



Make as Much Fun of Him as You Want

■ John Tesh can take it. He's found fulfillment with his thriving upbeat-talk radio show.

By Martin Miller, Times Staff Writer

Say what you want about John Tesh, but the man inspires people.

One blogger was moved to post this remark about the 53-year-old square-jawed celebrity who has sold millions of New Age records and sold out hundreds of concert halls: "The guy's music makes me want to stuff a knitting needle in each ear."

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concentrates on a passion of his own — "The John Tesh Radio Show," one of the fastest-growing syndicated radio programs in the country.

"When people make fun of you, you have two choices," the self-deprecating Tesh said at his Sherman Oaks recording studios. "I remember when Michael Bolton made the other choice and he just went nuts. You just can't win that battle because it only makes it worse. And having been on the other side of it, having made fun of a few people myself on 'Entertainment Tonight,' hey, you learn you just have to go with it."

Heard daily on more than 220 stations across the United States, Canada and New Zealand,

Writer Joe Queenan, apparently filled with the same type of zeal for the former host of "Entertainment Tonight," crowned Tesh a "prince" — but not of something you'd want to be the prince of. Meanwhile, radio shock jock Howard Stern practically foams at the mouth describing the 6-foot-6 Tesh as "the blond Frankenstein" or "the latter-day Liberace" or "the Lawrence Welk of the Dockers generation."

And that's among the nicer mean comments about a conscientious Christian who for some reason seems to bring out the devil in people. The father of two laughs off the various attacks and instead



'Uplifting talk'
(Gary Friedman / LAT)

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the show debuted locally last November on Glendale's KFSH-FM (95.9) and bills itself as "Music and Intelligence for Your Life." The topics are safe and simple — health, relationships and family, and absolutely no politics or religion. The mood is always unfailingly upbeat.

During the five-hour show, Tesh frequently chimes in with a bit of advice or informational tidbit. Recent subjects include how to tell if your pet is depressed, how couples can avoid fights over money and how cinnamon can help lower cholesterol. "If it doesn't make you better, healthier or happier," Tesh said, "we don't have it on the show."

Structured similarly to a Top 40 countdown, Tesh is usually on the air for about eight minutes an hour; the rest of the time is music and commercials selected by the affiliates. It's an a la carte formula that many radio programmers, representing a wide array of musical formats, find appealing.

For instance, at KFSH-FM, Tesh is coupled with a contemporary Christian musical format; at CIQX-FM in Calgary, Canada, it's smooth jazz; and at KAYN-FM in Boise, Idaho, it's country-western. And elsewhere, Tesh's good-guy persona — although critics might argue it's annoyingly vanilla — mixes just as easily with oldies, adult contemporary or classic rock.

Every bit as versatile is the show's ability to be plugged into any time slot and score solid ratings. Locally, KFSH-FM runs Tesh from 7 p.m. to midnight, but his show has been just as successful in the morning drive-time or afternoon slots in other markets.

Nobody is making fun of how quickly Tesh's radio show has caught on in a jampacked marketplace hungry for wholesome content. In less than three years, Tesh has built a weekly audience between 8 million and 10 million, a figure that is several times larger than Howard Stern now commands on Sirius Satellite Radio (the company won't release ratings for its individual channels).

"He saw the possibility of a radio niche for what you might call 'uplifting talk' that focuses on everyday life," said Tom Taylor, editor of the trade publication Inside Radio. "He comes across as an extremely likable and credible guy, and when he's getting a point across or even reading the five key findings of a medical research study, you know that his heart's behind it."

Part of the radio show's success, of course, is tied to Tesh's earlier fame gained in other mediums. His decade-long stint as co-host of "Entertainment Tonight" from 1986 to 1996 stamped his name and face into the mass consciousness. That gig even led to a memorable guest-starring role on "Star Trek: The Next Generation" in 1989 — he played K'Tesh, a Klingon going through the agony of puberty.

"It sounded good on paper," said Tesh, who regularly flashes his trademark "Nice Guy" smile. "I thought I was going to be Capt. Picard's assistant or something, then I'm sitting down to five hours of makeup and I was too scared to ask what I was going to be doing."

