

INSIDE RADIO®

Monday, July 6, 2009

“Personalities INSIDE RADIO”

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TODD'S TAMPA TAKEOVER

by Mike Kinoshian, Special Features Editor

Instances of music radio air talents doing a live local show and then voice-tracking one for syndication are on the rise, with Ryan Seacrest and Elvis Duran naturally springing to mind as rapid representations.

Several personalities in the Talk realm (including Lars Larson, Thom Hartmann and Michael Smerconish) do a local program and turn around to host a completely fresh national broadcast.

Auspicious Alumni

Another unique and exemplary situation can be found in Tampa where [Todd Schnitt](#) does a daily 3-6pm program on Clear Channel Talk WFLA **after** he's done morning drive (6-10am, as “MJ Kelli”) for CHR sibling WFLZ. “If you manage things properly, it's not an issue,” maintains Schnitt whose core beliefs remain consistent from show to show and station to station. “My fundamentals and ideologies are rock solid. The content does change but my personality and delivery are the same. It's just different content for different audiences.”

Curiosity in the medium for Schnitt - who uses his real name on WFLA - dates back to the early-1970s and more specifically to WABC/New York. “My earliest memory was listening in 1971 [when I was five years old],” he precisely recalls. “That's when I started having a [cognitive] feeling toward radio. I'd bring my small mustard-colored, RCA transistor radio to school. I wanted to know how records `faded' and how radio's other mechanics worked.”

Moreover by the time very avid radio listener Schnitt was seven years old, he knew he wanted a career in the medium.

Four years later, his family relocated from the greater New York City metropolitan area to Norfolk but the move didn't dampen Schnitt's radio interest. “I began listening to FM stations,” he explains. “[At the same time though], I also listened to a lot of Talk radio [so] my roots to [that part of the business] go back to my very early-teens.”

At a time when his high school friends were getting their first jobs bagging groceries, Schnitt's initial work experience, at age 16, was doing weekend shifts at AM day-timer WCPK. “The station was owned by Charlie Payne who, in the early-1960s, was WINS/New York's General Manager,” Schnitt points out. “I was [at WCPK] for about a year and got a board-op job in 1983 at Norfolk's Talk station [WNIS].”

Weekend overnights followed at WNVZ and in the fall of 1984, Schnitt went to Ithaca College, later securing a job at WVBR, Cornell's student-run, commercial radio station. “I had some pretty good radio experience at that point,” he remarks. “[Coleman Insights President/CEO] Warren Kurtzman was [WVBR's] General Manager. [Mad Dog Radio sports anchor] Bill Pidto and [Clear Channel/New York Senior VP/Programming] Tom Poleman were there the same time I was [while MSNBC's Keith Olbermann worked at WVBR about eight years earlier].”

Young Pirate

By his junior year at Ithaca College, Schnitt moved back to Virginia and had taken a late-1986 job as a “screaming” 6-10pm personality at Norfolk's WGH-FM where he would remain until August 1988.

Consultant Alan Burns grabbed Schnitt at a Bobby Poe convention in Tyson's Corner (VA) and said he had a client who was interested in hiring Schnitt. “My day-part was the only one beating [rival `Z104'] WNVZ,” Schnitt boasts. “At that point in the late-1980s, those stations were locked in a pretty good [CHR] battle. I was offered a great deal to go [to `Z104']. WGH-FM didn't match it so I left and stayed at WNVZ for about a year.”

Apparently without Schnitt's knowledge, someone sent an aircheck of him to bombastic KQLZ/Los Angeles Program Director Scott Shannon who needed a creative production person.

Four months after Westwood One-owned “Pirate Radio” went on the air, Schnitt was hired (over the phone) for \$60,000 a year as its Assistant Program Director/Creative Services Director. “I was told to be in Los Angeles in three weeks,” he recalls still somewhat in disbelief. “It was a thrill being a 23-year-old kid and getting a call from Scott Shannon. At first, I hung up on him [because] I thought it had to be a joke. Making the move from Norfolk to Los Angeles was huge [but] by February 1991, Scott and his whole crew were blown out.”

