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Redbird Buzz Episode 7: Sam Alex, Fall 2021

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Sam Alex Interviewee

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Redbird Buzz

Episode 7: Sam Alex

August 2022

Rachel Kobus 00:00

This conversation was recorded in the fall of 2021.

Rachel Kobus 00:12

Welcome to another episode of Redbird Buzz. I'm Rachel Kobus with Alumni Engagement. Many listeners may have already heard the voice of 2007 Illinois State graduate Sam Alex as the host of *Taste of Country Nights*, a five-hour nightly radio show heard on over 100 stations nationwide. Now Sam wears many hats in the radio world as the creator, executive producer, and host of the nationally syndicated radio program *The Sam Alex Show*, the ultimate on-air backstage pass to Nashville's biggest stars. Sam will tell anyone that if you just ask, people will give you a chance to try and to succeed. As a student on campus, that is exactly what Sam did when he walked into the ISU athletic director's office and asked for opportunities to work behind the microphone. After that one question, Sam would call the women's soccer games for the next four years, along with working as a student at WZND and as an intern at Bloomington-Normal's country music station. Now Sam is letting others ask the questions as a part of Camp Broadcast, a workshop for aspiring journalists and broadcasters. As founder and director, Sam brings high school- and college-age students together to have opportunities to work on interview skills with celebrities and other well-known personalities. We are Redbird Proud of Sam. And without further ado, let's hear more from Sam about how he launched and manages two businesses in the radio industry.

Rachel Kobus 01:33

We are here with Sam Alex, a 2007 graduate of Illinois State University, the producer, on-air personality, director, everything, of *The Sam Alex Show*. I don't even know where to start when you have your own show, Sam, and also the founder of Camp Broadcast. So welcome, Sam. What's the word, Redbird?

Sam Alex 02:01

Go Redbirds! Rachel, thank you so much for having me and yes, I feel like I just do it all. Why not? It's good to try things, fail at it and just keep going. But yes, it's fun being your own producer and being your own booker, your own social media coordinator and host. I love doing it all.

Rachel Kobus 02:18

And I love that you do it all and I love that you're - it kind of started with the mantra I feel like you have, it's great to fail and try new things. Like that's what I feel like you're all about, is trying new things, seeing what's out there, and having fun with it.

Sam Alex 02:31

So true. I remember being an undergrad, I was doing, hosting weekends and fill-in at B104, the country station in town. And on my own I reached out to Lamont Robinson, who was drafted by the Atlanta Falcons, I just sent him a message saying hey, can I call you on my show? He said yes. Then boom, I had, you know, his first ever interview, him being a professional athlete. And then same thing with former president Dr. Bowman, just ran into him, I was a public address announcer at a baseball game, said hey, I'd love to have you call into my radio show and just talk about what's happening at school and in the news. He said sure! But - and so if I would have had a producer for my weekend show, I don't know, like, it's just - sometimes it's a bad thing having too much too soon. It's good to work for it and then just organically make those relationships. And so yeah, I feel like I've always been a producer even when I had actual people producing for my shows. And by the way, my show's syndicated on a bunch of country music radio stations, Monday to Friday, seven to midnight. So the past seven years I've been on B104's competitor, 1077 The Bull in Bloomington-Normal. But you know what, we're all friends, right?

Rachel Kobus 03:36

Right. I mean, you're getting the news out there, you're getting country music out there. And so, I mean, that's where - I mean, after graduation, I know you went to a couple stations, but then you really launched when you started doing Taste of Country Music Nights and had in that a nationally syndicated show. You were nominated for awards, I mean, you did - you started it all with those interviews and getting on the red carpet, like let's talk about it.

Sam Alex 03:57

Yeah, I was so honored, nominated for ACM, Academy of Country Music, award for national show of the year, but yeah, I didn't go from weekends in Bloomington-Normal to a nationally-syndicated show on 150 stations. I actually went from, so, WBWN, B104, in McLean County, and then my first full-time job right after I graduated in August of 2007 was at WBWB in Monroe County.

