





THE AWESOME AM 960

News, blues and interviews

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARIANNE TODD

James Poe sits down, puts on his headphones and pulls the mic close.

As he begins his radio broadcast from the little building on Money Road in Greenwood, his listeners are tuning their AM dials to the 960 frequency. Just a little taste of the Awesome AM and any listener will know, they've reached the home of the blues.

But Poe said it wasn't always so.

In a land rich with blues history, legend and lore, it wasn't until Poe moved to the Mississippi Delta from Minnesota that blues hit the airwaves 24-7.

"As a consultant, my philosophy has always been that you don't implant a radio station into a market," Poe said. "You go into the market and survey the market and listen to other stations and find the void. Then you plug the void. And the void in the Mississippi Delta was that no one was mixing the blues with the classic rock. People come here from all over the world, and when they come, they're looking for one thing – the blues. They came for Robert Johnson, but they couldn't hear Robert Johnson on the radio unless it was at a given time. There was no Sonny Boy Williamson, unless it was at a given time. Well, that's what WABG is, 24-hours-a-day of blues, news and interviews."

The retired Air Force air traffic controller said he got into radio through a bizarre twist of fate. He had always loved listening to radio, and as a boy growing up in Jackson, would tune in to

James Poe spearheads news, blues and interviews round the clock, seven days a week on WABG, the home of the Awesome AM 960 in Greenwood.



WOKJ.

“Back in those days the AM stations were more potent than FM,” he said. “They had all the best personalities. They did all the soul music, and they had the best deejays. I’d sit on the back steps of our shotgun house and listen to personalities like Bruce Payne the Soul Ranger, and I fell in love with it.

“One day after playing in the park with three or four friends we were walking past the station on Lynch Street, and there through the glass paneled window was a deejay. We stood and watched him for 30 minutes. He had an Afro and a turtleneck, and he was playing ‘Disco Lady’ by Johnny Taylor. He was spinning around and writing on his log, and we said, ‘Man, that’s cool.’ So I went back home and tried to imitate all that. Then when I was twelve my mother gave me a tape recorder, and it stuck with me.”

But the pivotal moment -- the one that took Poe from air traffic controller to airwaves controller -- came from sheer tragedy. Poe had been assigned to the air traffic control tower at Buckley Air National

Guard Base and worked base flights around flights to and from the congested Stapleton International Airport in Denver. He had given instructions to an awaiting B-66 for a northerly departure. But then there was a sudden wind shift that favored a southerly departure, and instead of taking a delay for a southerly departure in the burgeoning snow storm, the pilot elected to depart on a northerly take off course.

“The plane crashed and killed everyone on board,” he said. “They suspended our ratings and ordered psychological evaluations. Just after 11:30 that night they released us. I went home that night, and I was so shaken all I could do was drink. I drank, and I drank until I blacked out. I woke up at 4 a.m., and my television was on. And on television was a guy named Thom Brent. He said, ‘If you would like to change your life and start a new and exciting career in broadcasting, come to the Columbia School of Broadcasting.’ That guy on TV would be my mentor.”

The next day after passing his psychological evaluation, he went to the school and signed up. Poe said the training program led to



OPPOSITE PAGE: The Awesome AM 960 at its present day location on Money Road in Greenwood.
 TOP: Poe talks with co-owner Attorney Bill Luckett on the airwaves.
 CENTER: Poe is no stranger to celebrity, interviewing everyone from John Grisham to actor Morgan Freeman.

another for FCC licensing because, “that was a prime possession back then. If you had a first class FCC license, you could do just about anything in radio.”

By the early 90s, Poe was ready to retire. Having worked 18 years as an air traffic controller with a part-time gig in radio, he was ready to devote all his time to his prime passion – radio. A station in Minnesota would be the first to offer the now Columbus resident a full-time position. Six years later, Poe was offered the chance to return to Mississippi – this time to the Delta.

“I had sent down a blues show I had compiled over the years with interviews of Tyrone Davis, Albert King, Z.Z. Hill, just peddling this five-minute radio show,” Poe said. “And a great radio personality by the name of Steve Ladd called and said, ‘You’ve got to come down to Clarksdale and see what’s going on in the Mississippi Delta.’ So I came down, and the radio station was located on the back side of Ground Zero. I walked in and there was Morgan Freeman shooting pool. Steve Ladd was on stage, and they had a band there. I thought

I was in heaven.”

