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HIGH PROFILE: Bobby Bones grew up poor, bullied in a small Arkansas town; today, he has millions of fans, big plans

Bones excelled in high school and his ambition shaped him



By his own admission, Bobby Estell was a poor, disheveled, often hungry little boy growing up in Mountain Pine, a former sawmill town of 700 near Hot Springs. He was bullied relentlessly for the way he dressed, or because he was too quiet or smelled bad. For a while, he wore a patch over his mostly blind right eye but found that only provided more fuel to the school bullies.

He found his only solace with his grandmother -- a music leader at her church -- in school, in books or listening to the radio.

The story has been told before. His father abandoned the family early on, leaving Bobby's mother, who had gotten pregnant with him at 15, to raise him and his sister alone. The boy's mother was overwhelmed with her circumstances, turning to booze and drugs and long hours staring at a TV. Bobby was just a boy who came and went, dressed and fed himself and crashed on the sofa because he never had a real bedroom.

Bobby Estell had to learn to find his own way, to make his own bed.

Eventually, that boy grew up to take the radio name Bobby Bones, offered to him by DJ Kevin Cruise at the Hot Springs station KLAZ-FM, which hired him as a teenager and where he continued working while studying at Henderson State University. (Cruise is now at Little Rock's KDGE-FM.) He was offered either Bobby Z or Bobby Bones, neither of which the aspiring DJ was wild about, but he could live with Bones.

GETTING TO THE TOP

After excelling in high school against all odds in academics, and holding his own in football and baseball at Mountain Pine High School, Bones graduated from Henderson State University in 2002 with a degree in radio and television. While in college, he worked at the campus radio station as well as the Hot Springs station on weekends, which is why he couldn't attend the school of his dreams, the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville.

"I'm trying so hard to get the University of Arkansas to give me an honorary doctorate," Bones jokes. "I couldn't go there, I had to work. I had the grades, I had the ACT scores, but because of my circumstances, I wasn't able to get up there. It was my dream. I went to Henderson State, and it was great," Bones says.

After graduating, he took a job at Little Rock's Q-100 (KDGE-FM). In 2003, a better offer came along in Austin, Texas, and Bones moved. There, he began putting together a team that would follow him to Nashville, Tenn. While in Austin, the awards started coming. Bones was named Austin Radio Personality of the Year from 2009-2011. He also met and hired a few of his co-hosts there, including Lunch Box (Dan Chappell) and Amy Brown.

"In 2005, he was eating alone and I listened to the show, so I knew who he was maybe, but the internet wasn't as big as it is now, so a lot of people didn't know what he looked like. But I remember nudging my friend, and I was like, 'I think this is Bobby Bones.' And she was like, 'Who is that?' So, I just went and said hi. I said, 'Are you Bobby Bones?' And he said, 'yes.' And I just said, 'Hey, I listen every morning'... and we just became friends," Brown says.

With no radio experience, it was a tough sell at the station, but eventually, Brown would join the show and follow Bones to Nashville. Lunch Box was the same story, except that he was a food delivery driver Bones met and befriended. It was all part of Bones' plan to make his radio show as original and organic as possible. He wanted it to sound like friends talking, Brown says, not just radio professionals.

That's still the plan today. Bones makes notes on topics to discuss but doesn't share them with his co-hosts before they are live on air.

"He's always wanted everything to be super organic. Now that doesn't mean planning doesn't go into the show. We all work really hard. But when it comes to talking about

something, it's most likely the first time everybody on the show has heard about it. That way there's an organic reaction, right?" Brown says.

In 2013, Bones and company moved the show to Nashville and transitioned from pop music to country.

ORGANICALLY GROWN

Today, Bones is a 40-year-old syndicated radio host of the nation's No. 1 country morning show who champions up and coming country artists, a mentor on TV's *American Idol*, a best-selling author, a *Dancing With the Stars* champion, comedian, guitarist, singer, obsessive Arkansas Razorbacks fan, dog lover and a household name in many parts of the country.

