

Bob Nelson

'Almost Live!' writer and performer, 1989-1999.

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[Your roles, and how you saw your character's typical persona.] "My main interest was in writing, and I found equal joy in turning out jokes and sketches. At first, I struggled with sketches because I grew up loving verbal comedy, and my pieces came off better on the page than on the screen. So I had to start reminding myself to think visually, even in dialogue-heavy bits.

"I read through all the local newspapers to gather set-ups for the John Report news section and possible ideas for John's opening monologue, and perhaps sketch material. We did so much humor based on neighborhoods and towns that I was always looking for other local news, from politics to sports, to keep the writing interesting.

"We might have overdone the local humor sometimes, but the audience never tired of it. When I wrote 'Lynnwood Beauty Academy,' I was feeling a bit like a hack, but what the hell, I was struggling for ideas that week. And 25 years later it inspired a public art project by Alderwood Mall, which helped ease any residual guilt. [Click here for story](#).

"As for performing, I had limited experience except for radio programs in college. But Joe Guppy left the show the year before and created an opening for the Deadpan Guy, and I felt comfortable starting there, with slight variations as Dumb Guy, Clueless Guy, Boring Guy, Folky Guy and Angry Guy. A prized possession is a residual check stub from our Comedy Central years for playing 'Phlegm Guy,' which took no acting whatsoever. Playing Normal Guy was always a bit uncomfortable for me. I've never once referred to myself as an actor.

[Favorite sketches, both overall and those in which you participated.] "My favorite sketch changes from day to day. Today I recall one of Pat Cashman's dubbed pieces over Brian Bosworth's film 'Stone Cold,' notable for the dramatic pause and then the line, '[My shoulder hurts](#)'.

[Sketches that inadvertently bombed.] "When we put together dozens of shows for Comedy Central in one mad summer, it was suggested I do more 'Folk Songs of ...' sketches, because they were easy to shoot with just me, Bill Stainton, our guitars, and B-roll of whatever I was singing about. Not sure why I sang about Southern California — probably because the show was going national — but when I warbled lines about El Segundo to a Seattle audience they stared silently, seemingly peeved that they'd driven to downtown and had to find parking to watch this.

[What you're doing today.] "I'm writing another script for the 'Nebraska' director Alexander Payne about the true story of World War II German POWs who were placed in prison camps in Nebraska.

"I've also started work on an original screenplay about old people, which no longer takes much research.

"And I wrote a script about Joseph Welch, the Army lawyer who confronted Joe McCarthy with the line 'Have you no sense of decency?', but so far it's been judged too wordy and not visual enough. (I still haven't learned my lesson.) Because Hollywood thinks the movie-going public isn't dying to see old guys sitting around talking during hearings 70 years ago that very few remember, I'm taking all the research I did and writing a book about Mr. Welch.

[What role 'Almost Live!' played in your lifetime arc. The highlight? Invaluable link to other pursuits?] "It was definitely my link into Hollywood, and I doubt if I would have found a way down south without the show.

"The show even played a big part of the long journey of the script I wrote titled 'Nebraska' making it to the screen. First, I read about the inciting incident of a man traveling across the country to claim a sweepstakes prize in a newspaper article in the Seattle Times while I was looking for John Report jokes.

"A few years later, after 'Almost Live!' was canceled, I was working on a Bill Nye show called 'Eyes of Nye' when I showed the 'Nebraska' script to producer Julie Thompson, who said she knew a Hollywood producer who might be interested, and that eventually led to the film getting made.

"But I still consider 'Almost Live!' to be the highlight of my working life, mainly because it didn't feel like work, and it was a joyful experience of 10 years with people I liked and admired. And I got to write jokes and sketches and see them on TV a few days later. I feel grateful to have made it into film, but it's the exact opposite experience — years of development to get something made. It took 10 years after being optioned for 'Nebraska' to be shot.

[Your vision and hopes as the show evolved into its iconic format.] "My goal as I joined the show was to keep improving as a writer. I think I had a vague idea that someday I would give L.A. a try, but I was in no hurry to do that, and never applied for another show, like SNL or a late night talk show, during my entire run on 'Almost Live!' I did take a few months off in 1998 to go to L.A. to write for Magic Johnson's ill-fated talk show, 'The Magic Hour,' but that came from an offer from ex-'Almost Live!' cast member Jim Sharp, who was heading up the comedy for the show.

