

Host/musician trades lucrative TV career for 'the power of radio'

# John Tesh

By Erica Farber

**J**ohn Tesh has done it all. Following a successful career in TV news and entertainment and as a full-time musician, he decided to use the airwaves as his pulpit for what he refers to as “purpose-driven” radio. Using his great passion and abounding energy, Tesh’s award-winning radio show is now heard on more than 260 stations across the country.

**Beginning your career:** I went to North Carolina State and studied with heavy-duty classical teachers of piano and trumpet. My parents were afraid I was going to starve if I was a musician, so they enrolled me in textile chemistry. A friend of mine told me a way to bring up my grade-point average, because it was pretty bad: Radio/Television 101. I was a sophomore, went into this class and I was like, “I’m home.” My friend and I created live radio programs. We did man on the street [segments] and pretended there were fires and stuff, and we’d put them on the campus TV and radio station.

**First job:** I ended up at WKIX in Raleigh, N.C. I begged these guys for a job. I found out a year later that I got the job because the station had a basketball team, and it was between me and a guy that had three years’ experience. I didn’t have one minute of experience—but I got it, because I was tall. My first job was playing the religious tapes on Sunday mornings. Every now and then one of the tapes would break and I’d be on the air live.

**Moving into TV:** I showed up on the doorstep at WTVB [Coldwater, Mich.] and was hired to become the guy who put film through the processing machine so it would be ready for the news. The anchor guy quit one day, and I was the only guy under 55—I was 19 or 20—and they said, “You’re the anchor guy until we find somebody.” I didn’t even have a jacket. From that moment on, I became a television guy.

I ended up in Orlando for four months and Irving Waugh, who started the Grand Ole Opry, saw me on the news. He said, “Young man, you’re coming to work in Nashville at WSM.” So at 21, I left college, didn’t finish and went to work in Nashville with a guy named Dan Miller, who is still there. Pat Sajak was doing the weather and

Oprah [Winfrey], at 19, was on channel five. I then ended up at WCBS in New York as a street reporter and weekend anchor, then went to CBS Sports for six years.

**Returning to radio:** I had been at “Entertainment Tonight” for 10 years. I’d go in four hours a day, do the show and then spend the rest of my time in the recording studio. When “The Three Tenors” came out on PBS, I decided to take every bit of cash I had from years of television and put on a \$1.5 million TV special. I rolled the dice—and it became a No. 1 instrumental record. It just sort of blew up and I said, “You know what? I really don’t want to do this television thing anymore anyway,” so I left.

I was gone six or seven years, and Casey Kasem was in one of his contract disputes. We got a call asking if I would fill in; I said sure. Then



Westwood One said, “Let’s create a show for you.” We did—but it just sort of fell apart.

**Creating “The John Tesh Radio Show”:** I realized the power of radio and called Scott Meyers, who was a song plugger for me, and said, “We’re going to do a radio program ourselves, and you’re head of syndication.” He said, “I don’t know how to do that.” I told him he was the best salesperson I know—“You’ll figure it out.”

My wife, [actress] Connie [Sellecca] is a news hog. You can ask her about anything and she reads all these magazines. I thought, “Let’s create a show for that woman. Let’s take these articles, give me some copy points and we’ll call them ‘Intelligence for Your Life.’ ”

There were maybe five or six early stations, and [McVay Media president] Mike McVay said I should do a 7 p.m.-midnight show every day. We hired 10 people whose job is to subscribe to everything and then carve it up so I can turn it into a two-minute piece. We had more researchers than when I was at CBS in New York.

**On the success of the show:** For 10 years at “Entertainment Tonight,” I would get letters from people saying, “Can you get me LeAnn Rimes’ autograph?” or “I love your tie.” But now I get hundreds of e-mails a day from people who say, “You helped me save my marriage” or “I lost five pounds because of you.”

**State of radio:** I’m a big fan of terrestrial radio. In Los Angeles when I see all the traffic jams, I’m like, “Yes, more listeners!” I think television is eating itself alive. There are some really good shows like “American Idol” or “Dancing With the Stars”—fun entertainment. But there is some other stuff that’s just horrible.

I have this great memory, [on New York’s] Long Island, how we used to go to Jones Beach and in those days you could walk along the beach and hear the same radio station all along. I remember how much a part of my life radio was.

**Something about you that might surprise our readers to learn:** I know all the words to the clean version of the Kanye West album [“Graduation”].

**Career disappointment:** I wish I had left television earlier. I felt like I went for the money a couple times and I shouldn’t have.

**Advice for broadcasters:** Find a way to meet listeners regularly and in person. Also, the stations that work with service organizations and connect with their listeners are the ones that end up the strongest.

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## Liner Notes

**Profile:** John Tesh

**Title:** TeshMedia CEO; musician, radio host

**Favorite radio format:** Talk

**Favorite TV show:** “24”

**Favorite album:** “Fragile” by Yes

**Favorite movies:** “Gladiator” and “Braveheart”

**Favorite book:** “The Purpose Driven Life” by Rick Warren

**Favorite restaurant:** Il Tiramisu in Sherman Oaks, Calif.

**Beverage of choice:** Pellegrino water

**Hobbies:** “Being on the radio and playing piano. I box every morning. I pay a guy to come to the house and then I hit him.”

**E-mail address:** scott@meysersmedia.com