comprehend the era's violence.¹⁰ As historian James Stewart noted, through their songs "performers, musicians and composers took up these topical problems in their music and they also offered solutions for improvement and change."¹¹ Although its roots were originally in the gospel music of African American churches, soul gained white listeners throughout the late 1950s and early 1960s. Not only did white listeners become familiar with the music as they discovered rhythm and blues, but as the Civil Rights Movement unfolded and the struggle for African American equality became a national topic that could not be avoided, soul permeated the radio airwaves as well. Seen as a reaction to racism and discrimination, according to music historian Peter Guralnick soul was the "product of a

⁹ Robert Stephens, "Soul: A Historical Reconstruction of Continuity and Change in Black Popular Music," *The Black Perspective in Music* 12, no. 1(Spring 1984), 21.

¹⁰ The Impressions, "Keep On Pushing," *Keep on Pushing*, 1964 by ABC-Paramount, B001CAILHQ, compact disc.

¹¹ James Stewart, Message in the Music: Political Commentary in Black Popular Music from Rhythm and Blues to Early Hip Hop," *The Journal of African American History* 90, no. 3 (Summer 2005), 206.

particular time and place that no one wanted to see repeated, the bitter fruit of segregation, transformed...into a statement of warmth and affirmation.”¹²

Since its emergence as a musical genre, historians and musicologists grappled with defining soul and how it differed from rhythm and blues. Guralnick argued that “musically, I believe that soul remains the story of how a universal sound emerged from the black church.”¹³ Blending together rhythm and blues with gospel, one of soul’s hallmarks was its application of secular lyrics to the melodies of religious songs. For example, Ray Charles’ 1956 hit, “This Little Girl of Mine,” was set to the gospel standby “This Little Light of Mine.” Charles’ mixing of religious and secular music shocked and titillated listeners. Blues singer and musician Big Bill Broonzy declared about Charles’ music, “He’s crying sanctified. He’s mixing blues with the spirituals. He should be singing in a church.”¹⁴ Despite abandoning gospel’s religious message, soul retained other aspects of the genre, such as its lyrical ability to express a high degree of emotional honesty and raw emotion. Indicative of this style is Aretha Franklin’s 1967 song, “A Natural Woman,” whose lyrics honestly declare “You make me feel so good inside / And I just want to be close to you / You make me feel so alive.”¹⁵ In addition to its emotional openness, soul was also vocally intense and complex, and singers often conveyed their

¹² Peter Guralnick, *Sweet Soul Music: Rhythm and Blues and the Southern Dream of Freedom* (Boston: Back Bay Books., 1999), 13.

¹³ Ibid, 22.

¹⁴ Ibid, 142.

¹⁵ Aretha Franklin, “Natural Woman” *Aretha in Paris*, 1968 by Atlantic, B0000033FZ, compact disc.

emotions through an unrestrained improvisational array of climbs, moans and screams as they felt their way through the lyrics of a song. In one such case, Jerry Butler's 1968 "Only the Strong Survive," Butler took listeners on a musical roller coaster as his voice ebbed and flowed through the chorus' rolling crescendos.¹⁶

Just as the Civil Rights Movement emphasized the theme of unity, soul also sought to create a sense of togetherness amongst its listeners. Borrowing call and response pattern from gospel, soul songs often encouraged audience participation.¹⁷ This call and response pattern, as seen throughout Fontella Bass' 1965 song "Rescue Me" in which her backing singers echoed her refrains throughout the song, not only served to reinforce the lyrics through repetition, but also provided the listeners with an emotional investment in the song and a sense of togetherness as the work now involved the participation of more than one person.¹⁸ Furthermore, the contributions of back-up singers, who often participated in the song's call-and-response aspects, served as guides for the listener's participation. Additionally, numerous soul singers also furthered this sense of unity with the listeners through their physical involvement with the Civil Rights Movement. Groups such as The Impressions allowed their songs to be used at rallies organized by groups such as the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and often participated at movement rallies

¹⁶ Jerry Butler, "Only The Strong Survive," *The Iceman Cometh*, 1968 by Mercury, B005N0TZY4, compact disc.

¹⁷ Michael Haralambos, *Soul Music: The Birth of a Sound in Black America* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1985), 96.

¹⁸ Fontella Bass, "Rescue Me," *The New Look*, 1966 by Checker Records, B0014C402W, compact disc.

and events. Historian William Van Deburg argues that soul “served as a repository of racial consciousness that transcended the medium of entertainment and provided a ritual in song in which African Americans could identify.”¹⁹ Its singers therefore, were not just mere entertainers, but like WVON’s disc jockeys, were seen by their listeners as social activists as well.

Leonard Chess’ decision to focus a significant portion of its broadcasts on soul, a genre of music which spoke to the African American experience, further strengthened the station’s pro-Civil Rights stance, and throughout its heyday, WVON not only became a station that played soul, but it became one of the most important soul radio stations in the country. Particularly with its sizeable African American listenership, WVON served as an ideal station for the introduction, or “breaking,” of rhythm and blues and soul records by African American artists in the 1960s and early 1970s. Ernie Leaner of United Record Distributors recalled that “WVON was the strongest station I’d ever seen. NY never broke records...they came here.”²⁰ For WVON disc jockeys, breaking a record was not only a lucrative event, but one that demonstrated how much control they had over listeners and the degree of power they had in the broadcasting business. Disc jockeys were instrumental to the process of breaking a record, and as the owner of his own record label, Chess Records, WVON owner Leonard Chess himself firmly understood that

¹⁹ William Van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965-1975* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 205.

²⁰*The Dawn of Urban Radio*, producer and director Mark Williams, 1 hr 30 min, CTV, 1990. VHS.

importance. From his early days at the label when he handled promotional work himself, Chess had carefully cultivated a nationwide network of disc jockeys to help support his label's artists and as noted by Nadine Cohodas "Leonard made sure to visit them [disc jockeys] every time he stopped to see his distributors."²¹

As they held the power to make or break records, both the record industry and the station's listeners viewed WVON's disc jockeys as prognosticators who could predict the next hit. Disc jockey Pervis Spann stated "If a DJ was in Jackson, Mississippi and heard from some promotion man that a record was hot in Chicago, he'd immediately play it."²² Marshall Chess recalled that "We figured if a record could make it in Chicago, then it would definitely have a chance in New York or L.A."²³ Throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, national industry publications such as *Billboard* interviewed jocks such as E. Rodney Jones regarding what songs they currently liked.²⁴ In addition to publications, WVON was an industry model for radio programming and at trade conferences the Good Guys provided insight into WVON's success and "How We Made R & B #1."²⁵

²¹ Nadine Cohodas, *Spinning Blues into Gold: The Chess Brothers and the Legendary Chess Records* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 61.

²² Spann and Walker, *40 Year Spann*, 72.

²³ Marshall Chess, interview by Michael McAlpin, transcript, ca. 1994, Michael McAlpin Collection, Archives of African American Music and Culture, Bloomington, Indiana.

²⁴ "Top R&B Jockey's Pick of the Week," *Billboard*, February 13, 1965, 30.

²⁵ Robb Baker, "The Sound: Music and Radio: For Young Listeners," *Chicago Tribune*, June 11, 1968, B19.

As a testament to its power in Chicago, in an October 1966 *Billboard* survey record promoters, distributors and manufacturers rated WVON as the most influential R&B station in the city. In a ranking of the top ten rhythm and blues disc jockeys in Chicago believed to have the greatest influence on their listeners' buying preferences, six jocks were from WVON and the top four were all from the station.²⁶ Respected by the industry, the station's jocks held the power to make or break an artist. This power to "make" or "coronate" a record or artist was not lost on the disc jockeys, and in some cases, promotional events transformed into regal coronations. In essence, the sheer power of WVON's disc jockeys could popularize an artist and thus legitimize their success. The jocks also used regal terms to describe specific artists. For example, in a 1965 "Pervis Spann Show," Spann introduced Aretha Franklin as the new "Queen of the Blues" before playing her new song "Runnin' Out of Fools."²⁷ For Franklin in particular, her moniker as the "Queen of Soul" is owed to Spann, who during a 1968 concert at the Regal Theatre literally placed a crown upon the head of a young Aretha Franklin on stage while announcing her "Queen of Soul."²⁸ E. Rodney Jones also employed this regal rhetoric with Gene "Duke of Earl" Chandler. Before playing Chandler's song "You Can't Hurt Me No More" Jones declared "Aww...that's my man...King Earl...at the Regal during

²⁶ "Radio Response Ratings, 3rd Cycle," *Billboard*, October 16 1965, 61.

²⁷ "Pervis Spann Show," WVON, Chicago, IL, January 29, 1965, compact disc.

²⁸ Spann and Walker, *40 Year Spann*, 87.

the Christmas holidays I took that sword and tapped him on both shoulders and said ‘Rise king, no longer a duke!’”²⁹

Some of the most popular rhythm and blues and soul hits of the 1960s and 1970s had their first airplay on WVON. Prominent hits that broke at WVON include E. Rodney Jones’ breaking of Marvin Gaye’s “I Heard it Through the Grapevine” and The Supremes’s “Stop in the Name of Love.”³⁰ As a result, WVON played an influential role in the music industry as African American disc jockeys became the ones who controlled the potential hit-making potential of records and thus the direction of the industry. Herb Kent recalled, “It was absolutely an explosion of black music...so we were right in the middle of that. Aretha Franklin, The Temptations, The Miracles, the records were being given to us first.”³¹

In particular, the WVON Good Guys focused their musical selections on local artists. Lucky Cordell stated that “we knew that if you only play the major artists the little guys will never get a chance.”³² By the middle to late 1960s, WVON devoted a third of its playlist to local Chicago rhythm and blues and soul acts and sought to give an extra push to records released by local talent. This emphasis on local acts intertwined the station with Chicago’s local recording industry and, for record labels like Chess, helped

²⁹ “E. Rodney Jones Show,” WVON, Chicago, IL, January 29, 1965, compact disc.

³⁰ E. Rodney Jones, Radio Smithsonian interview.

³¹ Herb Kent, Radio Smithsonian interview.

³² Al Benson, Interviewer unknown, compact disc, n.d., Radio Smithsonian: Black Radio Project Collection, Archives of African American Music and Culture, Bloomington, Indiana.

fuel its success.³³ For local artists, the essential first step on the road to professional success was to make it onto WVON's playlist and hope that their songs followed the path as demonstrated by one budding songstress, Diane Cunningham. In 1967, sixteen year old Cunningham first recorded and locally released her song "Someday Baby" on the small Chicago record label New Breed Records. The song received its first airplay on WVON and through promotion by the station's disc jockeys, quickly climbed the station's charts. As a result of its popularity, Cunningham's song attracted national attention and the national label Fontana picked up the song and released it nationally.³⁴ While Cunningham failed to record another hit, numerous local artists such as The Impressions, The Dells, The Chi-Lites, Gene Chandler, and Ramsey Lewis, paralleled her trajectory and all had records break on the station and then enter the national charts.³⁵

For Motown in particular, WVON was instrumental. Berry Gordy made sure to get all of his records to WVON first in order to test their appeal with African American listeners.³⁶ Marketing itself as the "sound of young America," the Motown sound was simply described by Mary Wells of The Supremes as "youth and happiness...it's just not that it's old folks." The introduction of the label's music to WVON's young African American listenership provided Motown with an essential test to judge its artists' possible

³³Robert Pruter, *Chicago Soul* (Urbana: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 18.

³⁴Sel Yackley, "The Sound: Music and Radio: For Young Listeners," *Chicago Tribune*, November 1, 1967, D17.

³⁵ Kent and Smallwood, *The Cool Gent*, 87.

³⁶*The Dawn of Urban Radio*.

commercial appeal and national sales potential.³⁷ As historian Suzanne Smith argues, “Berry Gordy’s genius rested in his ability to attract strong talent, to control every aspect of the record production process, and to groom his artists for “white” crossover audiences.”³⁸ Gordy himself estimated that for a song to be considered to be a national hit, 70% of its audience had to be white. WVON proved to be the initial first step for a Motown song to enter the Chicago market, and Gordy depended upon jocks such as E. Rodney Jones for crucial airplay for the label’s songs.³⁹ For Good Guy Richard Pegue, Motown defined the music of Detroit. “The Detroit sound is only either after Berry Gordy or before Berry Gordy...with the start of Motown, the infusion of what would now be called ‘pop’, the well-orchestrated things that became the distinctive Detroit sound.”⁴⁰ Nevertheless, while Motown’s affiliation was with Detroit, WVON’s Chicago listeners helped refine the Motown sound by determining which records worked and which did not. Motown also specifically designed songs during the 1960s with AM radio stations like WVON in mind. With their radio-friendly short lengths and the rich sounds of the Holland-Dozier-Holland production team which featured strong string arrangements and

³⁷ Nancy Moss, “The Supremes: 11 Frantic Hours, 50 Screaming Minutes,” *Chicago Tribune*, March 20, 1966, 131.

