Armed with a doctorate in economics, a microphone and one very short fuse, Julianne Malveaux ’74, is headed fast for a national audience.

HELLBENT

By Bruce Morgan

November 9, the morning after the election that effectively kicked the legs out from under liberalism in American politics, progressive economist Julianne Malveaux ’74, is on the air at community radio station WPFW in Washington, D.C., doing the best she can to revive her listeners’ spirits. “Newt Gingrich,” says the headphone-wrapped Malveaux, chewing the syllables like sand. “Every time I say that name, I’m glad I didn’t have any breakfast.” Behind a rectangle of plate glass, the staffers in the control booth chuckle and shake their heads.

Malveaux is on a roll. “Some listeners have accused me of Republican-bashing,” she continues. “I don’t have anything against Republicans. I gave a drink of water to a Republican just the other day.” A moment later: “You know, I see that in this morning’s USA Today, columnist Linda Chavez accuses me of saying I wanted Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas dead. I never said that. What I actually said [on the PBS talk show “To the Contrary”] was I hoped his wife was feeding him lots of butter and eggs.”

Photos by Geoff Why
The wicked, slanting attack that deflates pomposity is pure Malveaux. At 43, she has earned a reputation in some circles for her biting humor; but the powerfully built woman you see leaning so puckishly into the mike is much more than a jokster bent on teasing out the next big laugh. Malveaux, trained as an economist and informed by the happenstance of being born poor, black and female, is serious in a way that few public commentators are, or ever can be. Her jokes enfold a grim, unending call for economic justice in this country—a call fueled by what one observer has labeled her “spiritual indignation.”

Malveaux believes such justice is possible; she believes it must come yesterday if not sooner; and she never stops saying so. Last year she published Sex, Lies and Stereotypes: Perspectives of a Mad Economist (Pines One Publishing), a collection of five years’ worth of newspaper columns. Running through the book like shale is the bleak refrain of “the real deal.” For Malveaux—who classifies herself politically as a Jesse Jackson Democrat, economically as a “redistributionist”—the real deal is economic; and historic. The real deal means African Americans have always worked at crummy, low-paying jobs. The real deal means a third of black America lives in poverty. The real deal means women have always gotten the shaft. The real deal means the struggle for justice never ends.

It all adds up to a tough sell. As shown most starkly by the November election results, people are fed up with liberal government and the slew of entitlement programs that are identified with liberal politics. People want austerity in government; people want accountability; people want lean, bottom-line management of social programs. Fine. How does that austere message translate for the millions of Americans who are working hard and barely scraping by—or, worse, losing ground—through no fault of their own? Malveaux never loses sight of that question, or those people.

Social and economic conditions have been deteriorating in many ways since the early 1980s, according to Malveaux. Beginning with the Reagan presidency, “our nation managed to find a way to reward the rich and punish the poor, to divide the poor by setting white against African American, and to use code words and buzz words like ‘welfare’ and ‘crime’ to magnify differences,” she writes. “In the same period, the collective racial myopia of our presidents turned tolerance into active malaise . . .” Harvard’s Cornel West, author of the 1993 bestseller Race Matters, believes the United States faces “racial apocalypse” if current trends proceed unchecked.

Can a large black woman with a short fuse save the world by ranting into a microphone? Malveaux aims to find out. So far, the limitations placed on her at WPFW are few. This is her talk show, after all—she’s the executive producer, as well as the host—and one of the reasons she plugged in her mike at this
small, threadbare facility last September was simply to be able to say, in two-hour batches five mornings a week, whatever she felt like saying. I have creative control," explains Malveaux, "so, unlike on commercial radio, I can call [North Carolina Senator] Jesse Helms a 'butthead' if I want to."

