



Sunny With a Chance of Funny

How a meteorologist in snowy Pennsylvania used a stuffed sidekick and a few jokes to become the Caribbean's most famous weatherman.

JOEY STEVENS STANDS IN FRONT OF THE GREEN SCREEN, DOPPLER radar swirls of red, blue and orange depicting storms drifting across the Caribbean. As usual, the OneCaribbeanWeather.com meteorologist is wearing one of his 30-plus tropical shirts (the louder, the better), with a life-size puppet of a red macaw — sidekick Bob the Parrot — perched jauntily on his right arm.

Steel-pan music in the background, Stevens delivers a forecast of scattered showers for Cuba, Jamaica and the British Virgin Islands, interspersed with shout-outs to Dominica and Bert's bar, in Barbados ("Best daiquiris in the Caribbean"). He zooms clockwise from the Leeward Islands to Guyana, then through the ABC Islands to Central America.

"Ninety-one in Managua," Stevens predicts.

Bob stirs to life and offers a signature squawk: "Hot! Hot! Hot!"

After wrapping the Caribbean report, Stevens doffs the plush-toy bird and changes into his meteorologist suit and tie to report the weather outside his home studio — in Erie, Pennsylvania. WSEE is a good 1,000 miles from any sun-splashed Caribbean shore. And as Stevens sketches a typical autumnal Rust Belt weekend of 20-mph

winds, small-craft advisories and inland temperatures of 45 degrees, somewhere Bob is muttering: "Cold. Cold. Cold."

"People are always surprised to learn we do OneCaribbeanWeather from Erie," says Stevens. "They think I broadcast out of Puerto Rico or Barbados."

But for the past six years, the affable weatherman has been calling the weather of two distinctly different regions, tracking local blizzards and lake-effect snow as well as tropical depressions and hurricanes. Tiny WSEE, a longtime CBS affiliate, is carried by Primetime 24, a package of stations offered on C-band satellite to viewers in rural North America, in Latin America and throughout the Caribbean. Shortly after Lilly Broadcasting acquired WSEE in 2002, the new owners decided to expand their reach in the Caribbean with an English-language weather report, tapping Stevens, the station's chief meteorologist, to serve as the host.

A South Bend, Indiana, native, Stevens has been tracking the weather for nearly 40 years. Living in Erie, he's seen almost everything Mother Nature can dish out. "The weather's constantly changing here," he says. "It's different every day. With Lake Erie, the dynamic is amazing: rain, snow. Being in the Northeast — it's a challenge."

Conversely, weather conditions in the Caribbean — with the notable exception of hurricane season — are fairly predictable. "On a day-to-day basis, there's a rainy season, a dry season; the weather doesn't change a lot," Stevens notes. "It's usually clear and partly cloudy, with a chance of afternoon showers."

So he decided to relieve the blue-skies monotony with a bit of "weathertainment." Back then he hadn't been to the Caribbean, so a Hawaiian shirt seemed a natural fit — better, at least, than a poufy-sleeved *Pirates of the Caribbean*-style tunic.

He also tried out stuffed-animal sidekicks, briefly flirting with Jocko, an orange monkey, before settling on Bob, a toy parrot he started wearing on his shoulder during the stand-ups. It wasn't long before the wacky weathercasts, now seen in 33 countries, made the pair famous.

"I have a lot of fun," says Stevens. "Maybe it's a little cheesy. Obviously the highlight of my day is doing the Caribbean weather broadcast."

Nielsen Media Research ranks Erie 144th out of 210 U.S. television markets, meaning it includes about 158,000 households. South of the border, however, Stevens' (and Bob's) potential viewership tops 10 million people.

"The station sends out two signals," Stevens says. "One is local; the other goes to Puerto Rico and 32 other countries. What's funny is a lot of people in Erie don't know what I do [in the Caribbean]."

But it's an immutable law of show business that whenever you work with kids or animals — even those of the stuffed variety — you're going to wind up second banana. So although it is Stevens who studies the National Weather Service updates and builds multiple Caribbean forecasts every day, it is Bob who has become, quite literally, the brand. The parrot's image adorns the OneCaribbeanWeather.com website, he blogs about his recent Caribbean trips, and he even sports his own tiny tropical shirts.

"Let's be honest," says Stevens. "Bob's the real star. I just work with Bob."

The job frequently takes the pair on the road, to Grenada, Belize, Guyana, Trinidad, Puerto Rico, Jamaica, Curaçao and Barbados, Stevens' favorite. He never lets "the franchise" out of his sight on these overseas trips, and Bob always flies carry-on, accompanying him to every meal and meeting.

"I have to have him with me," explains Stevens. "People always want to know where the parrot's at. If he goes, I'm in trouble."

The duo did have a falling out — in the literal sense — in 2009. Mid-broadcast, Bob plummeted from Stevens' shoulder to the floor, breaking a leg. Without missing a beat, the weatherman ad-libbed: "He's drunk, ladies and gentlemen. I was afraid this would happen."

The party store was out of replacements for the worse-for-wear bird, and the forecast looked grim. But while vacationing, Stevens stumbled across a shop that stocked red-macaw hand puppets. He

immediately snagged Bob 2.0. The original Bob now roosts in Kingston, Jamaica, after fetching \$700 at an auction held by the station to benefit survivors of the 2010 Haiti earthquake.

Such natural disasters are reminders that the weather isn't always happy talk. "We get very serious during potential Caribbean storms," says Stevens. "That's the focus: where we think the storm is going and updates as soon as we have more information."

"The weather can be life or death," he adds. "If you're in Barbados or St. Lucia and a storm's coming, where are you going to go? It can be very traumatic."

"For a lot of folks who live in the Caribbean, the show is very important," Stevens concludes. "I don't go anywhere that people don't know who we are. It's humbling; it's a small world."

And Stevens and his feathered wingman are out to conquer it, one Caribbean country at a time. — CHRISTOPHER R. COX

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