

VETERAN TALKER JOHN B. WELLS PILOTS A NEW MOTHER SHIP

The

dusty dictionary definition of the word *renaissance* leads to a history lesson about that special period during the 14th to 16th centuries, but in another definition, it's much simpler: *renaissance* can also mean the revival of or renewed interest in something. Veteran talk host John B. Wells, not one prone to hype but more to humility about his press-release persona as a "well-rounded Renaissance Man," is truly re-emerging on the terrestrial radio landscape.

Wells formerly served as weekend host on Art Bell's *Coast to Coast*, but now he's piloting a new mother ship, called *Ark Midnight*.

Wells explains, "When I was on *Coast to Coast*, I just couldn't resist personalizing the program a bit, so I started referring to *Coast to Coast* as the 'mother ship,' and people liked it and it stuck. My cyber-delivered video program, which is carried Tuesday through Friday, is *Caravan to Midnight*. I figured four days a week isn't enough, we've got to add a fifth day. So

my wife suggested a radio show, I said, 'All right, I'm in. What are we going to call it?' I thought about aircraft carriers, in particular a British carrier that was lost in World War II, the *Ark Royal*, so I came up with *Ark Midnight*. It's the new mother ship, and it's perfect. I love it."

Now airing on more than two dozen affiliates and platforms with major-market presence, the three-hour Saturday late-night program is distributed by Salem Radio Network.

"They are very highly thought of, and it's a dream come true to be able to work with them," Wells says. "They have been very accommodating – everything we wanted, they have made available to us. We aren't on all of their stations yet; more are coming on all the time. We are able to do some good national penetration."

Ark Midnight execs are equally happy. Operations Chief Ted Edwards says, "We are working all major markets, and the demand for the live *Ark Midnight* broadcasts on Saturday nights and the encore shows that are available Sunday through Friday are welcome new options garnering a lot of serious attention right now."

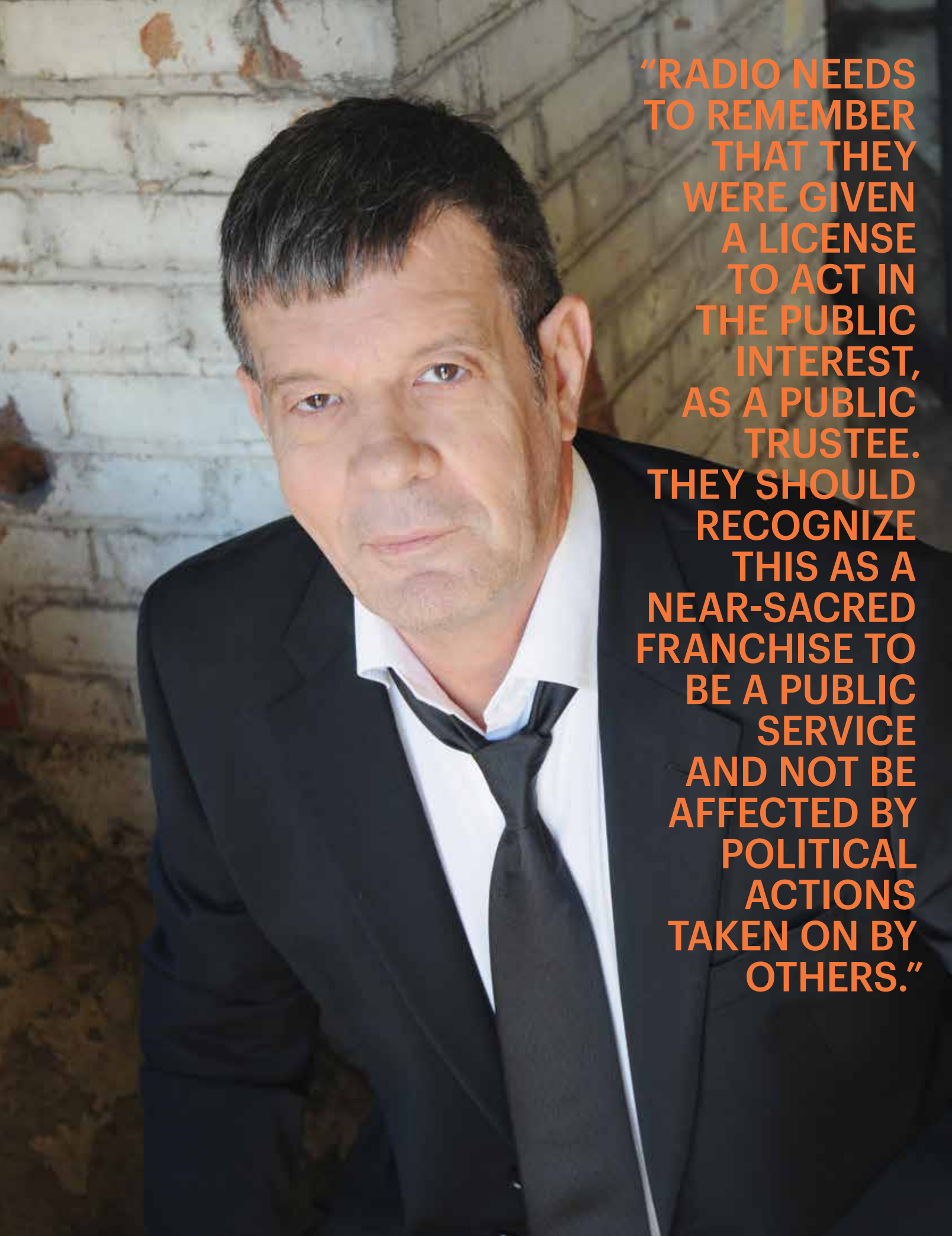
Wells believes the program is being noticed because it's different from the rest of what is available after dark. "We talk

