

INSIDE RADIO®

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“Personalities INSIDE RADIO”

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SUPER SMOOTH FROM MORNING TO MCKNIGHT

by Mike Kinoshian, Special Features Editor

Distinctively touching, profoundly moving and emotionally penetrating almost minimize describing the presentation of this quintessential epitome of silky song craftsmen.

Jam-packed audiences consistently sway in hypnotic unison as majestic melodies emerge from the 6 foot, five inch soon-to-be 40-year-old personage.

Women clearly are enthralled by his striking good looks while men can't help but be envious of the toned frame that would be equally at home mixing it up on an NBA court with LeBron James and Kevin Garnett.

Hot Property

If singer-songwriter-producer-musician weren't enough to plaster his plate, he can be heard in morning drive on a Los Angeles Smooth Jazz outlet and, as of late-January in a completely separate venture, nighttime on dozens of (mainly) Urban ACs. “You have to strike when the oven is hot,” reasons [Brian McKnight](#) whose Citadel Media show is fed from Los Angeles 4-9pm (Pacific Time). “I'm not sure if many of these opportunities would be there if I didn't treat them like it was my everyday job, which it now happens to be.”

When Dave Koz decided to relinquish morning drive duties at Los Angeles' “Wave” (KTWV), the CBS Radio Smooth Jazz facility auditioned guest hosts for weeks at a time before McKnight was ultimately anointed in early-2007 to be the saxophonist's successor. “As I get older, being on the road nine months a year isn't as appealing as it used to be,” McKnight politely acknowledges. “I still love doing shows but to have a career that would keep me at home was appealing.”

Prior to accepting “Wave” wakeup responsibilities, McKnight was his own boss at everything he'd previously done. “I didn't know if I'd like going into research meetings or discussing songs that were going to get played,” he candidly remarks. “It was very interesting to know [about the process], how advertising gets bought and how our lives are broken up by the hour - not by the day. It's crazy to wrap your brain about how [a station format clock] works.”

There isn't as much chatter from McKnight these days on KTWV

so he admits, “Things can be fudged there. It's more about playing, singing and doing some features. I don't have to get up and be at the station at 6am but it sounds [that way].”

Getting Fooled Again

Upon completion of his first year as a morning personality, McKnight realized radio could evolve into a full-fledged career so he initiated brainstorming scenarios to capitalize on it. “We went to [Citadel Media], which syndicates Tom Joyner, Doug Banks and Michael Baisden,” he notes.

Specifically isolating Joyner and marveling at the talented morning entertainer's numerous accomplishments McKnight comments, “It truly is a testament to what hard work can get you. Whether or not you like his show, it's amazing how he reaches his audience. He doesn't go above or below them – he's right there with them. That's one of the keys to doing this. I wondered if there was a slot [at Citadel Media] for the kind of show I wanted to do. To be honest, the people there weren't interested.”

One year later though as McKnight succinctly summarizes, “Here we are. I get to play [whatever music] I want every night; we have guests; and we talk about relationships. It's the kind of radio that has been missing for a while.”

Concurrent with the live nightly airing of his Citadel Media program McKnight can be found online chatting with listeners. “You get a real idea of what they like and don't like,” he explains. “It's very different from radio when I started. There was no way to really know that. Now, they're right there in your face.”

By design Emmis/New York Urban AC “Kiss” (WRKS) was McKnight's lone affiliate for the show's inaugural three-week run. “It takes time to work out a global show where you're not specific to one [particular market],” he opines. “When you're talking about a topic, the greatest thing is to be able to get calls from all over the country. It's incredible that people actually call into a radio show and that you have that kind of effect on people.”

Discussion topics generally dictate who will phone but just when McKnight assumes he has a handle on his show's audience composition, he jests, “The next night comes and I'm fooled again.”

