

INSIDE RADIO®

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“Personalities INSIDE RADIO”

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SMORGASBORD OF ACCOMPLISHMENTS

by Mike Kinosian, Special Features Editor

Traverse the threshold into his Philly office and you'll encounter an impressive assemblage of political photos – fully explicable in light of the status he rightfully possesses as one of America's preeminent talk talents.

Over his desk though is an attention-grabbing poster not of an elected official or politically-associated broadcaster.

Specific, significant meaning is attached to having an image of “Seinfeld” co-creator (and mastermind/star of HBO's “Curb Your Enthusiasm”) Larry David filling that precious space. “It's my visual reminder to be relevant,” remarks CBS Radio Talk WPHT/Philadelphia morning driver *Michael Smerconish*.

Long-associated, self-inflicted running jab regarding one of the most prolific programs in television history was that 30-minute sitcom “Seinfeld” was a show about nothing.

Patience Pays Off

In that Larry David-influenced vein, Smerconish declares the same of his daily radio offering although he emphasizes, “By that I mean it's about *everything*. We'll talk about the stimulus package but I want to do it all. Apart from [CNN's] Wolf Blitzer, I was the only American [broadcaster] to interview former Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf. I had dinner with him and questioned him extensively on Bin Laden's [whereabouts]. It was extraordinary.”

As of three months ago (2-2-2009), indefatigable Smerconish added a national platform to his repertoire with a daily, CBS Radio-Dial Global-partnered program.

Although assured it was bound to happen, lawyer-turned broadcaster Smerconish candidly questioned if he'd ever get a syndicated vehicle. “So many times, I thought a radio or television deal was going to take me to the next level [but] I was always the bridesmaid,” he states. “I began in radio as a guest and then a guest host [on Philadelphia's WWDB] in offbeat hours. I finally got my own Saturday night/Sunday morning show.”

That was parlayed into three hours in afternoon drive before Smerconish graduated to mornings. “It's almost as if there were a master plan but the truth is it was all happenstance,” he confides. “It looked like I'd have a CNN deal [and/or] a syndicated radio show. When Joe Scarborough [left Westwood One], I was offered his slot. I studied it for 24 hours but passed. I regretted it and wondered if I'd

blown my one shot [at syndication]. There were conversations but nothing jelled.”

As Bill O'Reilly's chief fill-in for five years, Smerconish garnered tremendous visibility. When Fox News Channel's “Factor” host made it clear he wouldn't continue his radio show, Smerconish observes, “Those affiliates were suddenly put into play. People surveyed the landscape and I had the sweat equity. I'm the guy who ‘worked’ it all those years for no return but ego.”

Some felt it was essential a major “name” succeed O'Reilly but Smerconish jokes, “David Lee Roth is available. Dial Global had always taken an interest in me and wanted to immediately do [a deal] to pursue those O'Reilly affiliates where [I am] known. The biggest, [New York's] WOR, came on-board and everything fell into place.”

Emphatic about retaining his local touch, Smerconish says his Philadelphia audience has made it clear it doesn't want him moving on from regional subject matter. “Very unconventionally, my program does not break for news or traffic,” he explains. “In the syndicated version, there's a soft-start and a more formal [beginning] every hour. Philadelphia listeners have me to themselves for five minutes at the top of every hour [which is when] I do [locally]-based stories. It's the perfect balance.”

Brush With Greatness

A product of Philadelphia's suburban public school system, Doylestown, PA native Smerconish became drawn to broadcasting while in junior high. “Instead of having announcements read on a P.A. system, ours were [given] on closed-circuit television,” he recounts. “I wasn't the anchor [but] got face time doing features. From that moment on, I was [hooked].”

Matters however detoured in Smerconish's senior year of high school when his father ran for office and Michael caught the political bug, even meeting Ronald Reagan that year. “I was fortunate to go to [the University of Pennsylvania] law school,” he proclaims. “In my second year, I ran for the Pennsylvania legislature and lost in a competitive race by 419 votes.”

Notwithstanding that defeat, several highly noteworthy political experiences came quickly thereafter. In his early-20s, Smerconish worked for George Herbert Walker Bush and by age 29 the Phi Beta Kappa Lehigh University graduate served in a sub-cabinet-level appointment.

