



James Poe became a partner in radio station WABG in 2007. He became the sole owner of the station earlier this year.

THE MAN BEHIND THE 'AWESOME A-M'

James Poe, the disc jockey and radio station owner, stitches radio programming like a quilt, piecing odd fragments to form a whole sound that's vintage but hip.

It catches the ear. His station, WABG 960 — the “Awesome A-M” — broadcasts from a small wooden building with three broadcasting towers on 16 acres surrounded by fields out on Money Road north of Greenwood. The station catches the eye.

These things make up a fabric that Poe weaves from both Greenwood and Columbus, the location of a second office, “Studio B,” and his home. He runs the station from both places and travels back and forth.

A couple of hours of listening might slide between interviews from a bluesman's funeral to the Gants' “Roadrunner” to Roseanne Cash's “Money Road.” The

station airs classic rock and blues with patches of Poe.

“I like to keep things light on the air,” Poe explained.

Poe — he prefers that people call him by his last name — grew up in Jackson and spent more than 20 years in the U.S. Air Force as an air traffic controller. He retired as a first sergeant. He recently started volunteering as a retirees' activities officer for Columbus Air Force Base, and he owns and operates a training school for those who want a career in radio, both broadcasting and sales.

His own involvement with radio started as an outside gig.

STORY BY SUSAN MONTGOMERY ■ PHOTOS BY JOHNNY JENNINGS

"I've always done radio. I did radio with the AFRTS, the American Forces Radio and Television Services, in Thailand and all the way through my career. Most of us had something we did as a sideline," Poe said.

His show was designed to entertain — he'd put on Wolfman Jack — to relax, give listeners a break. "I had a different kind of show, real laid back." He loved it.

Eventually, Poe found himself working full time with a station in Willmar, Minnesota. He thought it would be a short-term job there, just three months.

"Those 90 days turned into six years," he said. "My sidekick up there and I had a blast, and we turned that station upside down."

Then, DJ Steve Ladd, who was working for WROX in Clarksdale, was trying to revive the station after the death of its owner. He called Poe, who had produced a collection of blues interviews for Southern radio stations. Ladd liked them. "Steve talked me into coming to Clarksdale and working with him."

What clinched the deal was a preliminary visit. WROX was being operated from Ground Zero Blues Club. "It was in the same building, on the back side. There was Morgan Freeman shooting



WABG's studio and its broadcasting towers sit on 16 acres of land on Money Road a little more than a mile north of Greenwood.

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“The Awesome A-M is my life’s dream, and I am going to hold onto it until the day I die.”

James Poe

pool, and I could not believe it.”

Poe stayed in Clarksdale but was unhappy with some changes. The station’s format changed from classic rock and blues to hip-hop. Ladd left. “I stuck around Clarksdale another few years but had enough and came back to Studio B.”

That’s when WABG cropped up with a call from the Greenwood-based blues historian, Steve LaVere. Poe said LaVere asked him how he would like to have his “own radio station.” That question led to Poe’s partnership with LaVere and Clarksdale’s Bill Luckett and the purchase of WABG from its parent company in 2007. Over the years, LaVere and then Luckett sold to Poe. He became sole owner earlier this year.

The property has become a landmark because it is scenic — a 1950s radio station in the middle of the countryside — and because it sits between two other notable sites. The station is 1.3 miles up Money Road from the Bobbie Gentry “Ode to Billy Joe” marker, which is on the Tallahatchie Bridge. Travel past the station for another mile, and there’s Little Zion Church with bluesman Robert Johnson’s grave in its cemetery.

Visitors make the quiet drive day and night. Some stop at the station. If Poe is there, he might try to put them on the air. That’s what happened with Bruce Falconer from Forest, Ontario, in Canada.

In 2011, he and a companion were driving along the road, looking for the Johnson grave at night. Poe lent them a flashlight. Back at the station, he put Falconer on the air.

“We talked and talked,” Poe said. “He wanted to learn radio the way we do it.” The conversation led to a stint by Falconer as the host of a Sunday night blues show.

On another occasion, there was a Robert Johnson festival at the station. Just 50 people showed up. Country blues guitarist Rory Block was a headliner, and she performed from 10:30 p.m. until midnight.

“She got on that stage. We had a full moon in the dark, and we were mesmerized,” Poe said.

Among his happy associations are one with Beth Cook, who was a DJ for the Awesome A-M until she left for school in Alabama, and another with Tommy Gray, a



Poe is seen in the studio with Tommy Gray, an evangelist who does a Sunday show on WABG.

former farm manager who is an evangelist with a Sunday morning show. Gray said he came on board because Poe gave him a call.

“His speech and my speech were the same,” Gray said.

People can listen over the air as far away as Yazoo City and Starkville, and worldwide over the Internet, Poe said. The station has a following in Japan. This bolsters Poe when dealing with the challenges of keeping a vintage radio station alive.

Money is perpetually tight for maintenance and repairs. Advertising dollars are important.

“We are still working hard and struggling financially, which is not a big deal,” Poe said. “I didn’t get into radio to make money. I got into radio to make a difference.”

“The Awesome A-M is my life’s dream, and I am going to hold onto it until the day I die.” **L**

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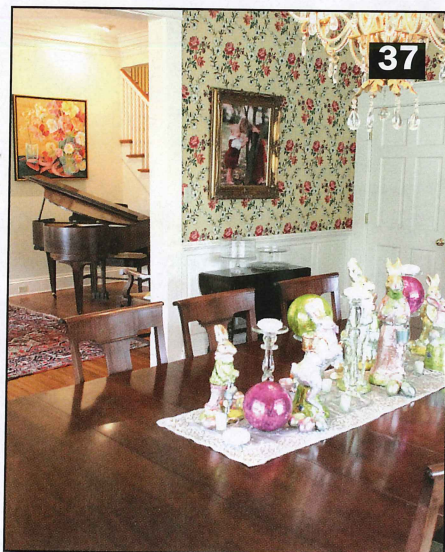
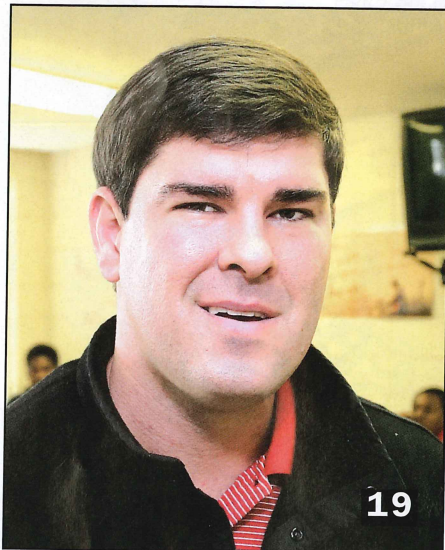
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On the cover: Beekeepers McLeod Meek, left, and Dr. Todd Fincher show off honeycombs from one of the hives they keep at their Greenwood homes. (Photo by Johnny Jennings)

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