

John Tesh

Keeping It Real

by Ellen Lefkowitz

Garden City native John Tesh is 54 and host of “The John Tesh Radio Show,” music interspersed with information termed “Intelligence for Your Life.” As one of the most-listened-to syndicated radio programs, Tesh is heard daily on more than 200 stations nationwide. In addition to pursuing his first love, music, Tesh remains a devoted husband to his beautiful wife, actress Connie Selleca, and father to his two children. Instead of settling into what could have been the typical Hollywood lifestyle of glamour, parties, movie openings and the like, he has chosen the road less traveled – certainly in the entertainment industry – one of normalcy.

Long Island Woman: *How many years of your childhood were spent on Long Island before your family moved to North Carolina?*

John Tesh: Exactly 18. I graduated [from] Garden City High School, and we moved down to North Carolina the next day. My parents loved North Carolina and had had it with paying Long Island taxes.

What was growing up on Long Island like?

I was miserable like every other teenager. The education that I got in Garden City – elementary through high school – was intense. It was only when I went to the University of North Carolina that I realized not everybody had that kind of education. My elementary school, The Stewart Avenue School, offered so many things – a jazz band, orchestra, three choirs – and that was elementary school! Even the private schools weren’t as good as the Garden City schools were.

What led you to pursue a career in television?

I was born in 1952, and there was certainly not a lot on television and almost nothing on radio, so we were forced to be creative. I have two older sisters; they’re nine and 11 years older than me, so I grew up like an only child and had a lot of down time. My family had an 8mm camera, and we used to put on little shows. Everyone had garage bands; I was always writing goofy songs. It seems to make perfect sense that I would be on television.

What did you enjoy most?

After graduating college in Raleigh, I started as a reporter at a local station in Durham. The local reporting stint is great for someone who is not “big project-oriented.” A station will send you out on an assignment and tell you to have something on the air in a couple of hours. Then it’s off to your next assignment, and it just keeps going. It was perfect for me at the time. I think I’d score 100 if I took an ADD test.

How did you land the job as host of Entertainment Tonight?

ET actually found me. I was in Europe working for

CBS Sports, and I got a call from someone who had seen a tape of me anchoring the news and asked me to audition for the show, which I had never seen. When they offered me the job, I didn’t want it, which made them want me all the more. They knew that I loved music, and once they offered to build me my own recording studio and told me I’d have to work four hours a day, I said yes. When you do something like that for 10 years and have 20 million people a night watching you, that’s who you are.

Although your first love has always

been music, I’m sure many people were surprised that you left such a high-profile, successful career in television.

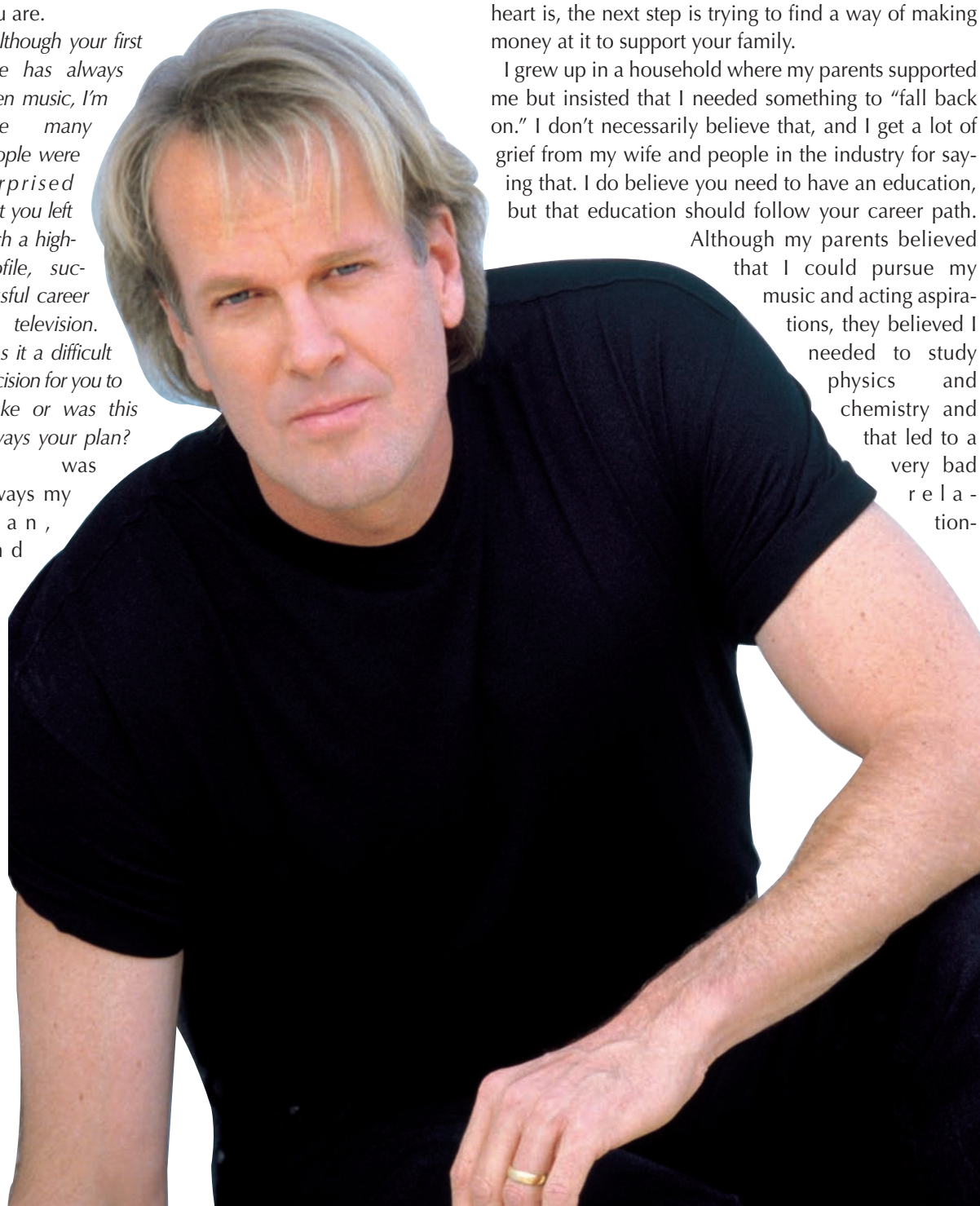
Was it a difficult decision for you to make or was this always your plan?

