

INSIDE RADIO®

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“Personalities INSIDE RADIO”

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MUSIC TO LIB TALK DONE WITHOUT HESITATION

by Mike Kinoshian, Special Features Editor

Guaranteed to be a sure-fire door-opener for any Adult Contemporary programmer is the inclusion on his or her programming portfolio of heritage WASH/Washington's highly regarded set of call letters.

Some eyebrows were raised last August though when it was learned Air America Radio's Senior Vice President/Programming was being imported from that music-intensive Adult Contemporary facility.

BIG Discovery

Only those unfamiliar with [Bill Hess](#)' complete background though would find his appointment at the progressive talk network as incongruous. “The [Air America] brand within the radio industry has some tarnish but it's very recognizable and strong with the general public,” remarks Hess whose resume contains considerable Full-Service and Talk programming entries. “We're encouraged by how the nation [voted] during the last presidential election. At the end of the day though, we know we have to put informative, entertaining and provocative hosts on the air. We're working with the talent we now have and recruiting some new [ones who] can do entertaining programs. It might be fair to say that wasn't always the focus here in the past.”

For the two decades leading up to Hess' Air America appointment, he'd programmed music and spoken-word stations.

After becoming Program Director of WASH and Clear Channel Classic Hits sibling WBIG, Hess discovered he really missed the Talk format.

Intrigued when asked to add Operations Manager responsibilities for Clear Channel/Washington, DC's progressive Talk WWRC, Sports WTEM and conservative Talk WTNT, Hess recalls it was a very enjoyable experience. “That's why it was so interesting when this opportunity presented itself,” he comments. “I've been fortunate to program some [excellent] music stations and work with great air talent on that side. Certainly one of the highlights of my career was to spend five years at WASH [but] this job was too much fun - I [had] to take it on.”

Role Of Flow

Somewhere in existence, courtesy of Hess' grandfather, are reel-to-reel tapes of a then-six-year-old Hess adlibbing commercials from the yellow pages. “It's pretty embarrassing,” the talent on those

recordings somewhat sheepishly admits. “I consider myself to be very fortunate however to be making a living doing what I've wanted to do since I was a little kid.”

The Philadelphia native sampled superb signals in a variety of formats such as Top 40 on powerhouse WFIL, now a Salem-owned Religious outlet, and then-Full-Service WIP (which airs Sports under the CBS Radio banner). “Those stations and the personalities they had were very inspiring,” Hess declares.

Not only did Hess edit his high school newspaper, he anchored a weekly high school television news show and later managed a ten-watt station while he was attending college. “I did that for about a year and packed up one day and took a job [at WCBG] in Chambersburg, PA, which truly is a little town of 10,000 people,” he notes. “I was there for a year and then did mornings at [a Brockton, MA] day-timer and got hired by the bigger cross-town station.”

Further significant New England programming and on-air expertise was accrued at Worcester's dominant Full-Service and Adult Contemporary combo WTAG-AM & WSRS-FM, leading to Hess' benchmark 1987 opportunity at another such duo approximately 40 miles to the west - WHYN AM & FM/Springfield, MA. “I wound up spending about ten years there,” he recounts. “I shepherded the full-service AM to Talk. I put Rush [Limbaugh] on and built the programming around [him].”

Through the process Hess learned several priceless lessons, including that of audience flow. “Rush was the new thing back then and we countered him with a more liberal point-of-view later in the day,” he explains. “That [however] didn't turn out to be a successful strategy. I wish George W. Bush would've called out one of [Air America's hosts] like President Obama [did with Limbaugh]. From an entertainment standpoint, Rush plays that very well. We are at a legitimate shifting point at how our leaders communicate with the people at large. The evening news is clearly no longer the way to go.”

Focused, hard-working and a programmer who has historically cared about the people with whom he toils, Hess followed his Springfield assignment by becoming Director of Programming for Clear Channel/Providence (which includes Talk WHJJ-AM) before transferring to the Nation's Capital.

Still Mad

Roughly coinciding with Hess' Air America arrival were the 2008 Democratic and Republican conventions but he spent the first several months on his new job learning the operation and becoming acquainted with the staff. "This network has some very solid and committed affiliates," he observes. "They've frankly put up with a lot over the years. Part of what drives us every day is doing a good job for them. We need to create an atmosphere and a place for people to discuss issues without them being shouted down."

Top priority for Hess is to create entertaining programming. "You must have personalities and programs people enjoy listening to and [will connect with]," he stresses. "It's up to us to be relevant and topical. In the past, that perhaps wasn't job one here."

As far as he's concerned, there's little to be gained to complain about change in the industry. "You have to recognize where the train is going, figure out your role in that and how to make it work," Hess suggests. "I'd like to recognize the good internal talent – both in front of and behind the microphone - and recruit some others as we build a good team to get our shows on radio stations."

Since the first of the year, Air America host-turned-MSNBC megastar Rachel Maddow has had her radio responsibilities redefined in light of the demands of her skyrocketing cable career. "We were able to keep her involved with Air America," Hess states. "It's fair to say her goal was to remain associated with Air America as the network continues to grow. She's on a trajectory with the television thing which is exciting for her and for us."

Particularly notable segments from Maddow's brilliantly-delivered hour-long MSNBC show are re-packaged. Air America-specific commentary she cuts after the television program is fed four times the next day in morning drive. "Frankly, she's always been a great interviewer and a great commentator," Hess assesses. "Her radio show was never telephone-heavy, which may have been a bit frustrating for some of our affiliates. She's pretty good about knowing her strengths."

