

INSIDE RADIO

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“Personalities INSIDE RADIO”

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DARE TO READ ABOUT A WILD, WILD LIFE

by Mike Kinoshian, Special Features Editor

Paul Ryan took time from a busy schedule so he could chat, as did Jake Webster who contributed to the extremely cordial conversation.

Also offering unique insights were Duke Ramsey and Thomas Remington Sloane.

Anticipation that Jesse Hawkes, Pasquinel and Tooter Campbell would participate in this momentous get together were gratefully realized.

Some may find, when taken in totality, these names weave a common thread.

This slight charade becomes more transparent after considering this trio - Major “Pappy” Boyington, Tom Lopaka and (the clincher) James T. West.

Epic in the sitcom world was Bob Newhart’s CBS-TV longevity with “Newhart,” “The Bob Newhart Show” and even “Bob” and “George & Leo”.

Likewise with “Bonanza” (1959-1973), “Little House on the Prairie” (1974-1983) and “Highway To Heaven (1984-1989) the late Michael Landon carved out a durable television career.

Another person however deserving consideration in that esteemed company is CRN Digital Talk Radio host [Robert Conrad](#).

Granted there were some gaps, but beginning in October 1959 when he portrayed Tom Lopaka in ABC-TV’s “Hawaiian Eye” and extending to July 1995 as Tooter Campbell in the NBC adventure series “High Sierra Search & Rescue”, Conrad not only appeared in ten network TV shows (and one mini-series), he was billed as the lead in each.

One would be hard-pressed to argue his flawlessly over-the-top performance of agent James T. West in the September 1965-September 1970 CBS-TV classic “The Wild, Wild West” is his most familiar small-screen role.

That was followed in the early-1970s by “The D.A.” (Paul Ryan); spy drama “Assignment Vienna” (Jake Webster); war drama

“Baa Baa Black Sheep” (Major “Pappy” Boyington); 1978-1980 historical drama “Centennial” (Pasquinel); detective drama “The Duke” (“Duke” Ramsey); “A Man Called Sloane” (Thomas Remington Sloane); “High Mountain Rangers” (Jesse Hawkes); and a continuation of the Hawkes character in 1989’s aptly-titled “Jesse Hawkes.”

Six of Conrad’s shows were on NBC-TV; three on CBS-TV; and two aired on ABC-TV.

In No Rush To Talk Politics

As CRN Digital Talk Radio CEO Mike Horn was looking to add a program on his already vast lineup, he floated the idea past actor Larry Manetti who declined but suggested Conrad. “Radio works for me,” succinctly states Conrad who collaborated with Manetti on Baa Baa Black Sheep as well as The Duke. “It is fun and I like it. My stepfather, Eddie Hubbard, was a big time [Chicago air personality].”

That’s not prejudiced hype on Conrad’s part since Hubbard co-hosted (with Jack Brickhouse) a WGN talk show and did morning drive on the heritage facility prior to Wally Phillips’ arrival.

Retired from acting for the last ten years, Conrad spent roughly four decades on television back-lots and studios. It was undoubtedly enjoyable but as he matter-of-factly remarks, “I’d had it. I managed to do the roles I wanted and to achieve some of the stuff I wanted.”

Well into his second year with the CRN venture which airs Thursdays, Conrad welcomes Geico as a full 60-minute sponsor. “We needed an extra hour because we couldn’t get the [show] working in just a one-hour situation,” he comments. “The format is simply called ‘entertainment’ - that’s what the show is. I’ll never be on 600 stations like Rush Limbaugh. We don’t talk about politics - I don’t want to. We talk to a celebrity for one or two segments, which is about eight to 15 minutes. Our fans write us funny emails and we take phone calls.”

Frequently mentioned in correspondence Conrad receives is that his show represents an escape. “Radio has become so political and so redundant,” he opines. “I loved Rush years ago but when I listen

to him now, it's the same old-same old. Everyone is trying to do Rush. I love radio and I love air personalities. I'm not a Howard Stern fan but I understand his popularity. The last part of my career I had a company that made [television movies of the week] and I had a driver who was a big Stern fan. When we were in the car, I 'let' him listen to Stern's show. It's different."

