

Rolling Stone

Bobby Bones on Country Beefs, Death Threats and the State of Radio

"I'm really not a dick, but sometimes you get that reputation," says the outspoken country-radio personality

Bobby Bones takes a seat behind his desk in the modest office he occupies in the iHeartMedia building on Nashville's Music Row. Country radio's most polarizing and outspoken DJ has just come off the air and, dressed in khaki jogging pants, a teal sweatshirt and his trademark Buddy Holly glasses, is as unassuming as they come. But as Bones tells it, he's often looking over his shoulder.



"I've had 15 death threats. I have security with me everywhere I go," he says. "It's not even that they care about me, Bobby. But I'm an asset to the company."

That company is radio giant iHeartMedia, formerly Clear Channel, where Bones has stood out with his hugely popular *The Bobby Bones Show*, broadcasting to nearly five million weekly listeners in 100 markets around the country. But while his employers try to survive underneath a reported \$20 billion in debt, Bones is busy building his own brand. In just three years since landing in Nashville from Austin, where his show was structured around pop music, the Arkansas-reared Bones (né Estell) has followed in the footsteps of one of his heroes, Howard Stern, in becoming if not a king of all media, then at least a prince. His band the Raging Idiots, with morning-show colleague Producer Eddie, regularly sell out their gigs and scored a Number One comedy album with *The Critics Give It 5 Stars*; he has a series of TV projects in the works with the production company he formed in conjunction with iHeart; and his autobiography, *Bare Bones: I'm Not Lonely If You're Reading This Book*, released in May, topped *The New York Times* bestseller list.

Through it all, Bones, who has tussled on-air and on social media with Kacey Musgraves, Aaron Watson and, most recently, Florida Georgia Line (the duo jabbed at Bones for a billboard publicity stunt) has remained humble. Sort of. "I'm the best interviewer in the whole format," he says, priding himself on his ask-anything and keep-it-real approach. "Except for Howard Stern, I'd put myself against anybody. Because I ask human questions." And therein lies Bones' appeal. For all his boasts, he remains unfailingly genuine and approachable on the air, as willing to discuss his childhood raised by an alcoholic mother as he is his previously lackluster dating life. (Since moving to Nashville, he's been linked to former Gloriana member Rachel Reinert and, according to him, some unnamed actresses.) Earlier that morning, he and his team, including primary foils Amy Brown and Dan "Lunchbox" Chappell, hold forth on *The Bachelorette*, the merits of Marilyn Manson and Lunchbox's misplaced wedding ring. It's everyday stuff, reinforcing Bones — who sits in the center of his crew, arranged in a semi-circle so that they can maintain eye contact — as the witty, slightly nerdy homebody next door. Just one who travels with a bodyguard.

Why do you think your book is connecting with readers? Is it the classic rags-to-riches story?

I think so. When I went to write a book, I wanted to write a kids book. I wanted to write a book about a kid not being able to fit in and how your biggest weakness usually comes back to help you. As I started telling the story of my life, they were like, 'Hey, we want you to write an adult book.' I was like, 'Uh, I don't know.' But I spent some time writing it and working with it. It's weird to see now what people really pull out of it. Mostly, it's the motivational stuff.

It's the self-help book you didn't know you were writing.

It's a self-help book that helped *me*. There were times when I'd write, and I'd have to stop for a couple days, because I'd be in such a weird emotional place, especially talking about my mom [*Bones' mother, an alcoholic, died in 2011*]. It's weird when you write. You start writing and it takes you to other places. I'll do that in therapy too at times. It's almost like I was in therapy again, because I'd be like, 'Oh, I forgot about that.' It'll be either an excellent memory or one that there was a reason I repressed it.

You talk a lot about not being accepted by the old guard of Nashville when you brought the show here in 2013. Is that changing at all?

Yeah, a little. Because [now] I have a history of being an artist advocate. I didn't have that when I came in. I just hadn't done it. But I'm still the same person and we do things that aren't absolutely "country" still. But I'm really into the music. I really like to find those artists and those songs that probably wouldn't have a

chance if it wasn't for me. I think that has given me a little bit of the "maybe he's not so bad."

I don't do a lot of hanging out, socially and in the industry, because I don't want to be jaded by the process, by the labels, by artists. So I stay away from all of it. And staying away from everything, you become known as the aloof guy. I'm really not a dick, but sometimes you get that reputation. I keep everything at arm's length. If I lose my ability to just be honest about things, then I've lost everything. I don't have any credibility at all.

Observing you this morning, it's clear your unfiltered honesty is the magic of the show. Especially since Nashville peddles a certain myth that everyone gets along and are all "buddies."

Yes, for example, the Florida Georgia Line guys went after me on satellite [radio]. I said this is great! This is real life. Good! I said that on the air. We're being humans now! I just have to be objective, but I can't be if I'm best friends with everybody. It's hard, because I have friends now. Quite frankly, Chris Janson has become a friend. Eric Paslay has become a friend. Because they're such good people, it's hard to not be their friend. But there is that mentality here. There are artists I don't like but I love their music. Or there are artists I have had sour relationships with. For example, for a long time — and it's not the case now — Kacey [Musgraves] and I were not on good terms. I was a real jerk. But we're so over that. We've talked since. It's gotten to the point where she says, "Stop saying you're sorry." We're just cool. "Remember when I was a dick? I'm sorry about that." But even as all that was happening, I was still the only guy playing "Follow Your Arrow." Because I can separate them. I don't have to be best buddies with somebody to think their music is great.

"You don't always need radio — Chris Stapleton is a prime example. Quality is just going to win now"

Florida Georgia Line called you out for anonymously buying billboards around Nashville that read "Go Away Bobby Bones." In your book, you come clean about it. Do you regret the stunt?

