

Dana Dwinell

"Almost Live!" producer, 1984-1986. Interviewed via Zoom June 7, 2024.

"I was working at KING on the morning show. I was hired right out of the University of Washington to start at KING. I started part time. And as they finally developed the morning show, I was there and stayed there until we had a new program director, Bob Jones. He was a disrupter and he at some point wanted to start a comedy show. I remember watching it, them producing it, recording it. I think they did two of them. I don't think they ever aired.

"I went to Bob and I said, 'This show sucks.' I think the host was very forced. He was very Vegas-y, and it just missed. It just missed. It was just trying to do hard, and there were no video elements, none at all, not that we ever used them in the beginning anyway. So Bob said, 'What would you do differently?' I said, 'I really don't know,' but he said, 'OK, go ahead, give it a shot.' Ross [Shafer] was already attached, as was Mike Neun, who all shared the same agent. I'm not sure if [John] Keister was brought in in the very beginning, but maybe because I remember him.

"There was a lot of conflict about us trying to be a little mini-'Saturday Night Live,' but as it turned out, that's what we did. Ross was very much of a Johnny Carson Tonight Show kind of a guy, and yet 'Saturday Night Live,' most of us thought that was awesome and different, more irreverent, less interview, just a little wackier.

"The first year was just really, really tough. It was hard to coordinate people. We didn't have a regular production slot. It was just sort of like, 'OK, you kids go off and play in the barn and come up with some video, and here's your time slot.'

"So Mike and Ross and John and Ross' partner Jim Sharp were it, really. We somehow got through the first year. We had very little financial support, which really ended up being the crux of the problem for the time I was there — the lack of financial support for the people who were killing themselves to do this show. We had no staff.

"I'm pretty sure it made first year, maybe it was the second year we won an Emmy, and that changed a lot. We also, though, realized that we weren't getting a lot of promotion. We did have this small core of people. We had no problems filling up our studio audience. They wanted to come and have the experience. We served wine, of course, and it was really a fun experience to be at the show and tape the show because it was goofy and irreverent and just pick something, and we got almost all of the comedians who are coming through town who were headlining at the Comedy Underground. We met a lot of people John knew. Jay Leno didn't come into the studio, but we did a field piece with him. Dana Carvey and lots of standups who became famous later.

"In the second year was the year we did the 'Louie Louie' campaign, and that, I think, was a very, very significant breakout. I remember sitting in the conference room with the guys, and we had no women. Tracy [Conway] wasn't involved with it. No women were involved unless they came in and did a field piece. I think maybe Joe Guppy was there. People were brought in to write a piece, but they were not staff. They were just freelancers. Man, I don't even know. Maybe they were paid AFTRA scale. It was bad.

"But I remember sitting in this conference room about 'We have got to break out and do something beyond the walls of the production that gets our name out there and gets us visible and stuff like that. And that is how the 'Louie Louie' campaign came about.'

"It was huge. It was everywhere, omnipresent and, of course, got national press, which was great. The Husky band adopted 'Louie Louie' as their song, so we got to go and do that. And it just worked.

"At the end of the second season, we were going into contract negotiations for season three. John and Ross and whomever else, Jim, were still attached and were a little bit fed up with the low salary and low pay. And I was the representative of KING Broadcasting in the staffing, and they were really bitter and rightly so.

"Right in the middle of that, Bob Jones, our creator, the guy that started it, got fired, and he went to Philadelphia and called me and asked me to come to Philadelphia and do their morning show. I was so tired of fighting with the production department and the program directors and stuff like that, I said yes and took the job in Philadelphia. So I left everybody high and dry to do their own negotiations. I remember before we left that we hired Bill Stainton because I had met him at a KING conference down in Portland, and he was very edgy and very confident. Bill took the reins and did a brilliant job.

"One thing very apparent is that standup comedians are a very solitary group. They are not collaborative. They basically write their stuff, present their stuff and either rise and fall on their skills and their creativity. So when you put a standup comedian in front of in a group and you have to collaborate, and 'Is that funny? Is that not funny? And who gets to decide?' It's bumpy. It's very bumpy. And I have to give Ross a lot of credit that he would — and Jim, too, Jim was certainly the tiebreaker almost always. If some people said, 'I don't think that's so funny,' and Ross would say, 'I just love it,' Jim would weigh in and get his way. But it had to be funny. That was the thing, and who are we appealing to. We weren't appealing to people really 50 and older. We were appealing to a younger crowd, and the use of video became the most important thing, the most identifying factor.

