

(11.30.17) <http://www.mystatesman.com/entertainment/how-bobby-bones-became-the-biggest-name-country-music/EZ20AD8tLUsvx0aa3P5kl/>

How Bobby Bones became the biggest name in country music



Bobby Bones sits down to talk touring, philanthropy and why Austin will always be home.

When I arrive 10 minutes early to the Hideout Coffee House on Congress Avenue to interview radio personality Bobby Bones in late October, he's already waiting.

"That's one thing I do: I get places on time. That's my talent," he says from behind his signature black-rimmed glasses. "I have friends who are good singers and good writers. I am punctual."

He's also being modest.

In addition to being host of the Nashville-based country-radio format "Bobby Bones Show," which is syndicated on more than 100 stations and has millions of listeners each weekday morning, he's also a bestselling author, a touring stand-up comedian and frontman of the Raging Idiots, his comedy band that has raised more than \$6 million for charity since forming in 2014.

"When you take his radio show combined with his stand-up comedy tour and his band touring and other things that he's putting time into he absolutely is a workaholic," said Rod Phillips, senior vice president of programming and country brand manager for iHeartMedia. "Within a day and a half of being off, he's bored to death. Me, I'm just trying to go to the beach again."



Bones (born Bobby Estell) might be “sort of the Ryan Seacrest of the country music world” (The Washington Post) and “the most powerful man in country music” (Forbes), but the 37-year-old’s formative radio years — and the early years of “The Bobby Bones Show” — occurred in Austin, a city where he lives nearly half of the time and considers home.

“He’s so good at knowing what the listeners are going to want to hear or what they’re going to enjoy,” said Amy Brown, who was a fan of the show and a friend of Bones’ before becoming a co-host in 2006. “He knows how to put all the pieces together and magically form them into an interesting five hours. Back in Austin, we used to call him the ‘pulse of America’ because he’s just good at knowing what’s going to be interesting.”

Phillips, who first connected with Bones nearly a decade ago and has since helped him grow the show, remembers finding it refreshing.

“I was immediately drawn into how real the show was,” Phillips said. “It didn’t sound like a radio show, which to me was a good thing. It didn’t sound like everything else.”

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Bones says co-hosts like Brown, whom he first met when she handed him a coupon for free ice cream at a North Austin Culver’s Restaurant, and Lunchbox, a former Jason’s Deli employee, keep him grounded.

“I have the best people around me,” Bones said. “None of them have ever been on the radio. They’re all such great people, and I found that I was able to be a better person when I was doing the radio show. It kept me from being a radio person.”

They credit him with fostering the kind of vulnerability that draws listeners to the show and keeps them coming back. Since joining as a co-host in 2006, Brown has opened up about her mother’s battle with cancer, her own fertility struggles and the impending adoption of her daughter and son from Haiti.

“Bobby makes it easy because it’s almost like I’m talking to him, we’re just sharing,” Brown said. “Are there times that has led to tears on air? Yes. But if we can be relatable and make someone else feel like they’re not alone, then we’ve done our job.”



Because so many country artists live in Nashville, the show will remain based there, but the show also has an Austin studio where you can frequently find Bones. During one of his recent stays in Austin, we sat down to talk touring, philanthropy and why this city will always be home.

Describe your work ethic.

I usually work like 27 days in a row and then take one off. I work Monday-Friday on the air, then I go out every weekend and tour (with his band, the Raging Idiots, or doing stand-up comedy) unless there’s another event I have to do or a charity event that I want to do.

You’ve talked a lot about growing up poor in Arkansas. When you pitched a children’s book idea to Harper Collins, they asked you to write a memoir instead. (The resulting book, “Bare Bones,” went on to become a New York Times bestseller.) What was it like writing a memoir?

At the time I was like, “Hey, I’m 34 years old, I don’t have anything to write. I’m not a Kardashian. I haven’t been to the moon, I’ve done nothing.” ... It felt weird the whole time and I hated it, I thought it was a terrible book. I was embarrassed of the whole thing, not of the stuff I was saying in it but, No. 1, who is going to read it? And No. 2, I’m going to have to go do publicity for something that’s going to sell nothing. It was really humiliating before I even put it out. And then it came out and it started to sell and I couldn’t believe it.

You’re working on a second book now that should be out next summer. What’s it about?

