



Cephas Bowles, WBGO's leader who guided the station to nationwide prominence

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By **Peggy McGlone/The Star-Ledger**

Cephas Bowles appears to be an unassuming Mr. Reliable: the unflappable leader who doesn't get excited, never raises his voice, never seems to rush.

"You can never tell when you first talk to him if it's good news or bad news," says WBGO board member and longtime friend Oliver Quinn. "I've known him for 30 years, and on the phone he always begins by saying 'Cephas Bowles, WBGO.' "

The president and CEO of WBGO-Jazz 88 has "an old-school gentlemanly" quality about him, says college classmate and fellow broadcaster Bob Costas.

"He's cool, but he's a jazz man," Costas says.

But beneath his throw-back exterior — his hair and beard cropped close, his suit always dark, his shoes always shined — Bowles is a technological innovator, a cautious but bold leader willing to take necessary risks, and a lover of jazz (the music he calls America's greatest) who believes celebrating its artistry is a public service.

"Other jazz stations are dropping like flies, but we're committed," says Bowles, 58, a native of Newark who now lives with his wife in Dover. "The station is 31 years old and it is still connected to this American art form."



Noah K. Murray/The Star-Ledger
Cephas Bowles, president and CEO of WBGO Jazz 88.

Since he took over WBGO (88.3 on the FM dial) in 1993, the country's premier jazz radio station has prospered. It has increased its listeners and membership ranks and expanded its reach in local and global markets. It has also enhanced Newark's reputation.

"It was like he was born for this position," says Quinn. "The match between Cephas and WBGO had to be created in another dimension."

A Passion for WBGO

The Park Place offices of WBGO reflect Bowles' sensibilities: They are clean, tasteful, but not fancy. A framed concert poster announcing a show by Marian McPartland hangs across from a black and white photo of Billie Holiday; a bigger photo of Count Basie can be seen around the corner. Six-foot-tall and lanky, Bowles walks down the hallway from his messy office to the spare conference room, his loping gait relaxed and unrushed. He sits at the end of the conference table, near a boxy Sony TV that hasn't been upgraded to a plasma. The station's mission statement hangs in a sturdy, sensible frame.

His accomplishments at WBGO are many. In 1998, it became the first jazz station to use the internet to stream its music around the world, resulting in loyal fans and donors who hail from Brazil, Netherlands and Thailand. He renovated the offices, increasing the studio space and upgrading the technology. This year, he launched a campaign to move the transmission tower to a Manhattan high-rise, a move that will keep the station in Newark but dramatically increase its metro-area reach.

And he and his staff are now creating a second channel of WBGO's digital signal, one devoted to young jazz musicians and composers.

"The paradox is he's very low-key, very measured, and yet his passion for what he does is so easily recognized," says Quinn. "It's not through a lot of drama or flare, but that love is very clear. You push that WBGO button and Cephas just goes."

His passion for music is obvious, too. Normally very linear, his conversation bends and twists as he talks about music. He remembers the avant-garde sound he loved in college and starts listing the groups — the Sun Ra Arkestra, the Art Ensemble of Chicago — and their appeal. "I liked the sound of it. They weren't singing about 'love me in the morning,' " he says.

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**Cephas Bowles, CEO of
WBGO Jazz 88**

**Gaston Jean-Baptiste,
Haitian musician**

**Jane Aronson, CEO of
Worldwide Orphans
Foundation**

**Michelle Papka,
neuropsychologist**

**Ron Brooks, double-
amputee singer**

**Teresa Vivar, executive
director of Lazos America
Unidad**

**Terry Dehere, Former
Seton Hall basketball
player**

He recalls his discovery of Chick Corea, his appreciation of Miles Davis and John Coltrane. He prefers instrumentals, he says. "I'm listening to the sounds, to the melody."

Newark Beginnings

Bowles grew up in an apartment complex on McCarter Highway, the second oldest of seven children born to Carey and Sarah Bowles. His late father, a preacher, enjoyed the big band music of Duke Ellington, Glenn Miller and Artie Shaw, and the gospel sounds of James Cleveland and the Five Blind Boys of Alabama. Later, his older brother, Carey, bought Billy Taylor and Grant Green records and played them on the stereo in the bedroom the brothers shared.