"So Ross was very skilled at standup and standing in front of a studio audience and all of that, and very engaging and warm and comfortable, and people really like that. But the personality of the show became John Keister as Ross left. And that kind of edgy humor, the collaborative work on the video pieces.

"I remember we started 'Ballard Vice.' I was there for that first one. My favorite piece that Pat Cashman did was 'Sluggy,' and that's infamous now. I watch that still and cry with laughter. Unbelievable. And so there you go. The seeds were just getting really funny people and staying as much local as we possibly could.

[Why the 'Louie Louie' campaign caught on.] "It was like, what the fuck? Why? Why are you doing this? Ross had a friend who was in the Legislature, so he knew that he could probably get this guy to stand up in front of his peers and say, 'I move that we change the state song to "Louie Louie" because of the Kingsmen and blah, blah, blah.' And it was just so weird. Every time you said it, people laughed. It was just so great.

"Ross said that he ended up having to talk to the lady or the daughter of the lady who wrote the official state song and apologize or smooth it over. But, you know, 'Louie Louie' is such an iconic song, you know: 'Dun Dun Dun, Dun Dun ...' It was it was just great. It was just perfect.

[What if she had stayed in Seattle and on the show?] "It was funny and I was never the person who got to make the call necessarily because, 'What do you know? You've never done comedy before.' But I was a great laugher, and if it made me laugh, that worked. But I actually think I probably would have gotten squeezed out.

"Probably because of my lack of comedy background. I was brought in by Bob in the very beginning. 'We need somebody who's going to make sure the thing gets done and time out all of the logistics of making a show. And how do you tell Bill Nye you have to make this in under two minutes? This is not whiny, but. I don't think there was much respect for the production people. There was certainly a lot of respect for the video people because they made magic, but people who were just representing the production facility, which is KING, there were not a lot of respect there.

[How did KING's higher-ups view the show?] "In the very beginning, they didn't, and we have to give a massive amount of kudos to Dorothy Bullitt for just letting it go because 'No harm, no foul.' But honestly, the way all local stations work and any broadcast group or just a sales department that really makes the call. And so the first two years, the show was very, very difficult sell. And so the sales department, 'We don't like to work that hard.'

"So we had to constantly go to the program director, the station manager, who was actually Eric Bremner then, and Ancil Payne, and then to Mrs. Bullitt and say, 'Let's give it a shot.' I think they liked the fact that they were doing something that nobody else did. 'This is what KING does, and we can do it because we have this ownership, and it's in Seattle and we can kind of get ignored.' We have to thank the people who were in the big chairs, but it really was a sales department.

"Once something broke through, when that 'Louie Louie' thing broke through and the sales department are going out in the public — not Mrs. Bullitt and Ancil and Eric, who are talking to people who probably haven't seen the show — it's the people on the street and the sales department said, 'What the heck? That is the coolest thing I ever saw.' They would come back all puffed up and go, 'Yeah, we got this.' So they really, in my opinion, saved our ass.

[As a woman, did you have to fight for respect?] "I don't remember fighting the battle, but it definitely was there. I think the other women who were on camera got more respect. That was sort of tough. I was, 'What is this? What is this little girl doing here, bossing us around?' Like I said, I couldn't tell them if I thought it was funny or not. I would offer my opinion because I have one. But no, I don't think there was much respect at all.

"It wasn't my idea to do 'Louie Louie,' but it was certainly one of my major goals to do something dramatic, significant to break out into the public consciousness. I think I brought that to the table with a couple other people, because what I do, and I think they went, 'Oh, hey, maybe she does have a clue.' Then we got an Emmy nomination, so that worked.

[The sketch with gorillas atop the Space Needle.] "I think that's a riot. It's certainly how so much of it just evolved. It was like, 'Hey, here's a crazy ass idea,' and everybody thinks that's really great, and then there's a few keywords, and you kind of do a script, get the camera in the van and go and do it. What is it? Ask for forgiveness instead of permission. That's what we did."