I did a TED Talk and it was called, “Winning by Losing,” and it’s about how the really successful people that you see, when you’re like, “Wow, that person must be really good, he’s that successful,” that’s just the tip of it. Yeah, they’re probably really good, but they actually got to that successful point because they failed so many times. These are the resilient people. There are tons of talented people, and they might not even be the most talented, but they’re the ones who were so resilient and learned in loss that it was winning by losing. I put my story into it and all the failures I’ve had, which are probably 10-to-1. So I did a TED Talk and my publisher was

like, “Hey, we’d like you to write that book.” I wasn’t disgusted with the idea because it’s not about me, thank God.

Since the show moved to Nashville, you’ve helped provide a platform for a lot of up-and-coming country artists, especially females. Why is that important?

I was raised by all women — mom, grandma, a bunch of sisters. I saw a big void in female (country artists), so I started there. As soon as I got to Nashville, I started bringing on females, doing shows with them, putting them on the air, trying to help them get record deals. For the last four years, that’s been a huge priority and still is for me. ... I’m not one that goes, “The playlist should be 50/50.” If there are 70 percent great female songs, those should run. As long as everyone gets an equal shot to get heard, that’s my job I feel like.

You and your ex-girlfriend, Lindsay Ell, recently broke up, in part because some competing radio stations would no longer play her music. How are you doing with that?

I was the one who was like, “Hey, listen, logically, if you want to get ahead, you can’t date me anymore because it’s not going to get better right now.” She understands. She’s super smart. She graduated high school early, was like valedictorian at like 9 or something, so she’s super smart but she also really has human feelings. ... It’s tough on both of us. But I’m not going to penalize her career. She’s worked her whole life for it.

Your 14-year-old dog, Dusty, was also recently diagnosed with cancer...

It really sucks. ... This relationship with my dog is the longest relationship I’ve ever had with any living creature. It’s a weird thing.

You were also deeply shaken by the shooting at the Route Harvest 91 music festival in Las Vegas, where the Raging Idiots had played the night before. How has that impacted you?

It’s really, really the saddest, weirdest ... I don’t even know words to describe some of the emotions because I’ve never seen something that’s been so newsworthy that I’ve been so connected to. ... I would read the news stories about people who would die and there was a kid in Northern California and in the article it said he went to see the Raging Idiots. To actually say you went to a festival to see an artist, I thought, man, he must have really wanted to see us play. I was shook so hard by seeing my name attached to this guy’s face. ... (The Wednesday after the shooting) I was talking about it and I broke down and started crying on the air. That’s when I finally broke. I felt like I had to be the responsible voice of the format, voice of the artists, voice of the listener, I was trying to do a lot of things and then I just broke.

You and Amy came up with the idea for #PIMPINJOY and have raised \$1.45 million for charitable causes. Why has it been so successful?

It just became so much bigger than we ever expected because of the people that were doing it, the listeners. We can say things all we want, but if no one reacts it’s just a tree falling in the woods and no one hearing it. Every time we do anything, Austin’s the No. 1 place of all that supports it. Austin is our biggest philanthropic helper, even for things that have nothing to do with Austin or Texas. They have our back here and have had it longer than anybody else and have stayed with us. I don’t take any of that for granted. Austin has been the backbone of the success of the show.

You still have a home in Austin and spend a lot of time here. What do you love about this city?

The people. Everyone is so nice. You can wear whatever you want to wherever you want. It's not pretentious. And there's really not winter — winter's cute here. When I do a hometown show, this is it. When I do a hometown anything. My favorite venue I've ever played is the Paramount. When I finally got to play the Paramount and I sold it out that was like done, tapped out, there's nothing else. All my growth as an individual happened in Austin.

What misconceptions have you heard about Austin?

I remember being told by people at the radio station (that in Austin) you can't talk about how you like going to Olive Garden, you have to say Chuy's. Well, I like Chuy's, but I also like the soup and salad at Olive Garden. They'd say, "You've really got to talk about how you spent all three days at ACL (Fest)." But I didn't. I didn't want to see Ben Harper for the third time. He's good. I've seen him. Austin is cool, but there are normal people that live here. We're normal people. I just try to be as real and as honest as possible. If I'm not right, people at least believe I'm telling the truth — at least my truth.

You recently played to a crowd of 4,000 at the Nutty Brown Cafe. How was that?

Those are my people. We stayed two hours and met every single person who wanted to stay and meet us. Hopefully that's what people think of when they think of me and us. I'm as odd as can be, but I also am just one of them.