

AIRSPACE

Published Quarterly by the Association of Independents in Radio

328 Flatbush Avenue, #322, Brooklyn, NY 11238 (888)YES-AIR7 Fax: (718)857-3376 <http://www.airmedia.org> dolores_brandon@hotmail.com

EXTRA! EXTRA! EXTRA!

Hey Indies: Got a Date for the Weekend?

An Interview with Public Radio Weekend's Jim Russell and Tim Owens

Editor's Note: There just wasn't room in the 16 pages of the Summer 2002 issue of AIRSPACE for this 3,600-word interview transcript, but we felt it would still be of interest to AIR members. And since we didn't HAVE to fit it into the print edition, we also didn't have to cut it.

(This interview took place by phone on June 5, 2002. Tim Owens, Coordinating Producer for Public Radio Weekend, is on loan to PRW from NPR; where most recently he was Executive Producer for NPR Jazz. He is also a former AIR Board member. Jim Russell is Senior Vice President & General Manager, Minnesota Public Radio's Marketplace Productions. Janet Dagley Dagley is Editor of AIRSPACE and Vice President of the AIR Board.)

JDD: How do you see independents fitting into **Public Radio Weekend**?

TO: We see them playing a big role, actually, both as producers of sound and on-air talent — as you know, many independent producers in public radio can do both. I think that this is going to end up being a show that will require a tremendous amount of input from independent producers, anywhere from half to probably 3/4 of the product that we put out there. Now don't forget that my task is to create a prototype, or prototypes for **Public Radio Weekend**. And we're grappling with what those prototypes will look like right now, in terms of format, style, approach. Heavy-hosted or not so heavy-hosted? What percentage independently produced material? What percentage host-generated material? We had a very successful retreat this past weekend which really represented one of the first times we got some of the best producers in the system together to talk about making a show, and then we're doing the same thing in Baltimore. After these retreats, we'll put our heads together and try to figure out what this thing's going to be, and begin to talk to independents and others to create for it.

Basically, we're looking for new paradigms here: how can we address what listeners want to hear on the weekend? One of the things that we do know is that listeners are somewhat unsatisfied with what we're currently offering, particularly between 11 a.m. and 5 p.m. on Saturdays. What can we create that might be a little different, that doesn't sound like **Weekend Edition**, that doesn't sound like **All Things Considered**, but has a personality, and style and approach of its own. We're trying to create something unique. Now it may be common to **Weekend Edition**, to **All Things Con-**

sidered, in some things, but my hope is that it can stand on its own legs and have its own personality.

I think there are a couple of key elements we're trying to do here: live-sounding, freshness, spark, spontaneity — it's those kinds of qualities we're trying to get out of this, as well as humor. I think humor plays a big role in this. I think the other thing is a sense of place. You know, place can be anywhere & everywhere. If you were to do everything through the lens of a place, or a sense of place, what might that do in the creation of this show? Will it sound any different? Can you give the listener a sense of place? And I think that's one of the critical things to do in creating programming anywhere. The second thing, the other character to this, would be telling a story — almost always telling a story about something. That's what's going to engage the listener. Even if you're doing a sound montage, you can tell a story just through sound alone.

JDD: Where are you now in the process?

TO: Moving forward. I'm getting anxious to see what this thing's going to look like. We're not at that stage yet, but we're certainly at a stage where we've got a lot of ideas, we have some research, we're gathering more research — I mean, literally, audience research — we're beginning to get increased interest from stations to participate. So I would say it's beginning to take on some form, but it's still more a blob than it is form at this point. Don't forget that we're still somewhat early in the process as you and I are talking. One thing to underline about **Public Radio Weekend**: It's as much a process, an approach to creating programming, than it is anything. And that process is having to do with considerable research, having to do with station consultations, having to do with producer consultations, to get ideas, to collaborate, you know — drop the walls, folks! Let's all collaborate to see what we can do to make weekends better. In that sense, I'm using Jim's words here, because he is the true visionary in this project.