Rachel Kobus 04:25

All right, yes.

Sam Alex 04:26

See, I was in McLean County to Monroe County, WBWN and then WBWB - so confusing - and then went from Bloomington, Illinois to Bloomington, Indiana, that's where WBWB is. So confusing, but yes. So I was - right out of undergrad was able to host my own morning show on a Top 40 station, kind of like being here, and was assistant program director, so did that for three years. And that's the town where Indiana University is, so I feel like I got to go to undergrad. I lived right off of Third Street, we lived a block from campus, you know, the Sample Gates, and just got to interview all the Broadway touring shows coming through town, all the athletes, everyone involved in Jacobs School of Music, and, you know, everything I learned from just grinding, working part-time and fill-in at the local stations in Bloomington-Normal. I got to just hit the ground running my first full-time job and then after three years we were Indiana Broadcasters Association Small Market Show of the Year and we were just doing amazing things and then went from there to Washington, D.C. It's a pretty big market -

Rachel Kobus 05:27

Oh, I didn't know about Washington.

Sam Alex 05:28

[Cross talk] radio, producing morning show there and being on air and then Cincinnati, Ohio, similar thing, and then had an amazing opportunity in February of 2014, saying Sam, would you like to launch a *Taste of Country Nights*, syndicated country music show direct from Music City USA! And then just did amazing things there for so many years. And loved being on the red carpet, interviewing country music celebrities, building relationships, every time they had a new single, a new album, a new tour or a charity, they want to talk about, just hop on in studio. Long story short, two years ago I said hey, it'd be cool to be my own boss, so *The Sam Alex Show* was launched, country music show heard nationwide Monday to Friday on a bunch of stations across the country. Now I get to use all that knowledge I learned in Bloomington-Normal and the other stations across the country for my own show, which I own it! Pros and cons to that. Yeah, pretty cool. I could make my own schedule and just do what I want when I want, having fun.

Rachel Kobus 06:28

So what gave you that extra nudge? I mean, like you said, you were in Nashville for quite a few years and then 2019 you just decided that was it one day, you woke up? Or what really got you there?

Sam Alex 06:39

Yeah, it was a relationship I built really with lots of entrepreneurs in Nashville, especially musicians who are like, hey, Sam, even though I'm represented by a record label - like Blake Shelton, Dan + Shay, Brett Eldredge, they're repped by Warner Music Nashville - even though they have a record label, who, I guess, you know, gets a percentage of the profits and so on and helps market them, they're their own boss. No one tells Blake what to do! Maybe Gwen Stefani. But no, Blake is his own boss. Yeah, so a lot of the artists said, hey, Sam, have you ever thought about being your own boss? So when you get new affiliates, you know, you're taking ownership, you're getting a piece of the pie, you get to control the content you talk about and the contests and the music and so on. So it was really the entrepreneurs and artists who said, hey, you should be like us, be your own boss.

Rachel Kobus 07:27

Wow!

Sam Alex 07:28

And I get to do cool things, such as, you know, I'm the correspondent for Celebrity Page TV, which is a syndicated entertainment news magazine show on the REELZChannel, as well as 150 local TV stations. Now in Chicago, it's on The CW on the weekend. In New York and LA, it's on ABC, and so on. So I love hosting red carpets for them with the CMA Awards and the Oscars. And then many interviews I do on my radio show, you know, are simulcast, are on Celebrity Page TV as well. So I get to do cool things like making my own schedule. Before, if you worked for big company, maybe they want you in their corporate office all the time. But here I can, you know, do what I want.

Rachel Kobus 08:08

Yeah, like I said, try new things, see what works. I love it.

Sam Alex 08:12

Exactly. So I got to do cool things like go on the Kentucky Derby red carpet, where I'm interviewing Aaron Rodgers for, I think it was a [cross talk] -

Rachel Kobus 08:19

Ah yes, the Aaron Rodgers viral video!

