

Posted on Mon, Dec. 08, 2003

Hancock's world fills with static

Rare disorder leaves broadcaster deaf in right ear

MARK WASHBURN

TV/Radio Writer

John Hancock, who makes a living making noise, is facing the prospect of a largely silent future.

The longtime Charlotte radio personality is losing his hearing to a rare and unpredictable disorder. It deafened him in his right ear 28 years ago and attacked his left this autumn.

"Voices sound electronic to me," says Hancock, 51, who is on weeknights on WBT (1110 AM), 6 to 10 p.m. "Music is so distorted. It's all highs and lows. I have no tone definition."

He can't tell from which direction voices or sounds come. He can't sort out conversation from background noise.

He slips in the back door now at WBT so people won't hail him on his way to the studio because workplace noise drowns out conversation.

"Sometimes people say something and I ignore them, keep on going," he says. "I get tired of saying `what?' or `huh?'"

Until weeks ago, he was a gregarious raconteur at the studios off Morehead Street that contain the creative energies of WBT, WLNK-FM ("The Link," 107.9) and WBTB (Channel 3). Now he finds himself retreating into earphones, which limit noise to just the voices he must hear.

A loss of hearing could mean an abrupt end to his broadcasting.

"The part we're focusing on now is whether I'm going to finish a career or end a career."

Mysteries of Ménière's

Ménière's disease, named for the 19th-century physician who first described it, causes periodic attacks of hearing loss, tinnitus and vertigo. "It's an unpredictable disease," says Dr. Michael F. Miltich of Charlotte Eye, Ear, Nose and Throat Associates. "Some people have a benign course that can be treated with medicines. Some people have a devastating outcome."

The disorder is believed to be caused by a fluid buildup in one of the chambers of the inner ear.

If the pressure ruptures the thin membrane of the chamber, it can destroy the inner structures of cochlea and vestibular organs, effectively short-circuiting the inner ear's mechanisms for balance or hearing.

Severe, sickening vertigo is among the symptoms. Medication can control vertigo and fluid buildup, but in some cases, patients go deaf. Cochlear implants can restore limited hearing in the most serious cases.

It is a frustrating disease to treat.

"In the majority of the Ménière's cases, we don't know what causes it," Miltich says.

After 28 years, it returns



T. ORTEGA GAINES

John Hancock on the air at WBT-AM.

Hancock was working in Denver in the mid-'70s when his right ear started giving him trouble. It felt like swimmer's ear. It wouldn't open.

He started suffering vertigo attacks, his world spinning violently. Vomiting, diarrhea and disorientation would follow.

"You're too sick to get to the john to throw up," Hancock recalls. "Then would come the cold sweats and suddenly you'd sleep for hours."

He learned to control the symptoms, to delay the attacks when he was driving or on the radio. But he lost almost all hearing in that ear.

And for the next 28 years, he got by.

At the end of October, Hancock came down with what he thought was the flu. Joints ached. It was a struggle to walk. His head felt gunky.

He went to Dr. Steven Gold of Charlotte Eye, Ear, Nose and Throat Associates. Gold found Hancock was losing function in his left ear.

Saved by a cat named Grins

Hancock got a radio gig before he got a high school diploma. In 1969, he learned to cue records and deliver station identification at KKEP-AM, a 500-watt station in his hometown of Estes Park, Colo.

He worked in Colorado and Florida and came in December 1990 to WBT in Charlotte.

His unapologetically brash style was a departure for polite, Presbyterian Charlotte. People thought he was pushy. Obnoxious.

"They hated me," Hancock says. "Then one night I talked about my cat named Grins. It was time to put her to sleep. And my voice cracked. That was a turning point."

Hancock says people liked his open, occasionally emotional, account of life.

"I've brought my life to the radio. They know everything about me. They know about my partying days."

"People are looking for honesty. I think I'm about the most honest person you'll run into in your life," says Hancock.

"The only thing bigger than John's mouth is his heart," says longtime competitor, colleague and pal Chuck Boozer, now on rival WKAT-FM ("Kat" 96.9) from 2 to 7 p.m.

"There's nobody more passionate about his craft, what he does. He's so Charlotte."

Hancock quit WBT in 1999 in a quarrel with management. He went to the morning show on WEND-FM ("The End" 106.5), then got sacked there in favor of the syndicated "Bob and Tom" show in 2001.

He soon returned to WBT and continued the dialogue with Charlotte.

Lately his ear problems have been part of the show. On Nov. 21, he had a guest who knows the problems of Ménière's firsthand. Her name is Meg McDonald.

Suddenly, a silence

McDonald spent nine years as an anchor at WSOC (Channel 9), then in 1990 moved to Philadelphia and a job with WCAU-TV.

In May 1993, she moved into the national spotlight as a reporter for "American Journal," a syndicated TV newsmagazine.

Two weeks later, her world started to crumble.

She woke one morning to public radio's "Car Talk." But the voices were fuzzy. It felt like her ears were plugged. She could hear roaring sounds.

"It went overnight," McDonald, 48, says from her Myrtle Beach home. "It's so unbelievable. You think it's a mistake -- it's going to come back."

But it didn't. She couldn't hear producers talking to her in her earpiece, couldn't hear in interviews.

"My career was down the tubes. Although I flailed hard against it, reporters have to hear."

McDonald soon left the career she loved and entered a world of unseen challenges. She learned to shoot and edit video. She became a motivational speaker.

"And not in the cheesy 'you-can-do-it-if-you-just-try' way. I had breast cancer in January. I've had 14 or 15 fractures because of bone disease."

She still falls because of balance problems. She can't ride horses, ski, ride a bike.

"When things happen you just have to hunt them down, chase them and kill them -- overcome them, in other words. Because the alternative -- taking to your bed and making everyone around you miserable -- is not acceptable."

Hoping for the best

Hancock says he's not afraid of what the future holds, though he would like it to hold a place in broadcasting. "I'm not a business guy. I'm not a numbers guy. I'm a radio guy."

"I spent 30 years in a job that beats the daylights out of you. And God, I've had a ball."

"I've met three Beatles. I've stood on a stage with thousands of people cheering and introduced the Rolling Stones."

"And if I get up tomorrow and I've still got my hearing, I get to do my radio show all over again. Life is good."

Mark Washburn: (704) 358-5007; mwashburn@charlotteobserver.com

ABOUT THIS DISEASE*Ménière's disease -- named for French doctor Prosper Ménière who first described it, in 1861 -- is an inner ear disorder that can cause episodes of vertigo, dizziness, ear fullness, tinnitus, a roaring sound in the ears and progressive hearing loss.*

RARITY OF DISORDER

It is estimated about 615,000 people in the United States -- less than 1 percent of the population -- have the disorder and about 45,500 new cases are diagnosed annually. In 75 percent of cases, Ménière's is confined to one ear.

TREATMENT

No cure for Ménière's exists, but symptoms can be treated through diet -- like reducing salt intake -- or medication. Surgery can be effective for treating balance problems.

ON THE WEB

- www.nidcd.nih.gov/
- www.entnet.org

- www.drf.org

- www.earfoundation.org

- www.vestibular.org

CONTACTS

SOURCE: National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders; Carolina Eye, Ear, Nose and Throat Specialists.

CONTACTS

John Hancock: hancock@wbt.com Meg McDonald: Mawm@aol.com