Politically, WPFW's listeners supply the perfect audience for a Helms slam-dunk. The station, part of the left-leaning Pacifica Radio Network, is housed on several upper floors of a semi-decrupt building at the edge of the city's Chinatown. Inside, the toilet trickles nonstop and Chinese take-out menus decorate the walls. Supported by perpetual pledge drives, WPFW claims 100,000 listeners in the metropolitan D.C. area, 60 percent of them black. (WANU, the local NPR station, has 400,000.) This is a tiny launching pad for a talent and ego the size of Malveax's. But if she plays her cards right and the show catches fire (according to station manager Gail Christian), "The Julianne Malveaux Show" will be offered to a network of 60 or 70 stations nationwide in April, before too long Malveaux could be reaching a million people a day with her wisecracks and acuity.

The show airs weekdays from 8 to 10. This morning, after sign-off, Malveaux treks upstairs to the cavernous lair of her office. Her staff—all black women—assemble around her. Malveaux stands behind her desk, glancing over at the bulletin board on the wall where the next day's show is plotted minute-by-minute. "Let's see if we can fill that slot with someone better."

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THE MORNING AFTER—Hours after the historic election in which the GOP seized control of Congress, Malveaux commiserates on-air with David Corn of The Nation (left), and Larry Bensky, national affairs correspondent for Pacifica Radio. "She was tough, irreverent," station manager Gail Christian recalls of her first exposure to Malveaux. "Someone who didn't mind saying, 'Gee, I don't know about the rest of you, but I think the system stinks.'"

Economics, properly construed, is inseparable from politics and culture. And it is here that Malveaux lives and breathes. Cornel West, for one, can't get enough of her smoldering discontent. In the foreword he wrote for Sex, Lies and Stereotypes, he dubs Malveaux, flat out, "the most provocative, progressive and iconoclastic public intellectual in the country."
The habit of raising hell

San Francisco was where it all began. There, in the ethnically mixed working-class neighborhood of Barnet Heights, Julianne Malveaux and her four younger siblings—Antoinette, Mariette, Marianne '78, and James—were raised in an atmosphere of high achievement and often bitter emotion. Their parents were divorced when Julianne was six years old, and a great deal of the responsibility for running the household fell on her shoulders. "It was never amicable," says her mother, Proteone, about the divorce, "and she bore the brunt of it, being the oldest."

After the divorce Malveaux's father, a high school math teacher, became a distant and unreliable figure, more feared than loved. "There were lots of times when we didn't speak to him," Marianne remembers. "And we used to hear, all the time, 'We can't do this because the child support check didn't come.'" More than once, Marianne says, he mailed her mom a certified letter, forcing her to leave work to go and sign for it. Ripped open, the envelope would contain a dollar bill.

Did watching the sad, acrimonious dissolution of her parents' marriage affect Julianne's opinion of black men? "Yep," answers Marianne. "Just like it did for all of us." Of the four Malveaux sisters, only Mariette has ever married—and she is now divorced. "You might say we're intolerant," Marianne says of herself and her sisters. "We don't take a lot of stuff from men."

They don't much need to. The Malveaux women are a brainy, self-sufficient bunch. All four earned college degrees, as did their brother; in addition, Antoinette and Marianne walked off with MBAs from the Wharton School. Julianne has a doctorate in economics from MIT (Proteone, employed as a government clerk at the time of the divorce, managed to earn a doctorate in social work). Julianne says the message that she heard growing up was "not 'How do you feel?' but 'What did you do?' We were expected to achieve. I never doubted for a minute that I would go to college and then go on to get a graduate degree."

A few snags stood in the way. Being a black teenager in the late 1960s was a dangerous business, from her mother's point of view. For a while, James and Julianne were secretly attending Black Panther meetings. When Proteone got wind of that, she followed her children to the meeting site, strode in and asked if she could join. So much for the Panthers. "They wanted to go to meetings," Proteone says of her children, "but they didn't want to go to meetings with their mom." The easy availability of drugs also worried Proteone.

Her solution was to pack off her eldest daughter to live with an aunt in Moss Point, Mississippi, a place Julianne recalls as "a lazy little racist two-block town." Wearing a blazing Afro hairdo and miniskirt, the new West Coast arrival wasted no time in setting people straight. When she overheard a white delivery boy refer to her aunt as Auntie May, Malveaux lit into him: "You call her Mrs. X. Don't go calling her Auntie May." Then Julianne upbraided her aunt: "You're 67 years old. Why do you let him talk to you that way?" The aunt drew Malveaux away from the door and told her, "Girl, when you leave out of here, I've still gotta deal with these people."