After a fall tryout Seattle-based Ron Reagan became a key on-air addition and the network recently took over syndication

of "Newsweek On Air" a development which fascinates Hess because, "We get to talk to stations that might be outside Air America's traditional sphere and it also ties us to a strong brand. [Wonkette founding editor] Ana Marie Cox is the attitude [who] defines Air America as we move forward. She's a little edgy and younger in appeal. There are probably a few more things we anticipate accomplishing this year in long-form and short-form programming."

Pursuit Of Excellence

Typically seated behind his Air America desk by 7:45am, former morning talent Hess has ample time to respond to emails and return phone calls. "Our office doesn't get chugging until [about 9:45am]," he points out. "Getting in early allows me some quiet time to listen to shows."

That's frequently the most opportune occasion to monitor offerings such as Richard Greene-hosted "Hollywood Clout" or Ron Reagan's evening talk show. "We also do a daily video program [with Sam Seder & Marc Maron] on our website which runs everyday at 3pm," Hess remarks. "The way the afternoon goes, I don't generally get to see it [live so] I usually watch it the following morning."

Over and above radio content, watching over the same as it relates to emerging platforms is another task for Capstar Communications' former Regional Vice President/Programming. "We're still in the talent recruiting mode," notes Hess who recently added Montel Williams. "[Since] we're in the process of building this company, there's a lot of effort going toward strategic meetings and planning. It's remarkable the 'name people' who are interested in - and are supportive of - Air America. You need to recruit the right talent and harness that interest. It is very difficult to do a two- or three-hour hour talk show five days a week."

Already in its brief history, Air America has produced a United States Senator – Minnesota's Al Franken - and as Hess emphasizes, "We're always looking for excellent talent."

Rather serendipitous was the fact esteemed television personality Williams was eager to do a radio program simultaneous with

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Air America's talent search. "We didn't chase him as much as we found each other," Hess comments. "He has a sense of the radio side of the business and what's involved. On top of that, he's an incredibly strong one-on-one communicator. Montel will help bring more people to the tent [and] we're very excited about him being on the team."

Meeting A Mentor

Finding time to coach talent though is among the stiffest challenges for Hess who deals differently with various shows. "I meet with some teams every day and others weekly," he explains. "I'm pleased I've been able to bring several very strong producers to the network."

Producers at the Air America level don't simply book guests and answer phones. "They're really very important in steering and running the show," Hess points out. "Air America is a pretty active place. Guests come in and out for the video project [Breakroom Live with Maron & Seder'] and there are show staffs and guests. It's remarkably similar to running a radio station because we feed programming throughout much of the day. Our focus though is becoming more of a show-by-show provider."

Given that Talk radio is talent-driven, there's always an opportunity for strong personalities to find an audience whether on Air America or another progressive outlet. "People [such as] Stephanie Miller and Ed Schultz [who like Maddow has a nightly MSNBC show] have built great followings," acknowledges Hess. "It's also important to remember though that Air America blazed that trail. For all the challenges this company may have had earlier in its existence, if it weren't for Air America, I don't know if those shows would be where they are today."

On the other end of the spectrum Hess doesn't imagine Air America is competing against Rush Limbaugh for station clearances. "He's a lightning rod and therefore becomes part of the discussion. Our hosts certainly treat him that way."

Many of Hess' radio philosophies have largely been formed by listening to an assortment of air talents with George Michael being at the very top of the list. "He inspired me at a young age and helped to keep me really excited about this business," Hess states. "When I was a kid, he was the consummate 6-10pm Top 40 air talent. I tuned into WABC/New York when he went there from Philadelphia and just loved him."

Shortly after Hess was hired at WASH, Market Manager Bennett Zier (now Air America Media's CEO) set up a memorable dinner for his new programmer with Michael the guest of honor. "After George was done with the 6pm news, he [along with his wife]

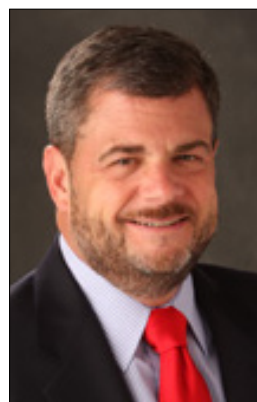
met Bennett and me at an Italian restaurant," Hess delightfully recounts. "It was a very enjoyable evening."

Something To Prove

In addition to having a Manhattan apartment, Hess kept his Washington-area home and goes there several weekends a month. "I have the best of both worlds," he maintains. "It's fair to say one draw in taking this job was the chance to live in the big city. One of the nice things about New York City is there's always something going on. You can go to a comedy club and we're just 20 blocks from the theater district. It's definitely something I've taken advantage of since I've been here. We do a fair amount of recruiting and have meetings [in DC] so it's [also] nice to have a base there."

Mysteries, lawyer novels and - especially - baseball occupy the bulk of Hess' leisure time. "When I was living in Connecticut ten years ago, my girlfriend and I would go to Yankee Stadium and she'd always wear her Boston Red Sox cap," he points out. "I'd ask her if she were crazy. Of course, she could get away with it because Yankee fans are chauvinist - they would never give a woman a tough time. I'm sure I could never pull that off."

Added impetus for Hess wanting to succeed in his Air America job can be traced to Vermont venture capitalist Charlie Kireker. "He's committed on the political side but also in demonstrating what we're now doing can be a successful business," Hess asserts. "Let's face it - Air America really hadn't been [a winner business wise]. A big part of me wants to make sure we make this a success because Charlie's such a good guy. He's put his heart, soul and money in this project and believes in it. Not many companies are expanding these days but we are and it's because of Charlie's commitment. I want to make him look really smart. I'd like to prove what all of us at Air America believe which is there's really [a great] business here."



WHO: Bill Hess
WHAT: Senior Vice President/
 Programming
WHERE: Air America Radio
WHEN: Since August 2008