

By Marilynn Bowler

The bravado on the outside disguises a marshmallow heart on the inside of the good-looking, blond-haired, pizza-loving, SUV-driving grandfather of two who thinks nothing of racing down I-85 at impossibly early hours to get one of his beloved dogs to Raleigh for a post-surgery heart check-up.

How in the world did the Colorado-born-and-raised son of an Episcopalian minister and a professional model grow up to become the host of his own radio talk show deep in the heart of Dixie? Specifically, for the top-ranked, 50,000 watt grandfather of all stations – WBT?

John was born in Denver and grew up in Estes Park, Colorado. (He refers to it as God's country.) Following his graduation from high school, the somewhat rebellious teenager lived a kind-of "wild life," ... very different from the one his parents had in mind for him. To quote from his bio at WBT, "after a short but uneventful stint at Colorado State University, Hancock majored in 'street smarts,' working with many major rock music tours, as a record promoter, and even for a bit as a rack jobber in Texas, Louisiana and Mississippi." His radio career spanned from Denver, to Dallas, TX, to Wilkes-Barre/Scranton, PA, and then to Jacksonville, FL. By then, radio was in his blood. He loved it, was good at it, and knew it was the career that would pay his bills. The stations for which he worked recognized his exceptional talent and enjoyed the numbers he brought in.

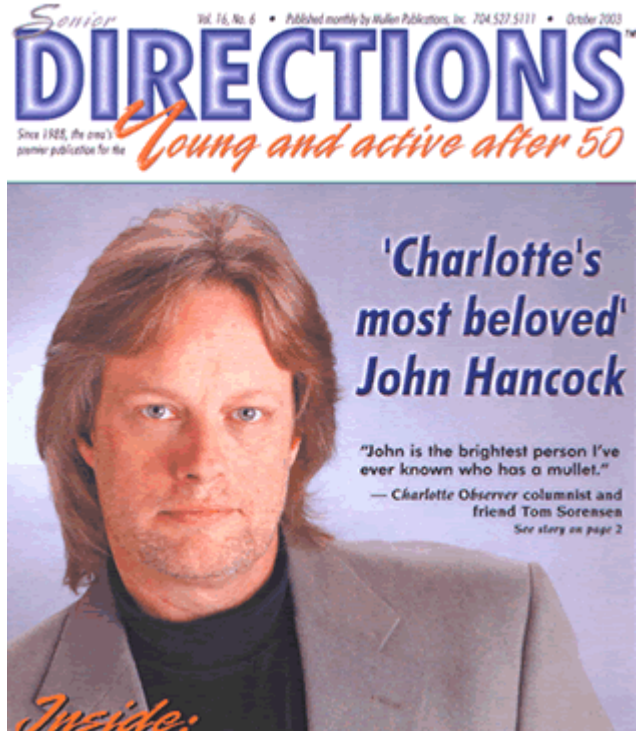
From an early age he had a special love of music. Asked to name the first concert he ever attended, without missing a beat John cites the Beatles at Red Rocks in 1964; he remembers it like it was yesterday. Over the years he has developed an eclectic taste in music and is now a diehard fan of Miles Davis, Eric Clapton (for whom one of his much-beloved pooches is named,) and Tom Petty, among other favorites.

Proclaiming himself "Charlotte's Most Beloved" upon his arrival in town in the early nineties, John Hancock came fresh from a tough job loss at a Jacksonville station and was hired at WBT to replace a popular station icon. A portion of Charlotte's listening public was horrified at the brash new guy but those who hung in there for a few weeks got a glimpse of the strategy of the newcomer whose job it was to get Charlotte thinking, talking and squawking about all sides of a variety of issues. The phones at 'BT rang off the hook; letters to the editor reamed out the station management for making this incredibly awful "hire," and the topic over corporate coffee klatches on weekdays consisted of surmising how long he'd last. "He's definitely not Charlotte and never will be," they said. But they were dead wrong.

John caught-on with the station's listening audience and his numbers rose.

Sponsors recognized a good thing when they saw it and signed up in droves. John's popularity took off and he began to rake in the awards: "The Zumwalt Community Award (National: Marrow Donor) 1996; Charlotte's Best Magazine's "Best Radio Personality" ('97 and '98); Creative Loafing's "Best Local Personality" ('92, '93 and '94); Creative Loafing's "Best Talk Show Host" ('95, '96 and '97); and Charlotte Magazine's "Worst Whiner" ('92, '93 and '94 – Award Retired) are just a partial list of his accolades and awards. He slipped off to WEND for a brief stint but the astute management team of Rick Jackson and Bill White lured him back home to WBT and most of those who know project him sticking around for a long time, putting him in the ranks with longtime WBT favorites – Grady Cole, Ty Boyd, Henry Boggan – who remained at the station until retirement.