I don't regret it for a second. [The show] may not have lasted, quite frankly. I don't ever regret things. I learn from them. That was a big boost for us. Ratings-wise, it helped. Had we not been helped, maybe we didn't last. Maybe there's another show in here now. So no, I don't regret it. I'd seen both sides of it. People have told me I'm really stupid, and then that I'm really smart. Had it not worked, it'd have been really stupid. Maybe I regret it if it doesn't work. . . I learn from things. I've screwed up a lot. But I wouldn't take back the fine (*iHeart was fined a reported \$1 million in 2015 after Bones played an emergency-alert tone over the air*) because I learned a lot. My company might want to take back the fine

because they had to pay the money, but it was such a humbling experience for me, at a time when I needed it.

Stern was a big influence on you. What did you learn from listening to him?

Growing up in Arkansas, we did not have Howard Stern. When I started radio as a teenager, I hadn't heard of Howard. So I was that guy trying to have the big deep voice and fake it. Once I started to get tapes and watch his show on E!, I was like, 'Dang, he's just like a real human.' All I could be is as good as I am. It was a flick of the switch. He has a terrible voice; I have a terrible voice. Neither one of us would make it in the voiceover industry. But he's so great at being a person. He's so great at putting his flaws out there. I wish I had grown up with him my whole life. I wouldn't have struggled so many years early on.

Recently you tweeted "just what the format needs. another dude, singing about drinking, and girls in bikinis" in response to an unnamed new "bro country" song. Is it hard to criticize the format in your position?

It's at the point now where [my bosses] let me be me. They didn't always. . . I feel like I have an obligation to the format, and to the artists, to say, right or wrong, how I feel about the state of the industry. I feel like we've slightly changed the cycle of it too — meaning this room, this company. . . I feel like we've been able to shift the narrative a bit. It's easy to say there aren't enough females on the radio — but there aren't enough females that are being paid attention to from even the roots level. So it's A&R, to labels, to radio. It's not just radio going, "We're not going to play females." We're just not getting it given to us. Because it's not being made as good, it's not being found as good. It goes all the way back to the beginning. It's like a baseball team. You build a farm system. And I feel like the farm system, because of the trend, hasn't been built.

What level of culpability does radio have then in proliferating that homogenized sound?

What happens in radio or TV or anything is we have to hit certain ratings, so we can sell revenue. And you know what tests? These big party songs, that are very male. And I always said Florida Georgia Line isn't the reason that this happened. They did something different. They were so good at what they did that everybody copied them. That's what happens. It's hard to break the cycle. For me, it's not about taking it all and shoving it down, it's about saying, "Hey, let's not forget about this." So for the past three years, it's been, "Look at these females." Let's get with them, start from the beginning, develop with them, hear what they're doing while they're doing it, bring them in on the air. And we've done that with a bunch of them. Now you're starting to see it pay off. We're better than we were 12 months ago. And hopefully in 12 months we'll be better than we are now. But everything goes in cycles. And people are like, "Oh, it sucks." OK, there are many cycles that have sucked over time.

So what do you think is the biggest problem with country radio right now?

I don't think it's a problem with country radio. I think as a format, just in general, all of radio and all of television, everyone just wants to have the safety of today. Everyone wants to keep their job. Listen, if I go down in the ratings, I'm done. Or I have to fix it or then I'm done. So nobody wants to go, "Oh hey, I'm going to take a big risk" and risk my job for something that isn't worth risking their job for. But I can be the guy who is always beating his chest going, "Hey, at least look at this." Chris Stapleton cleaned up at the CMA Awards last year and his album sales went through the roof. Still, radio hasn't gotten onboard. Why do you think that is?

Here's a funny Chris Stapleton story for you. Way before [Stapleton's *Traveller*], this random guy would come in and play, and I'd have him on the show. He came and played a Josh Turner song that he had written. One program director called my boss and said, "Hey, why does Bobby keep having this Stapleton guy on? Nobody even knows who he is." After I had gotten that call, a week later was the CMAs when he blew up. I was like, "OK, here you go!" It was so cool, because we did a charity show a month after the CMAs and he came and played it. He's a good dude. He's a loyal guy. Here's Chris, just like that, a huge star, and he's up on our little stage playing our charity show. But with radio and Chris, who knows why songs make it? You don't always need radio — Chris is a prime example. Quality is just going to win now. Period. If you're just good, you're going to sell. You will find your place to win. Will it be radio? Eventually, maybe. He doesn't fit the sound right now. I hate that. But will he? Sure. Or he won't. Chris doesn't care about singles. He's a project guy. The label might.

Yeah, but Chris doesn't. He'll go on a show and play this song, or play this song. He's a real artist. So much that I bet it drives corporate people crazy. On radio, it's probably to his detriment a bit, but he doesn't care. He just wants to be happy and be him. He stays true.

What's your take on the concept of the radio tour? Particularly in this format, new artists need to visit radio stations around the country and bow at the altar of the program directors in the hope of getting their song played.

I think that part of it sucks. The format is, in certain places, 20 years behind. Do I think an artist should have to go to every station to have a program director be like, "Eh, I think I might play this song"? No. They'll just pick good songs. And let's take an occasional risk. I'll say this: I think I've changed the culture in the format of wanting to break artists. Now everybody wants to break artists. When I came in, I was the only one stupid enough to try.

So where do you see *The Bobby Bones Show* in five years?

For me, radio is not just a thing that comes through the car. When I say radio, it's the phone, everything is coming through the phone. And we're, if not the biggest, among the two most streamed iHeart channels in the whole company. No one expected a country show to do that. . . It'll be interesting to see what happens in the next few years. The weird thing about radio is 97 percent of people are still listening to the radio at some point in their days. Radio is never going to go away, just like the TV networks haven't gone away. It's just finding different places to put yourself.