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RADIO WAVES

- Ben Fong-Torres



ME AND HOWARD: "Did you get laid a lot? You were with Rolling Stone; did you bang a celebrity?" The interviewer was, of course, Howard Stern. And the subject of his question was, to my surprise, me.

Actually, I wasn't entirely shocked. I'd asked to visit the infamous morning radio show while I was in New York recently, to observe it and to write about it for this column. But when I got to Sirius satellite radio's headquarters on Sixth Avenue, near Rockefeller Center, and to Stern's imposing warren of studios and offices, I was handed a release to sign, warning that I might be part of a show that "may contain nudity and vulgar language." Much the same way that going to war in Iraq "may" involve dangerous situations.

Then, after a segment in which an 84-year-old woman known as Rappin' Grandma subjected herself to a ruthless grilling by Stern about her sex life (or lack thereof), Stern's producer, Gary "Baba Booney" Dell'Abate, led me into the studio and to a chair about 15 feet away from Stern, who waved amiably from his U-shaped console, where he faced a half dozen computer monitors. He was doing a commercial break.

Most radio studios are about 15 feet long; Stern's is maybe six times that size. It looks something like a nightclub, awash in bright blues and reds, decorated with neon and other signs bearing Stern's name and image, along with blown-up photos of scantily clothed women. The ceiling is crowded with television lights for the on-demand cable TV version of the show. To Stern's right is the Sybian, a "sex machine" on which women are invited to sit. To his left is a more conventional red couch.

While Stern read and played commercials, Robin Quivers, his faithful sidekick-newscaster, sat in her glassed-in booth, about 10 feet in front of Stern. She was marking up articles from USA Today.

After a couple of minutes, Stern returned to the air, with a comic, the Rev. Bob Levy. They talked for a while about Artie Lange, the comedian-sidekick who peppers the show with smart-alecky remarks, having broken up with his girlfriend.

I'd been sitting quietly for half an hour, taking notes, when Stern suddenly said, "Hey, we've got one of my favorite writers in the studio." He asked what I've been up to.

Well, this was odd. Although I'd interviewed him by telephone for The Chronicle just before he started on Sirius, in January, we'd never met. And, not being a transgender hooker with huge breasts, or a tabloid celebrity, I wasn't a typical Howard Stern guest.

But he'd given me an opening to mention my latest books -- a collection, "Becoming Almost Famous," out now (see related story on Page 21), and "The Doors by the Doors," due in November -- and I was a happy man. Wary, but happy.

I soon got a firsthand idea of how and why the show works so well. Dell'Abate, who works out of a nearby office, popped into the studio and told Stern that, according to Wikipedia, I'd won almost \$100,000 in cash and prizes (mostly prizes) on "Wheel of Fortune" in 1993. The producer had sensed that I'd become an on-air guest and that he'd better give his boss some fodder.

We talked "Wheel" for a while, and Stern lobbed a couple of softballs, asking about my favorite interviews ever (Ray Charles and Marvin Gaye). Suddenly, he sprang on me questions about my marriage, my previous relationships and, inevitably, about celebrities I may have, in his delicate term, "banged." Knowing that there was no point lying to Stern -- especially since I'd mentioned it in my book -- I admitted to one indiscretion. He was off and guessing: "Who was it? Was it Diana Ross?"

"I wish."

"Michael Jackson?"

"He wishes."

With his staff joining in, the guesses seesawed between the ridiculous and the sublime: Eva Braun, Janis Joplin, Liza Minnelli, Grace Slick. Stern decided it was Linda Ronstadt. Or maybe Bonnie Raitt. He took guesses from callers, and Joni Mitchell got a vote. So did Chrissie Hynde and Yoko Ono. And "the bass player from Vixen."

Because he provides the programming for two Sirius channels (100 and 101), Stern has a news staff devoted solely to reporting on "all things Howard." One of them did a "news" report. When that was over, he returned to his obsession with my one-nighter. Was it Michelle Phillips? Gladys Knight? Emmylou Harris? No, no, no.

Dell'Abate popped in again, this time with a copy of "Not Fade Away," my first collection of past articles, which a staffer had on him. He read from a piece about Ronstadt, whom I'd portrayed as having spent a Valentine's Day alone in Honolulu.

"Aha!" they said in unison. But, alas, it wasn't the lovely Linda. Ronstadt may have been alone in Hawaii, but I wasn't.

Finally, Stern gave up and asked Quivers to do the news, made up mostly of celebrity gossip and items about oddballs committing weird crimes -- in other words, fodder for Stern and company to break into with opinions and jokes.

An item about Whoopi Goldberg starting a radio show on Clear Channel stations got Stern ranting about that radio giant, which dropped his show from six of its stations in 2004, and about terrestrial radio in general. "Whoopi Goldberg will bomb," he said. He panned the magician David Blaine, who failed to hold his breath underwater for seven minutes. Lange broke in. "I hold my breath for seven minutes every time I drive through Secaucus."

When Quivers finished, Stern turned to me again. "Ben, am I the greatest interview you ever had?"

No, I said. It was Ronstadt.

Stern ranted some more about terrestrial radio, riffed about how annoying it was, at age 52, to be receiving mail from AARP, the retired people's group. At 11 a.m., he began to sign off -- only to get word that he missed a commercial. With enthusiasm, he launched into a spot for a Mother's Day gift box that included pajamas. Quivers opened a sample box and held up a pajama top. "Robin, put that pajama on," Stern said, "and make Ben Fong-Torres forget all about Janis Joplin."

Back in San Francisco, I heard from people who'd caught the show. Stern and Quivers, they said, had treated me with respect. Is that what you call it? But it's true. Through all the grilling and joking, they'd maintained an all-in-fun tone. In exchange, I'd had my 10 minutes of (almost) fame. Just like every other guest on the Howard Stern show.

RANDOM NOTES: While in Manhattan, I popped in on Jann Wenner, publisher of Rolling Stone, and learned that he's a fan of Bob Dylan's new show on XM Radio. "He's great, and not only that, he's funny," Wenner said. Dylan's program airs Wednesdays at 7 a.m. on XM 40 and 9 a.m. on XM 15 ... The first Arbitron ratings in the post-Stern age are out, and Alice (93.7 FM) is celebrating. Its morning show, hosted by Sarah and No Name, was No. 1 among listeners age 25-49 ... At Stern's former local affiliate, Live 105 (KITS-FM), the morning ratings tumbled. But Woody, Tony and Ravey, in from Chicago, set up shop only in January, and GM Steve DiNardo is looking to the spring book as a better indicator ... And at "Free FM" (KIFR 106.9), the Stern replacement in several markets, Adam Carolla did best here among men 18 to 34, ranking seventh ... And why was Penn Jillette bumped from 2 to 11 p.m.? GM Ken Kohl says it was to make room for Leslie Gold, who's on from New York, live, from noon to 3 p.m. ... Sterling James, the popular DJ who was let go by Alice, has landed part-time gigs on KBLX ("the Quiet Storm") and KNGY (Energy 92.7). "One affords me the opportunity to work the classic soul, sultry, Sterling voice," she says, "and the other commands big energy and personality. It's been quite a challenge not to confuse the call letters and frequencies. I even called myself 'Alice' once."

Ben Fong-Torres is a freelance writer. His latest book is "Becoming Almost Famous" (Backbeat Books), and he will host a reading today at 3:30 p.m. at Le Zinc, 4063 24th St. in San Francisco as a fundraiser for the renovation of the Noe Valley Branch Library.