Sam Alex 08:21

- well, he said, hey, Sam, I'm gonna - make sure you watch Game of Thrones! Yeah, so he was saying that he was gonna be having a cameo in that show, and then next thing you know, it's on SportsCenter, the lead story, and the ABC affiliates in Milwaukee and Esquire and every outlet there is! Anyhow, so I get to do cool things like that where I could take my own projects while simultaneously doing my show from the road. So it's kind of the, I guess, Ryan Seacrest model, or Steve Harvey or other folks where they're their own boss and they just get to choose the projects and so on. So I've been having a blast.

Rachel Kobus 08:27

And it's - I was going to say, you've been doing well. It's been two years and we see amazing things coming from Sam Alex, so keep on keeping on.

Sam Alex 09:02

The only thing that wasn't amazing - I had the time of my life playing myself on the show Nashville, ABC, interviewing Juliette Barnes about Hayden Panettiere, and then the very next day, ABC canceled the show.

Rachel Kobus 09:16

I didn't know that was the next day. I mean, I knew you were on.

Sam Alex 09:18

Derek Hough was in the show, Kesha was in this. I think the issue was, Rachel, they put my scene at the very beginning of the episode. I think everyone tuned out after my scene -

Rachel Kobus 09:28

Stop it!

Sam Alex 09:29

If I would have been at the end people would have kept tuning in, Connie Britton would have come back the next season - and it all worked out, CMT picked up the show Nashville, but, uh -

Rachel Kobus 09:36

They did, yes. I love it. Well, I mean, you've already shared - I was going to ask you, because you've done so many red carpets and interviews, what - and maybe it's not with an interview or celebrity, what's some good memories you have so far? What's been the, like, greatest moments in your career?

Sam Alex 09:53

It's always fun on the red carpet when the artists or the guests run up to you. Yeah, Brothers Osborne saying, Sam, hey, [cross talk] right up to you. So that's always fun, you build a relationship when you're just, I guess, living in the same town and doing so many interviews over so many years. Highlight 2 was at the CMA Awards many years ago, talking to Garth and Trisha, that's how we - every time we get to interview them. Being at the ACM Awards, I interviewed Dolly Parton many times, but one I really remember well in Vegas at the ACM is talking to Dolly Parton where she didn't just talk to me, she talked to every single media outlet on that red carpet, looking us in the eye and listening to the question and answering it fully to the best of her ability, whether it was Entertainment Tonight, Access Hollywood, or the local campus TV station, she was talking to them. How cool is that? [Audio cuts out] from Dolly, which is treat everyone equally, with respect, how you want to be treated. Also good, in the CMAs many years ago, it was a crazy fun night, Justin Timberlake and Chris Stapleton and the Final Five gymnasts: Aly Raisman, Madison Kocian, the whole team, all five of them right there. How cool is that? They came right up to me.

Rachel Kobus 11:10

So when people do that, I guess - and this might lead into maybe what you're going to talk about soon in your kind of teaching and educating future broadcasters - how do you come up with questions, like how do you interview - you don't want to be the stereotypical - what's your next single, what's going on in your life? Like, you really, you build relationships with celebrities and that's why they know you so well.

Sam Alex 11:31

It's always good to have all those questions. It's good to have those great talking points from their manager and publicists and agent and spouse, and then it's good to look at them, read them up and down, and then do what Craig Ferguson used to do in the Late Show, like when the guests would come on out, he would rip those questions and throw them to the sky! Yes, you want to hit their talking points, you want to know what they're promoting, they're not there just because they're a nice person. So you want to make sure you plug what they're talking about, but as you know, Rachel, the best question is a response or a follow up to their statement. So basically, just putting down those questions, looking them in the eye, and just having the conversation. There's a good chance you're not going to get to any of those questions, which is so good.

Rachel Kobus 12:12

Or there's a good chance you'll find out Aaron Rodgers is going to be a cameo and go viral and no one else knew.

Sam Alex 12:18

Exactly.

Rachel Kobus 12:19

I still can't get over that.

Sam Alex 12:19

Yeah, you're just anyone else.

