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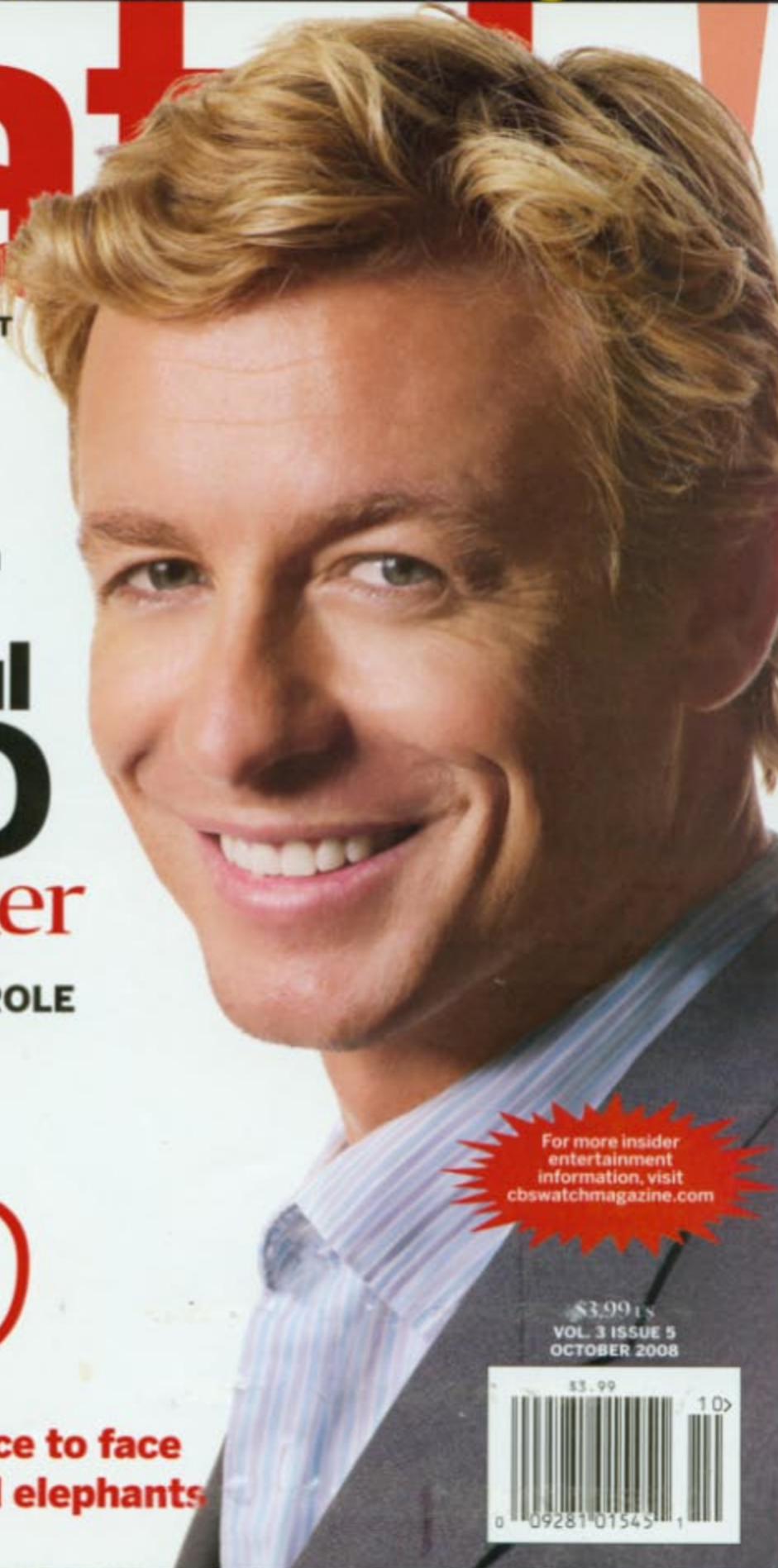
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Radio Days



Although disco's long been dead, *WKRP in Cincinnati* endures

Baby, if you've ever wondered whatever became of *WKRP in Cincinnati*: The cult classic comedy, which debuted 30 years ago this month, has grown only more beloved in the decades since it was canceled. Throughout its four seasons on CBS, the sitcom, set at a fledgling, second-tier radio station, struggled in the ratings as it switched time slots with an ultra-high frequency. "When your own mother is calling you wanting to know when the show's on, there's something wrong," observes the show's creator, Hugh Wilson. But, he adds, "ironically, when we went into syndication, a lot of people found the show for the first time."

A Florida native, Wilson says he "had no idea at the time what a lovely situation I was in" when, after only two years of writing for CBS' sitcoms starring Bob Newhart and Tony Randall, he was asked to come up with a concept for his own series. He immediately plumbed his previous life working in advertising in Atlanta, where he had frequented a media-hangout bar called Harrison's. The writer

had never been to Cincinnati but knew that he wanted to set his show "somewhere in so-called flyover country," he remembers. "I'd like to tell you there was a lot of thought in it, but really I just tried different titles. 'WKRP in Buffalo?' No. Cincinnati just seemed to roll off the tongue."

CBS execs responded enthusiastically to Wilson's pitch with tales from their own prior radio days. But they balked at paying for the signature touch Wilson intended for his series: incorporating real, hit songs into each episode. Cleverly, the

writer found a loophole, reducing royalty rates by shooting *WKRP* on videotape rather than film. Soon, record companies were lavishing Wilson and his stars, Howard Hesseman and Tim Reid, who personally selected many of the records their characters would spin, with albums, posters and standees to furnish the DJ booths at the fictional station.

WKRP was written, Wilson explains, as a true ensemble comedy. And that format, Reid theorizes, is what enabled the show to mine comedy gold. "My character, Venus Flytrap, was one of the few black characters on TV at the time who had a life beyond his clothes. There was a real person there, a former schoolteacher named Gordon Simms," explains the actor, who writes about his time on the show in his upcoming memoir, *Tim and Tom: An American Comedy in Black and White*. "WKRP was very unusual for a sitcom because every one of its characters was more than one trait deep."

By 1982, disco, which Hesseman's Dr. Johnny Fever so desperately hated, was truly dead, and salesman Herb Tarlek's polyester leisure suits now had to be specially ordered from a golf pro shop. And so *WKRP* signed off—only to be briefly revived in a 1991 syndicated version with which Wilson was not involved. Now at age 64, the writer—who went on to co-create the critically beloved CBS comedy *Frank's Place* with Reid and to direct films such as *Police Academy* and *The First Wives Club*—is "mostly retired," and occasionally teaches screenwriting as a guest professor at the University of Virginia. "After class—it happens every damn time—it's, 'Hey Mr. Wilson, my parents wanted me to tell you how much they loved *WKRP*,'" the writer marvels, laughing. "I'm excited that people still know the show, and still love it like they do." **U**



Johnny Fever