



## On the air

As WXJM celebrates the 25th anniversary of its first broadcast, founding member John Pezzulla ('86) recounts the early days of JMU's student-run radio station

BY PAULA HARAHAH POLGLASE ('92, '96M)

For the last 25 years WXJM, 88.7 FM has broadcast a diversity of music and talk shows, all produced by JMU students. WXJM is now on the air 24 hours a day, featuring music as diverse as classic rock, reggae, jazz, heavy metal, classical, folk music, progressive, hip-hop, urban and punk, and talk shows covering sports, comedy or DJ's choice.

WXJM alumni will gather on campus during MacRock weekend, April 1-3, 2016, or a reunion to celebrate 25 years of the station. The reunion weekend will include tours, as well as a potluck dinner, visit to the station and late-night live broadcast. In anticipation of the reunion, *Madison* checked in with WXJM champion and original general manager, John Pezzulla ('86).

**Madison: What are your memories of the process of starting WXJM?** It was truly like starting a new business — definitely challenging, a lot of work, but absolutely rewarding and well worth the effort. It was a great experience and one that is consistent with JMU's entrepreneurial spirit. JMU's current theme, "Be The Change," certainly was relevant to this effort back then and really applies to WXJM today.

**Madison: What challenges did you face?** The biggest challenge initially was convincing both the JMU administration and students that there was a need to establish a student-run,

student-operated radio station as an alternative to WMRA and explaining why they were different. WMRA was, and is today, a terrific NPR station serving the community. WXJM was an independent voice for students and an opportunity to share music with students that was not available on WMRA or any other FM or AM outlet in the Shenandoah Valley.

**Madison: How long did it take to get the station up and running?** Formal discussion of the radio station began when I was a sophomore in October 1983. At that point it was myself, along with nine others on a subcommittee of the Student Services Committee of the SGA. From there, a separate committee was developed that I chaired. We completed a constitution and submitted it to the administration for approval. Full approval came in September 1984. By the rules of the constitution, I was chosen as the station's first general manager. The effort really started gaining traction and moving forward on March 11, 1985, with a signed letter of intent to the university. In April of 1986, 96 percent of the 1,500 students who voted said yes to a referendum question asking students if they supported WXJM. The working first name for the station was WJMU, then WJMR, finally settling on WXJM. Over the next four and a half years, it took a dedicated group of students working very hard, along with a supportive administration to make it happen.



Page 50: One of the five WXJM radio station founders, John Pezzulla ('86) (inset), will visit WXJM on Oct. 1 to broadcast his original set list to celebrate the station's 25th anniversary. (Above): Vintage WXJM 88.7 FM bumper stickers. (Right): An original hand-written WXJM program guide.

The WXJM website fills in the next few years, as follows: It was decided the station would be broadcast on an FM signal instead of any other type of radio broadcast. The 88.7 frequency was selected after about a yearlong search in May 1987, the FCC application was submitted in 1988, and was finally approved in November 1989. To go along with our newfound FCC approval, WXJM moved into a new station in Anthony-Seeger Hall in 1990.

**Madison: WXJM went on the air Oct. 1, 1990. What are your memories of that day?** Seeing the station that so many worked hard on for six years go on the air was tremendously rewarding and a very proud moment for everyone involved. There were certainly some nerves as we went on the air, hoping everything was working right and making sure we delivered the right message and programming from the start. Since I already had graduated and was just invited back to be the first person on the air, I only played music for the first hour ... but I have always been interested in local music and supporting it, including JMU bands as well as bands from Baltimore and Washington, D.C.

**The WXJM December 1990 alumni newsletter captures the spirit of the station the day it went on the air:** "WXJM made its worldwide debut on Monday, Oct. 1, 1990. On that historic day, John Pezzulla, our first General Manager, came back to the 'Burg and went down in history as being the very first person ever to go on the air on WXJM. We blasted onto the airwaves at noon with Jimi Hendrix's "Star Spangled Banner" per-

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— JOHN PEZZULLA ('86)

formance from the Woodstock soundtrack. We set up a booth just outside the Warren Campus Center and blared our newborn signal through two life-size amplifiers for all the 'Burg to hear. Mike McElligott and Scott Clarke grabbed our homemade, cloth WXJM banner and ran all over campus with it, proudly waving it high into the sky with frenzied, maniacal, twisted looks on their faces. It was quite a touching moment, like when Marcia first falls in love with Harvey Klinger on "The Brady Bunch."

**Madison: What did you learn from starting WXJM that you still use today?** I gained extremely valuable experience that applied to my career through building relationships, leadership and working closely with both JMU administration and a group of students passionate about starting a student-run, student-operated radio station at JMU.

I would like to acknowledge all of the hard work from WXJM alumni that got the station to the finish line and on the air after I graduated ... and the many WXJM alumni who have kept it on the air for 25 years strong despite challenges along the way and the progression into the digital age with numerous online music options. College radio at JMU with WXJM has survived and continues to get stronger and continues to be relevant, a true testament to the many dedicated staff members involved over the years, the JMU administration and the many listeners who have supported the station.

**LEARN MORE**  
Alumni can listen to WXJM outside of the Shenandoah Valley through the app "Tuneln" radio: search WXJM.