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Community news

For the love of animals

Story by **VALERIE TAKAHAMA**

The Orange County Register

Host Duncan Strauss couldn't have been happier when Triumph the Insult Comic Dog appeared on his KUCI animal-themed radio show.

"It's pretty exciting, the first talking animal on 'Talking Animals'" Strauss said during an all-important pledge-drive show last month.

"Wait," the cigar-chomping canine said, "I thought you had Sandra Bernhard on the show, no?"

Paw-dum-pum.

Despite his 63 dog years in show business, Triumph had it wrong. But who could blame him? "Talking Animals" has hosted more than its fair share of bold-faced names, especially for an hour-long public-affairs show broadcast live on Monday mornings at 9 from a trailer on the UC Irvine campus.

As the show approaches its third anniversary, the list of animal-loving guests includes comedians like Janeane Garofalo, Kevin Nealon, Elayne Boosler and Merrill Markoe, and musicians such as Greg Ginn of Black Flag, Ian Anderson of Jethro Tull and singer-songwriter Nellie McKay.

Strauss, 47, is equally pleased with guests who are known for their work in the animal world, such as Ingrid Newkirk, co-founder of PETA; Temple Grandin, the autistic author and animal expert; and Jean-Michel Cousteau, son of Jacques Cousteau and an explorer, environmentalist and educator in his own right.

A former talent manager with a love of animals and a commitment to public service, Strauss sometimes calls on his show - business connections to book guests; more often than not, he just calls and people are usually willing to appear. It must be something about people who love animals; Strauss himself works for free.



AT ONE WITH ANIMALS: Duncan Strauss host of KUCI's "Talking Animals," listens as one of his callers offers her opinion. SANG H. PARK, THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

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Grandin, for example, called him at his Costa Mesa home shortly after he contacted one of her colleagues at Colorado State University's animal science department.

"I couldn't have been more thrilled if a major rock star had called," he said.

Even with the high-level experts, the show sends off a sunny, jokey vibe. Each week, there's an easy-to-guess Name that Animal Tune contest and an Animal Quiz. (Sample question: "True or false: The oldest elephant on record lived to be 77 years old?")

There are news updates from the "award-winning Talking Animals rip-and-read news department": A Seattle woman won \$45,000 in a lawsuit over the death of a pet cat; a territorial woodpecker mistook its reflection for another bird and smashed nearly 50 car mirrors in a town near Syracuse, N.Y., and singer Christina Aguilera donated \$16,000 to pay for pet microchip scanners in police cars in towns near Pittsburgh, Pa.

"Yea, Christina Aguilera," Strauss interjected.

All of it works together to make "a one-of-a-kind show," said Amy Sherer, founder of the Pet Trust Program and a former guest.

"I don't know of any show where you're going to hear Tippi Hedren and Jean Cousteau. You're not going to see it on TV," she said.

Tanya Petrovna, chef-owner of the vegetarian Native Foods restaurant in Costa Mesa, is another recent guest and a fan of the show's blend of humor and seriousness.

"There are issues like elephants in captivity that people need to know about that might be depressing," she said. "But (the show) has such a lively format, when you do bring up the darker subjects, it's OK."

True to form, last week's show mixed levity and life-and-death animal issues during an interview with musician, mystery writer and animal activist Kinky Friedman. Like most guests, Friedman was interviewed by phone, in his case from a Las Vegas casino. He said he was researching state-sanctioned gambling.

The former frontman of the Texas Jewboys country band and founder of an animal sanctuary announced last year that he's running for governor of Texas in 2006. He's promised that he will outlaw the declawing of cats and make Texas a "no-kill" state for animals in shelters.

Strauss, a stickler for research, spends about 10 hours preparing for each hour on the air. He impressed Friedman when he outlined a possible scenario for the gubernatorial race that involved incumbent Rick Perry and two possible Republican contenders.

"You know far too much about Texas politics," Friedman said.

It was Strauss' turn to be impressed when Friedman bought up the issue of the slaughter of wild horses in Texas.

"By all means, what's your view on that?" Strauss asked.

"Mine is pretty predictable," Friedman said. "It's an outraged view that two slaughterhouses are operating in Texas right now ... I believe that once everyone knows that, we're going to shut it down, the people will."

Strauss wondered about the twists in Friedman's career, from music to writing to politics.

"I'm not like Willie (Nelson) or Lyle Lovett or Dwight Yoakam, these people who love music or performing," Friedman said.

"I've always been ambivalent about performing. So recently I've come to the conclusion that anyone who uses the word 'ambivalent' should never have been a country singer in the first place.

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"You've got to fail at one thing before you succeed at another, I guess."

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