

Hans-Eric Gosch

"Almost Live!'" associate producer, writer and set designer, 1992-1998. Interviewed in person June 28, 2024.

"I was a broadcast journalism major at the UW and graduated in 1990. I'd had a segment on the University of Washington student channel. It was called Studio K, and I did entertainment reporting every week. I graduated in 1990 and moved to New York. I interviewed into the NBC page program. It was apparently the hardest program in the country to get into. So in 1991, I'm getting to work on 'Saturday Night Live,' and I'm working on the Letterman show and the Today show and the Donahue show.

"A lot of those were NBC page assignments, usually in talent relations. I had a job at 'Saturday Night Live' where I would walk the guests from the green room to the studio. I got to do that for almost a year. It was like being at the Super Bowl and not getting to play because you're there at this place that you always wanted to be, but you're not writing. You're helping Bruce Springsteen get to the green room.

"I met most of my heroes working on shows like that, but the two nicest people that I've ever met were Bruce Springsteen and Garth Brooks. At the time, they were the biggest stars that you could be. I would introduce myself, and both of them stopped and said, 'Wait, say that again. You have two first names. I want to get it right.' No one else did that. But those two guys did.

"I had an opportunity to come back to Seattle and actually get to write and produce. So I left New York, came back here and won an Emmy Award after six years of working on 'Almost Live!' I was the associate producer. I was a contributing writer because I was about 10 years younger than everybody else on the show. Before Joel McHale started, I would get cast all the time because they just needed somebody, and we used people off the street all the time. We grabbed people off the street. One of the things about 'Almost Live!' was the writing. It wasn't about the performances so much. Tracy Conway was a theater actress and studied drama, but nobody else did. It was about the writing.

"I find myself in this position where I am in charge of designing all the sets and extras and pulling together all the props for the live shots and running around town. It was always commando shooting. We didn't get permits. We didn't ask permission. It was just a special time.

"The thing that struck me the most is the love that everyone had when they would see John [Keister]. We drove around in an unmarked white van because we didn't have permissions to be doing a lot of the stuff that we did. And we were a gang. It's no exaggeration. We got paid to throw dummies over cliffs and off high-rise buildings and run over them with cars. And we dressed up and made each other laugh and threw this show together every week that became a part of people's Saturday night.

"I asked two folks this week, 'What did "Almost Live!" mean to you?' Both of them said it was something that they planned for on our Saturday nights. And if you wanted to see SNL, we were the only show in the country that got to preempt it. I was in my 20s and it was a dream job, right?

"There were only two producers. It was me and Bill Stanton, who is a hero to me to this day. I would get a writer's credit whenever I had jokes in the monologue or in the sketches. Once a month, I wrote a sketch that we did, but I was primarily there to pull it all together. Bill was the editor and decided, for the most part, what went on the show.

"It was the grab the people and get all the sets together. It was always borrowing. That's how we knew John Bennett. We would go to Jukebox City and borrow pinball machines or whatever we needed. We paid for everything with credits and tickets to the show. And that's how we knew Dave Grohl, because Nirvana was rehearsing upstairs at Jukebox City. Dave became a good friend. I must have been in three sketches with Dave.

"I had a recurring character. We must have done three or four 'Nature Walk with Chuck' sketches. I was the abused Boy Scout. It was odd because Matt Smith, the other guy in the sketch, who played Chuck, wasn't a cast member. So what you had was a really popular sketch starring two people who weren't cast members on the show. But we did three or four of them, and they were always the Act One sketch. The Act One sketch is the one that comes right out of the monologue. It's usually the big production.

"Outside of that, I played Boy George, I played Ace Frehley (rock group KISS), and a bunch of silly characters. It was a really magical time. Though I had been at other shows, 'Almost Live!' was almost more special because I was a part of it in an integral way.

[What drove you back to Seattle.] "There was an opportunity at KING-TV. I worked as a news writer, and then 'Almost Live!' thing opened up pretty quickly after that. Then I went back to New York. They had one season left after I left, and then the show ended. I said to myself, 'Well, now that I've got this Emmy Award and some real experience, I'll go back and try New York again,' and I ended up at VH1. I was a segment producer of a show called 'Before They Were Rock Stars.'

"So I'm sitting in my office in Times Square. Since I was in the eighth grade, all I could think about was working at MTV. MTV was life-changing for me and my friends. so I'm there, but I'm not quite doing what I wanted to do. I'm writing about Mariah Carey and Barenaked Ladies and groups that I don't like. It's late 1999, I'd been there only a couple of months, and my friends start calling me, and they're saying, 'Hey, you should really think about coming back to Seattle. We're buying houses with our stock options, and you could probably reinvent yourself as a dot-com guy.'

"I was just homesick enough, and the work that I was doing — someone would come into my office with a shopping cart full of VHS tapes of Mariah Carey when she was 4 or 8 and drop off this stuff, and I would have to watch it all and write funny stuff between it and have it done in three or four days. It was just not enough to keep me there.

