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Country radio DJ Bobby Bones reveals he spent \$13,000 on a hoax to win over Nashville



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If you've never heard of Bobby Bones, here's the gist: He's sort of the Ryan Seacrest of the country music world, if Seacrest was more polarizing and didn't have a filter.

Bones (born Bobby Estell) is the host of iHeartMedia's "The Bobby Bones Show," the most popular syndicated country morning radio show in America, with an audience of several million. Like Seacrest, Bones is everywhere, including sports talk radio, award shows and on tour with his band, the Raging Idiots. He's also very influential — Bones can send a song rocketing up the iTunes charts by playing it just once on his show.

Unlike Seacrest, Bones is a controversial figure, particularly in country music. And thanks to an anecdote in his new memoir, "Bare Bones," the DJ now adds another layer to his complicated persona, as he finally admits to taking drastic measures to get listeners to like him during his first year in Nashville.

As detailed in the book, many weren't thrilled in 2013 when iHeartMedia made Bones (a popular Top 40 DJ in Austin) the host of Nashville's flagship radio program. Not only did Bones replace beloved DJ Gerry House, he was a lightning rod in a town that loves tradition: He had no background in country radio

and no typical DJ voice, and his co-hosts were all his friends without any radio experience. He caught artists off-guard with odd questions during interviews and occasionally played hip-hop songs. He didn't follow the "old guard" and he didn't care. Some listeners loved it; others took an instant dislike.

"Everyone who considered himself a real defender of country music hated me," Bones writes. "My attitude was, 'This is how it's going to work. I'm playing whatever I want to play. I'm doing the bits I want to do. I don't wear cowboy boots or hats or belt buckles. I am not you; I am me.'"

While Bones writes now he probably could have handled the transition better, at the time, he was determined to not change. But a year into his run, he was getting tired of being known as "the weird radio guy." "My attitude wasn't winning me any friends — or listeners. I needed to get people to like me, or at least feel sorry for me," he writes.

The plan? "I launched a massive negative PR campaign against myself to garner sympathy." So, Bones writes, he spent nearly \$13,000 of his own money to put up billboards all over Nashville for three weeks with a message: "GO AWAY BOBBY BONES."

Sure enough, the phones started ringing: From listeners, his bosses and media outlets. The main response: "Dude, I can't believe people are doing that to you." Bones writes that people started wildly speculating who it could be, from record labels to other radio stations to country singers who didn't like him. When media outlets (and even his own company) tried to investigate, they found the billboards were purchased by an organization called "Anti-BOBBY BONES."

The billboards caused a stir; a few years later, Bones still can't quite believe he got away with it. No one guessed it was him. At the time, he acted surprised as anyone, and played along with the guessing games; he also didn't bring it up too often. "The quieter I was, the more legitimate it seemed," Bones said in a phone interview this week.

He said he's not worried about the reaction from his bosses, even though he took the "ask forgiveness, not permission" approach when he decided to spring for this PR maneuver. According to Bones, one iHeartMedia executive read the anecdote and responded, "I see you admitted that, good stuff." (iHeartMedia declined to comment for this story.)

Overall, Bones said, the idea was a success: Months later, people remembered the signs. Over time, ratings grew from 2 to 3 million listeners as more stations picked up the show. At this point, even though he's admitting it was a hoax, there's little likelihood of backlash — especially because listeners are used to his wacky stunts.

In the book, he admits the billboards were “pretty desperate measures to take to get more ratings.” Still, he wrote that he has no regrets: “You have to understand how hard it was to be rejected for the thing that I had been doing for years and that had made my radio show [in Austin] so successful — and that was being myself.”