

# INSIDE RADIO

Thursday, November 6, 2003

“Personalities INSIDE RADIO”

## Overnight Sensation

by Mike Kinosian, Air Personality Editor

The professional highlight of Jim Bohannon's illustrious radio career will be realized this Saturday night (11/8) in Chicago, when Westwood One's peerless overnight talent is inducted into the Radio Hall of Fame.

Appropriately enough, Westwood One will broadcast the Larry King-hosted ceremonies nationally (10-11pm, ET). "I'm in august company," Bohannon says with distinct humility in his rich voice. "This is the only time in my life that my name will ever be linked with [fellow inductee, the late 'Singing Cowboy'] Gene Autry."

For five of the last six years, Bohannon served as announcer for the prestigious ceremonies. That assignment this year goes in the Charlie Cook-produced radio event falls to Fred Winston. "I was Fred's sidekick for a year when I worked at WCFL/Chicago," says Bohannon, who will be introduced Saturday night by none other than Mancow Mueller. "That will be a contrast, to say the least."

Others gaining Radio Hall of Fame entry this weekend are Viacom President/COO Mel Karmazin. Longtime Los Angeles (KABC, KHJ, KRLA, KNX, KLAC) talk show host Michael Jackson. And WGN/Chicago's 40+-year "Voice Of Agriculture", Orion Samuelson. "I'm deeply honored and humbled," Bohannon says. "I'm certainly hoping that my remarks will be well received and that I don't trip on any words. I'm going to savor every minute of it."

### **Modest Beginnings**

The affable Lebanon, MO native is heard on more than 300 stations.

Whenever he's within 50 miles of an affiliate, it's not unusual for him to drop by for a visit. "I like to sit in with the morning show, meet the staff and cut promos," Bohannon remarks. "I think that's very important. It doesn't matter to me how big or small the station is."

One reason he doesn't discriminate about market size can easily be traced to his own professional background.

Unlike some radio hosts these days, Bohannon started the old-fashioned way in a small town and managed to work his way to Hall of Fame status.

The first stop some 40 years ago was at hometown KLWT. "We used to call it, 'Keep Listening – We're Trying,'" Bohannon remarks. "It's a good station and they carry my shows. It was a chance to learn and make mistakes in an atmosphere where that was tolerated – to a certain extent."

The minimum wage at the time was just \$1 an hour. "As GM Jack Sellers was hiring me, he very seriously said 'Jim, we'd pay you what you're worth, but it's illegal.' That pretty much set the tone, but it was a great opportunity. In retrospect, I'm very grateful that I had the chance to make the mistakes and miscues that people do when they first start out. It would've been a lot worse to do that in front of a national audience. I regret to say that paying your dues doesn't seem to be a valued term anymore. I really believe that there's more to this business than just showing up and sitting in front of a microphone."

### **Varied Background**

A gentle giant of a man, Bohannon graciously states "I'd be the first to admit that I've been lucky along the way. I had many very good breaks and I'm grateful for that. There was certainly nothing pre-ordained; a lot of good things fell into place."

In the embryonic stage of his career, he had the chance to do a little bit of everything. "I played records in virtually every format; gathered and read news; and even did play-by-play. It was a real schooling and I didn't pay tuition. They paid me, albeit not very much. The most fun was spinning the 'stacks of wax' and 'picks to click.'"

An especially memorable highlight occurred in Springfield, MO when he was able to take three busloads of fans to Kansas City to see a group called the Beatles.

### **Bucks & Yucks For The Stud**

But never in his wildest imagination did Bohannon ever believe he'd be a national radio force. "It was all done back then for a few bucks and a few yucks," he jokes. "I felt spinning records would increase my stud quotient."

Turns out that's precisely what happened, although the results weren't exactly immediate.

About nine years ago, he re-met the woman who would become his wife. "I was invited to visit my Columbia, MO affiliate for their 70th anniversary," Bohannon notes. "In the receiving line, I saw the lovely Annabelle Arnold. I just worshipped her in high school, but she dated the football captain and I didn't make any time with her. We've now been married for a little over five years; radio finally paid off for me."

That big booming voice certainly didn't hurt Bohannon's chances, but he alleges "I haven't always had anywhere near the voice I do today. There are tapes out there somewhere that I'd like to destroy. At the time, though, ignorance was bliss. Had I known how bad I was, I would never have had the nerve to stay with this job long enough to get any better. I was atrocious and fumbled along until finally, over time, I became somewhat better."

#### **Defining Moment**

A key turning point in his career came in 1964. While working at his second radio job in Springfield, MO, Bohannon considerably elevated his on-air talents. "We were going to do a remote covering [then presidential candidate] Barry Goldwater's speech," he recalls. "The thing was sold, but Goldwater was delayed. They didn't want to go back to playing music because he might show up at any minute."

So it was up to Bohannon, who'd always taken part in public speaking and debate in high school and college, to fill. "Goldwater was over an hour late. That night, I called on everything I had in reserve. I was adlibbing and making comments about the campaign. It was like being dumped in the middle of the English Channel and told you needed to learn how to swim. That sticks out as a time I was given a big test; I think I passed it pretty well."

#### **Mountains Of Preparation**

Major topics on Bohannon's show these days, of course, are the war against terror and the war in Iraq. "Other things such as the sniper trial and war against spam and telemarketers flare in and out," he notes. "Check the headlines and that's pretty much what we're talking about."

