

RADIO DREAM TEAMS, “THE NIGHT SHIFT,” AND SCRITTI POLITTI: CRAIG ALLEN AND ANNE GRESS ON RADIO



By Sean Ross

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There are no two people more enthusiastic about radio than those at the helm of “The Night Shift with Craig Allen,” the new Classic Hits evening show from Compass Media that launched in early April. Allen is the guy who used the public affairs show as a wedge into his hometown radio station, where the PD told him to stop being so enthusiastic and making the rest of the staff look bad. Gress was the programmer who always had thoughts on whatever was in “Ross On Radio” each week, even as her WOGL Philadelphia became the station that ushered in this decade’s resurgence of Classic Hits.



Gress, Allen, Townsquare president of local programming Kurt Johnson (whose 17 Classic Hits stations are among those carrying the show from 7 p.m.-Midnight on weekdays), and voice-of-“The Night Shift” Dan Kelly all came through Star 104.5/Alice 104.5 Philadelphia in the late ‘90s and the early ‘00s. Gress, Allen, and Johnson were reunited when Gress became PD of WKXW (New Jersey 101.5), the News/Talk powerhouse where Allen hosts Classic Hits on Saturday afternoon.

Allen and Gress are clearly the kind of people you want to hang out and talk radio with. Even during the planning sessions for “The Night Shift,” (for which the author oversees the show’s mix of mid-‘70s through early ‘90s hits with an emphasis on the ‘80s), you could pretty much count on radio geekery to break out. So here’s what talking radio with Anne Gress and Craig Allen sounds like.

Sean Ross: You’re obviously the sort of radio people for whom the fascination with radio began early, and who had a lot of radio influences...

Anne Gress: My father moved the whole family every few years. I grew up listening to the greatest stations of all time. In Phoenix it was KOY, in Los Angeles it was KHJ, in Minneapolis it was KDWB, in Tampa it was Q105 and the Power Pig WFLZ [where Gress eventually worked]. The DJs were my first friends in every city we lived, and Casey Kasem was my best friend because he was in every station. I didn't know I was going to work in radio but that course was being set for me throughout my life.

Craig Allen: I knew from age nine, when I wasn't even tall enough to see over the little wall that separated the audience from the station at the 4H Fair . . . I grew up in New Jersey with the best of New York and Philadelphia, with summer vacations in Wisconsin where I got to hear the Chicago radio wars. When I came back to go the Univ. of Wisconsin, I used to listen to Big Ron O'Brien on W-NNNN-BC at night. I wrote a friend at WNBC and said "who is this guy?" Little did I know in the '90s that we'd be working together.

I started out as a news guy in college. My first opportunity was at Wisconsin Public Radio and when I came back to New Jersey, I got into news and full-service stations, but always wanted to be a DJ. When I was at Star 104.5 Philadelphia and Kurt was brought in as PD, I immediately recognized him as the guy I listened to at night in my dorm room on WZEE (Z104) Madison, feverishly writing my papers. He told me he used to hear me in the morning on WPR. We bonded over our love of '80s music right away, and I ended up hosting a Saturday night '80s show that helped lay the groundwork for what I'm doing on "The Night Shift" now.

Anne: Star 104.5 was a dream team of people with Steve Rivers, one of the most brilliant programmers ever, collaborating with John Cook and Gerry DeFrancesco, they had come up with this [rhythmic-based Hot AC] concept, and it was a new way to look at programming. I was lucky enough that they had an MD opening. I was lucky to fall in with Steve who was very kind and patient and generous with his philosophy. That station was truly innovative, and of a moment.

Craig: It was an AC station but it was playing Bobby Brown, Amii Stewart, Stevie B....

Sean: In a lot of ways it was the station that laid the groundwork for WKTU New York.

Anne: That station at that moment was one of the most exciting things I've ever done.

Craig: Dave Kaye, the production director, was playing back the listener line and there was a woman calling from *New York*, who lived on the top floor of a tall building and listened to *us*. She said, "You guys are all that and a bag of chips." That was the first time we ever heard that expression. You can be sure that made it into a promo.

Sean: So about working with Big Ron O'Brien....? (immediately, both begin talking at once)

Craig: I never *ever* saw him write anything down. He just sat there and would snap his fingers and bob his head and the break came out. And he always had something great, and he always hit the post. I said, "Ron, you're so far past being postmaster general that it's not worth mentioning."

