

# Publisher's Profile

By Erica Farber



## TOM ROUNDS

Founder and President, Radio Express

**T**echnology is helping us to become part of a true global community, and Tom Rounds has seen firsthand that radio stations around the world have a lot more in common than most of us think.

Founder and President of Radio Express, Rounds has enjoyed a career that has included programming stints at great stations such as KPOI/Honolulu and KFRC/San Francisco. He was a pioneering producer of rock videos and the founding Exec. Producer of *American Top 40* with Casey Kasem.

Since Radio Express was started over 15 years ago, the company has been working in more than 108 countries, providing programming to some 12,000 radio stations, not counting those in the U.S.

**Getting into the business:** "My first job was at a college radio station at Amherst College in Massachusetts. It was a student activity that, at the time, was probably on the low end of the totem pole. I managed the station, and I've continued to work with it on an alumni basis in a consulting capacity. Then I did weekends part-time at WHMP/Northampton, MA. I thought I was going to be in television, but when I got out of college, there was a recession, and nobody was hiring. My uncle knew the guy who owned and operated WINS, then an MOR station in New York. I had worked there summers for a couple of years. One thing led to another, and I'm glad it did; I would have gotten lost in television."

**Getting involved in syndication:** "What sparked that was my getting involved with some amazing people in Hawaii. After New York I went to Honolulu as a newsman, then became the afternoon-drive guy and, eventually, the PD at KPOI. We ran a concert business on the side. We were always in business in one way or another in addition to our radio jobs. When it came to pass in the late '60s that videos were beginning, I moved from San Francisco to L.A. to head up a video-production company. That led to a joint venture with Drake Chenault in a concert-promotion company that attempted to book concerts into all its markets."

"We got involved in doing the first big commercial East Coast pop festival, in Miami in 1968. The budget scared Drake Chenault, and they backed out because they needed the money to go into the syndication business. We had to find another backer, and we got into business with the Strawberry King of California, Tom Driscoll. That led to the establishment of Watermark. One of its first gigs was to develop and syndicate a radio show with Casey Kasem called *American Top 40*."

**Founding Radio Express:** "From the beginning, *American Top 40* was an international success. It was always fascinating to me that other cultures were interested enough in American music to want to cover it on a weekly basis. By the time Radio Express started in

1985, I felt the American syndication business wasn't going in a direction that was satisfying, creatively interesting or even profitable, to a certain extent. We noticed that certain evolutionary events were taking place in the international market that had already happened in the U.S. We thought we had some foresight and intuition about what was going to happen next."

"When we started Radio Express, thousands of stations were coming on the air or being commercialized or privatized around the world, so there was a huge market. It was like being in the middle of a herd of buffalo — you couldn't go wrong. We started with a group of five people, and it grew to about 50 people at its peak. We're now operating with fewer, because we've become more automated."

**A description of his business:** "It's really not the syndication business as we know it in the United States. Back in the good old days, *American Top 40* was the same show in the same language on every radio station. The programming, advertising and marketing are much more customized than I ever thought they would be. Each deal is completely different, because about 75% of what ends up on the air is adapted in one way or another. *The World Chart* comes out in four separate format editions, for example, and in about 35 different languages. We've had to be very flexible to respond to the needs of the markets. It's a lot more work than producing radio shows, which is what we originally thought the business was."

**The World Chart:** "By the early '90s countries were growing a little tired of just playing the American hits week after week. We tried to come up with a concept that represented what was going on in the world according to worldwide airplay. At about the same time you could go to just about any market in the world and find a station playing what we call 'International Hit Radio.' It was more or less what you would hear on the air here but with slightly more of a European influence. This was the genesis of a whole concept that involved music without borders, dedication to the environment and a lot of common inspirational themes that we found were important to young listeners all over the world. What actually precipitated it was ABC's decision to cancel *American Top 40* in 1994."

**State of the industry:** "I loved John Parikh's recent article in *R&R* that said that what we're seeing now is a renegotiation of power. That's absolutely what's happening. Internationally, no one has figured out how to globalize or brand radio. Clear Channel would be in the right position to do it, because it has so much access. Currently, it's so complicated and so local, it'll be interesting to see how it can be done. In a way, that's what we're doing, but we're doing it through programming, as opposed to ownership."

