

Darrell Suto

"Almost Live!"' photographer, editor and performer, 1988-1992. Interviewed via Zoom, June 4, 2024.

"The show should come back for the anniversary to do one. It would just be an update of Seattle. That's why it was so successful. It's because it applied. It made sense, right?

"We were working on the show with intent. We had a vision as a GarageBand video situation, perfect situation because the KING 5 shop was set up as a photographer's editor's shop. It had KING Screen Productions. It was well-known across the country for its photography and won awards and even was nominated for an Academy Award for one of the documentaries. So it was that legacy. It's what they call a photographer's shop. People from all over the country were like, 'I know that station and I would love to work for it.' But people came in with the news idea. They were news people, KING 5 News was well known and won all the NPPA awards and all that.

"But we a programming department. No one else had it. We were looking for stuff to do, and it wasn't news we wanted to do. Well, parody was the best. I think the guy that really hatched that was Pat Cashman, because he did it with his KING 5 News promotions. He would do these sketches that really hit. Emulation and all that. It's sort of a starting ground for all those nuggets.

"Then bring on a perfect storm of writers. I mean, you couldn't have planned this show. You couldn't plan it. If you planned it, it would fail. It just had to come together just right. There were adjustments made along the way with who's up front, and all that stuff had to be adjusted. You would think it would be a problem to do that. But it wasn't. It just was supposed to be.

[You came to KING from KOMO.] "I came to do 'How Come' with Al Wallace. The photographer on that show went on to 'Real People' at NBC. He said, 'Get this young guy to come over and take my place.' The funny thing about it was, I didn't have any intention of moving because I was just starting out. Joe Walsh, the photographer, said, 'Get that guy. He's just young. He doesn't know anything, but he's learning, and he's probably going to be the leading edge later on.'

"So they brought me in, and I just went there to hear what they had to say, because I was not going to leave KOMO, because I had a sweet deal. Internship, then job, right? So why move? But my mentors, who were all photographers, said, 'If you don't take that job, I'm going to punch you in the nose because that just doesn't happen.' So I went over.

"The programming department, there's a staff. There are five of us, and we would get assigned. I did this thing called 'Northwest Wild,' and it was natural-history documentaries. Great gig. We're chasing grizzly bears in Montana. It's KING 5, for crying out loud. We went to Hawaii to get on a Russian research vessel to go get samples of the atmosphere out in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. We got on their ship and went out there, and I mean, this is a local TV station, so that's sort of the attitude that KING 5 had.

"So when "Almost Live!"' came on, it's like a hybrid. It's was ready in a lot of ways, but then it needed some special ingredient to make it because it doesn't fit into the other templates. If you try to do that, or you get a news person to try to be funny, all you get is this: [clown face], that acting where it's just, 'Hey, I'm on. I'm doing something you're not used to seeing.' These actors [from 'Almost Live!'] were all in for the bit. Joel McHale. his 'Braveheart' thing, that launched him, I think. I got to work with him for a little bit.

[How 'Mind Your Manners with Billy Quan' came to be.] "I'm a photographer on the show. But the thing about that show was, it needed people to be in it. We'd just go in into the station and grab one of the salespeople and go, 'Hey, I need you for a bit,' and then you're in, they got a chance to act. But we made sure they didn't do this [clown face] after every joke. That corny, campy stuff, that's not what the show was. It was just this vision of parody. You were trying to make it look like 'Miami Vice.' It's 'Ballard Vice.' 'East Side Story' instead of 'West Side Story,' all that stuff. 'Ballard Driving Academy,' that's not a parody. That just is. That's just something that's just something. Everyone knew what that was because it's Seattle's show.

"One of the main photographers, Mike Boydston, he was the original DP or the photographer on it, really talented guy, and he was all in for the bit too. So that's where the point of view and get it behind the legs and fly all that stuff. Genius, right? Just hokey enough to almost look real.

"John, Mike and I would go out to lunch a lot of times and just, 'Where do you want to go?' And we had all these Seattle places, Caveman Barbecue, whatever. We would just go off, and then we would talk about stuff. I don't know if it was Mike's idea, but we talked about this thing called 'Generic Action Movie.' It's just the good parts, right? So it's Rambo putting the clip in the machine gun and getting ready to fight, and James Bond pulling the ejector seat, all these sight gags and stuff like that. And the other one was out-of-sync Kung Fu movie.

"So how did I get it? Well, I'm Japanese, but it was sort of like, 'Well, you got to do it,' because it doesn't work if — nobody can be Billy Quan except an Asian dude, right? So they said, 'We want you to do it.' And Mike will tell you, I was nervous. I did not like being on camera. But that was it. It was a Kung Fu bit, maybe about 25 seconds long, out of sync, and that bit got great laughter. And Bill Stainton said, 'We've got to do a whole [series], we've got to see what this is.' So we started doing 20-something of them.

[Billy Quan's finger-pointing] "That's all I can muster. OK. 'You have defiled this, that and the other thing and insulted my ancestors.' It was these real jerky motions.

"Then I have to be saying something so that my mouth has to be saying words, but it's supposed to be in Chinese, right? I don't speak Chinese and I don't know any Chinese. So you know what? John said, why don't you just say 'Kwan Fai "Willie" Mak'? That's the [murderer in the 1983 Wah Mee massacre]. That was the name of the guy, and I really didn't make the connection, but he's just saying, 'Kwan Fai "Willie" Mak,' and I'm lipSyncing. It's not we're not using the sound, but I'm saying it because to look emphatic, you have to use your vocal cords so that you're moving air. I had to yell that. The first one was in a Chinese restaurant, right?