- He's host of *The Bobby Bones Show*, heard on 150 stations across the country -- including Little Rock's KSSN-FM -- reaching millions of listeners weekly. How popular is he? Well, Bones is the youngest person ever to be inducted into the National Radio Hall of Fame.
- He has his own podcast, *BobbyCast*, featuring interviews with artists and music industry figures. Because of the podcast's success, Bones launched the Nashville Podcast Network, made up of a variety of hosts who focus on music culture in the Tennessee hub.
- He won Season 27 of ABC's *Dancing With the Stars* and is currently appearing on ABC's *American Idol* as a mentor to the contestants.
- His band, Bobby Bones & The Raging Idiots, plays a comedy-musical mashup and released a new album, *Live in Little Rock*, on Bones' 40th birthday, April 2.
- In 2019, Bones conquered the wilderness on an episode of *Running Wild With Bear Grylls*, a sort of celebrity survival series on which President Barack Obama famously appeared.
- He has written two No. 1 books on *The New York Times* best-seller list: *Bare Bones: I'm Not Lonely If You're Reading This Book*, in which he tells of growing up in poverty, his now-deceased mother's addiction, his father's absence and his own will to survive, and *Fail Until You Don't: Fight. Grind. Repeat*, his self-help book in which he shared how he overcame odds and insists that, by gosh, you can too.
- As a newly minted millionaire, Bones is also a philanthropist who has raised millions for St. Jude Children's Research Hospital. Every school year, he buys shoes for kids in Mountain Pine who want to play on the school's basketball team because when he was there, he couldn't afford the shoes.

"A lot of people don't know this about Bobby, but he's such a giver. He does so much for people just under the table that he doesn't even want to be recognized for," says Bones' former Mountain Pine coach, Vic Gandolph, now principal at St. Luke's Episcopal School in Hot Springs.

He says buying shoes for the basketball team is only one of Bones' contributions to his old school. "That's besides the football uniforms that he bought for the football team years ago. And that's besides the scholarship that he gives to somebody every year," Gandolph says.

Gandolph and Bones keep in touch after all these years. It was Gandolph who Bones credits with helping him get through tough times, along with another former coach, Jerry McGrew, now deceased, and a church youth director named Robert Parker.

"I think I just came along at the right time and filled a void for Bobby, as I think I did with a lot of young men throughout my coaching career," Gandolph says. "Bobby, I think, at that particular time needed a strong role model. Someone to tell him there's more out there, just keep reaching and keep digging and keep rolling up your sleeves, and he bought into that. Bobby was an extremely hard worker. He wasn't a great, great athlete. But he made up with it in his hard work and determination. He played receiver and defensive back. He probably didn't weigh a buck 15 or a buck 20 back then. He just found a way to get it done. He took some of those skills, life skills that we taught him along the way, and ... I think that was a big help in him being successful right now," Gandolph says.

"He just did about everything he could to not have to go home and deal with stuff. He found his own life out there and just sort of did it," Gandolph says.

McGrew, Bones says, took young Bobby on the only vacation he ever had as a child, a trip to Colorado with the McGrew family one summer. And Parker, Bones says, was a big help in another way.

"Robert was really great because he was my youth director. I was a big part of church. He would always encourage me to come stay, me and some friends, at his and his wife's house on Saturday nights. And what I would think was, he just wanted people to come over and watch movies, but really what was happening was they wanted to make sure we had food and got to church. It wasn't until I got older and I started to actually see why they were doing it that I really started to be extremely appreciative of it because he knew the situation most of were going through. And especially me," Bones says.

Another male figure came along eventually. Bones' mom would marry Keith Sandage, who became another bright light in his often dark world for the six years the marriage lasted. "I think I was 13 or so. He was definitely right there, too, as someone who at

least was there with a positive influence" besides his grandmother, Hazel Hurt, Bones says.

Growing up wasn't easy, but Bones often relied on the kindness of small-town Arkansas to get by. Nearby Hot Springs, he says, was the big city.