Sam Alex 12:19

I think - and he did many interviews and he just somehow, we just built a rapport where he knew I wasn't trying to do gotcha questions. I didn't have talking points, we were just having a conversation, saying, hey, good to see you here, so what time are you going to the race tomorrow? Is there a horse you're thinking of putting money on - or, like, something - a conversation you would normally have with any person, not just a super famous person.

Sam Alex 12:21

I'm making it sound so simple, but you definitely have to do the Malcolm Gladwell 10,000 Hour Rule of just, basically, ten years of just making mistakes, learning from them and then you start finding your groove.

Rachel Kobus 12:54

Well, and you sharing all that kind of leads me into my next topic, because besides, you know, launching *The Sam Alex Show*, you did something during a pandemic based on all these interview skills and what you found succeeds, the failures you've had, and you launched Camp Broadcast. So a camp for a - yeah, no, why not, because why not share what you've learned? I mean, that's what we, how we learn from people, we learn from our mistakes, we learn from our experts, we learn from our peers, and I think Camp Broadcast brings all that together. Plus your students get to, you know, talk to maybe a couple of celebrities along the way too.

Sam Alex 13:32

That's so cool. Yeah, real hands-on experience, interviewing celebrities every single day at camp and then having a different guest mentor or speaker, someone like me who works everyday in the field taking their hosting reel and so on. But yeah, it all happened a few months after COVID hit. I mean, I remember it was May and there was like one day where all these summer camps made a big announcement, camp is cancelled. All these major media companies announced we're canceling all in-person internships. And I just know, if it wasn't for all the internships I had at WIIT in Chicago, [inaudible] channel, and then in Bloomington-Normal at 96.7 I-ROCK, and WBNQ leading in to working part-time at Q104 and I'm on every day in Bloomington-Normal 1077. If I didn't have all those internships - and then I was a camp counselor in Wisconsin, in Chicago, and I was a camper for many years. If I didn't have all those internships and all those camp experiences there's no way I'd be where I am in life or professionally. So it's so bad that they were all canceled. So it's - that day I just thought of Camp Broadcast and asked my friends who work in the biz, saying hey, what do you think of this idea? And they'd not only say, Sam, that's a great idea, they said, you should do it and I would love to help, I would love to volunteer my time and join a camp for a day and help these campers. So mostly college students and recent grads, but we've had some middle schoolers and we had some people who are in their 50s who are looking for change or looking to give a TED Talk. But for the most part it's college

students or recent grads who are really looking to be a TV host, a sports play-by-play announcer, a radio host, they want to start their own podcast or through a YouTube channel, or they just want to help improve their public speaking. And a lot of parents have told me too this really helped their child just break out of their shell. It's a skill set, it's talking to someone, especially talking to an adult, maybe, who you have nothing in common with, and just having a conversation, so yeah.

Rachel Kobus 15:24

I was going to say, it's all about building conversations, like that's what we have to learn to do.

Sam Alex 15:27

100%! So that first summer when COVID first started I did ten one-week sessions, all on Zoom, and every day had a different celeb who the campers get to interview, such as Scott Hamilton, who is a figure skater, [inaudible] Super Bowl MVP, Real Housewives, folks from The Bachelor and Bachelorette, comedians and musicians, Granger Smith, Cole Swindell, Cassadee Pope, so basically at CampBroadcast.com you can see the over 130 celebrities who have volunteered their time and over 100 guests who work in the biz, Entertainment Tonight and ESPN and so on. So that was an amazing summer, The Today Show did a whole segment, five minutes. I thought they were just gonna do a quick plug, it was a five minute segment!

