

David Scully

'Almost Live!!' writer and performer, 1997-1999. Interviewed by phone, June 7, 2024.

"I wasn't in on the first part of the 'Almost Live!' story, but I definitely was the closer. I don't even know how they found me. I was doing a lot of stand-up and performance things and doing a lot of impressions and a lot of my own material. So I met with Nancy [Guppy] and Bill Stainton first, and then I met with John Keister. They were looking for a new cast member, so they were bringing on pairs of us. They were bringing on two people at a time who were writer-performers, so I think it was Tamara Paris and Rhonda Watson, Barb Klansnic and Kim Evey were a pair, Brooks McBeth and I were a pair, and then Matt Smith and Lauren Weedman were a pair. Of course, they picked Lauren, but Bill Stainton called me and said, 'Hey, we'd like to have you stay on as a featured player,' so I stayed on.

"I was doing a lot of stage work, a lot of theater work, but on the side I was doing stand-up mics and my own material. So I was doing a lot of comedic stuff as well. I've never asked Nancy or Bill or John how they found me, but somehow the word must have gotten out. After 'Almost Live!' I did a comedy podcast. But I had done a lot of voiceover and stage and stand-up, so somehow they got my name, so there you go.

"I think a lot of the focus has been on performing and what characters you did, and for me it was the writing that I loved. I had written for the stage, I had written for video games, screenplays. I'd never written for a sketch-comedy show, so I spent the first few months there just soaking it up. Like, how do you write for a three-camera sketch comedy show with a limited budget? So yeah, I was just trying to see how John and Nancy and Bill and Pat [Cashman] and Bob [Nelson], how they did it. It was mostly an education in writing for the people, not just for myself. But how do you write for somebody else in the cast? So that was the fun part for me, was the writing.

"One of the characters I did, a sketch that a writer named Winlar wrote, and it was called Star Wars No. 7. It was about Obi-Wan Kenobi and Luke just kind of hanging out, and Obi-Wan is bored, and he just says, 'I'm bored, Luke, let's go kill somebody.' I did Obi-Wan, and that was one of my favorite sketches. I didn't write it, I think I contributed a few lines, but I remember when we read it, I can't remember if it was Bill or John, said, 'I don't know who's going to play Obi-Wan.' I didn't want to show off, but I walked by Bill's office later, and I said, 'You know, Bill, I think I know somebody who could possibly play Alec Guinness. He goes, 'OK, you're in.'

"The second thing I did that I used to do in my stand-up is I would switch characters a lot and do different characters. So I wrote a sketch called Black History Month, and it was all about different people around the region commenting on Black History Month, and the premise was, it was the John Report, and John goes, 'Correspondent David Scully has reached out to all these people to talk about Black History Month,' and I said, 'Yep, Steve [Wilson], roll the tape,' and Steve came on the intercom and said, 'Yeah, David, we're having some technical difficulties.' Then John said, 'Why don't you just tell us what they said, David?' So that was just a chance for me to do a half-dozen characters, and just switching back and forth. That was in my stand-up bag, so I just threw that.

"The first sketch that I mentioned was new, written by somebody else, and the second one was mine that I wrote. A lot of times, somebody would start a sketch idea, and they go, 'Yeah, I have the beginning and the middle, I don't have an end.' So they pass the sketch around, and we all have a turn at it, and I really love that part. I can still watch old sketches and say, 'Oh, that's Nancy's line,' 'Oh, that's Bob's line,' 'That's my line.' So that was fun.

"There was a sketch I wrote for Tracy Conway. It was a Dr. Laura Schlesinger sketch that I like. The premise was, Dr. Laura gets disgusted with talking to people, and she says, 'From now on, I just want to talk to people who are dead or alive.' So we had people calling in like Joan of Arc. Joan of Arc calls in and goes, 'I'm hearing these voices,' and Dr. Laura goes, 'You got to get that checked out.' I wrote that sketch for somebody else, and Tracy thanked me, and she killed it. Just writing that stuff, I never got over it, just the thrill of bringing in something on Tuesday and

having it air, or part of it air, on Saturday. I never got over the thrill of that, just saying, 'Oh, I just got an idea,' or 'Here's the sketch,' and 'Yeah, great, we're shooting that Saturday,' or 'That'll be in the next show. That was great.

"I felt supported. When I was doing the show, I had people ask me, 'What's John Keister really like?' And I go, 'He's really great, he's really supportive,' and they would get kind of disgusted, because they think they want some dirt. And I say, 'I don't have any dirt, it's a great ensemble, and they're supportive, and they're lovely,' and they're like, 'Oh, do you have any dirt?' I go, 'No, I don't, sorry.' My experience was, I had a great time. I had fun writing.

"Learning to write for that show, eventually I learned we had sets that were already built. There was a therapist set, there was a game-show set, and we were writing sketches around what we already had. So I started thinking like a producer. That was from watching Bill Stainton, because he had his eye on everything. Yeah, I had a good time.

