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INSIDE RADIO

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“Personalities INSIDE RADIO”

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HORN OF PLENTY

by Mike Kinoshian, Special Features Editor

A long-ago joke was that television was simply radio with pictures. Perhaps some transmutation of that imagery triggered the Cable Radio Network to not only come to fruition but to thrive. Besides producing its own shows, CRN partners with other broadcasters seeking cable coverage and syndicates programs to terrestrial broadcast radio. With six different networks, dynamo **Mike Horn**'s 1983-founded entity has approximately 100 different hosts and offerings.

In Search Of Elusive Females

It was while working at KFI/Los Angeles approximately 30 years ago when Horn noticed a trade publication article that mentioned Los Angeles rocker KMET showed up with a seven-share in the Phoenix book. “KMET was the audio [on Channel 3] of a local cable system there,” he recounts. “I thought what everyone else did – no one would listen to radio on television. I always wanted to own radio stations but considered [this as a viable alternative].”

Discussions with an executive of King Cable in Los Angeles’ San Fernando Valley led Horn to program a Country music channel. “From the first day we put it on, we began getting phone calls for song requests,” he points out. “We later changed it to Oldies to make it more mass appeal. Valley Cable and Falcon Cable both wanted it.”

Hookups were done by phone lines which became rather expensive so Horn switched to satellite. “I basically put my own money into it as an entrepreneur and continued to make it grow,” he states. “I wondered what we could put on that no radio station would air [so] I found Dick Sinclair to do a polka show. To this date, the response we get from that program is still huge.”

Different offerings found a home on CRN, however when noncommercial music formats done by companies such as Digital Planet and DMX began surfacing, Horn decided to switch to Talk rather than compete against them.

Inescapable is the topic of ratings so Horn commissioned a company that worked with Arbitron to put together a survey. “It became a great learning experience,” reflects Horn who ascertained CRN shared similar-size audience as MSNBC, Cinemax and Fox Sports.

“We took those results to agencies for sales [but] it didn’t necessarily help us because they are television numbers compared to radio numbers. It did help [however] in determining what we have.”

With demos akin to that of a typical Talk radio outlet CRN’s audience leans decidedly male; therefore Horn is constantly on the prowl for female-skewing programming. “We try to develop shows that will increase our numbers where we’re weak,” he reasons. “The challenge is to find more shows that get a 60% female/40% male audience which opens us up to a lot more advertising revenue.”

Country Connection

Native Angelino Horn’s childhood years found him enthralled with his mother’s radio preference – KMPC - which boasted such stellar on-air talents as Gary Owens, Dick Whittinghill, Roger Carroll and Johnny Grant. “I wanted to build a radio station at my high school but never was able to get that going,” Horn laments. “When I was [thinking about colleges] I noticed UCLA’s radio station only had 10 watts but Cal State – Northridge’s campus station was [30 times greater]. You could actually hear it on FM. I thought that’s where I wanted to go and I became a [CSUN] Radio, TV & Film major.”

That’s also the setting where Horn developed his country music interest. In the early-1970s he had his own program on Cal State – Northridge’s campus outlet and went to record labels hoping to receive product.

Instead of country music though, he was handed 45s of rock and contemporary artists. “[KBBQ-AM/Burbank’s] Corky Mayberry gave me all the songs from the survey each week after he was done playing them,” Horn recalls. “My show began sounding great and I thought I needed to do interviews. Country music is the way to break in because [artists in that format] are the nicest in the world. [Management at North Hollywood’s] Palomino Club let me hang out in the back room and I got to talk with [artists like] Johnny Cash, Doug Kershaw, Loretta Lynn and Bobby Bare. I’d cut up the interviews and [intersperse] their music.”

Following its sale, KBBQ-AM became KROQ but as Horn points out, it wasn’t the CBS Radio Alternative FM we know it as today. “It had great personalities like Charlie Tuna and Sam Riddle. I

became the all-night news editor on KROQ's original staff but the station began having financial problems and I was the first one to be let go. I went to KFOX/Long Beach and KUDU/Oxnard-Ventura before being able to get work [at Los Angeles stations KLAC, KFI and KRLA]. If you knew people you could always get something going."

Although it was his preference to remain in Southern California Horn reluctantly agreed to be flown out to interview for a WITS/Boston programming job. "Mustiness of the apartments smelled like my uncle's basement in Illinois," he vividly recounts. "The main thought I had was, if I became unemployed [in Boston], I didn't know anyone there."

All his contacts were in Los Angeles. "I'm a big baseball fan and [Mariner Communications-owned WITS was then the Boston Red Sox flagship] and the company also owned [Cincinnati Reds flagship WLW, now a Clear Channel property]," Horn recounts. "I loved being considered [for the programming jobs] but turned them down. I stayed in Los Angeles and continued working on my own business. Had I not been married though, I might have rolled the dice."

It was Horn's intention to keep working in radio and have CRN as his side business. "In my mind, owning a business was secure," he opines. "When you're trying to sell something though, everyone becomes a program director and tells you how to change it. You never get away from having people tell you what they think you should be doing."

Attractive Model

Something however did get modified: The Cable Radio Network moniker was transformed to CRN Digital Talk Radio. "No one could ever seem to get the concept," acknowledges Horn who welcomed the arrival of satcasters Sirius and XM. "I'd say we were just like they are except we're heard on cable television and satellite television. People understood that."

Distribution is significant but programming is even more essential for Horn. "A diehard Rush Limbaugh or Howard Stern listener will

find [those talents] on radio, their iPod or through a coffeepot," jokes Horn who befriended KABC/Los Angeles Program Director David G. Hall. "Ten or 15 years ago, [Hall] said there were no secondary markets. He asked me to put several people on to see what kind of audience they would get. We have people in major markets who want to be carried on cable and new people coming up who are interested in getting in radio. Sirius and XM were the catalyst to get people to understand what we are. We now want to be everywhere."