Requests came his way to be a radio/television guest bringing things full circle and he confesses, "The ego of it consumed me. Ultimately, I wanted to go back to what I was doing in [middle school]."

Nearly Morning Mike

For a while Smerconish juggled practicing law and being a broadcaster. "People say I have an insane schedule because I'm doing two shows a day," he notes. "This is nothing. I'd arrive at my law office at 7am; practice law until 5pm; pull out a microphone from my credenza; throw an ISDN switch and do two hours of afternoon drive from the same desk. I did that for several years. I've always had it in my blood."

One could easily quarrel his current arrangement isn't a vastly improved day at the beach since Smerconish wakes up at 3:15am and is in studio by 4am – two hours before going on-air. "I'm done at 9am; I work out before I collapse; take a [45-minute to 60-minute] nap and prepare show number two," he explains.

Wrapped around that, he somehow files two weekly newspaper columns and honors a multi-night MSNBC commitment. "I do the [national radio show] from a comfortable home studio," Smerconish points out. "When I moved to mornings, every [wakeup] guy in the world gave me their strategy about how to beat the system when it comes to sleeping. One said there was no solution because the human body wasn't meant to be awake in those hours. That's the best advice I heard." Even so, there was an outside chance his routine would have been yet harsher and more challenging.

The backdrop involves CBS Radio and MSNBC's dismissal of Don Imus for his comments about some members of Rutgers University's female basketball team. "My opinion was pretty emphatic," states Smerconish. "He said something stupid and deserved to be punished - but not fired. He was embarrassed and punished enough in the court of public opinion. Even though I said [that], I was the first person MSNBC put in that chair after Don Imus got fired. It was very surreal."

Vigorously attempting to induce himself into thinking it wasn't a tryout, Smerconish in retrospect acknowledges it was. "I would've liked to have been offered that job," he candidly admits. "I'd be lying if I said I didn't want them to ask me. I don't know if I could have taken it because that was a 2am wakeup call. With four kids, I'm not in a position to relocate. I've solidified my relationship with the

MSNBC folks. Joe Scarborough [Morning Joe] was a terrific pick and that's a great role for him. I'm cheering for his success."

Classic Case Of Supply & Demand

Ability to think on his feet was a critical element Smerconish was able to transport from his law background to radio. "I wasn't in an office drafting wills – I was trying cases in front of juries," he explains. "It gave me an insight on what people are interested in. There's nothing like losing a case to learn a lesson that things you were saying were not necessarily what [the jury] was interested in hearing. That was invaluable to me. I keep my law license active and every year I'm obligated to sit in a classroom for 12 hours to get ethical training. I can still practice law [but] generally speaking, I do not miss it."

Somewhat along the lines of legality and broadcasting, Smerconish doesn't believe serious consideration was given about reviving the Fairness Doctrine. "I thought it was conservative hosts just stirring the pot," he remarks. "There's so much choice out there; I don't think we need it. It came in an era when there were so few places to turn for news and opinion. The moral foundation for it has totally evaporated. It is nuts to contemplate bringing it back. I did not think it was for real - maybe I'll be proven wrong."

It is Smerconish's contention that liberal/progressive network Air America was handicapped coming out of the box. "Talk radio developed when conservatives felt they were disenfranchised and closed out of every other medium," he observes. "This became the clubhouse and the place to gather. Now conservatives have Fox, a lot of print and a boatload of blogs and online outlets. It's a different world. Air America came in with a supply but there wasn't a demand. It might be a different picture if [that network were] to launch today."

Controversial Camp Letters

Several elements leap out when considering what distinguishes Smerconish from the vast majority of his counterparts.

Clearly a conservative he nonetheless endorsed Barack Obama and had the then presidential candidate on his show three times during the campaign. "For far too long, extremes have controlled [radio] and there's no need for that," Smerconish stresses.

