



BILL CODY

Of the People, For The People



If ever someone was destined to work at WSM, it's Bill Cody. From his rural upbringing in Kentucky towns like Gravel Switch, Crab Orchard, Junction City and Lebanon, Cody carries early memories of listening to 650 AM in his dad's car. Exposed to local townspeople at their highest and lowest through his father's duties as a Southern Baptist pastor, Cody has remained close to his roots, keeping connected with common folks from all walks of life.

After marrying his high school sweetheart, Cody working his way up through WVLK/Lexington, WHAS and WCII in Louisville, WHOO/Orlando and had a strong run at KKYX/San Antonio. In 1993 – coincidentally on his birthday – Cody received word that his dream gig – mornings at WSM – had become available. Not only did he get the job, he's parlayed his talent into the GAC Classic TV show, the syndicated Classic Country Weekend, voiceovers and much more. One of Country radio's great storytellers, Cody still lives out in the country and, in a nod to his namesake and love of the West, might one day fulfill a fantasy of raising a few bison.



My dad took me to our local 1-kw daytimer, WLBN/Lebanon, KY, when I was 12. The station rebroadcast his 11am Sunday sermons at 1pm, and Dad was dropping off a record of a friend to Frank Kemp, the PD. I looked through that glass into the control room, and there was Frank, whom I listened to and who would teach me so much. He played the record, and just watching him I knew I had to do that. So I started hanging out, typing

We got there and Wanda Jackson's version of "We'll Sing In The Sunshine" was to be my first song. I cued up the track from the album, did my introduction, fired the record ... and started Wanda off at 45 RPM! It just goes to show you can make it into the Country Music Disc Jockey Hall of Fame even with the inauspicious beginning of starting your first record at the wrong speed.

One of my favorite high school teachers was actually a nun, Sister Joseph Marian. And she was just wonderful. She once said to me, "Don't always assume that the people who aren't laughing or responding to you aren't having a good time." I've remembered that, especially when speaking at a luncheon or another event.

Being in that showcase studio at the hotel gives me an advantage because there's an audience watching. There are more people visible to me for my radio show than when we tape the TV program because there's no seated audience for that. I can look out the window and there are all kinds of conventions going on – NCAA, Major League Baseball, cheerleaders. Last year the orthodox Russian and Greek churches were here, with men

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labels, anything I could to be around and soak it up. After Frank would sign off the station, he'd show me how to cue things up and work the mic.

A few weeks later, I got a call at school. Frank was sick and needed somebody to fill in at 4:30.

High school drama was huge for me – a great catalyst for self-confidence, working a live audience, thinking on your feet and interacting with other people – the kind of teamwork you have doing mornings.

When the WSM job came open, I sent my stuff in and was bold enough to say to then-PD Kyle Cantrell, "I don't know what you guys plan to do with WSM-AM (at that point there was some question what direction it would take), but if you do Country music, I am the man for the job." And I'm not like that, but I just said it, and later thought, Gosh, does Kyle think I'm a jerk, or what? "Who is this egotistical guy calling me from San Antonio and telling me, 'Hey, I'm the man for the job, buddy'?" But it turned out that way.

My first day they asked me who I wanted to have as my first-ever guest, and I said, "Charlie Daniels," who's been such a hero to me. Because the studio is in the Opryland Hotel, it provided the coffee, which turned out to be chocolate raspberry truffle-flavored. Charlie took one drink, and gave me this look. "What's the matter?" I asked. "Cody, you've come to Nashville and started drinkin' hippie coffee."

in black robes and Old Testament beards going by.

It's a great cross-section of people. And with that loudspeaker out there – no matter whether it's kids, cardiologists or hip-hoppers – they will invariably stop to watch and listen. I think it naturally warms me up on the air because I see them nodding, smiling or shaking their head. Even with all of today's technology, there's something about live radio that people become fixated with.

Growing up, I listened to a lot of people – Coyote Calhoun, Bob Moody, Wayne Perkey. I hope I've been able to or will be that spark for somebody out there. Gary Burbank, who was my biggest early influence, once told me, "Listen, it's as simple as this: Put the listener on the air. Let 'em tell their joke, do their thing, and laugh with 'em. Let them make you look good and you'll be surprised how quickly people will warm up to you." Boy, is that true.

We re-created WSM station coming on the air for the 75th anniversary. Among our phone guests were Presidents George H.W. Bush and George W. While talking with the Senior and setting up the Junior, we disconnected George Senior. Charlie Chase, who was up next, said, "I've done a lot of things, but I've never known anyone to hang up on a President!"

We did that re-creation on the Ryman stage. Sitting there in the darkness with only the stage lit, I looked out at that stained glass as the morning sun came in. And when we kicked that thing off, it hit me – the whole history, [legendary Opry announcer] Grant Turner and all the WSM guys, many who already are in the Hall of Fame. That was a moment when I really realized what an incredibly special place WSM is.

What is so emotional for me at times is that my dad didn't get to see my WSM dream come true. As we would travel to games or just be out at night, he would find whatever programming was on WSM, and he'd say, "Son, that's the one, right there."

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Home On LaGrange: Backstage at the Grand Ole Opry in 2002, Bill Cody, ZZ Top's Billy Gibbons and Cody's son Levi strike the famous panhandlin' pose.

Our Tower: Gaylord CEO Bud Wendell, WSM morning maestro Bill Cody, Marty Stuart, MCA/Nashville Chairman Bruce Hinton and Country Music Hall of Fame & Museum's Executive Director Kyle Young (l-r) celebrate during WSM-AM/Nashville's broadcast of the installation of the WSM radio tower replica in the Hall's Rotunda in 2001.



Rows Of San Antone: Here's KKYX/San Antonio PD Carl Becker, the late Wagon Wheel Wagon Wheel and KKYX morning ace Bill Cody in Nashville for a CMA Awards remote broadcast in 1992.