about stuff that other outfits just won't touch. I will offer opinions and make it clear that they are my opinions, and I will take the blowback for them. The object is not to tear anybody down. The object is to reveal what's behind the talking points. We try to show our audience the reality behind the talking points."

It's the audience that comes first for Wells, and he is adamant in pointing out that it will be the audience that will determine the direction of the show, not those who pay the bills to keep the lights on.

"Once upon a time an old Louisiana lawyer told me, 'No matter how thin you slice it, every piece of bread has two sides.' We like to show them both sides of the bread. I find that many outfits don't do that. Many of them are leaned on very heavily by sponsors to not talk about certain stories. We are not beholden to anyone but our audience. If the audience starts declaring that we don't like this and we wish this guy would go away, then we'll go away."

A licensed pilot, Wells says about live radio, "Like flying, once it gets in your blood, it's there. There is an excitement about live radio. It's almost like a theatrical play rather than a movie. You really can't do any retakes. You have a dump button that you can use if you or a guest

A man with dark hair, wearing a black suit jacket, white shirt, and black tie, is looking directly at the camera. He is positioned in front of a weathered brick wall. The lighting is dramatic, with strong shadows. Overlaid on the right side of the image is a quote in orange, all-caps text.

“RADIO NEEDS TO REMEMBER THAT THEY WERE GIVEN A LICENSE TO ACT IN THE PUBLIC INTEREST, AS A PUBLIC TRUSTEE. THEY SHOULD RECOGNIZE THIS AS A NEAR-SACRED FRANCHISE TO BE A PUBLIC SERVICE AND NOT BE AFFECTED BY POLITICAL ACTIONS TAKEN ON BY OTHERS.”

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makes a mistake, but other than that, you need to be quick. If something goes wrong, you need to fix it. There is just an excitement and immediacy about live radio that simply can't be duplicated by recording or by constant do-overs.”

For Wells, audience engagement on live radio works best when the topics are timely and the guests are interesting. “I like to be around and talk to people who are a lot smarter than I am. The best part about it is being able, in many cases, to talk with somebody that has spent 20 or 30 years on one subject and the only thing they were interested in was developing everything that could be known about the subject. I’m more interested in what shapes the way people think, and why they think the way they do. Sometimes that’s far more interesting than what they actually think about and believe.”

Being an active participant and observer with some significant time navigating the radio landscape helps Wells shape his views on the changes in the business. “There’s a lot of content out there, that’s for sure,” he says. “It’s either talk or music. I guess music radio is all right. I think the playlists are somewhat restricted, but they always have been. The freeform days are kind of over with, and I guess in a way that’s good – because you might like the jock but you don’t like his taste in music,

and now the station is being held hostage by someone’s musical tastes.

