

INSIDE RADIO®

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“Personalities INSIDE RADIO”

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CHARLES IN CHARGE SOUNDS AGREEABLE ACCORD

by Mike Kinoshian, Personality Editor

Mightiest of masterful humorists Johnny Carson and David Letterman have (and in the latter case, of course, continues to) famously, cleverly and adroitly plied (ply) their craft through sagacious utilization of a witty sounding board.

Superior comedic and timing skills possessed by these late-night talk behemoths wouldn't have completely vanished without the presence of Ed McMahon (Carson) and Paul Shaffer (Letterman); however their “sidekick,” “second-banana” - or whatever particular label you feel comfortable affixing - deftly enabled to make the star shine even brighter.

Additional AM Duties

History will be the ultimate judge.

It is however unfathomable at this juncture to imagine any serious conjecture that Don Imus has positively affected the manner in which morning drive personalities approach their profession and that his position in the elite class of all-time on-air greats is secure. Writer/newsman and some would correctly state Imus' right-hand man **Charles McCord** has been with the “I-Man” for well over 30 years.

Two weeks ago (11-24-2008), remarkably affable McCord began fronting an ideal lead-in to the Imus extravaganza, the “Imus in the Morning News Hour” (5-6am) on flagship Citadel Talk WABC-AM/New York. “I thought it went smoothly the first day but didn't know how smoother it could be until the second,” he playfully remarks. “You put a clock together with the segments and it's just [a matter of] hitting all the points. It's been so many years since I tried [assembling] an hour of all news but it's fun.”

Something that probably doesn't convey much personal enjoyment though involves the harsh reality McCord's wakeup routine is pushed back to 2:30am. “It's a biological affront,” he declares in mock dispute. “We are diurnal and set our circadian clocks to dawn and dusk. I've done morning drive so long I guess I've become acclimated to it [but] I wouldn't describe myself as a morning person. If there's any attribute to working morning drive, it's you can go into a big metropolitan situation like New York City before the traffic starts and get out before afternoon rush hour. When I have the opportunity, I stay up late and watch ‘Saturday Night Live.’ I believe I constantly I operate in some degree of fatigue.”

Unique Kick Start To A Career

Paramount among objectives McCord's father had was to keep his undirected son out of Springfield, MO pool halls. “I didn't sufficiently apply myself,” Charles confesses. “God bless him, my father knew a fellow who had one-third ownership in a little radio station [Springfield's 1,000-watt KICK]. He appealed to him to find something for his knucklehead son [me] to do.”

It was therefore pure, “absolute serendipity” that McCord landed in radio even if it meant his initial duties were relegated to re-writing PSAs and ad copy. “I didn't have any expertise or formal training but I've always had kind of a flair for writing so I guess I was okay,” he downplays. “There was a funky, little newsroom that looked like an elongated bathroom. Inside was the old clackity-clack teletype machine. You had to put on a pair of white gloves to change the purple ribbons.”

Barely a week elapsed in his KICK employment when McCord heard bells emanating from the imposing wire service machine. “I wasn't the newsperson but wondered what [all that noise could mean],” he vividly recounts. “I went over to look and won't forget it for as long as I live. It said, ‘Flash – shots have been fired at the presidential motorcade in Dallas.’ I took the copy to the General Manager [who was] only a few doors down the hall. If you can imagine, that was my indoctrination to radio news.”

Our nation stood still that November 1963 weekend as we attempted to catch our collective breath.

Former Boston Archbishop Richard (Cardinal) Cushing was a close Kennedy Family friend and composed a eulogy for the slain President. “It caught the fancy of our General Manager and he asked me to read it on the air,” McCord recounts. “That was the first time I ever was [behind a microphone].”