"In career terms, I should have tried for Hollywood sooner, but I was always very aware that 'Almost Live!' was a rare, nearly unheard of situation in TV, to have the freedom to create exactly what you like while working with people you're fond of and living where you want. To me, that was the dream. I was actually dreading the thought of having to go to California, but I knew it was probably coming eventually.

[The show's most effective sketches and ongoing bits, plus ones that may be unjustly unremembered today.] "The show's most effective sketches were ones that literally hit home with the audience. So the recurring area sketches worked well, like the 'COPS in...' (Kent, Mercer Island, Ballard, Fremont, Redmond, etc.).

"And then pieces with recognizable human behavior like the crowd favorite that Ed Wyatt and Bill Nye worked up and John Keister became an instrumental creative partner on, 'High-Five'n White Guys', or Keister's invention of and Tracey Conway's legendary performance as 'The Worst Girlfriend in the World.'

"We had quite a few inventive running bits, like Pat Cashman's running 'DJ' series, Nancy Guppy's 'Me!', Ed Wyatt's 'Comparables.'

"One sketch of mine that I'd plug for more attention: It was called 'The New Neighbors,' mainly for the inspired performances of Tracey and Nancy as they immediately shared every relationship secret while their husbands talked awkwardly about sports. And Ed Wyatt perfectly captured the sincere but stilted way an eager host talks when getting to know the new guy next door.

[Why some topics hit a bull's eye and whether such topics could be addressed similarly today, 25 years hence.] "We did a lot of relationship and sports humor, and those worked very well, and it seems as if they'd still be evergreens for today's comedy.

[Insights on how unusual the show was nationwide, i.e. whether similar shows existed in other cities.] "One thing I think we can be proud of is there was never another show like 'Almost Live!' We would hear of programs inspired by our show, but they tended to stick to taping stand-ups with a few sketches thrown in, mainly because of budget constraints.

"'Almost Live!' was unique because it had several fortunate factors coincide, starting with a local station that was willing to pay 10 people to air a once-a-week show. Then we had the elements of Seattle being a striving city that wanted more fame and money, an influx of world-changing businesses like Microsoft, Amazon, and Starbucks, the sudden emergence of the Northwest as the darling of the music scene, several thriving sports teams, and very distinct neighborhoods and towns. All of these things were ripe for poking fun at.

"But the most fortunate break for the show was a group of people who just happened to have the right skills that complemented each other, starting with Ross Shafer and John Keister and the gang working out the 'Almost Live!' tone and format in the late 1980s.

"And how lucky that John Keister, Pat Cashman, Steve Wilson and Tracey Conway were already working at KING, or that Bill Nye was spotted at a comedy show, or that TV-savvy Bill Stainton just happened to have come out to Portland to produce, and cultural-savvy Ed Wyatt would be just down the road teaching. And who knew that Joe Guppy's girlfriend Nancy had that much talent?"

[Key sketches you wrote.]

“Live sketches:

[Sports Talk: Low-key Baseball Network](#)

[U.S. Bell Long Distance](#)

[Politically Correct Seattle](#) (co-written with other staff)

“Taped sketches:

[Streetwalking Lawyers of Aurora Avenue](#)

[Condom City](#)

[The New Neighbors](#)

[Wally Hoagland: Crappy Cult Leader](#)

“Local area sketches:

[The Fugitive in Seattle](#)

[COPS in Kent](#)

[Lynnwood Beauty Academy](#)

[The Making of Studs of South King County Calendar](#)

[Malcolm X in Enumclaw](#)

“Musical sketches:

[Protest Songs of the 1990s](#)

[Folk Songs of the Slightly Inebriated](#)

[Uncle Fran's Musical Forest](#)

[Seattle It Is a-Changin'](#) (co-written with other staff)

Interviewed via Zoom, July 15, 2024.

“I had only performed on radio. At KGRG at Green River Community College is the first time I was on air. And then at the University of Washington, KCMU, I did a radio show there called the ‘Bob Show,’ trying to do comedy, and that was all I’d never performed on stage or, or anything like that.

“So when I joined ‘Almost Live!’, I thought, ‘Well, I can probably do deadpan, and I can probably do dumb, and I can probably do really dumb. But other than that, I’ve never called myself an actor. I would say after 10 years of it, I guess I could call myself a performer because I think that’s more inclusive. It’s a little broader. But when you go around calling yourself an actor, that’s an actual profession, right? And an artistry that people study for and practice for years. So I don’t call myself an actor.

