



'Nervous, no talent and nowhere to go but up': How Dave Pratt became a Phoenix radio icon



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To the listeners who made him the top-rated morning-show host in metro Phoenix, Dave Pratt is the Morning Mayor, a title somewhat jokingly bestowed on the radio personality by Phoenix's mayor-elect at the time, Terry Goddard.

It was 1983 and Pratt had Phoenix Mayor Margaret Hance and her newly elected successor on his morning show at KUPD-FM just a few days apart.

"I said to Terry, 'Soon you will be mayor of Phoenix,'" Pratt recalls.

"He replied, 'Yes, but you will always be the Morning Mayor.' I must have played that clip 100 times the following week, and it stuck. Now, almost everybody except my family calls me 'Mayor,' 'Mr. Mayor' or 'Your Honor.' It will stick with me forever," he said.



'Think Mayberry': The Mayor got his start in Elko

Long before he was declared the Morning Mayor, Pratt began his life in radio at KELK-AM (1240), the only station in Elko, Nevada.

It was 1977 in the kind of town where "everybody knew everybody, including the owner of the station," Pratt recalls. "I went to high school with his son. Think Mayberry."

His mom approached the owner and the next thing Pratt knew he was on the air as a "painfully horrible" 16-year-old DJ.

"But it didn't matter," he says. "With only one station in town, we were always in first place ... and last."

Pratt hosted a night show, sneaking in records by his favorite rock acts in between the latest disco hits.

"I was Boogie Shoes Pratt," he recalls.



Boogie Shoes Pratt moves to Phoenix

The DJ moved to Phoenix in his late teens for three reasons – to live with his father (his parents had gotten divorced), to major in broadcasting at Arizona State University and to try to break into a larger market.

"As Casey Kasem would say, I wanted to 'keep my feet on the ground but keep reaching for the stars,'" he said.

As for college?

"I hated it," Pratt said. "It bored me. Too slow, corporate and structured. I was always a free spirit."

One professor told him he didn't have "a serious enough attitude" for broadcasting.

Three years later, Pratt recalls, "I had the No. 1 morning show in Arizona and was invited to speak to his class."

The Morning Mayor comes to KUPD

Pratt was 19 when he got his foot in the door at KUPD.

"Everything happened so fast that most don't realize how hard I worked in that short period of time," Pratt said.

When he started, he was doing research calls to ask what station people liked and why. On weekends, he would clean around the station, a doublewide trailer in a Guadalupe dirt lot. "I even cleaned the bathrooms," Pratt recalls.

He also drove around to record stores with KUPD bumper stickers.

"I did all the menial jobs before finally earning my shot on a weekend late-night show, and yes, I was still horrible," he said.

But he got better.

"I worked hard and improved by practicing in that little trailer studio every single night from 6 p.m. to 6 a.m.," he said.

He started doing personal appearances, six a week, shaking hands, meeting people — you know, mayor stuff.

"Knowing I wasn't as talented as others, it inspired me to out-work my competition," he said.

All of that work paid off when Pratt became the host of America's longest-running rock 'n' roll morning show at KUPD.

James Brown inspired Pratt to start a Band

It was 1982 or so when Pratt had James Brown on his show and asked him about being called the Hardest Working Man in Show Business, suggesting that it can't be that hard doing what he does.

Phoenix disc jockey Dave Pratt and his Sex Machine Band are known for party anthems and songs deriding any enemy of the United States.

"He was somewhat offended and said, 'Well then do it!'" Pratt said. "So I did. And I named my band after a James Brown song to stick it to him."

Dave Pratt & the Sex Machine Band went on to record five albums, 22 singles and a concert video filmed at the Celebrity Theatre.



"We sold thousands of recordings," Pratt recalls. "We headlined arenas and stadiums in Phoenix, Tucson and Flagstaff with opening bands like Blue Oyster Cult, Great White, Lita Ford. It started as a joke, but as the band evolved, I brought in some extremely talented musicians."

The only song he'd ever tried to sing was "Happy Birthday," until the Godfather of Soul stepped in. "I ended up writing and recording over 86 songs," he said. "And no, there will never be a Dave Pratt & the Sex Machine Band reunion show, although there have been many interesting offers."

The 3 keys to Pratt's success

Pratt attributes his success to three things: "My listeners. My listeners and my listeners," he said.

"No radio personality in the history of Arizona has ever had a more loyal following. They understood the sarcasm. My relationship with my listeners is a true friendship, even if we have never actually met."

That's why they followed him from KUPD to CBS Radio's alternative rock station KZON in 2002.

