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Is Shock Radio Dead? More Potty-Mouthed DJs Join Don Imus In Doghouse

Bad boys of radio living on borrowed time as sexist, slur-filled gags garner suspensions, firings.

By Gil Kaufman

It was a good, flatulent, slur-filled and sexist-gag-soaked run, but the bad boys of radio appear to be living on borrowed time.

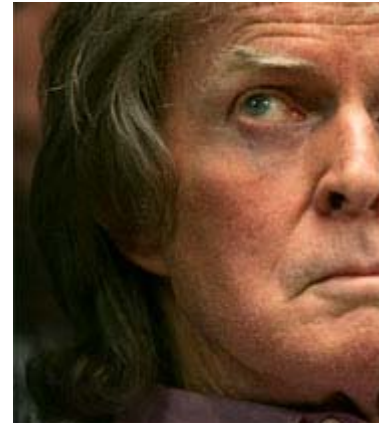
On Tuesday (May 15), XM shock duo Opie and Anthony were slapped with a 30-day suspension for last week's gag involving a homeless character discussing his desire to sexually assault Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, first lady Laura Bush and the Queen of England.

"Nobody in radio thinks they're a shock jock; they're entertainers. But if [the genre] isn't dead, it's certainly had a storm warning," said Tom Taylor, editor of Inside Radio, citing last month's firing of Don Imus as well as this week's canning of the New York duo JV and Elvis over an on-air prank that featured a derogatory call to a Chinese restaurant.

Add in the firing last week of New York Power 105 jock Donnell "Ashy" Rawlings for making anti-Semitic remarks and a flap in Cincinnati over billboards for an AM talk station that used exaggerated Hispanic stereotypes and you have what appears to be a death knell for a genre that has been cracking wise about minorities, politicians, women and anyone else within earshot since the early 1970s. "It's certainly put a chill in the air, like when you're driving down the highway and you see someone pulled over and you look at your speedometer," Taylor said.

If the genre isn't down for the count, it's certainly wounded, according to Radio & Records Executive Editor Paul Heine. "It remains to be seen whether or not broadcasters will get some balls and stand up for their right to entertain people on radio," he said. "But the whole genre of edgy radio is under the microscope now, and anyone with an ax to grind will probably have their words fall on receptive ears."

The suspension of Opie and Anthony — who set the outrage bar pretty high in 2002 when they were fired for sponsoring a contest in which a couple had sex in New York's St. Patrick's Cathedral — added a new wrinkle to the Imus blowback



Don Imus

Photo: Spencer Platt/ Getty Images

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because the duo are now on a satellite channel, which is not regulated by the feared Federal Communications Commission. An XM spokesperson did not return calls, but in a statement, the company said that comments the duo made on their show Monday "put into question whether they appreciate the seriousness of the matter."

Even though the Opie and Anthony show is on one of XM's explicit channels, a tamer version of their show is also simulcast on some CBS Radio stations — which carried Imus and, coincidentally, fired the pair in 2002 over the St. Patrick's gag. The suspension could have something to do with a current push by XM and Sirius to convince the government to roll back restrictions that would prohibit them from merging. "If you work for XM or Sirius right now, it's not a good time to say something provocative," explained Sean Ross of radio research firm Edison Media Research. "[The same goes] if you work at CBS, which is going to have to defend its decision to break Imus' contract."

Opie and Anthony apologized for their gag last week, but they took a different stand during Monday's broadcast, according to *The Associated Press*. "We're under the same scrutiny as [National Public Radio] — it doesn't make sense," they said on Monday's show. The pair also expressed sympathy for Don Imus, saying his career is now "gone, just because he was trying to entertain people."

Suddenly, jokes that seemed funny to some even a month ago are off limits. The undisputed master of this kind of toilet humor radio, Howard Stern, however, appears to have skated around the controversy so far despite continuing his patented brand of provocative, often offensive gags on Sirius satellite radio. Stern's agent did not return calls for comment.

Ross said there are hundreds of other edgy shows across the country that have less visibility than some of the genre's fallen stars and they won't likely all go away overnight, if ever. But they will certainly think twice before making the kinds of jokes that used to pass without much uproar.

"Are you saying you can't entertain without saying racial slurs or talking about assaulting prominent women?" Ross said. "I would hope that these people see themselves as having more to say. ... But the bigger issue is, I don't know what anyone who makes any of these comments means. I don't think it's because it's a deeply held opinion and they say they're doing it as comics to be provocative, which is maybe even worse."

Holland Cooke — a news-talk specialist and consultant for McVay Media, the biggest radio programming consulting firm in the world — said another factor in the potential demise of the genre is the emergence of instant protest over the Internet by watchdog groups like Media Matters and the Family Research Council, which can flood e-mail inboxes within minutes, cutting the time it used to take to mail a letter of protest and wait for a reaction. Another blow is the popularity of sites like YouTube, which helped spur Imus' fall thanks to the widely distributed footage of his derogatory comments about the Rutgers women's basketball team.

"You can [still] say whatever you want," Cooke argued, even in light of the Imus meltdown, which he said had more to do with *where* Imus made his comments, i.e. on TV *and* radio, than what he said. But the question for many shock jocks going forward will be, is it worth the laughs?

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I don't condone Don Imus' or any o DJ's behavior, but it's entertainmen that sometimes they do cross the li freedom of speech. I am a Hispanic times I do get offended by some of that are made in these shows, but i humor. Change the station or just l
Laura, 30 | San Antonio, TX

People who don't listen to Opie and understand the humor or the contrc the same way that those who don't Park" or "Family Guy" or "Chappelle understand that humor.
Sean, 23 | Cleveland, OH

I hope everyone is enjoying their ov outrage. When your favorite show, i is removed for something that offer interest lobby, I'll be here fighting f listen to it. Just remember: There is be offended in this land. Does anyoi silencing every single thing that offe person is a good thing? Remember you're debating a political ideal or li
H, 45 | Lincoln, RI

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For more on Imus' firing and the attack on hip-hop that followed, see "[Hip-Hop On The Defensive After Imus Incident; Sharpton Calls For 'Dialogue' With MCs,](#)" "[Hip-Hop Hits Back At Imus, Critics: T.I., Snoop, Fat Joe, Common Weigh In](#)" and "[Hip-Hop Under Fire: A Video Timeline Of Controversies Over Rappers And Their Rhymes.](#)"

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