An appointment as KICK's newsperson was McCord's reward and an actual news department was established. “There was a 50,000-watt station in town, KWTO, which stood for ‘Keep Watching The Ozarks’ and I was contacted to become its newsman,” he notes. “KWTO reached into Dallas-Ft. Worth and I [later] got a call to join WFAA's news department. It was a really weird symmetry because, at the time, WFAA [then owned by the Dallas Morning News, now Cumulus' KLIF] was located at Dealey Plaza – literally a stone's throw from the Dallas Book Depository Building.”

On Top Of The World

Two other news jobs would follow before McCord was invited to become part of the team at WTOP/Washington's soon-to-launch all-News format. "I took the place of someone who went to Vietnam and was told I'd probably be out of a job when that person came back," he points out. "They did not however get rid of me [when he returned]. It was an interesting time to be in Washington. I covered all sorts of stuff there [including] anti-war protests and the Poor People's march."

When WNBC came calling in 1970, it wasn't a slam dunk McCord would leave for the Big Apple, as the newsman confides he endured consternation and self-debate before ultimately accepting the offer. "This goofy person from Cleveland, John Donald Imus, arrived [approximately one year later]," recounts McCord, who fielded and accepted a string of radio job offers leading to the NBC flagship. "I swear it was a series of lucky [breaks] and good fortune that happened over the years. I've never really had to apply for a job which is very weird. I don't think that could happen in the current environment. To this day, I absolutely love and adore the business."

From the very outset and with no prior history with the gifted morning talent, McCord found Imus to be extraordinary and obviously quite funny. "He did unusual and outrageous things but wasn't scatological," McCord explains. "I'd write some offbeat items for him and, as I look back on it, they were really goofy and dumb. Nevertheless, he wanted more of that kind of thing. From those humble beginnings, we've wound up working together for a long time."

In comparison to the program's nascent days, more cast members presently contribute content with McCord proudly being the longest-tenured. "I would wear the term 'sidekick' as a badge of honor when you're talking about this guy," he proclaims. "When you think about it, he is one of the most important and [impactful] broadcasters. It is very interesting to watch his evolution. Don's gone from a supposedly outrageous [on-air talent] to what he has become today, which is a very important and influential figure on the national scene. You don't have much of a political campaign unless it goes through Don Imus' front door. It sounds crazy but he really is a figure to be reckoned with for anyone with high political aspirations."

Amiable chemistry notwithstanding, there have been feisty on-air exchanges between "The I-Man" and McCord.

Among the most memorable occurred approximately two years ago when McCord could no longer stand Imus' deliberate substitution of the word "erection" for "election" and exhibited a mini-meltdown although he insists, "I really can't think of anything that would represent a fracture in our relationship. There hasn't been anything like that. The whole thing is first, foremost and always entertainment. That has to be the guiding principle."

Supreme Slipup

Writing political/satirical commentary has given him more of an outlet. At the same time though, McCord remarks, "I can preserve whatever journalistic integrity I might have. People can take me seriously even when I'm wacky with him. I provide the voice of reason and pull him back. It's all calculated but most of the time, I can bring him in before he goes out on the brink."

Operative words here are "most of the time," since that certainly was not what eventuated on April 4, 2007.

Disappointingly it couldn't be attributed to a tardy April Fool's Day bit that turned sour.

Faster than one could say "That's right, I need 1200 hamburgers to go," or, "This is the right reverend Billie Sol Hargis coming to you from Del Rio, Texas," certain words flew from Imus' mouth he still must live with.

As Diana Ross, Mary Wilson & Florence Ballard so perfectly warbled in 1967, "Suddenly – it just happened" and McCord admits when Imus uttered his now infamous statements about some members of the Rutgers University women's basketball squad, "We got into an area we couldn't correct. It didn't strike me at the time as something that was going to be as profound as it turned out to be. We've goofed on many different people. At that very moment, it didn't feel to be any different."