"When someone would go to town, you would go and tell your neighbors, and you go, 'hey, we're going to town, you need anything?' And so town would be Walmart And so you go to town and get whatever you need and what everybody else needed and bring it back. Hot Springs was the big city to me. Because they had 20,000 people there I was like, are you crazy, 'If I could ever work in Hot Springs!' was my thought at first.

"... and Little Rock, dear God! That was New York City to me. We only went once a year maybe to Arkansas Travelers games, when the Travelers were there at Ray Winder Field. I wrote in my book when I got to move to the city where Ned Perme was, I was like what is happening!"

Bones often felt the embrace of warm Southern hospitality from caring adults in the area, part of the reason he always tries to help out when he can now.

"As a kid I was given to a lot, as far as Christmas. Churches would come by and give us food and even toys because we didn't have toys. We didn't always have food. Just to use the analogy, I was given fish a lot but I really wasn't taught how to fish. My mom got pregnant at 15. I didn't have a dad around, and so everyone was trying to survive more than they were trying to learn how to invest in the future of anything.

"But then as I got older I started to actually be around people that taught me things and that's what I'm trying to do now. I'm not trying to survive anymore -- I'm actually doing quite well -- but my goal now is to take care of those that were me a few years ago. And to teach them how to take care of themselves long-term," Bones says.

One might think Bones would be bitter about his childhood. Mad at his mom. Mad at his dad. Mad at the world. That's not the case.

"The situation with my mom where I was a bit resentful when I was younger for what I didn't have, I'm actually quite proud of now because I can now empathize with people that are going through the same thing, and I don't think I would have had that skill set had I not gone through that," says Bones, who has never tried alcohol or drugs.

Bones has even let go of the anger he had toward his father for walking out on the family.

"I've only recently been back in touch with him. When I did my second book, the whole first chapter of that book was me going to find him and meet him. I had written this entire book about how ... the things that are most important to you are sometimes the

things that seem the scariest or that you're most reluctant to kind of jump back into because of how sensitive they sometimes feel.

"After I'd written this whole book, I was like 'Man, I feel quite the hypocrite because I haven't really chased down what had been most bothersome to me and that was my biological father being gone. But it was the first time we talked in 30 years, we had lunch, and it was very awkward, but it was supposed to be. It's not like you get together and have a bunch of hugs and kisses. When we sat and talked, it was the only time I ever had a conversation with a parent ever. He wasn't a villain to me after that. It was just a guy who made some bad decisions when he was a kid, I mean, he was 17," Bones says.

BIG THINGS AHEAD

Get to know Bobby Bones now or later, because someday he may be your leader.

"Eventually, I do feel like I'll go back and be the governor of Arkansas, like that's the next goal," Bones says during a recent interview in a hotel lobby in downtown Nashville, just after he finished his live morning stint on the radio.

"And if I'm so moved to do it, I could be comfortable and stopping this and just going there. Something's calling me to go back and do that. When, I'm not sure. Maybe sooner, maybe later."

Looking at Bones' rocket-fueled career trajectory, the governorship will have to wait. Every minute of every day is a schedule for the meticulously on-time celebrity. He famously sends his radio team members home if they arrive more than a couple of minutes later than the 4 a.m. clock-punching time.

For this interview, two handlers came to watch over him. He pulled his dirty red Tesla into the parking garage right on time, looking fresher than someone who has been up since the wee hours should.

"It's cold outside and everything hurts," he says, walking stiffly toward a table. It seems the cold weather has brought back an old *Dancing With the Stars* injury recently exacerbated by Bones' workout on the new Peloton bike at home.

"When I fell I tore this muscle up here on my shoulder. All season, they kept injecting me every episode. ... I didn't want to come off the show, because I was determined to go as far as I could. I felt like I could win the thing. I was the only one. But I felt like I could win the thing, and they would shoot me up every week," Bones says before settling into a chair.