John has proven himself to be a much sought-after voice of credibility for sponsor products. Due to the fact that he actually uses the products he endorses on-air, sponsors give him credit for much of the increase in business they enjoy after he has endorsed them with his usual candor. Many sponsors – like Barry Wolfman of "Wolfman Pizza" - have become personal friends of John's. Barry now lives in Missouri and describes John Hancock as, "one of the most genuinely nice, intelligent people I know. He has a great sense of humor ... dry and quick." Barry relates how he got to know John, "Not long after I first opened "Wolfman Pizza" the phones started ringing off the wall. I hadn't even heard of John Hancock but it seemed every customer who called mentioned hearing John on WBT talking about how great Wolfman Pizza was. On the following Friday night every table in the place was full and those customers began chatting with each other and found out they had all heard about "Wolfman Pizza" from listening to the John Hancock Show. I asked around and found out that John had just dropped by one time, loved the product we served him, and spread the word. I turned my radio on to 1110/AM to hear this guy and my timing was perfect; John was actually raving about it just then. Of course I called to thank him." Barry continues, "We're not



just all about business, however. John and I have good times together. The Cajun Queen was the scene of one of our better evenings and one we both recall and chuckle about frequently.”

During the past decade Hancock has become a ready on-air proponent of a variety of community and charitable organizations - the bone marrow drive and children’s medical shelter to name two - and is quick to “plug” them during his radio program. The results are always outstanding. His listeners chip in and give generously to his causes which demonstrates that Charlotte, North Carolina accepts, likes and trusts this kid from Denver.

But the one important thing that was missing from John’s life ten years ago was about to be found. In 1992 Susan Geiger was unmarried and handling promotions at WTVI. They had booked political satirist Mark Russell and decided to recruit a couple of well-known radio personalities to tape some promo spots. Susan was already friendly with (then)WBT talk show host Mike Collins so she invited him and another on-air host who she knew absolutely nothing about ... some guy by the name of John Hancock. Susan’s memories of their meeting are entertaining and, in a way, touching. “John was the first to arrive,” she said. “It seemed like he couldn’t stand still; he kept pacing. Not a nervous pacing but more an ‘I’m an important person and my time is valuable’ pacing.” She laughs and continues, “I kept thinking to myself, ‘What have I gotten myself into?’ And then Mike arrived and the spots were taped. What John will remember most is that I made them both wear those plastic political, red, white and blue hats and he’s so particular about his hair! He kept taking the hat off; I kept telling him to put it back on.” Not an auspicious start to a relationship that was to take off soon after and lead to one of the happiest marriages in Charlotte.

A few days after the WTVI taping John called and asked Susan out. She recalls clearly what he said. “It was a classic. He said, ‘So ... do you eat?’ The rest – as they say – is history.” The two were married with the blessing of Susan’s sons from her first marriage, Phil and Matt Geiger with whom John has a very close relationship. Typically of John, he gets along well with their biological father which makes life easier for all of them.

Susan says he’s mellowed and those of us who consider him our friend say so, too. And yet there’s still the interesting “edge” to him when he’s on-air that keeps listeners tuned in evening- -after-evening. Perhaps WBT General Manager Rick Jackson says it best, “John may be the most honest man I’ve ever met. Whether you’re listening to him on the radio or having dinner with him, the conversation won’t be measured or manipulated. Most of us present ourselves as we would like to be perceived. John presents himself as he is. I love that about him and I think his listeners do, too.”

His cohorts at the station jump at the chance to talk about their relationship with the king of late afternoon radio. Talk show host and pal Brad Krantz comments, “He is simply one of the most intuitively decent people I’ve ever met. It’s just part of his DNA ... that he cares about the way other people are feeling. John doesn’t have an agenda. When you look up the Yiddish word ‘mensch’ in the dictionary you’ll find a picture of John Hancock. (NOTE: Webster defines ‘mensch’ as “a person having admirable characteristics such as fortitude and firmness of purpose.”) When the ice storm knocked out everyone’s power back in December and I couldn’t get home, John and Susan opened their home to me.” (As an aside, Brad said, “I can’t remember what they charged me but I know it was a lot less than the Hyatt but a bit more than Motel 6.”) “But, seriously, John’s absolute honesty, unquestionable integrity and his ability to see through the BS that inhabits our business makes him one-of-a-kind. I’ve seen the greats and the near-greats but I consider my friendship with John Hancock priceless.”

Relative newcomer and WBT mid-morning host Keith Larson adds, “I’ve had no better supporter nor better resource at the station than John ... which is the measure of the man. He had the 9:00 a.m.-to-noon shift once upon a time and might have liked to have it again when management moved Dr. Laura out. Then they hired me and John was nothing but helpful and supportive. I’m not sure I could’ve been so generous but that’s the way he’s made. He lets himself ‘hang out’ so honestly, swarts and fears and all. (And sometimes you listen to him and you think, ‘Heck, I’m not so bad off ...’”, he kids.)

Susan says when people ask her the usual question, she answers, “Yes, he has changed. I think he’s mellowed somewhat personally and has gotten more conservative. He’s more comfortable with himself. He’s really happy being a homebody now.

What does John Hancock dream of doing? He’d like to run his own business ...perhaps something like a radio station inside a bar/restaurant. The question is --- will he still collect the plastic toys that McDonald’s gave away in the sixties and seventies? Will he still agree to hang a \$100 decorative flag off the front of the house? Will he still be found relaxing in front of the TV with pizza on his time off?

Time will tell. In the meantime, as “Charlotte’s Most Beloved” says ... “I’m outta here!”