



By Kevin P. Casey for USA TODAY

Sleepless in Seattle: Delilah's nightly five-hour music and talk show is gentle and supportive, a contrast to the bombast of much of talk radio.

A best friend on the airwaves

Talk show host Delilah is a lighter version of the 'Night Listener'



By Anne Joyce, Miramax Films

Night Listener: Robin Williams is a radio storyteller who develops a phone relationship with a dying boy. The film arrives Friday.

By Janet Kornblum
USA TODAY

SEATTLE — Hours after she returns home from work and her kids are tucked in bed, Delilah pads down to her basement home studio and punches one of the ubiquitously blinking buttons on the phone. It soothes her to take calls in the night.

It might be a woman wanting to dedicate a song to her husband. Maybe a daughter wanting to extol the virtues of her mother. Or a troubled teen, the scrape of pain raw in his voice.

Cover story

"A lot of people just need to feel like someone gives a damn," says Delilah, 46, who hosts a nightly five-hour radio talk and music show broadcast by more than 200 radio stations across the USA and heard by 7 million people. Every day, 100,000 to 150,000 people call and an additional 1,500 e-mail.

Part DJ, part therapist, part minister — and a big dose of mom — you could call Delilah, born Delilah Rene Luke, the real "night listener."

Based on the novel by Armistead Maupin, the film *The Night Listener*, opening Friday, is the tale of late-night radio storyteller

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Cover story

Delilah remains open but is no longer 'co-dependent'

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Gabriel Noone (Robin Williams), who develops a relationship over the phone with a dying 14-year-old fan (Rory Culkin). Noone spends most of the movie trying to find out whether the boy is real.

"It seemed appropriate that a man who was seducing people with his own voice would in turn be seduced by one of his listeners," Maupin says. "There's something about our inability to see the person on the line that allows for a greater intimacy."

Delilah experiences that intimacy daily. "People think I'm their big sister, and they trust me sharing things," she says.

Though the movie is dark and suspenseful, *Delilah* is a lot like its hostess — lively, colorful, inspirational, easy with a laugh, sometimes schmaltzy, sometimes soulful and serious.

In this day of confrontational talk radio, Delilah "wants to be a friend to people, whether they're in her personal life or listeners of her show," says *Delilah* producer Jane Bulman.

You might hear a mother calling in about her daughter going to Iraq, but you won't hear anyone talking about what they think of the war. You might hear Delilah promising to pray for her listeners, but you won't hear her debating abortion or gay marriage. You might hear her talking about her two divorces and her multiracial family of seven kids, biological and adopted, ages 6 through 21. But you won't hear her talking about the politics of race.

Most calls last a few minutes and are taped to become part of Delilah's nightly show of stories and love songs. (She loves what she does "so stinking much" that she takes calls from both her office and her home, a 46-acre bucolic farm filled with trees, paths and a stream.) But some calls — the really difficult ones — can take hours. And they may never make it on air, even if the material would make great radio. "If there's any chance of

Corrections & Clarifications

USA TODAY is committed to accuracy. To reach us, contact Reader Editor Brent Jones at 1-800-872-7073 or e-mail accuracy@usatoday.com.

Bowling Green State University is in Ohio. The location was incorrect in a story Wednesday about campus cybersecurity.



Photos by Kevin P. Casey for USA TODAY

They talk, she listens: Delilah says she loves her job "so stinking much," and listeners seem to understand that and trust her.

someone getting hurt as a result of (a call), I won't air it," she says.

Delilah began her career in Reedsport, Ore., when the owners of the only radio station in town were asked to judge her junior high speech contest. She won four of five divisions — and got a job offer to deliver school news and sports. From there, she bounced from station to station throughout the country as a DJ and call-in host, getting fired 11 times along the way.

She began her current show, today syndicated through Premiere Radio Networks, nine years ago, and draws a third of talk radio leader Rush Limbaugh's 20 million listeners. Howard Stern, by comparison, is available to 4.7 million satellite subscribers on Sirius.

But Delilah's show is notably different from most talk shows, which usually focus on politics and draw listeners who share the same views. She's more like a *Dear Abby* of the air. "She's someone you could tell something intimate to and she would treat it respectfully," says *Inside Radio* editor Tom Taylor. "We all want someone we can talk to and Delilah is that person."

Statuesque at 5-foot-10, Delilah once modeled. But these days, you're more likely to see her in jeans and T-shirts, hauling her kids around town in her mom-messy Cadillac Escalade SUV.

Delilah, who describes herself as a born-again Christian, has both conservative and liberal beliefs: Her close circle of friends includes everyone from wealthy Republican

"We're here to talk about issues of your heart: who you love, why you love them, who you're praying for, who you're missing and who holds the keys to your heart."

— Delilah

businessmen to single mothers to people who are openly gay. In person, she talks about the same things she does on-air — except in much franker terms and often with off-color detail: ex-husbands, her kids and her girlfriends, many of whom started as listeners.

"What you see is what you get," Taylor says.

Delilah doesn't have a psychology degree and doesn't claim to be an on-air shrink. Instead, she doles out plenty of homespun advice.

"It's like somebody sitting down at your kitchen table and you're just drinking a cup of coffee and letting it go," says listener Lelia Groneman of Vega, Texas. "You can just sit down and cry it out, talk it out, laugh or get mad."

Groneman, 41, called into the show recently to talk about her 15-year-old son, who died of accidental carbon monoxide poisoning. She wanted to share the information. And she felt as if she were sharing her heart.

Delilah's friend Ruth Graham, daughter of evangelist Billy Graham, says she understands why people try to connect across the wires.

"I love her show and I love what she does," says Graham, who was introduced to Delilah seven years ago because of a mutual interest in adoption. "But it's sad to me that it is so popular — that people need to reach out to someone they don't even know to talk or get advice. It's very telling of our society."

On a recent summer evening, Delilah, clad in a black suit and shimmering turquoise top, sits in her office, her size 11 feet bare except for a gold toe ring on her right foot, a yellow rose tattoo on her left ankle and a French pedicure.

"We're not here to get you riled up, to hear you argue, to pontificate about anything," she croons in that warm mocha voice she calls a gift from God. "We're here to talk about issues of your heart: who you love, why you love them, what's going on in your world, how your summer's going, who you're praying for, who you're missing and who holds the keys to your heart."

While she talks, she reads both personal and work e-mail and takes notes on a legal pad, popping black licorice into her mouth.

Calls this night include a woman

about to enter the Army, the third generation in her family to do so. She wants to dedicate a song to her boyfriend. Delilah plays Michael McDonald singing *Ain't No Mountain High Enough*. There's a man who met the love of his life in the military, then lost touch, only to run into her seven years later in Iraq. Delilah plays Cher and Peter Cetera singing *After All*. A 9-year-old girl calls just to tell Delilah how much she likes her. They talk about summer plans and Delilah plays *Summer Breeze* by Seals & Crofts.

There is a call from the woman moving away from her alcoholic mother to raise her son and marry her fiancé. "So are you leaving to go to something better or are you leaving to run away?" Delilah prods. When she is assured that it's for something better, Delilah tells her she'll play a song and makes the woman promise to start going to Al-Anon, a recovery group for friends and family of alcoholics. She plays Rod Stewart's version of *Have I Told You Lately That I Love You*.

LaDonna Shelly of Albuquerque, 41, calls in to dedicate a song to her husband of 17 years.

She lets Delilah know that she and her husband are disabled. Delilah wants to know how they met.

"So you're going to college, you're planning your future and you wheel smack-dab into somebody who took your breath away." Delilah smiles into the microphone.

"Pretty much," Shelly replies in a weak voice. "At first," she says, "he scared me. But after a while . . ."

"Wait, wait back up," Delilah interrupts. "Why did you say he scared you?"

"Because of the situation I was in before. My boyfriend had shot me, and that's why I'm in a chair."

Delilah pulls her head back slightly from the oversized microphone and her blue eyes widen. A beat later, Delilah congratulates Shelly for trusting again — and asks how life is for her today.

"Life is beautiful," Shelly says. "We've (raised) four children. It's an adventure every day." Delilah plays *Reach* by Gloria Estefan.

Shelly says later in a telephone interview that she loves listening to Delilah because "she's an inspiration. She says the nicest things. And she cares."

Some former listeners have become good friends.

Frank Niro, onetime executive director of the United States Chess Federation, met Delilah when she worked in Boston. Today he's living in her backhouse at her farm while he writes his memoirs.

"She's very generous and helpful to those who are willing to help themselves, no matter what road they've taken in the past," Niro says. "She'll help people out if they're willing to straighten their life out."

But both Delilah and her friends say she's a lot more careful today than she once was.

"I was so co-dependent. I was constantly trying to rescue my listeners," Delilah says. "We'd go visit people in recovery programs — you know, just allowing myself to get sucked dry."

There was the time she befriended a prostitute. Delilah took the woman into her own home, only to have her turn back to the streets. "Hopefully I've matured beyond that, and I have support systems in place that can help people."

But she has been duped: The 16-year-old girl who called claiming she was being sexually abused turned out to be 23.

Delilah knows she's gullible. So she trusts her producer to keep her in check. "I view one of my greatest jobs as protecting her and protecting her show," Bulman says. But that relationship works both ways.

Delilah "brought out something in me that I didn't really want to show to people — the schmaltzy side," Bulman says. "I feel like the world is so jaded. I don't know, it feels good sometimes to just go, 'Oh, isn't that sweet?' Everybody wants a happy ending."