

# Tim Roberts

## Pillar Of Positivity

**T**im Roberts, WYCD/Detroit PD, has been deeply embedded in the format for decades, but he's never had a year like this. As Entercom/Detroit VP/Music Programming and the company's Country Format Captain (since January 2019), he keeps a full schedule – and that's before tending to his participation on boards for the Academy of Country Music, Country Music Association and Country Radio Broadcasters. Despite the workload and arguably the most tumultuous span in a lifetime, Roberts isn't just upbeat – he's unabashedly optimistic about Country radio and country music. [Ed. Note: This interview was conducted prior to Entercom's Country format restructuring.]



**CA: Doom and gloom scenario. The pandemic continues through the end of next year, ratings and revenue are at current or lower levels, radio continues contracting, becoming less live and local and more susceptible to competition from digital services. Is radio more vulnerable than ever?**

**TR:** I'm not sure I'm even qualified to answer that question, because I'm not the CEO of the company. What I will say is this is the greatest time of innovation I've seen, and our level of creativity is going to be the determining factor. The best content providers are always going to come out ahead. It's been that way going back to the great radio Orson Welles was making in the 1940s – via a network, by the way. Audio professionals who are super creative are going to have a strong future. Meanwhile, we are seeing advertisers coming back to radio ... seeing the value. We've demonstrated over and over again during this crisis how important we are to our communities; that doesn't change. So, I'm bullish about the future of radio, specifically Entercom.

**What have the bright spots been over the last six months?**

Getting to know my people better. I've just been able to touch base with so many, from a Format Captain perspective in multiple markets, as well as my own people. I'm really proud of how all our Country stations stepped up and how the personnel did here in Detroit.

**What's been the toughest part?**

The human factor. Anybody who's furloughed or laid off. It's always tough. And seeing some people get sick. We've had people in the company die from the pandemic. People are affected by this pandemic in so many ways.

**What's surprised you?**

We started #PlayOnThePorch in Detroit, inspired by something we saw going on in Italy where people went out on their balconies and shouted. We decided to make it a sing-along and had all our stations promoting a song every day – "Don't Stop Believing," or whatever it was. At 6pm, everyone was encouraged to go outside and sing along. A little Facebook group got started about it – organically, not us – and it ended up getting millions of views and shares.

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That's just one thing that surprised

us, but it's reflective of a connection with listeners that's been remarkable. Likewise, the willingness of artists in our format to connect with the audience via radio, Radio.com and our other digital channels as the conduit has been amazing on a level nobody could have predicted. This has also raised everyone's technical capability – not only radio, but the audience.

**How has your day-to-day changed?**

GoToMeetings and Zooms have consumed a lot of time. It would almost be weird now to be sitting in a big room with a bunch of people. You'd be like, "Whoa, you're sitting near me." We're so used to social distancing now, and that would just seem bizarre.

The quantity of email communication is way up. I've learned and become adept at more software and technology. Everyone has had to deepen their own practical education, and it has likely improved their craft. This was almost like being at bootcamp; like it or not, you're going to be in shape when you come out of this.

**What's a typical day like for you?**

It varies, but I have six or seven set meetings per day, like the music meeting for my local market here in Detroit. There are set meetings with different program directors every week and coaching meetings with morning shows locally and abroad. And, I obviously pay attention to projects as needed. I spend an immense amount of time talking to labels about everything you could possibly imagine. There's not enough time in the day to get to all of that part, because there's just so much music. Nashville is thriving on the music side, so listening to it all is maybe my biggest challenge and a little overwhelming sometimes. I laugh a little bit when people ask me for five minutes. I wish I could, but I literally don't have five minutes in what is typically a 12-hour day.

And, by the way, hats off to Nashville, because a lot of music is really good now. The quality of the format is excellent overall, and the new artists are really good. It used to be so easy to separate weaker artists from good ones. It's a lot harder now, and that's a blessing. Our format is healthy, as we're seeing in summer PPM numbers.