³⁸ Suzanne Smith, *Dancing in the Street: Motown and the Cultural Politics of Detroit* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 8.

³⁹ Gerald Posner, *Motown: Music, Money, Sex and Power* (New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2005), 57.

⁴⁰ Richard Pegue, interview by Julieanna Richardson, videocassette, January 24, 2002, interview A2002.011, The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, IL.

high treble voices, acts such as Diana Ross of The Supremes and Michael Jackson of the Jackson Five technically lent themselves well to AM radio stations like WVON.⁴¹

An example of one of Motown's largest breaks on WVON was E. Rodney Jones' introduction of Marvin Gaye's "I Heard It Through the Grapevine" on his show in autumn of 1968. Playing the song without any plans for its release as a single by Motown, Jones' promotion of the track caused the song to quickly climb the charts. As recalled by Ernie Leaner, "We moved 100,000 Marvin Gaye's "I Heard It Through the Grapevine" in ten days."⁴² For his efforts, Jones received a Motown "Golden Ear" award for breaking the song and due to demand from WVON listeners, the record was released as a single by Motown in November 1968 and became the label's biggest-selling hit at that point in time.⁴³ As Herb Kent recalled, often the power for determining which songs were going to be hits lay in the hands of African American disc jockeys rather than record labels. He stated that "It might not have been the record that the record company wanted. Many times it wasn't, and the record company--if the deejays broke it, the record company would have to scurry and repress the records and rethink their promotional thing. They were valuable."⁴⁴ In recalling the label's power, Kent continued "Motown

⁴¹ Nelson George, *The Death of Rhythm and Blues* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 86.

⁴² *The Dawn of Urban Radio*.

⁴³ Peter Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around: The Secret History of Disco* (New York: MacMillan, 2006), 123.

⁴⁴ Herb Kent, interview by Julieanna Richardson, videocassette, February 15, 2000, interview A2000_26, The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, IL.

Records was cutting its teeth. We broke most of the Motown Records for the world right through WVON. If a record was to be big, it should have gone through WVON. The station was just that--just a powerhouse..."⁴⁵ Jones' success with "I Heard It Through The Grapevine" demonstrated the massive sway WVON held with its listeners. By the mid-1960s, while Chicago's white popular music radio stations such as WLS 890 were still generally unwilling to play African American music, WVON flourished as a result of their restrictive airplay policies.⁴⁶ Ernie Leaner, co-founder of United Record Distributor, the country's first black-owned record distribution company which distributed records from acts such as The Marvelettes and Smokey Robinson and the Miracles, stated that the "market contained enough black people with a strong enough economic base to buy those records."⁴⁷

Artists who received airplay on WVON broke a critical barrier in their professional careers. In Michael Jackson's autobiography, *Moonwalk*, he recalled that in the early years as the Jackson Five was trying to gain access to the airwaves, his brother Marlon Jackson told him that to hear their group on WVON was a good luck sign.⁴⁸ Eddie Kendrick of The Temptations argued, "They (WVON) made Chess records, they made Motown, they made King Records, because other DJs wouldn't play black records

⁴⁵ Kent, The HistoryMakers interview.

⁴⁶ Eddie Thomas, interview by Julieanna Richardson, videocassette, August 21, 2000, interview A2000_033, The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, IL.

⁴⁷ *The Dawn of Urban Radio*.

⁴⁸ Michael Jackson, *Moonwalk* (New York: Doubleday, 1988), 59.

on white stations then.”⁴⁹ Curtom record label owner and promoter Eddie Thomas noted: “They (white stations) didn't play a lot of other records that they had, see, so that's where the prejudice came, is on the turntable, but in the pockets and the checks, the bank book, everything was fine. Everything was equal, but the music was--definitely you had to cross over. Otherwise the jocks wouldn't touch you.”⁵⁰ In reference to WVON, Thomas continued: “We needed exposure. No matter how good your music is, you've got to get exposed. That's the key to it. Somebody's got to hear it. John Q. Public can't buy it if you don't hear it... we had to rely on our guys at our VONs and CHB in Detroit, JOB in Detroit, all these other stations, to rely upon them to play our music because that's the way it was.”⁵¹

WVON's disc jockeys employed various on-air tactics to increase the popularity of a song. As noted by Lucky Cordell “if you are going to give a record a shake, you've got to give it some exposure. If you do it for a week, the record doesn't take off, if it doesn't show signs of movement, drop it. But in all honesty, to give a record a fair shake...people got to hear it.”⁵² These tactics included playing a song multiple times in an hour, and often even playing it multiple times in a row. One example of “pushing” a song is demonstrated by a 1965 recording of the “Franklin McCarthy Show” in which McCarthy played the song “Killing Floor” by Howlin' Wolf multiple times each hour

⁴⁹*The Dawn of Urban Radio.*

⁵⁰ Eddie Thomas, The HistoryMakers interview.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Cordell, Radio Smithsonian interview.

throughout his show, enthusiastically announcing each time that he played the song “It’s going all the way!”⁵³ Herb Kent, who broke The Vibrations’ “The Watusi,” a Chess Records track, recalled that despite payola regulations, “Leonard Chess called the station and told me to play it. Then he called again and said play it again. All in all he had me play that record five times in a row.”⁵⁴ Another promotional tactic, the “Top and Bottom,” featured WVON’s disc jockeys playing both sides of an artist’s album in a row. For example, a 1967 show by Bill “Butterball” Crane featured Crane playing both sides of the Fantastic Four’s album songs “As Long as I Live” and “To Share Your Love.”⁵⁵ Before and after the playing of the song, a snazzy promotional recording announcing the “Top and Bottom” feature heightened the listener’s anticipation of the songs and served to make them believe they had just heard something special and unique.

A sign of a record’s potential success in Chicago was its inclusion on the “Soul 45,” a weekly listing of local record sales compiled from African American record stores and airplay on WVON. First published in 1967, the “Soul 45” list was available every Friday from the station.⁵⁶ More importantly, the “Soul 45” list traced the impact of records that WVON “broke” into the market. Breaking a record involved having a disc jockey introduce a new song to WVON listeners and then having the song climb to the

⁵³ “Franklin McCarthy Show,” WVON, Chicago, IL, January 29, 1965, compact disc.

⁵⁴ Kent and Smallwood, *The Cool Gent*, 87.

⁵⁵ Bill ‘Butterball’ Crane Show,” WVON, Chicago, IL, August 27, 1967, compact disc.

⁵⁶ Haralambos, *Soul Music*, 12.

top of the “Soul 45” chart. After this introduction, disc jockeys and race record companies such as Chess hoped the song would crack the “Top Forty” charts and *Billboard* rankings. The disc jockeys touted on-air songs that made the “Soul 45” as being currently on the charts, and regularly informed listeners, often with the accompaniment of a “WVON Hot Sound Countdown” jingle, of the song’s current placement and chart trajectory.⁵⁷ WVON’s rankings list was not the first list of sales of records by African American artists in Chicago, and prior to WVON’s creation, African American disc jockeys created their own informal lists which they promoted on their individual shows. For example, prominent disc jockey Al Benson created his own top twenty chart and a second chart comprised of twenty up and coming records based on sales at local record shops primarily patronized by black listeners. These charts he then promoted on his time-brokered shows.⁵⁸ In addition to on-air promotion, throughout the late 1960s the *Chicago Tribune* and *Chicago Sun-Times* regularly published WVON’s sales chart, thus legitimizing the role that the station played in the city’s broadcast arena and serving as formal recognition of the station’s role as a measuring stick with which to gauge the musical tastes of Chicago African Americans.⁵⁹ While the “Soul 45” grew and transformed throughout the years, it nonetheless remained an important promotional device by the station that was utilized by both the music industry and advertisers.

⁵⁷ “E. Rodney Jones Show,” WVON, Chicago, IL, September 9, 1966, compact disc.

⁵⁸ Pruter, *Chicago Soul*, 50.

⁵⁹ Topy Malagaris, “The Sound: Music and Radio: For Young Listeners,” *Chicago Tribune*, September 11, 1967, B21.

According to 1963 Federal Communications Committee regulations allowing for Leonard Chess' ownership of the station, WVON could not play more than ten percent of Chess, Checker, or Argo records on its entire playlist.⁶⁰ While station management strongly urged Chess recordings be played, Lucky Cordell remembers that due to the FCC restrictions, Chess recordings played on WVON faced "a limited play of that product, more than any other record company....that meant, if you had ten records on the list and you wanted to bring a new record, one of those records would have to come off before you could out another record on."⁶¹

WVON's jocks firmly attest that Leonard Chess did not force them to provide extra airplay for Chess artists. According to Lucky Cordell, "He honestly didn't do that. He hustled his records with us the same way the other record promoters hustled them."⁶² Good Guy Cecil Hale also attested that "Leonard never leaned on anybody to play his records. Never did. His theory was that, 'If you make good records, people will play them.' And he was right about that. It didn't hurt that many of the folk that were on Chess were also hometown people. You know, so we were gonna be very inclined to look... to listen to them and play them anyway."⁶³ As Cecil Hale stated "Remember that Leonard

⁶⁰Cohodas, *Spinning Blues into Gold*, 215.

⁶¹ Cordell, Radio Smithsonian interview.

⁶²Lucky Cordell, interview by Julieanna Richardson, videocassette, January 16, 2002, interview A2001.017, The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, IL.

⁶³Cecil Hale, interview by Julieanna Richardson, videocassette, February 22, 2002, interview A2002.008,

Chess owned a record company. If anybody was going to be, you know, subject to payola and pressure from record companies, it most certainly would have been that station if any other station in the country.”⁶⁴ Despite the limitations to the airplay for Chess Records on WVON, Leonard Chess nevertheless quickly sent potential hit records to the station. In the case of Mitty Collier’s quickly recorded 1966 song “Sharing You,” Collier recalled that “I didn’t know anything but the band was there, they laid down the track, I read the words off the paper and they had a dub of it on VON before I got on the expressway and got home.”⁶⁵

For the station, this ability to play the latest in black music before other Chicago radio stations meant increased ratings and advertising profits, but also for the disc jockeys it meant special pay-offs, typically non-monetary, in the form of payola. According to Lucky Cordell, “a Cadillac, a boat, a fur coat for your wife...they were all incentives to play a record just a little bit more.”⁶⁶ He maintained, however, that there was not nearly as much exchange of payola amongst black disc jockeys as white. “I’ve heard of instances and stories where a white disc jockey got married, and when he and his family moved into their new home, it was totally furnished...rugs on the wall to the refrigerator

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, IL.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Cohodas, *Spinning Blues into Gold*, 240.

⁶⁶ Moses “Lucky” Cordell, interview by Michael McAlpin, Transcript, ca. 1994, Michael McAlpin Collection, Archives of African American Music and Culture, Bloomington, Indiana.

in the kitchen.”⁶⁷ The key to the payola market lay in knowing what songs were hits and which ones were “dogs.” “Airplay, exposure....you know there were people who felt at one time that you could play a dog, and play it enough, and it’ll be a hit. That’s not so. You can play a dog forever and you’ll sell some records...it’s not going to be a hit. On the other hand you can take a hit and not expose it, and it’ll die on the vine.”⁶⁸

In order for WVON to adhere to FCC regulations and avoid government investigation of issues such as payola, the station employed a series of Music Directors that vetted the overall roster of all music to be played on the air. During the 1960s and early 1970s, these Music Directors were E. Rodney Jones, Lucky Cordell, and Richard Pegue. These Music Directors also worked as disc jockeys for the station as well. Pegue recalled as Music Director “I was the only one who had the right to tell Leonard, ‘Take this record off your radio station,’ ...And he’d listen to me. I wasn’t the final word. But he paid attention.” For the disc jockeys, they retained the power to select the songs on their show and then play that music as they saw fit. In reference to songs on the disc jockeys’ shows, Pegue stated “How does it get played? That’s not even discussed. Is this new record by Little Milton Campbell a real hit? We think so. We think this is a real hit. ‘Hey guys we’re gonna play this record!’ And they pound it and they pound it--and it was a hit.”⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Cordell, Radio Smithsonian interview.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Pegue, The HistoryMakers interview.

While the popularity of WVON disc jockeys was apparent amongst Chicago African Americans, it is much harder to gauge their popularity amongst white listeners. While larger wattage radio stations such as Memphis's 50,000 watt WDIA 1070 and Helena, Arkansas' KFFA 1360 had the power to blanket the southern United States and, hence, both black and white listeners with their African American focused broadcasts during the 1960s and 1970s, WVON's small 1,000 watts limited the station's broadcasting scope. It was only on clear nights that the station could make it to cities such as Gary, Indiana and Oak Park, Illinois. With such a small signal, the station focused its directional antenna to broadcasting on the south and west sides of the city, both areas in which African American residents predominated. Furthermore, the station actively shunned playing music that was "too pop" or "too white." WVON stayed away from African American artists who were popular with white listeners, including Nat King Cole, Sammy Davis, Jr. and Lena Horne.⁷⁰ Additionally, the station also restricted its play of music by white artists. On a limited basis, the station played music by white recording artists and when it did, WVON often served as the entry point for records by these artists to be introduced to Chicago's African American community. For example, E. Rodney Jones broke records by white artists such as the Rolling Stones' "I Can't Get No Satisfaction" and B.J. Thomas' "Raindrops Keep Falling On My Head."⁷¹ When music by white artists did receive airplay, rhythm and blues influenced the music, as

⁷⁰ Cohodas, *Spinning Blues into Gold*, 218.