It was always my plan, and

everyone who ever really knew me, knew it was my plan. When I announced that I was leaving, everyone said, “What are you doing? You’re leaving a seven-figure job to go and do something that’s not guaranteed?” I woke up every morning with that itch that I couldn’t scratch, knowing I was hosting ET for the money, and that’s a bad place to be. If you don’t figure out what’s in your heart, what your deepest desires are, you may be 65 or 75 years old until you do and be miserable. I say the sooner the better. Once you figure out where your heart is, the next step is trying to find a way of making money at it to support your family.

I grew up in a household where my parents supported me but insisted that I needed something to “fall back on.” I don’t necessarily believe that, and I get a lot of grief from my wife and people in the industry for saying that. I do believe you need to have an education, but that education should follow your career path.

Although my parents believed that I could pursue my music and acting aspirations, they believed I needed to study physics and chemistry and that led to a very bad relation-



John Tesh

ship with them. I ended up changing my major without telling them because that's the environment that was created.

What are your thoughts on some of today's pop musicians? Who do you listen to?

I still listen to the people I grew up with such as Peter Gabriel, Billy Joel and Sting and also classical music. On our radio show, we don't change music very often; we add maybe two or three songs a year because there's not much out there that's very good. I actually listen to a lot of hip hop music, which is one of the tips we give our listeners on the radio program. If you have a daughter who's 12, you'd better become an aficionado of what she likes. A lot of the hip hop today is a derivative of the disco music from our time.

How did you develop the concept "Intelligence For Your Life" for the show?

When I brought the concept to some of my friends in the industry, they said, "that's way too long a title and way too much work," but it was actually created from an experience in my own house. I vividly remember an exchange my wife Connie and I had a few years ago, where she looked at my side of the bed and asked me to please clean up all of the loose wires on the floor and keyboard parts that were laying around. I looked at her side of the bed and saw she had five months worth of *Prevention*, *Better Homes and Gardens* and *Oprah* magazines. When I asked her to throw them out, knowing she would never get to read all of them, she insisted there were articles in them that she really wanted to read and planned to get to. That's how I look at the concept of the radio show.