But even with his superior skills, Bohannon hardly skims headlines before waltzing in the studio. "I might as well just blindfold myself and go stomping through a mind field," he states. "If you're particularly glib, you might be able to get away [without preparing] for a show or two. But over time, it will be abundantly clear – especially to the very savvy talk show audience."

The daily routine, therefore, includes checking out stories

on front pages of at least four newspapers, looking at Op-Ed pages, watching television news programs, listening to other Talk radio shows and checking the Internet. "When I first got into broadcasting, you could say with some degree of assurance that if you read a few newspapers, watched the news and read three newsmagazines, you'd exhausted the information out there," Bohannon comments. "But in this Internet age with 200 channels, you aren't able to read everything. You have to find a pattern that works. Sample those things that seem to provide you with a good overview and go from there."

#### **Working On The Night Shift**

While many commiserate with Bohannon about what appears to be a grueling upside down schedule, he rather simply reasons, "I don't fight rush hour traffic and there's no dress code or bosses. My wife and I frequently play tennis on public courts. There's never anyone there, because everyone else is at work. If I take an overseas vacation, there's no jetlag, because I live on overseas time."

His typical day "ends" at 11am and "starts" at 7pm. "That's when I have a bite to eat, clean up and go to work for last-minute preparation on timely topics," says Bohannon, who does "The Jim Bohannon Show" from 10pm - 1am (ET).

Following the conclusion of that show, his next four hours are spent writing a daily feature and the script for the other show he hosts - "America In The Morning." The news program airs 5-6am (ET), but as Bohannon explains, "I stick around for the Pacific re-feed. There's a second re-feed from 6-7am and a final one from 8-9am. When the 8am Pacific feed starts, I'm gone."

#### **Pinch Hitting For The King**

The big national break in Bohannon's career came more than 20 years ago, when he began substituting for Mutual Radio's Larry King. "I spent 11 years filling in for Larry, [who was] on nighttime radio for 15 years," Bohannon notes. "It will be 11 years in January since he left and I've had that shift for my own. That was my first connection to the big time."

It may be a hard label to shake, but Bohannon is quite comfortable being known as the person who succeeded King on radio. "That's fine with me; I enjoy it," he claims. "I remember one time I replaced Larry when he had a speech to give to a group of college broadcasters. It was such a last-minute cancellation that many of them showed up with a copy of Larry's latest book. When I was done with the speech, people came up to me and I signed all of their books, 'Filling in for Larry King – Jim Bohannon.' Why not?"

#### **Representing The Sensible Center**

A self-described "militant moderate," Bohannon asserts,

“Our political system gives the extremes too much of a say-so. We’re very often given the choice between an off-the-wall, right wing whacko or some left wing idiot. The result is that the sensible center - where things actually get done in this country – winds up having to choose from the ‘evil of two lessers.’”

Declaring there’s nothing weak or wimpy about his unique moniker, Bohannon says, “I’m sure many people consider ‘militant moderate’ to be an oxymoron. They think moderates have to be milquetoasts. That’s nonsense - not the least bit true. It’s only through compromise – which is as American a trait as you can have – that things get done.”

**Rush To Conservatism**

It’s both well-documented and quite obvious that most talk hosts have a decidedly conservative lean. The source of that, Bohannon maintains, can be traced to Rush Limbaugh. “You just can’t underestimate his impact. His success prompted stations to look for Rush clones. They, of course, were happy to come out of the woodwork to emulate his paycheck. As a result, Talk radio became heavily conservative; that was considered to be the winning formula. Actually, however, the winning formula would be to have some of Rush’s talent – not just his ideology.”

Many moderate and liberal Talk radio listeners, Bohannon opines, quickly tired of Limbaugh’s “unending tirade” and left for NPR or to read books or newspapers. “The track record in regard to liberal talk radio hasn’t been very good. I know there’s another effort out there to do something along those lines. It remains to be seen whether that will work.”

Regarding Limbaugh’s recent problems with prescription painkillers, Bohannon remarks, “I hope the treatment is working and that he recovers completely.”

But taking note of the obvious irony of some of the things Limbaugh said in the past about drug addicts, Bohannon offers this reminder. “[It was Rush’s opinion that] they should all leave the country. It’s been interesting to listen to conservative radio lately - you’ve never found a more

compassionate pack of conservatives in your life. For the most part, they’ve done a complete 180. If nothing else, the long-term impact of this is that it’s going to be very hard for many of them to go back to their old stance regarding addiction. If Sean Penn or Tim Robbins were to [announce tomorrow] that they had an addiction, it will be difficult for conservatives] to say ‘run the bum out of the country.’ It may have made a serious shift in the national dialogue on that subject.”

**Other Opportunities**

In addition to being a fill-in host on CNN and CNBC, Bohannon did a week’s worth of hosting duties on “Talkback Live.” While he wouldn’t want to leave radio, he says “I’d like adding to it. I’m talking with a Nashville-based cable network and I’m looking forward to being part of that. I’ve written some newspaper columns in the past and think it would be fun to get my hand back in print. But radio remains my true love. Commercial radio is 83 years old and I’ve been in it for 43. I love the industry – it’s been very good to me.”



WHO: Jim Bohannon  
WHAT: “The Jim Bohannon Show” / “America In The Morning”  
WHERE: Westwood One  
WHEN: “The Jim Bohannon Show” (Mon-Fri 10pm-1am ET); “America In The Morning” (Mon-Fri 5-6am ET)  
HOW MANY AFFILIATES: “The Jim Bohannon Show” 315 and “America In The Morning” 303

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