⁷¹ Kent and Smallwood, *The Cool Gent*, 92.

exemplified by Herb Kent's playing of "Brown Sugar" by the Rolling Stones.⁷² For the Rolling Stones, who publicly idolized Chess Records artists, such as Muddy Waters, and visited the Chess Studios when in the United States in 1964, the playing of their rhythm and blues influenced music was not too drastic of a departure from WVON's standard musical offerings.⁷³ In relation to soul, WVON did occasionally play "blue-eyed soul" or soul music by white artists including Dusty Springfield, the Bee Gees, and Tom Jones. In an interview with *Billboard*, Cordell stated "I'm quite pleased when we play an occasional record by a white artist. A dramatic case in point was 'Look of Love' by Dusty Springfield, a recording we broke on WVON before anywhere in the country...we upset this whole city with the record because it wasn't available in America when we started playing it."⁷⁴

In addition to groups such as the Rolling Stones, Elvis Presley also received some exposure on WVON.⁷⁵ Leonard Chess' past relationship with Elvis Presley illuminates perhaps why the playing of music by white artists was never a priority for WVON. Chess Records had flirted with the idea of possibly signing Elvis Presley in the early 1950s, but due to a falling out between Sam Phillips of Sun Records and Leonard Chess over transportation costs for a Jackie Brenston and His Delta Cats tour to promote

⁷² "Herb Kent Show," May 19, 1971.

⁷³ John Collis, *Story of Chess Records* (New York: Bloomsbury, 1998), 89.

⁷⁴ Earl Paige, "Slant's Out as Music Integrates," *Billboard*, August 23, 1969, 49.

⁷⁵ "Herb Kent Show," WVON, Chicago, IL, July 14, 1966, compact disc.

the song “Rocket 88,” business between the two men dissolved. Throughout its operations, Chess Records did not pursue signing Presley or other white artists, such as Jerry Lee Lewis. Under the leadership of Leonard and Phil Chess, Chess Records tended to stick with African American blues, rhythm and blues, rock n’ roll and soul recording artists, and this singular focus on the African American market continued at WVON. As argued by Chess biographer Nadine Cohodas, “Record men like Leonard and Phil weren’t in a headlong rush to get their own Elvis.”⁷⁶ As WVON was a proven successful economic venture in African American broadcasting, it made sense that the Chess brothers continued to focus on African American listeners rather than try to expand their listener base to white listeners lest they risk damaging an already successful broadcasting endeavor.

Leonard Chess’ complicated relationship with race continued with the white employees who worked at WVON. While the station’s disc jockeys were African American, in the early years of the station’s existence, its management and advertising staff were white. In 1968, Cordell became the first African American employee to crack the upper echelon of station management when he became Assistant Manager of the station. He eventually rose to become General Manager in 1970. As noted by Good Guy Richard Pegue, above all else Leonard Chess was a pragmatic businessman, and as he recalled “he did a lot of things to protect I’ll say our interest as well as his interest.”⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Cohodas, *Spinning Blues into Gold*, 147.

⁷⁷ Pegue, The HistoryMakers interview.

Chess was fully aware that in order for the station to succeed financially, national advertisers needed to purchase time on the station. As whites owned most of these businesses, Chess feared that African American sales staff and managers would be a financial hindrance. Skirting the line between conservatism and social activism, the station attempted to ensure its profit-making ability by not being too radical as to scare off potential advertisers. One case in point in regards to this fear was Sears Roebuck and Company. According to Sears executive and activist George O'Hare, "my people at Sears didn't know how to spell black." In 1964, when, after the urging of Dick Gregory, O'Hare contacted Sears' advertising agency, McCann-Erickson, to purchase advertising space at the station, O'Hare recalled being told "You can't put them on WVON...It's run by a bunch of ex-convicts. They're Communists."⁷⁸

WVON aggressively pursued the national advertising market in order to assure potential buyers that time bought at the station was a sound financial decision. This pursuit included a 1968 advertising campaign in which the station spent over \$250,000 to market itself to businesses in Chicago's four largest newspapers. *Chicago Tribune* business writer Allan Jaklich stated "WVON is an AM radio station run by and for Negroes. It is relatively small, 1,000 watts in power, and features rhythm and blues music. Why then is VON running more than \$250,000 worth of ads this year in Chicago's four daily newspapers? Because it is possible for the profit motive and social

⁷⁸ Span and Walker, *40 Year Spann*, 62-63.

responsibility to co-exist.”⁷⁹ “Station manager Al Bell stressed that “WVON is not only a black radio station, but a force in the total market. If the total market doesn’t listen to WVON, then the station will try to reach it other ways.” For WVON, advertising dollars were crucial, and in its first year of operation, the station made over \$600,000 on advertising, which was a little over half the total price which Leonard Chess paid for the entire station. By 1965, the station derived over half of its advertising revenue from national sponsors.”⁸⁰ The station counted Colgate-Palmolive, Bristol Myers, General Foods, and Lever Brothers amongst its national sponsors.⁸¹ In the early years of the station, local businesses served as the bulk of advertising and hundreds of disc jockeys produced advertisements for businesses such as the Moo and Oink grocery store chain and Munz’s Television shop which filled the station’s airwaves. For national advertisers, the station served as a way to “break” products to test their popularity with African American consumers and if successful, then market them nationwide. In one example, a spicy locally produced condiment, “Mumbo Sauce,” first advertised on WVON and based on its sales success with listeners, next broadcasted commercials on WBBM 105.9, CBS-FM.⁸²

⁷⁹ Allan Jaklich, “VON Stresses Responsibility,” *Chicago Tribune*, July 29 1968, c10.

⁸⁰ “Negro Radio an Ever-Increasing Influence,” *Billboard*, March 27, 1965, 54.

⁸¹ Jaklich, “VON Stresses Responsibility.”

⁸² “Small Businesses Discuss Forming Group to Stretch Advertising Dollar,” *Chicago Tribune*, September 1, 1968, sc5.

“People Get Ready”: Civil Rights and Soul Music on WVON

As previously mentioned, one important way that WVON supported the struggle for civil right was through its support of soul music. From the mid-1960s to the early 1970s, the station’s playlists carefully interwove the music into its broadcasts. As noted by African American music and radio historian Brian Ward, soul’s development as a genre paralleled the intensification of the Civil Rights Movement. Ward argues that in the beginning years of soul, its songs contained subtle allusions to the larger struggles for racial equality and often listeners created deeper political interpretations of songs that were not the original intentions of the song’s creators. Although these early songs did not include the overt political statements that became hallmarks of the genre in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Ward stresses that the early works of musical talent such as Sam Cooke, James Brown, and The Impressions nonetheless contained soul’s core tenets of African American racial pride and respect for all races.⁸³ Playlists from WVON’s early years attest to Ward’s thesis as they are peppered with less militant songs. For example, the July 17, 1964 “Soul 45” included both The Impressions “Keep on Pushing” and James Brown’s “Out of Sight.”⁸⁴ As musician Little Milton attested, “Now when we did this we had no thoughts at all concerning the great Martin Luther King’s movement which at that time was starting to pick up oodles of momentum. We were just trying to get a hit

⁸³ Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding*, 143.

⁸⁴ WVON, “Soul 45 - July 17-July 24, 1964.”

record.”⁸⁵ Yet listeners who were watching the Civil Rights Movement unfold before their eyes, often politically interpreted these songs. At first glance, Brown’s 1964 hit “Out of Sight” is an upbeat ode to a beautiful woman. Yet to some listeners, with its lyrics of “You’re hip / You know just where you’re at / You’re beautiful mama,” Brown’s song transformed into an anthem of pride.⁸⁶

As the Civil Rights Movement intensified in the mid-1960s, WVON’s playlists revealed the emergence of soul songs with both subtle political allusions and also more direct lyrics. A survey of the February 12, 1965 “Soul 45” listed a plethora of politically direct songs including The Impressions’ “People Get Ready,” Sam Cooke’s “A Change is Gonna Come,” Maxine Brown’s “It’s Gonna Be Alright,” The Vibration’s “Keep on Keeping On,” “I am Blessed” by Nina Simone, and “You Can’t Hurt Me No More” by Gene Chandler.⁸⁷ What is important to remember is that the “Soul 45” and its rankings not only reflected songs in heavy rotation at the station, but also sales from local record stores. Therefore, the station’s rankings serve as a testament to soul’s cultural and financial impact in Chicago’s African American community. Furthermore, by the late 1960s, WVON’s musical offerings reflected not just the growing nationalistic direction of soul, but also how Chicago African Americans turned to the music in the wake of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s assassination. Less than a day after his death, the chart registered the

⁸⁵ Ward, *Just My Soul Responding*, 158.

⁸⁶ James Brown, “Out of Sight,” *Out of Sight*, 1964 by Mercury, B000002G9B, compact disc.

⁸⁷ “WVON Soul 45 - February 12-19, 1965.”

event's impact on listeners. The playlist for the week of April 5-11, 1968, which started just one day after King's death, featured as its number one hit "I Got the Feeling" by James Brown. Other songs near the top of the station's chart that week included Aretha Franklin's "Since You've Been Gone," Gladys Knight's "End of the Road," "Impossible Dream" by The Hesitations, "Hold On" by The Radiants, and "Tribute to a King" by William Bell, all songs with lyrics that addressed loss and hardship.⁸⁸ Throughout 1968 and 1969, the playlists continued to reflect songs with politically explicit lyrics such as "Say It Loud - I'm Black and I'm Proud" by James Brown and "Everyday People" by Sly and the Family Stone.⁸⁹ This commitment to politically charged soul continued into the early 1970s, as evidenced by an April 1970 Herb Kent show during which Kent played Stanley Winston's "No More Ghettoes" and George Perkins' "Crying in the Streets."⁹⁰ In his book *Radio and the Struggle for Civil Rights in the South*, Brian Ward argues that at black radio stations, the "message and the medium fused to create a total package of empowering black-oriented sound." The combination of the commitment of WVON's disc jockeys to Civil Rights in addition to the station's broadcasting of soul served to reinforce the message of the Civil Rights Movement, but also reached audiences that the movement's leaders were unable to reach.⁹¹

⁸⁸ "WVON Soul 45 - April 5-11, 1968."

⁸⁹ "WVON Soul 45 January 31, 1969-February 7, 1969."

⁹⁰ "Herb Kent Show," WVON, Chicago, IL, April 7, 1970, mp3.

⁹¹ Brian Ward, *Radio and the Struggle for Civil Rights in the South* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2006), 320.

Despite the growing mainstream popularity of soul throughout the 1960s, WVON continued to show its commitment to soul's emphasis on the value and validity of African American culture by providing airtime to music that was not stylistically soul, including blues, jazz and gospel. For example, throughout the 1960s WVON continued to play the blues and even jazz during its overnight hours on Pervis Spann's show despite their waning popularity with younger African American listeners. It was during the depths of Pervis Spann's overnight show that deep blues songs such as Otis Rush's 1960 "So Many Roads, So Many Trains" found their ways to the airwaves, thus serving as one of the last outlets where music of this kind had a chance at being broadcast. After playing Rush's song, Spann sighed, "Boys, that's some blues... You've been begging me for blues. Well you got them uninterrupted blues!"⁹² While obviously the early hours of the day were not intended for peak listening, the station's continuance in playing these forms of music served as tacit approval of its legitimacy as a viable cultural form. In addition to playing other types of music during its overnight hours, WVON solely focused its Sunday broadcasts on gospel music. Bill 'Doc' Lee's "Gospel Open House" show continued WVON's commitment to soul's emphasis on the respect for African American culture by featuring live gospel music and recording from both national and local groups from across the country. What was remarkable about Bill 'Doc' Lee's show was that any local citizen with musical talent was welcome to perform and was treated the same as a national performer. From broadcasting recordings by various local choir groups to

⁹² "Pervis Spann Show," WVON, Chicago, IL, January 7, 1965, compact disc.

advertising their practice and performance times, Lee's show bolstered the respect paid to these local artists. Lee stated during a January 1965 show that 'We have a real good time every Sunday morning! And if you care to come by, come on by! We have a brand new Hammond organ. If you want to play the organ and you can play, the invitation is yours!'" After this announcement, Lee announces that a "Brother Carl" would like to play and the show broadcasts a few minutes of his performance.⁹³

For WVON, the station's commitment to soul was not simply fulfilled by spinning every record with a possible political message. As noted by music historian Robert Pruter, African American radio faced much resistance from music directors over the playing of "overtly" political songs. White radio stations shunned songs with strong political messages that could alienate white listeners and advertisers, and at African American radio stations listeners found themselves pushing the radio station in the direction of playing more political songs.⁹⁴ According to music historian James Stewart, the careful selection of songs with key political messages by black disc jockeys further served to underscore the civil rights activities of African American radio stations. In accordance with Stewart's thesis, often WVON's disc jockeys walked a tightrope between playing the soul music that listeners requested and management's objections. As a result, disc jockeys demonstrated their support for the Civil Rights Movement and the political message of soul in non-direct verbal ways. While one major sign of the

⁹³ "Bill 'Doc' Lee's Gospel Open House," WVON, Chicago, Illinois, January 31, 1965, compact disc.