The relationship segment comes in the show's third hour. Women call if we talk about ways to know when a relationship is over but if the [subject] is cheating, men call to defend themselves. Guys are smart and [understand] they can score points if they can get me to sing a song [and dedicate it] to their girl."

Career Conflict

When Buffalo-born McKnight was in high school (in Orlando), he imagined he'd be a professional athlete. "My mother had other ideas," he comments before busting out into his genuinely contagious laugh. "She wanted us to be in church and do music. [Conversely] my father wanted us to excel at whatever we wanted."

Still playing ball when he enrolled at Huntsville, AL's Oakwood University, then 18-year-old McKnight landed a publishing deal. "When I was writing songs fulltime, everything else fell by the wayside," he points out. "I thought it was cool until it took three years to put out the first record. I was offered some 'developmental' deals but when you're [a teenager], you think you know everything. I'm sure the record I would've put out then wouldn't have been anywhere near as good as the one I [released] when I was 22."

If however he knew then what he grasps now about the sports business, there's a chance McKnight would have pursued a professional hoops career. "I don't regret what happened but every now and then I think to myself [what might have been]," he reflects. "The thing I love about it the most is I did it my way. I never had to compromise anything I wanted to do and found a modicum of success."

That's obviously the height of understatement from the towering McKnight whose imposing vitae includes his portrayal of Billy Flynn in the musical "Chicago," which in October 2007 marked his first Broadway appearance. "People have an idea what [that character] is supposed to be so you can't 'half-way' it," he stresses. "You have to go there and be 'for real.' I knew it would be a daunting task but it was so much easier because the cast is great and the production people have you [well-] prepared. It would have been completely different if it weren't a cool place. It was one of the best experiences I've ever had."

Especially since McKnight admits he can't do anything the same way every time, he discloses he'd deliberately attempt to trip up his fellow cast members. "I tried doing it the right way the first

few performances but I wasn't feeling it," he explains. "I sang it differently every night and it was fun."

Compassionate Celebrity

Opportunities to improvise come each weeknight on his five-hour Citadel Media offering as well as on the road where McKnight's shows are still sell-outs. "Loyalty of my fans is the greatest thing I've seen in the world," the exceptionally appreciative and gracious artist proclaims. "People in my fan club will travel 2,000 miles to see me and they've seen the same show. I thought our last show was the best one we've ever done."

Challenged to top it McKnight asserts, "We have to because we can't [simply keep] giving people the same show. When people see one of our [concerts] we make sure it's worth [the ticket price]. Many young artists don't understand you can't phone-in these [performances]. You have to give people what they want. You know you're doing something right when you keep hearing the applause and people yelling 'encore.'"

Such clamoring was plentiful for an approximately three-week booking which took him to Asia early last month and a two-week Europe tour this month. "You have to be serious about doing this - otherwise, there's no way," insists McKnight, whose new record project will be released just before summer. "That's how it is with anything. People who are successful don't do things halfheartedly."

Virtually the poster boy for such a sentiment is Donald Trump and McKnight was invited to be a "Celebrity Apprentice" participant on The Donald's NBC-TV series. "They tell you all the wonderful things that will happen because of the show," McKnight points out of the interview procedure. "I did it because it isn't about love or having to eat something stupid. There were some very fun aspects about that show. I probably wouldn't do it again [though] because I don't define myself based on how famous I could be for [appearing] on a television show. If there's work I do that brings me fame or fortune, so be it but I don't need that much attention just to be on television."

Outlasting Andrew Dice Clay, Scott Hamilton, Tom Green, Claudia Jordan, Dennis Rodman, Tionne Watkins, and Khloe Kardashian - McKnight heard the dreaded "You're fired" line two weeks ago (4-17-09).

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Luminaries on that “Apprentice” version participate for a charity and in McKnight’s case, Youthville USA was the beneficiary. “It’s an organization which puts kids in foster care in North Carolina and I’ve been on the board forever,” he proudly comments. “It’s such a wonderful thing when you see how you can be an integral part of these young peoples’ lives.”

