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# Tony Bankston

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Interviews for WESN 35th Anniversary Celebration 2007

[This interview was conducted during a live broadcast, and this recording starts with Lindquist referring to a song by The Ponies that has just ended.]

Rick Lindquist: …who have some hometown roots here in Bloomington, Illinois. This is WESN 88.1 FM Bloomington, Radio to the Far Left. And we're here with a very special guest in the studio. We have Tony Bankston who is Dean of Admissions, correct Tony?

Tony Bankston: That is correct, Rick.

Lindquist: And you're also an alum, Illinois Wesleyan alum.

Bankston: Another claim to fame, yes, Class of '91.

Lindquist: Class of '91…I was—that was my eighth grade year.

Bankston: Thanks for bringing that up.

Lindquist: Class of '91 in eighth grade. Well, you know, this is what happens but I'm almost ten years out of college now but that puts me in a weird place because I've been advisor here at the radio station here at WESN for a while. I was a student here for a while but I don't have any memories that go back before 1995, so this is the thirty-fifth anniversary year of WESN. I want to make sure that we have some of these nostalgic memories recorded for posterity and for our homecoming celebration this year for thirty-five years. So I wonder, coming down here to the studio today, what kind of memories do you have flooding back?

Bankston: Well, you know, I'm in a unique position like you in a different way because I'm forgetting all of my memories now—

[Both laugh]

Bankston: That I had from that long ago. They slowly disappear. But, no, walking back down into the studio, it's really weird. You start walking down those steps and you come through the catacombs here in the basement and you remember all the fun you had with your friends and college was such an exciting time to be into music. You know, I was in a band, really into music quite a bit throughout high school and college and this was a place where you really had the opportunity to come down and express yourself and share your music, especially the type of music that I was listening to that you never heard on the radio. It was a chance to get it out there and that was pretty exciting.

Lindquist: We've heard from a couple of alums who were from the eighties and before and they talked about some similar things, so I really think it's interesting that even though most of these people have never talked to each other, there's a similar thread sort of institutionally here of playing that obscure music or playing things that commercial

radio wouldn't have a part of. What are some examples of some things that you'd be spinning here?

Bankston: Well, I remember there are a number of bands—I always used to call them the big four, probably my big four—I mean, I had a lot of bands I really enjoyed but R.E.M. and U2, which are two good examples of bands that are, you know, have been all over every type of radio station. You get in—I get into an elevator now and I can hear them on Muzak, you know, and even bands like The Smiths, you know, and I'll be watching a car commercial on tv and I'll hear a Smiths song in the background of the commercial and I know well that's because someone's an advertising executive right now who's probably my age who was really into The Smiths when they were in college and when The Smiths were a great college band and very popular. But those are two good examples. I think when I started college, you know, in high school I remember U2 came out with *War*, *The Unforgettable Fire*, and *The Joshua Tree* came out during my four years of high school and they really didn't start hitting popular radio until *The Joshua Tree*. I think "With or Without You" was their first single. I remember vividly R.E.M. coming out. I think it was "Fall on Me" off of *Lifes Rich Pageant* was that first one to hit the radio, but before that the only places that you could really hear even what are megabands now like R.E.M. or U2 was on college radio. Now there's a lot of other bands like the Red Hot Chili Peppers, bands like The Replacements, you know, more bands that nostalgically now people look on and they got some minor radio play. But if you didn't get into college radio—now there was the really obscure type music that you would hear. You know, if you wanted to hear Naked Raygun or groups like The Mekons or some of the bands that were just very obscure back then, college radio was the only place you'd really hear it.

Lindquist: Well that's cool. Yeah, I think that's still the case today. I mean the radio station in the nineties when I was here laid the claim that we were the first ones in Bloomington to play Cake.

[Bankston laughs]

Bankston: Right.

Lindquist: You know, more recently, probably The White Stripes, things like that, you know, bands that are much more mainstream than they were. We have locally been big supporters of Ani DiFranco, so Ani DiFranco was huge here at the radio station before she became huge all across the country.