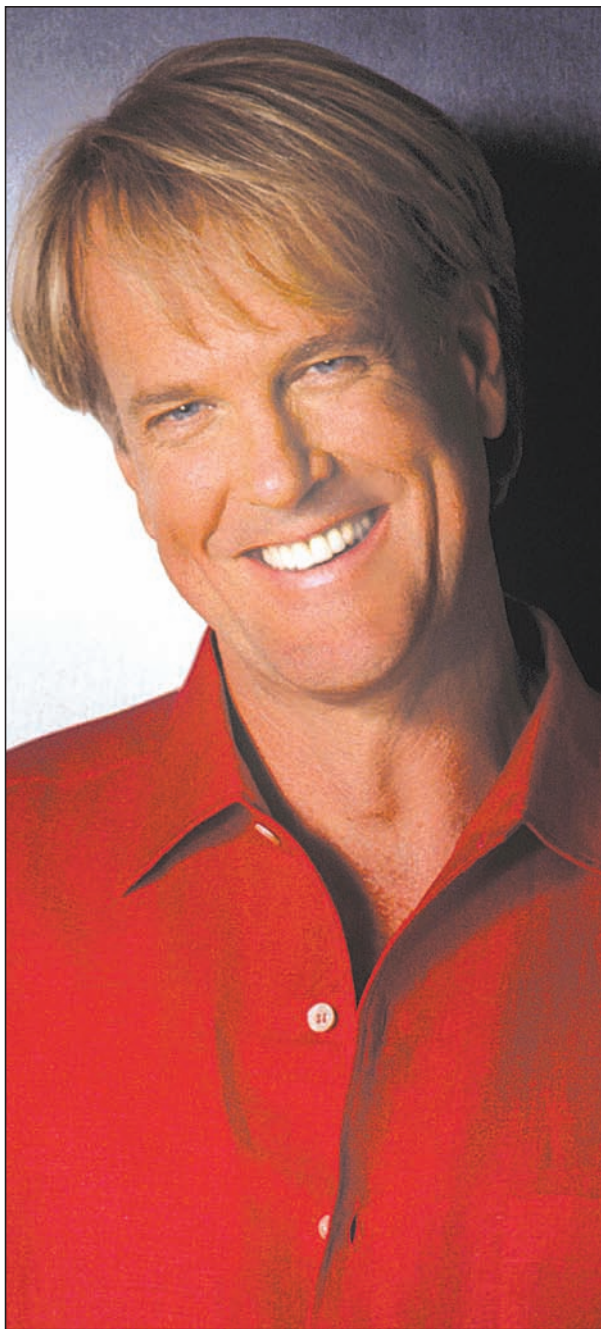
We're all too busy. We want the information, but we just don't have the time. Imagine yourself standing in front of one of these giant magazine racks and all of the information that you want or need for your life jumps out at you. I'm just whispering it into your ear. People ask me how long I think that this radio show can last, and my response is that as long as there are people dieting, in bad relationships/marriages or interested in making their relationships better, we'll have a show.

You cover everything from marriage, relationships and finances to the workplace, travel and so much more. Where do you and your staff gather all of the information for the program?

We have 10 people that research and gather the information for our show every day. The process is that they pitch their ideas, and we discuss suggestions that our listeners email or call in to us. It's a lot of fun being in the middle of all of these ideas being bounced back and forth every day. I love it.

Do your writers draw on their own life experiences at home and in the workplace?

We discourage them from doing that, and most of our writers happen to be single. I can definitely relate to some of things that are on the air – a lot of the information you hear on marriage is taken from "The Marriage Project," which is John Gotham's project out in Seattle.



I believe that if you build your life around your family, everything else will fall into place.

When I listen to your show, very often I think to myself, "That makes so much sense. Why didn't I think of communicating it in that way?"

It's like watching *Seinfeld* or seeing a comedian in person. It's easy to say, "I could've done it or said it that way," but you didn't. It's similar to when people have an aversion to spirituality. You could sit in church for 20 years, and then one day, the pastor says something that grabs you and completely changes your life. If you're not ready to receive the information or not interested, you won't hear it.

We treat this show as a secular ministry. We have five hours every day, and we consider every second an opportunity to move people from where they are right now to where they're meant to be. We all have something burning inside of us saying, "OK, this is where you need to be ... this is where you need to go." I think we all say to ourselves, "When am I going to stop doing what I'm doing right now, which may be dysfunctional, and get to where I need to be?" Ninety-eight percent of us haven't gotten there yet.

Why do you think that you and your radio program appeal to so many women?

Our biggest listening audience is women and children. I have many parents call up and say, "I've been telling my kid the same thing 100 times, but he heard it on your show last night and 'got it.'"

Most of the decisions in the family are made by women, although men may think that they make the decisions. A lot of female listeners hear a really interesting piece of information and say, "let me plug my husband/partner into this and let him take it from there." Women are really the catalyst for change, not only for men but for their children as well. My wife took me off of a horrible path when I was working in Hollywood and put me on the right path.

How do you maintain a local feel to your program?

We're not a large corporation and do not have to cater to corporate decision makers. It's just me and a couple of other leaders, which allows us to put on the best possible show every day. We have very close relationships with our affiliates and are in constant contact with them. Because of that, we're able to promote whatever our local affiliate wants us to promote (KJOY in the N.Y. market) at any given time.

Has your radio program afforded you more family time than television or less, and was that a consideration for you when you decided to leave television?

When I left television to pursue my music career, there was actually less time with my family because I was touring all the time. My family came to me and said, "You either need to go back on television or cut down on touring." So, I cut back on touring and started the radio program as a weekend show. I believe that if you build your life around your family and do what you're supposed to do as a man, everything else will fall into place.

What would you say the pros and cons of a celebrity marriage are, and what, if any, impact does it have on your children?

My wife and I don't have a celebrity marriage. We don't attend Hollywood openings and when my wife does a film, it's usually in Canada. We do everything as a family. Nobody else has ever picked up my kids from school. We just don't live that kind of life. I've been off television for 10 years now, so my daughter doesn't even remember me on television. She'll say to us, "why you don't you guys go and do something and be famous?" We just say, "no thanks, we're good." ❖