Poe resigned from his position in Minnesota and headed back to Clarksdale, where he helped Ladd get WROX up and running with old time blues favorites like Muddy Waters, Howin’ Wolf and T-Bone Walker, “... the music that came out of that region. No one was playing that kind of music around the clock, everything Mississippi, everything blues. But they had some internal problems, and for some reason they decided to do hip-hop.”

By that time, Poe had formed a close friendship with Clarksdale attorney Bill Luckett, who had interests in Ground Zero with Freeman. “Bill asked me not to leave. He said, ‘Hang around town, and when you get a radio station, I’ll advertise with you.’” Poe remained, doing radio consulting and freelance work. The work wasn’t a bad living, but proved inconsistent, so Poe gave up and headed back to Columbus, where he still owned property.

“Then one day I received this email that said, ‘How would you like to own your own radio station?’” Poe said. “I learned it was a station

in Greenwood, so I took an engineer who told me it was a good deal at the right price with low overhead. I saw an opportunity where I could really do some good in the bedrock of the blues. So, with another investor, I called Bill Lockett and asked him if he wanted to partner with me, and he said, 'Yes.'

Lockett said the move seemed like a natural fit.

"I'm getting ready to teach a course at Ole Miss called Lawyers as Entrepreneurs," Lockett said, citing the number of businesses in which he is involved. "A lot of people like the sound of my voice, so I do voice-overs and ads. I work as an actor, too. At Ground Zero Blues Club the other day I was a commentator (or maybe an agitator) on Bubba's Best Bets. He'd say who he thought would win a bowl game, and I would add some colorful comment. We provoked some call-ins to the station because of that."

Operations of the new Awesome AM 960 began in 2008 after moving WABG radio station from its former location on Highway

82 to its current location on Money Road under its transmitter towers.

"The first thing we had to do was to come up with a format for the station," Poe said. Everyone has a niche, and we like to do what we call People Radio. People radio is for black, white, Hispanic, Japanese, Chinese – for the majority of the people. Our generic format serves the people and the void that was in the Mississippi Delta. We're a non-stop dose of Mississippi Delta blues, classic rock ... everything from Muddy Waters to Led Zeppelin – the music that kept Muddy Waters alive after Chess closed its doors. We're on air 24-hours-a-day with news, blues and interviews, everyone from John Grisham to Bobby Blue Bland, Morgan Freeman, Ruby Dee, Bobby Rush, Charles Evers, James Meredith, Gov. Haley Barbour, doctors, lawyers, mayors – even the mayor of Meridian, the mayor of Greenville and the mayor of Alligator, Mississippi."

Broadcasting to an estimated 100,000 people in the Mississippi

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Delta and even more on WABG's Internet access, Poe said the station has come along way, but they still have more work to do.

"The first four years I slept at the station," Poe said. "I was Poe the deejay, Poe the secretary, Poe the grass cutter. We want to be in a position where we can make a positive contribution to the community – the community being the State of Mississippi, and it's rough sailing for us right now. We've paid our dues, but we still haven't gotten the recognition or notoriety we deserve for our hard work. It's going to take consistency – doing what we're doing relentlessly."

