

Pervis Spann interview.

At WXOL, 3350 S Kedzie, Chicago.

September 21, 1982. 2 pm.

You're an important man in the blues, Mr Spann.

I am? OK, thank you.

Do you see yourself as performing a service to the blues, keeping it on the air?

Well, yes, I do. Very few radio stations in this city - matter of fact, in this country - really put any emphasis on the blues. We do. We put emphasis on the blues. We play blues and more. That's our slogan, the station with blues and more. A few years ago, we were on a radio ^{station} ~~show~~ called ~~WYON~~ ^{WYON}, which played some blues here and there; I had a show at night. Then new owners came in, took over the station. And they eliminated all the blues, completely. So for about two to three years just nobody in the city of Chicago was playing blues. Meantime, after we got a radio station licence in 1979, we instituted a blues format, and even though we're a shared-time station, we only have fifteen hours a day, we made a tremendous impact as far as the market place is concerned, because we specialise in blues. That's our specialty. A lot of blues folks around the Chicago area, and therefore we have a vast market to deal with. Right now the economical hard times have hit a lot of black folks, just really turned to the blues, and we're more popular now, I guess - well, I know we're more popular now than any time since we've been on the air - because of the hard times. They can relate to the hard times.

Are you the man behind WXOL?

Yes, well I am the operational manager, and I'm one of the owners. And I guess maybe I'm the programme director. And I'm the announcer, and ... whatever it takes to make the station go.

Why did blues go off the air?

Well, that you could relate, I guess to a number of reasons. You know, most of the black ststions hire young programmers, and young programmers don't relate to the blues, they programme what they relate to, and that is, at the time when the blues was taken off the air, that was the Bootsy Collins, the Leroy James - you know, the up-tempo beat thing. The fellows, the young programmers could relate to that type of music, and people normally buy what they hear, you can brainwash people with records, and so they brainwashed them with the funkadelics, and they brainwashed them with Bootsy and so and so forth. So the young programmers programmed what they related to, and their peers, not taking into consideration that there's a completely different world altogether - older people, and some young, that really liked the blues.

But do you not think that before that 'brainwashing' began, that young peoples' tastes had already turned away from the blues?

I've never known young people to be too much in love with the blues, first place - young people. It's basically the programmers that determine, because see, if you

are a programme director, and you picking a music, and you playing a pop tune, and every once in a while you sticking a blues in, then your young audience will become exposed to some of the blues records. Therefore some of them will begin to like the blues records. So that is one way of creating new blues listeners - by instituting a blues or two, or some more, into your programming. But we do it the other way around - we programme the blues, and institute a few of the other contemporary records into our programming.

How do you decide what to play. Especially since there's probably more new blues releases coming out now than there were maybe ten years ago?

Well, after being on radio for twenty-two, twenty-three years, you got a feel for the records, you know if this will fit into your programme. Not hard at all. For example, if you look around, you see hundreds and hundreds of records. You won't be able to listen to all of them, you listen to a little bit of one, a little bit of another. In the first verse, you kind of tell whether this will fit into what you trying to do. You trying to accomplish a goal, and the goal is to maintain what you got, and seek to come up with other listeners. And there are those old standards anyway, the BB Kings, the Bobby Bland, Albert King, Little Milton, Muddy Waters - folks of this nature. The Johnny Taylors, ZZ Hill, now, he's very popular - you just got to go with these particular people anyway. And there are the newcomers, Guitar Jr Johnson, the record Got to Have Money, you know it's all right in to what everybody wants, you know. Got to have money, everybody got to have some money.

Where does your own taste come into it? Or is your own preference the sole determining factor? Do you just play what you like?

No. Not really what I like. I play what I think the listeners will like. I've answered the phone, over the course of my career in radio, I've answered the phone, and you can get a general feel about what the listeners want to hear, just by answering that telephone. You play a record a few weeks, nobody ever calls for it, you call the record stores, it's not selling, well - chances are that's a dead record, you can forget about that, get to something else.

Do you ever actually push a record, to get it to sell?

No. I'll play it. If I like it, I'll play it a little more than I would another record. Pushing then, no.

How did you get into radio originally?