Anne: There was a definite physical-ness to his show. For a guy who wasn't really into physical anything, he was very physical and animated in the studio.

Craig: He'd be ready to do a break and a grin would break out. He'd lean in to the mic and his head would start to bob, and out came gold. And here comes the post, and here are some interior posts. He's moving in and out effortlessly without any notes whatsoever. He'd played these songs so many times, and he knew them by heart. It

just came pouring out of him. When I would fill in for him, there was always an extra energy because it was Ron's show. There was just an added magic that took you over.

Sean: Dan Kelly, who does the show's imaging, was in Philly as well. Craig had met him at WPST Trenton and helped recommend him for the job.

Anne: The best production directors have a sixth sense. They take a script, look at it once, and in their head, they've got it! You come back and it's bigger and better than you hoped it could ever be. That's what Dan does.

Craig: You just have to unleash the beast, and he will come back and amaze you every time. He went from Philly straight to New York. He did imaging for Scott Shannon.

Sean: Anne, you ended up programming Smooth Jazz on WJJZ...

Anne: I wanted to be a PD. I had a job offer in San Francisco, but my then-GM Jeff Specter didn't want to lose me. They told me to come back in 24 hours, then they said 'we're going to give you WJJZ!' I looked at them like they had ten heads, because I didn't know anything about Jazz. I had Broadcast Architecture's framework, but I would also reach out to Steve Rivers and he would tell me to 'just play the hits.' I realized we did have hits, but they were George Benson, 'Breezin'" or Sade, 'No Ordinary Love.' I turned it into a top 40 that played jazz because I didn't know what else to do, and it worked out really well.

My GM at WJJZ, Sil Scaglione, had gone across town to WOGL. We'd really enjoyed working with each other. He kept begging me to come over and finally I did.

Sean: The Oldies format was trying to find its way at the time. Many stations were getting out of the format, not in. WOGL ended up being the first station that helped revitalize the format.

Anne: That's kind of you to say.

Craig: But if your success at WOGL hadn't happened, WCBS-FM might have been looking at something else [when its Jack-FM experiment ended, instead of returning to Classic Hits].

Anne: I walked in and they were in fourteenth place. The president of CBS told me "you're never going to make WOGL work." That made me mad and I said "I'm going to make it top 5." Then I wondered "what did I just say?" But I was playing these songs I'd played my whole career. It all worked out.

Sean: Tell me about working with Craig at New Jersey 101.5, and now on 'The Night Shift.' What's special about him on-air?

Anne: The passion for the music. He's always had it. You can tell when people are faking it. The headphones come off and it's 'four and the door.' That's not Craig at all. He loves the music. That passion and emotion are not fake. He's played that song a thousand times before. He's excited to play it again on the radio.

Craig: A great song is a great song. You hit it again, and the magic happens again.

Anne: That you think it's magic is great. These days, people call what they play product, not music anymore . . . As the show runner for "The Night Shift," the one thing I haven't had to do is fire Craig up, because he comes in fired up.

Craig: We're all '80s on Friday night. One of my favorite songs from the '80s that I've gotten to play that might surprise you is "Perfect Way" by Scritti Politti.

Anne: I had the 12-inch single.

Craig: I have that, plus two copies of the vinyl single and the CD.

Anne: Paul McCartney was recording in the next studio over, and he kept ducking in to listen to their stuff. He thought they were the best thing ever.

Craig: They're due for a comeback. So many of our "Night Shift" faves are on the road this summer, and that's awesome.

Anne: I've heard they're touring again.

Craig: I was lucky enough to meet the Go-Go's, Bryan Adams ... all that great '80s music is just as relevant now. A whole new generation is learning it through their parents or a movie soundtrack. We present it as "the here and now" and here we are.

Anne: The unofficial theme song for the show is Wang Chung, "Everybody Have Fun Tonight." We're going to have fun through the talent, through the music, through the memories that are imprinted on you through the music. We all got in this business to have fun and we're putting it all back on the radio at night.

Craig: If you're having fun, the audience is having fun with you. Cracking the mic coast-to-coast used to be for the jocks on the 50,000-watt AMs or for guys like Casey Kasem. I get to have fun and I get to crack the mic coast-to-coast.



To learn more about the "The Night Shift with Craig Allen," contact **Doug Ingold** at 310-242-8746 or dingold@compassmedianetworks.com.



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