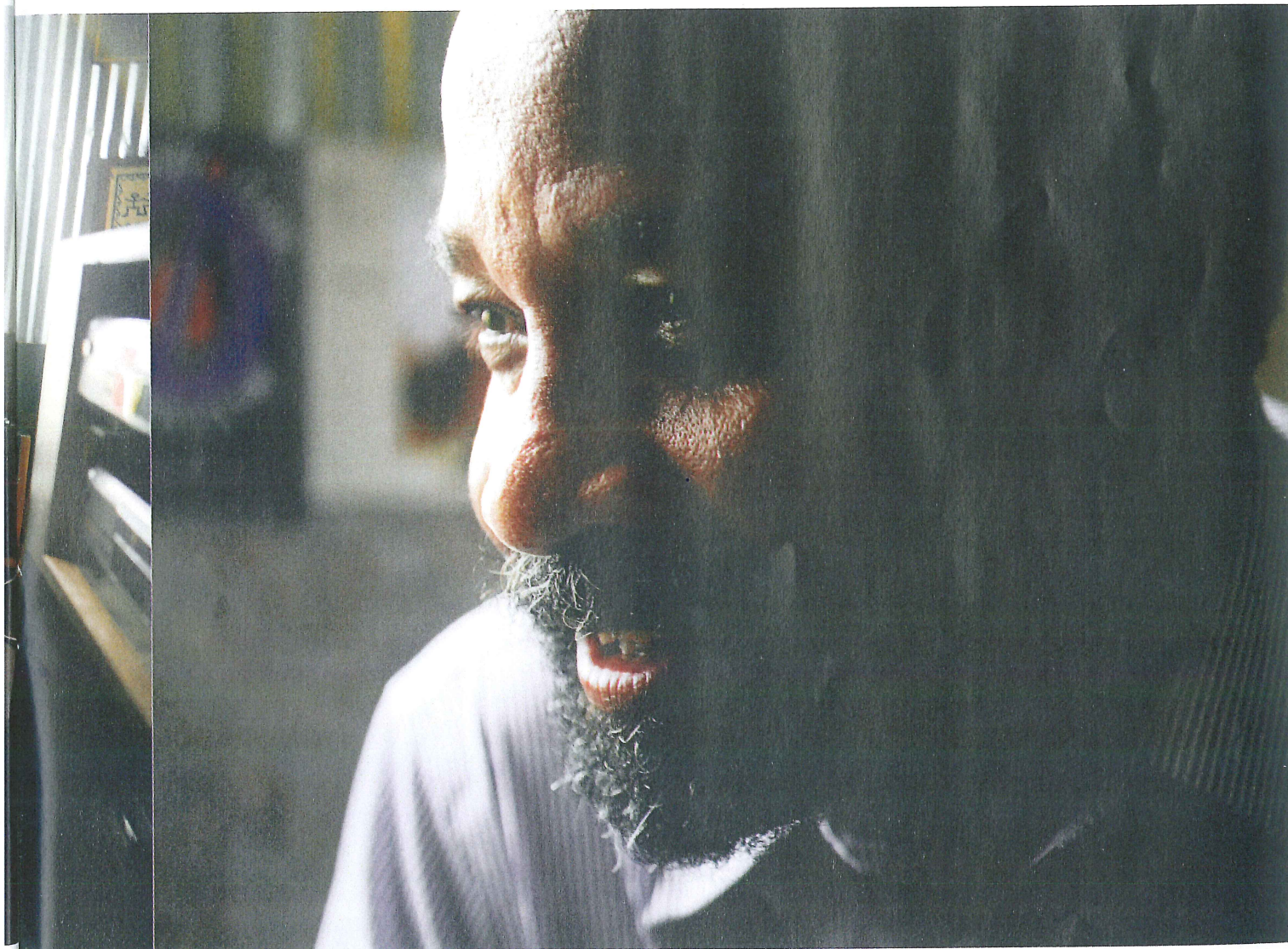
In 2011, WABG hosted the Robert Johnson 100th Anniversary Remembrance Festival with headliners Rory Block and Maria Muldaur. The festival concluded with a prayer vigil at Johnson's grave site. Although the turnout wasn't as large as expected, Poe hopes to grow festivals like this and others, offering regular live music in Greenwood's home of the blues, where there is essentially none currently offered.

And he's getting a little help. Apprentices like Beth Cook of Hernando, Fla., came to sharpen her skills in advertising and sales. Bruce Falconer of Forest Ontario, Canada, came to learn the ropes as a radio personality, and Tomoni Hoshina of Yokohama, Japan, also came to learn the deejay trade. "She spoke broken English and Japanese, and the people loved her," Poe said. "She was an overwhelming success."

"I think we're an important asset to the community. I've never been in radio to make money. I'm in it to make a difference. I know the power of radio – to educate, to inform and to entertain. Making people laugh and think have always been important to me."

WANT TO LISTEN?

Visit the Awesome AM 960 at www.awesomeam.com. To advertise on WABG's airwaves, contact Poe at (662) 455-1688 or email him at thejamespoe@yahoo.com.



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