Once a show concept is developed Horn brainstorms possible hosts. Conversely though, there are other instances when someone approaches him with an idea and he'll attempt to make it work. "If we do our own show, we know how we're going to sell it," Horn explains. "It doesn't matter if it's one advertiser - we know we're going to make [at least] a dollar more than we're spending. If someone has a great idea and wants to sell his own inventory, they can do that. Sales and programming go hand in hand with us."

Despite horrendous numbers elsewhere in the industry business at CRN Digital Talk Radio is in Horn's words, "surprisingly good," a fact attributable to the company's business model. "We've always found partners to work with," he emphasizes. "If someone packs it in, we can go to the well and find new people. We give advertisers more than they can get anywhere else. When they spend a dollar with us, [their message] is heard in [numerous] different directions. That's why we've partnered with so many great broadcasters."

Part of the package now includes placing some programs on terrestrial radio since it puts CRN in a game it heretofore hadn't played in. "Shows are pre-sold with [incoming] revenue," Horn points out. "Listeners have to hear a show and the advertiser has to get results. Our advertising has always been more direct-response. If you think it through, it sells itself. It [requires] more work in this economy but you can't get scared - you have to move ahead."

Parking Place

Approximately 20 staffers are employed in CRN's Crescenta Valley headquarters (adjacent to the San Fernando Valley) and Horn concedes there had been a push to relocate to a glitzier spot

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in Burbank's Media Center. "We backed out because everyone does their show from home," he notes. "You want someone new to broadcasting to come into the studio and get the feel of it but for people like Mike Reagan who've been around, they can do the show from wherever they want."

Among the organization's bright beacons is conscientious Vice President of Sales & Marketing Jennifer Horn (Mike's daughter) who markets programming to cable systems, DirecTV, Dish Network, Sirius XM and wherever else CRN can locate shows. "My middle name is ancillary revenue," Mike Horn proclaims. "CRN survived that way. It's a Monopoly game and I've always been on the Baltic [Avenue], Mediterranean [Avenue], Vermont [Avenue] and Oriental [Avenue] side of the board. I build my hotels step-by-step. I've never been Park Place or [Boardwalk although] I'm not saying I can't be at some point. In this economy, you're moving around the board to get back to Park Place. If you get a monopoly on that side, you'll make more money than the guy with two Park Place spaces."

Today's on-air talent pool includes fresh voices not being afforded much of a chance and older personalities who unfortunately are also getting shunned.

Picture-perfect representation of the latter is the late Ed McMahon, whose pure passion was having a microphone in front of him. "He would just shine that way," Horn insists of McMahon whose radio show aired on CRN. "As we get older, we still want to do vibrant things. [Nowhere does it say] when you get to be 55, 65, or 75 [or older] you have to stop what you're doing. Until the last six months of his life when he had to give up the microphone, George Putnam remained sharp and never embarrassed himself on the air."

Two weeks before passing away last September, the 94-year-old Putnam summoned up the energy to make a final CRN appearance and Horn stresses, "He sounded like he always did. He turned it on and pumped it out. That show was his outlet and what he loved. I wonder how long he would've lived if he didn't have it. There's just a ton of quality radio people no one in radio will talk to these days because they think they're archaic. These guys however have a lot to say. So many people can turn a certain way and they have to be given a chance to re-invent themselves."

As soon as Rick Dees exited Clear Channel/Los Angeles CHR "Kiss-FM" (KIIS), Horn contacted the legendary morning man to have him cut a demo. "You'd be spellbound for 15 minutes listening to the story he was telling," Horn comments of the wakeup talent on Emmis/Los Angeles' now defunct "Movin' 93.9" - KMVN. "Rick's a great host and personality who goes for the one-liner [but] he's [also] an incredible storyteller. I had a network ready to

go to pop that show but he felt more comfortable with [a music-intensive program]."

No Pitfalls Optimist

Had he not wound up in radio, sports nut Horn would love to have been a Los Angeles Dodgers outfielder but he's now on a quest to locate the ultimate sports talk show host. "It's so difficult to do," he maintains. "Sports is weird because everyone loves their local team [but] I don't know how national it is."

Now that CRN has evolved to high-definition audio on cable television, listeners are able to integrate the outlet through a DVR. "We're actively working to get some static video," Horn points out. "As a show is being watched there would also be something on the screen. We've expanded our channels and [KFI/Los Angeles PD] Robin Bertolucci allowed us to use [the feed of KFI morning talent] Bill Handel. Robin's one of the great programmers - she gets it. She immediately understood CRN could [increase] her KFI audience and the station would be heard in more places. Usually the ones who immediately understand it are the most successful ones in the business. Others are scared you are going to take something away."

Continuing to host several of his own CRN programs Horn proudly states, "When I turn on that microphone switch, I have a responsibility because I'm communicating with someone out there. We may not agree on political [issues] but we can exchange ideas. Howard Stern is great because he thinks things through - Stern wannabes don't. It was a genius move to bring Howard to satellite radio but I think he'll return to [terrestrial radio]."

Wish lists are endless for Horn who admits to being a dreamer and salivates at the notion of having Brad Pitt or George Clooney do a radio show for him. "These guys are hot now but there's going to come a time when they'll have a lot to say [and have time on their hands]. Mancow and Phil Hendrie are incredible talents. Money will come if you do something of value. You can do something of value if you don't think about the money. We're taking money from our positive cash flow and throwing it right back into other shows; hiring more people; getting new equipment; and coming up with new ways of doing things."



WHO: Mike Horn
WHAT: Founder/CEO
WHERE: CRN Digital Talk Radio
WHEN: Since 1983