Rachel Kobus 16:09

I watched it and it was great too. I mean, you got their, you know, their morning producer that came with, he actually like got involved with it too -

Sam Alex 16:16

[Cross talk] with us for a couple of days. And then this past summer, my hometown of Chicago, we just did one week only! It was in person. So we rented out a conference room at a hotel and every day from - the campers would come in person and we had Andy Masur, White Sox play-by-play announcer, Christina Loukas, Olympic diver, and Jenny Tolman - the whole list, it's all at CampBroadcast.com, but we got to do it in person and then we also went on field trips in person to a radio station, in person to a professional baseball game where we got to sit in the broadcast booth and just shadow everyone. And we also went on - and our graduation was at Country Thunder, we brought all the campers, we went on stage introducing some of the bands and went backstage where the campers got to interview musicians one-on-one. So at the end of the week, they had a five minute reel and interviewing celebrities as they apply for internships and jobs. So, I mean, you need two things: one is a portfolio, so [inaudible], it could just be a landing page or links to your socials and so on. And how valuable is that, if someone's applying for an internship or entry level job and they have a five -

Rachel Kobus 16:16

They already have a reel, yep.

Sam Alex 16:32

- where they're interviewing actual celebrities and stuff. So it - everything you would do at an actual internship, but I just squeeze it in to four days. So yeah -

Rachel Kobus 17:40

And now they are far ahead now.

Sam Alex 17:42

13th through the 16th, we'll be in Chicago. Registration is open. It's almost sold out. But yeah, CampBroadcast.com is where you can sign up. Yeah, it feels so good just paying it forward so I've been having a blast doing this.

Rachel Kobus 17:56

As they say - and you - so I was gonna ask, I mean you kind of answered this too, I mean, you're doing bigger and better things with it. You obviously - you said you're going to continue it this summer and it's almost sold out, so obviously, you know, you are impressing, impacting our future journalists, our future broadcasters, because this is not dying, this is just a transition of technology for how we get our news, and I mean, when people talk about, you know, journalism, broadcast, it's gonna go away, it's not, it's not.

Sam Alex 18:23

My friend who hosts a morning radio show in a major market, he says we're not DJs anymore, we're not morning hosts or on-air talent, we are content creators.

Rachel Kobus 18:31

Oh, yes, I like it.

Sam Alex 18:32

So that's a giant umbrella.

Rachel Kobus 18:34

It is!

Sam Alex 18:35

[Cross talk] having fun making TikTok videos, they want to start their own YouTube channel, their own podcasts. Even though it has nothing to do with the traditional radio or TV, people are always looking for news to be informed. Entertaining and informative, like, those are the two things that everyone should have who is a journalist or broadcaster, whatever the medium is. Yeah, even radio or TV, it doesn't matter. People are always gonna want content. They always want to get their news and they always want to make people smile and be entertaining.

Rachel Kobus 19:08

And Sam Alex always makes me smile. Every time I talk to you, you make me smile, you are so fun. Just, I love it.

Sam Alex 19:16

I need to know which major media outlet should we be on next, because you know, Camp Broadcast two summers ago was on The Today Show, this past summer Good Morning, America did a feature. And who's next?

Rachel Kobus 19:26

I love it. I don't know, who is next? I mean, technically Illinois State University podcast, I mean -

Sam Alex 19:33

Done! I was gonna say Fallon or Kimmel, but -

Rachel Kobus 19:36

I mean, Illinois State's just a little better, don't tell them I said that.

Sam Alex 19:41

100%!

Rachel Kobus 19:43

Well, and actually, that kind of, you know, segues me in as we kind of start wrapping up here. Sam, I would be remiss to not ask you - I mean, Illinois State, like you said, and internships and you know, where you start - it's where you started that. So what can you say about your experience at ISU, how did it help you prepare to be where you are today?

Sam Alex 20:04

Well, I mean, it was so nice. I got to make so many mistakes and really just hit the ground running, such as when I walked into WZND, the campus station at ISU [inaudible] and they said, hey, our only opening is Tuesdays at 5 a.m. Boom, raising my hand! Normally you have to work your whole career to be able to do a morning shift. Obviously, it's different when you're an undergrad, you don't want to get up early, you know what I mean? You know, the primetime shift would be later in the afternoon or later in the day, so it's kind of reversed. I thought, oh my gosh, mornings, just like my idols, cool! It's like, how cool is that? You're 18 years old, I get to just, they just, like I was just thrown in. We do a proper newscast and sportscast and so on, so that's awesome. And then also, I remember Orientation Week, before classes even started your freshman year, just walked into Assembly Hall and the athletic director's office, saying hi, I just wanted to introduce myself, my name is Sam, if you're ever looking for someone to fill in to be the public address announcer for any of the sporting events, just let me know, I love to do it. Brendan Fouracre, assistant AD, the very next day - or he said hey, tomorrow, can you be the public address announcer for our women's soccer game? I did it and then four years later, it turned out that I was the announcer for every single home woman soccer game from 2003 to 2007, saying, "Here's Kanisha Campbell, here's Meghan Boler, here's Jackie Rucinsky!"

