

# A Detroit star is reborn

**P**lans were in the works to bring Bill Bonds back to television even before Detroit's mayor suggested it. After all, WXYZ-TV could hardly celebrate its 50th anniversary last year without Bonds—arguably the biggest name ever in Detroit news but dismissed three years earlier after a drunk-driving arrest.

Talk of bringing Bonds back had resurfaced while he worked with the ABC affiliate on a documentary commemorating its golden anniversary.

Later, when receiving an award at a formal dinner, Bonds spoke briefly but movingly, not about himself, one observer recalls, but about his city and its place in America. "I just said what was on my mind," Bonds notes. "I felt it was kind of a chance to redeem myself." And when his turn came, Detroit Mayor Dennis Archer said, "Bill Bonds is a legend in this city. He is still loved and respected...still very much a part of this station."

For Bonds—who once challenged another Detroit mayor, the late-Coleman Young, to a fight—it was an impressive tribute.

When word got out that Bonds might be coming back to WXYZ, viewers acclaimed the idea. Bonds was the city's ratings king for years. Before losing his job in 1995, the million-dollar-a-year anchor had been referred to in an article about Detroit media as "local anchorman/demigod."

"He's a man of this town," says Grace Gilchrist WXYZ's vice president and general manager, explaining Bond's extraordinary hold on the people of Detroit. "He's an inordinately talented man, in many ways a wonderful human being. He's devoted to politics and current events and he loves to talk to people about it."

Gilchrist, who played a key role in bringing Bonds back on the air as a commentator, believes that despite wealth and fame, Bonds "never really lost that guy-on-the-street perspective." Even Bonds' well-publicized struggles with drinking, she believes, further endeared him to his city. "I think it's a combination," Bonds suggests, "of being good at what you do and being lucky."

Bonds has been a fixture in Detroit TV for more than 30 years; a career that includes well-publicized acts of varying outrageousness, a body of solid reporting and commentary and acts of personal kindness. Bonds once took the toupee off his head and auctioned it to benefit the family of a local sportswriter who had passed away.

Bonds first attracted national attention



*"I'd like to anchor [a half-hour show], raise hell and interview everybody in the world that's available."*

## William Duane Bonds

News commentator, WXYZ-TV Detroit; b. Feb. 23, 1932, Detroit; Air Force, 1951-1956; BA, English, University of Detroit, 1961; reporter, WKMA(AM) Detroit, 1961-1964; reporter, anchor, WXYZ-TV Detroit, 1964-1968; KABC-TV Los Angeles, 1968-1971; reporter, anchor, WXYZ-TV, 1971-1975; reporter, anchor, WABC-TV New York, 1975-1976; reporter, anchor and commentator, WXYZ-TV, 1976-1995; host, WJBK-TV Detroit, 1995-1996; host, WXYT(AM) Detroit, 1996-1997; current position since 1998. m. Karen Lawrence, Dec. 22, 1996; children: John, 31; Mary Christine, 31.

covering the Detroit riot in 1967, attention that attracted stations in the nation's two largest markets. But he always returned to Detroit, where he's most comfortable, and certainly most appreciated.

Nonetheless, he approaches national issues and national figures with his characteristic aggressiveness and outspokenness—which once caused Sen. Orrin Hatch (R-Utah) to drop his earpiece and leave an interview abruptly, saying Bonds was about "as discourteous" an interviewer as Hatch had faced.

Bonds took the national stage when his question during a 1992 debate between Democratic presidential candidates set off a heated exchange between Bill Clinton and Jerry Brown regarding Clinton's electability and his wife's law firm.

The outrageousness? Loud clothing. A couple of fistfights. The challenge to Coleman Young, which some characterize as a misunderstood joke. Traffic incidents. In 1984, he took time off to be hospitalized for exhaustion. In 1989, he checked into a rehab facility and spoke openly about his alcoholism. He would check himself into another facility after the 1994 drunk driving arrest that cost him his job.

But it was a traffic incident in December 1982 that has affected him the most. His daughter, Joanie, was 19 and a Michigan State University student when she was killed in a head-on collision. "That changed a lot of things. I was always a guy who could fix anything. I could not fix this for myself, my wife, or my other children. I had been riding high; my career was going great...this led to a lot of depression, a lot of pain. It never does go away. Coming from a family of alcoholics, I tried to kill the pain with booze. It doesn't work."

What characterizes a Bill Bonds commentary? It's about me, about you, about problems...You write them in your head and your heart. You type them with your hands." Even as he turns 67 this week (Feb. 23), he says he'd like to work more.

"I'd love to do a half-hour show," he says. "I'd like to anchor it, raise hell and interview everybody in the world that's available. I don't know how that plays anymore."

"It shouldn't have ended the way it ended" when he last signed off, he says. "It somehow worked out; and that's a blessing for which I'm most thankful and grateful. I still like to raise a little hell, and I get pretty well paid for it."

—Dan Trigoboff