Quite forthcoming in the fact he has no idea where the radio program will lead him Conrad nevertheless enthusiastically declares his immense enjoyment of it. "As long as we stay true to [being entertaining], I'm in. I always like to break into the song, 'That's Entertainment.' I had a great interview with Ed McMahon, who had a wonderful career as a Marine. He was a war hero. We received many emails thanking me for introducing them to the Ed McMahon they never knew."

Reaction in general has been very humbling. "People are kind," states Conrad who turned 74 four weeks ago (3-1). "We have callers from all over the world, which is something I really like about the show. People I haven't seen in 20 or 30 years phone in. My payday isn't [as] generous [as it was in television but] I'm doing [this program] for fun. I'm a fan of the people I get to talk to like Richard Chamberlain. No one has turned down a request to do the show. I relate to the fans – the listeners. Some people call in every week. They become regulars. The show is about 'us.'"

Rebel Just Because

Part of Conrad's rough upbringing includes being raised primarily by his single parent mother who was only 15 years his senior. "I didn't hookup with my dad until I was 15," explains the athletic Conrad who got interested in boxing when he was just six. "I thought I wanted to be a professional [boxer] but lost interest. I liked soul music and would listen to jazz."

By the time Conrad was 19, he was singing in clubs with the Paris Trio and notes, "They were exceptional musicians and wound up teaching later in their lives. We played a club near Northwestern University and our audience consisted mostly of students. I wanted to pursue a singing career but [Elvis Presley] came along and music changed. I wasn't a rock and roller - I was [a bit] like Andy Williams with a little more soul and jazz."

Weekend singing jobs presented a stark contrast to Conrad's day job as a dock worker but he was able to become acquainted with actor Nick Adams who brought "The Rebel" Johnny Yuma to life in the early-1960s western. "He said if I ever got to Hollywood, I should look him up," Conrad points out. "His father was a janitor and his mother was a maid and he told me they needed 'real people' in Hollywood. My grandfather was a butcher and my grandmother worked on a switchboard [so I knew what he meant]."

After being flown out to Hollywood to be an extra in a film and trying (unsuccessfully) to find acting work in New York, Conrad bought a first-class, one-way American Airlines ticket to Los Angeles. "I dropped a dime in the phone booth and called Nick Adams' exchange," he recounts. "We met at Schwab's Drugstore [and later had pizza at a popular San Fernando Valley eatery]. That was really the beginning of our friendship. In September 1957, Nick got me into the Screen Actors Guild. [Adams] introduced me to the producers of a movie ['Juvenile Jungle'] he was supposed to star in. He got a better offer and they hired me. I also read for a part in 'Thundering Jets' and haven't stopped working since."

Often compared to "77 Sunset Strip" (understandable for the show's nature and because both were Warner Brothers-produced), "Hawaiian Eye" was Conrad's first television series. "It was shot in Hawaii and I learned to surf," he remarks. "Connie Stevens [unforgettable in the Cricket Blake role] became one of my dearest friends. The cast was a lot of fun – it was a good time."

That particular detective series had its last airing in September 1963.

No Ill Will

Practically two years to the day later, Conrad surfaced as James T. West on one of television's greatest cult shows, CBS' "The Wild, Wild West," a program he never watched during its original run. "We worked Friday nights to finish shows," he explains. "I got glimpses of it and [didn't even watch reruns until recently]."

When he was working on it though, Conrad realized the 60-minute program (which featured Ross Martin as Artemus Gordon) was different and had an edge to it. "We debuted [Friday nights at

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7:30pm] with a 44-share; I knew it was unique. It wasn't a 'western' and we had wonderful guests. It was a great experience which I didn't take for granted. I appreciate it for what it was. This is a tough, tough business. There aren't that many roles and you have to deal with [considerable] rejection. I was lucky but I know so many people who've tried it and [their careers] never got going."

Actors generally dread receiving the news their show has been yanked from a network's schedule.

