

Thirty years of Dallas Blues Radio

Don O. says "It was, and still is, all about the music."

by Pat Schram

COMMUNITY RADIO STATION KNON 89.3 FM in Dallas just celebrated its 30th anniversary of broadcasting at the end of July. That's an amazing milestone for an organization that depends mostly on donations from their listeners. It's even more impressive when you consider the fact there are only a handful of paid staffers and nearly everything at the station is done by a large cadre of volunteers.

As you might imagine, over those 30 years there have been literally hundreds of volunteers pass through the doors and across airwaves of "The Mighty KNON." Only a couple have been along for the entire ride and one of those is Friday blues host, Don O. The station will celebrate his long tenure with a benefit show at Poor David's Pub on October 20.

KNON first signed on the air on July 30, 1983, but Don's love of community radio went back to their predecessor, KCHU.

"KCHU was the first community station in Dallas and it went on the air about the time commercial radio in town went to crap," remembers Don.

"They only lasted a couple of years, but they had an amazing variety of programming.

"That was the first place I ever heard great pre-war blues like Bessie Smith, Blind Blake, and Charley Patton. I was in college at the time, and usually broke, but I always tried to scrape together a few dollars to help them out at pledge time." Unfortunately, KCHU never made enough money to pay its bills and the station went off the air

when their equipment was repossessed in 1977.

The early years

FAST FORWARD TO 1983. A new group was trying to resurrect the old 90.9 FM frequency and one of Don's blues buddies gave him a call at work. "I had this friend in college whose wife, Joan, was from Chicago," says Don. "We had stayed in touch over the years and when we got together she would play Chicago blues for me and I'd play Texas blues and pre-war blues for her.

"We had talked about the failed experiment at KCHU and we always said if that station ever came back, we would go down there to make sure some good blues got back on the radio. In early August of 1983, Joan called me at work to say one of her friends had just landed a show at the new station, KNON. We went down and applied and did our first show at the end of August. We called it 'The Best of the Blues.'"

The first KNON studio was located on San Jacinto Street in a two story former rooming house built in the 1920's. The equipment was ancient and the station



He is also the KNON historian: Don O.

frequently went off the air for hours or days at a time. Training was minimal, Don recalls. "My first time on the air was pretty crazy.

"We were following Groovy Joe Poovey and he had only been on a few times himself. He pointed out the key switches, then left, and that was pretty much it. It was just sort of sink or swim.

"The old broadcast board we had looked like something out of a 1950's Russian submarine. We were literally in a closet on the second floor of that old house with no windows and no air conditioning.

"I remember by December we were off the air for about 2 weeks due to equipment troubles, but I was down there anyway to answer the phone to promise our listeners we would be back. I had to wear my coat in the studio because there was no heat."

Don's partner, Joan, eventually left the station after having her first child, but he hung around despite the studio conditions and the dicey neighborhood. "Yeah, San Jacinto Street was a pretty tough place back in the early days," recalls Don. "It was difficult to get from your car to the front door without some lady offering you a 'date' or some gentleman requesting spare change or offering up an illegal substance for sale.

"I was on the air the night

someone torched the crack house across the street. I was on the mic giving a song list when I smelled the smoke and heard the fire engine turn the corner. At first I thought KNON was on fire, but when I went to the window I could see flames shooting 100 feet in the air across the street. I was stuck at the studio 'til 3 am because you don't drive on the fire hoses."

The music

DON SAYS THAT DESPITE all the craziness, it was the music that kept him going back. "It was, and still is, all about the music," says Don.

"The fact that we have the freedom to play whatever we want within our format is what really makes it fun. If I want to play a brand new CD by Buddy Guy right after an old record by Blind Willie McTell, I can do that. If I want to play music from a blues band from Sweden then back that up with some brand new local blues, I can do that, too.

"In 30 years, I have never once been told what to play or what NOT to play. That's an incredibly rare thing in radio. Plus the fact that one of the best blues scenes in the world is right here in North Texas gives us the opportunity to support our own. I have seen local artists go from boom box tapes to playing overseas and at the biggest blues festivals in the world. It is incred-

ibly rewarding to be a small part of helping them make that journey.

"The musicians around here have been key to the existence of the station, not just blues musicians, but across all of our many formats.

"I have no doubt KNON would not exist today without their constant support through our many music benefits. It is a symbiotic relationship of the highest order.

"There is just so much incredible talent here. It is really a shame that we seem to be the only radio station that recognizes that fact. It is a privilege to be able to play the music I love on the radio and support this amazing scene."

KNON historian

HIS LONGEVITY AT THE STATION made Don O. sort of the unofficial KNON historian. As the station's 30 year anniversary approached, the board of directors asked him to help document the first 30 years of KNON.

"Well, I am definitely the pack rat type," laughs Don.

"I had all the old newsletters, schedules, station memos, and other junk.

"I went through all of that then wrote up a short history of the station, scanned all the old stuff I had, and we put it online as the KNON Online History Museum. That's been a blast from the past for a lot of folks. We're

still collecting stories and photos from KNON's past and if any of BUDDY's readers would like to contribute we'd love to see what they have."

One of Don's favorite shows every year is his annual tribute to Dallas blues giant Freddie King. "That's something I started doing back in 1985 and have done every year since, around Freddie's birthday," says Don. "Freddie was the first live performer I ever saw in a club and the effect of that night remains with me to this day. He deserves to be remembered in a special way. I am very lucky to have the freedom to do that every year, thanks to KNON."

The station will celebrate his long tenure with a benefit at Poor David's Pub on October 20 beginning at 4 pm.

Special guests will include blues artists Larry Lampkin from Fort Worth, Greg Izor & the Box Kickers from Austin, and Jason Elmore & Hoodoo Witch from Dallas.

Tickets are available at KNON.org and admission includes a free dinner and cake, while they last. "Yeah, it seemed like a good excuse for a party," laughs Don.

"Plus we always need the money. Good old KNON is still hanging on by our fingernails and I am still hanging in there with them. We'll have some great blues, food, and cake, on a Sunday evening. What's not to love?"

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