

# INSIDE RADIO®

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“Personalities INSIDE RADIO”

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## NO ONE LIKE ROME – RACK HIM

by Mike Kinoshian, Special Features Editor

Showcased in rapid-fire succession is impressionist Frank Caliendo's creative vocal range.

Dramatically contrasted to kinetic energy from his trademark John Madden though is a one-word verbal homage leaving immediate one-person audience, WLUP/Chicago morning personality extraordinaire Jonathan Brandmeier, in complete awe.

Inflection Caliendo ratchets up for the solitary utterance are both the word he speaks - but of much greater magnitude - the precise depiction of the talent being mimicked.

Not only is California native Jim Rome a “phenomenal” on-air personality, a substantive case could effortlessly be constructed he's among a handful of the medium's most influential broadcasters of at least the last quarter century.

Baseball's Hall of Fame has never had a unanimous first ballot inductee; the inimitable “Romey” would be a rare – and justified – lock to enter a comparable radio shrine in that manner.

Uninitiated listeners roaming into his three-hour, midday Premiere Radio “jungle” anticipating traditional “Our team won last night – let's discuss” fare are left with their heads spinning.

### Marathon Man

A youngster who couldn't get enough football, baseball and basketball, Rome devoured all related reading material and yearned to somehow make sports a career. “The second I got to college, I knew exactly what I wanted to do [which was to work in radio],” he remarks. “When I realized I couldn't play the game, I wanted to talk about the game.”

No sooner had Rome checked into his University of California – Santa Barbara dorm room he bolted to campus facility KCSB to offer his services. “I started hammering and found internships,” notes Rome whose post-graduation turning-point break was discovering XTRA-AM/San Diego would transition to all-Sports. “I was familiar with the [690 frequency] because it had that 50,000-watt signal. I hounded and pumped them with resumes, tapes and telephone calls.”

That merciless barrage took place after Rome graduated from UCSB (1987 Communications degree) and scored a local job at KTMS.

Covering triple shifts as the station's Sports Director, Rome worked virtually around-the-clock, hauling in the lofty sum of \$1200 a month.

Over and above doing morning drive sports updates, Rome co-hosted KTMS' one-hour noontime “Radio Mall,” a Home Shopping Network radio equivalent. “I resisted it greatly but was told if I didn't do it, I'd be fired. I did sports updates in the afternoon and a one-hour sports talk show.”

For good measure he performed weekend play-by-play duties.

### Lustful Welcome to the Jungle

Everyone at XTRA-AM became familiar with Rome for his persistence and management capitulated by inviting him to audition – but the pleasantries came with a catch. “If I didn't do well,” Rome states, “I was told to leave them alone because they were tired of me.”

Not surprisingly, XTRA-AM executives saw substantial upside in him and by the mid-1990s Rome's daily sports program was syndicated to 16 other markets. “Frankly, I didn't want to get locked into this whole local mindset where it was the same thing show after show, year after year [so] going national was in the back of my mind,” he concedes. “When the show couldn't be grown anymore, it was bequeathed to Premiere [which] wanted to get into more long form programming.”

Hard-driving “Lust for Life” (Iggy Pop) serves as the jungle's bumper music and is an excellent precursor to underscore virtually everything about Rome's sports extravaganza is different from cookie cutters.

Quite prudently on Rome's part, listener calls don't overpopulate the program, perfectly/masterfully punctuated by the host's judicious use of pregnant pauses superbly on-par with – if not at the very least highly evocative of - the late Paul Harvey.

Notwithstanding the word “compelling” has been used to excess that its impact has been significantly diluted, it nevertheless comes as close to explaining what differentiates Rome from the rest of the pack. “People initially wondered who I was, where I came from and when I was going back,” claims the exceptionally dexterous broadcaster who can do mesmerizing-sounding back-to-back segments about something as inane as the ShamWow. “Perhaps it

was my naivety but I had a very strong belief in what I was doing. No matter what, I was determined to let it rip.”

