

# THE LAST

It was almost 40 years ago that Jim Ladd cracked the mic for the first time in Southern California at then free-form rocker KNAC/Long Beach. Since, he's become intricately woven into the tapestry that is Los Angeles' rock radio history. He moved to KLOS in 1971, but it was the nine years he spent at legendary KMET (the Mighty Met) that cemented his reputation as the city's top FM late-night rock jock. After KMET gave way to smooth jazz KTWV (the Wave) in 1987, Ladd helped launch the original Edge—KEDG/Los Angeles—and did some time at KLSX during its classic rock days before returning to KLOS a little more than a decade ago. ■ Along the way, he's become a published writer, one of few music radio personalities to get a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame and a producer. He appeared on Pink Floyd founding member Roger Waters' 1987 "Radio K.A.O.S." album and tour and in Cameron Crowe's 1989 movie "Say Anything." Ladd also has the honor of serving as the inspiration for his longtime friend Tom Petty's 2002 album "The Last DJ" and its title track, with Petty name-checking him in the CD liner notes. On top of all that, he still hosts a free-form music show on KLOS every weeknight, which brings the Citadel classic rocker its highest ratings. ■ In 1991, the renowned personality recounted some of his exploits in the semi-autobiographical book "Radio Waves: Life and Revolution on the FM Dial." Some 15-plus years later, he is still very much kicking and "beating the tribal drum," as he calls it.

KLOS/  
Los Angeles  
free-form night  
jock **JIM LADD**  
is still beating  
the tribal drum

**By Keith Berman**

## Flying Without A Net

Five days per week for five hours per night, Ladd works at KLOS as the last known free-form commercial music personality in America, flying without a net every time he goes into the on-air studio. "The nightly show is not preplanned at all; I don't know what the first song is until about five or 10 minutes before the show starts, when I think about how I want to kick things off," he says.

"From there, everything that you hear is stream of consciousness. That first song will suggest to me the song that follows it, and so on throughout the night. On a good night, every song you hear has a thematic link to the other songs, lyrically and musically."

That's not to say that Ladd just throws whatever he wants on the air or that his show is unstructured. Quite the contrary: He says that there is more structure in a single one of his sets than an entire day's worth of programming on a regularly formatted playlist. "I have to make a minimum

of about 30 decisions per song," he says. "What's the lyrical content? How does the song start? How does the song that's playing end? Is it a soft segue or a hard cut? How will that advance the story line of the set that I'm playing? All of these things come into play to choose just one song. Then I have to start all over again to choose the next song."

At its core, Ladd's show is tightly structured, but the distinction is that he creatively builds its structure rather than running material through a formula and spitting out the end result. It's the equivalent of making a complex and meaningful mixtape live on the air every night.

But before anyone runs off to his or her PD to demand a free-form experiment, be forewarned that KLOS PD Rita Wilde does strive to keep Ladd within certain boundaries, as relaxed as they may be. "He's given a certain freeway, shall we say, and he's given these lanes to travel in," Wilde says. "Sometimes he gets out of the lanes

and that's when I have to corral him back in and remind him what we agreed upon. I'm kind of like an air traffic controller in that sense."

However, Wilde is first and foremost a listener, having grown up with Ladd and his influence when he was behind the mic at KMET. Since she's worked at KLOS for more than two decades and was promoted out of the jock pool to the PD's office, Wilde and Ladd have developed a close friendship and a true connection about radio, which gives her an advantage when the odd occasion arises when she needs to reel him in.

Given that Wilde is a fan, Ladd is able to relate to her more easily and accepts her constructive suggestions—and he also appreciates it when she calls simply to tell him she loved a set he just did.

"Rita is without question the best boss I've ever had in this business," Ladd says. "There is no way in hell I would be doing this without Rita. She is the one who has protected and nurtured the show in the face of a lot of suggestions to take me off the air. Disney/ABC screwed up and hired the right person when they made her PD—someone who knew what she was doing, is smart and was actually on the air, so I don't have to explain a segue or what I'm doing. All Rita does is support me. We have an amazing relationship, and I really respect her."