When WPLJ/New York brought Shannon aboard to do “Mojo Radio,” he took Schnitt and several other “Pirate Radio” cohorts with him. “I did the same thing as I did [in Los Angeles] and was part of the morning show,” Schnitt reports. “I was there for about [18 months], cranking out promos and IDs. I did all the on-the-fly morning show production and put together parodies.”

Chasing Down Morning Drive

Understandably thrilled to be back in his native New York City, Schnitt fondly recalls gazing out his office window and seeing such skyline landmarks as the Empire State Building. "As a kid, I grew up listening to radio stations in that market," he notes. "It's the reason I'm in radio in the first place."

Not only that, he was in the very same 2 Penn Plaza building as his beloved WABC. "It was just phenomenal," Schnitt giddily acknowledges. "I'd study WABC when I was nine years old and listened to Johnny Donovan on my transistor radio. Then a few years later, the great Johnny Donovan walked into my production room to ask for help on a project or for some assistance in getting a sound effect. You've got to be kidding me. That's a thrilling moment."

On-air personality at-heart Schnitt though craved to have his first morning show.

It eventuated 17 summers ago at WOVV/West Palm Beach, which coincidentally occupies the same frequency as WPLJ (95.5). "I was 'MJ in the Morning' [on 'Star' - WOVV] and our numbers were going up," comments Schnitt who added Program Director duties there. "In January 1994, Marc Chase called from the 'Power Pig' [WFLZ] in Tampa. He was driving through West Palm Beach and heard me."

About to be transferred to Cincinnati to run WLW and WEBN, Chase needed to locate his replacement as WFLZ's morning drive talent. "He said I was the guy and he wanted to hire me," Schnitt states. "I drove to Tampa for a Saturday lunch meeting and was offered the job the next day."

That was more than 15 years ago (February 1994) when wakeup offering "The MJ & BJ Show" was born; BJ Harris left in 2001.

No Identity Crisis

Several years after Schnitt arrived in Tampa, WFLZ dropped all music in the morning, essentially making it an all-talk program.

Very much accustomed to talking for prolonged periods Schnitt took advantage of the opportunity to do just that when WFLA's Glenn Beck got a Premiere Radio Networks 9am-Noon show im-

mediately after the 9/11 attacks. "A different type of talk product was needed then," opines Schnitt, whose "Todd Schnitt Show" debuted October 1, 2001 on Clear Channel Talk WIOD/Miami. "I did the show exclusively for WIOD from Tampa for about three months and then took over Glenn's [WFLA] afternoon slot when he moved to Philadelphia."

As far as doing two separate shows in the same metro while utilizing different monikers is concerned Schnitt simply reasons MJ Kelli is his fabricated radio handle. "A program director once told me I couldn't use [the name] Todd Schnitt on the air. I got over [being schizophrenic] a long time ago. I answer to it all."

Some listeners early-on wondered if MJ Kelli and veteran on-air talent MG ("Machine Gun") Kelly were the same person but Schnitt insists, "It didn't come from that. It's just a completely fake name. No one thought it could be this simple but it has been a very easy transition. It will be eight years [in October] that I've been doing two shows [every day]."

Copious Preparation

Each weekday is power-packed and as Schnitt (mostly) in jest states, "It's become an involuntary part of my landscape – sort of like breathing. If you don't know any better, there's nothing to complain about. It's an automatic part of my routine."

Up at the peculiarly odd/random time of 4:53am, Schnitt tries to get to WFLZ 30 minutes before his show's 6am start. "I've pretty much done my show prep the night before [so when I get to the station] I just go through the local paper and USA Today," he explains. "The morning show is [over] at 10am [and] I do whatever production that needs to be cut."

Especially considering that he lives within very close proximity of WFLA & WFLZ Schnitt returns home to begin preparing his afternoon broadcast. "I do that until 2:15pm and then go back to the office," he points out. "We have a three-person staff for the [WFLA] show. We're constantly talking to and emailing each other about themes we need to hit and topic research that needs to be done. I pretty much see what feels good and pick my material for whatever is hot. The afternoon show is incredibly agile. We adapt to breaking news in a millisecond. We're immediately on any breaking story."