It's the height of understatement to mention that assessment didn't prove accurate since Imus was stripped of his CBS Radio deal with WFAN/New York and syndication through Westwood

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One as well as the show's MSNBC simulcast. "The offending passage was just nine seconds," recounts McCord, still in disbelief. "The thing that disturbed me is I know this guy so well. I know his head and I know his heart. It bugged me this unbelievable and historic broadcasting career was being judged on nine seconds of what he has said, time and again, was wrong. Don has apologized for it and said there was no justification for [his on-air remarks]. He has repeatedly emphasized the girls didn't deserve it and weren't there to defend themselves."

Relevance-Charged Return

Those believing Imus had written his own professional obituary were most likely stunned when "Imus in the Morning" was resurrected one year ago (12-3-2007) through Citadel's ABC Radio Networks in what McCord maintains is a far better program. "It's more sensitive without having the humor damaged. We obviously needed to have our awareness raised. Don is now actually on more radio stations than before the 'unpleasantness.' We're very pleased with the way we were able to come back with a more relevant show. We can explore areas and have some conversations we weren't [previously] having and probably couldn't have had. People who swore after everything went down they would have these conversations [haven't followed through]. Don said he would; he has; and will continue to do so."

Frequent guests have included Harvard University Divinity School preacher/theologian (Reverend) Peter Gomes, comedian/activist Dick Gregory and SUNY-Albany Journalism professor Deborah Dickerson. "Dick Gregory is a genius and has been such a delight on the program," McCord states. "He's in his 70s and hasn't lost anything off his fastball. With Barack Obama's ascension to the White House, it couldn't be a better time to deal with this sort of thing. It's all been good."

Despite having worked simultaneously for the same company twice in their careers (first at WNBC and later for CBS Radio), it's probably a safe bet Don Imus and Howard Stern aren't requesting to be each other's Linked-In or Plaxo partners.

Surprising - if not diplomatically though - McCord opines, "I don't think there's been that much of an honest-to-God animosity between this program and that one. I know Howard remains a very important person in [radio's] overall scheme of things. It just seems like when he went to satellite, and I certainly don't want to be unfair about this, he doesn't have the [same] currency. I really don't know but it looks like people who go [from terrestrial radio] to satellite lose their high profile. Don and I just adore Opie & Anthony. There couldn't be two better people in my estimation and I know 'The I-Man' [feels the same way] about these guys."

Monumental Impact

Endeavors to remain current with news and pop culture can run the risk of making one crazy but McCord puts forth herculean effort every day, especially now with the added news hour. "It sounds stupid but, in a way, I'm always working on this pro-

gram," the avid pianist comments. "I'm either writing for it or investing time [doing research] as everything has become so stinking complicated. We're doing cram courses on things like credit default swaps and [other areas] we never [dreamt] we'd need to know. We're trying to figure it out yet [Treasury Secretary Henry] Paulson and [former Treasury Secretary under Bill Clinton Robert] Rubin don't even know what the hell has happened. Everything is being done on-the-fly."

Professionally and personally McCord clearly relishes his more than three-decade association with the outrageously talented Imus. "[Whose names come to mind] when you think of the top three [radio] figures in the country? Howard [Stern], Rush [Limbaugh] and Don Imus. There are many other wonderful people who are very important but, had it not been for Don Imus, how would some of these others even occurred? I don't want to make it sound like he should be on Mt. Rushmore but, as far as radio goes, he is. All these people stand on his shoulders."

For several years, New York University (NYU) students were uniquely fortunate to have McCord as a broadcast writing instructor. "That was fun and I might like to do more of it down a road," he ponders. "I love kicking back in my bass boat at my stupid little lake house in Northwest Arkansas, which is a gorgeous part of the country. When it's time to retire, I might go back to doing news at a little radio station in Harrison, AR. I'm nothing more than a hillbilly from the Ozarks and I'm desperately proud of that. I just started wearing shoes a couple of months ago and they're still uncomfortable."



WHO: Charles McCord

WHAT: "Imus in the Morning"

WHERE: ABC Radio Networks

Also, since 11-24-2008, "Imus in the Morning News Hour" (5-6am) on Citadel Talk WABC-AM/New York

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