ROBIN WOOD

perpetuating the cosmic grin

by Belinda Baxter

“Radio is like a big relay race,” grinned 26 year old Robin Wood, WEBN’s full-time female disc jockey. “You must keep passing the baton to the next person.”

Wood grabs the baton from Ty Williams every morning at 6 a.m. and proceeds to march through her 6-10 a.m. shift. During these four hours, Wood must read newscasts, play a rotating format of album-oriented rock music, answer the phone, relay plenty of cheerful thoughts to her listeners, and repeatedly “chirp” the time and weather.

“Sometimes I feel like a parrot saying the time and weather constantly,” she confessed, “but I realize people listen to the radio for only short amounts of time while getting ready.”

While other top names in radio (such as Jim Scott of WSAI or Jerry Thomas of WKRC) conduct their own early morning radio slot in a jocular or anecdotal fashion, Wood handles her show with a conversational, low-key approach. She almost whispers in a mellow, sophisticated and cynical manner.

In person, Wood is tall, slender, and bears an elfin-like quality mixing her youthfulness with her maturity.

During her show, Wood often leans towards the soft sounds of rock, usually playing cuts by Joni Mitchell, James Taylor or Emmylou Harris. She tries to sprinkle her show with informative comments about upcoming concerts, interesting trivia about stars, or news-related tidbits.

“I try to read several periodicals such as Time, Newsweek, and Rolling Stone each week in order to keep on top of things,” she said.

Wood awakens each morning at 5 a.m. to begin her day’s work as the only full-time female disc jockey in town. After a light breakfast of cereal or yogurt, she sits in WEBN’s studios in Hyde Park Square for her 4 hour shift.

Her afternoons are generally occupied with reading or familiarizing herself with new albums which are sent to her home by various major record companies. She also performs outside announcing jobs for businesses, such as car dealers, and recently, even donned a lab coat, tied back her hair, and narrated a 10 minute film lecture on air pollution devices for the Environmental Protection Agency.

She tries to wrap up her day and be in bed by 10 p.m., but admits that she hardly ever makes it to bed before 11 p.m. “I’m constantly short on sleep,” she said wryly, “but I can fall asleep anywhere at anytime!”

Although Wood is now reaping the fairly lucrative rewards of radio,

Photography by Karen Gourley Lehman

“I’m constantly short on sleep, but I can fall asleep anywhere at any time,” Wood said (above)

(Left) “Wood grabs the baton from Ty Williams every morning at 6 a.m. and proceeds to march through her 6-10 a.m. shift.”
she did not simply "land" into this enviable position, despite the fact that her brother, Bo Wood, is president and general manager of WEBN, and her father, Frank Wood, is Chairman of the Board. She argues that the success of the station is far too important to her family for them to hire someone who was unqualified, simply because that "someone" was in their own family.

"My father was skeptical at first about hiring a family member, but my positive performance on the air overcame any skeptical effects of nepotism," she stated.

Wood first proved her worth at WEBN in 1972 when she joined the traffic department, where she was involved in the placement of various commercials. She also occasionally performed spots that required a female voice. In May of 1975, Robin decided to attempt a career in broadcasting and fervently began studying the technical end of broadcasting in order to pass her FCC third-class license test. The passing of this test is a pre-requisite for any WEBN disc jockey, because a D.J. must know how to take transmitter readings at the station.

Following the ordeal of the FCC test, Robin followed a route similar to that of a student teacher in a school system. She sat next to the late-night D.J. Ty Williams for a few evenings and observed his mastery of the switchboard and all its dials. She then began actually talking on the air while Ty ran the dials, and then running the dials while Ty talked on the air.

Wood finally reached the point where she could handle a show on her own, but remembers her first solo flight on the air with a bit of embarrassment. "After giving a station ID at 3 a.m., I turned to Ty and said, 'Well, was that OK, Ty?' and then realized I had forgotten to turn off the mike," Wood said.

She is now much more adept at controlling the dials, but admits that running the board requires a great deal of mental discipline.

"It's hard to always remember to turn down one switch and turn off another. You must be thinking ahead at all times. When one record is playing, you must be planning ahead what commercials you're going to plug in, or what record you will play next. Otherwise, if you don't plan ahead, a record will stop and you'll have nothing but dead air," she said.

Wood tries to inject individuality into her program by grouping together songs in a thematic
fashion. "I like to try to make the songs flow," she said, "so I'll try to group songs in certain ways. For example, if one song ends with a quiet piano, I'll quickly think, 'Well, there's a Boz Scaggs tune that begins with a quiet piano, so I'll play that next.'"

She does not have complete freedom, however, over the selection of her material. WEBN houses a library of various formats ranging from brand new LP cuts and old LP cuts to recent hits and jazz cuts. Through a card notation system, each D.J. must play songs from each category and then note the songs they play at the specific times in order to avoid unnecessary repetition.

Although WEBN formerly leaned more toward underground progressive rock, Wood agreed that the station now plays many more familiar songs.

"The looser your format and the wider your playlist, the smaller your audience will be. It's been proven that most people want to hear a familiar song," she said, adding, "We are different from our competition, though. True, there is a fine line between what's familiar and what's top 40, but our station conveys more of a family-like, close-knit attitude because we're not working for some large corporation like some of our competition's disc jockeys are. We're not like them, working to please some big cheese in the sky. Our only goal here is to try to please the folks and to perpetuate that great cosmic grin!"