

relish

A spicy mix of weekend picks

WPAQ Is 70

Mount Airy radio station founded by Ralph Epperson
and his family celebrates another milestone

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Profile

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Rockabilly, swing, old-time,
local musician can play it all

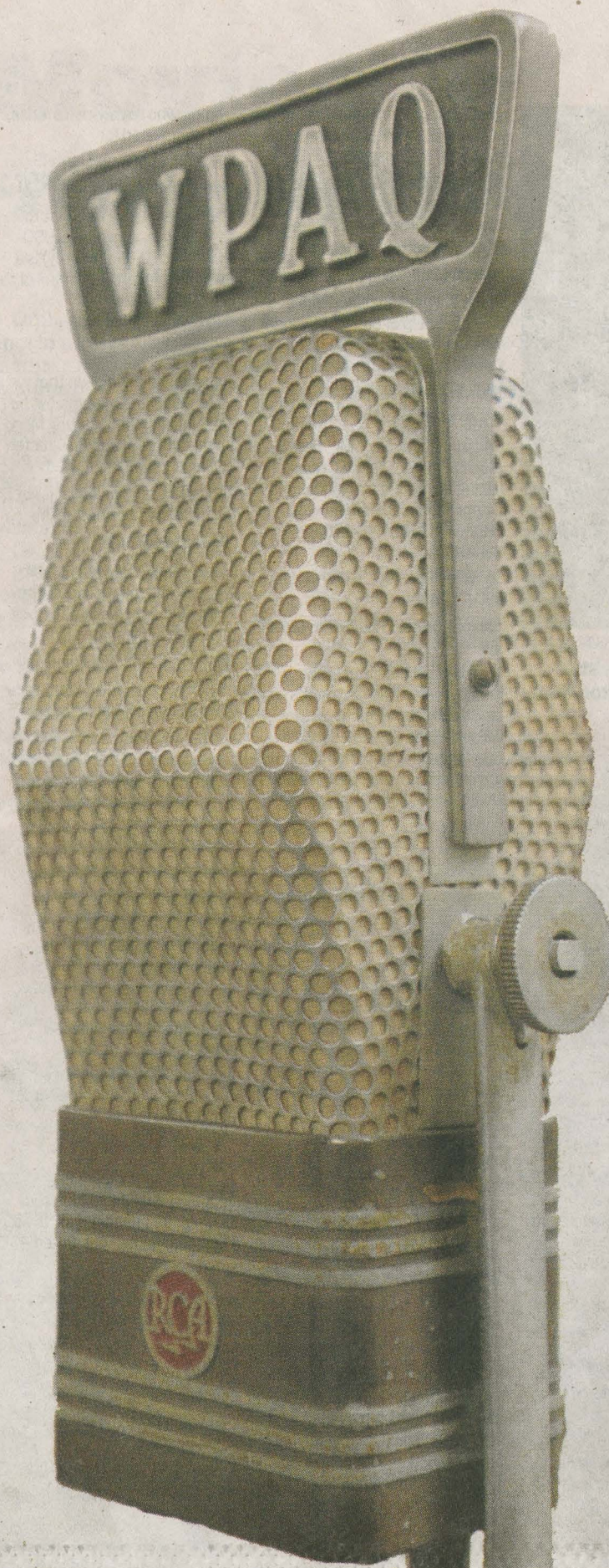


Get Out!

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Nat Greene Trail offers
a different lake, streams





JOURNAL FILE PHOTO

From Pirate to

Radio station WPAQ celebrates 70 years

BY EDDIE HUFFMAN
Special Correspondent

Mountain musicians would come from miles around to appear on Ralph Epperson's radio broadcasts in the years immediately following World War II. Pickers and preachers would gather in the family's parlor, sending songs and sermons out to the hills and hollers around Ararat, Va., just across the state line from Mount Airy.

There was only one problem: The station didn't have a broadcast license.

"This was kind of a pirate radio station," said Stuart Epperson, one of Ralph's younger brothers. "He just put it on the air. It reached about 15 miles, maybe 20 miles."

Ralph Epperson eventually decided to create a legitimate, licensed radio station, and WPAQ went on the air at 740 AM on Groundhog Day, Feb. 2, 1948. The station will celebrate its 70th anniversary on Feb. 3 with a birthday celebration at the Historic Earle Theatre and Old-Time Music Heritage Hall in downtown Mount Airy.

"All of it is free," said Kelly Epperson, Ralph's son, who has owned WPAQ since his father's death in 2006. "It's a gift of appreciation."

