

EDITORIAL PAGE

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Guest column

RICK MURPHY

Blues for Papa Hambone

When I was in high school, I made a point never to miss my favorite radio show, heard nightly on Milwaukee's WTMJ.

The host was this guy with the coolest voice and the coolest attitude, who played the coolest jazz and read poetry, to boot. Even the commercials were cool: *"brought to you by Wisconsin Rural Electric Cooperatives ... those cats who swing a little with the poles and the transformers out in the boonies. Believe it, paisan: without Rural Electric Co-ops, we'd all be a little more in the dark!"*



Vukelich

One of the few bad things about moving to Madison was that I couldn't get WTMJ in the dorm and I was bummed at the thought of not being able to spend a half-hour each night in the warm glow of "The World of Hambone." Then a friend told me that my hero, Papa Hambone (who I was sure must be based in San Francisco or New York), was actually on several hours each night on WIBA — live and local!

Better yet, my friend had met Papa and said we could visit him at the station. Later that week, faithful Aunt Dorothy the professor picked us up at Sallery Hall and ferried us out to WIBA's old studios on Regent Street. In mere moments, we were in Studio C, shaking hands with the Coolest Cat I've ever known: George Vukelich, a.k.a. Papa Hambone.

In my checkered show biz career, I've been lucky enough to meet some formidable folks, ranging from Duke Ellington to Jimi Hendrix to George Martin, the Beatles' producer. But nothing has matched the awe this UW freshman felt in the presence of his Radio Hero.

George was no small influence in my decision to start a radio career, and several years of same were spent in that same studio, and walking the halls of Radio Park with other local legends like Bob King and the late, great star of Madison radio: "WIBA ... where you can have breakfast each morning with the old pro, 'Jamie' Mader."

And that's when I learned that my first impressions of Hambone had been right on the mark; after a rough day, there was nothing as soothing as spending a few minutes with George. *"There are just two things to remember down here on the planet. No. 1: Don't sweat the small stuff. No. 2: Down here on the planet, it's all small stuff."*

About the time The Capital Times sold the station, George and I moved on to other things: me to WHA and National Public Radio, George to pursue his writing career. You can't keep a voice like that off the radio, though, and George soon reunited with Mader and the popular Clark Hogan on WERU (now WMAD/AM). *"WERU, One-One-Niner-Zero: Old Pro Radio, flying from a small cornfield somewhere outside of Sun Prairie."*

Eventually, George and I reunited to produce the weekly "Pages from North Country Notebook." The program was originally a sponsored show on WIBA, *"brought to you by Anchor Savings and Loan. Remember, paisan, Anchor has a way to improve your lot in life ... and the house that sits on it!"*

Later the show enjoyed a long run weekend nights on Wisconsin Public Radio, which along with George's regular visits with Larry Meiller on WPR, extended the ranks of the Hambone Fan Club to the state's borders and beyond.

(A favorite scene from "North Country Notebook": Father Himmelsbach comes into the bar at Christmas-time, despairing at the misplacement of a key element of St. Theresa's nativity scene. *"I can't find Jesus!" exclaimed the good Father. "God!" replied Doc. "That's like your pilot telling you he can't find O'Hare!"*)

George would want to be remembered, too, for his pioneering anti-war stand in the Vietnam era. On-air manifestations included the controversial Vietnam Seminars (produced with the help of the remarkable Helen, his wife), which featured interviews with the likes of The Progressive's legendary Erwin Knoll, and which endured the loss of advertising from conservative sponsors.

Another Hambone Classic was the annual Christmastime reading of "The last Letters from Stalingrad," which moved many to tears and to thought.

Just as he entertained, enlightened and inspired thousands with his microphone, George touched countless with his pen: novels, poetry, articles, interviews and writing workshops. And it's those writings, tapes of his broadcasts and cherished memories that'll keep a friend with us forever. After all, *"for good food, for good wine and, most of all, for good friends, thank God!"*

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I won't be able to drive up to Three Lakes in the near future, but in spirit, I'll be with the Good Doctor, Father Joe, Gene the Bartender and Steady Eddy at the American Legion bar. We'll knock one back for the Scout, the Guide, the Old Pro. And, for one night at least, we'll know why the loons cry.

"This, then, is the way the world ends: not with a bang, but with the blues."

Rick Murphy is a longtime radio broadcaster and producer.