**To this year's Power 31 theme, what have you learned about the business, your team and yourself?**

This is probably the greatest time of innovation I've seen in radio a long, long time. Forced by the pandemic, of course, but it has revealed how people can really shine in radio. It's also taught us that radio is essential to many people, and we were able to disseminate a lot of information. Fortunately, Entercom is a leader in news and information in America, and we were able to partner with our news brands and deliver critical information when the pandemic first hit.

The collaboration and technical innovation we were forced into was unprecedented, and it happened very fast. In what seemed like three days, we were all working and broadcasting from our houses.

**And yourself?**

I've learned I only have one phone line. It's made me multitask and actually connect better with my managers across the country. Circumstances forced an increase in connectivity, so I've been working closer with my people rather than farther away. This has also taught me something about what's important. Certain things in a workday wasted time, and you don't do those anymore, because you're not around as many people. Casual conversation goes away, and it allows for hyper-focus on work.

**How do you interact with Entercom's other Country stations as format captain?**

It's a collaborative environment in which we work together on all of our initiatives. We have a great event initiative team and the Radio.com team that I work with

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all the time. For instance, we recently did a Rascal Flatts farewell tour live event, so I've been working with all the brand managers and Radio.com on that. We've had world premieres – Darius Rucker and Blake Shelton not too long ago. On those bigger projects, you're working with a lot of people, so it's a combination of collaborative environment and local dedication – the magic recipe.

**Do you program music by consensus? Are local PDs trying things out and bringing results back to the group?**

I wouldn't want to give away any company secrets, but we talk about music all the time. When we're doing world premieres, we want to make sure that it's a record that we believe in formatically. Ultimately, I'm the gatekeeper as Format Captain, but we try to pick songs that we think are right for our audiences.

**To your point about the best content, how are radio, Country radio and Entercom doing with talent development?**

I think we're doing great. We have developed a number of personalities in the last three years, with plenty of new people coming in. Being mediocre is not cutting it anymore; the audience is demanding that of us. If we're not doing anything special, of course they're not going to listen, right? It may have been a bit different before the internet and streaming – they didn't have any choice. They still had to put up with you, even if you were bad. They don't have to anymore, so we have to be better.

I get auditions from people all the time and am consistently and pleasantly surprised. We have certainly given a lot of opportunities in morning drive, and I can think of a lot of shows that are ACM and CMA award level. We've received a lot of nominations in those areas and will, I think, continue to. We believe in talent and giving them the tools to win. There was one time about 20 years ago when I wasn't seeing as many young people [coming into radio], and it lasted for about three years before a good, new cycle started again.

**Are we perhaps seeing less of that market-to-market rise through ranks with more national shows and fewer places for young personalities to develop?**

You're getting it from different places. I've gotten people from comedy, and I'm getting a lot from television. Varied backgrounds – you name it. You don't have to come up the traditional path of Eau Claire to Rockford to Milwaukee and finally Chicago. And by the way, I do hear people in small markets that I think are really good. It's not just major markets.

**As a board member for both the ACM and CMA with two big tentpole awards events coming up this month and in November, how do you think response and planning are going?**

I'm very bullish about both events; they both have put in a lot of time and effort on excellent plans. We saw from the [network] specials ACM and CMA did, and the CMA *Staycation*, great success with the television viewing audience. Country consumption levels – in our case, Radio.com – saw massive year-to-year growth. The consumption is there. People want to see their artists and, thank goodness, ACM and CMA are going to bring them exactly that. I could be wrong, but I don't think we'll see much decrease and, if anything, growth. The live experience is gone – I can't buy a ticket to go see Keith Urban – so this is it.