It soon becomes clear that Bones is an open book. He's already talked about the painful stuff in his own book, so nothing is really off-limits. So excited to talk to a fellow Arkansan, Bones frequently brings up his beloved Razorbacks.

"What's been the coolest about being somewhat cool recently, because I was never cool, but you get on radio or TV and people start taking your calls a little bit, is that the football program says, hey, we'd love to have you be an ambassador for us. So, I got to know Coach [Bret] Bielema a little bit, Coach [Chad] Morris, I met Coach [Sam] Pittman. ... At the basketball game Coach [Eric] Musselman had me into his office. For me, the coolest thing that I get to do is meet people that are involved with the Razorback program," Bones says, despite having met hundreds of high profile entertainers.

"If you aren't around people that have done big things, you don't think you can do big things. I want to be that influence on people. It doesn't have to be in the nutty world I'm in. I hope it's not. I hope it's encouraging people to be teachers and encouraging people to give back. ... I think that's the main reason that I want to go and be the face and the voice of the state because I think I'm the voice of the people in that state, more than anything else," Bones says.

There are those gubernatorial aspirations again. "My biggest problem with people in politics is we have so many privileged people making decisions for everyone that's not, especially in the state of Arkansas. You get a lot of rich people making decisions for poor people. ... I'm such an advocate for just human rights in general.

"There's a lot of the human element that's missing because politics is, if you're on this side you must hate the other and I just do not feel that way. I think that we're probably 96% alike, but we focus so much on the 4% we're not that we're not able to get anything accomplished. Socially, I'm just such a human rights guy and in so many ways that I'm excited to go back and actually lead my people and be someone that's come from where they come from."

SELF PORTRAIT

Bobby Bones Estell

- **DATE AND PLACE OF BIRTH:** April 2, 1980, Hot Springs
- **WHAT DO YOU MISS MOST ABOUT ARKANSAS:** The Razorbacks. Being able to see the Hogs on license plates. I miss just being around Hogs fans because here there aren't any except the occasional one on a license plate, and you'll chase it down and try to wave at it then you realize that somebody borrowed somebody's truck. Awkward.
- **FOR MY FANTASY DINNER PARTY, I WOULD INVITE:** David Letterman, who has been my hero my whole life. I'm going to go Letterman, Abe Lincoln (I have a lot of questions for that dude) and Howard Stern.
- **I ABSOLUTELY WILL NOT EAT:** I don't eat peanut butter. I don't do mayonnaise. I'm not into onions.

- MY BIGGEST ON-AIR MISTAKE: I got fined \$1 million a few years ago. I got in a little trouble with the government because I hit the wrong button and a clip that we had taken off the internet as an old EAS (Emergency Alert System) test. It turns out it wasn't fully cleared and some of the systems were triggered by it, and it shut down a bunch of signals across America and TV stations, and it was a whole disaster and \$1 million.
- WHEN I'M NOT WORKING I LIKE TO: Sleep, if I can. I have really made a priority in the last year or so to sleep a little more and drink more water.
- THE LAST BOOK I READ WAS: My problem right now is I have so many books going. Right now I'm reading the Ben Folds autobiography [*A Dream About Lightning Bugs: A Life of Music and Cheap Lessons*], who's an artist I love, one of my favorite artists.
- MY FAVORITE CHILDHOOD MEMORY IS: Probably in seventh grade, I was like 12 or 13 years old, and they made me the captain of the 12th-grade Quiz Bowl team. That was pretty cool for me because I really felt like, one, I belong somewhere, and two, I was really starting to thrive.
- I WAS REALLY NERVOUS WHEN I MET: I always get the most nervous when I meet people who were famous when I was a kid. ... For me, it was when I met Barry Switzer. That was crazy to me because he played on the Razorbacks championship team and he coached the (Dallas) Cowboys and Oklahoma. The first time I met Garth Brooks, I was pretty nervous. He disarms you pretty quick. Garth hugs are pretty good, man. Pretty good.