

Jim Sharp

'Almost Live!' associate producer, writer and performer, 1984-1988, 1992. Interviewed June 10, 2024.

"Ross was an up and coming standup comedian in Seattle. He was really breaking out. He was starting to headline clubs all over the country, and he had just won the Seattle Laugh Off, which was a standup competition done each year. At the time, it was kind of a big deal, and he won it.

"There was a new program director. He was determined to have a locally produced comedy show. So he went to Ross and said, 'Listen, I don't know what this show looks like or how it goes. I want it to be about Seattle and the region. Let's do a pilot.' I knew Ross a little bit. We talked comedy and I'd written jokes for him, he said, 'Will you help me with this?' So we did a pilot.

"We both love comedy, and we talked about comedy, and I had written jokes for him. So he knew that that was a passion of mine, and I had a little bit of experience, not a lot of experience. There was a third person, too. His name was Mike Neun. By the way, he passed away a couple of weeks ago. He was living in Thailand for quite some time. He was really a great writer and really smart and a really funny guy.

"So the three of us did this pilot. It was called 'Take Five.' I'm guessing it wasn't very good. Then Bob said, 'Let's do another one. Let's do another one. You guys learned a lot. You told me what you would do different, and so let's do another one.' So we shot another one, and I'm guessing it was a little bit better, and they picked the show up. So we had some more time to develop it and figure it out. And now we have a little bit of a budget.

"That's when I'm trying to remember if John Keister came on then. He wasn't in the pilot, or he might have come on a few episodes into a season. Obviously, John was instrumental in the success of 'Almost Live!' and what we were trying to do. He's a funny guy. He had his own bit each week, his own taped piece each week, and they were quite successful.

"So we had this show that we were trying to figure out as we went along. And Ross had a lot of talent. He was a funny guy. He was a good actor. He was fast. But he's also a good-looking guy that looked good behind the desk. And he was a host. He was a really good host.

"It was kind of a Letterman ripoff show, to be honest. We had the desk. We had the band. We tried to bring a guest on each week. But we didn't have three guests. Instead of all those guests, we'd have sketches. We'd shoot bits. We'd come up with stuff. We were like kids in a candy store. We had this TV show in Seattle, Washington, on KING Television, and we were really inexperienced. We didn't know what we were doing.

"We were doing everything. We were shooting and directing and editing and sweeping up the studio and warming up the audience. And a funny thing happened. They didn't cancel us.

"Finally, about four years later, three years later, we figured it out. You know what? They didn't cancel us. And we started getting pretty good at the comedy thing. We started making better bits and writing better and editing better. And the show finally got its legs going. The show really got pretty good, and people noticed it, and it won some awards.

"Ross got the call from Hollywood to go down and host 'The Late Show' on FOX Television, and he did the last six months of that contract on Fox nationally. He took me along as his head writer. And we were done. That's when we had left 'Almost Live!' and John took over as host.

[How the show was named] "The way I remember it, we didn't like 'Take Five,' and we wanted to come up with another name, and we were all brainstorming. It's kind of how you do it, you know. So we all probably had lists at the time. I remember being at a little ad agency at the time making commercials for a guy, and we were in the audio studio, and all of a sudden that name came to me. I don't know why, but I can remember where I was when it came to me. 'Almost Live!' So I wrote it down. It was on my list, and everybody responded to it.

“There was another name that was kicking around, too. That was ‘Live on Tape.’ And there was a show actually in Los Angeles, and I knew the guys, but I was still down in L.A. at the time doing television, and I knew the comedians that had that, and I remember thinking, ‘Wow, “Live on Tape”.’ That was my second choice for ‘Almost Live!’ But I didn’t tell them that. ‘Live on Tape’ is that same kind of subtle. But it’s live. It’s on tape. It doesn’t make quite sense. ‘Almost Live!’ you know. So, yeah, it’s a subtle name and has some comedy in it. It’s humorous if you think about it. But it’s a real easy name, you know.

