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ORANGE PEEL / A LOOK AT LIFE INSIDE THE COUNTY

Running a Zoo for the Ears

■ A UC Irvine radio show host not only talks about animals but also presents them in song and comedy.

Times Staff Writer

The morning started on the fly for animal talk show host Duncan Strauss.

With five minutes to go before radio airtime, Strauss scrambled to cram enough chairs and headphones for several unexpected guests into the walk-in-closet-sized space posing as Studio A.

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"It's a couple minutes after 9 o'clock "

The 46-year-old flipped a switch to activate his microphone at the UC Irvine radio station and crooned the standard greeting in a smoothly modulated radio tone.

"... It's time now for Talking Animals on KUCI."

With another finger flick, Strauss'

microphone was muted, and "Bluebird" by Jim White issued from the headphones hugging his neck. He fiddled with a few yellow folders, gave two interns a quick lesson on cueing sound clips, then offered them a quick warning:

"We're about to go on air, folks.... All right, here we go."

Strauss placed his earphones over his wavy white hair and began introducing the show to any first-time listeners.

"Primarily, we strive to learn about animals and animal issues ... but we're also here to celebrate animals through music, through comedy."

Strauss' show, which airs Mondays from 9 to 10 a.m. on 88.9 FM and can be heard online at <http://www.kuci.org>, premiered just over a year ago. Although the signal barely reaches all of Orange County, the show's webcast brings it to the world.

Strauss, a former talent manager, said he'd been fed up with the daily grind and was looking for a way to get back to his public service roots.

With his love for animals and airwaves, Strauss decided to go the way of several pet/vet radio shows he had heard. But instead of being too heavy on animal activism, as Strauss believes those shows are, his would mix animal-oriented comedy and music into the on-air discussions.

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Strauss hopes decent people are listening, and since he'll get phone calls while on air, he's pretty sure all his efforts aren't going into a black hole.

On this day, there were news tidbits to offer:

West Nile virus hits horses. Ringling Bros. helps defeat bill to ban animal circuses. San Francisco officials transfer zoo elephants to sanctuary. Emergency landing in Brussels after agitated cat attacks pilot.

Then it was time for Strauss' weekly animal trivia question:

"True or false: Bumblebees use 21 muscles to sting."

A breathless Liz from Toronto, phoned in to correctly guess "true" on the bumblebee. Next was a Bill Cosby comedy clip titled "Dogs." Then it was time for a phone interview of Les Schobert, a former North Carolina zoo curator and animal consultant.

"What are the challenges facing zoos?" Strauss asked him.

"People have to start realizing that we need to provide a high quality of life for these guys or we shouldn't be allowed to have them," Schobert answered.

Elephants, in particular, Schobert and Strauss agreed, have been on the brain since Southland residents called for the return of Ruby, the L.A. Zoo pachyderm packed off to another zoo and pining in Knoxville, Tenn.

A blue light on an overhead panel flashed insistently. Strauss waited until a break in the conversation allowed him to slip in a caller with a question.

"Is there any kind of body that would put pressure on these zoos to move elephants into sanctuaries?"

Schobert said a lack of elephant advocates isn't the problem. "I think [zoos] feel like the public will complain that they don't have an elephant.... The key is the public — what a voice the public has."

Schobert signed off, and as the clock counted down the last five minutes, Strauss wound down with a name-that-tune contest. Familiar lyrics floated from the studio speakers. Seconds later, the blue light came on again. Doris, a caller with a cat named Otis, was ecstatic.

"It's 'Free Bird'.... Skynyrd!"

With a slight laugh, Strauss then signed off: "Be kind to animals, be kind to others, be kind to yourself."

Again he flipped a switch, and as he pulled off the headphones and swiveled out of the chair, a "Lonely Bull" cover by the Untouchables ended the show.

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