Her niece was just warming up. When the local newspaper used the term "negro" in a story, Julianne fired off a letter to the editor. "Everybody knows 'Negro' is spelled with a capital 'n'," she wrote, "and if you don't know it, you should look it up in the dictionary." The move won her celebrity among classmates in her all-black high school, but rubbed other people in town the wrong way. Some men in a pickup truck were waiting to teach Julianne a lesson after school one day, and only the timely intervention of a policeman saved her from violence.

Malveaux's headstrong manner was much more than adolescent rebellion.
On her mother's side of the family, the readiness to speak up on significant issues—or, more precisely, the inability not to—came deeply ingrained. Proteone's grandmother, a trim, steely woman with an eighth-grade education who worked as a maid in Mississippi, had a habit of showing up at City Hall to rail against the poll tax or whatever else struck her as unjust and indefensible. She was often accompanied by Proteone, who remembers, as a little girl, falling asleep amid the buzz of protest meetings, thereby absorbing, she suggests, the activist's itch through her skin.

Proteone grew up restless. She tried college at Xavier University in New Orleans, but was expelled for insubordination. "You go to Mass every day, you get little stars on your uniform—I mean, that's juvenile stuff," she snorts. Next stop: California. Like her grandmother, Proteone was prone to sounding off. Recently, Julianne's mom handed her a faded newspaper clipping, saying, "See, you're not the only one." In the photo sat Proteone, wearing a pillbox hat and testifying about the Social Security needs of divorced women before a commission in San Francisco in 1964.

After completing her junior year of high school in Mississippi, Julianne applied to Boston College, eager to experience city life up North. ("Plus, it was Jesuit," says Malveaux, "and that mattered to my mom.") She was going to have to skip her senior year; she lacked a high-school diploma; but that didn't stop her. That was a time on American campuses when black students capable of performing at a high academic level could pretty much write their own ticket, and there was Julianne: tough, smart, self-reliant and seemingly bound for the moon. She got in easily.

**Ground central**

On campus, Malveaux took charge. She assumed a leadership role in the administration of the Black Talent Program, the University effort (which lasted from 1968 to 1975, when it became part of the regular admission program) to promote greater minority recruitment and representation on campus. "Julianna was really one of the architects of the transformation [toward a multicultural student body] that Boston College went through in those days," says Jack Maguire, then dean of admissions.

According to Barry Bluestone, a professor of political economy at the University of Massachusetts who taught at BC from 1971 to 1987, Malveaux's passionate nature sent up showers of sparks in the classroom. "I remember her as one of the most intriguing and interesting students I had at BC," he says, "always trying to link the discussions we were having in economics to greater social problems. She was constantly raising issues—forcing us to think about real issues. I relished her sense of excitement."

Curiously, economics was not Malveaux's first choice of a major. She arrived on campus intending to study math, but found it too arid and solitary.

Economics, in contrast, dealt with the allocation of resources and involved all kinds of people. And Malveaux likes having lots of folks around. She tells the story of interviewing for her first post-doctoral slot at a university in the Midwest, in a city with a population of 300,000. She decided not to take the job. "Is it because there aren't enough people of color?" inquired the dean. "No," said Malveaux. "There aren't enough people."