Ladd says that because of Wilde, he doesn't get any push-back. "I'm sure she does, but she refuses to tell me anything about anyone telling her anything about me—and I know there have been [instances]. She's like the firewall between me and any kind of negativity. And thank God GM John Davison has been nothing but supportive."

The love fest is mutual. Wilde adds, "He's a joy to work with. Jim is one of the kindest, most caring and courteous individuals I've ever met. His parents definitely raised him with that sense and those values, which I find very charming and admirable."

Describing Ladd as a "repeat felon," since he's currently in his third round at KLOS, Wilde has the benefit of having seen and learned from how other PDs have worked with Ladd. "I hear the same sort of thing: 'He's a renegade,'" she says.

"There are few who understand him and get what he does, but fortunately,

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—Jim Ladd

my boss, John Davison, is someone who also appreciates what he does. I would not be able to have even anything to do with Ladd if not for John supporting him and me."

### How It's Done

Now that the general picture has been painted regarding how Ladd's show has been able to continue all these years in the face of corporate restrictions, let's take a look at the actual technical aspects of how he does what he does on a nightly basis. For a good portion of his material, Ladd relies on the station's Enco system.

Wilde says, "We have the normal KLOS library in our Enco system, but we also have what we call 'the Ladd library' on the side, where he has his own songs that he has access to." There's probably a spare server somewhere bursting at the seams with all the stuff he's put in there, and Ladd says that his file directory grows daily.

In addition, KLOS left its CD library on a rack in Ladd's studio, so he can reach back and snag one if he needs a track that's not on the hard drive. And if that still isn't enough, he has a huge filing cabinet at the station filled with thousands of CDs he's brought with him. "I'm in that thing all the time," he says.

Listeners help expose Ladd to some new music, but a good portion of his new material comes from Wilde—as does one of the few restrictions he faces: "When Rita adds new music from an artist like the Eagles or John Fogerty or R.E.M., for example, for a period of time, I can only play the cuts she chooses from the newest album," Ladd says. "I can play them anytime or not play them at all, but I just can't go deep into the new albums for a little while. Once it becomes just another album, I can play anything I want off of it."

That's not to say that listeners are looking for new music. Some are actually not completely keen on what's coming out these days and are content to let Ladd expose them to music unfamiliar to them; to some listeners, it's primarily tracks that were recorded before they were born.

"A while ago, a kid called around 1 a.m. and said, 'Jim, I'm 18, and how come you guys got the Beatles and Bob Dylan and the Doors and the Rolling Stones, and we got Britney Spears? We got ripped off,'" Ladd recalls. "That kind of thing is happening now in numbers that I would've never thought of."

### Free-Form's Evolution

Despite the fact that his musical focus may look to the past, Ladd is locked in on the future where his show is concerned, using the Internet to connect in new ways with his audience. Two years ago, he started a feature called "Theme of Consciousness" on Fridays, launching a MySpace account at the same time. From the humble beginning of a single MySpace friend—who was 17 years old and kept requesting a bunch of deep Dylan tracks written two decades before she was born—Ladd now has almost 4,000 friends. However, there's more to it than just the standard friend-connection

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community that MySpace usually features.

About six months ago, Ladd decided on a whim to look up the account while he was on the air, to see what was happening in the comments section. He had just finished a break talking about Al Gore winning the Nobel Peace Prize, then started a track about the environment.

"In the time it took me to press the button and start the song, 20 pictures of Al Gore and polar icecaps melting and floods had been posted in the comments," Ladd says. "It dawned on me that these guys are interpreting the show in real time in a visual manner.

