

Bob Jones

KING-TV program director, 1983-1985. Interviewed by phone, July 18, 2024.

"I was a longtime fan of 'Late Night with David Letterman.' His humor was deprecating and a little off the standard run. He stood apart. What a great show. I also had listened to people and agreed: During that time, comedy had become the jazz of that period. I was realizing the strength and pervasiveness of a new kind of comedy. It was a range from Milton Berle to fairly sophisticated, and it was all rooted in common experience. And the secret to what became 'Almost Live!' was that it was so rooted in Seattle. It was inside jokes, if you were a native or lived 2,000 miles away. The more you knew the city, the funnier the show would be, and a lot of the sketches were localized to mini-communities. The humor was not vindictive. It laughed with Seattle, it didn't laugh at anything in Seattle, and it was very open about its humor.

"When I got to Seattle, I was trying to come up with whole string of new shows. I wanted to adapt morning shows to a younger audience and be fresh. KING was so dominant, they owned Seattle, both then and before. The station was very involved in civic affairs, but it wanted a new way to relate to the city, and I agreed. We tried a number of things.

"I'd done one-off, two-off shows in Louisville, a comedy skit kind of thing, Sherlock Holmes theater with comedy bits, and I personally enjoyed it. When got to Seattle, there were plentiful resources, gear and people. I was with 'Almost Live!' for the first year and a half, then others came along. Got there and began at the station in January 1983.

"It started in a talk-show format, with a talk segment, and inserted comedy minutes and stories. We had done the John Keister show, REV, which was a little off-key, a little different, and it was a lot of fun to being around. The staff were open to anything. Dana Dwinell was the perfect initial producer. She could juggle this group of creative people well, and that's a task. And her laugh — you could hear it all through the building. If something was funny, I could hear her halfway across the building. They did a terrific job from the get-go. Creatives like to think it was best when they were there. It won a bunch of awards right away, solely because people were involved. The writers, the on-air talent, Dana, they were all very creative, very into it and very much in tune with Seattle.

"They knew the city. That was the key to the show. If it was just a comedy show, so what. They can get that from national sources. We were open to localized comedy, directed at the community you lived in and loved. People who live there don't just live there, They love it there. The connection was far stronger than anybody imagined, even the little inside jokes. The first year was lot of experimentation. It was still being formed into what it would become.

"It was a really big change when Ross left. They were in a bind. Would they continue doing what they want to do or throw it open to the strength of the comedy itself? They concentrated even more on the community with remote work. The technology wasn't as easy as it is today. With the gear we had, they were amazing getting out and doing sketches. They had a firm idea on the comedy. They had to discover, and it had to be recognized, what tools and approaches worked, and be recognized by somebody in charge.

"That show was one in 1,000. It was unheard of these days for a show to start and get to the level of Comedy Central [in 1992]. But its comedy couldn't go national. It had to remain local. It was a hothouse flower in a Seattle greenhouse, and it had to remain there. Some people went on to brilliant careers afterward. When you see people succeed out of something you had something to do with when it began, it's most rewarding thing you can imagine.

"There was a lot of talent in Seattle at that time. The stars have to align. The show formed the basis for a lot of Seattle talent to move on into the national stage. But the irony was that the people most adept at plugging into Seattle scene were also the people who for many reasons didn't want to leave. That was home, and the show became a vehicle for people to stay in one place and have a job.

"I met Keister when he did the REV [Rock Entertainment Video] show. But it was too hip. It was music-based, but if it focused on really hip music, it would exclude a percentage of people, even in Seattle. When we moved to comedy, I loved comedy, and it struck me, 'Let's give it a go.' Very soon, even in the first or second show, it was obvious we were onto something.

“That can’t be said of upper management because the show was so different than KING had been. KING had a very important but very serious, news-based presence that was community-based. For them to see these madcaps satirizing part of the community and having fun was a real shock to the system.

“It was a multi-person show, and not the cheapest. It was closest to the news model. It had all of that talent available, and it was like repurposing it. For a while, upper management looked at it in a curious, arm’s length manner, and we were having fun. It was initially an audience show, live audiences mixed with Bill Nye live bits, wonderful little stories, pure nonsense, and it was all very, very funny. In that first year, it was always a worry, ‘Was show going to be supported for another year.’

“One thing that pulled our chestnuts out of fire were the local and national awards. When I left, I was very happy to see that it would continue.

“The only moment I was worried, oh my gosh, was the toppling of tower [the Space Needle collapse prank of 1989]. Oh man, ever since ‘War of the Worlds,’ you don’t screw around with something like that because something’s going to get you. There were no real repercussions, but they knew not to do that again.

[The show name] “We must have had a think-tank session. My first exposure was through Dana: ‘We think we have this name.’ The name ‘Almost Live!’ was just a winner from day one. It wasn’t live, it was all taped. Most of late-night SNL was for the East Coast live. So the idea this is ‘Almost Live!’ was hilarious. Everybody heard it and said, ‘Yep, that’s it.’ It was so completely incongruous appearing. You’re either alive or dead. It was a good indicator this was going to be a comedy show. Perfect title.

“Comedy has gotten much more difficult today. There are no more cheap laughs. You have to really be thoughtful. It’s made it a lot harder for comedians, but that’s no excuse, it’s a good thing.

“It’s 40 years since ‘Almost Live!’ began, and thank heavens the United States and most people have changed in the social acceptance of things. ‘More difficult’ is no excuse. You have to make allowances. The jester didn’t make jokes about the king. The list has gotten a little more inclusive.

“Overall, ‘Almost Live!’ is a complete study in stars and their orbits just clicking at the right time. I’ve had a 50-year career, and that happens just once in a million. It’s very rare for a show to come out hot, develop well and build like that show did. It is literally so rare. It was truly a gift to Seattle. American Bandstand in Philadelphia had some of that. But be perfectly aware it probably will never happen again.