⁹⁴ Pruter, *Chicago Soul*, 141.

station's support was by simply playing the song, the Good Guys demonstrated their support for the genre's core beliefs by uttering simple phrases of agreement or even mono-syllabic tones indicated their agreement with the song's political message.⁹⁵ Often, these simple utterances were the only signs of support that a disc jockey could provide to listeners, given factors such as the short length of the songs, the need to prepare the next song for play, fitting in the time needed for commercials and the watchful eyes of station management. Disc jockeys supported soul's messages by using the power of the microphone to voice their approval. Often this approval could merely consist of the disc jockey singing along to key phrases to demonstrate their support of the song's message. In the case of a 1965 Pervis Spann show, Spann grunts and states repeatedly "That's all right" while The Impressions' "People Get Ready" plays in the background.⁹⁶ In other cases, the disc jockeys transformed songs without overtly political messages into works with a larger significance. In a February 1965 recording of the "Ed 'Nassau Daddy' Cook" show, for example, newscaster Roy Wood broke into the show to announce that police arrested over 300 protestors, including Martin Luther King, Jr. while they attempted to march on the Dallas County Courthouse in Selma, Alabama. Cook exclaimed after the announcement "How about that! Did you hear that? Things is happening! People are getting a little bit restless!" After making these comments, he then proceeded to play Gene Chandler's "You Can't Hurt Me No More" and occasionally

⁹⁵ Stewart, "Message in the Music," 200.

⁹⁶"Pervis Spann Show," January 29, 1965.

sang along with the song's chorus.⁹⁷ The playing of these political songs combined with the social activism of the station demonstrated WVON's dedication to the African American civil rights struggle.

In addition to providing a soundtrack for the Civil Rights Movement, WVON's soul-centric broadcasts also provided a soundtrack for soldiers serving in the Vietnam War and served to unify them with African American culture on the home front. As a war that saw disproportionate numbers of urban African American youth serving in the armed forces, it was only natural that Chicago African American servicemen listened to station recordings in order to retain a sense of normalcy and a link to the home front. As Herb Kent recalled:

During the Vietnam War in the 1960s I was at the height of my popularity and we sent tons of WVON tapes to Vietnam because the soldiers wanted to hear the music of the day from back home...I talked to soldiers when they came home...and they said they'd be listening while they were fighting. I don't know how they did it...they'd take that hookup and just go off shooting. One guy told me that when he was patrolling he played a tape I made with the song "I Only Have Eyes For You" on it...You're a long way from home and just to hear that music was something.⁹⁸

"You've Got to Make it Baby!" The Business of Being a WVON Disc Jockey

WVON's disc jockeys not only introduced their listeners to the larger Civil Rights Movement through the songs they played over the airwaves, but the jockeys were also vital parts of the music business and from discovering new talent, operating venues in which musical acts performed, to promoting and organizing concerts and tours, the

⁹⁷ "Ed Cook Show," February 1, 1965.

⁹⁸ Kent and Smallwood, *The Cool Gent*, 28-29.

jockeys connected musical artists, radio, and the recording industry. The disc jockeys' close proximity to WVON and Chess Records owners Leonard and Phil Chess caused them to be viewed as potential stepping stones to musical success. Local talent served WVON well and the station's owners, Leonard and Phil Chess, had gotten their start in the music industry by recording local talent that appeared at their club, the Macomba Lounge.⁹⁹ As Chicago's African American community realized, a connection to Leonard Chess was a possible chance to be discovered. As demonstrated in a 1965 column by Tommy Picou in the *Chicago Defender* in which he discussed heavyweight boxer Ernie Terrell's musical aspirations, he wrote "rumors are that Ernie and his Astronauts intend to cut a record, and if Leonard Chess just happens to glance over this column, it might be worth his while to 'check Terrell out!'"¹⁰⁰ In the case of budding singer Jackie Ross, Good Guy Bill 'Doc' Lee personally escorted her to the Chess Studios for a tryout and to introduce her to label staff after she won a talent show he hosted at the Trianon Ballroom. Jerry Butler of The Impressions recalled the atmosphere of creativity and musical aspiration he witnessed growing up in the Cabrini-Green housing projects. He stated that "We were all trying to sing. That was about the only thing to do really...the area didn't have any street gangs at the time. Everyone would form a group and go into Seward Park,

⁹⁹ Pruter, *Doowop*, 10.

¹⁰⁰ Thomas Picou, "Terrell Selling Fast as Rock & Roll Hit," *Chicago Defender*, March 29 1965, 26.

which had a recreation building and club rooms, in which everyone would practice.”¹⁰¹

Bobby Rush also attests to music serving as an outlet and states

There was one place on the North Side that Major Lance and Jerry Butler and Curtis Mayfield and many others that they practiced at. You could go into Seward Park almost on any afternoon during those days and you could hear The Impressions and you could hear others you know all throughout the place practicing you know, competing and, and, and, and honing their skills.¹⁰²

For artists such as Gene Chandler of The Dukays, the success of groups that had appeared before them served as role models for escaping the world in which they lived. Chandler recalled “I never went to voice school. I used to copy the groups like the El Dorados, the Danderliers, and what have you. Listen to their sounds and just sing their songs on the street corner.”¹⁰³ WVON served not only as a conduit for these artists to be discovered but via its airwaves provided them with role models to emulate. Fred Erickson, an ethnomusicologist from Northwestern University, noted in 1966 that that “these kids are folk musicians. Their music, even when it’s imitating a commercial recording they heard on WVON, Voice of the Negro radio station, is still folk...you might say that WVON has taken the place of the old man who sat on a stoop and played for the neighborhood in earlier days, for they play lots of music coming from the Negro neighborhoods.”¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ Pruter, *Chicago Soul*, 76.

¹⁰² Bobby Rush, interview by Julieanna Richardson, videocassette, August 22, 2000, interview A2000.035, The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, IL.

¹⁰³ Pruter, *Doowop*, 62.

¹⁰⁴ Mary Merryfield, “These Youngsters See Music as a Way Out and Up,” *Chicago Tribune*, March 13 1966, f12.

While also discovering talent by chance, recording artists also used WVON as a launching pad for public exposure through talent shows. For many potential black recording artists on the South and West sides of the city, these talents shows were not only a way to fame and fortune, but represented a break from the harsh realities of everyday life. A 1965 *Chicago Tribune* article sums up the hopeful promise that these talent shows held by stating “‘You got to make it baby!’ That’s an expression you hear a lot in various inner city neighborhoods like Lawndale on Chicago’s West side. To kids from deprived backgrounds, it means one thing as one of them told me: ‘To break out, to get out of the struggle pit, maybe I can even be another Sammy Davis Jr.’”¹⁰⁵ As a promotional act, the talent show was long familiar to WVON’s disc jockeys with the events having their roots in the 1950s Chicago doowop scene when local street corner vocal groups performed in the contests. These talent, or “amateur,” shows continued into the 1960s, and civic clubs and churches sponsored these events. Additionally, entertainment venues also organized them to provide warm up acts before the club’s marquee performances. WVON both sponsored its own shows and throughout the 1960s, advertised numerous community shows on its airwaves. In addition, its jocks were in demand to serve as judges or emcees. As stated in an advertisement for a talent show promoted by the station in 1965, these shows were crucial for budding acts as they “will allow space and give publicity to your act.”¹⁰⁶ With the lure of increased exposure and

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ “Teen Talent Show,” *Chicago Defender*, September 28, 1964, 8.

often prizes for the winner, these shows were popular events. Amateur shows that were hosted by the Good Guys also provided an opportunity for a performer to hone their skills and often included future major acts such as the Jackson Five. The Jackson Five first appeared in talent shows hosted by E. Rodney Jones and Pervis Spann at the Regal Theater and the Burning Spear.¹⁰⁷ The station even minted its own vocal group, the aptly-named Vontastics, who received a recording contract after winning a WVON-sponsored talent show in 1965.¹⁰⁸ Their songs “I’ll Never Say Goodbye” and a cover of the Beatles’ “Day Tripper” received significant airplay on the station.¹⁰⁹

For African American recording artists in the 1960s and early 1970s, a stop at WVON’s studios on Cicero Avenue or at one of the Good Guy’s promotional events was an absolute priority during promotional visits to Chicago. As noted by the *Chicago Tribune*, during a 1966 appearance by the Supremes on E. Rodney Jones’ show, “babies, honeys, and inside jokes were exchanged.”¹¹⁰ This friendly banter can also be heard in a 1965 Bill “Doc” Lee Gospel Hour Show in which, during a live recording from the Southmoor Hotel, Lee warmly greets and exchanges pleasantries with Roebuck “Pops”

¹⁰⁷ Jake Austen, “The Jackson Find,” *Chicago Reader*, September 10, 2009.

¹⁰⁸ Frank Hoffmann, *Rhythm and Blues, Rap and Hip-Hop* (New York: Checkmark Books, 2007), 271.

¹⁰⁹ “The Low Down,” *Chicago Defender*, September 4, 1965; 27; “E. Rodney Jones Show,” WVON, Chicago, IL, September 9, 1966, compact disc.

¹¹⁰ Nancy Moss, “The Supremes: 11 Frantic Hours, 50 Screaming Minutes,” *Chicago Tribune*, March 20, 1966, 131.

Staples, who is sitting in the audience listening to the show as it is recorded.¹¹¹ As discussed earlier, WVON disc jockeys were frequent guests at high school dances and record hops on the West and South sides of the city. In addition, the jocks also hosted dances at local colleges and for fraternities as well.¹¹² Often geared towards a teen audience, artists appeared at these WVON-sponsored or disc jockey-hosted events including dances, hops, and even skating rinks such as the Broadway Strat-a-Go-Go on West Roosevelt in order to assist the breaking of their records in Chicago's African American community.¹¹³ From studio appearances by Dionne Warwick to record hops with performances by Aretha Franklin, Smokey Robinson and the Jackson Five, both WVON's shows and related events created a sphere in which artists had their records and performances played and promoted on the station and then participated in events hosted by the jocks.¹¹⁴ According to E. Rodney Jones, James Brown never traveled north of the Mason Dixon line until he came to WVON to make an appearance on his show.¹¹⁵

The work of WVON disc jockeys was not simply limited to the radio station; some disc jockeys ran virtual entertainment empires in addition to their broadcasting

¹¹¹ "Bill 'Doc' Lee Gospel Open House Show," WVON, Chicago, IL, January 31, 1965, compact disc.

¹¹² Tribute to Herb Kent: 141st Congress Rec. H1328 (November 17 1995) (Statement of Rep. Bobby Rush).

¹¹³ Topy Malagaris, "The Sound: Music and Radio for Young Listeners," *Chicago Tribune*, September 13 1967 B20; "Moses 'Lucky' Cordell Show," WVON, Chicago, IL, January 29, 1965, compact disc.

¹¹⁴ Topy Malagaris, "The Sound: Music and Radio for Young Listeners," *Chicago Tribune*, December 6 1967, C25.

¹¹⁵ E. Rodney Jones, interview by Alexis Gillespie, audiocassette, March 14, 1995, Radio Smithsonian: Black Radio Project Collection, Archives of African American Music and Culture, Bloomington, Indiana.

duties. These outlets strengthened the symbiotic relationship of the disc jockey, the recording label, and WVON in Chicago's musical community. Not only did artists aspire to have their music played on WVON, but they also appeared and starred in events they organized and promoted. For Leonard Chess, these side jobs for the disc jockeys were not a major concern as long as they did not interfere with their duties on WVON. As Pervis Spann stated, "Leonard Chess was making so much money with WVON, he didn't have time to worry about what his djs were doing in the black community."¹¹⁶ One example of a WVON disc jockey who fully immersed himself as a businessman in Chicago's music scene was McKie Fitzhugh. Beginning in the 1950s, in addition to his broadcasting duties, Fitzhugh operated two restaurants, his own record shop, and on an almost weekly basis served as an emcee and deejay at various area dances and special events, including a series of talent shows at the Park City Bowl on Sixty-Third Street and South Parkway Boulevard.¹¹⁷ In December 1956, he took over the former Strand Lounge on Cottage Grove and opened McKie's Disc Jockey Show Lounge, which featured live performances and a "Jockey Room" which featured portraits of Chicago's most popular disc jockeys."¹¹⁸ Lucky Cordell recalled

It was a small place, but very popular. By him being a disc jockey, he could entice...he was right down the street from the Pershing Ballroom--Pershing Hotel. So that's where all of your major artists stayed when they came to town. So they

¹¹⁶ Spann and Walker, *40 Year Spann*, 73.

