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Being Billy Bush: For this television correspondent, it's all about connecting

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Being Billy Bush

For this television correspondent, it's all about connecting

Story By Kate Bolick '95 Photo By Fred Field

"Yes," Billy Bush '94 confirms from his corner office at NBC Studios in Rockefeller Center, "as captain of the lacrosse team I did run naked except for snow boots through Miller Library. But I paid the fine!" Not every network television correspondent warrants introduction by way of his most famous college exploit, but in Bush's case it couldn't be more appropriate.

Behind his desk: a band leader's helmet, an American flag, a pair of boxing gloves and one prosthetic leg. ("You never know when you'll need that extra leg," he says.) On his desk: a mirror with "I'm better looking than O'Brien" written on it in marker. Spilling off his window ledge: photos of Bush arm-in-arm with every celebrity imaginable—Robin Williams, Christina Aguilera, Steven Spielberg, Adam Sandler. And J. Lo, of course.

Suffice it to say, it's difficult to imagine Bush ever not having fun. Between his million-dollar smile, irrepressible energy and booming, circus-barker voice, it's easier to imagine him raising hell on the lacrosse field than doing anything as sensible and restrained as forging a career.

But you don't get as far in the entertainment business as Bush has without working hard. Though he may be one of the most animated, extroverted guys you'll ever meet—*The New York Times* described him as "cocksure but affable . . . capable of conjuring instant bonhomie"—he also has, as his post-Colby career path attests, the savvy and gumption to match. In 1995, he was a lonely bachelor spinning oldies in rural New England. Six years later he was named East Coast correspondent for NBC's popular entertainment news show, *Access Hollywood*.

Bush first took to the airwaves as an undergraduate DJ on WMHB at Colby. "I'd like to thank, distinctly, Walter in Winslow for listening. He may have been my only listener," Bush said, laughing. "But really, that's when I got the bug, and just in time. It was my senior year, and I realized I could do this for a living." His international studies major ("Let's just say I wasn't a great student; my dad and I liked to joke that I was on the dean's *other* list") wasn't immediately applied to his career track. After graduation he moved to Guilford, N.H., and began selling ads for a small oldies station to support his \$6-an-hour on-air gig. It was far from glamorous, or even all that much fun, but, he said, "being there further cemented that this was what I wanted to do." Soon he asked to take over the afternoon drive show. Management obliged and Bush was off and running.

Two months later Bush made a tape of his show and sent it around the radio circuit. TK, a classic rock station in Washington, D.C., snapped it up. He moved to D.C. and set up shop. After only 13 weeks hosting the TK day show, Bush won the Washington Air Award for best new talent in the market and was hired by Z104, a start-up Top 40 station, to be its drive-time host—the most coveted slot in broadcasting.

"The Bush League" was known for its gags. One time, on the air at 6 a.m., Bush called a friend who'd dated Gwyneth Paltrow the previous night to grill him about the details; another time he enlisted an intern to receive Simon Says instructions via cell phone on *Good Morning America*. Soon enough, it was one of the most

popular radio shows in the city and remained that way for more than four years.

Of course, with a surname like his, one might be expected to go far in the nation's capital. But Bush has done everything within his power to downplay the fact that he's the nephew of the elder President Bush and first cousin to the Bush now in the White House. In 2001, when Billy Bush was invited to make his first TV appearance—as a guest on the entertainment magazine show *Extra*—it wasn't until he saw the episode that he learned the producers had decided to introduce him as the president's cousin. "I realized, 'Oh! They're using me. It's not that they think I'm funny on the radio.'" Here his normally jovial voice gets unusually somber. "I told them I'd never do their show again."

Fortunately, the news director of Channel 4, the NBC affiliate in Washington, had seen the piece and called to ask Bush if he'd try out *their* morning show. Channel 4 readily agreed to Bush's demand that his name not be associated with the president's. From there, one thing led to the next: his segments on *Today in New York* led to a call from Jay Ireland, the president of NBC Television, asking if he'd be interested in being the East Coast correspondent for *Access Hollywood*; two weeks later, CNN invited Bush to be morning co-anchor with Paula Zahn. Suddenly, this New Hampshire DJ turned D.C. radio personality had Manhattan in his pocket and a big decision to make. To Bush, it was a no-brainer: "On a bad, bad, *bad* night on prime time you've got seven million people watching. Getting coffee on a network is a better opportunity than anchoring anything on cable, cable news especially."

Bush likens his switch from radio to TV to "that white flash that comes out when you walk into heaven. It was amazing." Filling four and a half hours of live radio a day is hard work, especially when you've only got a staff of three. At *Access Hollywood*, on the other hand, there are 125 people working on one half-hour show each night. Bush still works hard and has to travel extensively, but he has more help, which is especially important now that he is married with two children. When a staffer drops in to say hello, Bush introduces her as his make-up artist, "an amazingly talented and beautiful person," and suggests this article be titled "The Perfect Working Environment."

It's clear after just a few minutes in Bush's presence—not only is he a born entertainer, he's made for television. "I can't help but chuckle when I see him on the tube," says Colby friend Matt Lapidus '94. "His persona fits the job perfectly. In retrospect, we all should have known he'd end up doing this."

As Bush explains, the job demands that he be smart, versatile and relaxed. "This is not the *Today Show*. We are not doing long format interviews. This show is all about moments. It's about being off the script, and connecting."

Like the time he interviewed Sharon Stone: "It was a cold night. She had this great big white fur wrapped around her. I was like, 'Honey, I'm freezing here. Share the wealth.' So I took the fur off her and wrapped us both in it. The photo ended up in four magazines." Now, that's a moment.

Billy Bush and Tom Cruise at the New York premiere of The Last Samurai.