“When I was doing the comedy on radio, I’d tried a little broader characters. But when I listened to it back, I didn’t really care for it. But when you’re doing deadpan, it’s so easy. You don’t have to do anything. I think nobody mentioned it to me. Before I was there, Joe Guppy was probably the go-to deadpan guy. But he was more of an actor. He had broader skills as an actor. He could do deadpan, but he could do other things. I think I tried early on trying to actually act in a piece or two, and I didn’t care for it. So I kind of slid back into what was comfortable.

“But it made it easier when I was writing. I didn’t necessarily write pieces for myself, but if I came up with something that I thought I could do, it was usually along those lines, because it was within a narrow range.

“One of my favorites all time going back was Peter Cook, so I guess I was looking at people like him. Bob Newhart’s a favorite of mine. I even wrote him a fan letter, and he wrote me back. It’s on the wall here. That’s how much I like the Bob Newhart style.

"I think I wanted to be a Beatle growing up. I wanted to be a musician, and I was never good enough. I played in a band in college, we did some gigs, but I could never get it to the next level. And that was when Monty Python was hitting, Bob Newhart was on the air, a lot of that was going around and Woody Allen movies at that time. So I think I just took a pause.

"I had a friend lived across the street, his name is Gus Hall, and he came over with Monty Python records. So not even the videos, just listening to them on record, and he brought over the Woody Allen book, and we would read the book and listen to the albums, and I think that's really when it started. That would have been probably at the end of high school, start of college.

"As far as being in the biz, one of my favorite shows as a kid was 'The Dick Van Dyke Show.' Out of the three writers on the show, none of them you would consider deadpan. They're all pretty broad performers. But just a life, just going into work and writing jokes and laughing all day. I think that carried through and that was in the back of my mind.

"My first job, I was still in college when I was hired by KVI radio back in the old days. They had the Larry King show at night. I was running the board for Larry King. I was an intern for them, and because they just switched to talk-show format, quite different than today's KVI talk show format. This is when they used to have the guidelines in place for equal time. It's the Fairness Doctrine.

"There was a station in L.A. that was very popular. I think it was KABC that had a format that other stations tried to copy around the country, and that's what KVI was doing. So there was a talk show host named Mark Saban, who was on from 9 to 1. After I did the Larry King show, he needed a producer, so I produced for that show for a couple of years. He returned to LA. But for a couple of years, we did a really fun talk show. And in those days, there were a lot more people coming through town, so it made it a pretty interesting job.

"I thought I was going to be a journalist. I was on the school newspaper from eighth grade until I was a senior. I was the editor of the Royal Herald at Kent-Meridian High School. And then at Green River, I started out on the Green River Current. I did that for a couple of years. But it was in a portable building, and it shared it with KGRG, the radio station. So a friend of mine, we were writing for the newspaper, and he said they need people on the radio who want to try doing a show. So that's how I started doing radio as well.

"And we started writing comedy bits almost immediately. We would play comedy albums, because at that time, there was no one really overseeing the content. You could pretty much do what you want. So we started playing comedy albums, and then we augmented it by starting to write and produce comedy.

"I was on a direct track, but I took a detour into the Seattle Times somehow for over four years. And what's funny, looking back, is about the time I started at the Seattle Times is when 'Almost Live!' started. I should have really been trying to get a job over there all those years.

"In the early years of 'Almost Live!', it wasn't [a day job] I think most people were trying to augment their income because you weren't paid a lot. We didn't really make what would be considered regular-job money probably until most of the Comedy Central, when that stuff kicked in and 'Almost Live!' ratings started to go up in the early 1990s.

"The nice thing was growing up in Kent. Being from the area, I knew the South End, and I don't think anyone else is really from the South End at that point. We had Jim Sharp, who was from more of the Tacoma area. So I kind of came in with a South King County knowledge, but I also went to the UW. I knew the area pretty well. So I think that helped a lot.

"As far as the writing, I really from the start, I felt comfortable writing jokes. And then sketches were a little harder, especially in my first year or so. Figuring out how to structure a sketch and how to make it pay off is tough. It's like you're creating this whole world with its own rules and characters and telling this story usually in three minutes. So it is a skill, and it takes some time. I don't think I could have developed that on my own. Being thrown into the fire and 'Almost Live!' made me work hard at it. It also put me around people who knew what they were doing to help me. John Keister helped me finish a lot of my early sketches, the payoff joke, whatever. Having someone like Pat Cashman to be my alter ego and perform them, I was writing a lot for Pat when I started out, and I did for 10 years.

