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How does country music really work? Bobby Bones's podcast is an unlikely gold mine of insider info.



Apparently, it takes about 11 minutes before a country singer is comfortable enough to start spilling secrets.

Not on purpose — sometimes, it's just what happens when the artist is relaxing in a cozy armchair, curled up to a microphone for an interview that just feels like a chat between friends. That's the setting of iHeartMedia's "Bobbycast," a podcast by country radio personality Bobby Bones, whose primary job is hosting a syndicated morning radio show in Nashville that reaches about 5 million listeners.

As the podcast hits its six-month anniversary and 35th episode, the "Bobbycast" has unwittingly become a treasure trove of unusually candid anecdotes and inside information about country music. The casual conversations often expose how the genre really works, as singers, songwriters and Nashville experts share stories behind hit songs; how and when they actually get paid for making music; and their genuine frustrations with the industry.

Bones — a powerful, sometimes controversial radio host and stand-up comic who likes to make up his own rules — started the podcast because he wanted to have longer conversations without the time constraints of radio, where he has to leave time for music and daily segments.

He was inspired by Howard Stern's long-form interview style, except he never goads anyone into revealing juicy details. His podcast questions are relatively straightforward. However, during hour-long conversations, particularly with people who don't typically do in-depth sit-downs, it's easy to forget you're being recorded. The stories naturally pour out.

"There's about an 11-minute mark when people start to crack — because usually no one gets interviewed, ever, for longer than that," Bones, 36, said recently during an interview in Washington. "You can feel people start to put their guard down ... and they can actually just speak from the heart."

Some anecdotes are bizarre: Craig Campbell explained that his 2011 single, "Fish," stalled on the country radio charts because some stations were uncomfortable with the song's risqué wordplay. ("I had everything we needed in the bed of my truck/Turns out my baby loves to ... fish.")

Others are illuminating: Lee Thomas Miller revealed that Trace Adkins (jokingly) put him in a headlock at the 2008 Academy of Country Music Awards, after Miller won song of the year for co-writing "In Color." Adkins was supposed to record the song, until he went on a music hiatus to appear on "The Celebrity Apprentice." So the song was instead given to Jamey Johnson, who made it a massive hit.

Others are inside baseball: Preston Brust from LoCash detailed how the duo's song "I Know Somebody" became a No. 1 hit on country radio — and it involved many record labels calling stations and urging them to play LoCash's song until it beat Billy Currington's "It Don't Hurt Like It Used To," which was angling for a second week at the No. 1 spot.

And some are vulnerable: Kelsea Ballerini, nominated for best new artist at the Grammy Awards this weekend, spoke frankly about how she's received a chilly reception from some in Nashville in the wake of her huge radio success. Bones theorized that because her songs have a pop sound, which radio loves, certain insiders have decided she's "not cool." Ballerini agreed: "It's a huge insecurity of mine," she admitted, adding that she hopes to change people's minds on her upcoming second album.

"Kelsea left and she was like, 'I've never done an interview like that in my life,'" Bones said. "I feel like there are stories that [singers] have always wanted to tell, but they haven't — and they know that they can tell it and feel protected, because I'm not going to let them say something that's going to get them in trouble."

Bones, a former Top 40 DJ in Austin who has earned a fiercely loyal fan base in Nashville on "The Bobby Bones Show," has zero qualms about getting in trouble himself — which he does with some regularity. He's known for occasionally "going rogue" on the air and playing music by new artists, causing unknown songs to shoot up the iTunes chart, and is quick to point out flaws in the country music system.

He's also protective of artists, particularly those whom he feels are treated unfairly, so it's no surprise on "The Bobbycast" when he empathizes with singers who vent about the country establishment. For example, Lauren Alaina, who revealed that a radio program director once told her that listeners don't want to hear female voices on air; or Eric Paslay, who had multiple No. 1 tunes as a songwriter, but struggles to find radio success as an artist.

"I have a frustration, so I can't imagine what your frustration is right now," Bones said in October of Paslay's single, "Angels in This Town," which failed to chart.

"All of radio's saying 'We love it, we need to find room. Because there isn't room right now,'" Paslay explained.

“There’s always room for good songs,” Bones said. “This is me from the inside saying never believe that crap. Because it’s crap.”

Although it might sound odd to hear the genre’s highest-rated radio show host complain about his own business or call program directors “knuckleheads,” Bones frequently gets worked up as he tackles the (admittedly complicated) internal politics of country radio. “I’m in radio, and I fight with radio people more than anybody,” he recently joked to Brandon Lancaster of LANco.

Sometimes, those in the industry aren’t thrilled with this behavior — Jennifer Leimgruber, executive vice president of entertainment programming at iHeartMedia’s Premiere Networks, said “it was a bit of an adjustment” when the company launched “The Bobby Bones Show.”

“I think people have come to understand and appreciate that he speaks openly and honestly about everything,” Leimgruber said. “He can relate to an artist’s struggle to be heard because it’s so similar to the struggle he went through to get where he is now, and the struggle everyone goes through to try to achieve their dreams.”

During the interview in Washington, Bones admitted that the longer he’s in Nashville, the more he learns about the industry; he’s changed some of his views. “I have learned that I’m an idiot, you know, through doing this, too,” he deadpanned. “Because I felt a certain way. But just like anything else, the more education you get, the more you understand why things happen, even if you don’t agree with them.”

In the meantime, the “Bobbycast” is growing in listeners — iHeartMedia would not release download or streaming figures, and only noted it’s “extremely popular.” Bones hopes to continue getting relatively unknown voices on the podcast, in addition to well-known artists. And he won’t shy away from questions that might be awkward, such as inquiring whether a No. 1 song can really earn enough to buy a songwriter a house. (Sometimes, artists reveal, it really can.)

“I ask the questions that I want to know. And the uncomfortableness to me really isn’t a factor because if I want to know it, I feel like the listeners want to know it, and that’s who I’m representing,” Bones said. “It’s almost like I feel like I’m in the House of Representatives ... those are my people, and I want to ask the questions that they want to know.”