"The shows we have have an international presence. The advertisers know where to find us and our shows. In effect, it becomes a de facto global radio network. That's where I see it going. I would love to see a little bit more realization on the part of the American radio business and the American public that we're only one small part of a huge, developing world that's changing all the time. A great majority of our new business is in developing countries — Africa, India, Latin America and Asia."

"It's interesting how many people I run into who confuse 'international' with Europe. They say, 'Can you get us on the air in Europe?' Well, Europe is only a small market compared to what the rest of the world represents. Radio is No. 1 in most of the developing world, and, therefore, that's our strongest territory."

**Biggest challenge his company faces:** "Lack of money. We've never really had the kind of investment that we feel needs to be applied to the initiative that we've taken. We know where to go, but we're a small, independent operator that tries to serve many masters. It would be interesting to see a concerted effort by an American company to reach out to the international

market on a more extensive basis than just ownership."

**Future opportunities:** "The biggest play right now for our big brands — Coke, Pepsi, Kodak and so forth — involves a combination of Internet and terrestrial broadcasting. With new technologies that enable more than a couple hundred people to listen to an audio stream, you can do some interesting things. Take Mexico, for example. Only a small percentage of the population has Internet access, but they're the people with the spending power. This is definitely the shape of things to come. All of the even moderately educated populations of these countries are aware of the Internet and have access to it in one way or another. The combination of that and conventional terrestrial advertising on radio is very powerful, and it's going to open up many new avenues."

**Something about his company that might surprise our readers:** "For years my job has been teaching, not really expanding business. We try to have three or four foreign interns all the time. It's great that we're in L.A., because we have a hugely diverse community, ethnically and language-wise, that we can draw on. There is a huge amount of talent that may never get into the radio business in the sense that we're in it. In a way, we're a throwback to the old days when you had one station to think about, and you put all your energy and focus into that, and it was a constant learning experience."

**Most influential individual:** "There are so many. Ron Jacobs was the most explosively creative person. He opened up more of the possibilities of radio and media to me than anybody. From a show-biz, savvy sense, Ed McLaughlin. For people who had amazing intuition, there's Tom Moffett, Bill Drake and Casey. They didn't have to learn anything; they were born knowing it."

**Career highlight:** "The fact that we've been able to get into and stay in good contact with broadcasters all over the world and build thousands of relationships is very exciting. It opens up new lines of communication that probably didn't exist on that level before. The truth is, we're all one. Radio people wherever you go are pretty much the same. They have the same problems, issues, turn-ons and challenges. That's a very exciting thing."

**Career disappointment:** "Being born too soon or too late. It's amazing that we were able to do all the things that we did back in the old days without computers and without all the knowledge and experience that we have now. The only regret I have is that I'd like to do it again."

**Favorite radio format:** "Radio Nova in Paris."

**Favorite television show:** "I love Jennifer York in Skycam 5 on *The KTLA Morning News*."

**Favorite record:** "Legend by Bob Marley."

**Favorite movie:** "This year, *Memento*. Of all time, *From Here to Eternity*."

**Favorite book:** "This year, *Island* by Alistair MacLeod. Of all time, *The Snow Leopard* by Peter Matthiessen."

**Favorite restaurant:** "Joe's in Venice, CA."

**Beverage of choice:** "Stoli on the rocks."

**Hobbies:** "Sailing — I used to race sailboats — gardening, piano, music and art."

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**Advice for U.S. broadcasters:** "As far as I can tell, radio is still in the dark ages when it comes to its ability to understand its customers, the advertisers. A lot more work is being done in other countries to get intimately acquainted with each account so that you understand them top to bottom in terms of their personnel, their direction and their marketing. They really get in there instead of just being recipients of spots that are passed to them by some media buyer in a small office in Akron. I don't really see a lot of initiative being taken by the huge American radio groups to get into the heads of advertisers and make radio the powerful thing that it needs to be and should be. There are countries where radio gets a lot bigger share of the pie than it does here."