Rachel Kobus 21:29

All because you started a conversation. It is really about starting the conversation and putting yourself out there.

Sam Alex 21:35

Well, well, and it's because the opportunities being offered at ISU where they said yes, we're gonna give you a shot, go for it. So that's where it's been invaluable. We're able to just to just try things. So thank you to ISU for just giving me and giving all the other students a chance to fail.

Rachel Kobus 21:56

Perfectly said, I love it. And that's why - and I have to say too, Sam Alex is one of our Outstanding Young Alumni recipients from the Alumni Association, we got to honor you with that a few years ago. And it makes me laugh, though, because I think, and you can correct me if I'm wrong, I think you accepted that award and then it was like three days later, you had to go to the Academy Awards and do the red carpet?

Sam Alex 22:19

Two award, two red carpets in one week.

Rachel Kobus 22:21

So you have to say ISU's was better, right? I mean, we topped the Academy Awards?

Sam Alex 22:26

That's an actual red carpet, Redbird red.

Rachel Kobus 22:29

Yes, it is. And it was honoring you! I mean, as much as I know you love to honor fellow celebrities and award recipients it was very fun to honor you and all the work you've done and obviously all the work you continue to do.

Sam Alex 22:42

Thank you, so - that was very nice of the ISU president for allowing me to borrow the private jet to fly from -

Rachel Kobus 22:48

Oh, yes, yes. Yes. That private jet we have next to our private boat. Well, Sam, thank you so much for taking the time to talk to us and talk to our listeners. You have anything to add?

Sam Alex 22:59

Yeah, that does remind me, being in Hollywood, that there's so many ISU alums that live in LA. [Cross talk] the film, TV, movie business is it - I was in a production, The Fair Maid of the West, sophomore year. A lot of my - for whatever reason all of my roommates were theater majors. So I lived on Franklin and - oh, yes! So a bunch of times they would take me to their Theatre of Ted, which was -

Rachel Kobus 23:22

Oh yes, uh-huh, very popular.

Sam Alex 23:23

- like an open mic night. But yes, they have a big slogan where they just talk about, make mistakes, like, just go for it! Who cares? I don't think professors were allowed in this space so it was like an ultimate stage. But yeah, that's definitely like the theme of a great school like ISU where you're given opportunities to just do things and just reach for the sky. But yeah, I wanted to mention too, when I did the Oscars I saw a bunch of folks who I went to ISU with, so that is just -

Rachel Kobus 23:51

Oh, that's amazing!

Sam Alex 23:52

Coast to coast, worldwide!

Rachel Kobus 23:54

Redbirds are literally everywhere, and that is so fun. Again, from the relationships you build at ISU to seeing them on the red carpet, we love to hear those kinds of stories. And Sam, we thank you again for everything and for your time and we look forward to seeing what you do in the future.

Sam Alex 24:08

Thank you so much, Rachel, and feel free to follow me too at Camp Broadcast or Broadcast Master Class and then connect with me too, I love connecting with fellow Redbirds. @SamAlexRadio on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn. For some reason there's blue checkmarks on those, I don't know why.

Rachel Kobus 24:25

Verified!

Sam Alex 24:26

I love to keep in touch.

Rachel Kobus 24:27

All right. Thanks, Sam.

Sam Alex 24:29

Thanks, Rachel.

Rachel Kobus 24:48

That was 2007 alum Sam Alex and we thank him for sharing his story today with us. Tune in next time to Redbird Buzz for more stories from beyond the quad.