



# 1977 and WVSP Radio

Jereann King Johnson

The year was 1977. The Civil Rights Movement was on the back burner and the heat under corporate mergers, environmental justice, and AIDS was yet to rise. I was 25 years old and living on 17<sup>th</sup> and R Street, NW Washington, DC, with my 6 year-old, Juba, and his father. We shared a lovely Victorian styled house with two other couples and had people from various backgrounds and ethnicities coming and going all the time, in and out of our home. My son loved it! He was the only child in the house and was the center of attention. We were surrounded by folk who sat in the bay window of the living room, deliberating for hours on the dialectics of Marx and Engels and fussing about the metaphysical aspects of water. We were tie-dyeing cloth, greeting each other in Swahili, eating bean pies, and bean sprout sandwiches. We all dreamed of some kind of revolution.

The year was 1977. College was behind me. Part of my last year at Antioch College Center for Basic Human Problems was spent studying history, women's movements, and touring Europe in a five-month seminar focused on "Socialization of Youth." While there, I mostly hunted down bootleg jazz recordings from John Coltrane and Eric Dolphy's 1961 European tour and checked out every jazz scene, jazz club, and jazz concert that I could find. Back in Washington with college out of the way, I was ready to move on with life, move away from Washington. And where did I think I was going? To Cuba. Why Cuba? Well, given that Cuba had a socialist revolution in the 1950's and is located only 90 or so miles from the United States, I thought it



was just the place to be. However, I didn't know exactly how that would happen or how I would get there.

The year was 1977. One of my housemates was doing her college internship at a public radio station in Warrenton, NC. During one of our phone conversations, I asked her about her work at the radio station. She told me about all the cool things happening at the station and she mentioned that they needed someone to do a children's program and jazz program. Well, I was up to speed on jazz, especially avant-garde jazz, what we called outside jazz, but I knew nothing about radio – nil, nada, nichts, nix, nothing at all about broadcasting and producing radio programs.

The year was 1977. The one thing I knew for sure; it was time to leave Washington. I wanted to go to Cuba, but I could stay in North Carolina for a year and then make it over to Cuba. So, I caught the bus to Norlina, North Carolina, where my housemate met me and took me to the radio station to meet the principal station organizers, husband and wife, Valeria Lee, station manager and Jim Lee, station engineer and news director. They had to think (maybe they knew) that I was crazy when I told them that I wanted to go to Cuba, but would come live in North Carolina and work at the radio station for at least a year.

The particulars were vague, but I had sort of an invitation to work at a radio station; a community-based, public broadcast station, WVSP: Voices Serving People. On that first meeting, I sat talking with Val and Jim in what I would soon come to understand as the middle studio. The station was located on the second floor of what was known as the old Black

Professional Building in the heart of the Black section in the teeny, tiny town of Warrenton, in rural eastern North Carolina.

The year was 1977. I was too foolish to know that I didn't know. I was 25 years old, too grown, too tired, and too free. All I knew is that I wanted to live in Cuba, but I was moving to North Carolina. I bought a restored 1970 Chevrolet Super Nova with jacked up tires from a friend's husband, packed up everything I could get into it, put my son, Juba, in the front bucket seat, and headed south on I 95 to I 85, then to US 1 South to Norlina. It was October, the leaves had already started to fall, and I was driving south, away from too many buildings, too many people, and too many broken dreams. I was breathing with hope, ready to replant myself.

Again, the year was 1977. I am at WVSP Radio Station, not knowing where to start. So, I sat for about a week in the radio station's middle studio, just checking everything out and finally Val told me, that I had to move into the broadcast studio and get on the air. I didn't know what I was supposed to do. I got a lot of help figuring out the next steps. Walter Norfleet helped me to understand some basic pronunciation rules about "the" and Steve Hyman showed me how to speak into the microphone and how to cue up a tape. Jim gave me an orientation to the Associated Press (AP machine) and Val was all around kind and became my son's second mother. I got it together. I had settled into a new world. I soon began to grasp the possibilities, the reality, and power of radio broadcasting.

