

Spilling The Milk

Derek “Big D” Haskins and Sean “Bubba” Powell have been doing mornings together for almost 30 years, but in terms of industry recognition, they’ve never been more celebrated. In addition to the Country Radio Hall of Fame induction, they are this year’s ACM National Daily Personality and have earned their second consecutive nomination for the (National) Radio Hall of Fame. First paired for mornings at then-WXCT/Baton Rouge in 1996, the duo with the self-proclaimed “largest belly buttons in radio” joined crosstown WYNK three years later, where they began in syndication. They were based out of WSIX/Nashville from 2003-2011, formed production company Silverfish in 2014 and returned to Nashville’s airwaves at WKDF in 2021. In addition to mornings on more than 100 affiliates, the pair – both of whom are pilots – host a weekly podcast and the syndicated weekend show Honky Tonkin’ with Big D & Bubba.

Bubba: We were both 14 when we started in radio, but in different states. Radio was not work, so that was the draw. It was fun to play music, push buttons and talk to people on the phone.

Big D: I wanted to be a psychologist, but did radio because a teacher said I had a good voice.

Big D: [WXCT was] going to do a national search for a new morning show partner for me, and my wife said, “What about Bubba?” He was doing afternoons, had so much energy, was really good with the phones and just doing fun radio. When I offered him the job, I felt like I was about to give a kid an inheritance or a promise ring. But he said no, because he was going out drinking at night after his shift and that was his life. It took a couple of weeks, but finally he came around.

Bubba: We’ve done some dumb things over the years, including a contest where we asked people what they would do for concert tickets. This lady said she’d let dogs eat dog food off of her. So, we brought her out to the studio, put her in a kiddie pool, covered her with Alpo and let five dogs in. We would lose our career for doing something so stupid now – what if a dog had bitten her? She stunk, but she won the tickets.

Big D: During the “Got milk?” campaign, we did an entire broadcast submerged in milk. We had a special scuba rig with microphones in a dunk tank filled with powdered milk that the fire department filled up with water, and a crowd of rednecks in Wal Mart standing around watching and listening.

Bubba: They had to continuously dump ice in it to keep it at a good temperature because if it started to spoil, it could have been unhealthy for us. We put our lives on the line! And you would never believe how opaque milk is. You can’t see anything. We had to train for it at a YMCA pool. Our butts were so tight. We were not letting anything from outside in. But we had the smoothest skin afterwards.

Bubba: At least once a quarter we have a really poignant moment that reminds us why we do this. In 2017, we learned of a dying woman who had taking a helicopter ride on her bucket list. We found out and, within 24 hours, she was on that helicopter. She flew around Nashville and gave us a play-by-play of what she was seeing. That one is special because she passed away very soon after.

Big D: Not to outdo that, but when FFA guys name their livestock after us, that’s when I know we’re making an impact.

COUNTRY
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Bubba: The work we do with St. Jude Children’s Research Hospital has been formative. I was always the goofy guy and had never really done serious radio, but that opened me up to being vulnerable and showing a different side.

Big D: We are the official Country morning show of the United States military via Armed Forces Network. It means everything to us to be able to have listeners on who say, “Hey, I just got stateside. I was listening to you guys in Djibouti.”

Bubba: We get calls from Guantanamo Bay and Antarctica. We had confirmation they were listening on the space station. Crazy places where you never thought you would be available.

Bubba: One time we had naval assets deployed and went on the air telling them, “We know you guys are

listening. Hopefully everything is safe. Be careful.” We instantly started getting emails from dot-mil addresses that read, “Don’t worry, we’ve got this.” We were like, “Okay then. Here’s another George Strait song.”

Big D: People want entertaining audio back. As an industry, we got so caught up in trying to compete against streaming services that there was no place for personalities on the radio. It’s hard to come up with new ideas and content every single day, year after year. With the influx of podcasts, people now see how hard it is. Podcasts don’t last long. Most people only do five, and they are never heard of again. We’ve done more than 500. Personality is why people are attracted to us.

Bubba: There is a hunger for entertainment. There’s so much going on in the world, so much craziness, and so many people pointing fingers at what they think is the problem. We want be the solution. We want be where people can go to get away from all of that.

Big D: One of the things I’m most proud of is running a company. I don’t think most jocks understand what all goes into it. Being able to see both sides of the microphone as a small business owner changes everything. There are many times when we have an in-studio artist interview and, on one screen I’ve got their new release, the questions we want to ask or the game we want to play with them, and on the other screen I have spreadsheets of cashflow reports, vendors we’re looking at or insurance paperwork. Learning how to run a small business has been the most impressive part of our career.

Big D: Bubba and I were flying West out of Nashville going somewhere in Arkansas. It was a beautiful, sunny day, but I look out and see an inverted triangle floating at our 12 o’clock, at about 3,000 feet altitude, and it was on fire! Bubba’s got his phone out recording while I called in a UFO to air traffic control. They said they don’t see anything but to keep an eye on it.

Bubba: I’m thinking we’re going to call Deborah Norville and be on “Inside Edition.”

Big D: It’s increasing in altitude, so air traffic control starts asking other aircraft in the area if they’re seeing this anomaly. Other pilots start coming on the radio [mocking us with the “Twilight Zone” theme song]. This goes on for 15 minutes, and then finally it hits us. Bubba goes, “You don’t think that’s the sun reflecting off the pyramid in Memphis, do you?” It was a haze layer, which is why it was upside down and looked like it was on fire.

Bubba: Everyone at air traffic was laughing at us.

Bubba: We got the news about the Country Radio Hall of Fame induction on a Zoom with KFRG/Riverside’s Heather Froglear, and I was completely flummoxed.

Big D: I would never say the word “flummoxed,” but we’re truly humbled and honored. **CAC**

