

John Woods

by Jim Beatson

4ZZ first took to the airwaves at midday, 8 December 1975 on 105.7 MHz with presenter John Woods at the microphone. 4ZZ was Australia's third FM station and its first rock FM station. Woods, a former Channel 9 presenter, with a rich voice put his sense of humour aside for a three-minute introduction of the station saying it was an important act of free speech. He then played the station's first music - The Who's *Won't Get Fooled Again* - Pete Townsend's song about revolution was an apt metaphor for the new station.

As we discovered after employing John he had been sacked at Channel 9 for participating in the first Gay Rights demos in Adelaide at a time when he was hosting the kids show, as well as his other Channel 9 on-air duties including sports-program host and weekend newsreader. According to John after telling fellow Channel 9 staffers he would be participating, the station's General Manager, apparently with particular reference to the kids show told him "if you participate I will sack you and you will never work in radio or television again". That sacking happened immediately after John appeared in the front row of the march.

John next found himself working in the refrigeration room of an Adelaide ice cream company while doing some volunteer work at 5UV, an early Adelaide public broadcaster¹. John saw our newspaper ad for the coming Brisbane radical radio station. Many years later after leaving 4ZZZ and the ABC in Darwin and Sydney, he lived in Ballina where he operated a Japanese restaurant with his boyfriend while being an announcer at 4GGG (the ABC's Gold Coast station) before dying of leukaemia in his mid '50s.

At the time of its creation 4ZZ's activists (later 4ZZZ) were mostly highly political but straightish people compared with what was happening o/s and in Melbourne, John's favourite hang. So we weren't really prepared for John. We had been impressed by his thoughtful one page written application response to our national advert for presenters. John Stanwell and I conducted a phone interview with John, given we couldn't afford to fly him in. The interview consisted of going to a public phone box of the period while by holding one end of a long nail to the B button and the other to the phone's handset as you could make free calls that way. So crammed in the box with our nail, John's beautiful voice and lucid thoughts produced smiles. It was a done deal.

A week or so later I drove to Brisbane airport late in the afternoon to pick him up after he had had an overnight stopover in Melbourne. To my surprise I greeted a slightly plump, sweating man in a floral shirt, with tall Cuban heels wearing a necklace, rings and a bangle. His beautiful cheery voice was accompanied by shaking fingers and an unsteady manner. I thought, he is either an alcoholic or, in the term of the day, a druggie. I drove him to an Indooroopilly station party where he met the Z gang and after chatting for an hour he passed out for the night. My first conclusion was common and we were left wondering what next?

It turned out we were correct. John was a man who lived by considered extremes; he had tried most stimulants often and in substantial doses, burned the candle along the full length of the wick. Often seen sleeping on the station's couch at any of the day trying to catch much needed winks having been up to 4am before commencing brekky two hours later. His charm, wit, sensitivity and warm supportive personality, a listener to every person in trouble and everyone's favourite drinking companion hid an acute political observer. He wrote and delivered a weekly piss take of BA Santamaria's TV slot called BS Santagertruda and entered the unspoken competition between presenters in another unique 4ZZZ contribution to public radio through attracting subscribers to the station not by begging like the rest of the sector, and sadly largely ZZZ today, but by making satirical sub-plugs.

But on his first day working he had no problem grabbing a trowel and joining the very happy band: the station building team.

After five wonderful years at 4ZZZ John's skills and charm led to his rise and rise at the ABC radio. First in Brisbane then Darwin until he got the top-presenter job in ABC radio, Brekky Presenter at its Sydney flagship, 2BL, (or to use its current name 702). But unlike another first Gen 'ZZZ star, Marian Wilkinson, who dizzily moved from senior current affairs and news position to another, or Stewart Matchett who seemed to be head of programming at JJJ forever, John's reign at the very top, sharing limos and jokes with ABC GM, David Hill, was very short, perhaps due to the final catch up between John's lifestyle and the uncompromising demands of his job. Perhaps they just wouldn't provide a day-bed for him outside the studio.

Perhaps the most loved person ever to work for Z.

Stuart Matchett adds:

I seem to remember I went to the airport with you to pick up John when he arrived in Brisbane. My memory was that he was carrying a guitar case and so on the way back to that party (at John Stanwell & Helen Hambling's place) I asked him what music he played on the guitar and he told me he couldn't play guitar. He'd been at a farewell party the night before in Adelaide and when he awoke the next morning he had to bundle some clothes into a bag, which he didn't have, so he stuffed everything into a guitar case belonging to someone who lived in the house where the party was held.

Like most people in Brisbane, I loved John Woods. He flirted outrageously with my mother who thought he was, "such a lovely man". I went to more parties with him than I care to remember. As well as 4ZZZ we worked together at Triple J where I did 6pm-10pm and he did 10pm-1am. There were several nights where I did 6pm-1am while a very merry John regaled me with stories before passing out around 11pm.

¹ When the 'Public Sector' in radio was established in 1974/5 by the Whitlam Government it was called Public Broadcasting. Well over a decade later the ABC approached the Public Broadcasting Assoc of Australia asking could the sector and its stations to rebrand themselves as "Community Radio" based on the BBC's claim to be a 'public broadcasting' organisation. The ABC wanted to follow suit and claim the title "Public Broadcaster". To the dismay of the sectors founders, the PBAA quickly acquiesced, renaming itself the Community Broadcasting Association of Australia.