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The World According to CableFAX

Stan Hitchcock's America Runs on BlueHighways

The co-creator of CMT talks about his latest network venture, which will bring the full flavors of local roots, community and culture to a national cable audience.

By Shirley Brady

Country music legend Stan Hitchcock is back. The musician-turned-televisionary behind CMT (and then Americana Music Television) has been quietly lining up the funding, programming and team to breathe life into his dream network: BlueHighways TV. Now available as a preview channel on Crawford Cablestar, and with a launch team in place that includes SVP of affiliate relations Davida Shear, the family-friendly network with a country twang is looking to launch as a digital service this year. Hitchcock chatted with *CableWORLD* about his journey to BlueHighways.

CW: Why "BlueHighways"?

Hitchcock: When I started traveling in the music industry doing shows, back in the '50s and '60s, if you picked up a road map, the back roads and small towns would be marked in blue, so we called them the blue highways. That mind-set is what this network is about. We go to wherever ordinary people are doing extraordinary things. It's important that television be encouraging to viewers, to make them feel good about themselves and their country.

CW: How big a role does music play in this network?

Hitchcock: Music is part of our lifestyle, but we consider this a lifestyle channel, not a music channel. But music is such a strong part of our lifestyle that certainly we will be celebrating music, but the music we're talking about is not necessarily star-driven. We will be enjoying the different types of American music wherever we go, from local participation to storytellers and singers and

songwriters and musicians and artists—it's the creative spirit of America we'll be celebrating.

CW: What are your signature series?

Hitchcock: Whenever I go to a region to do programming that's indigenous to that region, I always try to go behind the scenes rather than to focus just on the most obvious aspect of it. One of our producers, for example, is now shooting a series called



▲ Stan Hitchcock, founder and creator of BlueHighways TV.

Due West, a documentary-style program about life in the West. While in Arizona he found a cowboy who was injured several years ago when his horse fell—a team roper in rodeo who's now paralyzed from the waist down. Instead of giving up and quitting the sport and lifestyle that he loved so much, this man taught his horse to lie down flat on the ground while he crawls over and gets his legs in the saddle and holds on until the horse stands up. We also do a lot of

Appalachian storytelling, which is an art form that has almost been forgotten in many circles, but has such a heritage in our history. We meet these great storytellers and go out to the cowboy poetry conventions and sit down with these folks. In our series *Great Rivers of America*, we highlight these original highways or interstates that connected our country. Those rivers spawned communities so we—I'm co-hosting—explore the history and culture along different rivers. Our *Artists of...* series highlights artists and arts communities, from painters and sculptors to all types of arts.

CW: How diverse is your programming?

Hitchcock: We tell people's stories you normally don't see on television. *Due West* includes two shows on Native American artists, one a silversmith and the other a wood-carver. We have an African-American producer doing a series on blues music and the history of that art form. We're doing a series called *The Red Road* that deals with the history and culture and heritage of American Indians and looks at tribes' history and modern-day life. We'd love to highlight every tribe, if we could.

CW: What do you hope viewers get out of this network?

Hitchcock: I want them to get up feeling good about what's going on in this country and in our communities. A lot of that spirit is what drove the original pioneers of cable. They were



▲ Left: *The Great Rivers of America*, one of BlueHighways TV's series about the sights and sounds of American life. Right: An episode of *America's Backroads* that captures performers at the St Louis Blues Celebration.

doing a service to their community and their neighbors by trying to bring the world into areas that didn't have a lot of coverage. That's the history of our industry, and I've had the pleasure of getting to know some of the pioneers, and I really respect that they were able to foster communications.

CW: How does this expand on your earlier TV concepts?

Hitchcock: CMT and Americana led to the BlueHighways TV concept, and I'm working with what I consider to be the same audience: the regular people of America that support roots music, arts and crafts and the regular everyday goings-on in the life of America. I've been in the entertainment business since 1962, and I've been playing to this audience all my adult life. I've been getting to know them by traveling constantly across the country to their towns, auditoriums and singing to them and talking to them and going to their homes and making friends. That led to CMT, because we felt there was a need for the music industry—particularly the country music industry—to tap into that. When CMT sold and we decided to start another network, it wasn't a clone of CMT or a video channel. We added the lifestyle piece to the mix because that same audience told me that's what they wanted.

CW: What was involved in getting this ready for launching?

Hitchcock: We've been pulling together programming for BlueHighways for the last several years in preparation. I've also been building a team of independent producers and creative people across the country, so by working together on several dif-

ferent projects we can develop a sameness in spirit and style that helps unify the network's look and feel. The initial funding and team are now together, so we've made considerable strides.

CW: How does BlueHighways connect to your roots?

Hitchcock: I started in television as a performer. I was just a kid out of the Ozark Mountains, but I had a major recording contract with Columbia Records in Nashville in the '60s and a nationwide syndicated television show from 1966 to 1972. I learned early on the power of the tube as it related to musicians' careers and also how it could shape people's opinions and attitudes. It's a powerful medium, and you can use it for good or bad. I've just always wanted to use TV for positive things, and I think this network will really stand out as a positive force that's for the good of the community.

CW: How will this network help cable operators reach their communities?

Hitchcock: We are locally focused, even though we are nationally televised, because we're going across the country into the communities and into the back roads and big cities and finding real stories. So we'll be working with cable operators in those regions to show different parts of their areas and looking for local talent and artists. Local involvement at the grassroots level is the one thing cable does better than anyone else. Cable has the ability to work within the community, and we want to be one of the workers.

CW: How else can BlueHighways address the needs of operators?

Hitchcock: Everybody's so niche-oriented right now, and we combine several of the smaller niches that service this larger and passionate audience. And we'll offer operators whatever's important to them, such as VOD content.

CW: What's the response to the sneak peek so far?

Hitchcock: We have a test signal up on one of the transponders, so cable operators can check it out and see that it's real. Everyone that we talk to has been so responsive. Some backyard dish owners have also found us. A woman called the other day and said, "When I found your network it was just like finding an old friend again." A few weeks ago I got a call from a woman in North Carolina, who said, "I remember back on CMT when you had Randy Travis on, and the time you had Garth Brooks on and you were sitting on your porch, and when your son was born and you brought him on the channel to introduce your new baby to your viewers." She added, "You know, Stan, you and I have really got some great memories." My son is now 17 years old, and it hit me how we have Nielsen ratings and awards and all kinds of ways to try to judge our efforts. But to create a memory—that's really making an impact on someone's life.

CW: Do you ever get any time to perform?

Hitchcock: When we started CMT all those years ago, I put my guitar down and picked up a network. These viewers are my people, they're the folks I've spent my entire life with. I promised them that we'd be back, and we're back. □



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