By 1980 Malveaux was fully credentialed. She had earned her bachelor's degree magna cum laude, then added a master's in economics from BC and a doctorate from MIT (where she studied under Lester Thurow, focusing on the labor market and public policy and writing a dissertation entitled "Unemployment Differentials by Race and Occupation"). She had served successive stints as a member of the White House

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BOSTON COLLEGE MAGAZINE 43

**BALANCING ACT**—Among her many roles, Malveaux periodically acts as moderator in discussions broadcast from a TV studio in nearby Alexandria, Virginia. Today she doesn't hesitate to chide the best-known panelist, Harvard psychiatrist Alvin Poussaint (seated, third from left), by commenting, with typical Malveaux bluntness, "Oh, come on, now, Dr. Poussaint, you're not saying . . . ."
WORK, WORK, WORK—Malveaux doesn’t know the meaning of “take it easy.” She typically logs two hours on-air in the morning, then plans upcoming broadcasts before rushing off to a medley of other engagements. Today she will endure several hours under hot lights for a national video conference, then race back to the station to fine-tune the roster for tomorrow’s show—all before heading home to her computer and the two syndicated columns that must be written tonight.

Council of Economic Advisors (1977-78) and as a Rockefeller Foundation staffer (1978-80).

Doctorate in hand, Malveaux returned home to San Francisco, where she signed on as a visiting faculty member at the University of California at Berkeley. She soon began stirring things up in local politics.

Among the highlights: in 1984, Malveaux led the fight to get a referendum on the ballot requiring the city to divest itself of pension funds connected to South Africa. The referendum passed, and the city divested. Several years later, Malveaux leaned on the city to hire more African Americans. Side-by-side with Lulann McGriff, president of the San Francisco branch of the NAACP, Malveaux held a press conference, threatening to shut down the city if the percentages did not improve; together, the two women succeeded in winning commitments from the mayor. “She brought a consciousness-raising that had been lacking,” says McGriff admiringly. Malveaux’s constant agitating made her something of a local star. McGriff says the last time they ventured out together, “we couldn’t get through the crowd anywhere we went. Julianne had become a celebrity.”

Malveaux’s life in San Francisco during the ‘80s was, for her, a typical mad whirl of academic, political and organizational demands. She led an effort to keep city playgrounds open. She conducted research at Stanford. She ran for the Board of Supervisors (and lost). She served as president of the San Francisco Business and Professional Women’s Club, as well as the local Black Leadership Forum (Malveaux believes in participating fully in black organizations such as the Forum and the NAACP, saying that they offer a means for working inside as well as outside the existing power structures). She edited scholarly essays for Slipping Through the Cracks: The Status of Black Women, published in 1986. She wrote newspaper and magazine columns and spoke out frequently on radio and TV.

These days, Malveaux has all but abandoned academic life for the sake of a wider audience. Bluestone places her among the ranks of such respected and popular economic commentators as Robert Kuttner of The New Republic and Paul Solman of “The McNeil/Lehrer Newshour.” “The field of economics journalism has a limited number of participants,” notes Bluestone, “and Julianne is part of that new generation.”

Moving to Washington, D.C., began to make more and more sense. For starters, the District is ground central for American political debate. The city “has race issues, has urban-stress issues, with a schism between the haves and have-nots,” comments Michael Harrison, editor of a trade magazine devoted to radio talk shows across the country. “It’s a convoluted market, difficult to get a handle on. But nowhere in the nation is there more well-spoken diversity than there is in D.C.”

Washington is also on the East Coast, and—no slur on the California sun—that is where the culture concentrates its power. The big TV talk shows are either in the Washington vicinity or in New York. And convenience counts.
becoming the first major black radio talk-show host in the United States who isn’t conservative.

A talk show in a big Eastern city with name-brand policy-makers dropping in to chat, and the chance to boost the signal across the continent before long—that all adds up to valuable exposure, both for Julienne and the ideas that she hears and embodies.

What work is

Malveaux’s message comes down to a single, irreducible word: equity. “Her great interest,” notes Bluestone, “is how do we redress inequality? How do we use institutions to improve the well-being of those who are disadvantaged?” Julienne Malveaux adds a jolt of attitude: “Not only do you have rights, but you should demand that those rights be delivered and you should demand respect.”

“I’d call it a quest for truth, a quest for justice,” says Proteone of her daughter’s lifelong struggle. “It’s got to be someone crying out and saying, ‘Hey, this ain’t right.’”