Bankston: Well one of my favorite stories about it is we would obviously get—still then we were getting vinyl from the record companies, and so I happened to—I lived in Magill Hall on campus and the station manager and a lot of the guys who ran the station lived the floor above. They were third floor, I was second floor, and so they'd bring down albums for me to listen to and give them a spin and see if there were things I wanted to play on the show. Well I—I'll never forget the station manager back then, Tim Vasil—you know, Tim brought down a stack of albums for me to listen to and I started going through them and so all of a sudden I see this one album and it's these grungy looking

long-haired dudes and there's whiskey bottles all over the cover and it was a time during—where—for metal bands it was a lot of the hair bands, you know, Mötley Crüe and Poison, and that's really what you heard a lot of on the radio and the classic rock on the rock stations, and that type of thing. So I put this album in and I listen to it and it's kind of different, you know? It's not really your typical college music but it's also not what you're hearing on the popular radio. I find one song that I like, I come to the studio, I put it on, I play it that night on my show, but it never really took hold or anything so I just kind of forgot about it. About six months, seven months later over the summer, I hear the song again on the radio. The song is "Sweet Child o' Mine" and the band is Guns N' Roses.

[Both laugh]

Bankston: Which of course then that summer just completely blew up and it was funny because at first I don't think the record companies really knew where to slot them, so they sent it out to these college radio stations all over the country and Guns N' Roses isn't a band you would typically think of as college radio music. They're falling into that genre. But I'll never forget that because I heard that and I go, "Wait a minute, I know this song. I know this band." And that was one of the more unique memories I had.

Lindquist: Well, when I do chronicle the history of this radio station, I'll put you down as having given Guns N' Roses the first spin.

Bankston: I feel I broke Guns N' Roses right open and when Axl Rose eventually comes out with his new album maybe I should play it on WESN first just to keep the—

Lindquist: Maybe, or maybe he'll give you a little, you know, a little nod in the liner notes for that one.

[Bankston laughs]

Bankston: That's all I can hope for.

Lindquist: You mentioned Tim who was the station manager at the time, were there any other people that you have recollections of? Fond memories? You know, things that are semi-legal that happened—

[Bankston laughs]

Lindquist: That were good memories here?

Bankston: Well, I remember Tim and Brad Wilson was really one of the major guys. I remember Kevin Short and Ty Hullinger—those guys were all a very tight group of friends. They were all third floor guys and—but musically we were all really kinda connected and I remember going to a Naked Raygun show. I mean, we didn't get a lot of—that's one thing that's really changed—Bloomington-Normal you hardly got any live

shows in here—and I remember Naked Raygun came down from Chicago to perform and we had a great time going to that show and that's a really fun memory. I remember being back in the old studio, there's an old radiator that's right beside where the DJs typically sat and it was just incredibly hot and so we came on for a show—I think we were doing two-hour shows back then—and we were—the guy that I was doing the show with—we were just complaining about how hot it was and it was like doing a show from the middle of the Sahara. And when you were down here in the basement you had this feeling that nobody was listening to you, you know, you're just kind of playing your music. The phone might go off every once in a while. So we're just complaining about it and every time we'd come in for a drop, we're talking about how hot it is, and all of a sudden, we're about forty-five minutes into the show, and the strangest looking guy just all of a sudden walks into the studio…[laughs]…which kind of freaks you out because there was supposed to be a doorbell up top and it was supposed to be secure and so we weren't really sure how he got in but the door must've been open and he walks down and he's got—there used to be an old taco, you know, Mexican food place called Speedy Burrito that did a lot of deliveries—and so this guy walks in with a Speedy Burrito shirt, he's got hair down to his rear end, you know, big long ponytail, and he's got the two largest soda I've ever seen.

[Lindquist laughs]

Bankston: I mean just these two hard—huge jugs of soda, and he just walked to the back and he goes, "Hey, I heard you guys were thirsty." And he drops them off and I said, "Well thanks, you know, we appreciate it," and I said, "Can we do anything for you?" And he said, "Just play some Chili Peppers, dude."

