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Paul Nolte

Paul Nolte '84
Illinois Wesleyan University

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Interviews for WESN 35th Anniversary Celebration 2007

Rick Lindquist: And we do have a special surprise for everyone today. This is going to be the first and I hope a series over the next month of interviews with some of our alums who are going to be returning for homecoming. This is the thirty-fifth anniversary of WESN. Yeah, 1972 was the time that we began as far as we can tell, broadcasting here in Bloomington and Normal, Illinois. And on the phone with me I have Paul Nolte who is an alum who was here back in the early eighties and we hope to share a few memories with him and see what he has to say about WESN. Paul, are you still with me?

Paul Nolte: Absolutely.

Lindquist: Great, good to have you with. What class were you here at Illinois Wesleyan?

Nolte: Graduating class is '84.

Lindquist: Class of '84, so you're just about twenty-five years out. I, personally, am Class of '99 here, so I am just about—just about ten years out, but I wonder what the differences are, the things that have stayed the same, and the things that have sort of been different. We're still a new music station. Were you focused on new music in the eighties?

Nolte: Oh absolutely. We were involved a lot with—it was kind of the second wave British invasion if you will—was the early eighties, so you had groups like the Tom Tom Club, Oingo Boingo, The Police, The Clash, and we were trying to get a lot of our DJs to play a lot of this type of music well before it became mainstream, so if you heard it on one of the local radio stations, we really didn't want to play it because we knew we couldn't compete with them as far as on-air talent and slickness of production and all the rest of that, but where we could compete with them was we could be, for lack of a better term, we could be more cutting edge on the music side, so we really tried to push it as best we could on a lot of the new groups, new music throughout the broadcast day.

Lindquist: Right and I think that we still strive to do that, which is sort of fascinating that we can actually, without anybody around who has bridged that gap of almost fifteen years between the early eighties and now, we still have sort of the same mission. It's really fascinating that that's held true. Were you still located in the basement of Kemp? We've always been in the basement of Kemp. Am I right?

Nolte: As best I can tell, yes…[laughs]…as we liked to call it The Bowels of Kemp Hall.

[Lindquist laughs]

Lindquist: I'd like to think that when you come down at homecoming that things will look a little bit nicer than if we hadn't changed anything since 1972. Now we do have a bigger main studio than when we—when the original station opened it had a sort of small studio way down at the end of the basement, a little, bitty, narrow room. That's sort of an

auxiliary studio for us now. We have a nice large studio with a new board. We now have the ability to take callers on the air, which is, I think, a cyclical thing. You mentioned off the air that you indeed did take callers. Do you have any interesting, sort of fun things that happened while you were on the air back in the eighties here at WESN?

Nolte: Oh, there were always a few. I remember usually the Friday night and Saturday night shows were always pretty lively. We got a pretty good group. We usually had a heavy listening from Illinois State and certainly we'd have a—we'd be the entertainment for more than a few parties up on campus, so we would always be getting requests for music being played. But we also did do a few special interviews. We had a musical band play down in the—at the radio station. Jefferson Starship was in town with 38 Special up at Illinois State and there was a local minister in town that I remember we had—he was really against the bad stuff of rock 'n' roll, just the heathenist type of music and he had written a couple articles in the *Pantagraph* and letters to the editor. We were able to contact him and bring him down into the radio station to do an on-air interview and have him talk about his issues and that type of thing and it was—we had a call-in for that as well—and I think we ran that program the better part of three hours.

Lindquist: Wow.

Nolte: And we were scheduled to do it about an hour and a half but the calls were just—just kept coming in. We had to be very careful obviously about screening calls but we were amazed at the response that we got, not just on campus but certainly around the community.

Lindquist: Yeah that's a—it's always a surprise and it's a pleasant surprise to hear people out in the community say, "This is a radio station that I actually listen to more than any other," despite the fact that we don't have a broadcast major here, we don't have a mass communications major, so we don't have people who are taking classes to learn to do radio. It's all sort of inspired by our own desire and our own interest. Back in the day, in the eighties, was that still the case?