So now, the year is 1980. WVSP is at its zenith with a diverse core of talented and committed staff, all with a shared mission – to broadcast meaningful information and entertainment and to provide a platform for addressing public affairs and social justice issues relevant to the audience we served. Cynthia Chamblee is covering the gambit in consumer topics. Steve Hyman is mentoring teenagers and helping them to produce not only music programs, but also radio soap operas and

health education programs. Rebecca Ranson, a political activist writer, is writing street and stage plays addressing issues related to alternatives to incarceration and other criminal justice concerns. Rebecca's longtime friend, Warren Johnston, a graphic artist produces funky line drawing of the WVSP people for *Dialogue*, the station's program guide. Jim Lee is organizing a network of anti-Klan activists and reporting on a range of social justice issues. Jim is also keeping the station on the air and the signal strong. Val is raising money, managing the station, and keeping everything in check. Willie C and JR are rocking with the blues, and with a lot of volunteers, we are doing it all: jazz, blues, news.

I learned the broadcast business and produced *Tickle Me Think*, a children's program; a thirteen-part series on North Carolina jazz and blues musicians; *Under All Is The Land*, a series exploring land ownership and use; and many cultural and public affairs programs. I enjoyed programming jazz throughout the day and *Just Jazz* on Tuesday evenings. WVSP staff and volunteers with microphones in hand were everywhere important discussions and presentations happen. We covered environmental justice issues stemming from the fight against locating a PCB Landfill in Warren County, alternatives to incarceration (North Carolina had one of the highest incarceration rates in the world), and the growing national Anti-Klan Movement. Education, racism, civil rights, health, economic justice, and community development issues were just a few of the featured topics heard on the station.

I often think back to the year 1977, the way I made a decision to move through all the ambiguity and anxiety of leaving Washington and coming to work at WVSP Radio. My days at the station were some of the best days of my life. I met my soul mate, Bernard Johnson, in Warrenton. I found my footing, developed a creative spirit, and cultivated everyday virtues that ground my life today. I didn't make it to Cuba as I had planned, but I lived through a revolution at WVSP.



**Jereann King Johnson** has been quilting as far back as she can remember. Her early discovery of and fondness for textiles and texture flourishes still. With 25 years of experience in literacy education, leadership, and community development, she currently works in rural communities coordinating school and community activities. In collaboration with several North Carolina quilters, she helped to launch the African American Quilt Circle in 1997 and the Heritage Quilters in 2001.



# JITTERBUG QUEEN AND HER GENE

Connie Jackson Kenney

**B**ertha Lee Wright was a roaring flame in a world of candle light. Born in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia, her heart always longed for the energy of the big city. Her dream finally came true at the age of 17 when she married James Roscoe Kenney and moved to Jamesburg, New Jersey. Jamesburg wasn't quite the big city life, but then again it certainly wasn't the mountains of Virginia. Bertha Lee soon had her first child, Anthony, followed by James Eugene, affectionately called "Gene". She would go on to have four more children: twins, Joan and Jack, then Edith and Cecelia. While still very young, Anthony and Gene were sent to live with their grandparents back in Virginia. The time stretched out to nine years, but frequent road trips between New Jersey and Virginia helped to pass the time.

Finally, at the ages of 9 and 11, Gene and Anthony made it back to New Jersey but under difficult circumstances. While in Virginia, Gene and Anthony attended school in a one-room schoolhouse and Anthony needed Gene's help more and more throughout the year. It was determined that Anthony was going deaf and the best thing for him would be to attend The School for the Deaf in New Jersey.

With Anthony away at school, Gene was without his best friend. It was as if Gene tried to make up for all the time he had spent away from his mommy. He was her riding partner. Bertha Lee and Gene. During the week, she would concentrate on work and he on school, but on the weekends, Gene and his mommy would go out on the town. Bertha Lee lived life with passion and fire and she loved to visit the neighborhood clubs and bars. Gene would be right there with her. Her son, her protector. Bertha Lee's skills on the dance floor were unmatched. To Gene, she was mommy. To others, Bertha Lee was the "Jitterbug Queen." Gene would sit in the corner with his chicken sandwich, chips, and soda pop and watch his mommy work her magic. Spinning and hopping, her joy was infectious to all those around her.



One weekend, Gene was left behind. The Jitterbug Queen was on her own. No one saw or heard from her for almost a week.