"I came back to Seattle and reinvented myself, and I've spent the last 24 years in the tech world doing business development and half of that time at Amazon, so I haven't had a television career. In 2019, I walked away from a director of business-development job that I'd been in for eight years to create two TV shows that are out in the world with production companies, we'll say.

"I wasn't at 'Almost Live!' for the Ross Shafer years. Bill Nye wasn't there, but I would work with Bill once a year. He would come in during May sweeps and do something in the studio and blow something up, or we'd shut down a street or roll a crane down the street.

"Everybody was in all the Billy Quan sketches, but Billy Quan was mainly Darrell Suto and John. We threw dummies off buildings for lots of things besides Billy Quan. But every Billy Quan would be, you know, putting a dummy on a bicycle and rolling it down an enormous flight of stairs. Dummies were a big thing, and we did dummies better than anyone, maybe to this day.

"We destroyed a lot of dummies. We ran over them with cars a lot. What we did is take a wetsuit and stuff it with newspapers and then dress it. We used a lot of black tape, and everything looks better on TV than it does in real life.

"We did Rockstar Fantasy Camp, and I created a shirt that Kim Thayil and Mike McCready wore. Years later, in 2011, I ran into Kim. and I said, 'Hey, Kim, I don't know if you remember me from the Rockstar Fantasy Camp sketch.' We were backstage at some show and he raises up his shirt and goes, 'I'm wearing the shirt today.' He cared about it so much that he held on to it.

“Then there’s ‘Jet Guy’ and Ralph Bevins. You can’t overestimate his contribution. Outside of the sketches that Pat Cashman did — because Pat was so good that he even edited his own stuff — Ralph edited everything, the whole six years that I was there. I also know there were good editors there before I was there: Mike Boydston and Darrell Suto. But Ralph was the guy. He was the sole editor. He’s really, really good at what he did. He put a tremendous stamp on that show.

“When Ross was doing the show, John was the sketches. It was often him out being an intrepid reporter. It was a very different show when I got there. I think the production values and everything went way up. We had a big, big sponsorship in place with Miller Beer, so for the first time we were having sets that were canvases that we could dress and do all sorts of things. Bill Stainton was very, very good at Photoshop, so we created some really beautiful statements.

“Bill Stainton is maybe the smartest person I’ve ever met. He’s immense. He is a beautiful pianist. He’s a Beatles expert. He can do anything, and he was he was my boss. He and I sat at a table on every set every Saturday night. We had stopwatches and we back-time the show and hit the applause buttons. He was the man.

“There wasn’t any room for me to advance because no one left that show. That was part of the problem with the show. Why would anyone leave that show?

“They brought a couple of people in. They wanted to get some diversity on the show because there haven’t ever really been any. But Joel was the only person who joined in the six years that I was there, other than some featured people that came on. Lauren Weedman was one of them, and Lauren was just amazing. But again, it comes back was the writing.

“Joel McHale was a performer. He ended up taking a whole lot of the spots that I used to do because he was younger than me and just so good. It was like immediately everyone could see that Joel was going to be a star. My favorite of him is probably when he did Braveheart. That was always big. He rode a horse into the studio. Those were amazing. He was the best performer that I’ve ever seen on that show, for sure — he and probably Lauren Weedman. But again, it was always about the writing.

“So it was it was a dream assignment. We were a family, and we were a gang, and people just loved John. Everywhere we went, people couldn’t wait to be near him, couldn’t wait to tell him how much the show meant to them, that they thought it was funnier than SNL. We got away with a lot of stuff because people loved John and that show so much.

“We’d go to lunch because we’d be out shooting all day. We’d always end up eating in some neighborhood restaurant, and it would start all over again. Everyone wanted to come and tell John what he meant to them, and it was so fun to watch. I’ve never seen anyone that admired as I did when we’d be out with John.

“Ross drove a Ferrari and had a really great head of hair. John’s show was much, much better. John is very real. He was like a big brother to me. He did some things that people don’t even know about.

“There was a time when ‘Almost Live!’ went into syndication, not on Comedy Central, but across all the BELO stations. BELO was a station group in the 1990s. Now it’s a tech company. Those guys, because they were all on AFTRA, got some pretty big checks for that syndication deal. Though I was writing and was in sketches every week, I wasn’t a member of AFTRA and didn’t get that check. John could see that I was uncomfortable with the fact that they were opening up envelopes with thousands of dollars for the first eight shows or something, and he pulled me aside and said, ‘Hey, I can see that you’re upset by this. What would make you feel better?’ I said, ‘Well, I just wish that I had joined AFTRA and was celebrating this.’ And he wrote me a personal check for the amount that those guys were getting and didn’t tell anyone about it.

“I’ll never forget it. He’s that kind of guy. I think that people just saw how much he loved this city. He knows more about the city than anyone I know.

“He's doing better now than he was a couple of years ago. He sort of had a farewell, a thing at Benaroya Hall where he didn't think he'd be ever performing again. We all went and, and he seems much better now.