For Tesh, "Entertainment Tonight" brought him a new level of wealth and fame, but ultimately it left him feeling unfulfilled. He wanted to matter on a deeper, more spiritual, level to his audience.

"I probably should have left a couple years earlier than I did," Tesh said. "I didn't believe in what I was doing. I know it sounds corny, but I love being a part of people's lives in a meaningful way and that's really one of the fun things about the radio show."

After the television show, Tesh devoted himself full-time to his first love, music — a move that made him a New Age and mid-America superstar — and a piñata for music critics and every urban hipster with a laptop. His legions of fans adored his heart-touching melodies and soft pop instrumentals that delved into faith, love and family. His concerts at the Red Rocks Amphitheatre in Colorado became nationally televised specials on PBS and helped earn him gold records.

Even with the radio show today, Tesh continues to work on new albums and has scheduled about a dozen concert dates

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this year from coast to coast. Last month, Tesh joined other Christian recording artists in playing the fifth annual FishFest in Irvine.

But his musical successes only fueled his detractors to the point today where he shies away from Googling his own name for fear of what it may summon.

"He's always used as a pop culture reference for the lowest of the low in music," said Tesh's stepson, Gib Gerard, who works as a marketing and licensing director for his media company. "And if you're under 35, liking John Tesh is the epitome of un-cool.... Really, we just laugh about it."

Sometimes, Tesh is able to do more than that. In turn-the-other-cheek fashion, nasty e-mails and letters can get a surprising response from Tesh.

"Instead of giving them the finger, we give them a hug and they're usually very uncomfortable with that. They end up going, 'huh?' " said Tesh, who sometimes sends out free CDs and T-shirts bearing his likeness.

In a business overrun with thin skins and oversized egos, Tesh's ability to take a joke is rare. Witness his appearances on "Late Night With Conan O'Brien Show," "The Tonight Show With Jay Leno" or "The Daily Show With Jon Stewart," where he is fodder for the talk show hosts.

In one segment on O'Brien's show, Triumph the Insult Dog rips into Tesh in only the way a wisecracking, cigar-smoking, hand-held puppet can. In another, Leno interrupts Tesh mid-performance during a Detroit concert to hand out loaves of white bread to the audience. (These last two clips can be viewed at <http://www.tesh.com>.)

Tesh credits a good sense of humor and his Christian faith with keeping the entertainment world in perspective. With Baptist ministers and Sunday school teachers in his family, Tesh was a four-day-a-week churchgoer as a youngster. But the strict upbringing produced a backlash within and drove him to resent religion for years.

It really wasn't until about 15 years ago when his second wife, actress Connie Sellecca, brought him back into the church. He was seeking a greater purpose in his life and the church gave him that, he said. His faith, however, has presented a challenge for his radio show.

"I'm a Christian guy, but this is not a Christian show," said Tesh, who also acknowledges Sellecca's mountain of unread bedside magazines as one of the original inspirations for his radio program. "We don't ever preach on the show."

Still, his faith and life experience has done more than help him manage pop culture stoning — it also fortifies him to take action. When a tsunami devastated parts of Asia in late 2004, Tesh said his radio show listeners urged him to visit the disaster and help. Initially, he didn't particularly want to do it.

"We started getting phone calls and e-mails asking whether we were going to broadcast from Sri Lanka and we said, 'Uh, well, no,' " Tesh said. "And then people started getting angry, saying, 'You're always talking about this and that and where are you?' I decided they were right, so I took my family over there."

After touring hard-hit areas of Sri Lanka, he and his wife published a compilation of children's artwork from the disaster called "Shades of Blue: The Tsunami Children's Relief Project," which has raised more than \$400,000 for charity. Similarly, after Hurricane Katrina slammed into the Gulf Coast last year, Tesh led a donation drive among his radio listeners, later delivering more than 60 pre-owned mobile homes and trailers to displaced victims in Slidell, La., and Long Beach, Miss.

"At my age, it's like let's do something where we can make a difference," Tesh said. "That's all I'm trying to do."

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