### Rome Wasn't Built In A Day

Integral to Rome's ascension to the upper echelon of radio personalities, regardless of format, is his creation of a complete vernacular – a “glossary” – which has evolved into an undeniable pop culture component. “It's funny - I never sat around and said ‘this is what I'm going to do,’” he reflects. “It's the same nonsense I would do with my buddies. I didn't stay up writing this stuff on a legal pad. Many of them just came flying out.”

To put it mildly, listeners (“clones”) embraced it and submitted their own entries leading Rome to proudly proclaim it's assumed a life of its own. “It's like an internet thread [though] that just kind of dies. It's still out there but not being further constructed.”

Originally a 7pm-Midnight personality, Rome half-jokingly states, “You can imagine the sort of kooks and nut cases who'd call in that fifth hour. They were either on drugs, alcohol or were just nuts. Someone called one night and said the show is a ‘freaking jungle.’ It just stuck.”

Splendidly well-prepared Rome has sufficient material that he doesn't need to take calls, yet doesn't want to completely eliminate that element. “Callers tend to be confused with listeners,” he perceptively notes. “[Many] people love the show but never call. Women don't call very often but that's not to say they don't listen. We have pretty good appeal [among] 18-34s and 25-54s - male and female.”

Delicacy is definitely needed in the call-screening process since clones frequently get carried away, fervently endeavoring to out-do the uniquely-gifted host. “They have to play their way in,” Rome points out. “It's not their inalienable right [to be on the show]. I went an entire week without taking calls to let them know they have to step up their game. They can't be on the show unless they help the bottom line. More of me and less of them is good for the show. Calls, calls and more calls means the host didn't do any prep.”

Once each year a “Smack-Off” is held showcasing exceptional callers, some of whom have been 15-year regulars. “They've been there through thick and thin,” acknowledges Rome, whose current favorite athlete to have as a guest is golfer Steve Elkington. “He

talks smack and is hilarious. We like anyone who is unafraid to state an opinion. [Unfortunately], most guys don't have much to say.”

### Rigorous Routine

Recognition of what listeners want to talk about is paramount to Rome who points out that football is unquestionably “king” in this country. “Nothing else is even close,” he points out. “I still love football, baseball, basketball and hockey. I like tennis and golf a lot. If people don't like it, they'll switch stations and I can't have that.”

Clearly what distinguishes Rome from the vast majority of past and other present-day sports talk talents is his on-air persona, attitude, sensibility, presentation and overall gritty feel he gives the broadcast.

Part of that includes the veritable daily clinic he conducts on the art of the interview. Tough, smart and engaging characterize his efforts. “I have to ask questions people expect to be asked,” he opines. “No one taught me how to do it. It was a staple and I wanted people to talk about it.”

Up each weekday at 4:30am, Rome generally arrives at work an hour later and starts “hardcore grinding” until he goes on at 9:06am (PT).

Instantly after the radio show's Noon conclusion, he drives to a television facility, dons a suit and prepares to host ESPN's 30-minute “Jim Rome Is Burning” (1:30pm). “Theoretically, you'd think my day is over at 2pm and I get to come home at a reasonable hour,” he remarks. “I have a wife [Janet], a seven-year-old and a three-year-old. I work out in the afternoon and hang out with the family. I won't compromise that. I'm back in the home office every night from 7-10pm as I get ready for the next day. It's a treadmill I can't get off of.”

### Kraig Tops His List

Toiling simultaneously in the visual medium is anything but virgin territory for Rome, who's done ESPN's “Talk2,” FX's “The FX Sports Show” and Fox Sports Net's “The Last Word.”

Exposure he garners there is certainly gratifying although he declares, “At the end of the day, I'm a radio guy and take it over television every day of the week. I wouldn't have television if it

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[weren't] for radio. There are so many ways you can go with the radio show in three hours. I don't want to give up doing television but you're [somewhat] boxed. Radio is still invigorating."