Nolte: Oh absolutely. [laughs] I remember that was one of the things I wanted to get involved with when I went to Wesleyan is I wanted to get involved in radio. Egotistically I guess you could say, I had heard from many different people I had a good face for radio, so I thought I'd give it a try, went down and talked to the station manager, he invited me down to the station, it took me a little while to find it, got down there and we chit-chatted for a little bit. He kinda showed me the ropes, what we needed to do, how do you queue up a piece of vinyl at the time, what the normal three-hour show would be like, and said, "When do you want to start?" And this was probably on a Tuesday, I said, "Well, shoot, I need a couple days to get my music together, kind of lay all this stuff out." I said, "How about Thursday?" So I came down on Thursday, started at nine o'clock, and I was going to run from nine to noon. Most all the shows were—generally you had a three-hour time slot, so hauling over my armload of vinyl from Dolan, walking across campus, got down there, the lights were all off, doors locked, got down, turned the board on, turned

everything on as best I could figure—remember what I had to do two days prior—and I think it was probably a good six or seven weeks before I got a phone call from anyone—

[Lindquist laughs]

Nolte: To let me know that I was actually broadcasting. I don't think—I wasn't sure whether I had any of the equipment on properly or if anybody could actually hear me. I may have been doing a three-hour show just for myself, but that was my introduction into college radio as it were. But it did inspire a lot of people to give it a try that ordinarily would not have and we certainly tried to foster as much of that as we could during our tenure down there, and actually I want to say '82-'83, I think even '84, we ran 24-hours a day, seven days a week, and it was all student-run and student shows.

Lindquist: That's—

Nolte: The hardest—

Lindquist: That's amazing.

Nolte: The hardest slots to fill were three to six in the morning but we were able to do that and actually had a waiting-list of students that wanted to get on the air, so those were some pretty heady days for us.

Lindquist: Wow, that's amazing. So were you—you know, you started out just working as a DJ, especially for those first few weeks maybe as a DJ, then did you move on to sort of working with the management of the radio station?

Nolte: Yeah, the next year—obviously the station manager graduated and people moved on and it was open then for anybody to apply for the various positions, so we had a station manager, program director, news director, and production. Those were the positions at the station, so I figured, you know, as a cocky freshman I thought, "Well shoot, I should be able to run the station."

[Lindquist laughs]

Nolte: Applied for that, good friend—what turned out to be a good friend of mine, Kirk Johnson, became station manager as a junior, so he was station manager for the two years. I became program director for those two years and we worked together to develop kinda, I don't want to say standards necessarily, but certainly "This is what we're looking for. It is very free form, it is very open. We want you to be creative, but we do want you to adhere to at least some minimal type of standards." And so we did tape different broadcasts, tape different people, provided some type of critique. We did spend a fair amount of time listening to the radio station and different DJs.

Lindquist: I think that's an interesting thing that we've kind of come to encounter here is that many of our students no longer have radios in their rooms. They do have radios in

their cars but they don't use their cars very frequently here on such a small campus, so we are in a sort of similar motive. We are attempting to, before homecoming time, start webcasting so that we can listen to our live programs at least if not the over-night programs over the internet and our student body can listen in and our staff can listen in and parents, alums, everybody can listen in. We're trying to get started as well with a new initiative to do sports casting. Did you do any sports back in the—

Nolte: We did—

Lindquist: The years you were here?

Nolte: We absolutely did. We did basketball, we did football, and I also did baseball. I couldn't handle basketball and football. We had a couple people doing that. As a matter of fact, one of the guys that was doing the basketball broadcast for us is now a news anchor on WBBM television here in Chicago, Randy Salerno. He moved from Illinois Wesleyan, again as you mentioned we don't have a broadcast major—he moved up to Illinois State, I think, as a junior and then finished up there and worked at WGN-TV and now at WBBM. But we did do baseball and football and basketball and it was a lot of bailing wire and bubble gum—

[Lindquist laughs]

Nolte: It was—the equipment we had was not spectacular. We cut out every once in a while, but it was a lot of fun. We did also broadcast a few concerts that were held in the old basketball arena before Shirk Center came around.

Lindquist: Is that the Fred Young Fieldhouse?

Nolte: The Fred Young Fieldhouse, the big barn. So we did do some of the concerts there as well and were able to simulcast a few of those, so we did do those and, again, that provided another outlet for different people who weren't necessarily interested in being a DJ but were very interested in sports and wanted to do broadcasting.

Lindquist: Well I think that for the audience—I don't know if I speak for you or I speak for other listeners or other alums—I would personally rather hear some students calling a ballgame and hearing their perspectives as students and of course they're going to be a little more lighthearted, a little more informal, you know, if I really cared about that team, if I was going to listen to a Cubs game or something, I might prefer the professional broadcasters, but when it comes to Titan sports I would certainly prefer to be able to tune in and hear what students are saying about it. I think it's a lot more fun that way.

Nolte: It was a lot of fun. We did get ourselves in trouble a little bit—

[Lindquist laughs]

Nolte: Because we got to be a little bit more personal…[laughs]…if you will.