JDD: Just observing from a distance, I would say Jim has a tendency to ignore the walls that are there. It sounds like you're not just coming up with programming for the weekend, but changing the way people in the system deal with each other.

TO: Exactly. You've got it. The simple fact of the thing is that resources are limited. And to some extent the public radio audience views it all as, they don't care if it's PRI or NPR...

(Jim Russell joins the conversation)

Continued on Page 2

Public Radio Weekend's Jim Russell & Tim Owens:

Continued from Page 1

TO: ... The system needs to collaborate. This is not about NPR, not about PRI, not about MPR — it's about everybody coming together to create something.

JR: We're just pretending that the walls don't exist.

I said to someone yesterday, what I'm sort of daring the people who erect walls to do is assert the walls being there. In a kind of transparent environment, which is what we're trying to create, whoever does that, we just name them the villain. So come on in. You want to put up a wall? Great. We're going to put the spotlight on you for putting up a wall. And basically, with that kind of spotlight, I don't see any walls going up.

TO: It makes sense to collaborate, because after all, there are limited resources in the system, and if we pool our assets, we're much better off rather than trying to compete with one another.

JR: And you know something? The reason we're on the right side of God or whatever it is on this one is because the audience doesn't care, the programmers don't care, the people who care have very precise vested interests, and if they want to stand sort of naked in front of the world wearing only their vested interests, that's cool with me. It turns out that they don't. When it's put that way, they decide to wear clothes.

I've said to everybody from the very beginning, any one of you could stand up and say, "We're not going to participate." And you could probably kill this idea if you're big enough. OK. Who's going to be first? And you know, it's kind of a game of bluff, and so far, no one has stood up and said "No."

We'll see how involved they are. One level of not stopping it is to simply not erect roadblocks, but that doesn't mean that people will enthusiastically support it. That's what we're about to find out, isn't it? But when we had the audacity to go to NPR and say, we want Tim, the old NPR would have started laughing hysterically. I said to [NPR Senior Vice President for Programming] Jay Kernis at the very beginning, "I am skeptical of NPR's ability to partner without controlling." And he said back to me, "You should talk! You come from Minnesota Public Radio!" And I said, "OK, fair enough. Now that we've insulted each other, let's see whether our organizations really, really are changing their thinking. And so far, with, I'm sure, some degree of discomfort, they are. And it's kind of a miracle.

From the very beginning. I said to both PRI and NPR, one of your reasons for being involved in this project would be to keep an eye on what we're doing, on the off chance that we might actually do something worthwhile. And even if for some reason a new national program did not emerge, which we think will, but if it didn't, we're still focusing on the right questions and asking a hell of a lot of the right questions and looking at the right issues.

TO: And building, maybe, a new paradigm for the creation of programming for the future.

JDD: Let's talk specifically about how you envision independents being part of this, not just the planning but the fruition.

TO: Let me repeat what I said earlier: I envision independents being a big part of this, in terms of being both producers and talent.

JR: I don't know if you had any feedback from that meeting at the PRC, but it was a meeting that had a little tension to it. But I wasn't particularly surprised because there's been tension in every meeting that we've had about this project because people go into the meeting absolutely certain that we know what we want to do and