Fighting Words

Golf has been one of McKnight’s passions the past three years and he boasts a sterling seven handicap. “I used to play four or five times a week - now I play about once a week,” laments McKnight who is in the final year of participating in a basketball league.

Claiming to have put on 20 pounds during the holidays McKnight decided to get back into shape by hiring a trainer and taking up boxing. “The trainer I found said he wouldn’t [work with me] unless I was serious about being a fighter. I’m not going to fight but I’ve taken a fighter’s mentality and am in the best shape I’ve been in the last ten years.”

Motivation to trim what he envisioned to be excess baggage may have been fueled by the upcoming (Labor Day) unveiling of McKnight’s 60-minute television show which he promises will pick up where Arsenio Hall left off. “There’s been a late night void for something like this but my show will be a little different because it will be one night a week,” explains McKnight - unlikely to deliver an opening monologue in the small-screen presentation. “Instead of having to do 250 great shows, I’ll do 52 and each one will be great.”

Initial plans called for “The Brian McKnight Show” to be pitted against “Saturday Night Live,” however it might wind up in primetime Thursday night. “It will look and sound like nothing that’s ever been on television before,” maintains McKnight who honed his interviewing skills by working as an “Extra” correspondent. “It’s basically giving people at home an opportunity to see what life is like behind the velvet rope.”

Much of that can be attributed to his superlatively stylish vocals although McKnight is more partial to songwriting. “Without the song, there’s nothing else,” he declares. “You can always sing someone else’s songs and have someone else produce you but no one knows me like I do. No one can tell my stories the way I can.”

From the outset, he never aspired to be an artist. “I wanted to be a writer,” McKnight proclaims. “Record deals were dangled in front of me. I said I’d be an artist – but only on my terms. They let me do it and I haven’t looked back since.”

Stinging Sad Songs Say So Much

While “One Last Cry” and blockbuster “Back At One” are among McKnight’s masterpieces (several of his Christmas cover interpretations have become classics), “Anytime” is the song he believes got the ball rolling. “Without it, I’m not sure ‘Back At One’ would get the attention it did,” he muses. “It’s very interesting that ‘Anytime’ gets the biggest response of anything I do. Sad songs

resonate with an audience more than happy ones do because most people are unhappy.”

Notwithstanding the majority of his fans associate McKnight with the piano it isn’t his favorite instrument. “Bass guitar is always the last instrument I play on a record because the bass is the foundation,” the younger brother of Take 6 band member Claude McKnight remarks. “If I play it first, it will be too busy. Unless you’re a genius like Sting, it’s very difficult to sing and play the bass at the same time.”

Accolades and nominations recognizing McKnight’s work are voluminous which makes the fact he is so gracious that much more exceptional. “I always want to believe I’m still climbing up the mountain,” he modestly downplays. “There have been great places to stop and look at the view and then we get right back to climbing. There are peaks and valleys. You fall occasionally and have to get back up. We’ve always been able to [do so].”

With such mainstream appeal it’s his goal to open up the boundaries and expand his nightly Citadel Media program to formats such as Adult Contemporary. “I think it would [be compatible and moreover] it would give me a chance to play different songs,” he states. “I know it sounds crazy but I’d like to be retired in five years. I’ve traveled the whole world [yet] haven’t seen it. It would be great to be in a position to be able to take two years off and do absolutely nothing.”



WHO: Brian McKnight
 WHAT: “The Brian McKnight Show”
 WHERE: Citadel Media
 WHEN: Monday-Friday, 7pm-Midnight (ET)
 HOW LONG: Since late-January 2009

WHAT: “The All New Brian McKnight Morning Show with Pat Prescott”
 WHERE: CBS Radio Smooth Jazz KTWV/Los Angeles
 WHEN: Monday-Friday, 6-9am
 HOW LONG: Since early-2007

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