

## Lifebeat

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SECTION E



THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL / BILL MURPHY

Don Imus broadcasts his national radio program live from the Rhode Island Convention Center, early yesterday morning to benefit the Groden Network, which serves people with autism in Rhode Island.

# Imus the Irritable

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**Fans flock to live show in Providence to hear what's bugging him**

It's 5:55 a.m. Friday and the streets of Providence are empty — so is the Convention Center as I walk in. I assume I'll be among the first to join the Imus in the Morning show, being broadcast live inside, but when I reach the third-floor ballrooms, there are hundreds filling the seats, even at \$10 a ticket. It's got to be the biggest event in the state at this ridiculous hour.

Imus may have had a rough ride 18 months ago when he was dropped by CBS radio after some controversial banter, but he's back now, still draws, and if you ask me, he's still got it.

I've listened to him for a while, usually off a radio hanging in the shower tuned to 790 AM, but seeing

him onstage gives a little more grasp of why he connects. In a time when most celebrities package themselves, you can tell Imus is not an act. He really is an acerbic curmudgeon. He even does it while reading commercials, at one point ad-libbing an ad for Lumber Liquidators by saying they "won't screw you."

My press pass allows me to walk to the fourth VIP row, though even there, I can't fully see Imus' face. No one can. All I see is a large black cowboy hat pulled down to his nose. If you don't know Imus you might consider that a bit much, just as you might if you don't know country-western singers. But his fans can't imagine him wearing anything else.

The local crowd erupts when he tells his coast-to-coast audience of millions that he's in Providence. Then, live, he asks those in the ballroom if they'd been able to hear the first half hour before he just told his crew to turn up the speakers. A buzz in the back indicates some hadn't.

"So you must be irritable," says Imus. He adds: "Like I am."

It's part of why people like him. Don Imus is always irritable. There's something about that.

He makes it known that some photographers in the room are bugging him. He then calls to a producer to get

# Imus the Irritable

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him better coffee, even asking those in nearby rows where they got theirs because it looks better.

Journalist Mike Barnicle is the first guest. While talking about being inspired by Barack Obama, Imus gets irritated again and calls Barnicle a

liberal wussy.

**MARK PATINKIN** Actually, he uses a different letter than the "w." In

response, Barnicle points at the backdrop for 790-radio and says of Imus, "How appropriate is it that he is seated in front of a screen that says, 'True Oldies.'"

That's a running joke on the show — cracks about Imus' age: 68. But it says a lot that in a business that skews young, he's still one of the edgier big voices

Imus' political putdowns apply to all ideologies. During the morning, he calls Hillary Clinton "Satan" and Joe Biden a "weasel", but he also lambastes "right-wing idiots."

Aware of his own tone, he looks out at the audience and says, "It's good of you people to come here and listen to me complain about stuff for four hours."

I get to wondering why folks would drive through the dark at 5:30 a.m. to see the same show they could hear at home.

During a break, I approach an older man in a U.S. Navy hat. His name is Frank Rogers, 72, retired from head of

maintenance at a home for the elderly.

"He tells you the way it is, don't he?" says Rogers. "That's why he got kicked off the air. I know it wasn't right, but it wasn't fair."

He is referring to the April 4, 2007, scandal when Imus made a racially charged comment about the Rutgers women's basketball team in brief on-air banter.

I ask why Rogers paid \$10 for something he could have heard free.

"I don't care if it cost \$200," he says. "I went to the Patriots last night, got home at 2 a.m." He said he lingered after the game to "let all the drunks get out."

I tell him he sounds like Imus.

"Got to tell it like it is. If you don't like it," he says grinning. "Bye."

I approach John Millette, 66, a 911 operator.

"When he got fired," says Millette, "it was like I lost a friend."

Victoria Early, 40-something, who'd arrived in time to get a front-row seat, says this is her fourth "remote" — hearing Imus live on the road.

"I've been listening to him since his WNBC days," she says, "back when he was still drunk." Imus wouldn't take offense at that, since he often describes his former self the same way.

Early has been a Navy wife for three years. Her husband,



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Columnist Mike Barnicle gestures during an appearance on the *Imus in the Morning* program, which was broadcast live from the Rhode Island Convention Center yesterday morning.

James Early, is on a submarine somewhere in the Pacific. She says she likes Imus because he says whatever he thinks. She and others say that's hard to find in the media, even among those who act like they're being brash and candid.

Imus sidekick, Charles McCord starts reading a news story about the current mayor of Washington getting in some trouble. You can tell Imus is squinting in thought even though you can't see his eyes.

As he often does during the news, he muses out loud: "Didn't the former mayor..."

"Yes," responds McCord. "The bitch set him up."

Either you got that or you didn't, and if you didn't, the show moves on anyway, because that's how it works.

Rob Bartlet was also there, a portly comedian who does impersonation riffs. Today, he gives Don Corleone's take on the economic crisis, referring to those "pedicure-loving thieves from AJG." The Godfather questions bailing out an auto industry that still makes Hummers. You can't be a successful pimp, he says, if you put things on the street that are too expensive, too ugly and that eat too much. He goes on to say that men who drive Hummers are compensating for

something. "Kind of like people who wear oversized cowboy hats," he adds.

Imus has come to Providence to benefit autism treatment at the Groden Center. He has Dr. June Groden, director there for 33 years, come chat on air, asking her why autism is on the rise.

She said no one is sure, but some theorize it's because children are exposed today to more vaccines and chemicals.

"I'm very happy we can play a small role in raising money for

you all," Imus tells her.

He's known for being gracious for good causes, particularly the ranch he started in New Mexico for kids with cancer.

Many there had hopes of seeing Imus with Buddy Cianci, a regular guest in the past, but he isn't scheduled. Word on the street is the two are having a spat after Cianci, in his last appearance, went a bit too far bringing up the Rutgers scandal.

Throughout the show, the team onstage keeps up local repartee.

Sportscaster Warner Wolf asks to hear it for the New York

Jets, who'd edged out the Patriots the night before.

The boos are so loud the seats shake.

To their delight, Imus even honors the crowd with one of us affectionate insults, referring to them as "People who after this are going to their AA meetings."

But he gets some shots himself when Bartlet takes his chair and impersonates him after Imus goes backstage for a break.

"It's cold in here," Bartlet mimics. "Where's the coffee? No pictures damn it." And he generally acts senile.

Imus' next guest is Kinky Friedman, a singer and novelist who'd run for governor of Texas. Frankly, it isn't the most interesting part of the show, but Imus gives him 90 percent of the airtime, and actually responds to what Friedman says instead of asking

pre-conceived questions. You don't see either of those things often in a talk radio host.

At another break, Sam Ditrolio, 55, walks forward and gives Imus a shout-out for the entertainment over the years. Imus thanks him and then Ditrolio, a limo driver, has to take off to take a customer to New York.

A few others leave, too, but most stay, grinning as they stare at a cowboy hat, a nose and a mouth, and that's fine because that's what they've come to see — the real thing.

And that's what they get.