we're just trying to co-opt them and buy them in. They keep waiting for us to say, OK, this is what we want, this is what we're going to do, and when we don't say that, when we don't tell them, this is exactly what we're going to do, and this is what we want you to do, they go from being fidgety to being mad, and say, "Come on, will you tell us what the agenda is? We know there's a secret agenda, so what is it?" And finally, at that point in the meeting, they begin to wonder, maybe there isn't a secret agenda. And the truth of the matter is that we want, and have invited, AIR formally as an organization, and we want to have AIR and independents individually involved in helping design what this is, and we do not know what it is yet. And as I said in the meeting that I had, when I kind of got flustered in the meeting with independents at the PRC, I said, "Don't you think it's an enormous burden to me to NOT design the program?" I wake up every morning saying, gee, maybe it's this kind, and then I stop myself and say, no, we're not supposed to do that, because we wouldn't be honest to the process of consulting if we had fixed ideas and then just went out to test them. We want independents involved at every level in helping create the concept, in helping create the management paradigm or rules, we had a discussion in La Jolla and we'll have another one about what are the rights relationships, who owns what, and we read a very simple statement, and I can provide it to you, that basically said we are in favor of acquiring only those rights that we need to broadcast the program, we don't want to own anything, we want the nonexclusive right to broadcast it, and we want to encourage people to not only own their rights but to use material on other programs and other platforms as they see fit. It's what we said and it's kind of funny, because it's what we said in the CPB application. We are committed to that.

JDD: Would independents need to go out and get their own funding to participate?

JR: We're not anticipating that independents would go out and get their own funding. But we do imagine it will be a hodge-podge of funding, so that if someone has or would have funding for a project they're doing, they might well say to their funder, we're not only doing a one-hour show, we're doing a 10-minute piece for Public Radio Weekend, and we'll get you credit on Public Radio Weekend as well as on the one-hour show. But the program intends to acquire, and pay for the acquisition of material. What we haven't worked out yet is what an equitable rate card would be for what we're talking about is, often what we would be acquiring would be second rights. So, let's say that NPR has acquired something from an independent, and they have first rights and they paid, therefore, the principle money, what would the additional cost be of using a segment of it on Public Radio Weekend? And we haven't worked that out yet. We presume it would be less than first rights, but we haven't even done a budget, because we don't know what the show is. We're completely open to having that discussion and from my standpoint, the discussion ought to be held as transparently as possible. I know Karen Michel is involved in this group of independents who are looking once again at the subject of rates, she is coming to the meeting that we have in Baltimore, and as I say, we raised the subject at the meeting in La Jolla. We are following with

Continued on Page 3

Where Do Independents Fit In?

great interest what's happening with NPR, because that has always been, what, the 9,000-pound elephant. But a very interesting paradigm came out of La Jolla. I hadn't heard this before, but it was, generally speaking, when people like producers of shows or networks go out to acquire rights, they try to acquire maximum rights at minimum cost. The paradigm that came out of La Jolla was acquire minimum rights, least possible rights, and yet have some kind of way of making additional use. Public television, I don't know if public radio does, but public television calls these step-ups. So have built into the acquisition the ability to do some additional things down the road if you want to at a specified price. So if you want to do an anthology, you don't have to go back and ask permission, it's all built into the contract. You just have to pay this additional fee.

And the other thing is we were advised to be very careful about conflicting rights. So another reason for acquiring minimum rights, the first-rights people may have already acquired CD rights, anthology rights, so don't try to acquire rights you're not going to use and just have the show sit on the shelf somewhere, gathering dust, and you sort of gouged someone to get the maximum rights, when that's not what you need. The model here, the goal, is to maximize service to the audience. And I think it was Sandy Tolan who said, start serving the audience, and then back up your whole rights discussion to: "What kinds of rights do that?"

JDD: That's a really good way to look at it.

JR: It just shows you that it really is possible in this late day and age to have completely new ideas about how to put together a show.

JDD: Where will you be going after the first nine months of the project ends in September?

JR: I get to go on a big vacation.

TO: No, WE get to go on a big vacation.

JR: Obviously at that point we're going to go back to CPB with a grant request, and we will go out looking for the money. Assuming that we've come up with a show. It's always possible that we could come to the conclusion that this was a lot of fun but there's no show here, but I don't think that's going to happen, so we then have to look for the money. One of the things we did was a study with David Giovannoni about, sort of a feasibility study, looking at his audience data and his formulas, what could we expect might come from the system, from stations in terms of carriage? And it looked like between 25 to 33 percent of the cost of a show might come from the system and be met by increased audiences and increased contributions from both listeners and underwriting. And that's very much in line, it's actually a little higher than what many national shows get. So we obviously need some money from CPB, we need some corporate and foundation money. I'd love to say that it would be six months from September that it would be on the air, but that's not possible. It probably is a year. And it may be a year before we have money and then need to have startup time

TO: The process will also show us what works, what didn't work so well and what didn't work at all, and we'll be looking at that as we look into the crystal ball of the future to bring this to regular weekly life. It's likely that not everything is going to work. It's likely that not everything in the process is going to work, so we'll have to look at that, but that's all part of the evaluation and fine tuning that goes on in something like this.