¹¹⁷ Pruter, *Doowop*, 141.

¹¹⁸ "McKie's Disc Jockey Lounge Goes Over Big," *Chicago Defender*, November 4, 1957, 19.

could come over and make an appearance at his club. Not to perform, just be seen in there.¹¹⁹

Fitzhugh operated the lounge until 1965, and was a WVON disc jockey until his sudden death in 1970, after which the *Chicago Defender* eulogized “for nearly sixteen years he has been a fixture in the community as a result of these dances and his radio stints...these dances which are part of his answer to how to keep teenagers in wholesome activity, have earned him the title champion of the teenagers.”¹²⁰

In addition to his WVON show and numerous appearances at local high school dances and record hops, Herb Kent also operated a club for teenagers, the Times Square, which was located at Forty-Eighth and Wabash on the city’s south side. Opened in 1965, its facility was a leased United Packinghouse Workers of America meeting hall, and Kent provided key modifications in order to transform the former meeting place into an entertainment venue. The Times Square was the first dance hall in Chicago to feature modifications such as dual turntables, disc jockey booths, smoke machines and strobe lights.¹²¹ As the club catered to teenagers and African American youth, admission costs were low. In addition to weekly dances for teenagers and local college students, the venue also hosted musical acts such as Little Richard, Martha Reeves and the Vandellas, Smokey Robinson and the Jackson Five.¹²²

¹¹⁹ Cordell, The HistoryMakers interview.

¹²⁰“Obituary 2 – Mckie Fitzhugh,” *Chicago Tribune*, December 5 1970, a10.

¹²¹Kent and Smallwood, *The Cool Gent*, 104.

¹²² Aadmer Madhani, “Kool Gent Still Can Turn Up the Heat,” *Chicago Tribune*, October 6, 1999.

Of WVON's disc jockeys, the two who most completely immersed themselves in Chicago's music industry were Pervis Spann and E. Rodney Jones. Richard Pegue stated that "Pervis was the king of the entrepreneurs in the fact that he discreetly did a lot of things with a lot of people...I mean he wasn't on stage at the Regal Theatre because he liked standing in front of a crowd. At the time that he and Rodney were managing or were involved in bringing shows into the Regal Theatre, they did well."¹²³ As business partners and close friends, both worked together as two of the most powerful promoters and club owners on the south side of Chicago during the 1960s and 1970s. Prior to joining forces with Jones, in the early 1960s Spann owned and operated his own record shop on East 64th Street, where he employed a young Minnie Ripperton, who later became famous as a songwriter and solo and group performer with The Rotary Connection, as his secretary for his shop and artist promotion business.¹²⁴ In August 1965, the two jointly purchased the former prominent rhythm and blues and jazz club, Club DeLisa, on 55th Street and State Street and reopened it as "The Club." In line with Pan-African Nationalism, they later renamed the venue "The Burning Spear." The Burning Spear featured live performances and a hydraulic stage that could be lowered into the floor so the venue could be transformed into a dancehall when not in use.¹²⁵ With African American waitresses dressed in Playboy bunny-inspired devil outfits and nightly

¹²³ Pegue, The HistoryMakers interview.

¹²⁴ Spann and Walker, *40 Year Spann*, 47.

¹²⁵ "Spann and Jones Open 'The Club,'" *Chicago Defender*, August 7, 1965, 15.

live musical performances, the venue quickly became a popular south side hotspot, and throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s featured performances by artists such as Wilson Pickett and Bobby Bland and African American comedians such as Red Foxx and Dick Gregory. Furthermore, with the embracing of rhythm and blues by British bands in the mid-1960s, both the Beatles and Rolling Stones stopped by when in town to visit the venue.¹²⁶ Building on his success at the Burning Spear, in 1967 Jones also opened his own lounge, “Rodney’s Pad,” on East 67th Street.¹²⁷ Fitting in with their larger activities at WVON, Spann stated that “promoting artists, hosting concerts, and spinning records all went together like a fine tuned machine.”¹²⁸

Alongside Spann and Jones’ individual businesses, their company REP Productions became a powerhouse promotion in the 1960s and 1970s. For Spann, his producing efforts had started in 1960 when he co-organized a show with Oak Park, Illinois station WOPA disc jockey “Big Bill” Hill featuring B.B. King and Junior Parker at the Ashland Auditorium. The show was a major financial success, and Spann recalled “First concert I took in I never will forget...I took in 17 thousand---I been use to counting little bitty money I couldn’t count it, so I had to get a girl from the barbeque house that dealt with money all the time to count it.”¹²⁹ Beginning in 1963, Spann and Jones’ first

¹²⁶ Spann and Walker, *40 Year Spann*, 85-86; Earl Calloway, “Wilson Pickett Bows at the Burning Spear, He Performs at the Auditorium Sunday,” *Chicago Defender*, August 7, 1971, 16; “No Title,” *Chicago Defender*, October 14, 1968, 10.

¹²⁷ Dave Potter, “Heart Attack Fells WVON’s Rodney Jones,” *Chicago Defender*, October 2, 1968, 1.

¹²⁸ Spann and Walker, *40 Year Spann*, 72-73.

jointly produced show, the “Recordland All-Stars of 1963,” which featured over forty acts including Stevie Wonder, Mary Wells, Marvin Gaye, and The Marvelettes.¹³⁰

Throughout the decade, the two organized package shows at the Regal Theater and other area venues, and these packages often featured a roster of the hottest artists traveling together. For one 1970 package show featuring Johnnie Taylor, Junior Parker and Bobby Bland, Spann declared in an on-air promo that the show was the “the hottest thing since the Chicago Fire.”¹³¹ Shows organized by Jones and Spann also received critical acclaim and in one case, became the basis for B.B. King’s 1965 album “Live at the Regal,” which was a taped 1964 concert emceed by Pervis Spann.¹³²

As their business grew, Spann and Jones expanded their realm and organized shows everywhere from New York City’s Madison Square Garden to venues in Detroit and Cleveland.¹³³ The jocks’ involvement with WVON was crucial to the organization and promotion of these events. Spann stated “When artists announced they were coming to town, WVON would push their records real hard, and folks would buy them, making that artist real popular. After the stars arrived in town to put on their concerts, the

¹²⁹ Pervis Spann, interview by Sonja Williams, transcript, March 30, 1995, Radio Smithsonian, Black Radio History Project, Collection, Archives of African American Music and Culture, Bloomington, Indiana.

¹³⁰ “Regal’s Big Show to Feature 40 Performers,” *Chicago Defender*, April 8, 1963, 16.

¹³¹ “Herb Kent Show,” WVON, Chicago, IL, April 7, 1970, mp3.

¹³² B.B. King, *Live at the Regal*, MCA, B000002P72, July 29, 1997, compact disc. Originally released in 1965.

¹³³ Spann, The HistoryMakers interview.

performances would draw a huge audience...promoting shows and having WVON went hand in hand.” Quite simply, he continued, the “shows needed station and the station needed the shows.”¹³⁴ Spann and Jones’ largest effort was an August 1964 Sam Cooke show at Comiskey Field, which also featured artists such as Stevie Wonder, Marvin Gaye, Muddy Waters, Etta James, and Chuck Berry.¹³⁵ WVON sponsored the free event, and 60,000 fans attended what was Cooke’s last concert.¹³⁶ Following Cooke’s death in January 1965, WVON sponsored his public memorial service. Held at McCormick Place, E. Rodney Jones served as the emcee and Reverend C.L. Franklin managed the religious portions of the event.¹³⁷

Of all of the Good Guys on WVON, the one to become most famous was Don Cornelius, the host and producer of the African American music and dance show *Soul Train*, which ran on television from 1971 to 2006. Much as WVON did for radio, *Soul Train* brought soul and rhythm and blues music to African American youth that white television stations neglected. Born and raised on the south side of Chicago, Cornelius graduated from DuSable High School in 1954, and, after graduation, served in the Marine Corps during the Korean War. Following his military discharge, Cornelius worked at various jobs, including being an insurance salesman and a Chicago Police

¹³⁴ Spann and Walker, *40 Year Spann*, 73.

¹³⁵ “Will Star in Free Blues Revue,” *Chicago Defender*, August 15, 1964, 10.

¹³⁶ Spann, The HistoryMakers interview.

¹³⁷ “Sam Cooke Memorial, February 15 ‘Loaded’ with Great Talent,” *Chicago Defender*, February 13 1965, 3.

Department officer. In 1966, he pulled over WVON news director Roy Wood for a traffic violation. Amazed at the timbre of his voice, Wood suggested that Cornelius had a future in broadcasting and told him to submit an audition tape to the station. Throughout Cornelius' media career, Wood served as his mentor and guide. Cornelius quit his job as an officer to take a three-month broadcasting course and after completing the course, WVON hired him. During his first job at the station he answered the telephones for *Hotline*, and as he gained experience, he worked in the station's journalism department and as a fill-in disc jockey.¹³⁸

In 1969, Cornelius made his television debut by serving as a sportscaster on Roy Wood's WCIU-TV television show, "A Black's View of the News." According to the spokesman of the show's sponsor Bell Telephone, "A Black's View of the News represents an approach towards bringing black people into the mainstream of American life."¹³⁹ Similar to his fellow WVON disc jockeys, when off-air Cornelius hosted high school dances. Accompanied by musical acts, he advertised his shows and the artists he booked to appear at these dances as the "*Soul Train*." Based on the success he had at his teen record hops, Cornelius decided to take his act to television. Cornelius' later television show was not the first African American dance show on television in Chicago. In 1965, WCIU began airing Kiddie-A-Go-Go, a dance show which occasionally featured African American preteen dances. More importantly, in 1967 WCIU began broadcasting

¹³⁸ Spann and Walker, *40 Year Spann*, 57.

¹³⁹ "A Black's View of News Featured on WCIU-TV," *Chicago Defender*, May 6, 1969, 10.

an African American teen dance show called “Red, Hot and Blues,” hosted by local disc jockey Big Bill Hill.¹⁴⁰ Based on his success at WVON and these two dance shows, Cornelius convinced Sears, Roebuck and Company to sponsor a thirty-minute show on the black and white UHF Channel 26, WCIU-TV. For his August 1970 premiere, Cornelius utilized recording artists he had met through his work at WVON, including Jerry Butler and the Chi-Lites. Fellow WVON disc jockey Joe “Youngblood” Cobb was the show’s announcer and provided the ubiquitous “Soul Train” train whistle greeting at the top of the show and a hallmark of the production. Civil Rights activist and Sears Roebuck and Company executive George O’Hare, who agreed to sponsor the initial run of the show, recalled that at first he thought the concept of the *Soul Train* was ridiculous and that no advertiser wanted to purchase time. He stated “We always thought black folks...had no money. They were unemployed. They were poor. As a result, we didn’t go after that market whatsoever.” The show, however, became a moderate ratings success and was especially popular amongst African American audiences.¹⁴¹

For Cornelius, while *Soul Train* filled a gap in African American television programming, it was not the career route that he envisioned for himself. In a 1971 interview with the *Chicago Tribune*, he stated “Out of pure frustration, I’m hosting a hit television show.” Cornelius had always wanted a career in radio broadcasting, but with the growth of *Soul Train*, “the old management [of WVON] wouldn’t let me do both.”

¹⁴⁰ Jake Austen, “Soul Train Local,” *Chicago Reader*, October 2, 2008.

¹⁴¹ Spann and Walker, *40 Year Spann*, 77.

Cornelius believed that the show filled an African American television programming vacuum. He stated “blacks watch so-called general audience programs-actually white suburban programs, because there is nothing else. When there is something else, like *Soul Train*, they watch it. You go out on the street and try to find a black who watches anything else between 4:30 pm and 5:30 pm.”¹⁴² *Soul Train*’s ratings success in the Chicago area attracted the attention of Johnson Hair Products, the company which manufactured Afro-Sheen. Similar to Leonard Chess’s interest in WVON for the promotion of Chess Records, Johnson Hair Products sought an outlet to promote its product to African American consumers. Eric Johnson, Johnson Products’ Chief Executive Officer, recalled that “If you wanted to reach the black consumer, you had one, maybe two radio stations. You had one newspaper. You had no channels on television. So therefore, ‘*Soul Train*’ was an extremely effective vehicle for the company because it would bring the viewers to that channel...After all, it had the latest in music.”¹⁴³ In 1971, Johnson Products and Cornelius reached an agreement to tape the show for syndication, and taping moved to Los Angeles. The show retained its thirty-minute format but upgraded to taping in color, a format change which served the show well. As George Johnson, Sr., recalled, Cornelius was “quite a wild dresser. When I met him, I almost backed out because he had...high green boots up to here and real loud clothes...he was

¹⁴² Clarence Petersen, “Soul Train is a Hit in Spite of Itself,” *Chicago Tribune*, June 19, 1971, C3.

