

Profile: Jeffrey Callison

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Most Sacramento radio listeners know Jeffrey Callison as the worldly, inquisitive host of “Insight,” local NPR affiliate Capital Public Radio’s daily hour-long look at the issues facing the region. But while Callison’s smooth style and distinctive Scottish brogue are a natural fit for radio, his route into the medium was circuitous at best. In fact, without the timeless lure of a beautiful woman, a violent push from Mother Nature and a kinder, gentler helping hand from the first President Bush, this former professional stage actor and musician would likely never have made his way into the radio business—or to America—at all.

On Insight, the 44-year-old Callison draws heavily on his eclectic background to connect with a bevy of politicians, artists, musicians, social advocates and other unique newsmakers. The show is intelligent, occasionally artsy and cool and usually just a pleasant afternoon diversion. It relies on Callison’s seemingly innate ability to be respectful of his guests without pandering, to be persistent without badgering or lapsing into the role of “obnoxious radio host.” It is a welcome accomplishment in an age where most talk radio seems hell bent to gather listeners via screaming sound bites and “red state-blue state” hysteria. More important, Callison does so without falling into the “we sound serious, so what we are saying must be important” aloofness so common at NPR stations.

“For a long time in public radio, we gave ourselves permission to be boring because being boring was somehow a virtue unto itself,” he says of the NPR stereotype. “It somehow showed how serious you were about what you did. If you were snappy, that was commercial.”

Commercial is still a dirty word around most public radio stations, but Callison says competition from other sources has convinced CPR to come out of its comfort zone in an effort to keep listeners listening.

“The media landscape [in Sacramento] has changed,” he says. “We have competition now from another NPR station (San Francisco station KQED), from satellite radio and from other public stations that stream on the Internet. We can’t afford to just say, ‘we’re public radio, aren’t we great?’ We have to actually earn people’s attention.”

Callison goes about that by reaching across the spectrum to feature a diverse range of guests, from the likes of Ward Connerly, the former UC Regent who campaigned to end all racial preferences in California public education, to then-congressional candidate Doris Matsui in her first interview after the death of her husband, long-time Sacramento Congressman Robert Matsui, and local blues musician Jackie Greene, whom

Callison calls a particular favorite. That variety requires a lot of preparation, although a listener might be surprised to learn most of it comes on the fly every day.

“Because we have only a limited amount of time to prepare for every show, Jeff spends every morning becoming a mini-expert on that day’s topics,” says Insight’s senior producer Benjamin Jonas-Keeling. “He is an amazingly quick study and has an interest in a wide variety of topics, which makes him a natural host.”

He also is, according to the Insight staff, blessedly free of the diva syndrome that often afflicts successful media personalities.

“Jeff is just a very modest person,” says Jonas-Keeling. “He is very articulate and inquisitive, and for someone with a fairly high profile, has absolutely no diva in him at all.” Perhaps that is because Callison remains keenly aware of where he comes from.

Born in the Berwick region of Southern Scotland, Callison was raised in Aberdeen, a long-time fishing hub turned European petroleum center after the discovery of oil in the North Sea early in the 20th century. He didn’t exactly grow up drooling to get into radio or to prove himself across the Atlantic. Scotland was home and seemed like more than enough at the time. He also learned at an early age the unique privilege of being a Scot, recalling the reaction of classmates when they learned his mother had actually given birth to him in - gasp! - England.

“I remember being teased about that,” he says with a smile. “Kids on the playground would form a circle around me and chant ‘Englishman, Englishman.’”

The oldest of four sons, then-Jeffrey Howitt — he and his wife took the name Callison when they got married in 2003 — spent much of his youth listening to the BBC and “debating the universe” with his father, Jim. His mother, Charlotte, a nurse manager, often worked long hours, so his father would come home every day to make the boys lunch. Afterward, while the younger kids played outside, Jim Howitt and his eldest son would sit around the table and talk about whatever topics came to mind.

“I didn’t realize it at the time, but we were talking philosophy and politics and the issues of the world, which has had a great influence on me,” he notes. “He always drew things out of me by challenging me to think about issues. To this day, I still like to be challenged by new ideas that I may not have considered before.”

That willingness to try new ideas was also the impetus for the Callison name-change. Although he does not classify himself as a feminist, he has always been adamant that a woman should not be forced to take her husband’s name when marrying. That, however, didn’t exactly jibe with his new wife’s wishes. After considering a mish-mash of hyphenated and mixed versions, they decided to go with a neutral adaptation that connoted something important to both of them. Thus was born Callison — the name of the street where they were introduced by mutual friends and, eventually, where they were married.

He credits his parents for shaping many of his worldviews, noting that it was still fairly unique at the time for his mother to work so much while his father often took care of the kids. Both parents were also active in Liberal Party politics, and all the boys grew up participating in election campaigns.

