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# John Dickey

## Taking Country Vertical

**A**lready a formidable player in Country with more than 80 stations in the format, Cumulus Media Partners asserted itself further with the January launch of WNSH/New York. The flagship for its Nash-FM brand of stations and multi-media offerings, WNSH signifies a focus on the genre that is being spearheaded in many ways by Co-COO and EVP John Dickey. Serving in the latter role since 2000, Dickey was named Co-COO in 2007. Prior stops include Stratford and serving as a PD for Midwestern Broadcasting. Below, he explains his vision for radio, his involvement in music decisions and Cumulus' strategies for content creation and, specifically, Nash.

**Country Aircheck: How does Cumulus view the radio business today?**

**John Dickey:** The business itself isn't fundamentally changing – it's always been relevant and it's always been a great and very efficient reach and frequency medium. And it's going through a very healthy, encouraging transformation. People who have been placing a lot more focus on mobile are finally realizing our portability. There's a huge demand for mobile advertising and people are realizing that radio really is a very viable, large-scale mobile medium.

We're in the audio content business and radio stations have been the primary distribution, but that is changing over to other forms, including mobile. That's encouraging to people who look at the scale companies in our business now have.

They're starting to appreciate the platform's diversity and flexibility, and our ability to serve up their message in a variety of different ways – ways they probably didn't realize previously.

There are a lot of companies that have large valuations based on the promise of doing what radio has been doing well for a lot of years, which is delivering a very large audience. As an industry we're reaching 95% of the population, a number that hasn't shrunk demonstrably over the last 10, 15 or 20 years. There are over a billion radios out there, and the number is growing. This is a ubiquitous, relevant and immediate medium. Through technology, it's now a medium that has the ability to serve its message and interact with its listeners in a very intimate and focused way. So, I'm greatly encouraged about radio based on what I'm seeing, and how people are viewing radio and content platforms like Cumulus.

**It's almost full-circle. Radio really exploded in the '50s when the transistor radio made it portable.**

That's right. And it really is about portability. Radio is an out-of-home medium, and as our company grows on the content side and really focuses on becoming the largest audio content provider, we have the ability to deliver great content through different portals in a space that is exceptionally hot. Look at the valuation of Facebook and some of these other businesses as they're serving up ads and presenting a viable mobile strategy to Madison Avenue. We now have the ability to do that. We just have to take advantage of it.

**Cumulus stations have apps, and your stations are part of Clear Channel's iHeart-Radio platform. What is your position on FM chips in smartphones?**

The smartphone is certainly a big part of it, but it's really about wireless. It's about the increasing affordability of internet access, which allows more people than ever to stream our products on a smartphone, tablet or desktop, whether they're at home or in the car. It's about creating a mobile experience and making our medium and our brands totally portable and accessible in real time. Podcasting and other things add a time shifting aspect to what we do and will prove to be effective as well, but it's branded content that ultimately is going to carry radio forward and separate us from everybody else in the world trying to do what we do. Branded content that attracts large groups of people is where the value is created – something radio has been doing very well for a lot of years. I don't see anybody coming in and disrupting that.

**Some question the validity of that model in today's world.**

There are a lot of naysayers, but most of these other models – including Pandora and others like it – are serving up one experience for one person. Radio is a one-to-many model, which allows us to have very unique relationships in multiple cities across the country with tens of millions of people. It's just a question of how that's harnessed through technology and, ultimately, how that model is brought to bear on the huge transfer of dollars into digital. Give or take, 20% of all dollars are being spent in that direction and it's growing rapidly. We've got to do a better job of playing for that money. The great news is radio is ideally situated for that. As we continue to scale through consolidation, as these platforms emerge, as we're able to go out and tell that story and make the technology investments behind that story, you're going to see the radio business catching another big wave and transforming in a good way.



## THE INTERVIEW

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**Is radio moving toward more nationally branded audio content than we've seen recently?**

There is a premium on content and a premium on companies with the resources to develop and invest in content. That doesn't necessarily mean it has to be a nationally syndicated model. It could be a local effort and the nurturing of local talent. It's about finding, developing and nurturing that talent. It then becomes about finding different ways to amortize that investment locally, regionally or nationally.

A perfect example is Paul Finebaum, a great local talent in Birmingham. Paul was scaled regionally and now he's been picked up by ESPN. We've got the relationship on the radio side with his brand and he's go-

ing to be part of a new regional sports network. That's an example of nurturing a local talent and creating a very big business. It's not necessarily something that has to be developed with the intent to scale nationally. But bigger companies have the resources required to put together the kind of product that will be successful in a scaled environment.