They found her in a house with her sister Lucy and some friends. They had all died from a gas leak from a stove. Gene, her protector could not save her. But Gene, her son would miss her. Bertha Lee, the Jitterbug Queen, filled her 36 years with passion and joy and passed much of it down to her little boy. To this day, Gene is a protector, loves chicken sandwiches, sitting at bars, and tries his best to set the dance floor on fire.



**Connie Jackson Kenney** was born in Savannah, Georgia, in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century and now calls Henderson, North Carolina, home. She began sewing as a teenager and found a love for quilting 18 years ago. The quilt that inspired her was a crazy quilt made by her husband's grandmother. Her first quilt was of course a crazy quilt. Connie loves making art quilts because of their creativity, flexibility and freedom. A retired Nutritionist, she has been a member of Heritage Quilters since 2002. Along with her daughters Jasmine and Heather Joi, Connie operates [3oculverst.com](http://3oculverst.com), an online site for handmade goods.

## cloth like memory

heather joi kenney

piece by piece  
your story is told.  
stitched together through  
the windows of your soul.  
tales of old  
tales of new  
tales of triumph  
tales of truth  
cloth, like memory  
speaks for you.  
stories you hold and  
treasure so dear.  
your life, your way of  
saying you are here.





# BLUE LINES

Crystal Myrick

Eight, nine, ten... Eleven days had gone by! I frantically flipped back and forth between the fragile pages, consumed with anger, anxiety, and denial, reality finally set in that I had not accidentally bought a faulty calendar, but I was almost two weeks late and almost two seconds away from passing out on my bedroom floor.

It's not like I've never had prolonged visits away from my "Aunt Flo" but this time, it was different. I felt different. The possibility of being pregnant was often at the bottom of the list. My doctor, both in the examination room and on TV, would suggest it could be stress. Of course, it was stress. I was working as a sales rep for the telephone company. The quotas were ridiculous and the managers' outlined sales strategy was like telling us to take part in a taste test, but then taping our mouths shut before we could take a sip. I wasn't the best salesperson but I wasn't the absolute worst either. I was right there in the middle. And speaking of middle, my own could possibly look different in a few months.

My boyfriend, Michael and I had just reconciled after a year and a half split. To this day, we don't recall why we broke up but all that mattered was that we were back together and had made plans to join in holy matrimony the following November. While he sat on my black and red futon in the other room watching a karate movie on TV, he had no idea I was consumed with an odd blend of anger, anxiety, and denial. Before I insisted on freaking him out over nothing (yet), I dug through my drawer searching for a spare pregnancy test. I would keep several on hand, because as a young bachelorette, even though I always took measures to protect myself, I knew an "oops" could occur.

"You OK in there?" His voice echoed in my barely furnished one-bedroom apartment. I didn't respond. After emptying all my drawers and my bedroom floor was ink-blotted with dark winter and work clothes I had tossed behind me, I finally found a test lodged in the back of my drawer. It was hidden behind the nearly depleted brown bag, which was once full of condoms my doctor had given during my last check-up. Fatigue had settled into my knees and lower back, so I slowly stood up and was headed towards the bathroom, only to be met by an obstacle standing less than two feet away from me. His tight, curly afro and thick beard made him look part-werewolf, engulfing his smooth roasted almond skin, and the only thing he feared was a silver razor blade. His chestnut-hued eyes darted in my direction, his bushy dark brows scrunched to the center of his face, which could have easily been perceived as menacing but I knew his expression was one of concern.

Before either one of us could say a word, he glanced down to see the white plastic-encased test in my hands. He looked back up, slightly relieved I hadn't gone crazy, but his brows rushed to the center again. "Yeah. I'm late again. I'm just making sure. You can go back now." He hesitated but after hitting him back with a reassuring, "No, I'm fine, really" face, he walked back into the living room to finish watching the movie. I let out an unconscious sigh of relief. For a brief moment, I thought about where I would display my Oscar, because those were some award-winning skills at work. I was nonchalant on the outside, crying and buckling on the inside. What I would say in my acceptance speech would have to wait. There was something else that needed my immediate attention. Just in case he could see me, without a second thought, I threw my

shoulders back and blank-faced my entire route to the bathroom, which was only about six steps away from my bedroom door.