"Now we do this every night. As I move from a set about politics into a set about sex or outer space or whatever, you instantly see the listeners, in their creativity, reacting to the music. It's an extraordinary thing," he adds. "All of these years, I've tried to create pictures in listeners' brain pans as they listen to the show. Now there's a way that I'm seeing what they're seeing, and they're feeding it back to me. Suddenly, it's not just my output, but it's circular."

It was such a telling reflection of what was actually going out over the air that one of Ladd's avid fans who lives in Hawaii was able to follow along with his show just by seeing what was being posted in the MySpace comments. As of March 10, his show started streaming online, so now he is able to "pollute the minds of the planet," as he puts it. In the week after the stream launched, he had already been contacted by listeners as close as Texas and as far away as Moscow and Japan.

Wilde believes this new contact with his audience has helped fuel Ladd's love for the outlet that he's given so much of his life to. "I see him being this invigorated person," she says. "He never lost that passion for radio, but with the stuff through MySpace and streaming, he is a person who has renewed love for this medium, and that is so exciting to see."

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## Ladd On Radio

Outside of his protective bubble, though, Ladd doesn't have a particularly bright view of what's going on within the radio industry. "Someone once came up with the definition of insanity as doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result. That's what I see us doing," he says.

"They keep doing the same formats, the same consulting, the same formulaic stuff. The audience rejected it long ago. They hear [Jethro Tull's] 'Aqualung' and know it must be 12:15. Yet these radio companies keep doing it. Here I am, doing my show to great results, thank God, and the people who would love to see me go away continue to do the same things."

Ladd frequently refers to what he does as show business: "I happen to be on the show side, and there are brilliant people on the business side. For some reason, some people on the business side think they know how to do the show, but you rarely find someone on the show side who walks into the station manager and says, 'You know, I've been looking over the third-quarter projections, and I really think . . . We know we don't know anything about that, and it'd be ridiculous to listen to me tell the company how to run its finances—and they don't know how to do a radio show. We need to get back to trusting each other to do our own parts and giving the creative people the license to be creative.'"

However, Ladd sees positive signs within KLOS and Citadel: He's been working more closely with the sales department, and they've come up with some unique initiatives. An example is one of the show's new advertisers, Southern California electronic chain Ken Crane's, which is sponsoring an hour of commercial-free music every Thursday on Ladd's show.

"Their hour is called 'Free for All' because, as listeners and sponsors, they really understand free-form radio," Ladd says. "They decided that rather than run a bunch of commercials, they'll take the commercials out of the show. That's a creative thing to do, and the sales department is



Rita Wilde

hip to it as well."

Things like that give Ladd hope that sales and programming can work together, but he stresses that both sides need to learn how to cooperate. "People on my side of the business can't be so narrow-minded and uptight about the folks who aren't on the air; we need to look to them to solve problems and vice versa."

From a programming perspective, Wilde looks to Ladd as an example of where the industry's future is headed, since she thinks the pendulum will swing back toward a need for distinctive talent to drive radio. "You need to have talent, even if radio does become completely Internet-based or through cell phones using personalized stations," she says. "You still want that one-to-one connection, and people like Jim Ladd will always be there because they're so unique. We'll have our resurgence of people trying more and more to be as creative as him."

R&R

## FOR THE RECORD

In the March 21 feature "Damage Control," the call letters for Entercom's CHR/top 40 in Sacramento should have been identified as KDND.

An advertisement for ESPN Deportes Radio. The background is a blurred image of a soccer stadium with a crowd. In the foreground, a soccer player in a red jersey with 'Carlsberg' and 'adidas' logos is celebrating with his arms raised. The text "MAKE SOME NOISE." is written in large, white, bold letters across the middle. At the bottom, there is text about sports radio targeting a Hispanic audience and the ESPN Deportes Radio logo.

**MAKE SOME NOISE.**

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Be heard on: UEFA Champions League, UEFA – Eurocup 2008 and Superliga.  
AFFILIATION: Jim Roberts (972) 776 4613 ADVERTISING: Carlos San Jose (312) 899 4071

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