WPAQ has become a regional treasure in the decades since its founding. The station has showcased and documented live music by performers from one of the most music-rich regions of the country. Entertainers who have broadcast on the station include Flatt and Scruggs, the Stanley Brothers, Roy Acuff, Doc Watson and Andy Griffith. Bluegrass legend Mac Wiseman was a WPAQ announcer before his stints with Lester



DAVID ROLFE/JOURNAL

Ralph Epperson telling tales of the old days in radio at WPAQ, his station in Mt. Airy. The station was hosting the 4th Annual Old-Time Radio Conference in May 2001.

Flatt and Earl Scruggs and the Foggy Mountain Boys and Bill Monroe's Bluegrass Boys.

The people who knew Ralph say he loved all kinds of music, but especially wanted to showcase local styles.

"Ralph always had a strong, strong sense of who he was, and of the traditions that he wanted to shed a light on, or make visible so that other people could come embrace those in a joyful way," said Wayne Martin, executive director of the N.C. Arts Council.

Seven bands will perform for the WPAQ birthday

celebration: Rich in Tradition, Zephyr Lightning Bolts, Mickey Galyean and Cullen's Bridge, Narrow Road, Slate Mountain Ramblers, Country Boys and Nunn Brothers. They're all regulars on the Merry-Go-Round, a live broadcast that has aired every Saturday since the station first went on the air.

"We believe it's the second-longest continuous running show of its type, second to the Grand Ole Opry," Kelly said.

His father had a couple of primary goals when he launched WPAQ, according to

people who knew Ralph: promote the region's music traditions and spread the gospel.

"That was important to my dad, to make sure the gospel was represented," Kelly said. "That was sort of a pledge he made to my grandmother, his mother. She was very religious, and her aspiration was for him to become a minister. This was a different ministry, but still got it done."

The family believed Ralph lived to adulthood thanks to divine intervention, according to Stuart. Ralph was in a serious car wreck in Richmond

when he was about 12.

"They thought he was going to die," Stuart said. "He had a very serious spinal injury. But my mother prayed, and they rang the church bell in Ararat at the end of the service, and everybody gathered to pray for Ralph. And God just miraculously healed him."

Tinkerer and perfectionist

Ralph was born in 1921, the same year the first radio station in the United States, KDKA in Pittsburgh, began regular daily broadcasts. As

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much as Ralph loved music, he never learned to play an instrument, Kelly said. He got a mail-order banjo as a boy in Ararat, but struggled to play it. Eventually he returned it in exchange for a radio transmitter.

He went to college at John Brown University in Siloam Springs, Ark., eventually getting a job at the school's radio station. Ralph hitchhiked back and forth between there and his home in Virginia. He would stage roadside antics to get drivers to stop and pick him up, such as hambone body percussion, Kelly said.

"Somebody would say, 'What kind of fool are you?'" Kelly said. "He'd say, 'I'm just waiting on another fool to come along and give me a ride.'"

During World War II Ralph worked at the Naval Research Station in Washington, D.C., focusing on technology such as radar and walkie-talkies, Kelly said.

"Electronics were fascinating to him," Kelly said. "If you asked him the time, he wanted to tell you how the clock worked."

Ralph's attention to detail could lead to frustrating indecisiveness, Stuart said. For example, he spent a great deal of time analyzing various kinds of bricks while deciding which type to use for construction of the WPAQ building.

"His thoroughness on everything would just about drive people crazy," Stuart said. "The people working with him had to have a lot of patience. My dad constantly had to push him to make a decision."

Ralph got help with construction of WPAQ from his father, Harry Epperson, a farmer who owned a sawmill. They



HOBERT JONES/SURRY ARTS COUNCIL

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Kelly Epperson in the control room of his family's radio station, WPAQ

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built in a former cow pasture out in the country north of Mount Airy.

Paul Brown, host of "Across the Blue Ridge" on WFDD and a veteran of National Public Radio news, got his professional start in radio as a news reporter at WPAQ around 1980. He remembers Ralph taking a hands-on approach to keeping the station on air decades after its launch.

