

INSIDE RADIO®

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“Personalities INSIDE RADIO”

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TV TALK TITAN SEALS RADIO DEAL

by Mike Kinoshian, Special Features Editor

Adaptations of the word “decorated” can run the gamut from how aesthetically pleasing living environments are created or describing the way an artisan can bring something as basic as a birthday cake to life.

When it comes to one of the newest members of Air America Media’s weekday lineup though, it encompasses two completely different and marvelous meanings.

Not only does he proudly possess a plethora of honors for meritorious service to his country, Montel Williams is among the most decorated talk personalities to ever grace a television studio.

Initiated 18 years ago, CBS Paramount Television’s “Montel Williams Show” thrust the quintessential communicator center stage and this uniquely-engaging host seized the opportunity by copping a daytime Emmy for “Outstanding Talk Show Host” and racking up multiple “Outstanding Talk Show” nominations.

Different Ground Rules

Nearly 15 months have passed since the final “Montel” show aired (5-16-2008) and since then he’s weighed numerous options including radio. “I was going to interview at another radio network,” Williams confides. “I’ve done a lot of radio as a guest but usually wind up taking over someone’s show for about 30 minutes.”

During a caravan to promote his “Living Well” book, Williams was asked to meet the network president who wanted to discuss a job opportunity. “Two days before the interview I told my manager I was settling down and pursuing a radio show,” Williams remarks. “I got an agent and had a radio offer as soon as the question was broached. Over dinner, I met with [Air America owner] Charlie Kireker, [Air America Media CEO] Bennett Zier and [Senior Vice President/Programming] Bill Hess. Two days later, we were talking about a contract - I was on the air in two weeks.”

Parallels can be drawn to the circumstances that made his television show a reality, the only difference being the absence of an agent. “I did it on my own back then,” points out Williams whose Air America Media’s “Montel Across America” debuted four months ago (4-6-2009). “I literally took a meeting for my television show at a lunch in [the late agent/producer] Freddie Fields’ California office. One month later, I was negotiating with syndicators; two

months later, I signed a contract and moved my office to Los Angeles. We shot one test show and went on the next week.” Occasional editing and going long were visual medium luxuries at Williams’ disposal however he candidly states the toughest thing he finds in his new environment is the necessity to “shut my mouth” so he can be out in time for a hard break. “You don’t get to run over here,” he laughs. “Hitting the [time] marks can be [a challenge] but I’m getting there. I did the television show for 17 years. The idea of interviewing, talking and running my mouth isn’t difficult - I’m enjoying radio.”

Picture Painter

Indelibly etched in Williams’ memory is something the late Paul Harvey said regarding how people listen to radio with more than one sense. “If you take time to paint the picture with your words, listeners get to visualize along with hearing,” Williams states. “I’ve tried my best every day to paint that picture. If I’m just talking `at` you [without] trying to make you viscerally feel what’s going on, I may not be accomplishing what I need to. I believe we’re going to make [an impression] with the poignancy and trying to reach more than one sense.”

Actualities and quick drop-ins are integral components to Williams’ daily three-hour Air America Media broadcast. “I pull pieces from speeches but don’t edit things together,” he stresses. “I’m so excited because the show is over-the-top. The first segment is my chance to say whatever’s on my mind. We do headlines, hot issues and spotlight one [subject] throughout the [entire show].”

Approximately 20 minutes into the first hour he’s introducing the day’s big issue. One guest – possible two – along with callers comprise the second-half of hour one. “There’s something a little different in the last half-hour of our show,” the host of Showtime’s 2004 political reality show “American Candidate” points out. “I offer the ‘Living Well’ segment and tip of the day. I give information to impact a listener’s health care footprint.”

Focal points include sensible eating habits, exercise and increasing a person’s happiness and spirituality levels. “We have guests from every walk of life and it’s been an enjoyment,” enthusiastically declares Williams who turned 53 last month (7-3). “People call and email asking us to please [continue doing this].”

The Wanderer

Some broadcasters have landed in the industry completely by

accident whereas Williams' arrival appears totally logical.

President of his junior and senior classes, he was Parliamentarian for the Chesapeake Regional Association of Student Councils and on the Maryland Association of Student Councils. "I did 30 speeches when I was in high school," he recalls. "It was a time when America was faced with a lot of strife. Kids were leading the charge for inclusion and discussion. I was in student government and went to [my high school principal] to ask if we could start our own radio station. We were allowed to do announcements at the lunch hour over the p.a. system. I alternated with another person on the station we called 'The Wand'."

If not a Renaissance man Williams at the very least is a throwback.

Feeling compelled to go into the military after receiving his high school diploma he enlisted in the Marines and in 1980 graduated from the Naval Academy with an International Security Affairs degree.

Part of Williams' overflowing trophy case includes two Navy Commendation Medals, two Navy Expeditionary Medals, two Humanitarian Service Medals, the Armed Forces Expeditionary Medal and a Navy Achievement Medal.

Information Overload

Military training came in handy for his three-episode portrayal of a Navy SEAL lieutenant on CBS-TV's "JAG."

In that same vein, he was Matt Waters on the CBS-TV series of the same name which aired Wednesday nights, 9-10pm. After a 20-year Navy career, the lead character retired to become a New Jersey high school science teacher. "Matt Waters" debuted January 3, 1996. Its last episode aired six weeks later.

As a real-life Special Duty Intelligence Officer Williams did extensive briefings and addressed large groups. "Public speaking is ingrained in my DNA," he comments. "Before I started the [television talk show], I did a philanthropic program where we'd raise money for scholarships. I did that across the country for three years and spoke to almost one million young people. Mississippi Governor [Ray Mabus] brought together 12 different high schools and put them in the Biloxi Arena for me to speak to."