Lindquist: I'll bet.

Nolte: Were certainly more pro-Wesleyan depending upon the team that we were playing. Certainly in our day it was Augustana. They were Division III Alonzo Stagg Bowl winners, so they would normally run rough shot over Wesleyan but—so we would interject I think probably a little bit more color than was appropriate at different times—

[Lindquist laughs]

Nolte: So we might get into a little bit of trouble with the—not necessarily the athletic director—but different people on campus as far as that went. Again, it gave the—it gave a lot of students the opportunity to try their hand at broadcasting and do different sporting events and it, again, the people that we had, the broadcasts that we had in general were a lot of fun, and the fact that, again, as you mention, a lot of the students brought a different perspective because they knew all the players. In many cases some of them either tried out for the team or had been on the team for a while and decided not to continue on but knew more of the inner workings of the football or baseball or basketball team and could provide that added color in the broadcast.

Lindquist: Sure. I think that one of our alums, Bob Murray, who works here today actually had played basketball and baseball and he dropped out of the basketball team to concentrate on baseball but during basketball season worked doing color commentary on one of the radio stations in town here for the Titan basketball games. And another one of our alums, Bob Quillman, was a station manager here at WESN during his student years now works at a regular day job in Bloomington but is the—is one of the announcers for all the Titan basketball games on WJBC, another station here in town, so there are some people at differing levels of different degrees who have sort of used this in one way or another as a starting point or just, you know, a brief flirtation or a lifelong interest in broadcasting, so that is kind of inspiring since we don't have that major there, that people really did—they wanted it enough or they were interested enough to go do it, so that makes me feel pretty good about WESN.

Nolte: Absolutely. And like I said, it provided an opportunity that you would not have gotten and a lot of kids were…[laughs]…we'd open essentially try-outs, give them a scenario, set up a tv or something like that, "Here, go ahead and broadcast. Give us a shot and see what you can do." And so from that perspective it was, again, a lot of fun where you had the opportunity just to show up, try it out, see if you like it, see if you were at least passable to describe the action as it was going on, and then take it from there. And I personally have some very fond memories of broadcasting baseball games, which I enjoyed a lot for the three years that I was doing that.

Lindquist: I'm looking at the program guide from fall of '82 and—here, this is a weird perspective but I was five-years-old and I'm Class of '99 here so I don't mean to make that sound like I'm so young but I really have no perspective on what was going on at a college radio station in 1982 as far as the music, as far as the programming, the attitudes

or the general sentiments of a college station because I grew up in a town that didn't even have college radio at all. I'm looking at this program guide and I see that there was some special programming. There was a family hour featuring old time radio, there was a *Fade to Black* programming block which had the best soul music on the airwaves it says, and then there was *Alumni Vibes* which was a one a week show for older listeners. It also credits there's—there were—there was separate programming for Christian music and some educational programming. This all sounds very ambitious. I mean, was this all by design or were there really people who were out there that just really fit into those special categories?

Nolte: We tried to hit them all. For example, *Alumni Vibes* came from an alum, Barry Berglund I think was his name, and he was probably my age as well as we're relating today, forty-five now. He was probably forty-five when he was involved in the radio station. He came to us and was interested in providing jazz and not classical but more classical jazz if you will music and that was his gig, so we set him up and said, "Absolutely. Here, go crazy on it. Here's the three-hour time slot. Let's go." We had more than a few people from the black community come talk to us and say, "We'd like to have a special slot. We, you know, we've got a lot of people that are involved. They were already involved in the radio station. We want to do something special." So they proposed the *Fade to Black* spot and said, "Okay, this is what we want to do." And by far, because many of us were down at the station working that—usually three to six slot we were down at the station—by far in a way that was the most popular time slot as far as phone calls and people calling in. The phone would ring off the hook for requests, to talk to the DJ, different things during the course of the day. We had a couple people that were very interested in music. We, again, set up that time slot. So they would come to us with the different ideas and say, "Here's what I'd like to do. Can we do this?" And a lot of times we said, "Absolutely." You know, once you run the idea by us and we get an idea of how you want to do this, what's it going to involve, absolutely. And that's one of the true benefits to college radio is the flexibility that you have that you do not have—because you're never going to get that diversity on any station anywhere except at a college university.

