

INSIDE RADIO®

Monday, May 26, 2008

“Personalities INSIDE RADIO”

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Rocker Looks To Win With Talk

by Mike Kinoshian, Personality Editor

To claim there is a plethora of female, progressive-leaning talk hosts would be inaccurate.

Conversely however anyone lamenting the actual number is zero has clearly never listened to Clear Channel's WINZ/Miami.

Major Decision

Handling mid-mornings (9am – Noon) with her customary superlative aplomb is Jones Radio's rapier-witted and highly knowledgeable Stephanie Miller, while 3-6pm duties are the domain of Nova M's newest acquisition and longtime South Florida cult favorite Randi Rhodes.

Jumpstarting the day (6-9am) is yet another gifted woman with abundant regional roots and splendidly varied vitae.

When ardent music lover *Nicole Sandler* enrolled at the University of South Florida/Tampa in the late-1970s, the first item of business was selecting a major.

Broadcasting was the only thing that interested her and as she reflects, “I thought I could get to play music on the radio. I studied broadcast programming and production and that's really [how I got] into [the medium]. Most [other students] were into television but I fell in love with radio.”

Daytime Classical/nighttime Jazz campus outlet WUSF was Sandler's starting point. “They gave us a whopping four hours of rock and roll on Friday and Saturday nights and it was all turned over to me,” she gleefully recounts. “It was so creative to call it ‘free-form’ radio. I did that pretty much all through college. I also worked at [Adult Alternative WMNF] a community station that is still going strong.”

Immediately after obtaining her undergraduate degree in 1981, Sandler - no relation incidentally to “SNL” alum Adam (“Zohan”) Sandler – landed a commercial radio job in Tampa and would remain there for close to a year before relocating to the Big Apple as a weekend producer at WMCA. “My dad was very supportive and said if I didn't do it, I'd always regret it,” she remarks. “The job was ten hours a week at eight dollars an hour. Two months later, Bob Grant's producer left. I moved into that slot and worked with Bob [from 1982-1985].”

Surviving A Stormy Situation

A two-year tenure in a similar role at crosstown WPLJ for Jim Kerr (who now does wakeup duty at NYC Clear Channel Classic Rock WAXQ) followed in advance of Sandler's cross country move to Los Angeles. “[Being there] was a battle,” succinctly remarks Sandler whose initial L.A. duties were producing Phil Hendrie's KLSX Classic Rock morning show (co-hosted by Marshall Phillips). “That lasted about six months and just wasn't a good mix [because] I didn't think Phil was funny [and vice versa].”

Walking, for all practical purposes, across the street Sandler was hired to co-host mornings (with Warren Williams) on CBS Radio's mellow Triple A precursor KNX-FM (now Adult Hits “Jack” – KCBS-FM). “Less than a month after I got there, a new GM came in and [replaced Williams] with a friend of his [Scott Carpenter] from San Francisco,” she notes. “He [did a handoff] introducing me as ‘the weather mama.’ I may have finished the shift but walked into the GM's office and gave my notice. [Several days later], I handed him a resume and told him what [KNX-FM] would be losing. We had a very good talk and he convinced me to stay.”

When the station's Promotion Director left shortly thereafter, Sandler assumed that role and remained onboard for two years, which included the KNX-FM evolution to Oldies as KODJ.

Arriving in the City of Angels at about the same time as Sandler (1987) were Mark Thompson & Brian Phelps, a promising morning team making the leap to the #2 market from Birmingham's “I-95” (WAPI-FM) and Sandler declares, “They were doing something unique. I ran into Mark and told him they needed me to produce the show.”

Within six months, that became reality and she performed in that capacity for then-rocker/now Classic Rock KLOS for the next four years. “We rose to #1 and stayed there the entire time I was with them,” she proudly proclaims. “We owned Los Angeles. It was pretty magical and we were very creative. As much as Howard Stern wants to spin it and [claim Mark & Brian] stole his act, they never listened to – or wanted to be influenced by – anyone else. We didn't have a clue what [Stern] was doing. People listened to [Mark & Brian] and loved [them].”