[The 'Roscoe's Oriental Rug Emporium' sketch] "Yeah, that's as near as perfection as you can get in a comedy bit. Everything, ending with the performance.

"I think people were just trying to think of funny things, and then they'd write the sketch or at least sketch out the sketch, an outline, and then they would look at it and go, 'Oh, who on the cast would be good for that role?' Let's say with Pat, I'm not sure that I ever said, 'I'm going to try and write something for Pat. It was more, 'I just got to come up with something.' It's relentless. When we were starting, it was 26 shows a year with a small staff, and we just had to keep producing the material.

"Sometimes it was just out of desperation, so I didn't usually sit down and say, 'What can I write for myself?' After I figured out what I could probably do on the show as a performer, I never sat down and said, 'What could I do that I could perform this week?'

"We were doing a takeoff on Channel 9, the pledge drive, and they would show clips of shows. I think 'Uncle Fran' was on one of those, just for a few seconds. I didn't come up with a name. I think somebody just said, 'Well, Bob should do something with the guitar.'

[The 'Almost Live' approach] "It was never meant to be mean. I'm sure some people took it like that sometimes. But yeah, we didn't set out to be mean to anybody.

[‘Yelling at Whores’] "I wrote it. I would get kind of themes in my head and about who I'm going to make fun of. And going back to why I wrote comedy, I always try to keep in mind the target and who you're making fun of, and I try to make fun of people who either deserve it or can take it. Like Monty Python was always making fun of the elite, the upper classes and stuff like that. And I have some of that about my comedy.

"The 'Yelling at Whores' has kind of a dual thing going on because I wrote it to make fun of the jock nature in offices of these guys who talk like that and who would go and make fun of people outside a window. But yeah, the fact that they were whores might be problematic.

[How to approach such sketches today.] "I think for the most part you would, you might self-censor even more. I don't know how much, there's no local TV station I think that would ever do an 'Almost Live!' again. They've all passed into the hands of these corporations who don't care about local programming and certainly aren't going to go out on a limb to put a comedy show on that could offend people. So if we were doing the show today, I probably wouldn't have done that bit. Or I would have changed it so that these guys in the office were doing something else. I don't know what it would have been, but they would have been doing something equally as obnoxious.

"I heard every once in a while when we were on that other cities would try to do a comedy show, but it takes just too many of the right things happening at the same time to work. There are several factors that if any one of them was missing, we probably wouldn't have been able to pull them off — one of them being that they started off on Sunday nights as an hour show at a time where there aren't a lot of viewers in the first place. I don't see how the half hour show would have worked at all if it hadn't pushed Saturday Night Live back and forced people to watch us for a while.

[Without 'Almost Live!'] "I certainly wouldn't have written 'Nebraska,' for a couple of reasons. One, I spent 10 years in 'Almost Live!' learning how to write a joke or develop a scene. So if you look at 'Nebraska,' you can actually see a few scenes and they're actually comedy bits.

"But the other thing was, I saw the story about Publisher's Clearinghouse. People show up at their door when you used to be able to find where they were at, who'd traveled across the country. I read that because I was the one who would go through the newspapers looking for John Report joke setups. So I would write down these setups, and then I'd make copies and hand them out to everybody. And I don't think I wrote that one down, but just the fact I was reading the Seattle Times and saw this AP story, I think it was one of those ones on inside page 2, something like that, and that just stuck in my head. I didn't write it right away. It was only after actually I was out of work and was thinking of going to L.A.

"A friend of mine told me, 'Well, besides bringing your spec scripts, the writing, an 'Everybody Loves Raymond' [spec] and all of your jokes, write a script. If you have a screenplay in mind, they like to read screenplays, and see if you can develop character. I kept thinking about it and I thought, 'I don't know, I don't have a screenplay idea.' Out of that, I thought, 'Well, I could write that up.' It seems like it'd be one of those typical independent movies where it's just the father and son arguing as they drive across the country. So I still didn't write it up until I had the idea from my childhood of visiting Nebraska if they go through the hometown. That's when I finally wrote it up. So for several reasons, there's no way I would have written 'Nebraska' without 'Almost Live!'"