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Country music fans in the Roanoke Valley may know Bobby Bones from his nationally syndicated morning show, which runs weekdays at New Country 107.9 (WWYD-FM).

But Bones, the 36-year-old whom Forbes magazine recently identified as “the most powerful man in country music,” has been doing stand-up comedy almost as long as he’s been in radio booths.

He’ll bring his comedy to Jefferson Center on Saturday night. Bones, a rural Arkansan born Bobby Estell, has risen to the top of the radio world and written a best-selling book. He has a comedy band, and a podcast, too. Comedy is the hardest, though, he said.

“Now, waking up at 3 in the morning 200 days a year is awful,” he said of his radio rigors. “But ... stand-up’s more about a craft. You’re not having a conversation [on-air] where you get to be witty. It’s all on you. You’ve gotta build and then deliver and then get the laugh. For a long time, it’s build, deliver and get no laughs. Then you get a trickle of laughs. You just continue to work until you have a set.”

It’s a set that finds Bones poking at his own awkwardness, about his celebrity encounters, about the surreal things he gets to do simply because of his radio job. It’s a throwback-style set, with juggling and a mid-show music routine with his guitar. He said the musical part of his act is inspired in

equal portions by Adam Sandler and Minnie Pearl.

How often does a comedy fan see those two names in the same sentence?

Bones comes by it honest. Like any kid coming of age in the 1990s, Bones got big doses of Sandler. He said he spent Saturday nights in the 1980s with his grandmother, listening to the Grand Ole Opry on the radio. That show often featured Pearl, a performer whom the Country Music Hall of Fame calls “the undisputed queen of country comedy.”



Courtesy of Harper Smith

Bobby Bones has risen to the top of the radio world and written a best-selling book. He has a comedy band, and a podcast, too.

“That’s an odd combo, but that’s pretty much been the story of my life,” Bones said in a phone call last week.

It’s actually a pretty complicated story.

Bones said he never knew his real father, and that his mother died at 40 of substance abuse. No one in his family graduated from high school, much less college. He remembered that while no one told him he couldn’t be successful, no one told him he could be, either. Bones, who graduated both high school and college, wanted to escape a toxic environment.

“I decided early that I was going to make a few life decisions,” he said. “I wasn’t going to drink. I wasn’t going to do drugs. I still haven’t ever done either one of them, although there are many days, I’m like, I would like to start.”

That last clause gives a big clue about how he was able to make his escape: He is funny.

And he was driven. His grandmother saved a paper from his kindergarten days, on which he detailed three life goals: 1.) to be a radio personality; 2.) to be a stand-up comedian; and 3.) to have his own television show.

He’s making progress on the third, having recently shot a pilot for a network talk show. He almost got a daytime show with ex-football player Deion Sanders, he said, but neither one of them could commit to five days a week in New York City (Bones’ show and life are centered in Nashville, Tennessee).

Bones was 7 or 8 when he first saw late-night television talk show host David Letterman, who became his major influence.

“He was a guy who was dorky looking, like me, and he did odd things that I didn’t understand that I thought were so funny — as simple as throwing watermelons off a

building on TV,” Bones said. “I thought, wow, if this guy can look goofy and do irreverent things, then maybe there is a career in this for me.”

He has sure enough built one. According to the Forbes article, “The Bobby Bones Show” is on 100 iHeartMedia radio stations, with an audience of 3 million.

That’s a far piece for a guy who started out at 17 in a small Arkansas college’s radio station. He was doing stand-up by 19.

The show is built in part on its irreverence. The FCC fined iHeart \$1 million for a 2014 episode in which Bones broadcast fake emergency alerts, according to The Tennessean newspaper, in Nashville.

After he moved to Nashville from Austin, Texas, he secretly paid for billboards in town that read “Go Away Bobby Bones.” It was a move to gin up sympathy in Music City, where he has not been universally well-received since his 2013 arrival there. No one knew who paid for the billboards until Bones confessed to it in his book, “Bare Bones.”

He said that everything he does goes back to his lack of a childhood “safety net,” combined with a fear that it could all slip away in the next minute.

“Every day, I wake up and I try to do the best radio show I can, get the best ratings,” he said. “Or I try to go out and make people laugh the best way that I can, to do another show. I don’t really feel like ... I can sit back and relax.”