"I couldn't wait to get out of KUPD as ownership and management had changed for the worse," he said. "Although they generously made many offers for me to remain, I had zero interest. At the same time, CBS was nearly doubling their offer and term length for a decade. With four young kids, I made the decision that was best for my family and for my personal happiness."

It was the biggest deal of his career to that point. "And thanks to my listeners, I believe it is still the biggest deal in the history of Arizona radio ... by far," he said. "CBS needed help as KZON had struggled for years. We quickly dominated the rock market. Then I hit a stroke of luck."

When Howard Stern became available, CBS paid Pratt to give his morning slot to Stern so they could both be on the station.

"Howard was in New York and could not do the afternoon shift," Pratt said.

"Basically, I hit the lottery by controlling Boardwalk and Park Place, so I sold one to Howard."

Dave Pratt goes country at KMLE

Pratt's listeners followed once again in 2003 when he became the host of Dave Pratt in the Morning at KMLE-FM, despite the fact that he was spinning country records.

"It was never about the music," Pratt said. "Hell, anybody can play music."

Pratt himself is far more interested in entertaining than music.

"I have never purchased an album or a concert ticket in my life," he said. "All I cared about is what happened between the music during my entertainment time with the listeners. Music just gave me time to grab my next cup of coffee."

He saw music more as "just the bread that held the sandwich together." And his listeners agreed. "In fact, my listeners would often complain if I played too much music," he said. "They could listen to music anywhere. They wanted to be entertained."

In 2005, his show was nominated for a major market morning show at the Country Music Association Awards, that year held at Madison Square Garden in New York City.

"I did want to have a nationally recognized morning show in both rock and country radio as few people have ever accomplished it," he said. "Mission accomplished."

'I simply didn't need radio any longer'

Pratt got out of radio after parting ways with KMLE in 2008.

"I simply didn't need radio any longer," he said. "I was tired of all the corporate luggage. It was time to do what I wanted in life. Plus, AM-FM radio, in general, was declining at a fast rate."

With the recession of 2008 in full swing, large radio chains could no longer afford to keep their higher-paid personalities.



'I simply didn't need radio any longer'

"Instead of working for peanuts like so many other radio people were forced to do, I happily walked and took two years of guaranteed salary, endorsements and appearances with me," Pratt said. "It was awesome."

A note for his kids 'just in case'



The same year he got out of radio, Pratt published "Behind the Mic: 30 Years in Radio," an autobiography he started writing in 2005 while battling cancer.

"The night before surgery, I wanted to leave my four young kids a note 'just in case,'" he said. "During my recovery, I would continue to write notes for my kids just so they would have them one day as adults."

All proceeds from sales of the book at Borders, Barnes & Noble and Amazon went to fighting cancer.

"It did very well," Pratt said. "A decade later, we released the audiobook, including another 10 years of content."

That audiobook has been downloaded more than 1.3 million times for free from Star Worldwide Networks, an online network Pratt launched in 2010.

The New King of Media

Today, his company does audio and video production and media buying for some of the biggest brands in Arizona and beyond, as well as social network management, branding, consultation, PR, graphics, website design, audiobooks and more.

"We provide hosts total freedom and 100% ownership in beautiful state-of-the-art studios overlooking Scottsdale and Phoenix," Pratt said.

"Star Worldwide Networks is the Levi Strauss of pro podcasting and pro video shows. Levi Strauss made his fortune supplying the gold miners. We supply each host with every tool needed to succeed, but it is up to the host to seek their own destiny."

It was the obvious career move for a guy like Pratt.

"As radio was declining, internet was quickly becoming the new king of media," Pratt said. "Instead of looking in the rear view of AM-FM radio, I chose to embrace the future."

Yet again, his listeners followed.

'Draw a chalk body outline around it'

As for radio? He's glad he got out when he did.

"I find it laughable how the only people who still believe in AM-FM radio are either boomers, seniors or still employed by radio," he said. "The truth is obvious. Draw a chalk body outline around it."

"I have never played it safe or bowed to corporate pressure," he says.

"I have never been afraid to believe in myself, to believe in my listeners and to take a calculated risk. After all, I am from the biggest gambling state in the world. Taking risks is in my blood, and I still enjoy being the disruptor."

The most fun he ever had in radio was as a 16-year-old kid in Elko.

"Nervous, no talent and nowhere to go but up," he said.

"That big on-air light in the studio looked like the size of a hot air balloon, and that big microphone was staring back at a 16-year-old kid and laughing. I had to learn to take control and own it. Today, I control my own destiny, because I wasn't afraid to be David vs. Goliath."