That estimation however might not be shared by those whose jobs have been eliminated by syndicated talent such as Rome. "It's terrifying and very scary to me," he maintains. "I have immense respect for local markets. That's how I came up. It's a battle. I pride myself as someone who didn't walk off a MLB diamond or an NFL field into a cushy network radio job. I had to fight my way out of Santa Barbara to get into San Diego which felt like the big league. I know the impact local personalities and local stations have on listeners. All of a sudden, the kinship and connection are ripped from them - I'm very concerned about what I'm seeing."

Graciousness with which he comports himself is without doubt the most striking thing about Rome, who off-air typically speaks in his recognizable compact yet potently meaty sentences. "I say what I mean and mean what I say but it's a show," he stresses. "I don't come home and talk smack to my wife and kids. I can look myself in the mirror and know whatever I accomplished [I did so through] hard work and integrity. I didn't step on toes or stab people in the back. I feel lucky to have accomplished what I have."

Instrumental in aiding him to achieve a considerable chunk of his vaunted status is Premiere Radio's former President/COO Kraig Kitchin, who remains one of Rome's closest friends. "I would not be where I am without Kraig Kitchin," Rome declares in his trademark concise yet emphatic fashion. "He's one of the greatest and most dynamic leaders I've ever seen in any industry. He was more instrumental in my career than anyone else. Kraig's an incredible guy and has always supported me. I have no idea how he got as far as he did in his business being as nice of a guy as he is."

Not only was Rome influenced in the way platinum-standard Kitchin treats people, he was also impressed with Kitchin's ability to think clearly even when under tremendous pressure. "I was taking chances and stirring the pot," Rome concedes. "If you want me to be the guy who pushes the envelope to get people interested in the program, I need to know someone will have my back when things get dicey. Kraig Kitchin always did."

### Horsing Around

Some of Rome's confrontations can become combustible as witnessed by his 1994 "Talk2" visit with Jim Everett whom Rome constantly/deliberately referred to as "Chris" - as in female tennis star Chris Evert.

When NFL QB Everett challenged Rome to repeat the "Chris" taunt to his face one more time, Rome obliged and the next thing the talk host remembers was seeing Everett lunging after him. "Everyone was getting in line to punch [me] in the mouth," Rome states. "'Saturday Night Live' and Katie Couric were killing [me]. It was a critical and pivotal moment where I had to take a stand. I told Janet and my television producer things would get a lot worse. It was 'go time' and I had to man up."

The fact is by rebuilding things brick by brick Rome clearly survived the incident. "I wish it hadn't happened but I'm proud I didn't give up," he asserts. "It's a part of my career. I have to be responsible and accountable for it [but] that was not a good night at the office for me."

Free time is a rare commodity for the 2006 Southern California Jewish Sports Hall of Fame inductee, but at Janet's urging, Rome finally found a hobby. "It's thoroughbred racing and horse ownership but it has cost me a lot of money," he explains. "Now she wants me to find something cheaper but I love it. I get up Saturday morning and go to the barn to see the horses work."

Still essentially getting paid to watch and chat about sports, Rome comments, "It's the greatest job ever but it's a job and I treat it [as such]. I don't disrespect it. I work harder than most. [Janet] and I don't go out to dinner or to the movies during the week. I'm not banging a jackhammer or working in a coalmine but I put in a lot more than 40 hours a week. I'm still living a dream and don't want this to end. This is why I get up early each morning. I thought I could make a living in the business but this has been the most amazing ride."

Despite how long it would take or how thorny it might get, Rome early-on negotiated a deal with himself that he wouldn't quit. "There isn't a chance though that I thought I'd be on 250 stations with the power of Clear Channel and Premiere behind me and that I'd be on ESPN for six years after being on Fox for five years - no way," he emphasizes. "My challenge is to make sure I [neither] become irrelevant [nor] have people say I've lost a few miles on my fastball. I want to continue to be a content provider and would love to find [another] Jim Rome. I haven't [yet discovered] the person I want to get in [business] with."



**WHO: Jim Rome**

**WHAT: "The Jim Rome Show"**

**WHERE: Premiere Radio Networks**

**WHEN: Monday-Friday, Noon-3pm (ET)**

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