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Wolfman Jack (Robert Weston Smith)

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SMITH, ROBERT WESTON (“WOLFMAN JACK”) (b. 21 Jan. 1938 in Brooklyn, New York; d. 1 July 1995 in Belvidere, North Carolina), legendary radio personality, television host, actor, and commercial spokesman.

Born in Brooklyn, Bob Smith was the youngest of two children of Anson Weston Smith, Jr., an Episcopal Sunday School teacher, writer, editor, and executive vice-president for the *Financial World*, and Rosamund Small, who divorced while he was young. His father (known as Weston) had suffered financial losses during the Depression (selling shoes for a time), later starting his own public relations consulting firm and writing for the *Wall Street Transcript*. Both parents remarried and shared custody of Bob and his sister Joan.

Listening to a large transoceanic radio his father bought to keep him out of trouble – he later referred to himself as a “budding juvenile delinquent” – Smith became an avid fan of both rhythm-and-blues music and the disc jockeys who promoted it, like Philadelphia’s “Jocko” Henderson, New York’s “Dr. Jive,” the “Moon Dog” Alan Freed (first in Cleveland, and later at New York’s WINS), and Nashville’s “John R.” Richbourg, who later became his mentor. Bob began skipping school and instead hanging around at WNJR-AM, an R&B station in Newark, New Jersey, where he ran errands and learned a few radio basics. Selling encyclopedias and Fuller brushes door-to-door after being thrown out by his father, Bob was able to attend the National Academy of Broadcasting in Washington, DC, through Joan’s intervention with their father.

Upon graduation in 1960, he began working at WYOU-AM in Newport News, Virginia, where he played R&B music as “Daddy Jules,” sold ads for the station as Bob Smith, and later met and married his wife, Lucy “Lou” Lamb. (They would have two children, Joy and Tod.) When the station’s format was changed from R&B to “beautiful music,” Daddy Jules was forced to become “Roger Gordon and Music in Good Taste.” In 1962, he moved to Shreveport, Louisiana to manage country music station KCIJ-AM, also serving as the morning disc jockey (“Big Smith with the Records”).

Smith had long been fascinated by the freewheeling radio stations that operated just south of the Mexican border, outside the jurisdiction of the American government. Some of these “border blasters” (for example, XERF-AM) broadcast at 250,000 watts (five times the U.S. limit), enabling their signals to be picked up all over North America, and at night even as far away as Europe and the Soviet Union. Many of these stations made high profits selling airtime to evangelical preachers from the U.S., who broadcast via tape and sold “cures” for peoples’ ills through mailorder.

In December 1963, longing to create his own on-air character and have more control over the music he played, Smith traveled to XERF in Ciudad Acuña, Mexico (just south of Del Rio, Texas) and walked into the middle of a labor dispute. Using both charm and money, Smith was able to take over control of the station with the backing of the workers’ union and the *federales*, increased profits

by raising the preachers' fees, and put his newly created alter-ego "Wolfman Jack" on the air every night.

In his trademark gravelly voice – he always refused to quit smoking unfiltered cigarettes for fear that his voice would change – the Wolfman played R&B and early rock music, howling and yipping between songs, pounding on phonebooks, and using suggestive banter, telling listeners to "reach out and turn my knobs," and "Get naked!" XERF's profitable empire was built on mailorder, where the jive-talking Wolfman sold Jesus figurines, posters, baby chicks, drug paraphernalia, and pills to improve sexual performance, lose weight, and even gain weight. Wolfman Jack's show was so popular and profitable that it continued to appear on XERF (via tape) until 1966 and was also carried on the similarly powerful XERB, XELO, and XEG, even though Smith had left Mexico after eight months and moved to Minneapolis to run station KUXL in 1964. Missing the excitement, however, he returned to border radio to run XERB, opening an office on Los Angeles' Sunset Boulevard in January 1966, from which shows were taped a day in advance and then sent over the border to be broadcast from the powerful transmitter in Rosarito Beach. Smith lived the fast life in L.A. (concerts, parties, cocaine), and XERB was a huge success until January 1971, when the Mexican government suddenly decided that its Catholic citizens should not be subjected to evangelization and banned the Pentecostal preachers, taking away 80% of the station's revenue.

The Wolfman then moved to Los Angeles' KDAY-AM, a progressive station that could only pay a fraction of his former XERB income. Capitalizing on his fame, Smith edited his old XERB Wolfman Jack tapes and offered them to stations everywhere, inventing rock and roll radio syndication. He also began appearing on Armed Forces Radio from 1970 until 1986. Thus, Wolfman Jack was eventually appearing on over 2,000 radio stations in 53 countries.

When George Lucas, who grew up listening to XERB, cast Wolfman Jack to play himself in 1973's "American Graffiti," it was the first time that many people outside California saw the face behind the voice, and many were surprised that he was not African-American. No longer publicity shy, he was host of NBC-TV's "The Midnight Special" from 1973 to 1981, appeared in over 40 other network TV shows, and his legendary status was immortalized in numerous songs, including the Guess Who's "Clap for the Wolfman." Paid handsomely to join New York's WNBC-AM in August 1973, he moved back to California after only one year, and concentrated on his syndicated radio show.

On television, Smith hosted the syndicated "Wolfman Jack Show" in 1978-79, attempted an ill-fated animated Saturday morning show ("Wolfman Rock TV") in 1984, and in 1988 began hosting the Nashville Network's "Rock 'n' Roll Palace," which specialized in oldies groups and nostalgia acts, with whom he would be closely identified in the latter stage of his career, frequently appearing on infomercials promoting music collections. In 1995, he began hosting the weekly

“Live From Planet Hollywood” radio show from Washington, DC, heard on 79 stations. Overweight for many years, Wolfman Jack died of a heart attack at his home in Belvidere, North Carolina (where he had settled in 1989) after returning from a publicity tour for his autobiography. He was posthumously inducted into the Radio Hall of Fame in 1996, and the NAB Broadcasting Hall of Fame in 1999. Always insisting that he was in “the happiness business,” Wolfman Jack never used vulgarities on the radio, relying instead on attitude and double (or even triple) entendres. His enthusiastic style and fast-talking patter flourished when radio stations were driven by personalities rather than constrained by playlists.

Wolfman Jack looked back on his long career in *Have Mercy! Confessions of the Original Rock ‘n’ Roll Animal*, written with Byron Laursen (1995). Early profiles were published in the *Los Angeles Times* (“Wolfman Jack, From Cub to Howling Success,” by Dan Ford), 3 December 1972, calendar section, pages 1, 86, 88, and the *New York Times* (“Wolfman Prowls the Ratings Front,” by John Rockwell), 20 November 1973, page 32. Other biographical profiles appear in *The Pied Pipers of Rock ‘n’ Roll: Radio Deejays of the 50s and 60s*, by Wes Smith (1989), *Radio’s Morning Show Personalities: Early Hour Broadcasters and Deejays from the 1920s to the 1990s*, by Philip A. Lieberman (1996), and volume 23 of *American National Biography* (1999). The Mexican radio stations are thoroughly covered in *Border Radio*, by Gene Fowler and Bill Crawford (1987).

Obituaries appeared in the *Daily News* and *Los Angeles Times* on 2 July 1995; the *New York Times* for 3 July; *Variety*, 10 July; *Billboard*, 15 July; and the 1996 volume of *Newsmakers*. Various follow-up stories and tributes were published, the most notable of which are by Peter Goddard in the *Toronto Star*, 2 July; Richard Harrington in the *Washington Post*, 3 July; and David Hinckley in the *Daily News*, 5 July.

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