My game plan was set. Step one: drop pants and sit on the toilet seat. Done. Step two: Rip test from plastic encasing and remove sheath to reveal the designated target. Done. Step three: Let that bodily fluid tell my future. I knew step three wouldn't be a problem. Since we hardly had customers at work, I spent the majority of my time, talking to my coworkers, playing online games, and consuming my fair share of the company-supplied bottled water. Office chit-chat and those rounds of *Bejeweled* were often interrupted by restroom breaks.

Wait a second: Was I overlooking one of most common signs? Oh, God. I'm about to throw up. Is it possible to have morning sickness at eight o'clock at night? No, not sick, but I could go for a pepperoni pizza with double cheese right now. With step three out of the way, I waited, but the wait wasn't long. Before I could focus on this first blue line, a second blue one bolted through the adjacent test results circle before the last pee dropped. It was like God was telling me, "Hey. No need to wait 30 seconds. You're with child. Congratulations and you're welcome."

I looked down at the outcome and looked back at the guide printed on the test. I held the test up at eye level to make sure there wasn't a shadow cast on the test that could be mistaken for a positive. They were there: two deep, dark, life-changing blue lines, uh-oh.

How was I going to tell him? It was time to once again put more acting skills to test. Would I be in a happy and celebratory mood, jumping up and down, hoping the feeling would be contagious? Or should I start crying in hopes of garnering sympathy and he would not flee, but stay by my side

to help raise our child and for the occasional back and foot rubs? No, I couldn't. I wasn't happy nor did I feel like crying, I was content. I was 23 years old, had a decent-paying job, my own place, and a man who loved me unconditionally...or at least I hoped so after I delivered the news.

I looked around my bathroom. It was small, but the off-white walls and equally pale sink and bright lights over the mirror made it seem more spacious. I knew eventually I would be bathing a little boy or girl while he or she played with colorful toys, not aware that the flirty kicks and arm-flailing would splash water from the bathtub onto the sand-hued tiled floor. As soon as I thought about the exciting moments I had in store, anxiety stormed in unannounced. This was it, the final countdown; sleepless nights ahead. My already nonexistent social calendar will be replaced with doctor appointments and play-dates. Designer bags turn to diaper bags.

And what will my parents think? Will they be excited for their arriving grandbaby or will they be ashamed and disappointed I didn't have a wedding band on my finger at the time of conception? Will the same two people who raised me to be the woman I am today turn their backs on me, unlike how I, as a toddler, was running up and down the stairs and was their biggest distraction when they exchanged vows at the courthouse?

An anxiety attack was about to settle in when I was knocked out of it by a knock on the bathroom door. Michael walked right in, leaned back, and I watched as his broad shoulders eclipsed the pale door, and he folded his arms waiting for the verdict. I stood up, but my pants were still down, the same way I got into this situation.

"So?" His slightly slanted eyes widen with curiosity. "Yeah. You're gonna be a dad." "OK. You OK?" "I'm OK."

“Good!”

He unfolded his arms, but instead of reaching out to hug me like he always does, even if he's seen me all day, he opened the door behind him and walked out the bathroom and into the hallway.

That's it? Was that a sign for things to come? Should I be prepared for a phone call from the *Maury Show* producers?

I snatched my pants up not bothering to zip and fasten them. I didn't care about them falling down. All I cared about was not hearing my front door open and slam shut. I trekked down the hallway to see him standing in the corner. A sigh of relief came to an abrupt stop when I noticed my cordless house phone clutched in his hand.

Is he really going to talk about this with someone else before

we discuss it? He turned around and saw me standing in the middle of the living room floor, finally zipping up my pants.

“I'm ordering a pizza. We gotta celebrate, right? Can you still eat pepperoni?”

I smiled my reply, rubbed my stomach, thinking of how we would forever be connected, and how those ab workouts would be a thing of the past. But, that conquest for a flat stomach didn't matter. I was about to become a wife and a mother. This moment truly couldn't get any better.

He hung up the phone. “You want me to rub your back?”  
“Sure, why not?”



A purveyor of subversive humor, **Crystal Myrick** is a writer and lifestyle columnist residing in Warren County, North Carolina. In the wee hours of the morning, she enjoys absorbing books and films with strong female characters, preferably as leads. “Blue Lines” is her first quilting project.

