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Media

## Same Old Imus?

Lacey Rose, 08.15.07, 6:00 PM ET

Four months after his much-publicized canning, veteran talk show host Don Imus is back in the spotlight, this time for his expected return. But should audiences expect a softer Imus? Or will the cantankerous host return to his regular fare?

In early April, the 67-year-old shock jock was booted from his nationally syndicated CBS Radio gig, and its MSNBC simulcast, after making a disparaging remark about the Rutgers University women's basketball team. He referred to the squad, many of them black, as "some nappy-headed hos."

But after several months out of the public eye, he reached a settlement with his former employer on Tuesday that allows for his return, albeit to another station. The question is, How should the longtime radio personality, long known for his controversial content, return to the airwaves?

If Michael Harrison, publisher of radio trade magazine *Talkers*, had a say, Imus' return would echo the way he went off. The way Harrison sees it, an overhaul of a show that already had a winning formula isn't necessary. Instead, he says, "[Imus] should remain an acerbic curmudgeon who talks about everything from nonsensical chatter to important politics and social issues."

The only change Harrison would recommend? The shock jock should avoid attacking an underdog, as he did with the Rutgers team. Rather than bully the innocent, he suggests that Imus save it for the powerful, or those with a platform to fire back. "That's the key to Imus continuing with what has been a very successful presentation for years," he says.

Holland Cooke, a news talk specialist at Cleveland-based consultancy McVay Media, would take a more tough-love approach with the shock jock. His advice: "Don't screw up again." Imus can put on whatever game face he wants, but the consequences of his actions are such that he's probably not going to get another shot if he slips up again. So whatever Imus actually does once he gets back on the air has to be as though it's his last chance.

"If I were burdened with coaching him, I would try to get him curious about what his show is," Cooke explains. "If you were going to hang a billboard over the interstate with your picture on it, other than 'I'm back,' how would you describe this show?" Having that clear mission is critical, adds Cooke, because it was the radio host's going astray on the air that cost him his job.

But not everyone is so convinced the veteran jock needs advice. Tom Taylor, news editor for radio-info.com, a radio industry Web site, is among them. "[Imus is] a smart guy. He's survived in the business for 40 years," he says. "I think he's seen the lessons, and he's learned the lessons."

As for where the radio host will land next, no decisions have been made. He is believed to be having informal talks with a host of broadcasters, including reported front-runner WABC in New York. But according to Harrison, the station itself doesn't matter. What does matter, he says, is that the station has a good signal so that people can hear him; is in New York City, where he is well known; and has the revenue and resources to pay him what he's worth.

Walter Sabo, chairman of Sabo Media, a New York-based media consulting company, agrees that the station is irrelevant. "If somebody has compelling talent, it tends to cut through whatever is around them," he says.