Bowles graduated near the top of his class at Barringer High School, where he played outfielder on the same team that had at shortstop Joseph DiVincenzo — today the Essex County Executive. He was the first of his family to go away to school, to Syracuse University, where he studied broadcasting.

His work-study job put him in the cafeteria four nights a week washing dishes, but he still found time to play jazz records as overnight host on WAER, the university's student radio station. With his friend Andrew Manns Jr., he helped to build a 500-disc jazz library.

"That was my first test of the jazz world," says Bowles, who became the station's first African-American engineer. "We were listening, reading, learning about the music."

Costas, who provided the narration for Bowles' student documentary on Martin Luther King, recalls a young man who was comfortable with himself, who didn't need flash to attain his goals.

"The average young person in the early '70s at an eastern university, they sort of wore their politics or their cultural sensibilities, whatever their attitudes were, on their sleeves. Some could be in your face," says Costas, who remains a long-distance friend. "There was something cooler, in the best sense, about Cephas. People were always trying to make sure you knew who they thought they were. He was never like that."

A Move Out West

After graduating from Syracuse in 1974, Bowles moved back to New Jersey and took a job as a production assistant at CBS radio in New York. To gain more hands-on experience, he moved to KUAT in Tuscon, a public broadcasting network with a television and two radio stations that was licensed to the University of Arizona. The FM station was classical, but the AM signal played jazz.

It was a big move for a kid from Newark who had never been west of Syracuse.

"I don't know anybody here and I will have to make a life for myself. That had an appeal to me," Bowles says. "I loved what they did: meaningful programs. They wanted people to be aware of this important American music."

In Arizona, he rose up through the station's ranks, eventually becoming acting director of the division of media studies, a position equivalent to a dean with responsibilities over all broadcasting. Then he resigned to pursue an MBA, a degree he felt he needed.

While at KUAT, he met his wife, Linda, then a graduate student in education. Friends set them up on a blind date and they dated for a while before drifting apart. Years later they reconnected — they are "the African-American version of 'When Harry Met Sally,'" Bowles jokes — and they were married in 1997. The pair now lives in Dover.

Bowles and his wife, who earned a doctorate in education and is now assistant principal at nearby Roxbury High School, are active in the lives of their many nieces and nephews. This month, they flew to Arizona to witness a niece graduate from the university, and Bowles has taken his nephew to Syracuse basketball games in Newark. Each Sunday, the pair attends services at the Fountain Baptist in Summit.

He doesn't follow sports like he did as a kid, though when pressed he'll say he cheers for the Mets.

Strong Beliefs

Bowles has three passions at WBGO: the music, the station and Newark. He feels strongly that the station has a presence in the city, that it supports live music and education, that it brings news and information about the state's largest city to its listeners.

Linwood Oglesby, executive director of the Newark Arts Council, a frequent collaborator of WBGO, says Bowles has brought prestige to the station, and in doing so has "extended the image and impact of what's happening in Newark."

"That goes back to his roots here, and wanting to see Newark regain its rightful place within the hierarchy of great cities," Oglesby says.

Not surprisingly, Bowles is uncomfortable taking credit for the station's progress. Yes, WBGO's budget has doubled, its staff increased. Yes, during his tenure the station renovated its Park Place facilities and upgraded its technology, developed WBGO apps for the iPhone and Android cell phones.

"I am the beneficiary of an engaged, enlightened staff. I'm here talking, and they are doing the work," says Bowles. "I listen to people. I know enough when to get out of the way and let others help us to advance the ball down the field."

First concert he attended: Operation Push Big Band, which performed on a flatbed truck in the housing projects when he was a kid

Last performance he attended: Will Downing at State Theatre in New Brunswick

First record he bought with his money: "Must have been Chick Corea."

Influential people in his life: His parents and his pastor, J. Michael Sanders

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