¹⁴³ Eric Johnson, interview by Julieanna Richardson, videocassette, March 15, 2000, interview A2000.027, The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, IL.

right for the show.” With production beginning in October 1971, the show became a nationwide success not just for Cornelius but also for Johnson Products. According to George Johnson, Sr., “*Soul Train*’ went on October of 1971. I think we did around twelve million dollars that year. In 1975, we were doing thirty-seven million dollars, five years later.”¹⁴⁴ With its roots beginning with the work of a WVON disc jockey, *Soul Train* became a multi-million dollar African American entertainment empire.

Conclusion

Throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, WVON was a powerhouse of African American radio broadcasting in Chicago, and the station was a valuable test site for the introduction of new rhythm and blues and soul songs. During their time at the station, WVON’s disc jockeys understood the role that the station played on the national music scene and its financial achievements. In a 1971 show, Bill “Butterball” Crane introduced himself to listeners by stating “I’m your 300 pound bundle of joy, playing with my 6 million dollar toy!”¹⁴⁵ In less than a decade since its inception, the station had single-handedly transformed Chicago’s African American radio broadcasting landscape, and its ratings testified to that transformation. Prior to the station’s start in 1963, Chicago’s African Americans were just another block of listeners, lumped together with other ethnic groups that radio stations catered to via blocks of broadcasting time. By 1968, however,

¹⁴⁴ George Johnson, Sr., interview by Julieanna Richardson, videocassette, December 18, 2003, A2003.303, The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, IL.

¹⁴⁵ “Herb Kent Show,” WVON, Chicago, IL, May 19, 1971, compact disc.

63% of Chicago African American families listed WVON as their favorite radio station in the city, more than double that of the next four stations combined.¹⁴⁶

Several other radio stations in Chicago attempted to tap into the station's African American listenership during the 1960s. Despite their best efforts, these competitors did not make much headway. One such station was Harvey, Illinois' WBEE 1570, which Rollins Broadcasting owned. Reflecting the demographic shift which saw Chicago's African American population moving south and west through Chicago in the 1950s, WBEE shifted its format to rhythm and blues music in 1955 but only broadcasted during daylight hours. Another challenger to WVON's success was WMPP 1470, the first black owned radio station in the Chicago area. The station began broadcasting in August 1963, only a few short months after WVON launched. WMPP (which stood for Working For More People's Progress) was licensed out of East Chicago Heights, and owned by the Seaway Broadcasting Company, which was headed by William Marden and Charlie Pincher. In addition to featuring soul music like WVON, it also featured a core of dynamic disc jockeys nicknamed "The Mellow Fellows." Like WBEE, it was also was a small wattage station that broadcast only in the daytime and often WVON blocked its signal. Instead, the station directed its broadcasts to the African American enclaves of

¹⁴⁶ Michael Haralambos, *Right On: From Blues to Soul in Black America* (London: Eddison Press, 1974), 94.

Gary and Hammond, Indiana. Unable to broadcast at night, the station failed to build a sufficient block of listeners to present a serious challenge to WVON's ratings.¹⁴⁷

In 1967, one of WVON's most serious challengers arose when radio businessman Ralph Atlass bought one of the city's oldest stations, jazz station WAAF 950. Atlass transformed the station into WGRT and broadcasted soul and rock 'n' roll.¹⁴⁸ In its dial position between the two larger stations of 890 WLS and 1000 WCFL, WGRT tried to establish itself as a listening option for both African American and white listeners looking for music rather than news. In juxtaposition to WVON, the station focused on broadcasting music rather than the personalities of its disc jockeys. In 1972, Johnson Publishing, the publishers of *Ebony* and *Jet* magazine, purchased WGRT. The station was renamed WJPC, and began full-time broadcasts.¹⁴⁹ Finally, Oak Park's WOPA 1490 also presented a challenge to WVON during the 1960s. Featuring rhythm and blues and soul music, Egmont Sonderling's Sonderling Broadcasting Corporation owned the station in addition to its ownership of the African American radio stations of WOL, WDIA and KDIA. The station was also the home of Pervis Spann before he went to work at WVON in 1963. The station operated on the brokerage system and featured African American programming targeted towards African Americans residents on the West side of Chicago. Throughout the 1960s, the station featured "Big Bill" Hill as a disc jockey who, via the

¹⁴⁷ Pruter, *Chicago Soul*, 16-17; "Chicago Radio Timeline: WMPP, accessed February 18, 2012, <http://24.15.236.20/public/zecom/museum/Chiradhist/stationindex.htm#WDND>.

¹⁴⁸ Herb Lyon, "Tower Ticker," *Chicago Tribune*, May 9, 1967, 22.

¹⁴⁹ "Chicago Radio Timeline."

brokerage system, played the blues nightly and his “Big Bill Hill’s Shopping Bag Show” attempted to siphon off black listeners not interested in Wesley South’s *Hotline* on WVON.¹⁵⁰

As stressed throughout this dissertation, WVON wholeheartedly supported equal rights for African Americans. Its founder, Leonard Chess, received numerous community accolades for his work on behalf of the community. In 1967, Leonard Chess received the “Man of the Year” award from the Chicago Urban League and in November 1968, he hosted the organization’s annual Golden Fellowship Dinner. He described the event, which raised \$90,000 for the organization, as “the greatest interracial social fundraising affair in the city’s history.”¹⁵¹ As the station entered 1969, it seemed like its momentum was unstoppable. Yet 1969 was a pivotal year and ultimately the beginning of the downfall of WVON. In a little over a year from the Chicago Urban League’s 1968 gala, Leonard Chess was dead and Globetrotter Communications, not WVON, owned the station. The 1970s ushered in additional changes to the station. From the rise of FM radio to the ascendancy of contemporary music and standardized radio formatting, the days of WVON being a “Black Giant” in African American radio broadcasting were drawing to a close as nothing that has a soul endures.

¹⁵⁰ Pruter, *Chicago Soul*, 17; “Chicago Radio Timeline.”

¹⁵¹ “2,200 Help to Raise \$90,000 for Chicago Urban League,” *Chicago Defender*, November 16, 1968, 19

CONCLUSION

Throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, WVON had a successful and lucrative life as a radio station that deeply impacted the lives of African Americans on the west and south sides of Chicago. In his 1964 work *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, Marshall McLuhan wrote that the “tribalising power of the new media is little understood. Tribalism is the sense of the deep bond of family, the closed society as the norm of community.”¹ Consistent with McLuhan’s thesis, WVON, as a form of media, instilled a sense of community over the airwaves with its African American listeners. Through its broadcasting, WVON created a sense of tight-knit family. The station was not just a form of entertainment, but served as an aural “town square” in which its listeners could come together not only to reflect upon the urban experience of African Americans in Chicago, but also to become informed about the larger struggle for civil rights in the 1960s and to debate and discuss ways in which they could participate in and create change.

Primarily, this dissertation helps to chart the historical terrain of the role of race in American radio history. As argued by historian Louis Cantor, in order to fully understand the major trends in radio history, an in-depth understanding of the most powerful radio stations and their activities is needed. This dissertation provides a historical narrative of

¹Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw Hill and Company, 1964), 6.

WVON, one of the largest African American radio stations in the country during the 1960s and early 1970s. The vital primary sources, including recorded air checks and the business records of now defunct stations, are few or nonexistent. Thus, the creation of historical narratives concerning the role played by this wonderful medium, when developed to its full McLuhanesque potential, in the lives of twentieth century Americans can be understood and appreciated.

Beyond filling a historiographical gap, this dissertation seeks to explore the ways in which WVON served as a communal site for African Americans in Chicago. In reference to southern radio stations in the 1960s, radio historian Brian Ward states “Radio was a place where black social, economic, political, legal, cultural activities intersected, just as they did in the black community – and just as they did in a freedom struggle that was simultaneously about legal, political and economic justice, and about black pride, identity and respect.”² While Ward’s book examined the relationship of radio to Civil Rights activities in the South, his hypothesis also applies to WVON. In addition to providing increased opportunities for the playing and marketing of Chess Records’ music, WVON provided Chicago’s African American community with an arena where it could be entertained, educated, intellectually provoked and stirred to action during the Chicago Freedom Movement. The arena in which these activities took place was not a spontaneous creation but rather the carefully planned product of record mogul Leonard

² Brian Ward, *Radio and the Struggle for Civil Rights in the South* (Gainesville, University of Florida Press, 2004), 359.

Chess. Recognizing that there was a specific gap in twenty-four hour radio broadcasting, Chess built upon his experiences with African American musical culture to create a radio station that was an immediate financial success. This success depended in equal measure upon the first and second Great Migration, in which hundreds of thousands of African Americans fled racism in the South for the chance at a better life in northern urban locales such as the Windy City. Once in Chicago, African American migrants faced insurmountable obstacles involving geographical restrictions on housing. Forced to primarily reside on the south and west sides of the city, this bloc provided a critical mass of listeners upon which WVON's future depended.

Radio was the ideal media for reaching African American listeners in Chicago during the 1960s and early 1970s. Easily affordable, there were few hurdles to ownership of radio receivers for either adults or younger listeners. Despite its relatively low broadcasting signal of only 250 watts during the day and 1000 watts at night, WVON nonetheless efficiently broadcasted to the bulk of Chicago's African American residents, many of whom lived only a few miles from the station's South Cicero Avenue location. Beyond technological considerations and ideal listener demographics, the musical content that WVON broadcasted also supported the station's ascendancy. By playing the latest in rhythm and blues and soul music, and by providing programming that directly reflected the political, social and cultural needs of Chicago African Americans, the station became an instant favorite with its listeners. But above all else, WVON's Good Guys, Leonard Chess' carefully selected disc jockeys, were key to the station's success. The remarkable

chemistry of these players resulted in the creation of a true exemplar of a social network. Prominent disc jockey Al Benson, whose relationship with Leonard Chess was admittedly not the strongest linked Chess' success to wanting "to bring in funny little niggers from all over the country."³ Building on Benson's pioneering broadcasting style, in which he appealed to Chicago listeners by relating to their migrant roots, WVON's disc jockeys, through their humor and witty dialogue, reflected the harsh realities of the African American urban experience in Chicago. From skits such as Herb Kent's Wahoo Man, antics such as E. Rodney Jones' supposed kidnapping, to the southern-influenced diction of Pervis Spann, the Good Guys struck a chord with the station's listeners.

In addition to providing socially relevant entertainment, WVON's Good Guys also served as community leaders, and the station's airwaves became McLuhan's "classroom without walls." With a well-funded journalism department, WVON's news offerings provided Chicago African Americans with regular broadcasted news updates that were timely and focused on local, national, and international journalism that was relevant to the lives of Chicago African Americans. Led by news director Roy Wood, WVON's news department and his personally written editorials, in which he encouraged listeners to "run and tell that," encouraged debate and collective action. Unarguably, Wesley South's *Hotline*, the hourly news talk show which became a tool to gauge public opinion on various matters from the state of education for Chicago African Americans to

³ Al Benson, Interviewer unknown, compact disc, n.d., Radio Smithsonian: Black Radio Project Collection, Archives of African American Music and Culture, Bloomington, Indiana.

the role that the Nation of Islam played in Chicago's black community, was the hallmark of WVON's journalism. *Hotline* filled a space in Chicago black news programming during the 1960s and early 1970s. Recognizing its value both as a way to connect to the masses and to serve as social barometer, Civil Rights Movement leaders such as Medgar Evers, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Jesse Jackson used the show to spread news about the movement.

While WVON was overwhelmingly the most popular radio station for Chicago African Americans during the 1960s and early 1970s, the station had particular relevance for black teenagers. By devoting a significant portion of its broadcasting to African American youth, WVON followed a national trend in the radio industry. This trend was a shift away from a nationalized "one broadcast serves all" focus to the emergence of listener market segmentation in the post-World War II era. By the late 1950s, teenagers ruled the American airwaves, and from its earliest broadcasts WVON focused its attention on this lucrative group. WVON appealed to younger listeners by respecting the agency of Chicago African American teenagers, and by aiding in the development of a vibrant African American teenage subculture on the West and South sides of the city. WVON respected and legitimized Chicago African American teenage culture, including fashion, language, music and dance. While broadcasting to African American teens was a fiscally sound business decision for Leonard Chess and WVON, the station went above and beyond the call of its financial interests by serving as an educational resource and advocate for its younger listeners. As evidenced by its struggles against the school

superintendent of Benjamin Willis, WVON advocated for classrooms for students.