All this transpired pre-Internet and Sandler explains she didn't have any extravagant resources. "I did things with smoke and mirrors," she remarks. "There was no budget for Christmas and birthdays shows. We just pulled it all together and wrote rules as we went along. You probably couldn't do things that way today. After a while [though] success can sometimes spoil you and it stopped being fun."

Striking The Right Chord

A format that attracted Sandler to radio in the first place began popping up on stations such as KFOG/San Francisco and KBCO/Boulder (Denver). "I hadn't pursued [working in music radio] because no one played the music I liked," she states. "Playing the same songs over and over again wasn't what I wanted to do but suddenly there was a format [based] around 'my' music."

Timing for a circa-1994 communication and subsequent meeting she had with Triple A consultant Dennis Constantine couldn't have been more fortuitous since he and Golden West Broadcasters President Bill Ward were discussing such a Los Angeles entity. "Dennis put together [KSCA] from out-of-town and the air staff [consisted of out-of-market talents so] Bill Ward insisted I be part of this," Sandler notes. "He knew I had a Los Angeles following."

Originally slated for 7pm-Midnight Sandler ended up being Music Director/mid-day talent.

There was also a brief period when she and fellow KLOS alum Chuck Moshontz formed KSCA's morning team.

Not quite three years after "L.A.'s Finest Rock" was launched, the station was sold (1997) and transitioned to its current Regional Mexican format with the KSCA calls still in use. "I became the Album Network's Rock Editor," Sandler points out of his trade publication foray foray. "I promised I'd give it six months and quit six months to the day later. I hated it. It was promoting records and that's not what I do."

Channel Changer

Co-hosting mornings on then Jacor-owned "91X" (XETRA/

Tijuana-San Diego) Sandler began hearing rumblings Los Angeles' 103.1 frequency was about to make a format flip to Triple A. "My arm didn't have to be twisted to put 'Channel 103.1' [KACD & KBCD] on the air," jokes Sandler who was brought in as Music Director. "We were five blocks from the beach and I brought my dog with me to work every day. Charlie Rahilly was overseeing the station and was very supportive."

When the Santa Monica/Newport Beach over-the-air simulcast signal was pulled, there was a seamless transition to what was a groundbreaking Internet-only operation. "CNN was there to cover it and it was a story in [many consumer newspapers and publications]," Sandler points out. "It was pretty wild [but] we were too early. It lasted eight months and the dot com bust happened."

It was just after 9-11 (2001) and Sandler was contemplating her next move when she heard from a friend who owned a station in Taos, NM. "He was telling me how wonderful it was there," Sandler explains. "I'd just adopted my daughter and thought that might be a good place to raise her."

After just several months of being PD/morning person, Sandler realized her attempt to adjust to life in Taos was unrealistic. "It was culture shock and I got [physically] sick," she recounts. "Everything was wrong so I moved back to South Florida [where] I built a home studio. I began doing voiceover work [including] a six-day-a-week morning show for Sirius. I'd bought a house and was resigned to stay here."

That stance changed however when she was presented a Triple A programming job in suburban Beantown (Haverhill, MA). "I loved Boston but the owner was a control freak," comments Sandler who departed after a year. "It isn't worth it to be miserable. I'd had it with radio and began a video production company [but it became clear] I really like the creative side of things – not the [business end]. I've made some beautiful projects but just don't like asking people for money. I figured it was time to go back into radio, which is what I know and love. One thing I enjoyed at KSCA and 'Channel' was being able to discover new artists and new music."

