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Brian Copeland's new challenge: Free-flowing KGO-TV talk show

By Chuck Barney
Contra Costa Times
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After an unhappy gig as a morning-show personality in the 1990s, Brian Copeland was done with live television forever. Or so he thought.

Next week, the multitasking entertainer embarks on his latest adventure as host of "7Live," a new Bay Area daytime talk show on ABC7. As if a popular one-man stage show, an ongoing radio program, his stand-up comedy and various writing projects weren't enough to keep him busy.

Described as "groundbreaking television" by station management, "7Live" will air at 3 p.m. weekdays in the slot formerly occupied by "View from the Bay." It arrives with an ambitious agenda: to cover the hot topics of the hour while serving up opinion and humor and energetically interacting with viewers.

It's a format that has the dynamic Copeland revved up and ready to roll.

"I'm really excited," he said during a break in rehearsals at KGO's San Francisco headquarters. "We're going to cover the news, pop culture, the latest happenings in the tech world, politics and more. ... The idea is to have viewers feel like they're caught up on everything that's gone on through the course of the day."

It took this intriguing opportunity to lure Copeland back in front of the cameras. In the mid-90s he logged a five-year stint with KTVU's top-rated "Mornings On 2," where he did everything from man-on-the-street comedy bits to chatting up celebrities such as Dustin Hoffman and Garth Brooks. And though he made a name for himself on that

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Comedian Brian Copeland poses for a portrait at KGO Television in San Francisco.... (JOHN GREEN)

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show, he came away from the experience feeling worn down and disillusioned.

"I had no creative control or input into anything I did. It totally soured me on live television," he recalls. "Plus, it was an incredible grind waking up at 3:30 a.m. every morning. For five years, the first thing out of my mouth when the alarm went off was the F-word."

Fortunately for Copeland, he found a creative outlet that would leave him substantially more fulfilled. In 2004, he premiered at San Francisco's Marsh Theater "Not a Genuine Black Man," his one-man autobiographical show about what it was like to be part of one of the first black families to live in San Leandro during the 1970s.

The humorous -- and gut-wrenching -- production went on to become the longest-running solo show in San Francisco theatrical history. Copeland has delivered more than 600 performances across the country, and his best-selling memoir based on the show is required reading in many high schools,

colleges and universities.

Now at work on a new solo stage show set to debut in April, Copeland continues to perform "Genuine" on occasion, with several Bay Area presentations set over the coming weeks. He also still mans the mic for his Sunday morning KGO (AM) radio show, which has been on the air for 17 years. But many Bay Area residents he meets still identify him with his "Morning On 2" days, such is the pervasive power of television.

"It's kind of interesting because that's not really the work I want to be known for," he says. "I mean, for God's sake, I've been off-Broadway. My book is being used at Harvard. ... I think I have some idea now how Tom Hanks must feel when people come up to him and mention 'Bosom Buddies.'"

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If "7Live" catches on, Copeland will be able to give Bay Area fans something else to talk about -- literally. The show, he says, aims to create a "widespread conversation." To that end, viewers will be encouraged to interact with him, as well as on-air contributors Jennifer Jolly and Lizzie Bermudez, via e-mail, texting and social media during the course of the hour.

And to pump it into even more of a gabfest, members of the studio audience -- collectively dubbed "The Voice Box" -- will be situated directly on the show's set and invited to offer occasional input.

"7 Live" executive producer Maggie Baxter is convinced that Copeland is the right guy to moderate such a free-flowing discussion.

"He has an uncanny ability to be informative and entertaining at the same time," she says. "He knows how to make people comfortable, to engage them and get them talking."

Baxter also oversaw "View from the Bay," the lifestyle show hosted by Spencer Christian and Janelle Wang that aired for just over four years. She says the decision to end that show, which was designed to appeal primarily to women, and replace it with "7Live" was a response to the changing makeup of the daytime audience.

"We're seeing that more men are watching TV in the afternoon now," she says. "Also, the 3 o'clock hour is becoming a time when people want an update on the day's happenings." Baxter adds that "7Live" will have a "real-time" sense of immediacy that its predecessor lacked.

Copeland is thrilled by not only the show's innovative format, but the kind of artistic license he didn't have with "Mornings on 2."

"We're just a blank canvas and we're free to create," he says. "(Management) has promised to let us do what we do."

What he's been doing includes plenty of homework. In preparation for "7Live," Copeland, who considers himself a television "historian" ("I know more TV trivia than anyone should know"), has pored over footage of the talk-show greats, including one of his favorites, Dick Cavett.

"He had such versatility," Copeland marvels. "He could go from interviewing Robert Mitchum to some woman who produced the perfect diet plan to a powerful politician. And he knew when to get out of the way. The best skill in interviewing is knowing when not to interrupt. That's what we're trying to do -- let people talk."

Read Chuck Barney's TV blog at <http://blogs.mercurynews.com/aei/category/tv> and follow him at <http://twitter.com/chuckbarney>.

series premiere

WHAT: "7Live"
WHEN: 3 p.m. weekdays, beginning Sept. 13.
WHERE: KGO (ABC7)

Stage appearances

In addition to his new gig as "7Live" host, Brian Copeland continues to appear in his acclaimed solo show, "Not a Genuine Black Man." Here are some upcoming Bay Area dates.

Walnut Creek: Sept. 11, 25; Oct. 2 (noon). Leshner Center for the Arts. (These performances are accredited for Continuing Education Units)
San Francisco: Sept. 17 (8 p.m.). San Francisco State University
San Jose: Nov. 26, 27 (8 p.m.) Theatre on San Pedro Square

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