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Labeling himself a “fiercely-independent conservative,” Schnitt doesn’t profess to be a checklist guy. “You need to listen every day and see how I come down on every issue,” he straightforwardly suggests. “When someone is wrong and when I disagree about something or someone, I’m going to be honest. We bring a different aura in presentation, delivery and ideology of a somewhat conservative radio show.”

Sandwiched between his afternoon preparation and studio return is an approximately 15-minute power nap. “I have a couch in my home office and the nap does wonders,” Schnitt asserts.

Once the WFLA afternoon program concludes at 6pm, Schnitt transitions to family mode and spends time with his wife and their two young children. “I do the ‘daddy-stuff,’” he duly notes. “Then it’s right back to the prep. I end up going to bed at about 12:30am.”

Beyond The Sunshine State

Content on the two programs is 180 degrees apart but each show possesses personal upsides to Schnitt. “I bring elements of the morning show to afternoons because it keeps me in-touch with pop culture,” he declares.

Part of that contemporary life connection includes striking up a close friendship with commercial pitchman and Tampa-area resident Billy Mays.

Less than two weeks ago (Saturday, 6-27), the two men began an approximately seven-minute conversation at 9:52pm regarding the bumpy US Airways flight Mays was on. A rough landing at the Tampa airport resulted in him being struck on the head from objects which had dropped from the overhead compartments.

Less than 12 hours after that phone conversation, Mays, 50, was found dead. The following Monday morning as many other Tampa Bay morning shows were saturated with Michael Jackson coverage Kelli/Schnitt was reminiscing about his friend Mays.

Six other Clear Channel facilities air the internally-syndicated “MJ Kelli Morning Show” with Schnitt noting, “We’re on a 100,000 monster blowtorch stick in St. Louis [CHR KSLZ] - we’re #1 there [among 18-34s]. We’re also in Palm Beach-Vero Beach-Ft. Pierce, Jacksonville, Fort Myers and Melbourne.”

Some 20 terrestrial outlets and XM carry his afternoon endeavor which Peter Kosann’s Compass Media Networks recently began syndicating. “We’ve had very good growth the past [few months] and are starting to get some West coast interest which is great,” Schnitt proclaims. “We’ve been added on [Clear Channel Talk] KNEW/San Francisco [11pm-2am]. Our syndication phase is really in its infancy but we have decent momentum.”

Associated with such positive thrust is travel to affiliates and that’s

popping up on Schnitt’s already jammed agenda. “KNEW wants me to come out and I’ll probably be doing something in Miami,” he points out. “I just have to figure out how to work some of this into the schedule.”

Sleep Deprivation Solution

Even though Schnitt’s iPod is crammed with 10,000 songs he doesn’t get a chance to listen to much music. “As a broadcaster, my love is the spoken-word product, whether it’s the morning show or the afternoon show,” he states. “Talk radio is the best medium to mobilize people physically or emotionally - nothing beats it. Concept of the ‘Tax Day’ protests was great and if [nothing else it] brought about awareness. The most important thing is to have people begin to challenge the fact the government is growing at a ridiculous rate. Deficit numbers are unsustainable. The whole House can be voted out [next year]. Things can be done in the midterm elections - we don’t have to wait until 2012 for a presidential race.”

In addition to scuba diving and target-shooting, Schnitt enjoys going to Sebring Raceway for competitive driving however he emphasizes, “The most important thing on the weekends is that I get to double my sleep pattern on Friday and Saturday night.”

Extreme candor is expressed by Schnitt when he assesses the approximately five-year future of this extremely ambitious juggling project. “I need to settle on one show,” he remarks. “The long-term wish is really to try to jell ‘The Schnitt Show’ and end up doing one [program] a day. Perhaps I’ll move out to Colorado where I own some land and do the show from there.”



WHO: MJ Kelli (Todd Schnitt)

WHAT: “The MJ Morning Show”

WHERE: Clear Channel CHR WFLZ-FM/Tampa

WHEN: Monday-Friday, 5-10am

HOW LONG: Since February 1994

WHO: Todd Schnitt

WHAT: “The Schnitt Show”

WHERE: Clear Channel Talk WFLA-AM/Tampa

WHEN: Monday-Friday, 3-6pm

HOW LONG: Since October 2001