Hm. I was working. I guess all my life I've been real progressive. I worked in a steel mill, went to school, and drive a taxi. I was going to school to be an electronic engineer, and after my GI Bill money ran out, you know, it was for the veterans, and after I finished Electronic School, and I still had a few months left as far as the DA was concerned, I decided to go to radio analysis school. I did, and I was the worst in the class. But , as I said, I've always been progressive, and kind of pushy, and after I finished school, I checked a few areas, and there was no openings, just practically no openings, and it prompt me to say, along with everybody, and I tell everybody, that the doors of opportunity are always closed. If you want the door open, you kick it open. I kept kicking till somebody told me, yes I'll give you

fifteen minutes, that's all. WOPA, which is WBMX now. At that time it was WBMX AM and WBMX FM. No, WOPA AM and WOPA FM. Lately they changed it and made it WBMX on FM and WOPA on AM. So therefore, as far as getting into the business was concerned, I had my foot in the door. So I worked on that, even though bad as I was on the air - still am, yeah. The people liked me though, that's the thing. The name of the game is communication. I communicate with my peers, and they love me, and I love them, so we have a love affair going. They accept me however I come, they accept me. I do things on the air that I wouldn't allow any of the rest of the disc jockeys to attempt to do.

Like what?

Well, I don't know what they are. I mean, talking irregular, just stop the record, backing the record up, just whatever, you know. But my peers expect this of me, since I've been doing it so long, and they seem to enjoy it the way I do it. But when it come down to professionalism, I demand that the other folks live by a professional code. One of my disc jockeys is new in town, he's only been in town now for three months - two months - so if he get out on that limb, maybe he won't be able to get back. One of my disc jockeys got killed two months ago. So I do things unusual, but folks like me when I do 'em.

Big Bill Hill used to be on WOPA.

Big Bill Hill's Shopping Bag Show. Nothing but the blues. I was over there with him. Yeah, I listened to him. We were on WOPA together, you know, nights, he was on days.

That was your first station, then it was WVON, the Chess company. When was that?

April first, 1963. April Fools' Day.

Otis Taylor was just telling me that when a record company owns a station, they have to play nine other records to every one of their own.

Yeah, they got that type of memorandum on him, because he was so into into the record business, and they didn't want him to get the station and play all his records. They try to leave you good regulations as far as permission is concerned.

What was it like working for Chess?

Well, it was fun to me, pleasant. I guess the salary was in line with those years. No problems with that. I wish all the bosses were like the Chess brothers.

Is all you play blues?

Oh, I play the contemporary. It's just that blues have been my major, contemporary's been my minor. I play the top of the contemporary, you know, the Stevie Wonder, the Smokey Robinson, the Isley Brothers, if they got a hit record. But I also don't get too far from my BB King, my Howlin Wolf, stuff of that nature. You see, I run from the top of the contemporary through all the blues. All the blues and the top contemporary.

Big Bill Hill used to do live broadcasts. That seems to have been a healthy time for the blues.

Well, it may have been, but I thought the programming was the pits. I did it myself. But see, you try to pick up on one mike, six or seven instruments, and a singer -

and you can't do that. So all you do is hear a singer singing, and a bunch of noise in the background on the air. So it's the pits as far as listening is concerned, on the air.

But that's just a technical problem. There's no live blues on air now.

I doubt if there's any live any kind of musical programmes on the air, because it's a hectic thing. You just can't duplicate a phonograph record. When you go into the studio, you got twelve musicians, they got twelve microphones, they're all set properly; if you do it wrong, you do it over. I mean, you're on the air. What's going out is gone.

Have you not thought of trying to revive that?

Oh, no. No way. No way! I was glad to get away from it. But it was a necessity at that time, economically and... well, it was just a necessity.

Why?

Because they paid you to come over there and broadcast from the place, and the station needed the money, and I needed the money. And I guess Bill Hill needed the money. So you did it, but you do a lot of things you don't like.

That's interesting. I never heard any, and I was thinking about it as something really good.

No, it wasn't good. Good perhaps for the station owner, because he needed the money, and good for the owner of the club because you bring in a few people. But as far as to programme it, it's the pits.

There seems to be some minor kind of blues revival in progress.

You've suggested that the economy might have something to do with it.

Hm. Partly. I know one thing. Music run in cycles. Same as you was telling me about the blues in England: at one time it was real popular. It runs in cycles, and in the cycle that we're in right now, it's heavy on the blues. A few years from now, the pendulum might swing back the other way. But right now, blues seems to be coming over strong right now. A few years ago it was the disco. Before that it was the rock, folk-rock.

So when the pendulum swings back, where does that leave you?

Oh, I am a fixture. I remain constantly, I'm like the Cadillac, I'm here, every year. Other cars come and go, but the Cadillac remains.

You're obviously extremely busy, so I'll leave you alone.

Today's record day.

Yes. How does that work?

They come in around one o'clock, and bring the records, and I take 'em and look at 'em, you know. I review the records. If it sounds good enough, if they meet what I'm trying to do, I'll put 'em on. Some of them come through the mail, but most of them they bring, and today is the day. I do have some things to do...