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From the Los Angeles Times

[800 Words]

Red Bull Radio

By Dan Neil

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It's 12:06:30 a.m. and we're on the air. The bumper music goes down and the mikes come up. "1-800-288-9227 at the Midnight Trucking Radio Network!" Gary McNamara rattles the phrase into the microphone like an auctioneer. We're in a studio at WBAP News/Talk 820 radio, a mega-station between Dallas and Fort Worth. McNamara and cohost Eric Harley man the booth Monday through Friday, midnight to 5 a.m. Central Time, and for a multitude of truck drivers listening on terrestrial and satellite radio, theirs are the voices of the night.

Trucking is having one of its periodic pop-culture moments, a minor reprise of the late-'70s, when CB radios, C.W. McCall songs and movies with "Smokey" in the title were mainstream. (Note to readers: The familiar "10-4, good buddy" apparently is now some sort of man-on-man action code.) One of the sleeper hits of the History Channel this year was the nerve-racking "Ice Road Truckers," about truck drivers in Canada's Northwest territory who, while trying to supply Arctic Circle diamond mines, dash across the heaving lake ice.

Even for less adventurous drivers, the late shift means long, inconsolable hours. About 70% of all freight in the U.S. travels by truck, and so-called full-truckload drivers like to work at night to avoid traffic and make better time and money. Statistics suggest that at any given moment tonight, tens of thousands of huge, heavily freighted trucks are rolling down the highway, and drivers are getting sleepy, sleepy. . . .

"We feel like our job is to keep them awake," says Harley, who is the show's expert on the arcana of trucking. "We try to have the same energy at 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning as other shows have at 10 or 11 a.m.," McNamara says. "For truckers, this is drive-time radio."

Sure enough, tonight McNamara and Harley will serve up fistfuls of aural amphetamine, a lot of hearty hoorah and trumped-up debate about politics and sports, a morning zoo in the dead of night. McNamara throws out a question: Who is the greatest football coach of all time?

The phone lines light up. "You can't hate on Tony Dungy," ventures Andrew, who is currently (at 2:06 a.m. Mountain Time) a resident of a major interstate in Colorado. More calls come in, with the whistling big-rig cabins in the background. Chuck Noll, Vince Lombardi, Knute Rockne. The voices sound tired.

As it turns out, truck drivers' state of alertness is a matter of supreme and ongoing concern. In July, a federal appeals court struck down for a second time key provisions of the Bush administration's revised hours of service regulations, which allowed drivers to stay behind the wheel longer and to work more hours per week. The independent truckers, the owner/operators, as they're called, howled. "What other industry's workers complain when they are not allowed to work longer hours?" Harley asks.

For those who don't live the life every day, trucking radio is full of exotic wonders, thrilling tales of logbook

cheating, weigh stations, flat freight markets and Midwest thunderstorms that could swallow big rigs whole. The inequities of the Qualcomm OmniTRACS (electronic tracking), the shortage of truck-stop parking, the industry's plague of heart disease. These blood-and-steel concerns are what caught my ear when I found the show on Sirius' Road Dog Trucking channel (it has since moved to XM's Open Road channel). Here's a universe of problems I just don't have. The unintended beauty of satellite radio's narrowcasting is that, though it aims to provide specialized programming for every taste, it also serves a voyeuristic curiosity. Am I the only atheist to slum in Christian pop, or the only risk-averse person to listen to the horse-racing channel?

The difference is that Americans can get along without God and ponies. Without these raccoon-eyed truck drivers, American life would be functionally impossible. Spend a night listening to this show and you'll get a glimpse of the logistical effort and personal sacrifice it takes to bring, say, chicken to the food court's Chick-fil-A. When truckers sneeze, America gets a cold.

In the first hour of the show, Harley interviews the boys from the Chrome Shop Mafia, whose show on CMT, "Trick My Truck," is the whiter, working-class version of MTV's "Pimp My Ride." They are calling in from the Big Iron Classic in Minnesota, but the show's success reaches beyond the 18-wheel audience. "Cops, shift workers, anybody who has to stay up all night listens," McNamara says.

And sometimes they talk. By the third hour the show has taken on the air of a late-night call-in program. David, route and destination unknown, waits more than an hour to answer the question, "Who played Rocky Bleier in the TV biopic?" "David Ulrich," he says triumphantly. Not quite. Robert Ulrich is the name. "Oh, whatever," he says. David is just one of a dozen callers tonight who will hang on forever to get on the radio and then, with endearing clumsiness, flub their moment. He still gets a Charlie Daniels T-shirt and CD and has staved off the isolation of the road.

The calls dwindle and the sun comes up. Another night, another 300 miles or so under somebody's wheels. Thank God and Goodyear, the malls will get their Chick-fil-A. It would be too much to say the Midnight Trucking Radio show saves truckers' lives, but it probably does. Surely you could argue that it keeps them from going crazy.

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