[Origin of ‘Louie Louie’ campaign] “That thing just took off. We tried to get the it to be the state song of the state of Washington, the official song of the state of Washington. We had a lot of fun with that and probably did a couple of bits on TV. But it’s funny because it doesn’t take much to get a politician to run with you. They’ll do anything for attention. So we found somebody down in the House of Representatives. A representative said, ‘Sure, I will sponsor this. I’ll even try to get a couple more senators or representatives to sponsor this.’ And they probably had fun with it. It didn’t quite make it.

“It’s just what you do as a writer. You sit down, and you brainstorm, and you try to come up with bits, and you go, ‘OK, “Washington, My Home,” we can make that out to be a boring song. What if we came up with “Louie Louie”?’ And you write it down, and you go, ‘How about a campaign to get Sonny and Cher back together?’ You have 10 ideas, and if you have one idea that’s good, you’re pretty good. Nothing brilliant. It was just part of the thing you do as a comedy writer.

“You write 20 monologue jokes each week and come up with hopefully a couple desk pieces. And you come up with a sketch, a bit, that you’re going to go shoot, and some of them work, and some of them don’t, and some of them never — you go into a room, and you pitch them, and some people don’t even get it.

[Were you ever on camera?] “We won a bunch of local Emmys, and there’s one that I played. The premise was people who get in the wrong line at a grocery store, you’re in like 10 items or less, and you have just, you have just enough items or you don’t have enough. You’re writing the check and you’re showing ID, and you can’t find your ID. And then you made a mistake, so you have to write another — this person that takes way too long at the checkout counter, and I played that person. Somehow that won an Emmy, but acting was not my forte or strength. I left that mainly to the other cast members.

“We all did everything. That was the beauty of the show, and that was the fun of the show. When we started it, we were learning on the job, literally, and for some reason they didn’t cancel us. When you do it enough times, you start to get pretty good at it, and I think that was the key.

“I was down in Hollywood working, and the show continued under John. and under John, it became a pure sketch show. John wasn’t a guy to sit behind the desk and interview somebody, and those guys got really good at creating comedy. John and I later took the show to Comedy Central, did 65 shows for Comedy Central, while the local show was still going. Killed everybody. Oh man, we did something like 10 to 12 shows every two weeks. It was really a fun summer.

[Were you one of the gorillas on the Space Needle?] “That’s my claim to fame. I tell people that all the time. ‘You probably won’t believe it, but we did this bit and we were gorillas walking on the top there.’ Yeah. That’s so funny.

[Leaving ‘Almost Live!’ for L.A. with Ross.] “When we went to Los Angeles, quite honestly that was rough because Ross and I both cared very much about ‘Almost Live!’ We went back and forth for a while, but that wasn’t going to work. And we left those guys in a bad way because Ross was really the key person of the show. He was the host of the show, and all of a sudden we’re down in L.A. But it was such an opportunity to get a shot of doing a national show and going to Los Angeles. We did six months of that thing, which is a long time in television.

"But when 'The Late Show' got canceled, I stayed down there and continued to work in the television industry as a writer and producer. In fact, I retired seven years ago, and six years ago I moved back up here to Gig Harbor with my wife. The last 14 years, I was in charge of creative and development at Comedy Central.

[Role 'Almost Live!' played in your life] "That was the first comedy gig. It's something I loved. I got out of college and I wanted to write and write comedy. But I taught school for a few years and then had this opportunity with Ross and we did 'Almost Live!' and then 'Almost Live!' was a stepping stone to go to Los Angeles and have a national show. Then I continued to work there for the next 30 years. I spent the next years in either Los Angeles or New York producing and running shows, and the last 13 years of Comedy Central, I decided I would go to the other side, being an executive.