“It was all just regular life to us,” he recalls, “But in hindsight I can see that I have always been immersed in politics and public affairs.”

Perhaps, but his true love as he approached manhood wasn’t politics. His interests then went to English literature (“because I was good at it”) and philosophy (“it just sounded like a cool idea”), both of which he chose to study at the University of Edinburgh. He was just about finished with his studies when he decided he wanted to have a go at radio journalism. He applied for various graduate programs in journalism, but a lack of previous experience stalled that idea before it went anywhere.

“They all wanted to see some previous work in the field, but until then I had not shown the slightest inclination for it,” he says of those efforts. “I figured that was it and I began to cast about for what I would do with my life.”

It didn’t take long to discover another love: acting. Almost on a lark, he auditioned for and got a lead role in a production at Edinburgh’s top theater company. Transfixed by the thrill of performing before live audiences, he spent the next few years “eking out an existence” on Edinburgh stages before moving to France to study at the improvisational acting school L’Ecole Jacques Lecoq in Paris. He stayed in Paris for almost three years, piecing together a living by augmenting his stage work with guitar and piano gigs. Although he says he was good at it, particularly with light comedy, the profession was far from lucrative.

“It was a very difficult life because, not surprisingly, as a bohemian in Paris I was competing with thousands of other bohemians who were also trying to fashion a living the same way,” he says.

The Parisian experience did produce one major benefit – he met a young American student on break from UC Santa Cruz who had come to Paris to connect with her French heritage. Before long, the two were married. He admits that the thought of starting a new life in America had not occurred to him, but when it came time for his new wife to return to the States to finish her degree, he embraced the idea of joining her.

The move, however, went better than the marriage, which ended soon after the couple arrived in Santa Cruz in 1989. Undaunted, he got a job selling ad space for a local newspaper, optimistic his life’s calling was still out there. Little did he know that his big break was just around the corner, or that it would quite literally rock his world.

It came in the form of the Loma Prieta earthquake, the 6.9 trembler that shook Northern California to the core just as most of the country was sitting down to watch the A’s and Giants take the field for game three of the “Bay Bridge” World Series. The quake

devastated much of the Bay Area, collapsing freeways and bringing everything to a screaming halt. Further south in Santa Cruz, near the quake's epicenter, things were even worse. The devastation there was very concentrated, wiping out a far bigger percentage of businesses than even in San Francisco.

With virtually all of the newspaper's advertising revenue gone, Callison was suddenly jobless and without much hope of getting one. But then came good news from then-President George Bush, who declared the quake to be a national disaster. That decree authorized six months of unemployment insurance — even for those workers who were not American citizens. It was a welcome cushion, and with no other job to be had, Callison used some of his time to volunteer at the local NPR station, KUSP in Santa Cruz, answering phones and getting involved in the radio game. The rest, as they say, is history. He eventually migrated to Sacramento and CPR, where he served as news director for several years before Insight debuted in July 2004.

With the success of the show has also come a certain amount of celebrity notice, most often from the distinct vocal lilt that distinguishes him from his radio peers. Although the voice is perfect for radio's theater of the mind, it is impossible to turn off when he simply wants to get through the line at the grocery store. He admits to at times "just pointing instead of speaking" in order to hide his voice. It is understandable, if for no other reason than listeners are usually surprised and sometimes even disappointed when their mental image of a radio personality doesn't match the reality.

Gabrielle Callison says her husband's reticence is born from his sincere desire not to take advantage of being in the public eye. "He's very gracious about it," she says. "He is very interested in people, even if he doesn't let a lot of people in."

"It isn't being recognized that is the issue," she adds. "It is just important to be recognized for the right reasons, not just as a unique voice but as a great journalist and interviewer."

Callison agrees, although he says no amount of recognition could ever change him.

"I just don't take myself that seriously," he says, adding with a smile that, "If I did, my wife is excellent at keeping me anchored."

Callison rarely gets back home to visit his family, all of whom still live in Scotland, although Gabrielle notes that he does call regularly. He and Gabrielle, who is 10 years older than him, do not have kids, so these days he spends his limited free time playing piano and devouring the news.

"He is an absolute genius, intellectually and musically," says Gabrielle. "He can play anything on a piano, or accompany anything after only a few moments of hearing it."

The guitar, however, has gone to the wayside, a victim of a busy schedule that has also claimed any thoughts of venturing onto local theatre stages. He acknowledges the

tradeoff, but says the success of Insight has made it very worthwhile. He also notes a significant fringe benefit to the job.

“I always consider myself to be a journalist,” he says. “But for one hour every day, I get to be a performer again. That’s great.”