## Quilt Descriptions

Page 1, Ihsan Abdin - **The Pear Tree**, 26 ½ x 31. A rendition of a childhood experience, growing up in the city and discovering with other neighborhood children a pear tree. Cotton fabrics, photo transfers, cotton stuffed tree; appliqué, machine pieced and hand quilted.

Page 5, Belinda Mack Alston - **Be Still My Dancing Lights**, 32 ¼ x 39. Commercial fabrics, batiks, rhinestone accents, and photo transfers, fabric paints; appliqué, zig-zag piecing, hand and machine pieced and quilted.

Page 9, Cathy Alston-Kearney - **Topaze**, 35 x 43. Repurposed party dress fabric and pearl embellishments, cotton and batik fabrics, lace, polyester upholstery cloth, buttons, pearl beads, faux silk flowers, and family photo transfers; hand and machine quilted.

Page 13, Jane Ball-Groom - **The Promise of the Rose Tree**, 47 ½ x 35 ½. The quilt is based on genealogy research and discoveries of the writer. Repurposed cashmere coat, window curtains, cotton fabrics, cotton balls, polyester, terrycloth, plastic flowers, buttons, ribbons, and other materials found at home; machine and hand stitched and quilted.

Page 17, Arlene Bice - **Getting the Message**, 34 x 42. Cotton fabrics, re-purposed man's plaid shirt, photo transfers; machine appliqué, machine pieced, and hand and machine quilted.

Page 21, Virginia Broach - **A Woman's Wisdom Over Time**, 37 x 30 ½. Meredith College, Raleigh, NC, print on cotton; commercial cottons, photo transfers, fabric paints, doubled layers of batting in the center, no batting in the track; machine pieced and quilted.

Page 25, Margaret Woods Bullock - **I Pray the Lord My Soul: "Margaret's Coming,"** 42 ½ x 37 ½. Cotton fabrics, seashell embellishments, rickrack, photo transfers; machine appliqué, hand tacked with pearl cotton thread, and machine pieced and quilted.

Page 29, Sterling Cheston, Jr. - **Another Saturday at North Warren High School**, 39 ½ x 34 ½. This quilt captures a rendering of the nine-classroom with auditorium brick Rosenwald School building, originally named Warren County Training School. The building was constructed in 1931, in Wise, North Carolina. The building is part of the North Warren High School Campus. Photo transfer of Mr. Sterling Cheston, Sr., cotton fabrics, upholstery fabric, ribbon found in sewing basket of Sterling's mother, and fabric paints; machine appliqué and machine quilted.

Page 33, Karen Harley - **The First Fire Story**, 23 ½ x 34 ¾. Cotton fabrics, faux snake skin fabric, leather, earrings, embroidery threads; machine appliqué and machine quilted.

Page 37, Portia Hawes - **Unbridled**, 51 ½ x 36 ¼. Photo transfers of North Carolina Historic Marker, business transactions from 1877 to 1888 store ledger, and Oak Chapel AME Church. John Hyman rendering by Jereann King Johnson. Cottons, velvet, wool tweed, and paisley polyester fabrics; buttons and jewelry; hand and machine appliqué and hand quilted.

Page 41, Jewel B. Hawkins - **Transformation – Serenity**, 28 ¾ x 36 ½. Cotton floral fabric, plastic and embroidered embellishments; machine pieced and quilted.

Page 45, Jereann King Johnson - **1977 and WVSP Radio**, 71 x 52 ½. WVSP (Fall, 1980) Dialogue Program Guide photo transfers of Warren Johnston's graphics and Rebecca Ranson's *Behind the Sounds* article. Cotton fabrics, T-shirt fabric, silver ironing board cover fabric, WVSP Radio broadcast area print on cotton; machine appliqué, machine pieced, and hand quilted.

Page 49, Connie Kenney - **Jitterbug Queen And Her Gene**, 58 ½ x 38. Created in: cotton fabrics, repurposed vinyl raincoat, mirror tiles, faux leathers, ribbons, studs, photo transfers, stencil, gold testor pens. Machine pieced and hand quilted.

Page 53, Crystal Myrick - **Blue Lines**, 25 ½ x 36 ¾. Cotton and polyester fabrics, machine appliqué, photo transfers; machine pieced and quilted.

Notes:







