

Meet the Personalities 001 Neil Saavedra

Podcast Transcript

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Production: Gil Perez



Neil: The medium of radio, whether it be a podcast, whether it be terrestrial radio, whether you stream it through your mobile phone or mobile device, the truth is, that content and intimacy is what makes it so special, that connectivity.

Tom: *Meet the Personalities* is brought to you by LA Radio Specialist. Learn more about working with the very personalities you hear from within these podcasts at LARadioSpecialist.com. LARadioSpecialist.com, impactful marketing programs driven by influential personalities and the power of sound.

Tom: Welcome to "*Meet the Personalities*," the podcast where we sit down with radio personalities for a candid talk about their take on the business of radio. I'm your host, Tom Smith, LA Radio Specialist. And today I'm joined by Neil Saavedra, [The Fork Reporter](#). Neil can be heard on his show, "[The Fork Report](#)," every Saturday on KFI AM-640 right here in the Los Angeles market, and that is on from 2 to 5 every Saturday. Neil, thanks so much for joining me. This is our inaugural voyage on "*Meet the Personalities*." Thanks for being my proverbial guinea pig.

Neil: I'm not really sure what a guinea pig noise is, but that's the closest I can come up with.

Tom: That works. So, Neil, candidly, so everyone knows, we've worked together for quite a number of years, with a little gap in there when I sprouted wings and went into the startup world. Some of this isn't going to be new. What was your path to your current radio position today?

Neil: I was born in LA. I was raised out in Ventura County and started radio actually, in Ventura County originally. Huge fan of KFI. And listening to KFI when I was an art director when I was designing and doing graphics and things like that, I would have KFI on. And I always loved the take of KFI, of the energy of getting the information, getting news but with a little dab of irreverence. So I was a huge fan and ended up coming to KFI as an intern for [Bill Handel](#), as a matter of fact, our morning show host here in.

Tom: Handel?

Neil: Yeah. And so I worked with him for many a month for free, and later ended up becoming, you know, a member of the staff around here, both on-air and off. And just loved so much of it and being around it all the time that it's been...you know, I've been inseparable from it ever since.

Tom: So what year were you an intern for Handel?

Neil: 1994.

Tom: Wow.

Neil: Yeah. I've been here ever since. I've been pulling a paycheck from KFI since '96.

Tom: From interning for Handel, what was your first actual paid gig?

Neil: Promotions. I became the promotions director for KFI. So, basically, directing any event that we did, having contact with the sales department and the talent, and working together to make events and to promote the station and things like that.

Tom: And then the next job after promotions director?

Neil: I moved fairly quickly into a dual position of doing promotions and hosting a Sunday show. And I hosted "The Neil Saavedra Show" for years on KFI, maybe one or two years I think, and later did "The Tim & Neil Show," which it was Monday through Friday. I think we started at 7. And kind of similar to the slot that [Tim Conway Junior](#) is now, and did that for years. I've bounced around. I've been marketing director, I'm now the assistant program director in addition to hosting a national show on Sundays and then the local "Fork Report" on Saturdays.

Tom: This can be edited out, but are we gonna talk about...can we talk about the national show on Sundays?

Neil: Yes, of course. It's secret, not sacred. So I play Jesus on "[The Jesus Christ Show](#)" heard nationally on over 75 markets across the country. And so, Tom is being kind enough to make sure that he's not spilling the beans. But you could find that. You can Google that and find it out pretty easy.

Tom: I gotta tell you, the first time that I heard about that show, being a Christian, and I think anyone having any kind of religious feelings, is kind of like, "Huh?" But then I gotta say, I don't know what the definition of perfect is until after...

Neil: So not blasphemy? You would assume it would be. You're so not sending yourself to hell, which is what I assumed when I first heard the idea. Yeah, I know. It's a little weird.

Tom: No, you do such a good job. I was getting to the point to say I don't know what the definition of perfect...how to perfectly do that show, until after I heard you do it.

Neil: Thanks, man.

Tom: It's really just spot on and it's really cool. And that's what everybody says. I work with a lot of clients and when we talk Neil Saavedra and "The Fork Report" and whatnot, and that comes out, everybody says that, like, "Woo!" And then they hear it and they're

like, "Aw, man, that's just like spot on." Thank you for doing it. I think you're doing everyone a service.

Neil: I do it. It's a labor of love. It really is.

Tom: So that's where you got here today. That's fantastic. Southern California, born and raised?

Neil: Yeah. I was born in Encino, not far from the station here, actually. But raised in Ventura County, which is not far either. I often joke about how my dad didn't wanna raise us. I have a Mexican-American father and English, Irish, Scottish mother. And how my father didn't wanna raise us as poor Mexican kids, so he moved us to a white neighborhood and raised us as poor white kids. So, it was very kind of him. So now my Spanish is nonexistent and I probably could be making more money if I could speak Spanish.

Tom: So, big family?

Neil: Yeah. What? Do you assume that because I'm Mexican?

Tom: Pretty much, yeah.

Neil: "You know, I figure. You're Mexican." Yes. I have got...there's seven kids. Five brothers, one sister.

Tom: I know this through working with you that you're still pretty tight with them and...

Neil: Oh, yeah. I see my family and talk to them all the time.

Tom: This is a podcast. It's kind of like a bio as well. So, prospective partners of ours will be listening to this. With that in mind, the kind of sponsorships, partnerships that you're looking for, what do those look like?

Neil: My philosophy consistently has been, when it comes to endorsements or tying with clients, is I don't need the money and you don't need the headache if it's not the right fit. So you really want to tie into things that you care about, that you use and that's easy. You shouldn't be selling. You should be, you know, excited to talk about your experience. And so, with me, I get really focused on the things I'm excited about. And whether it's putting money aside. I joke about growing up poor, but we did. And my father, God bless him, he died in 2001, didn't leave anything to my mother. She's 79 years old. She's working. So when I talk to people about RichUncles.com for instance, which is a commercial REIT, I'm coming from a place that...

Tom: I feel like I need to ring a bell real quick.

Neil: Yeah, I know. There was a plug there. Ding. No, but the truth is, when I talk about that, I'm talking about it from a personal standpoint where I have a new adopted baby in our home, my beloved Max. I look at him at two months old and I say I wanna make sure that I'm not gonna burden him later, or burden his mother whom I adore, and I want to do things like that. So I can pass that along. So it's not just, "Hey, you want to make 7% interest? Do this." And so those things tie into very personal issues. I love art and creating. I love food and everything that surrounds food. I love art and music and expressing those things, and the joys of life.

So when I talk about [Outdoor Elegance](#) and I talk about my backyard, it's different. I'm not talking about, "Hey, you need outdoor furniture?" I'm talking about, "Hey, my family came over on Thanksgiving and it was one of the most amazing holidays this year because of the fact that we were able to do it outside in Southern California. And that's beyond buy this or buy that." So when they intersect, when a service or a client or a product shuffles into my life, and I into it, I think it becomes the best. And those are the ones that I get the most excited about.

Tom: We have a pretty busy guy.

Neil: Yeah. I wear a lot of hats around this joint.

Tom: The assistant PD work, Monday through Friday, and then a show on Saturday and a show on Sunday. First, real quick, the show on Sunday. How did that come about?

Neil: "*The Jesus Christ Show*" actually came about by way of Bill Handel and the then program director David G. Hall. Bill Handel, our morning show host here, wanted to have me come on. He knew I had a theology background, and we had been friends and he wanted me to come on as Jesus for a show prior to Easter, I think. He wanted to interview me as Jesus, and I'm like, "Hell, no. Not gonna happen." So he and [David G. Hall](#) called me and they were so excited about the idea. I said, "No." He said, "Why?" I said, "It's blasphemous." And to their credit, they played off of my intellectual side and the side of reason, and said, "Okay. Fair enough. But one question, why?" And I said, "I don't know why, actually." "You know, if it's okay to do it in a play or a movie, why would it not be okay on the radio?"

And I had to give it some thought. And I talked to pastors, I talked to other theologians and biblical scholars, and no one could come up with a reason. So I said, "Okay, we can do it, but this is how it's gonna be done. This is what I'm going to do, this is what I won't do." And it blew their minds and they really dug it. So eventually, we did that again, once or twice or three times. And then it became an hour show, and then it became a two-hour show, then a three-hour show, and then it became syndicated.

Tom: So you did it with Handel?

Neil: Yeah.

Tom: Obviously, Handel is a very popular listened-to guy. Now, Handel is on Monday through Friday here in Southern California but then also on Saturday with his show "[Handel on the Law](#)," which is syndicated across the country.

Neil: Yeah, with over 260 markets. He's got a big, big audience.

Tom: Yeah. When you did the first Jesus appearance with Handel, was that Monday through Friday?

Neil: Oh, yeah. That was on Bill Handel's show. And you gotta understand, this was in '98. The internet was in its most nescient stage. It's not like you had a lot of email or anything like that. So people rode into the station when they heard the promos for that interview that we were gonna do it. And they were upset. And they called in. They wrote into the station, snail mail, and were just saying, "We will never listen to this station again if you go through with this." And we promoted it, I think, for two weeks. And then after we did it, we had tons of people calling apologizing, saying, "We didn't know you were gonna do it in that manner."

Tom: Really?

Neil: Yeah. So they knew that they had something.

Tom: That's awesome. How did "*The Fork Report*" come about?

Neil: "*The Fork Report*" was much different in the sense that I had been working with KFI for so long and I'd seen shows come and go that dealt with food, whether from the perspective of a chef or a restaurant critic or what have you. And there was a point where Robin Bertolucci, our program director and fearless leader here at KFI, she at one point was like, "I'm done with food shows. They're either too complicated or too cheffy or there's not enough meat on them," or whatever it is, she just wasn't interested. So we went in a bunch of different directions.

An opening came up in the schedule, and I went to her and I had an idea and I said, "Hey, I wanna pitch a show that I host, that will be about the love of food. Not from the point of a professional, just from an everyday guy who likes food and wants to celebrate the people who make it and the ingredients and all the wonderful stuff behind it, the history and everything, and from a very approachable, hopefully, platform." And she loved the idea, but since she and I are so close, she didn't wanna greenlight something and have it look like she was just doing me a favor. So she had me pitch it to her boss, and he liked it. You know, I wanted it to be sort of tongue and cheek. I wanted it to sound important first.

Tom: Pun intended.

Neil: Well, like you hear it and you go "*Fork Report*, that sounds important." But then when you hear it the second time, you go, "Oh, that sounds like a smart ass." So it's meant to be playful and a fun look, and basically I'm a curator of curators. I'd basically

curate people that are very important in the culinary world here in Southern California and bring them on the show and then we talk about stuff and my journeys of figuring out how to cook things or making mistakes, and coming across cool gadgets, whatever it might be.

Tom: Where do you see "*The Fork Report*" going? What's your dream scenario for "*The Fork Report*"?

Neil: I don't know. I'd like it to happen naturally. I will tell you that, originally, the first sketch I did of "*The Fork Report*" was a television show. It wasn't even a radio show. It was an idea I had for a TV show. So it's already taken a different path. I've been approached to do TV. I've been approached about syndication. But I don't know. If it feels right and it was the right way. I like doing it super local. I think it gives me more of a hands-on connection with the content, but there's tons of possibilities about taking it national in one form or another. And we'll see. I don't need to force it. It's gonna be what it's gonna be. And we're having a good time with it and it continues to grow. It started out smaller and grew, it's three hours. I think it's the most listened to show of its kind in the country.

Tom: What to date has been your favorite show, your favorite "*Fork Report*" show?

Neil: It depends. I love guests. I mean, we have [Simon Majumdar](#) from the [Food Network](#) on once a month and I thoroughly enjoy him. I think he's brilliant. I think he's a really smart guy. I've enjoyed, you know, interviewing great chefs and heroes of mine like [Alton Brown](#) from the [Food Network](#) again and people like that. Chefs like [Michael Voltaggio](#) from [Ink](#) here in Los Angeles, to connecting with people like Armando De La Torre who is the chef and owner behind [Guisados Tacos](#). So, on all the spectrums, I kinda get a little something. I don't know if there's one particular show, but there are things that stand out. There was one, May the 4th, which is considered Star Wars day. "May the 4th be with you."

It was a May, the 4th episode, where I fought Darth Vader with my mighty fork against his lightsaber, because he wanted me to talk more about Star Wars foods and I said that I would not be pushed around on my own show. We had a laser battle and my producer at the time, [Oscar Ramirez](#), did not know that was going to happen. So the look on his face when it started was pretty fun.

Tom: What is Star Wars food?

Neil: That's what's funny. It's like sometimes it's stuff that has, you know, regular stuff that has funny names. You know, there is food in Star Wars that a lot of us geeks talk about, like blue milk. Blue milk is...Yeah. It shows up and things like that. Our Bantha, Bantha milk. But there is food that people have made to look like certain characters or things like that, or name it certain things like that.

Tom: Sure.

Neil: Yeah.

Tom: Sure. I do remember the one scene where Luke and Yoda eat good food, good food.

Neil: Snack bar or something. He's got like a Cliff bar and he goes, "Give me a piece." Yeah.

Tom: Talked a little bit about your perfect partnerships before and advertisers considering doing radio. And radio is so many different things these days. It's what we beam across the invisible airwaves of through the traditional signals, the terrestrial radio, through AM/FM signals. And then you have podcasts such as this. You have streamed radio. You have all this content in so many different ways. I'm thinking, I'm an advertiser, I have money to spend. I'm a marketer, I'm looking to grow my business. What advice do you have, then, for me, from a general sense, and how might I go about using not only radio but audio advertising and then bring it down to your show?

Neil: Well, I'm sure there's some things that don't work on radio. I just haven't come across them yet. I mean, really, in all my years, I've seen so many things if done right that work. And the intimacy of radio is really where it kills. And you keep using the term content. Television, for instance, you know, even reality television these days is scripted, basically. They've kinda forced things on it, right? The medium of radio, whether it be a podcast, whether it be terrestrial radio, whether you stream it through your mobile phone or mobile device, the truth is, that content and intimacy is what makes it so special, that connectivity.

Television, maybe you'll have two, three, four, people sitting on a couch. Radio tends to be listened to individually, and mass broadcasting. Lots of people, but them listening to it singularly. So in that sense, they get very attached to it. People don't see me as a star. They see me as their buddy. And it's really cool. I've been walking out of a restroom at Disneyland and someone go, "Hey, Neil." And I think, "Did I know that someone from college?" And then I go, "How do I know that person?"

Tom: Got that shirt on with my name on it?

Neil: Yeah. It's like, "I would have had to go to a college to know them from college." So you go through all these different things and sure enough they're listeners, but they see and connect with you differently. And when they talk to me about a product, when they tell me that they went to...one of my clients, they tell me as if, "Hey, thanks for that advice," like a friend would. And I just don't think you get that anywhere else. It's not a celebrity endorsement. It's word-of-mouth from a friend, a trusted friend, and that just is invaluable. And in all my years, 20-plus years here at KFI, I have never seen a brand like KFI more powerful that does that connection better. They just do it so masterfully.

And things like "*The Fork Report*" are already pre-calling people. It's getting people that listen on a Saturday, that choose to spend their Saturday listening to the show because they love food, they love going out to restaurants, they love these things, they have

families, they are trusting me for all those things. And so when I say, "Hey, you should try this, or maybe you need some relaxation, get out to [Valley View Casino and Hotel](#) and enjoy yourself and have some good food and have some good gaming," then, they trust it and then they wanna tell me they went.

Tom: So this question's kind of specific to you. You have to eat one food for the rest of your life and that's it, what is it?

Neil: That'd be a pretty hard-core wrestling match between a burger and pizza. Yeah. I eat some of the greatest food. I've tried all kinds of foods. But there's something about those basic classics that I think I crave the most.

Tom: Is it a gourmet burger or is it a basic cheese, roll, and a Jimmy Buffett song burger?

Neil: It's a good diner burger. Good diner cheeseburger to me.

Tom: Okay. So it's not some crazy gastro...?

Neil: No. I don't think you have to go nuts in those things. You know, pizzas too. I can go with the simple. I can go...I like a good margherita pizza. I like a good, you know, simple cheese pizza. Will suit me just fine. But I do...my go to is probably, you know, from growing up, was probably black olives and pepperoni.

Tom: I grew up in the Chicago area. So my next question was gonna be, is it Chicago style or New York style?

Neil: Oh, Chicago. You mean deep dish?

Tom: Yeah.

Neil: Well, the difference would be...

Tom: Is it 30-pound or...

Neil: If it was Chicago style, you could just have the one piece and have it for the rest of your life. I mean, the first time I had Chicago pizza, no joke, they're all, "You okay in there?" I ordered the pizza and they said, "Okay. What would you like to order now?" And I said, "Well, the pizza is gonna be coming." They're like, "Yeah, in like 50-minutes it's gonna come up." I'm like, "Fifty minutes for a pizza?" They're like, "Yeah. You wanna a couple of beers?" I'm like, "Okay, I guess that'll do." But the first time you have it, it's massive. That's a real treat. I don't think I could eat Chicago pizza every day. Seriously, you cannot eat more than one piece. And a Chicago pizza does not reheat well. You can't eat it cold. It's too big!

Tom: I have to say, when I was living in Chicago and a bachelor, I would oftentimes order a...not even a large, a medium or a small and it would be in my fridge and be my meal until the thing was gone, which was usually about a week or so.

Neil: It's like a wheel of cheese and you just take a chunk a day, a couple inches a day.

Tom: There was a little bit more to me to love when I lived in Chicago. Thank you so very much. The very last question. If radio wasn't in the equation, what would Neil Saavedra be doing?

Neil: My bizarre dream job would be to build props for film and television.

Tom: Cool. And that makes sense.

Neil: Special effects or props was probably what I would do. I build props for radio too. I think you tend to float to the things you do. I've always been the guy people come to, to tell their stories. So that's kind of "*The Jesus Show*." I've always been the guy that people come to for information and stuff, "Hey, how do you do...what's that one trick to do this?" So that ties into "*The Fork Report*." And I've always been somebody, thankfully, who can be trusted with important things, and that's where the management comes in. So I think they go with us wherever we go. It just happens I've taken them to radio. But if I was working somewhere else, I'd probably be doing those three things in that field too.

Tom: Well, awesome. Thank you again, Neil, my friend. The show again is "*The Fork Report*," Saturdays, KFI AM-640, 2 to 5. Then, "*The Jesus Show*," also Sundays.

Neil: We're gonna be shifting it up, and now it'll be 7 to 10 here in Los Angeles.

Tom: I'm Tom Smith. This is "*Meet the Personalities*," the podcast where we sit down with radio personalities for a candid talk, and you just heard Neil Saavedra's talk about the business of radio. Thank you so much, until next time.

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