Also, our ability to compete for great talent is going to be within our grasp. Radio is going to be able to create great local talent and make a play for great national talent. We're positioning Cumulus as the leader in audio content and doing some great things in some specific content verticals like Country and the Nash brand. You're going to see more of that. We are hard at work developing what we feel is great content that can be purposed locally and scaled, in some cases, nationally.

**You were heavily involved in the Nash Bash you threw in New York, you've met on numerous occasions with record label presidents and spoke to the CMA board. What have you come to learn about this format as you've gotten deeper into it?**

At first, I was doubtful about how the country business model works, but now I'm appreciative of what that model has done for the format. It has been steered and maneuvered very successfully. Look at other formats that have not had such strong guiding hands. Rock, for example, has splintered itself into irrelevancy. Country has not made that mistake and won't make that mistake.

**It's an amazing format based on its multi-generational appeal. You very rarely find a mainstream format that has a targeting ability as broad and as appealing as Country. I won't reel off all the statistics that most of your readers already know, but the listeners are very loyal, and that sells well. It's a great format for retail activation. The artists get it more so than any format I've ever been involved in and are a huge part of the process, in a good way. All aspects of the format are carefully welded and knitted together to create a very healthy and growing business.**

A lot of the peaks and valleys that naturally occur in more trend-driven genres have been smoothed out in this format. From the writing community to A&R to marketing to promotion to the live event side of the business, country has been carefully choreographed to minimize these ups and downs. That gives anybody who's involved or invested in the format a lot of comfort knowing it has sustainability and will provide a good, steady ride. The number of stations that are in the format certainly bears that out, and the success of the format against Top 40 in terms of ratings are more than healthy in bearing that out. It's a great business to be in and advertisers love the business for all those reasons.

**You mentioned the country model and the early doubts you had about it. Exactly what were you referring to?**

Well, there's a very healthy integration of the label community and artist management into the radio side of the business. The industry organizations that drive country are replete with people on the label side of the business. You just don't have that in many other formats. You have content providers and you have distributors. In this business, the content provider and the distributor are interwoven in a relationship that's very unique. That's very productive as you get to understand it. This is a format that has to regenerate itself. It's a product that is relevant and hip, but only relevant and hip to the extent that it continues to regenerate itself and renew itself, and that requires the cooperation of the distributors, of the radio community, to understand that and be part of that process.

**Cumulus rolled-out the Nash brand in January. You have about 84 Country stations, but Nash is only on a handful at this point. Is the rollout going as anticipated, and what's the end goal?**

The development of our entertainment brand in the Country vertical – that is ultimately going to be a lifestyle brand in Country – is going very well. We've got some extremely exciting things coming between now and Christmas. We're excited and on schedule.

**We're in the process of converting some of our Country stations to the Nash brand; not every one**

of our stations will convert to that. I've said that very publicly from the beginning. We've got some great brands that we'll continue to invest in and strengthen them in their markets. But we have other stations with brands that don't have the same emotional connection to the audience and Nash is a great repackaging for them. There are a number of those in our portfolio that will be converted; some coming in September.

The multi-media content we originate for the Nash brand – print, digital and live entertainment – has been thought through and we've got projects in various stages that will roll out as we fulfill the promise of what the brand can and will be. We're about to cut the tape on a Nashville facility that we've re-modeled specifically for the Nash brand. We'll have content designed, curated and built for the Nash brand coming from that 2nd Avenue building.

**We know a live studio audience will be able to participate. Anything else?**

Our facility will house a lot of content that we're developing to serve Nash affiliates. We can talk more about that at a later date. Kix Brooks is obviously part of that process and he's got his count-down show and overnight show coming from there now. Blair Garner and his *America's Morning Show* on WNSH/New York will be hubbed out of that new facility, and we ought to be lighting



them up by the end of this month. And, yes, that studio is probably one of the first-ever designed with all the multi-media ideas in mind. It's fully television-ready and has a studio audience component to it, which is fabulous. The print side of our Nash strategy will also be based in that facility; we anticipate that happening over the next couple of months.

**How are WNSH and the new morning show you mentioned doing in terms of your expectations for ratings and revenue?**

WNSH is tracking wonderfully. It's a two-share station 25-54, and we're consistently north of a million cume. We're growing, and we can accomplish our goal of

**“It's beneficial to the labels to have a COO who is as focused on content as I am.”**

being the most listened-to Country station in America within the next six months. The morning show is just getting going and we haven't seen its effect on ratings as yet. We expect to see some movement there in the next 30-45 days. But we're on track. Our business plan is being achieved and exceeded in some ways, and we're very excited about it.