WVON not only educated its younger listeners about black heritage, the need to stay in school, and the importance of education beyond secondary school, but it also diligently fought for rights on their behalf. A strong supporter of the CCCO's Chicago Public School boycott movement, through news updates, *Hotline*, and the support of the Good Guys, the station was a key communications network.

Due to its large African American listenership, and the relationships with artists that its disc jockeys formed, WVON was a frequent introducer of music, particularly rhythm and blues and soul, to the general public. Serving as arbiters of musical taste, WVON's listeners possessed a tremendous degree of power in deciding what music could be a national success. Furthermore, the message of the music played on the station provided a foundation for the station's pro-Civil Rights stance. In addition to the power of its listeners to ultimately decide the fate of a song, WVON's disc jockeys also occupied prominent positions of power in the national musical industry. In conjunction with record labels and local entertainment venues throughout African American Chicago, the Good Guys did not just spin records, but they helped transform emerging recording artists into stars. This symbiotic relationship continued into the 1960s and early 1970s as WVON's disc jockeys did not just break records, but served as catalysts in the music industry by discovering new musical talent, operating their own Chicago entertainment venues featuring the latest recording artists and musical groups, and providing key promotional support to artists. When not broadcasting on WVON, the station's disc

jockeys fully enmeshed themselves in Chicago's African American music and entertainment scene on both the South and West Sides of the city. From Fitzhugh McKie's Southside hotspot, the Disc Jockey Lounge, to Pervis Spann and E. Rodney Jones organization of stage shows at the Regal Theatre for some of the earliest commercial public performances by Aretha Franklin, WVON's disc jockeys linked performers, record labels, and radio stations. At their best, they achieved a seamless world in which all of these groups operated in tandem to maximize profits. Furthermore, beyond providing mere entertainment for its listeners, the music of WVON helped to reinforce the egalitarian message of the Chicago Freedom Movement and the pro-Civil Rights Movement activities of the station.

At first glance, by the end of the 1960s, WVON appeared to be an unstoppable juggernaut in African American radio broadcasting in Chicago. Several events quickly transpired at the end of the decade, however, to weaken the foundation of the "Black Giant" irreparably. First, there was the sale of Chess Records and its associated labels of Checker and Cadet by Leonard and Phil Chess to audiotape manufacturer General Recorded Tape (GRT) in November 1968. Leonard himself was eager to spend more time developing his radio business and did not include WVON's parent company, L&P Broadcasting, in the sale.⁴ With little experience in identifying new talent, recording artists or producing records, GRT quickly floundered. In 1970, it moved label operations to New York City, and by 1971, Chess artists such as Ramsey Lewis fled the label.

⁴ Hank Fox, "Chess to be Sold to GRT," *Billboard*, November 2, 1968, 1, 4.

Bleeding money, in 1975 GRT sold the Chess Records label to a small New Jersey Company, All Platinum Records. All Platinum, which was a small business, primarily held the rights to the label's catalog and as a result of inactivity, Chess Records was essentially defunct. In 1985, MCA gained the rights to the Chess catalog, and while it did not record any new music for the label, it was not until 1997 that the label began reissuing Chess recordings.⁵

A second event that had an even greater impact on WVON was the unexpected death of Leonard Chess on October 16, 1969 from a heart attack at only fifty-two years of age. Always a hard worker, heavy smoker, and light sleeper, Leonard had his first heart attack in 1957, and he suffered from cardiac problems throughout the 1960s. He received a fatal blow while driving from the Chess Records Studio to WVON with Bernadine Washington. Only two blocks from the radio station, Leonard lost control of the wheel and careened into two cars on Thirty-First Street until Washington gained control of the vehicle. Upon hearing about the death of Leonard Chess, WVON and its sister FM station, WSDM, switched to automatic programming for the remainder of the day.⁶

During both his life and after his death, Leonard Chess polarized many African Americans, and opinions regarding his businesses and practices are as varied as individuals themselves. The relationship between Chess and those who worked for him was not always smooth and cannot be classified as either simply "love" or "hate." In

⁵ John Collis, *The Story of Chess Records* (New York: Bloomsburg Publishing, 1998), 189.

⁶ Ibid, 137.

addition, Leonard Chess' unexpected death and the bitter fights between the Good Guys and WVON's next owners over salaries and the future direction of the station perhaps obscured some of the conflict between management and the jockeys during the 1960s. While he had close relationships with Chess recording artists such as Muddy Waters and Etta James, for others such as Chuck Berry and Koko Taylor, Leonard Chess became a symbol of African American cultural theft based on the allegation that Chess built his empire by cheating his recording artists on royalties.⁷ Yet for several artists on the Chess roster, Leonard Chess was the safety net that ensured they stayed out of financial trouble and had a roof over their heads. Etta James stated:

I'm not saying Leonard was 100% kosher. Sure, he ripped off copyrights. He fucked you on royalties. Business was plenty funky back then. But for a kid like me, Leonard was the man who kept me from starving or working at the five-and-dime. He could be cranky and short-tempered...Far as I'm concerned, though, he wasn't all that bad. As time went on--and I went off the deep end--he proved his loyalty.⁸

Throughout his tenure at WVON, Leonard Chess gave his disc jockeys a wide degree of latitude in both their on-air and off-air activities. He paid the disc jockeys on a salary system and generally allowed them to pursue individual side projects as long as these projects did not interfere with their work, endanger WVON's community-focused reputation, or hinder its profit-making abilities. Furthermore, Leonard Chess also backed

⁷ Collis, *The Story of Chess Records*, 38, 134, 174.

⁸ Etta James and David Ritz, *Rage to Survive: The Etta James Story* (New York: De Capo Press, 2003), 95.

WVON's disc jockeys by providing them with artistic and financial support for their on-air programming. According to Cecil Hale:

He supported us in all the ways that we needed to be supported. If we wanted to do something that would cost money, you know, he'd make that happen...They had this giveaway, where they gave away a Cadillac....But when it was brought up that they wanted to do that, he said, "Fine." So he went out and bought the Cadillac. And they gave it away. I mean with most station owners it takes a proposal and it takes almost an act of Congress to make stuff happen.⁹

Hale also argued that Chess understood that if “there's a winning chemistry in the organization and the organization is doing great things...it's a good idea not to play around with that. Just let them keep on doing what there're doing. And you'll make even more money and have more good will.”¹⁰ Yet throughout most of his ownership of WVON, Chess relegated African American employees to lower-level management positions and in regards to pay, *Hotline* moderator Wesley South believed that Chess underpaid his disc jockeys. South believed nonetheless that Leonard Chess was overall a better employer than most white radio station owners.¹¹ Richard Pegue stated that “when you look at him and his organization...the negatives that maybe would come up with an idea toward exploitation tend to disappear. His positives outweigh any negatives that I've

⁹ Cecil Hale, interview by Julieanna Richardson, videocassette, February 22, 2002, interview A2002.008, The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, IL.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Cohodas, *Spinning Blues into Gold*, 224.

ever seen or heard about. He did a lot to protect I'll say our interest as well as his interest."¹²

For other Good Guys, Chess was a generous employer and not only fairly paid his employees, but also treated them with respect, thus ensuring their loyalty. According to disc jockey Richard Pegue:

You wanted to work hard for him...you know, this guy is smart. So, no I can't put anything over on him. But maybe I should just give him the best that I got. And when you did that and you did a good job of it, he would let you know. And it wasn't necessarily with money. It also was an appreciation that he would show.¹³

WVON disc jockey Lucky Cordell recalled that Chess' respect and generosity were first apparent when he started working at the station in 1963. He stated that when he started, Chess "advanced me some money and it's a long story, but the essence of it was, 'I believe in you; I know you're going to succeed. If you succeed, you pay me back. If you don't, it was a gift.'"¹⁴ In addition, Cordell also attested that Chess did not pressure his disc jockeys for extra airplay for Chess songs. Cordell stated, "No. He honestly didn't do that. He hustled his records with us the same way the other record promoters hustled them."¹⁵ For Pegue, Leonard Chess was "my ideal description of the word "boss." You

¹² Richard Pegue, interview by Julieanna Richardson, videocassette, January 24, 2002, interview A2002.011, The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, IL.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Moses "Lucky" Cordell, interview by Lex Gillespie, transcript, June 14, 1995, Radio Smithsonian: Black Radio Project, Archives of African American Music and Culture, Bloomington, Indiana.

¹⁵ Hale, The HistoryMakers interview.

knew who was the boss....He was very expressive. That's a delicate way of putting it. He's the only person who could cuss you out, and you go "Yeah, well okay, you're right!"¹⁶

This praise for Chess does not mean he did not have a fiery temper or that his business' bottom line was not his first priority. Pegue recalled:

I think the realness of what Leonard was, was enticing enough for you to believe it and not challenge it...His personality was very strong. But it was not hostile. He definitely had a direction, and he knew--And you knew that he knew. But meanwhile, somebody else could come in the office. And the quiet that we have in the studio would be transfixed to a very loud, desk-pounding situation. And you'd sit there and go "Oh I'm glad I didn't get that one!"¹⁷

For several of the Good Guys, there were limits to Leonard Chess' benevolence. For example, in 1965 the station removed Stan 'Ric' Riccardo, the oldest of WVON's disc jockeys, from his broadcasting duties in exchange for a younger disc jockey who could better relate to the youth demographic.¹⁸ Chess also sought to protect the reputation of the station in the community, as evidenced by its distancing itself from Herb Kent in the wake of the murder of teenager Althea Harris outside of one of his dances in 1967.¹⁹ Chess also tried, albeit sometimes not always successfully, to reign in the more raucous activities of the Good Guys, including sleeping with female fans at the station. Herb Kent

¹⁶ Pegue, The HistoryMakers interview.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Kenan Heise, "Ex-WVON Disc Jockey Ric Ricardo," *Chicago Tribune*, March 16, 1985, 8.

¹⁹ Donald Mosby, "Girl, 14, Killed after Herb Kent Dance, Police Hit WVON Star's Record Hops as Too Unruly," *Chicago Defender*, January 17, 1967, 1.

attested that “I personally screwed ladies on Rodney Jones’ desk, on Bernadine Washington’s desk, on the floor of Rodney Jones’ office.”²⁰ In a 1967 show, Bill ‘Butterball’ Crane lamented his lack of female companionship, declaring “Mr. Chess said I can’t have no company y’all!”²¹ While Leonard Chess’ on-air presence at the station was virtually invisible, the fact that WVON’s disc jockeys did occasionally use Leonard Chess, “the boss,” in their on-air jokes demonstrates that he was not off-limits to the disc jockeys. In one 1967 Bill “Butterball” Crane show, Crane chastises the station’s engineer for not having a record ready to play. He cries out “Mr. Chess, I want a new engineer! Preferably a new young slim engineer.” He also tells the engineer “I ain’t going to tell Leonard that you ran that commercial twice by mistake...cause I don’t tell on people!”²²

One reason for the lack of open strife between WVON management and the disc jockeys was that the disc jockeys made an effort to police their own behavior just enough as to avoid open conflict with Leonard Chess. As noted by disc jockey Cecil Hale, while the station had an “animal house” atmosphere:

We believed in having fun. But we also believed in respecting the rules. We believed in making people laugh. But we also believed in understanding that this is a business and it has to be a business. If we saw one of our friends, one of our coworkers, one of our cohorts doing something wrong, we’d tell them. We would always keep anything that was going to be potentially destructive, we kept that way down. You know, we tried to snuff it out before it became a big deal. And it

²⁰ Herb Kent and David Smallwood, *The Cool Gent: The Nine Lives of Radio Legend Herb Kent* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2009) 201.

²¹ Bill ‘Butterball’ Crane Show,” WVON, Chicago, IL, August 25, 1967, compact disc.

²² Ibid.

always worked. That's why the station was so harmonious. We would cuss each other out. You know, then we'd laugh at each other.²³

For Leonard Chess, African American culture was not merely the currency of his business, but it was also the source of funding for civil rights causes to which he devoted significant time and money. Throughout his adult life, he operated two businesses, Chess Records and WVON, within the heart of Chicago's black community, and was in no way an absentee landlord. Instead, he remained a vital and active citizen of this social sphere. From appearing with disc jockeys at civil rights-related events, and serving as the chairman of Chicago Urban League fundraisers to personally distributing prizes to contest winners at WVON, Chess' involvement with Chicago's African American community was hands-on. As he noted to the *Chicago Daily News* "I made my money on the Negro and I want to spend it on him."²⁴ In the album notes to a specially produced 1969 WVON Good Guys album, the cover included a reprint of the editorial written and recorded by Roy Wood and played on WVON after Leonard's death. In the editorial Wood eulogized, "As long as people listen to and enjoy radio entertainment Leonard Chess will be well remembered. His radio stations...WVON, WSDM and WNOV Milwaukee are the most envied and imitated broadcast facilities in the nation. Leonard Chess will forever be loved and remembered..."²⁵

²³ Hale, The HistoryMakers interview.