Lindquist: Well, sure. I'm sure that a commercial station would—their program director would just faint with the prospects of trying to make money with a program that switches. For example, Saturday's program in fall of '82, we had hard and heavy rock 'n' roll from midnight to three a.m., then you had Pink Floyd and Genesis from three to six a.m., some old, some new album rock later, rock to jazz, hard rock with The Doors and Pete Townshed, then you switched to funk and mellow soul and rock. So, I mean, you're all over the place and that is, I think, in some ways both the strength and the weakness of college radio. I do enjoy it but at times I have to say it can be a trying, trying thing to listen to a whole day of college radio but I do love it.

Nolte: It's—you can't. It's very much like the weather in Chicago—you just wait a while and it'll change. And, again, that's—that is the strength of college radio. You're—it is never going to be something that you're going to listen to 24/7 but you're going to find something that's going to attract you and keep you listening. So from that perspective

you have a very diverse audience, both from students on both campuses, locals, the community in large then have the opportunity to listen to stuff that they would not be able to hear on any other station anywhere else around town.
Lindquist: In the early eighties, you mentioned that you did have news programming; you did have some news wires running down here. Being a college radio station, anything cool happen at that time in your in life or at that time in history that you got to be there for?

Nolte: Oh we had an AP wire that was in the station, so it would spit out news all day long and that was the source of our news, so it was very much a rip and read. And as news would come in it would be Illinois news, national, whatever, and the AP wire would normally, for important news items—top of the hours news or wrap up or whatever—you would hear a series of bells. One bell was usually "Okay, this is the top of the hour wrap up." When you got four or five bells, then it was a major news item and I happened to be down at the radio station on a couple different occasions when Belushi died and also when John Lennon was shot. Both of those—the first thing you hear—you hear one or two bells and you kind of ignore it but when it persists everybody runs over to the AP wire and we're reading it just as it's coming across and then to get it right on the air, so from that perspective, it provided a certain amount of immediacy to whatever was happening and you would cut in—obviously as you would at any broadcast station—cut into the programming, grab the news, and put it on the air.

Lindquist: I can only imagine the reaction to—people at a college radio station when the John Lennon announcement would come across the wires. That—wasn't that—I mean that was a national and global massive outpouring of sympathies after that happened.

Nolte: It was and we had, you know, certainly we had dedication programs after that, so it was—when it's coming across, as you're looking at it, you're reading it three, four, five times because it's not registering and those are things that you just kind of look back at and say it was—you knew where you were at that moment and those were certainly unique points in time for anybody.

Lindquist: It sounds like it. I wonder—and then I'll let you go in just a moment—but I do wonder, when you're a few years out of college and you look back on your experience, I know that it's a—the radio station for me was, during my college years, one of the most fun things that I did. It was my biggest interest. For you, how do you feel looking back on it? Was it something that you felt was a central learning experience? Was it just a lot of fun, great memories? I mean, what is sort of your look back on things here at college radio?

Nolte: It was all of those. It was something that I did want to do coming into Illinois Wesleyan and being able to do it and do it for the four years and thoroughly enjoy it, it was very much an ego trip—a lot of people calling up, telling what a great job you did, "You sound great, love the music"—and so I've always kidded people. I said, "Usually by the end of our three-hour time slot it was very hard to get my head through the doorway to get out into the world again because they pump you full of a lot of air and

you felt great after you got done with the radio program." It's also helped me a lot in my career. As a matter of fact, this afternoon I'll be talking to *The Wall Street Journal* for a radio broadcast and I've continued to do a lot of that type of stuff even afterward. One of the towns I used to live in in Pennsylvania I was able to do a radio spot for a local Ford dealership, so I've always been interested in it. It's—it has served me very, very well beyond the college radio just in communications and being able to do—continue to be able to do radio which is—for me is certainly a secondary love.

Lindquist: Well I certainly hope that you and Kirk and some of your other friends that we hope will come back next month for homecoming along with people from, well, many years, ten years prior to your time here and all along through the recent current students will come back and we're planning on, during the homecoming weekend, bringing people back on the air down in the studio to show them how it works right now. Everything's a little shinier but I suspect it works pretty much the same. We still do have a turntable over here, so maybe in your case we could dust off some, I don't know, some Blondie or some new wave music or something like that, some flash records.

Nolte: Oh I'll definitely bring some vinyl down, absolutely, absolutely.

Lindquist: I—my personally, I could bring down my Prince collection—

[Nolte laughs]

Lindquist: But I don't know if that was in there. It might be a little early for the Prince collection there. But I think we'll have everybody come back down and sit down in the studio and maybe get a chance to reminisce a little bit more on the air. I want to thank you for joining me on the air here. If you hang on a second, we'll sign off. I'm going to switch back now for our listeners to some music. This is a band called Hot Hot Heat on WESN 88.1.