**And revenues? How's Madison Avenue treating Nash?**

Very well. Every month grows over the prior month, and again, we're on track to our business plan and then some.

**Will you be putting America's Morning Show on other Cumulus stations at some point, or making it available to non-Cumulus stations?**

That's a great question and one I knew was coming. All I can say is that it's a show that we're excited to have in New York and Blair and his crew are very

focused on taking New York by storm and we're going to let them continue to stay focused on that.

**Along with the morning show, you have Cody Alan's evening show in partnership with CMT, and Kix Brooks' overnight show. Any plans for any other national shows?**

Yes, we have plans for more shows of that type. There are some dayparts and shows that make perfect sense for us to wrap the brand around. People can probably speculate on which those would be, but it's not far-fetched to think that we'd want to do something seven-to-midnight that is Nash-branded. We'll see how that plays out. We've got a good partnership with CMT and we'll see if that continues or not. But we've got lots of ideas and, again, I suspect a lot of this will play out between now and the end of the year.

**Back to Cumulus as a whole – what's your take on the programming and management systems you've put in place, especially with regard to the way Cumulus Corporate interacts with stations on a local level?**

All politics are local and, at the end of the day, all radio has to start by being local. That doesn't mean you can't put on great product that doesn't originate from a market. But these brands are local to the community and they require a programmer, a custodian of those brands who is trained, focused and can provide input into what the community is looking for. We work very hard on developing and mentoring programmers in all of our markets and through our systems. As a company that is striving to be the largest audio content company in the world, we need smart people who can help create this content. Developing programmers and people who have great ideas for content is a top priority in this company. We're hiring lots of people in that regard and we're focused on training the people we've got and helping to elevate their natural talents and gifts and make them better at what they do.

**You've assumed a large role in the music decisions for Cumulus stations. Not just Country, but in all formats. With all the responsibilities that a COO of a company the size of Cumulus has, why did you decide to take that on and exactly what is your role?**

One of my responsibilities is to oversee the content in our company and music is a huge part of that content. Given what I said earlier about country and the relationship between the distributor and the content provider, it's important for somebody in my position to be close to our content providers, our content partners. I want to understand their needs. I want to understand what they're doing so I can give them feedback. I want them to know our needs and to partner with them to develop content and encourage development of content. That's what this role is for me. That's the clarity that I'd like people to understand about my role.

Relationships with record labels and relationships with other content providers is a top priority, and it needs to be a top priority. At the end of the day, what separates us from anybody else is content. Without great relevant and regenerated content, we're not the company that we are today. It's important to understand ... to cut through and make decisions quickly about that. And I think it's beneficial to the labels to have a COO who is as focused on content as I am, so they know they're working with somebody who gets it, who they can have very productive conversations with and who they have access to.

**Is making sweeping national decisions on music, whether its about adds or rotations, just easier when you have so many stations?**

Part of that is true. We have a system that allows for input from the markets on things that they think we need to pay attention to and that are important to them. And we do. Ultimately, those decisions roll up, are blessed and away we go. But quality control and decisions that reflect the best interests of our partnerships are very important. People ask how I have time to do it. And I say if you don't have time to do it, it's a neglect of duty. This is a content business. How could you not have time to be focused on what are arguably some of the most important content partnerships that we have, and that's with the label community?

**From your comments at the opening of this piece, you seem bullish on radio. What is your long-term vision?**

**Five or 10 years from now, where will radio be, and where will Cumulus be?**

As a business, radio will still be healthy. Hopefully it will be in a better position to play for the digital dollars. I also think radio will be much further consolidated which, by the way, will help address the first two points I made. It will make the industry healthier by making us more efficient and giving us more access to those digital ad budgets. As Cumulus, we plan to be participating in that inevitable consolidation. What does that mean? I don't know. But we're acquisitive; we'll be opportunistic where it makes sense and where it's accretive. And I can tell you that we are going to continue to expand and will continue to grow the audio content side of our business. Ultimately, that will be the defining characteristic of a company like ours. The ability to be a large purveyor of audio content served up to people and consumers in a variety of different ways. That's a big focus of ours. **CAC**



# AUSTIN WEBB SLIP ON BY

WE'RE ONLY HERE FOR A LITTLE WHILE

GOD GIVES US ONLY SO MUCH PRECIOUS TIME

DON'T LET IT SLIP ON BY

“With **compelling lyrics** the song is sure to **resonate with listeners** and **tug on the heart strings** of many.

‘Slip On By’ is a solid song with a **strong delivery**, and may serve as a **breakthrough piece** for Austin Webb”

*Country Music Review*



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