²⁴ Dean Gysel, "Leonard Chess: The Voice Behind WVON," *Chicago Daily News*, June 21, 1967, 6.

²⁵ Various Artists, WVON Good Guys Album, WVON 1450, 1969, Vinyl LP.

After Leonard's death, having left no will with his future wishes for the station, Phil Chess longed to exit the radio business. In 1970, Globetrotter Communications, a media group owned by George Gillette (the heir to the Gillette shaving company) and Potter Palmer IV (the heir to the Chicago's Palmer House Hotel) bought the station for nine million dollars. Palmer also owned interest in another African American business, the Harlem Globetrotters.²⁶ Throughout the 1970s, Phil Chess continued slowly to extricate himself from L&P Broadcasting. While not nearly as influential as WVON, it is important to note these stations. During the 1960s, Leonard Chess tried to replicate WVON's success in other markets. In 1966, he attempted to buy WCAM 1280 AM, a radio station in predominantly African American populated Camden, New Jersey. The white owner of the nearby black programmed Philadelphia radio station WDAS 1480 AM protested the sale with the Federal Communications Commission. As a result, the FCC canceled the transaction.²⁷ In 1968, L&P Broadcasting successfully purchased WFOX 860 AM in Milwaukee, Wisconsin for \$260,000. They transformed the station into WNOV (Wisconsin Negro's Own Voice), the city's only radio outlet solely dedicated to broadcasting to African American listeners. The station immediately followed Chess' formula at WVON and focused on broadcasting rhythm and blues, soul and gospel music. In addition, the station served as a proving ground for WVON disc jockeys such as Cecil Hale, who polished their on-air presence before becoming full-time

²⁶ "WVON To Be Sold For \$9 Million," Chicago *Defender*, December 20, 1969, 22.

²⁷ Cohodas, *Spinning Blues into Gold*, 257- 258.

jockeys at the Chicago station. Without a strong force like Leonard to guide the business, the station slowly grew and in January 1973, Phil Chess sold WNOV to Courier Communications for only \$385,000.²⁸

WVON's sister station, WSDM 97.9 FM, also serves as an example of Leonard Chess' quest for the next big radio audience. From 1963 to 1965, WVON broadcasted simulcasts on its FM signal, which was included with the original purchase of the AM station from Richard Hoffman. In 1965, however, the FCC introduced regulations which stipulated that FM stations must contain their own unique broadcasting and not be simulcasting other stations. In order to comply with the regulations, L&P Broadcasting reformatted the station into WSDM, with the call-letters standing for "We're Smack Dab in the Middle" as an allusion to its location on the radio dial. The station broadcast jazz and instrumental music throughout the later 1960s. What set WSDM apart from other Chicago radio stations was its all-female cast of disc jockeys. Known as the "Den Pals" and modeled after the concept of the Playboy bunny, the station marketed itself as "the station with the girls" and featured a corps of sultry voiced African American and white young female broadcasters (average age of twenty-five) known only to listeners by nicknames such as "Peppermint Pattie" and "Pennie Lane." Prominent female disc jockeys such as Yvonne Daniels and the journalist Linda Ellerbee got their start at the station. By the end of 1969, the station generated its own advertising revenue. L&P

²⁸Cecil Hale, interview by Julieanna Richardson, videocassette, February 22, 2002, interview A2002.008, The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, IL.

Broadcasting continued to retain ownership of the station after the sale of WVON and Phil's son, Terry, served as general manager of the station throughout the 1970s. With the rise in progressive music and the growing competitiveness in FM broadcasting, in 1970 the station changed formats and call letters to become WLUP and brought aboard its first male disc jockeys. In December 1978, Phil Chess sold the station to Heftel Communications for \$5.25 million dollars, thus ending the family's involvement in Chicago radio broadcasting.²⁹

The years immediately following the 1969 sale of WVON to Globetrotter Communications started off with much promise for Chicago's African American community. According to WVON General Manager Bob Bell, both Potter Palmer IV and George Gillette purchased the station because "they want to help the black community."³⁰ Lucky Cordell recalled that "Everything was perfect. I mean the community loved us, our personalities were happy, the people at the station were happy, and we were making more money than any station our size in the country."³¹ Regardless of these positive aspects, strife immediately rose between Globetrotter and the Good Guys over a reduction in community service programming and a push to play fewer songs and more advertisements. As one disc jockey anonymously lamented to the *Chicago Tribune*, "I should have been playing 14 or 15 records an hour. Instead I found myself playing 5 to 7.

²⁹ "The Week-end Happenings: The Chicago Station with All Those Girls," *Chicago Tribune*, March 16, 1969, A6.

³⁰ "WVON To Be Sold," 22.

³¹ Cordell, Radio Smithsonian interview.

They wanted to keep all the commercials and cut out all the public service.” The station’s facility lapsed into a state of disrepair and in addition to antiquated broadcasting machinery “roaches, spiders, dust and sewers that occasionally continue to back up” became the new norm for employees.³²

In no way were WVON’s disc jockeys apathetic to the station’s downward trajectory in the early 1970s. Following the trend of black nationalistic concern about whites owning predominantly black businesses, WVON disc jockeys utilized Operation PUSH’s Jesse Jackson to speak out about the station’s white ownership and to serve as a mediator to negotiate improved salaries. As a result of these negotiations, in 1971, WVON’s disc jockeys with over five years of service at the station received a substantial raise of \$20,000 over a three year period and the promise of more community-focused broadcasts. Their salary raises reportedly made them the highest-paid group of African American disc jockeys in the country.³³ Despite this achievement, WVON’s ratings floundered in 1973 due to the station’s standardized formatting and reduced focus on community-related broadcasting. By spring of 1974, Globetrotter management contemplated a disc jockey shakeup at the station. After General Manager Lucky Cordell balked about firing the Good Guys, Globetrotter unceremoniously “promoted away” Cordell from General Manager to Assistant to the President in April 1975. Good Guy

³²Gary Deeb, “Was Cordell Kicked Upstairs?” *Chicago Tribune*, October 25, 1975, B11.

³³Faith Christmas, “Pact Makes WVON Disk Jockeys Highest Paid, *Chicago Defender*, February 16, 1971, 2.

Bernadine Washington was promoted to the General Manager position, and during her tenure she either fired popular disc jockeys such as E. Rodney Jones, Jay Johnson, Roy Wood, and Larry Langford or they left the station. Herb Kent “the Cool Gent,” was moved to a midday slot, thus isolating him from his core teenage audience. Wesley South’s *Hotline* was shortened to three hourly shows per week. For Bill Butterball Crane, the move away from the personality-based broadcasts of the station was unfathomable. “I couldn’t understand it, especially because of the way it was done. None of us had any idea why...but now I do. It was business and with WVON, it hadn’t been so much business.”³⁴ For Cordell, Washington’s promotion to “hatchet man” was a shrewd move by the station’s white ownership. He recalled that “The community couldn’t come after them, because they didn’t fire me, they promoted me, and they didn’t put a white in my position, they put a black, and not only that, but they put a black woman you see? So they covered all the bases.”³⁵ In the wake of these changes, Chicago’s African American community vehemently reacted. In 1975, students from Kennedy-King College organized pickets of Globetrotter’s offices in Chicago’s Loop to protest the reduction in *Hotline*. *Chicago Tribune* columnist Vernon Jarrett also criticized the station and organized a press conference to protest the station’s lessening interest in community-focused programming.³⁶ Station management worked to dispel rumors of strife at WVON, and in

³⁴ Crane, *The Dawn of Urban Radio*.

³⁵ Cordell, Radio Smithsonian interview.

³⁶ Vernon Jarrett, “The Strange Tunes at WVON Radio,” *Chicago Tribune*, November 7, 1975, A4.

1975, George Gillette stated that “WVON became old and unprofessional...naturally in the process of changing, you’re going to create some tension, but there’s no racial tension.”³⁷

Beyond WVON’s own internal dilemmas, another factor contributing to WVON’s decline was the rise of FM radio in the late 1960s and 1970s. With the introduction of the long-playing (LP) 33 1/3 rpm high fidelity records, listeners longed for longer tracks with better quality to be played on radio stations. FM broadcasts provided listeners with better-sounding music and, with the advent of stereo, the capacity to broadcast in stereo. Furthermore, FM radio represented a new financial frontier for radio station owners. As radio stations had virtually staked a claim on every possible on AM bandwidth, stations began to flock to unoccupied FM signals that could be purchased at a much lower rate. Seizing the opportunity, both AM and FM competitors pounced on WVON’s weakness. One strong competitor to WVON in the mid-1970s was WJPC 950 AM. Purchased by the African American owned Johnson Publishing Company, which published *Ebony* and *Jet* magazines, the station featured a dynamic cast of on-air personalities, including Tom Joyner, as disc jockeys. It also picked up broadcasting numerous Chicago African American community events, such as Operation P.U.S.H. meetings which WVON had dropped from their schedule. On the FM front, WVON’s most serious FM competitor was WBMX 102.7 FM, whose call letters stood for the “Black Music Experience.” Purchased by the Sonderling Broadcasting Corporation in 1973, WBMX 102.7 FM was

³⁷Deeb, “Was Cordell Kicked Upstairs?” B11.

the sister station of WVON competitor WOPA 1450 AM. According to the *Chicago Tribune*, the station was “heavy on the disco sound – lushly orchestrated, danceable music that transcends the boundaries of soul, rock, and easy listening.” Furthermore, the station openly marketed itself to both black and white listeners. In a direct jab at WVON’s disc jockeys, WBMX Program Director Earnest James stated “We’re not into jive talk or a too-good-to-be true approach. We’re going after adults, so our broadcasters speak clearly and intelligently- no broken English-because the level of our music is intelligent.” By the end of 1975, WBMX, which later became the powerful urban station V-103, shared equal ratings with WVON.³⁸

WVON attempted to deal with the onslaught of competitors by increasing its signal strength. In 1973, Globetrotter Communications purchased WNUS 1390 AM and 107.5 FM, and at the end of 1974 changed WVON’s signal to the more powerful 5,000 watt 1390 AM. For the first time in WVON’s history, its prior 1450 AM signal went silent. This increase in signal strength did not sustain the station, and throughout the late 1970s WBMX and WJPC continued to chip away at WVON’s ratings. In addition, Globetrotter itself also further sowed the seeds of WVON’s destruction by reformatting its 107.5 FM signal into an adult contemporary channel which it renamed WGCI, which stood for Globetrotter Communications, Inc. WGCI grew into one of the largest urban contemporary music radio stations in the nation, and while it marketed itself as a station for young adults, WVON 1390 AM became affiliated as a station for older listeners as it

³⁸ “WBMX: No Jive for the Giant Killer,” *Chicago Tribune*, December 10, 1975, E15.

continued playing older rhythm and blues and soul music. In 1977, the media conglomerate Gannett Company, Inc. purchased both WVON 1390 AM and WGCI 107.5 FM, the latter being the more powerful of the two stations. Viewing the real radio prize as WGCI and unwilling to invest money into both AM and FM radio station broadcasts, Gannett ended WVON in 1983 and began simulcasting the FM broadcast on the 1390 AM frequency, thus effectively silencing the former “Black Giant” of Chicago radio broadcasting.³⁹

WVON’s Good Guys mourned the loss of the station that Leonard Chess created and nurtured. Two of the Good Guys, Pervis Spann and Wesley South, attempted to resuscitate the former community-focused station and in 1977, the two partnered to form the Midway Broadcasting Company and purchased WVON’s former 1450 AM frequency. Naming the station WXOL and beginning to broadcast on a part-time basis in 1979, both Spann and South acquired the former WVON call letters when Gannet dropped them in 1984. Broadcasting only during the day, station transformed its call letters to “Voice of the Nation,” and, in 1986, became a talk radio station that focused on issues of concern to Chicago African Americans.

In looking at urban radio today, former WVON disc jockeys lament the failure of contemporary stations to employ effective personalities that connect with people. For Herb Kent, WVON was special because “it was a combination of us playing the best music possible and introducing people to the latest thing in music and the fact that we

³⁹ Cohodas, *Turning Blues into Gold*, 215.

were all personalities 24 hours a day.”⁴⁰ With today’s corporate stronghold on radio and the high start-up capital needed to buy a station, African Americans are still limited from truly making an impact in radio. For the brief time that WVON existed, the station was remarkable because it truly embodied the idea of radio as a “tribal village.” Although the station’s goal as a business was to produce a profit, Leonard Chess recognized the community-oriented success of Al Benson and modeled the station after his style and delivery. With a cast of broadcasters who acted and spoke like the community around them, the station served not only as a classroom without walls, but as a powerful force for community action in Chicago during the 1960s.

⁴⁰ Herb Kent, Radio Smithsonian interview.

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