[Lindquist laughs]

Bankston: And he turned around and he walked out and that was the end of it, so I got a free soda out of the gig.

Lindquist: No doubt. I think that one of the things that I recall hearing is that a lot of the local restaurants—the pizza delivery places, the places that were open late—would always tune in WESN in their kitchens or in their stores, and this was always one reason why they would be frightened the next day because we would inevitably go off the air for one reason or another—somebody would forget to turn on overnight, no one would show up at eight in the morning so we would have dead air for a section of time—and then all of a sudden, the first person to come on, the radio would be blasting and people would be in a quiet kitchen in the morning—

[Bankston laughs]

Bankston: Right.

Lindquist: Doing their prep work and then just all of a sudden, "Ah! 88.1 is on!" I did also make the mistake as a freshman here of setting my alarm clock to 88.1 to try to wake up for an eight o'clock class, which—

Bankston: Doesn't happen when there's no music or anything…[laughs].

Lindquist: Well, no, it really—the alarm goes off but there's no sound and it was that, you know, the first couple weeks the eight o'clock DJ made it in, started doing their show on time, and then they started to fade a little bit, started showing up at eight-thirty but now we've kind of mostly done away with that dead air.

Bankston: Well I think one of the things that everyone had to get used to when you first became a DJ is you had this misconception that if people were listening to you, they would call in all the time, and I remember it was always interesting to first-year student DJs because they're—you're giving out the number constantly and you're measuring the success of your show by whether or not people are calling in and then, you know, I always had to remind myself and I'd remind my friends, I said, "Well, you know, when you're listening to the radio at home or driving, how often do you call into the radio station, you know, to request a song?" I mean, I think there's people that kind of do that and other people that don't. But I'll never forget—we had a guy that used to call in regularly from Eureka and we used to call him—I still remember this—Eric from Eureka and we were just shocked that anybody from that far away—now I say that far away, Eureka, it's not like it's light-years away…[laughs]…but we knew that our range was basically the Bloomington-Normal area if we were lucky. You know, I mean, it might—you might get North Normal or South Bloomington—

Lindquist: Depending on the wind.

Bankston: Yeah, which way the wind was blowing, but this guy, you know, we didn't know if he had a heavy duty set of braces or a tin—a house wrapped in tin foil, but for some reason he was picking up the signal and it was really neat because that reminded me of me when I was in high school. You know, I lived just outside of St. Louis and Southern Illinois at Edwardsville had a great college radio station. I just remember staying up late at night to hear the music that I was interested in that I couldn't get anywhere else, and that's what this guy was doing. He was sitting out there in Eureka, he picks up this radio signal, he's hearing music that really resonates with him, and he tuned in every week, and that was a lot of fun.

Lindquist: Yeah, I agree. I think many of our DJs get into a mindset of "Well, nobody's listening, so I don't have to, you know, I don't have to work as hard. I don't have to plan out my radio show in advance." Did you—you didn't have digital technology. In your four years here, how were you managing to put on a coherent playlist?

Bankston: Well, we've talked about this before but CDs were just coming out when I was in college. I was here from '87 to '91 and I think around '87-'88 is where the compact disc really started to become more popular but the thing is is for your radio show it's not

like you had a big collection of CDs. CDs made it a lot easier but that kind of evolved as I was here so most of mine was—you know, I had analog tapes. I had either tape cassettes I purchased in the store, originals, or I had copies that I had made off of vinyl or from buddies tapes or from whatever and the quality still—I was amazed because I just recently went back and converted all of my analog tapes to digital so I could put them on my iPod and I always made a big point of spending extra money for the higher quality tape and I now realize, you know, back then you're like—like, you're a fool. Why wouldn't you just buy these cheap Maxells over here? Or whatever, you know, because they had the different levels and—but it really maintained the sound quality—but I would literally have to listen to the tape cassette and fast forward to the song I knew I wanted to play, then I'd hit play on the cassette, you know, let it play. As soon as the song started, I'd stop it immediately, stick my finger in the cassette, turn it back a half revolution, and I, you know, for a two hour show—and sometimes we had three-hour shows—that's a lot of tape cassettes, so then you walk over here with your tape cassette, you hope you didn't put it in on the wrong side because it certainly wouldn't be queued up to the right side and you just put it in and you'd have it on, you know, pause and play and ready to go because you didn't—the other thing that was tricky is you didn't want to have to hammer that play button on air because the mic would pick it up, so you kind of had to have the pause on, hit the play, and then just kind of slowly release the pause and the song would start up and sometimes you'd get that—slow—If you didn't let off the pause button fast enough it would be like "Rrrrrrrr." [laughs] You know?

