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## Dick Purtan is retiring from radio

*SUSAN WHITALL*  
*The Detroit News*

After 45 years in the Motor City, Detroit radio icon Dick Purtan called it a career this morning, announcing on his "Purtan's People" radio program that his last show will be March 26.

Purtan told his WOMC-FM (104.3) listeners that he and wife, Gail, had decided over the two-week Christmas holiday that it was the right time to hang up the microphone, almost exactly 45 years since he first came to Detroit to take the late-night shift at WKNR-AM (1300) after being hired there in May 1965.

"I must tell you, I've been blessed to do something I've loved and that I truly enjoy, but I have to be honest, I have been enjoying it less lately," Purtan noted.

In the last few years, as radio suffered with the rest of the economy, Purtan has seen several sidekicks trimmed from his morning show.

Purtan, 73, said he would be enjoying staying up late and sleeping in.

Naturally, he added a wisecrack: "I wanted to put off retirement until the Lions made it to the Super Bowl, but frankly, I need some sleep."

Several callers phoned in to Purtan's show to lament his retirement, one breaking into sobs, wondering what she would do without his show.

Then the boss called: Dan Mason, president and CEO of CBS Radio.

Mason thanked Purtan for his years on the CBS-owned WOMC, "and all the other stations you've worked for in Detroit."

After marveling at his 45 years in one city, quite a feat in radio, Mason pointed out Purtan's knack for raising funds for charity.

"Raising 22 million dollars for the Salvation Army over the years is quite an accomplishment," the chief executive said.

Purtan was also honored for his charitable work when he was named a Michiganian of the Year by The Detroit News in 1993.

Never one to let a comic opportunity pass by, Purtan asked the CBS uber-boss if he'd ever taken payola. "No," Mason said, laughing. "But I wouldn't admit it if I had."

"Neither have I," Purtan replied. "They never offered me a dime, not a trip -- nothing."

His more immediate boss, Debbie Kenyon, vice president and market manager of CBS Radio Detroit, said: "Unfortunately, we are losing a legend. Millions of people have woken up to Dick's voice in the morning. His

departure will leave a void I'm not sure anyone can fill."

Purtan and his wife, Gail, live in West Bloomfield Township and have six grown daughters (Jennifer, Jackie, Jill, JoAnne, Jessica and Julie) and seven grandchildren (five boys and two girls).

The veteran broadcaster was born Paul Purtan in Buffalo, N.Y., and earned both a bachelor's and a master's degree from Syracuse University.

His first on-air job was in Syracuse, while he was a student.

"I worked on WOLF at 1490 on the AM dial, and 250 watts. We were lucky to reach the parking lot," Purtan told The News. "I played country western music at night. I was known as The Buckaroo Sandman."

Newly wed to Gail, he did a brief Army stint, then worked in Syracuse (WOLF) and Cincinnati (WSAI), where Purtan briefly added "concert promoter" to his resume, when he put up the money and booked the Beatles.

"They only needed \$12,500 as a down payment," Purtan said. "So Gail and I, we pooled our resources and came up with \$2,500. We went to four of the jocks on the station, who each put up \$2,500. We sent a cashier's check for \$12,500 to the promoter to lock them up. Then before they took the stage, we had to give them another \$12,500."

Detroit's Top 40 sensation WKNR ("Keener 13") hired Purtan for its 10 p.m. to 1 a.m. shift, and he dropped "Paul" for "Dick" to avoid confusion with another WKNR jock.

From the start, Purtan was either indifferent to or dismissive of some of the music he played, often cracking wise about it.

"When I came to Detroit, I wanted to get as much attention as I possibly could, so I thought maybe doing a wilder show, especially at night when the kids were listening, was the thing to do," Purtan noted.

His humorous patter and frequent appearances at sock hops with other Keener disc jockeys endeared him to a generation of baby boomers. He was put on mornings within a few months, where there was ample room for comedy, and he's been on the morning shift ever since.

In 1968, Purtan left Keener for a brief stint on Baltimore's WBAL. He lasted only five weeks. "I was too wild for the station," Purtan admitted with a laugh.

One of the gags that put him in hot water was when he referred to then-Maryland Gov. Spiro Agnew as "Gov. Spiral Tax Agnew."

"And he heard it," Purtan said with a laugh. He was advised by the governor's staff to cut it out but instead, "being somewhat of a rebel, which I still am," Purtan kept it up. The jock was then summoned to Annapolis, where he was told by Agnew's table-thumping press aides not to ever call Agnew that again.

Five weeks later, Purtan returned to Detroit to do mornings for, first, WXYZ-AM (1270) and then, later CKLW-AM (800).

Purtan has long been a game-changer for stations that have employed him. It's been predicted that WOMC might change formats from oldies/classic pop, but only if and when Purtan retired.

In 1983, he brought his morning show (and top ratings) to easy listening WCZY-FM (95.5). In the 13 years he was there, the station went from light pop into more rock, becoming Z95.5/WKQI. The easy-listening format probably suited his taste more and that of his morning audience -- but the station didn't make an even more abrupt format change because Purtan was such a lynchpin, key air personality. It was only after he left that the station became "Q95.5" and went to a teen-pleasing "hits" format.

All in all, he spent 13 years at WCZY/WKQI until jumping to WOMC-FM (104.3) to do the "Purtan's People" morning show in 1996.

Recently, with the advent of the Arbitron People Meter, programmers at music radio have been pressuring air talent to talk less and play more music.

It's not a formula Purtan likes, especially in the morning. "I'd rather have it be less music intensive. Then there's more availability to entertain," he said.

Purtan was inducted into the Radio Hall of Fame in 2004.

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