Julienne Malveaux sounds that theme in a million different ways, through as many outlets as she can get to and will have her. Her regular diet of deadlines these days includes two columns weekly (one on economics, one on socio-political issues) for the King Features syndicate; a column for USA Today once a month; an appearance as a panelist on “To the Contrary” twice a month; and a column for Black Issues in Higher Education, an academic journal, once a month. Those are in addition to her daily radio show and steadily intensifying schedule of network TV talk-show appearances. Malveaux taped three of those in a single week in October.

“If you call the top TV producers, you’d find her name is at the front of their Rolodexes. She’s very much sought-after as a talk-show guest, to comment on a whole range of issues,” says Rochelle Lefkowitz, Malveaux’s publicist. The reason? Malveaux “is one of the few who can make economics understandable to a lay audience. She

Hitting “Donahue” when you’re living in San Francisco is a logistical back-breaker; when you’re based in D.C., it’s a bag of salted nuts and a soft drink away. The guest-list talent pool is also deeper along the Eastern corridor. During her first week on the air, Malveaux persuaded Jesse Jackson, Molly Ivins and Joyce Carol Oates—nationally known contenders in the worlds of politics, journalism and fiction—to join her in the studio.

People are listening to the results. According to station manager Christian, WPFW raised 40 percent more money this October than last; and the main difference is Malveaux. “People feel that she has sent out a different tone, that this station is seriously competitive now,” explains Christian. That “different tone” is absent from the national airwaves, Harrison says. He believes Malveaux has a clear shot at
won't talk about things with three syllables when she can use one. Whether you're talking about the savings-and-loan crisis, new tax proposals or the deficit, she can bring these issues down to a level where you and I can make heads or tails of them."

She is also thrilling to watch, regardless of topic. In early November, on a "Donahue" broadcast examining whether or not black men should be declared an endangered species (a group in Milwaukee was seriously pressing the point, claiming they should be given "pristine lands" on which to nourish themselves back to health, as provided for in the terms of the 1973 Endangered Species Act), Malveaux waited in the wings for 20 painfully long let's-humor-the-argument minutes. Her response, when it came, was devastating. "It bothers me immensely," she said when Donahue asked her to comment on the group's initiative. Malveaux began by linking the idea to the 19th-century eugenics movement and suggesting that this was a wrong and belittling direction for the African-American community to be moving in. Next, she popped the fantasy bubble by saying, "If the U.S. government is not gonna fund Head Start, they're certainly not gonna fund 'pristine lands.' Let's get real." The audience roared its approval.

The two black men in sweatshirts and ballcaps glanced down the row of chairs, not sure what had hit them. Malveaux raced on. She said, "Let's deconstruct that phrase 'endangered species,'" and did so astutely, pointing out the crippling passivity it contained. Finally, she shifted ground. "I sympathize with the brothers up here," she said, urging them toward political organizing and hard work in their home communities. (With her stress on individual responsibility, Malveaux shows traditional, even conservative, colors; all she wants is a fair shake for the strivers.)

"You can't do a whole unit on history and the only time you talk about black contributions is when you talk about slavery, with someone in the book who looks like an escapee from an Uncle Ben's Rice box."

"Later that month, on "To the Contrary," she once again dominated the proceedings. The show features five panelists—Karen DeWitt of the New York Times, Elaine Shannon of Time, Betsy Hart of the Scripps/Howard syndicate, moderator Bonnie Erbe and Malveaux—in a roundtable discussion of current events. The night's first topic was the GATT treaty, up for a vote in the U.S. Senate. Malveaux opposed it, arguing that the U.S. was "giving away too much." She added that she was mortified to be siding with Senator Jesse Helms on anything, saying, "I literally had to take to my bed and do the smelling salts routine." "We know you well enough to know you have never come close to fainting in your life, Julianne," said Erbe as the panel broke up laughing.

Malveaux was the show's center of gravity, the visage the camera kept circling back to. A grimace or a baleful roll of her eyes was sufficient to click the door on an empty argument. Malveaux used humor tellingly. Amid a discussion of religion in the schools, when Hart launched into a perky bit of Scripture-quoting to support her views, Malveaux looked like she didn't know what to say; but the camera stayed on her. "I'm sitting here stunned that Reverend Hart just laid her sermon on us," she finally stammered to general laughter.