[Both laugh]

Bankston: And it would slowly go into the song. And so I remember the first time I had a CD for a radio show. I'm like, "Okay, well, program, go to song two, hit play." I'm like, "What? Where's this been?" So it was a lot of fun. I mean, the carts were easier because you put them in, it had one song on it, and you'd play it, but—

Lindquist: You can queue them.

Bankston: And you could queue them but it, you know, you just didn't use carts that much. I mean, the carts—you were kind of at the mercy of whoever the station manager was and what he wanted to put on the cart, which some of it had stuff that you wanted, but you really wanted to play your own music and so that meant making due with whatever your collection was.

Lindquist: That's something that's actually still the case. It's still, well, as far as I know, the freest form station that I've found in the country. Even other college radio stations typically have some sort of guidelines, programmatic guidelines. Our sole guideline is that we're a new music station so you've gotta play new things and that's pretty unusual. We don't have a broadcast major, communications and mass communications, so we don't really have anybody really watching over what's going on, so I think that has, over the last thirty-five years, engendered the ability to have new music all the time and potentially weird and terrible things—

[Bankston laughs]

Bankston: Right.

Lindquist: That, you know—in equal measure. But that's one of the charms and curses of college radio in my opinion.

Bankston: Well it was a—I still remember it. I think the only rule we had when I was here as a student was no top forty and so it was even more expanded than that because we'd get, you know, I remember we used to have the six to eight slot—used to be—they used to call it *Fade to Black*, you know, and that was a song chosen by the Black Student Union at that time but it was everything from hip-hop to rap to r & b, to soul. And then from eight to ten was typically slotted for progressive music, and then ten to twelve was kind of a hodgepodge, so we'd come in and *Fade to Black* would be six to eight and then we'd come in with kind of, probably what we would consider at the time alternative or progressive music at that time, and then the guys that came after us were sometimes classic rock/hair metal and it was, it was kind of neat. You could tune in anytime, get a real eclectic taste of all different types of music.

Lindquist: It's difficult to listen to an entire day in—from beginning to end because there is, you know, every two hours or so is a complete, total—

[Bankston laughs]

Bankston: Yeah.

Lindquist: Ultimate change in programming and that's kind of the fun—one of the fun aspects of it. I remember you did say something about Jello Biafra.

Bankston: Oh yeah.

Lindquist: Did—do you recall what happened there?

Bankston: Yeah, well I remember Jello Biafra was doing—at the time was doing a spoken word tour across the country and I just remember we were promoting that. I mean that was a big deal for us on campus. I mean, for those who were familiar with Jello Biafra and his music, it was just—it was something that at Illinois Wesleyan at the time—I mean the bands—I remember the concert that we had when I was a student here was The Romantics, you know? [laughs] And like well after The Romantics had had a hit for—so they were still playing "Talking in Your Sleep" and "What I Like About You" and kind of these eighties songs that even for me from '87 to '91, that was like—it was like it was a washed up Vegas act almost coming, so Jello Biafra was a big deal because that was cutting edge. I mean he was talking about things, highly-charged political issues. In the world of alternative or progressive music he was a huge name and it was a lot of fun to be a part of that and we had a great crowd for him when he was here. You also had unique opportunities—I still remember there was a comedian on campus, a guy named