“John never had a script. Everybody else would have three or four drafts, and you'd work on them and polish them. John would have some notes on a piece of paper, and that's how he worked. He was the only person that worked that way. He just trusted himself, and everybody else did, so he had a very different way of working than everyone else.

“Every Monday we'd have off, and we'd reconvene on Tuesday morning. We would watch the show back together as a team, and then we'd go to the table readings. At a table reading, you don't have any props. No one's acting. You're just reading. And that's when you found out what would make the show. Even for that, John wouldn't have a script. He'd just come in and say, ‘Well, this is going to happen, and that's going to happen.’ He wouldn't write stuff out. But his was obviously mostly the funniest stuff that we did. Right. Everyone else would be reading their scripts in the right formats, and he'd just wing it.

“John didn't have a lot of stuff that got turned down. Other people did. And some people, like Nancy Guppy, really, really fought for their stuff. She would find a way to get it made. But the table readings were great because you knew when it was funny when someone just read it out loud and didn't have to act it out.

“That's what Bill would use to determine what would be on the show that week. The weird thing is you didn't want to share your stuff with the other people because if they'd already read it and already seen it or helped you work on it, they weren't going to laugh when you read it. So the response around that table was better if you hadn't shared what you'd written and worked on, and that's all Bill went off of. If it got laughs at the table, he'd consider it, and it would probably get made. But sometimes it just lay there. Nothing happened, or nobody said anything, which was oftentimes a lot of the stuff that I wrote.

“Not all of it was good, but I feel like I got enough stuff on there that I almost got away with something. I'm good. But I had a lot of stuff that my friends and I thought was hilarious that didn't make it on the show.

[What sketches couldn't be done today?] “Oh boy. There are lines in ‘Nature Walk with Chuck’ that you couldn't get away with today. There was a line where Chuck, Matt Smith's character, says, ‘We must never forget the contributions of the noble red man,’ and how even today he's doing so much for us. And then you cut to us and we're in an Indian reservation casino, and he's got Native American hostesses standing next to him. He goes, ‘Come on, lucky seven,’ and then it cuts. You couldn't do that today.

“That was the 1990s, right? Everything today is, and it should be, about inclusivity and equity and representation, and you couldn't make a joke like that today.

[Some humor was based on neighborhoods.] “But all the neighborhoods have changed. Ballard is one of the coolest neighborhoods in Seattle now, one of the hippest neighborhoods in Seattle.

“People would come [to the studio tapings] from Lynnwood and all over the place. We would open up the phone lines early in the week. I oversaw the interns who opened the phone lines, and those tickets were gone as fast as they could get the names. There were about 100 people in the studio, and every week there were more people that wanted to come than there were seats for them. And we always reserved maybe 10 or 12 seats because we're begging and borrowing from everybody around town, and that was the compensation.

“I had a great relationship with Jack, who owned the Army Navy surplus store on First Avenue, and we were in there for practically every show, getting something, borrowing it, just taking it. ‘We'll bring it back.’ In turn, I would give him tickets that he would give to the Jewish Community Center for auctions and all sorts of stuff. It was a currency — that and getting special thanks in the credits. There was no money.

"I think the whole city just felt the show was something that they owned. And John was something that they owned. It was a special time, I'll tell you. I feel like we got away with a lot. We had a lot of fun. Today, I think that you'd probably need a lot of permissions. But we would just go to public places and start shooting, and we were able to say things and do things and make fun of people that you probably couldn't today.

"I don't know what's wrong with making fun of people in Lynnwood who tease their hair too high. You know what I mean? None of it was mean.

"There wasn't a lot of talk about it, but what, what a strange thing that it was a white, mostly male cast for a long, long time. But Bill worked on that, creating that diversity. He brought in Rhonda Watson and some other folks. I would love to have had not just more diversity, but also younger, newer folks on the show, you know. New ideas.

"It really felt like a family. John was a big brother, and Steve was very, very intense. We had some serious arguments, Steve Wilson and I. I think he had them with everyone. Bob was quiet, kind. I saw Bob get frustrated or angry just one time, and it was with me. We were shooting down in the basement. Some scene that was, dark, and there was a fog machine. I took a bunch of those snap pops that you throw on the ground and they make noise, and I set them on the floor and came in and stepped on them. It just threw him off, and he screamed. But I've never seen Bob get upset. And Pat was just off to himself.

"I think the only person who really got close to Pat the entire time I was there was probably Joel. But Pat had so many other jobs that he was gone a lot, and he'd come in and he'd do his own thing, and he'd edit his own pieces, and he'd be out of there. Brilliant. Show me a better performance than 'Roscoe's Oriental Rug Emporium.' They did two or three of those.

"The 'Almost Live!' sets used to look homemade. There wasn't somebody who was designing the sets and curating the props. It was much, much less about that. It was really just about the writing. I think that some money probably came in around the Comedy Central time that allowed us to have some backdrops that we could paint and that we could light differently and that we could dress other things up and that didn't exist before that. So there was an emphasis on production values when I started there. All of a sudden, we were creating the inside of Tower Records in the studio. We were creating the inside of restaurants. It looked good."