During a discussion of the 40th anniversary of the decision in Brown v. Board of Education, Malveaux sat quietly while Erbe nattered on about Afrocentric curricula and their connection to Brown. Then Malveaux broke in abruptly. "That has nothing to do with Brown," she said. "Afrocentrism has to do with the fact that the textbook industry—and I underline the word industry; there are three major publishers of textbooks in the United States—has decidedly ignored aspects of American life and history. It's changing now. But you can't do a whole unit on history and the only time you talk about black contributions is when you talk about slavery, with someone in the book who looks like an escapee from an Uncle Ben's Rice box." She had the panel laughing again. "Stop it," she
muttered under her breath, looking pleased.

With its nuance, bite and quirky range, Malveaux's writing resembles her TV life. She is often surprising in her responses. A column about being harassed to buy Islamic newspapers by black men on the street stints on racial sympathy and ends by telling the men to get lost. "(Can someone explain the simple meaning of a two-letter word to these brothers? No means no, means get away, go away, I am not interested, forget it, not this time, back off. It does not mean follow me down the street.)"

A column concerned with recent findings that women consistently pay higher prices than men for their cars bluntly advises women to knock down and learn how to bargain better.

She's capable of hitting lofty notes. For a column on race relations, Malveaux writes poignantly: "The irony is that black folk have always wanted to believe that America would do them right. This belief is, perhaps, responsible for the muted nature of our struggles... Black folk have both chafed at racism and exclusion, and stood eagerly, like damsels deserted at a ball, hoping white America would come to its senses and ask for that one, affirming dance."

Work is the dirt floor that gets swept and swept again. "Hard work is something that is difficult to televise. But it's the backbone of our society," she argues in a Labor Day column. Malveaux's feeling for work, and workers, repeatedly lights up the page. "Usually we focus on slavery and the civil rights years, ignoring the century between them," she writes. "We rarely ask how we got over, from slavery to civil rights, what contributions, what quiet acts and efforts, made it possible for African Americans to survive.

"Who baked cakes and fried chicken to build hundreds of black churches? Who scrubbed clothes and gathered pennies to send black youngsters to college? Who worked as a porter and sent money home? Who sharecropped? Who organized trade unions, against all odds? Who took to the road to preach and teach about lynching? Who started banks and whose deposits sustained them? All of this is part of black America's untold story."

On the wall next to her computer at home, Malveaux keeps a small, black-and-white photograph of her great-grandmother Addie Hawkins, glaring out at the camera. "It hangs there to remind me what work is," says Malveaux. "Going down on your hands and knees and scrubbing floors is hard work. Having opinions and talking about economics is not. In 1940, 70 percent of all black women were maids, college-educated or not. They were maids so I don't have to be.

"Steeped in the past, and burning to see progressive measures rectify all manner of economic and social ills, Malveaux is out of step with the country's current political mood. She couldn't care less. She's in this fight for the long haul. Malveaux speaks for the largely invisible and inaudible American underclass—the 37 million people who were living in poverty in 1993—and for black people in particular, who claim a disproportionate share of the pain. They're not going away anytime soon.

"When we walk down the street, people come up to Julianne and say, 'You tell 'em!'" recounts Ramona Edelin, a Washington friend who is president of the National Urban Coalition.

It's not just bellhops and janitors who are cheering; it's black architects and doctors, too, who feel that Malveaux speaks for them. "People look at you and see the color of your skin, and they think you're not an achiever or you're stupid... You just get angry," says Marianne Malveaux. "Normally, when white America thinks of black anger, it thinks of low-income people," points out McGriff. "But this anger runs throughout the black community, among professional people, what have you. What I like about Julianne, she does not apologize for it. She's kept that anger and that fire."

Cornel West says the black community desperately needs to hear voices like hers. "What stood out most strikingly about Malcom X, Martin Luther

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Bruce Morgan is this magazine's associate editor.