Wayne Federman, who probably most people won't recognize by the name, but I had gone to the show and then I was doing a radio show later that night and I said, "Hey, you know, you want to come over and be on our radio show? We'll interview for ten or fifteen minutes." He's like, "Yeah, sure." You know, so—well the funny thing is I've seen Wayne Federman in commercials and in tv shows, most recently *The 40-Year-Old-Virgin*, which is on about every five minutes now—

[Both laugh]

Bankston: On cable. I don't know if it's HBO or Cinemax or whoever is the movie channel, whoever's got it right now, but he—there—if anyone remembers the scene where one of the guys, I can't remember the actor's name, but he's despondent over his breakup and there's a guy that walks in and he just wants to buy a cell phone and the guy keeps showing him a video camera and eventually just starts videotaping his rear end and going on and on about his girlfriend. Well the guy that's playing the customer is this Wayne Federman guy, and I still remember sitting in this tiny room over here and for about ten or fifteen minutes just trading barbs with this nationally-toured comedian and that doesn't happen a lot of places.

Lindquist: Yeah, there have been occasional brushes with bands or with celebrities if you will here at the radio station. They—we did bring down Wesley Willis to do a in-studio interview when he came here to play. Wesley Willis is sort of a rock 'n' roll savant from Chicago who has now passed away but—

Bankston: Right.

Lindquist: We've brought a number of bands that people have really enjoyed and we did have some of them in the studio. Unfortunately most of those things are lost. We didn't tape them or we sort of did and then lost the tapes and so if any listeners have recordings of any of the stuff or if any alums have recordings of the stuff, I'd be happy to digitize it and send it on back.

Bankston: Yeah, I mean I, even with my own collection, you know, I mean every once in a while you'd remember to tell the buddy across the hall if he was happening to be in his room for the next two hours, "Could you please hit record." And so even the tapes I've got are just kind of the shows straight through and I've probably got, I don't know, I maybe have two shows of all the shows that I did in four years of college. I've got maybe tape of two maybe three different shows and it was just—it wasn't easy to record as it is today. I mean everything's hooked up to the computer, you just hit the record, and you can have an endless supply of all these memories.

Lindquist: Yeah, you can make an mp3. You can just store tons of those things. Yeah, that would've been a little bit of a problem to store a thousand tapes—

Bankston: [laughs] That's right.

Lindquist: Just have all these tubs laying around. Well, Tony, I appreciate your time, coming down today. You know we are having some activities during homecoming, which is October 19th through the 21st, so anybody who's out there who's interested in taking part or sharing some of your memories of WESN over the years, please contact me. You can contact me here at the radio station, WESN@iwu.edu, and we should have some more interviews and some more segments with some people who are alums and have some memories of the station here coming up in the coming weeks between now and homecoming. So, again, I appreciate your time today and hopefully we'll see you at homecoming, Tony.

Bankston: Oh, it was a lot of fun and I appreciate all the stuff that you've done for the station and it's really impressive to see where it is and that the same spirit that I enjoyed when I was a student here is still going strong right now, so I think it's great and I hope all the students keep it up.

Lindquist: One problem that we have is that you can hear the mouse click when I start the computer back up.

Bankston: Yeah, I know. These mics are so nice, you know, I just—the mics that I was used to didn't even work half the time and now I folded my arms and I could hear my shirt rustling on air—

[Lindquist laughs]

Bankston: So these high-tech mics—you gotta be careful. But, yeah, the computer—that's just unbelievable to have that many songs available to you at your fingertips at any given time, so you just gotta figure out to get that quiet mouse—

Lindquist: Yeah, I need a silent—does anybody—if anybody could invent a silent mouse—

[Bankston laughs]

Lindquist: I would be pleased. So we're going to go back to some music here. This is Of Montreal. They've actually been around probably since about the mid to early nineties. They were associated with a collective of bands called Elephant 6, which focused a lot on psychedelic pop. This is one of there more recent songs. It's called "Suffer for Fashion". So thanks for listening to our interview and we'll have some more for you. This is Of Montreal on WESN.

[Recording ends at 17:45]