

Chris Smith and Jay Yovanovich

'Almost Live!' as viewed by Chris, creative director, on KING 5 staff 14 years, and Jay, marketing director, on KING 5 staff 6-1/2 years. Interviewed via Zoom, June 10, 2024.

'ALMOST LIVE!' EPISODES THAT ARE AVAILABLE NOW

Chris

"A lot of the episodes from Season Six on had already been digitized, because we had still been airing them. They were in our server up till a few years ago. I thought, 'Well, I can just go in there and start, prepping them for digital playback.' So that's what we've been doing. So we put them on our streaming service, KING 5 Plus, as well as our YouTube channel, and trying to do full episodes as much as possible.

WHY THE FIRST FIVE SEASONS ARE NOT AVAILABLE

"They were recorded on a different format. They're on one-inch tape, instead of Betacam, SP video tape. So those tapes we don't have actually in our building right now, we do not have a one-inch tape playback machine or the ability to transfer those episodes.

"We are working with someone outside who has the ability to do those transfers for us. And we're coordinating with MOHAI [Museum of History & Industry] on getting that paid for and everything. Those first five seasons were recorded on a different format. Those that's between 1984 and 1989 or 1990, something like that.

MANY OF THOSE ARE ALREADY AVAILABLE ON YOUTUBE.

"The people who were who were able to record it on their home VCRs or beta decks or something were able to save those, and they've been able to preserve them a bit on YouTube. But we're hoping to get the proper original copies, the masters, out for people to see at some point, too. So we're just working on all that."

Jay

"First of all, it's, it's local. It means something to everyone here. This is a part of the Seattle ecosystem, and really the Northwest ecosystem, that was produced at the local level and spawned so many people who came from the show, like Bill Nye, Joel McHale, and others, to go on to great, fabulous things.

"We should celebrate these shows, we should get those back out there, we should find new fans for these shows. There's so many people moving to Seattle who maybe want a piece of what Seattle was like, even two decades ago. This is an important piece of television history that was done at a time where Seattle was a different place, and it's just cool to look back and see it and see the work that was done."

Chris

"It was such a big part of pop culture. And it's time that, people do remember it well and fondly. To Jay's point, there's the potential for a whole new audience for it, or at least looking at it through a historical lens for some people, like this is what pop culture and things were like at this particular moment in time, because the show very much was topical, and from the monologue and 'Late Report' jokes to even the sketches were all very much of their time."

ADDRESSING SENSITIVE MATERIAL THROUGH TODAY'S LENS

Jay

"We actually review every single episode when we digitally remaster it. And if there are certain scenarios, which we think probably are not appropriate, we bring that to a wider group of people to look at that content to decide if this is should go forward or not. So we have edited some shows."

Chris

“Yeah. And I know that there has been some consternation among longtime fans and purists that they don't want the episodes touched in any way. For me, it's really stuff that's over the line that we're that we're looking at. Comedy, I think, by its nature is it's going to offend somebody probably.”

Jay

“Comedy challenges people, right? It challenges their sensibilities, but there's things that honestly, when we put them in front of a wider group, if everyone feels really bad about that, that should not be something that we put out there anymore with our brand on it, to be honest. So, yeah, we do edit some of these shows because we think that's the right thing to do.”

Chris

“Yeah, it is. There are some things, I think that the biggest kind of thing that we're focused on or that I've caught the most that we sort of pull back on, is latent homophobia — jokes that are just at the expense of or just simply making fun of someone for being gay or something. Those are the kinds of things that, yes, that was how jokes were made in the 1990s.

“But we don't really feel like they have a place, at least on our platforms, anymore. So those are places where we might do some editing. But again, like Jay said, this is not happening in a vacuum. We're bringing in a diverse group of people within our station to look at these things before we make those calls.”

THE 1994 ‘EAST SIDE STORY’ SKETCH BRIEFLY USES THE F-WORD FOR GAY TO CRITICIZE HOMOPHOBIA.

Chris

“That's a case where I might, as we get to that episode, if we feel like the sketch itself still has value, and the fact that in this example this sketch is still acknowledging homophobia, it's calling it out, right, so that's important. It shows the writers had that in mind, they weren't just trying to make fun. They knew that there are people out there who make fun, but they're calling it out, right? But it is a case where maybe that particular word would get a bleep before we put it out onto one of our platforms.”

EXAMPLES OF THINGS YOU ALREADY HAVE EDITED OUT

Chris

“It's so rare that we've done it. I don't think there's anything specific that comes to mind. It's few and far between, honestly.”

Jay

“And I don't want to give an example, just because these are decisions that we make internally with a diverse group of people, and we use our editorial judgment on those. We stand by our brand. Our KING 5 brand, obviously, is very accepting of all cultures, and we want to make sure everything we put out conveys that, even comedy.”

THE MUSEUM OF HISTORY & INDUSTRY EXHIBIT ABOUT THE SHOW

Jay

“I'm sure the exhibit also grapples with the same with these same questions, right? It's an historical account of those years, and what was done in 1991 is not done the same way today.”