Five years into *The Wild, Wild West*'s run, Conrad was participating at a Rochester (NY) charity event when CBS-TV's President called him. "He told me the show was being canceled because of violence," recalls an actually relieved Conrad. "We were getting injured big-time. I was afraid someone was going to get carted out [with permanent damage]."

Approximately ten years ago, director Barry Sonnenfeld and producer Jon Peters resuscitated "The Wild, Wild West" with Will Smith fronting the film in the Jim West role. "Will Smith had as much right [playing James T. West] as I do playing Martin Luther King," Conrad declares. "What kind of casting was that? I told that to Will when I ran into him coming out of a restaurant. He said he was doing his interpretation of [the character which made Conrad famous on the small screen]. One group named it the worst movie of the year and I was asked to accept the [Razzies] award [in 2000] and I said absolutely."

Neither "The Wild, Wild West" nor Conrad's first television series ("Hawaiian Eye") however qualify as his personal favorite pick. "It was Centennial," he unequivocally states. "I went from being 35 to 65 and was in one of the first 38-hour [mini-series]. About my acting, I said to myself I could do this. I had to do a French-Canadian accent and was told it was right on. Reviews were excellent so I was thrilled. Sally Kellerman played one of my wives; it was a great cast."

Personal Assault & Battery

Labels often associated with Conrad include "tough guy" or "macho" although he maintains, "I don't know what that means. All I know is [that's what some people call me]."

That image was only exacerbated when, in a famous commercial, he placed an Eveready battery on his shoulder and challenged anyone to call it regular. "It played for three years and was even in the Super Bowl," Conrad proudly points out. "I'm an 'A'-type personality and coached a football team to an undefeated season. I never played soccer but coached an undefeated soccer team. Some people might call me brazen [but] that's not who I am. I believe in what I do and what I say."

Nineteen years ago Conrad's family took the actor – then making a movie in Bear Valley where he lived for 25 years - to a dinner party

commemorating his 55th birthday. "My daughter was dancing with [an African-American] cast member," he recounts. "Someone made a remark to the two of them and they stopped dancing. I went over to ask what happened. The person told them that white women don't dance with [the 'n-word' racial slur]." Injudiciously the individual then told Conrad that Hollywood actors living in Bear Valley were a derogative term for homosexuals but Conrad assured the person he was an actor who lived there yet wasn't gay. "He said I must be [gay] and that was his last moment of consciousness," Conrad deadpans. "When I hit him, I knocked him onto a kitchen sign [that read] 'Specials of the Day.' My two sons were in the film and were there that night. They said the guy [I just decked] was picking on them. I knocked him out again. That's who I am."

Battle-Tested

It was obvious to anyone who ever watched Conrad participate in ABC-TV's "Battle of the Network Stars" he wasn't on the program as a lark. "I took it seriously because the reward for winning was \$10,000 – that was a lot of money," he remarks. "['Battle' commentator] Howard Cosell would come into my dressing room and prevail on my liquor cabinet but that was fine because I loved him. There was a competitive spirit on that show. I saw Farrah [Fawcett] racing against another beautiful woman in a bicycle competition at Pepperdine. I knew the seriousness of a fall on that hard [surface] but there they were."

Currently undergoing a legal separation, Conrad acknowledges, "It's brutal. My [radio] audience never ever refers to it. Subtly, they say I'm having some difficult times and I'm in their prayers. They're sensitive to what's happening to me. That's the kind of audience who has found this show. If it grows into something successful, I'll be very happy. Whether or not I'm the host, radio needs this kind of [program]."

Should the weekly broadcast however run its course anytime soon, Conrad would probably embark on a trip to France and/or Costa Rica. "I'm a very family-oriented guy," he states. "I like hanging out with my brothers and [enjoy] going to soccer games with my grandchildren. I've had a full run and I enjoy life. I don't think I have to be on a soundstage until the day I die."



WHO: Robert Conrad
WHAT: "The Robert Conrad Show"
WHERE: CRN Digital Talk Radio
HOW LONG: Thursdays 4-6pm

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