"Mike Boydston's toes are curling in his shoes going, 'I don't know. We're really pressing it,' but then we look at the people watching, and they're laughing, right? Because of the context. But that was really right off the bat, politically incorrect, and that's the stuff we did because you're all in, right? You're all in.

[It's part of the generic action scenes.] "Yeah. Everyone's seen those. It's iconic, right? So you just do those. It's established, and it's popular. So we start there and do our take on it.

"After we got going and we probably had done maybe six or seven of them, a Mike Myers movie came out and there was a Kung Fu parody, which everybody thought, 'I wonder if he watched and launched off of that [Billy Quan]. We couldn't prove that or anything, but it was being seen.

"We considered that, but he's on the side of good. I mean, he's not a bad guy, right? I mean, he's basically righteously indignant, right? But his way of dealing with his anger is the issue. But I don't know, I don't know. Someone would have to tell me that.

"The Chinese American Post did a story on it, and we were wondering, and the reporter, I forgot her name, well-known reporter for the Chinese American Post, she wanted an interview with John and me. We were going, 'What's going to happen here?' John goes, 'Ah, no, she loves the show. Let's go do the interview.'

It was just a celebration of getting the character, in the context of 'Almost Live!', which everyone loved. As an element, the Asian community was involved in that, because we filmed down there.

[Could it be done today?] "That's the whole idea with comedy, where you can go with it. I mean, you can find a problem with just about anything "Almost Live!" did.

It became a thing, it's not something you plan and then we're going to do this and launch this and then launch that. No, it was just, 'Do the show.' And it was a grind. The thing about it is, you set a bar and you can have dingers in there, but not too many of them.

If you were going to cast a show like this, would you pick the half the people that are on it? That's what you've got to consider. Maybe the first thing you would do wrong is pick the wrong people. You just have to have the people that are all in. Joel McHale was always all in. He still is, all in for the bit. Bill Nye was all in for the bit.

[It also was an ensemble.] "Absolutely. John embraced that because he knew the strength of the show was the exponential potential, the elements. The bar was set.

"I don't think Billy Quan came in until the second season. We're talking at lunch and going, 'Are we starting to scrape the bottom of the barrel here with these ideas? We're already running out of ideas. This seems far-fetched,' but on its face, it was pretty good. Just the good parts of action movies, right? And it's a movie made of just the good parts of the movie. Why not, right? So you're just cherry-picking moments in all these successful films and making it a bit out of it, right? How could you lose? Billy Quan was part of that.

"And the out-of-sync stuff cracks people up. I did the voice once, but it was just no good. I have no voice. Cashman had the perfect baritone voice. You know, it didn't match the body. It was just some Hollywood decision to get some big voice in there to get to give him more clout, right?

"The show started getting awards. At the Emmys one year, Billy Quan had to go accept the award. I go up there and get the award, and I'm just going to do a silent wave and shake my hand. Pat goes up and grabs my mike, 'Ladies and gentlemen—' so I had to start going like this [lip-synching, waving hands], and he would not stop. He kept me up there forever, right? I'm shaking it, I start walking away, and then it's, 'And furthermore—.' It's like it would never end, right? He gave me the look when he went up there. 'We're going to do this.' I was really flustered at that point, right? And it just was a moment, and I guess people go along with it because they get the bit, they got what it was, and it's not my voice. It's Pat Cashman, who happens to be hosting the Emmys, right? He just went with it, and he was he's such an ad libber, that guy.

[‘Roscoe's Oriental Rug Emporium’ is by Cashman.] "Going out of business for over 40 years. The other one he did was 'This Here Place (This Old House.)' And then the other one was Bob Ross. He's grabbing his painting, 'And there's somebody in the bathroom. You can see right through the window.' But that's another parody, right? Everybody knows Bob Ross, right?

"I think a lot of colleges were watching the show. I thought the national show lost some of its bite because the local knowledge was not there, right? It's like Ballard. Well, it just sounds like any other town. But Ballard was Ballard. Is it that kind of Ballard, right?

[Public recognition in your later filming career?] "Mariners games, it's the same audience, I get recognized at Mariners games. You can hear people talking, 'That's Billy Quan, you know.' Then and then say, 'Go say hi to him.' So I would turn around and say, 'Hey.'

"But sometimes I would forget that people would recognize. One time I had a lunch meeting with. David Wolper Productions, and it was for an idea that I was pitching for a history show, and they actually asked me to come down to pitch the show. So I was supposed to get down there for a noon thing down at their place. I overslept, missed the plane, panicked. I'm now going out to the airport to try to take the next plane, because there's plenty of planes to L.A. from Seattle. I'm saying, 'Is there any way that you could get me on the next plane?' Then they go, 'Billy Quan!' and they call on the Alaska desk. 'Hey, hey, hey, let's get a picture,' and I'm thinking 'I got to get down there.' Then they go, 'Oh yeah, we'll get you on the next flight. You'll be down there in no time.' They didn't buy the show, by the way.

[Are you retired?] "I went off and started doing videos for Microsoft. After the show, I did Bill Nye and then some other things for Discovery Channel. It's all this sort of a hodgepodge of things. Right now, I'm coming to the realization that I may very well be retired, even though I didn't make the decision to do that.