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Instead of tracking the latest rock bands she began focusing exclusively on Progressive Talk radio and since September has been in the morning drive chair at liberal-leaning WINZ. “Rush Limbaugh didn’t become hugely successful overnight,” states Sandler. “Air America didn’t have a good business plan to start with and tried to be a whole network, rather than a programming syndicator. There were some good shows [but] the way Air America set things up it was bound to fail. [Managers and programmers] don’t want to turn over their [entire station] to a network. The situation with Randi Rhodes [leaving to go to Nova M last month] is probably the best thing that could have happened. I was amazed at the number of commercials and Randi-specific [ones] she had the day [she debuted on Nova M].”

Colleague-Comfortable

Seven stations comprise Clear Channel’s Miami cluster; WINZ shares a sales staff with fellow AM talker WIOD which Sandler maintains gets most of the attention. “We’re the ugly stepchild. On some days, I’m thankful of that because I’m left alone to do my thing [but] it would be nice to have resources [our other] stations have. There’s no advertising, marketing or promotion. I don’t complain because I’m a Rock jock getting a chance to learn as I do Talk radio in Miami. I have a job and, in this day and age, that’s not so easy to say. I’m learning a different skill and am better at it some days than others.”

Getting the chance to be part of the same talent lineup as two of her professional role models is another perk. “She’s only about a year older [than I am] but I look up to [Randi Rhodes],” Sandler notes. “She [also] comes from a rock background and I’ve watched what she’s done over the years. She’s a tough, strong woman and I’m very impressed with her. I used to listen to Stephanie on [Los Angeles’ KFI] and have always been a fan. Ratings wise, she’s probably the most successful person on our station. When I got into radio, there was one obligatory woman [per station]. Listeners will occasionally say it’s nice to hear an intelligent female voice on radio. I met Stephanie and felt immediately comfortable with her. Randi, Stephanie and I are career-driven women.”

Parallels exist between Progressive Talk and Triple A. Each of those formats is occasionally misunderstood and both appeal to passionate audiences.

Listeners to these formatted stations can generally register extended TSL. “Most people think we need a change in government yet [it’s said] sponsors are reluctant to advertise on Progressive Talk stations,” Sandler remarks. “It might be because sales staffs don’t know how to sell [the product] or, in this age of consolidation, there aren’t enough resources to put into selling these stations.”

Appreciative Audience

Online has become Sandler’s primary source to hear new music.

“It takes ten hours to drive through Florida [so] not very many bands I like come down here,” she reports. “I actually play a lot of [bumper] music on my show and can mess around with it there. There aren’t any good music radio stations in this [market or at least] ‘good’ for my tastes. There are choices if you are into Hispanic or Top 40 but there isn’t something for me here. [Since] I’m trying to keep abreast of everything going on in the world [as well as] in South Florida I don’t tend to concentrate very much on music [anyway].”

Two huge binders occupy a prominent bookshelf position in Sandler’s home. “There are probably 1,000 sheets in each of them,” she points out. “In KSCA’s last ten days, I printed out emails I received from listeners. These people took the time to write as the station was going away. They weren’t writing to protest [but] to say ‘thank-you’ and that we made a difference in their life. Whenever I’m feeling sorry for myself, I read some of those letters from people who reached out to let me know I did something very worthwhile. They didn’t get anything because of it. I know I touched people and connected with them in some way.”

Heretofore an enthusiastic scuba diver Sandler has only done it once since she’s been back in South Florida. “I also like going to movies, concerts and theater but don’t do enough of it these days,” she admits. “When I was younger, I had something to prove and wanted to be a PD. I’ve had a chance to do that. I’m a single mom and it might be nice to have a social life once in a while where I’d actually go on a date. I’m in bed by 8pm so I’m asleep earlier than my daughter. I like communicating with our listeners and enjoy being on the air. My most ‘available’ years were spent doing morning drive. I put that first. [A relationship] may still be out there for me – you never know.”



WHO: Nicole Sandler

WHAT: “The Nicole Sandler Show”

WHERE: Clear Channel Talk WINZ/Miami

WHEN: Monday – Friday, 6-9am

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