JR: One of the reasons the weekend is a good place to do this is that NPR is going to be developing a weekday show, five days a week, and the opportunity to experiment versus the opportunity or the necessity to be right the first time, right out of the gate, you know, in a five-day-a-week show on weekdays, you've got to get it right quickly or you're in trouble. With a weekend show, you've got a lot more room for experimentation. I have no question that not only is it a work in progress now, it will be a work in progress when it goes on the air. And the beautiful thing is, if you're doing a magazine program, as this clearly is aimed at being, if one segment doesn't work, you haven't killed yourself; you just move on.

TO: One of the things we found out in the station-consultation process is that if stations were willing to take a risk, the time and day that they'd be willing to take a risk are Saturdays sometime between 11 and 5. And yes, the intent of the program is to take some risks, to see what works and doesn't work. One of the things that came up in the La Jolla retreat is some kind of showcase for independent or budding producers.

JDD: Is Saturday from 11 to 5 the deadest time in terms of audience size?

TO: My understanding in terms of radio listening on the weekend is that we're underperforming. There are listeners listening to radio; it's about 12 percent fewer than listen each day of the week, but they are nevertheless listening. And when you think of 12 percent, that's not a whole lot. But they are not listening as frequently or as long as they do during the week. And one of the potentials here with Public Radio Weekend is to, what's called, increase the number of occasions that a listener will tune in. And a program like PRW, that's one of the goals of this if it becomes a weekly show. Because if you have more occasions, you're essentially building audience. So we're underperforming.

JDD: And is that why stations are willing to take a risk at that time?

JR: Exactly. What have they got to lose?

JDD: What should producers do if they want to get involved?

JR: Send an e-mail to prw@marketplace.org and put the word "info" in the subject header, and they will get e-mailed back to them info including the way in which you submit ideas to us. There's an intellectual-property waiver, like everybody uses. Just because you suggest we do a program on science and someone else suggests we do a program on science doesn't mean you own science. And obviously we want to see ideas, and we want to see as many ideas as we can. One of the things that I think we're going to end up doing is these production consultants. Basically, we're going to be hiring some folks, probably from those who attended these meetings, to help us corral resources, to help us work with groups of producers.

TO: 75 percent of the attendees at these meetings were independent producers.

JR: I thought, gee, it would be nice to have some independent producers. We did. We had some, we had 75 percent.

TO: And the bulk of people in that room, they were producers, even if they were producing for the network.

JR: One of the things, by the way, about those meetings — Jay Kernis called me and asked how they went, and I said, somebody at the very end observed that we don't have craft meetings in our

Continued on Page 4



**Association of
Independents in Radio**

448 N. Kilkea Drive
Los Angeles, CA 90048
Tel: (888) YES-AIR7
Fax: (718) 857-3376

Summer 2002 EXTRA

Online ONLY

A I R S P A C E

Jim Russell & Tim Owens

Continued from Page 3

business — maybe you guys do in AIR — where people sit around and talk about, at a very high level, production ideas and how to solve problems and worthwhile problems to direct your attention resources at.

TO: And enthusiasm. That's the other thing that came out of this meeting was just the passion people have for radio and creating for radio. It was in the room, which I think is one reason people emerged from the retreat with a smile on their faces. There were others there sharing the same passion.

AIR's activities are supported by individual and organizational members. Major funding provided by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting the National Endowment for the Arts, and the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.