Part of Williams' weekday routine is being in the gym by 5:30am and at the studio about two hours later, a full 90 minutes before going on the air at 9am (ET). "We usually do a [75-minute] show wrap-up and then formulate ideas for upcoming shows," he points out. "I talk to my producers about five times a day between 2-7pm."

Remainder of the evening is spent at home as Williams scans several television sets tuned to MSNBC, CNBC, CNN and Fox News Channel. "In between all that, I try to read every periodical."

Enviably Mix

Throughout the first few months of "Montel Across America" its host intentionally avoided listening to radio and maintains some talk programming "bores the devil" out of him. "I get angry when people spew venom and don't back it with facts," Williams remarks. "We make sure we have the facts and also [attempt to provide an opposing] side. I try my best to be as inclusive as possible and don't want to offend anyone. I'm a stickler for [accuracy] so I do a lot of research. When I did ['The Montel Williams Show'], I'd cut off the television and stop looking at the competition. I don't want to be accused of stealing anything from anyone. I want to figure this out [by myself] and find my own niche. I don't want to be persuaded that someone else's [approach] is the way to go."

It is Williams' firm belief that Air America Media management is focused on providing independent thought programming. "Each host's take is different from Robert Kennedy Jr. to Rachel Maddow to Ron Reagan Jr. to - Montel Williams," he opines. "That is what I love about this. I'm being given the opportunity to flex my wings."

There's also immense satisfaction gained from reaching online listeners in locales such as South Africa, Israel and Sweden. "For almost the entire time my television show was on the air, it ran on Armed Forces Radio & Television," Williams notes. "Talk radio doesn't normally get many female callers but we've been able to bring in quite a few women. We're getting a 25-54 audience and our [male/female audience composition split] is probably right down the middle. My guess is half my audience is progressive and the other half is conservative. Some conservatives give me an earful about their health care opinions. They want to be a part

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of the conversation and – of course - they can. We want to have them call back.”

Regarding the present state of that particular hot-button topic, Williams fumes, “It’s ridiculous and egregious how much we in America have to pay for [such things as] an MRI. I’m not afraid to utilize my own personal experience or bring in experiences of others if it can educate and make people more aware.”

Multiple Scares

Well in advance of his newfound radio career, life undoubtedly was good for the definitive example of a host who masterfully combines intelligence, elegance and panache.

Such warm-and-fuzzy feelings though came to a numbing end ten years ago when Williams was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis; confirmation was made in early-2000. “It was insane and it is an every day battle,” he states deliberately and with a noticeably – and understandably - somber tone. “I recognize I have to work on it every single day. That’s something I can personalize for my listeners.”

Continued degradation was the pessimistic prognosis Williams was handed. “I almost believed this doctor,” recounts the leader of the Montel Williams MS Foundation. “It was a very tough time at first but I got to understand that I had MS but MS never had me. When I finally believed those words which I had said to so many others it reverberated to me. That’s when things began moving in the other direction.”

Traumatic as that experience was, things were actually even bleaker the previous year when Williams was laying on a gurney at Beth Israel North. “It was a ‘Code Blue’ and doctors came running in,” he calmly recollects. “I was later told it took 45-60 seconds for them to get me back. That event changed my life. I woke up in a critical care unit and was in there for four days.”

Suddenly the man with many great accomplishments to his credit began to realize what life is really all about. “Everything paled in comparison to the fact that I was still alive,” Williams stresses. “I truly believe to my core that a living is made by what you get [but] a life is made by what you give. When you meet whoever your maker is, it doesn’t matter what you left behind because it would have been brought with you wherever you went.”

Undaunted with his lingering MS condition Williams remains an ardent snowboarder and also enjoys being involved with community projects. “I’m a poker player and play for charities,” the national spokesman of the Partnership for Prescription Assistance – and 2007 World Series of Poker participant - states. “One is Ante Up for Africa, which is being put on by Annie Duke and Don Cheadle. I’m also involved in a charity poker event for the Childhood Diabetes Foundation.”

Knot Unusual

While normally originating from New York City “Montel Across America” has been a remote broadcast about 30% of the time from places like Los Angeles, the Nation’s Capital, San Diego and New Orleans.

To coincide with last month’s (7-11) Africa-based “Feed the Children” documentary Williams desperately wanted to do his radio show from there but was unable to get a line from his location. “We would have had to run one from there and the price tag just kept going up,” he explains. “We taped some segments and broadcast them the following week.”

Notwithstanding that the paparazzi rented a multi-million dollar home on a cliff overlooking the private club in Bermuda where Williams married Tara Fowler almost two years ago (10-6-2007), he declares it was still the “most magical” day of his life. “If that had been someone else’s wedding, I still would have been impressed,” he persuasively maintains. “We arrived on a Sunday and got married the following Saturday. It turned out being a seven-day wedding. There was a dinner or [other] special event [leading up the actual wedding day]. It was very private – 60 guests – and we had a lot of fun. We try to get to Bermuda several times a year. My wife introduced me to the place and I think it’s one of the most beautiful spots on the planet.”

Aspirations of hosting town hall meetings and debates for the 2012 presidential election occupy his mind yet Williams’ primary objective is to have listeners keep tuning into his daily radio show. “It’s not because I’m going to give them the answer but they know I will give them the information to form their own [opinion]. I’m having the time of my life. ‘Montel Across America’ has just been unbelievable. If I weren’t doing [it], I’d be yelling at my radio or my television screen. I’ll probably do radio for the next 20 years.”



WHO: Montel Williams
WHAT: “Montel Across America”
WHERE: Air America Media
WHEN: M-F, 9am-Noon (ET)
HOW LONG: Since April 6, 2009