“AM radio seems to be the last bastion of what anyone can call conservative. People need to understand what conservative means. It means to hold on to what you’ve got, don’t just abandon what has held you in good stead up to this point. For a lot of people, just the word *conservative*, let alone conservative radio, means ‘This is square, same old, same old. My country right or wrong.’ That’s simply not true.”

He adds, “I really don’t see much difference in radio today than what I was observing in radio in the 1990s. I don’t hear much left-wing commentary over the big stations. Which is pretty good because we do hear it over the big TV networks and channels.”

Going forward, Wells believes for radio to remain viable and relevant, it needs to promote itself better and define its niche in the media mix. To that end, he offers this: “Radio needs to remember that they were given a license to act in the public interest, as a public trustee. They should recognize this as a near-sacred franchise to be a public service and not be affected by political actions taken on by others. I really think they need to stay as neutral as they can. There is a vast array of fringe groups and fragmentation that can dilute the strength of radio. But otherwise I





would say it's doing exactly what it should be doing right now in this particular era."

A big part of the allure that has Wells returning to terrestrial radio is, as he says, "Radio keeps people engaged, it's immediate, and it's exciting." *Ark Midnight* Operations Executive David Rubini adds, "Far too many program directors across the country are finding that the programming content available late-nights and overnights has really devolved over the last couple of years and solid options are scarce and limited. *Ark Midnight* fills this void."

Wells offers this suggestion for radio managers: "Involve your listeners more and keep your sales team sharp. Don't be afraid if somebody takes exception to one of your hosts telling the truth about something. The station should not regret that revenue is being taken away because a sponsor was offended by a host that told the truth about something. There are a lot of men and women on the air doing good work. Stations need to stand behind them and support them. Build a firewall so they can get the truth about various matters out there without suffering the consequences of having the revenue that keeps the lights on and the transmitter running taken away."

It's clear that Wells is happy with his renewed presence on the talk scene. "I can write my own script. So the main thing is that I can talk about anything I want. I always go by what I call 'German Rules,' the same rules that apply to the German language, which is that you can say anything you like, but you must be polite. So I always try to be polite, but at the same time not compromise the integrity of the information."

He says, "Radio is doing pretty good, and not because they let me on the air again." (Laughs.) "Not solely because of that. It is gratifying to know that I can get out there and talk about the things that I want to talk about. The audience has been responding, and the stations are all right with us."

JOHN B. WELLS, UNFILTERED

John B. Wells believes Talk radio is the "only potential agent of change we have." That is why he is very passionate in his opinions. Here is a taste of Wells, unfiltered.

Communism: "What we are witnessing is the resurgence of global communism. We are going to start seeing it in this country. It's going to rear its head. It might be masked as socialism, but it will be communism because I believe they are one and the same. Socialism is just communism without the AK-47. So I don't know where the appeal has come from lately, but socialism is socialism, and it is an anathema to a republic."

Facebook, Google, Amazon: "Those three are entirely too powerful. I think their operations can be put to nefarious uses as well. It's a two-edged sword. Everything that can be used for good can also be twisted to use for selfish ends. You can use a baseball bat to play the game or you can use it to work out on somebody's kneecaps. It's still just a baseball bat, either way."

Mainstream media: "I think that it is more important now than ever before that some actual information, without a political spin being put on it, is available. It's vital, because now MSM and politics have become one and the same. It's difficult to find objective reporting."

Politics: "Politics is an ugly word. No business is free from politics, but now we're not talking about what's going on between a department store manager and his department heads. We are talking about politics that shape the destiny of a nation. To go forward like this with such verve and determination — there's got to be a megalomaniac in there somewhere."

Flat Earth theory: "Moronic at best, stupid at worst; but some people actually believe it. I'm not interested in whether the earth is flat or not, but why so many people actually believe they have been lied to at a spectacular level, that there are hidden powers that be, trying to hide that the earth is flat."

The future of America: "This is one of the most exciting and at the same time most dangerous periods of American history. I'm not sure people realize how potentially dangerous it really is. It's not the Democratic party, it's the Democrat party. They say 'Democratic' because it sounds better. Just call a spade a spade. Don't be afraid."