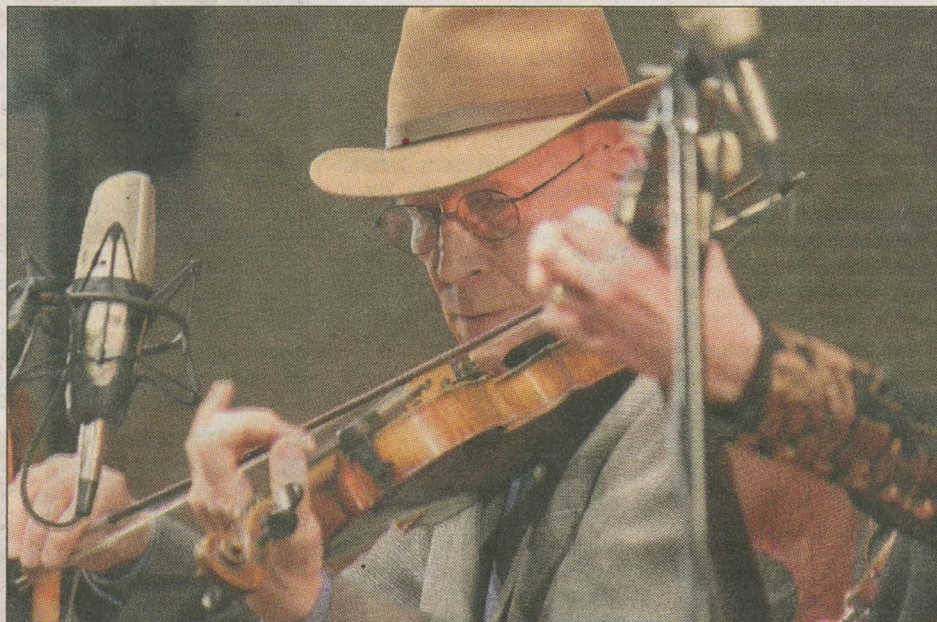
"We were working on the transmitter one night after hours, and he told me one of the most satisfying elements of his career had been helping musicians who had maybe fallen away from playing, or had no outlet on radio, to get back to playing, and to come to WPAQ, where they could be heard by more people," Brown said.

Bridging past and present

Brown performed on the air at WPAQ before he got a job there. He played in the station's legendary Studio A with a regional band — either Robert Sykes and the Surry County Boys or Benton Flippen and the Smokey Valley Boys, he said.

"It was like going back to the 1940s," Brown said. "Almost nothing in the building had changed. When you when walked in the door, you realized that you were at once stepping back into a time that you would never have had the chance to experience but for WPAQ, and at the same time you were very much in the present, because the station was still serving its community through its programming."

Ralph's community service and commitment to traditional music would



EDDIE HUFFMANN

Paul Brown, a veteran of National Public Radio news, got his professional start at WPAQ.

ultimately help earn him a place in the N.C. Association of Broadcasters Hall of Fame and the respect of people in the WPAQ listening area.

"He always said, 'If there are 25 radio stations up and down the dial doing the same type thing, why would I want to be No. 26?'" Kelly said.

WPAQ continues to evolve nearly three-quarters of a century after its launch. The station began streaming its programming online in 2007, and it will add an FM signal in coming months, Kelly said. WPAQ has always signed off the air at night, but it will begin broadcasting 24 hours a day on FM, duplicating its daytime programming from the AM station and adding new programming after dark.

Ralph and his brothers would eventually own more than 150 radio stations across the country. Stuart is now chairman of the board for Salem Media Group, a company with a conservative, Christian-oriented focus

that owns radio stations, a satellite radio channel, websites and a publishing company.

"Ralph's the one that led us off the farm," Stuart said.

The basement at WPAQ and Ralph's home held an extensive collection of recordings and other memorabilia from the station's long history. Wayne Martin helped convince Ralph to donate the bulk of his collection to the Southern Folklife Collection in Chapel Hill (finding-aids.lib.unc.edu/20401).

"He was a real documenting force," said Trish Kilby Fore, a former DJ at WPAQ who helped inventory Ralph's collection and conducted oral history interviews with him. "He captured so much music. It's just a wonderful resource for musicians today."

In 1999, Brown used the WPAQ archives to produce an album for Rounder Records of songs from vintage broadcasts, showcasing the work of regional performers such as the Skyline Serenaders and

the Silvertone Gospel Harmonizers. The Carolina Chocolate Drops learned "Cornbread and Butterbeans" by the Carolina Sunshine Trio from that record, according to Steven Weiss, curator of the Southern Folklife Collection. They recorded it on their Grammy-winning 2010 album "Genuine Negro Jig."

Brown credits Ralph with broadening his perspective.

"I was one of the luckiest people in the world that happened to land in this community when I did, happened to have friends that pointed me over to WPAQ, that the



COURTESY SLATE MOUNTAIN RAMBLERS



JOURNAL FILE PHOTO

'Slate Mountain Ramblers (top) and Rich in Tradition will perform at the WPAQ 70th Birthday Celebration.

What: WPAQ 70th Birthday Celebration

When: 5:15 p.m. Feb. 3

Where: The Historic Earle Theatre and Old-Time Music Heritage Hall, 142 N. Main St., Mount Airy

Cost: Free

Information: wpaq740.com/events/event/wpaq-70th-birthday-celebration

station was there at all, and that Ralph was the interesting person he was," Brown said. "I loved spending time with him,

because he opened my eyes to possibilities every time I was around him."

huffman.eddie@gmail.com
@eddiehuffman

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