Chris

"I think from a museum standpoint, for what they're doing with this exhibit, I think that's a great point, that they should be able to show history as it was and explain that. I think the difference is, what Jay and I are getting at with what we're doing in the slight bits of editing that we're doing with episodes, is that these are episodes that we're allowing to live on our platform as current content. Yes, it's stuff from the past, but it's not like these are just carryovers from stuff we uploaded back in the 1990s.

"That's not how it works. But we're putting it new out there. We release a new episode from the archive every Saturday. So in a way for KING 5 Plus, this is fresh content or stuff that people haven't experienced on this platform before. So I think we do want to be mindful of present-day audiences, as well as the people who enjoyed it back when it was on, but, of course, recognizing that things are a bit different today, and, and for the best."

WHY 'ALMOST LIVE!' WORKED SO WELL IN SEATTLE

Chris

"I learned a lot about KING's history over the last year. Last fall was our 75th anniversary, and as part of that, I put together a book, that's basically it's 64 pages of current and former employees telling stories about what it was like to work here over the years. So I feel like I have a bit of a grasp on our past.

"What I would say in comparison between KING and other stations around the country is, KING really empowered employees to come up with new ideas and do different types of programming. Most stations around the country, even today, it's just news. That's the simplest kind of production you can do, is a newscast.

"I think doing anything else is a little trickier, because who knows if it's going to take off, who knows if it'll be popular. But if you look at 'Almost Live!', the way it started versus the way it ended, it's almost like two separate, two completely different shows with the same title.

"The original show with Ross Shafer was a 'Tonight Show'-style talk show, with a couple of comedy sketches and things. By the end, it was a half-hour sketch comedy show with a monologue at the beginning and a similar sort of thing at the end, 'The John Report,' which became 'The Late Report' and all that.

"I started with the final season, and I'm working my way backwards. So I started with Season 15, got all those episodes out, then I went back to 14. So I'm on 12. Right now we're about halfway through Season 12. So that's why some of the older stuff I haven't quite gotten to yet. I'm just aware of the pop-culture sense, but I haven't necessarily seen all of the older stuff."

Jay

"The thought about why was this done here in Seattle, why was it done on KING and not anywhere else in the country? I'm not sure that that's absolutely true, but to my knowledge, it is. I think KING just has a history of innovation. It has a history of doing things first and doing things a little bit differently. Jean Enersen was the first female anchor on evening newscasts.

Even today, like our show 'Evening,' which is now known as Evening, there might be one other show like that in the country that still exists. There used to be shows like that all over. And now we're the only ones who still continue to have that magazine format show that we produce every single weekday. So, I just think it's in our DNA to do things a little differently and just sort of expand what's possible."

TECHNICAL CHALLENGES WITH REVIVING OLDER EPISODES

Chris

The funny thing with those older episodes is, I've got the tape reel cases, right? And some of them inside the case have a rundown, a list of all the sketches and segments from the episode. But most of them don't. So there's a ton of old episodes in there that I don't know what's on the tapes. I would have to have them digitized to be able to see what's there.

"The other annoying thing is, it's tough with our archive, because we moved buildings about seven, eight years ago. So not everything is as organized as it would have been in the past after that move. But I found episodes from Seasons Two through Four. Season Six-on is already digitized. So there's Seasons One and Five, the tapes still have to be around somewhere. But there's a good chunk of that 'Almost Live!' history that I'm not sure where it exists. I'm sure we have it somewhere. I just don't know, but hopefully we'll find it someday.

"When I started working at KING, we were in Dexter. That building was huge. It was the entire city block. We had the entire space to ourselves. I worked in there for five years before we closed down and moved. But it was enormous. Cavernous, really. Just between the marketing team, us and then the news department was so spread out. Right now, the news department right here next to me in this building. But we were just like an opposite building. It was a three-minute walk to go talk to anybody. But of course, we had space for all sorts of storage, so we had a huge tape library down there. We still have a storage space here in this building with that library. But it's just a little less organized than it was. But that happens.

"Obviously, with news content, they're a lot more organized with that. The assignment desk takes care of that, and they manage it. But anything that isn't news, there's really nobody overseeing it, keeping it, minding it. So I have tried a little bit to at least, 'OK, what do we have? What can we still make use of and put on a streaming?'

"So, along with 'Almost Live!', we've put on episodes of 'Gardening with Ciscoe' because the great thing about Ciscoe is, first of all, there's no reason to edit any of those shows. The gardening advice he gave you 12 years ago is still just as good today. And then his energy is just, still excellent on TV.

"And then there are other older shows. I haven't gotten to see an episode yet, but I know Cliff Lenz did a show in the 1990s called 'Music Magic.' I am still curious to see if that's one that would be worth bringing back, if it still works today. Not many people who I've talked to remember it as much. They remember Cliff, but not necessarily that show. It was a weekend show, but they produced a lot of episodes. I think they did 11 seasons of that show. So there's probably been over 100 episodes.

"But I think it's so cool to have that history memorialized and put in a place where people can still access it. One of the really great things about the internet, especially YouTube, is you can find almost anything in terms of old video clips and old shows and things like that. You don't want that stuff to be lost to history.

"Those shows were really important in their time, and 'Almost Live!' is definitely one of them, especially for this region. So to be able to keep that alive in some way so that people can still go back to it and not have to just, 'Oh, remember that show?' and try to recall details from their memories, you can actually relive it."