Further energizing unpredictability surrounds his program in that

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there (mercifully) aren't shouting matches or nonstop partisan-based monologues. "When our young daughter was away at camp, she wrote a slew of letters to my wife [Lavinia] and me," recounts Smerconish who aired the correspondence. "It was straight out of [Allan Sherman's] 'Camp Granada.' You would've sworn she wrote the song ['Hello Muddah, Hello Fadduh']. Guys said my kid was a wimp and should tough it out."

On the other hand, women tended to say it was appalling and Smerconish should rescue his daughter. "That's when I realized I wasn't talking about the news – I'm talking about life and [moreover] people are into it."

Magical Christmas Lights

Voracious reader and online enthusiast Smerconish is sensitive about remaining cognizant to everyday moments. "You might not think they're good fodder for radio but they really are," he insists.

One year when still doing afternoon drive Smerconish took the family to get the Christmas tree after he finished his PM drive shift. "I knew my wife would wrap white lights around it," he states. "I didn't grow up with white lights – they were big, fat colored lights which were [subsequently] hidden in the basement. We somehow became a suburban family of panache and upward mobility."

Not only did this strike a nerve with Smerconish he mentioned it on his program and points out, "It caught fire like you can't imagine. Every year I try to recreate the magic of the 'white light versus colored Christmas light' controversy. I hope a national audience will help me develop those themes. That's what I most enjoy doing. People can get front-page news from [many] different people. I hope I bring more to the table than that."

Correspondingly just last month, he accidentally ran over his son's cocker spaniel in the driveway of their home; three veterinarians couldn't save the family pet.

An on-air cathartic confession prompted listeners to share similar "amazing stories."

Through The Fire

Arbitron unveiled Portable People Meter in Philadelphia and Smerconish keenly tracks electronically-measured ratings results. "As [PPM] has taken hold, the gulf between syndicated guys we have on our station – Glenn [Beck], Rush [Limbaugh] and Sean [Hannity] – has gotten larger. I don't say this in a demeaning or negative way but as a point of fact, I outpace them on [WPHT]. In part, I attribute that to PPM technology which removes passion from the process. People would walk through fire for the political host most identified with their views. That isn't me because I've never been doctrinaire in my views. I've never bought into everything from the GOP. It's just not my style of radio."

Much to his credit Smerconish, in the days of diary-based methodology, conducted his own reviews and spotted his name, albeit frequently misspelled. "There'd be Rush with capital letters and

exclamation points," he remarks. "To me, that was a person who'd give Rush five days worth of listening credit, regardless of whether [they did so]. PPM is a much more honest read. In the past, those who engendered hardcore – but not broad – support had an advantage. Those days are over."

Among the select few talk personalities with both a daily local – and syndicated – program, Smerconish believes the economy is driving the trend toward more national talents but opines the pendulum will swing back. "I'd be shocked if that holds true for the next decade. The future is bright for those behind the microphone and gets brighter all the time. The sky is the limit for content providers."

Agenda-Free Weekends

Apparently however two daily radio shows, two weekly newspaper columns and his twice (sometimes thrice) weekly MSNBC appearances aren't enough for Smerconish.

Last Monday (4-27), the raconteur/three-time author (including NY Times best-sellers "Murdered by Mumia" and "Muzzled: From T-Ball to Terrorism, True Stories That Should Be Fiction") released "Morning Drive: Things I Wish I Knew Before I Started Talking" and he's enthusiastic about the book. "I think it's informative, revealing and funny."

As far as the (defending World Series champion) Philadelphia Phillies season-ticket holder is concerned, a perfect weekend is to have nothing planned because, "My wife has an active career of her own as a successful realtor and we work like dogs during the week."

Thankfully this riveting observer and commentator of the political process convinced himself he could have more impact with a microphone than with a legislative gavel. "I don't take lightly the responsibility of reaching many people and being able to inform and influence them," Smerconish states. "I'm very happy with where I am and it all makes sense."



WHO: Michael Smerconish
WHAT: "The Michael Smerconish Show"
WHERE: CBS Radio Talk WPHT/Philadelphia
WHEN: Weekdays, 6-9am

WHAT: "The Michael Smerconish Show" (a.k.a. "The Bald Truth")
WHERE: CBS Radio-Dial Global
WHEN: Weekdays, Noon-2pm

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