**You're also on the CRB board, and while there's no way to know what February looks like, the argument could be made there's never been greater need for a Country Radio Seminar collective IQ moment for this business. And yet that event may have to be very different.**

If there's a vaccine, it would all happen, and there's probably no drama. I've been involved with CRS for a long time. We've fought through really dark times where people were questioning if we were going to keep doing it, so I think we will find a way to connect. Will it be as wonderful as it is when we're all together? Might not be possible. We like that human contact, camaraderie and the solidarity we find at CRS. We all love country music, and it brings us together each year in a way that can't be duplicated. We will do the best we can under the circumstances. I'm confident in [Exec. Dir.] RJ Curtis and the rest of the board to making that happen. CRB has already done some very compelling digital seminars, and I think we'll see another level of that if we can't be at CRS in person. And there's also the option it gets moved later in the year.

**There's a tendency to talk about Country radio, country music or the audience as if they are monolithic, but we know there is wide variety in each. That said, has there been a guiding principle you've articulated to your stations and personalities in responding to the pandemic, economic pressures, social upheaval around George Floyd's death and other concerns? What's the balance between escape, entertainment and acknowledging very difficult times for many?**

You have to figure it out locally in your market based on what is going on. The experience listeners were having in Minneapolis was far different than the experience



they were having in Chattanooga, Houston, Seattle, Riverside and Portland. There definitely wasn't one plan, and I don't think there should have been. Generally, I think you could assume people came to music to escape, but at the same time, you can't be oblivious to the world and your market. I'm really proud of how all our stations reacted and supported their communities. I think we have had a big role in keeping people's spirits up in different ways, including messaging and letting the audience know we were there to uplift and help them in a time of crisis.

**How are we doing addressing ongoing issues of diversity in country music and Country radio?**

I actually think we're making some progress. This is being discussed and worked on by both the ACM and CMA. At one point this year, there were four females in the top seven records, and we've had multiple No. 1s by female artists. Would I love to see more Black artists or Hispanic artists? Absolutely. That would be great for the format, and I've personally encouraged label people [in that direction], but I don't run those companies. The awareness level is well above where it was, problems have been identified and I do think people are working hard to change it.

Will that happen in a day? No, only because of the process it takes to discover artists, develop them to the level of recording them, then putting their product out. The best songs win, and a growing number of female artists, Jimmie Allen, Kane Brown, Darius Rucker and others are proving that every day. The door is open, it's just going to take a little time to involve even more artists who love the music and love the format. I believe it is going to happen. The tide is turning, but it can't happen fast enough.

**“There's great hope for people who are in this industry. If you're creative, there are still so many avenues for that. Be adaptable, be creative, keep smiling and work hard.”**

**You spoke earlier about how well you think Nashville is doing creatively. What's the state of the relationship between country music and Country radio in terms of business dynamics?**

Interestingly, it's probably a little stronger than it was. Without the live touring aspect, we all had to go, “Okay, now what?” When you're not talking about concerts anymore, you have to be collaborative and creative. We started with the living room couch concert and evolved into a bunch of other things. We're always trying to think of new ways to connect, and I've talked to more label people than I did to that end. The chart always moves a little slower than they'd like, but it's just the way that the world is right now.

**Are there any aspects of the business you'd like to see improved? If I give you a magic wand, what do you wave it over?**

The negative press this industry does to itself. There are certain people who write negative columns every day. There's a lot of bashing going on [when] the secret is this industry is reaching so many people – more than television. Radio is absolutely the most effective medium for connecting, from an advertiser's perspective. I wish we'd stop beating ourselves up. Meanwhile, I'm seeing and hearing about wonderful things people are doing in their communities – helping people, raising money, getting a bike for a kid who had his stolen. So many great things go on every day and rarely get attention. This is a great medium and is worthy of being regarded that way. The other thing I'd say is having advertisers appreciate an overall 12-plus audience – the total audience radio is reaching every day, besides specific demos, which obviously they look at.

There's great hope for people who are in this industry. If you're creative, which is why probably 99% of us got in the radio business, there are still so many avenues for that. They may not look exactly the same as they once did. Job descriptions have changed. But my advice to people is be adaptable, be creative, keep smiling and work hard. You can make good things happen not only yourself and your career, but for your community and the communities that we serve throughout America.

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