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True Blue

Radio

Air America's
Long-Awaited
Return to
LA's Airwaves

BY DAVID HARRIS

As a band of loyal progressives in the Palace of Mystery Room at the Magic Castle Hotel eagerly awaits an invite-only live broadcast of the Al Franken Show on Air America Radio, Credence Clearwater Revivals' Vietnam-era anthem "Fortunate Son" blasts through the speakers. The irony behind the lyrics is not lost on this audience full of Bush-detesters. The producer shouts, "Ten seconds!" from the stage wings and Franken, the funny-man with serious politics, clears his throat with one last sip of water.

Four... three... two... The producer flashes a thumbs-up, the "On-Air" sign illuminates, and Air America Radio revels in its return to Southern California airwaves. Now on KTLK 1150 AM, the network hasn't broadcast in Los Angeles since it was booted off the air in April 2004, just one month after its initial launch.

"I didn't even know we were off," jokes Randi Rhodes, the sardonic and sharp girl-gone-wild who follows Franken during East Coast drive time with her own brand of ruefully irreverent political talk.

All kidding aside, Angelinos have missed their favorite sanctuary from right-wing talk radio. After it was forced off the air due to a cash crunch (according to one source, a billing dispute occurred when the network bounced a check to its LA affiliate), Air America spent subsequent months away from the SoCal air-



He's baa-aack! Franken has returned to funk up your morning commute.

even Corpus Christi in redder-than-red Texas. Statistics gauging Air America's cumulative national audience range from 2.5 million to 3 million listeners per week.

And in a strange sign of our paradoxical Orwellian times, Clear Channel Communications, Inc.—the conservative conglomerate whose CEO, Lowry Mays, is Franken's staunch supporter and personal friend—owns some of Air America's

their live broadcast off with a bang. Before former *Crossfire* host and newly anointed *LA Times* opinion page editor Michael Kinsey discusses the drive to privatize Social Security, and before director Rob Reiner arrives to push universal preschool for California's kids, Franken seems bent on scoring one for his listeners out in La La Land.

"They say that Hollywood makes up one percent of the entire population," says Franken in his slow, deadpan murmur. "And yet they consume 27 percent of the world's resources."

The crowd laughs, including the Magic Castle's staff of caterers. This mix of humor, edge and insightful political banter has become a trademark of the network.

"Depending on who you talk to," explains Franken later, speaking in a phone interview from Air America's New York headquarters, "Los Angeles is either the first or second largest market in the country, and so we're reaching a tremendous number of people... including some of my friends."

"This is a really sweet turn of events," says LA's own Marty Kaplan, a USC professor who hosts Air Amer-

ica's "So What Else is News?" on Saturday afternoons. "[Before Air America] there was no place to go, if you weren't on the right, and be entertained." Kaplan, who in addition to his Air America duties works as both a screenwriter and media critic at USC's Annenberg School of Communication adds, "If you hear dozens of voices that say things that you think are important, it reinforces the notion you are part of community."

Kaplan's show embodies the spirit of Air America—countering the Republican media machine and dissecting policy with a keen sense of style. Realizing a droning, heavy-handed propaganda-churner would drive listeners away, Air America takes a cue from right-wing talk radio's use of hyperbole, controversy and even humor to grab market shares.

While entertaining, shows like Kaplan's serve a larger purpose, offering a diverse flavor of stories and people that often fall below mainstream media's radar. His February broadcasts examined when the U.S. should withdraw troops from Iraq, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's barely publicized standoff with the California Nurses Association, and a roundup of

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the Academy Award nominations for those in his audience who are in the industry.

But for many listeners, investigative stories, insightful interviews and political wit aren't as important as the overall comforting feeling of inviting a long lost neighbor back into your home for good conversation.

"There's been such a void since Air America disappeared," says Elena Lohito, a Los Angeles resident who was invited to the Magic Castle broadcast through

a friend. "I listen to KPFK, but Air America is special. I missed AI. It's nice to have some humor in the midst of all the madness."

—Air America is also streaming online at <http://airamericaradio.com> and airs on both XM and Sirius satellite networks.

—David Harris last wrote for WLT about Internet arts marketplace Novica.com Dec. '04.