[Could some 'Almost Live!' sketches be done today?] "The answer is absolutely not. There's no way. We did so much stuff back then that would be considered politically incorrect and very offensive. I can give you a specific example that I was thinking about the other day, called 'Mime Hunting,' and it's one of my favorites.

"I don't know who came up with it. It wasn't me. But it's just what you would think. It's these guys that have flannel shirts and hats, and they're rednecks, and they have a truck, and I think they've got beer in the truck, and they get drunk, and they go, 'We're going to go get us some mimes,' because they hate mimes. And a lot of people do find mimes annoying, as you may agree. So you see these guys going through the downtown streets of Seattle in the back of a pickup with rifles.

"Then you see a couple mimes on the side, and the mimes go through all their little [routines], and they shoot one and the guy does the whole mime thing and comes up to it and it has his tears going. And I promise you that would not go. Guys shooting out of a pickup truck and down at human beings.

"So, yeah, it was a totally different thing, and everything evolved. You know, I've experienced all my life, you know, being in comedy in Los Angeles and doing shows and sketches. But, yeah, we it's quite different now.

[Pat Cashman was an early cast member.] "He was brilliant, man. He has one of my favorite sketches that probably is under the radar that I'd probably be the only one to say this. He did a sketch called, you know the Three Stooges? Sure. There's Moe and there's Larry and there's Curly. But there were three different Curlys. There was Curly, there was Joe and there was Shemp. Pat's thing, using real footage, the way he did it was like a documentary. 'Who's funnier, Curly, Joe or Shemp?' And he had all these bits.

"I'm telling you, man, that guy, that guy was just so important to that show. Because when I came back, and John and I did the national show for Comedy Central, I'd been experienced as an executive producer producing a lot of shows, and I brought in some structure and 'Here's how we're going to approach this,' because we're doing so many shows in a short time. 'We've got to really be nailed, we have to be on schedule, and we have to have a system. Otherwise, we can't do this many shows.'

"But I knew right away that Pat would not be able to do that. Pat was going to come and go on his own schedule. And he did, and he delivered, and he always came through, and that's how he worked, and boy, his percentage of success was very, very high.

[The overall success of 'Almost Live!'] "Part of the success is that we were holding court on Seattle. When you have a platform like that where you can do a lot of observational type of comedy, that's a really good target where you can say things and do things about what people are thinking and what people are seeing. I think the kind of comedy that worked best is that observational stuff. So you're making fun of Kent, and you're making fun of Ballard, and I think we did it right, too.

“One of the rules is you have to take on the big guys. You can't take on the little guys. You can take on McDonald's, but you can't take on the guy that's working there for \$10 an hour.

“I think that we did a lot of smart stuff there. I was only there five years. I will also tell you that I went on and did a lot of comedy and probably a lot of the sketch-comedy shows you probably haven't heard of. But I did one in New York called ‘The State’ for MTV, and those guys were really something. It was a very successful show, and then a couple others along the way.

“But I will tell you that the cast led by Ross and John and then Tracey and Bob Nelson and all those guys, they're as good as it gets. They just always delivered, and it was consistently good and smart, and that's really hard to do, boy, because so much television is crap and doesn't work. And it's one season and you're gone, and it's just hard, it's hard.

“When I had my staff, along the way the first thing we said is, ‘It's hard to be funny. We're going to start with that premise. It's hard to be funny.’ So it was really special what they did, what they accomplished, and that's how we got the Comedy Central show. Comedy Central looked at those sketches. They bought the sketches. They said, ‘These are really funny,’ but they didn't count on a studio show. They didn't count on John coming out and doing the monologue.

“They go, ‘Well, Jim, we can't do that.’ And I go, ‘No, this is a deal-breaker for me.’ That's how the Comedy Central version started with the sketch, because that was the deal I made with them. John's going to come out, hit his mark and do a bit, but we'll start a sketch first. So you'll get that hit right away. And, you know, it all worked. Again, the talent came through for those guys.”