[Were they getting feedback that they needed non-white faces?] "I think they heard that. They said, 'We need new blood. So I think that was the idea behind the 1997 experiment, because they were bringing in all kinds of new writers and new blood. So, yeah, I think the idea was just, 'Let's just see what we're missing. Let's see who else is out there,' which I thought was great. Giving people seven weeks, as opposed to, 'Let's do the sketch and see how you do.' It was, 'Let's give you seven weeks. Let's see how you work with the cast. Let's see how you work with the crew,' which I thought was really great. If I had just done those seven weeks, I would have been happy, but to be brought on longer was great. I think the last few years they got a lot more adventurous and experimental in certain ways, so it was fun as well to watch that show change.

[What sketches could be done today.] "To me, it's more about the city changing. When you did Ballard, the 'Ballard Driving Academy,' people would go, 'Oh yeah, I know that.' If you say that today, they go, 'What are you talking about?' If you talk about blue eyeshadow and Kent, that was kind of a running gag. It's like, 'No.' I think the city has changed a lot. And so I think the show would have had to change to reflect the change of the city. But back then, if you talked about a certain neighborhood, people would understand.

"John used to talk about the Bullitt sisters, even Paul Allen, people like that who had the money but seemed to be more involved in the city. We still have millionaires in Seattle. But there was this sort of love of the city and love of the sports teams and love of art. I'm optimistic. I think maybe we're due for another boom. But 'Almost Live!' was definitely grunge music and Starbucks. There was this period that 'Almost Live!' caught where it's a city where you can make jokes about Ballard and Kent and other things like that.

"I get in long conversations with people about what's funny and trying to take it apart. I still don't have the answer, and I'm around funny people all the time. Sometimes things just hit. Sometimes they don't. Sometimes they offend. Sometimes they don't. So it's this moving target.

[Unjustly unremembered sketches.] "I don't think a lot of people remember these sketches, but they were some of my favorites. Usually Pat Cashman was a spokesperson talking about new area codes or a new phone deal, and then he would say, 'Any questions?' Everybody in the cast, and we even had guests backstage. That was the other thing about the show. Sometimes you saw [Gov.] Gary Locke walking backstage, or The Presidents of the United States of America band walking backstage. So they'd get up at the mic sometimes. But people would ask the stupidest questions, and you got to watch Pat Cashman's slow burn, which was just great. So I love those sketches.

"One in particular, I think it was Wazoo [Washington State University] or the Huskies. Chris Cashman walks up. He's wearing a baseball cap, and he talks to Pat Cashman. He goes, 'Hey, I really love those backward caps.' And Pat Cashman goes, 'Oh, you do?' And Chris Cashman goes, 'Yeah, you know where I can get one of those? Which I thought, 'It's stupid, but it's funny. It still makes me laugh. And, of course, the camera did a close up of Pat's face. And he held it maybe 30 seconds. A lot of those sketches, everybody got air time, and everybody got to say something.

[The role 'Almost Live!' has played in your life.] "It's funny. I always know when somebody has seen the reruns, because I have a professional business mailbox. I walk in, and they go, 'Hey, how you doing?' I walked in one morning and they go, 'Hi!' and I said, 'How you doing?' and they go, 'Great, saw you on TV,' and I said, 'Yeah, that was 20 years ago.' And they went, 'Oh. Anyway, here's your mail.' It was this totally different experience. So I always know when people are Googling.

"The thing about 'Almost Live!' for me is, I still see Nancy Guppy. After 'Almost Live!' ended, I did The John Report with John Keister and Bob Nelson. I've always gone to Bob and Bill and Steve for advice through the years. Right after 'Almost Live!' Lauren Weedman got me an audition at 'The Daily Show' with Jon Stewart, the writer correspondent. She set that up, which is kind of unheard of in the business. People aren't usually that supportive of each other.

"When I worked at 'Almost Live!' I was applying for a job at Seattle Magazine as an arts editor, and they were doing background checks and going, 'Well, we don't know.' They contacted Nancy Guppy, who said, 'Just hire him,' and they hired me because of her. So our paths always cross. Then I did an interview with Joel McHale] while I was at Seattle Magazine. Joel had put out 'Thanks for the Money,' his book.

"Our paths don't cross often, but when they do, it's really nice, and it's a really pleasant memory. It was a short time, but it was a great time, especially as a writer. Less I enjoyed performing, but more just learning that craft of writing for sketch comedy, writing for other people, and just keeping in contact with a really nice group of people.

"Rhonda Watson and I made friends through 'Almost Live!' and have remained friends.

"It was a dream of mine because I would watch sketch comedy, and I was like, 'Oh, I wish I could do something like that.' It was like fun. It was fun. It was a lot of hard work. I guess where it spoiled me is I thought every creative collaboration was going to be like that. And it was not. Not even close. I'm like, 'Where's the support?' It made me think back to, 'Wow, I was really spoiled through 'Almost Live!'. Even if a sketch wasn't right, just somebody going, 'Yeah, can you go back and rewrite that and put a stronger ending on it? But it's coming along.' Just stuff like that. I would write really ambitious sketches, and Bill goes, 'Yeah, we can't do multiple location shoots. I love your sketch, David, but we can't.' It was a nice way to say that.

"What I've been up to lately is, I have a greeting-card business called Scully Cards."