

Joe Guppy

"Almost Live!" writer and performer, 1985-1989. Interviewed in person, June 19, 2024.

"I was a patrol boy in eighth grade at St. Joseph's School, between 18th and 19th on Aloha, where St. Joseph's Church is. I loved it. It was so good for my self-esteem and for the sense of service.

"One of the things that I realized in being a journalist in college was that I could go out and meet cool people that I wanted to meet and interview them, do stories on them, and it was a way to make contacts. I probably could have done more of that, but I wasn't exactly Machiavellian about it, if you will.

"I was thinking kind of the roots of "Almost Live!", like a rock band that's an overnight success but you find out they've been touring for 10 years, or the successful band, but it's made up of members of other bands prior.

"So to me, like the band, going all the way back to the Seattle University Spectator and me as a journalist and writing comedy columns in the paper. Parallel at the same time, Charles Cross and John Keister are journalists over at the University of Washington Daily doing their thing. We're both doing April Fool's editions that are causing trouble on the paper, right?

"Then I get into the theater and improv through this group called Off the Wall Players, and Keister becomes editor of the Daily first, then he's working at the Rocket. Charles and John are thick as thieves over there at the Rocket. So I'm doing comedy, improv, sketch comedy. There's three improv groups in Seattle.

"You can make these flow charts of Joe Guppy, journalist; John Keister, journalist; Rocket, Off the Wall Players, theater, then TV. We're shooting for KCTS. John gets into TV through the Johnny Renton column, which was in the Rocket. That becomes the Rocket Report on this REV, Rock Entertainment Videos. **That** show has got the Off the Wall Players doing comedy and John Keister doing the Rocket Report.

"We're not working together, but we're watching the show. I'm watching him. 'Oh, this guy's hilarious.' He's watching me. Then when 'Almost Live!' expanded in the second season, he recruited me and invited me to lunch. We met up at the Deluxe Tavern on Broadway, had a couple of burgers, and he tells me, 'You should apply to get on the show.' The rest is 'Almost Live!' history. I'm basically talking about the rock bands that we were in before we joined this 'Almost Live!' rock band. If you go to Bill Nye or anybody else, you'll see the same kind of patterns.

"Mike Boydstun, of course, was a huge figure. I remember hearing this story about Mike when he was an editor-shooter in the Midwest. The story is that he and his crew would be in a hotel room, and they'd look over, and he'd have the back of the television set taken off, and he's juggling the wires back there to make psychedelic pictures on the screen. You ask yourself, how is it that Mike Boydstun or Ralph Bevins, why are they comedy geniuses,, when they were hired to do Evening Magazine stories.

"The people who wanted to do it had the gut instinct for it. Comedy is so much about timing. It's the biggest cliche in the world, but it really is. I got into trouble one time because I'm so perfectionistic. We were working with a shooter-editor who wasn't really a comedy person and wasn't as experienced. We were editing this piece, and I'm going, 'No, it's got to be there. Come on, it's right there, cut there.' And [girlfriend, then wife] Nancy [Guppy] is like, 'Don't be mean. You can't be mean to the editors.' But it was because he just didn't have the same chops that the other guys did. I was a jerk, for sure.

"Obviously, nobody knew in the early days that 'Almost Live!' would become what it became, and obviously its format evolved in a way that you couldn't do today. I mean, if you're not a success in a few weeks, you're gone.

"I came on probably more as a writer than a performer, even though I was an experienced performer. But I think John knew that I wrote a lot of the stuff for Off the Wall Players, We had a tremendous team on Off the Wall Players, too. Really talented, really funny, good writers. I'm certainly not the only one.

"My role at 'Almost Live!' I look at as so collaborative that that's a hard question to answer. I would say as a team we collaborated to develop this style of comedy that became "Almost Live!" I think John and I shared a certain sensibility, a little darker, a little sarcastic, satiric, whatever. It probably had something to do with the 1980s and 1990s, and it probably even had something to do with the greatest cliche ever, which is grunge and all that.

"There's a certain kind of whimsical, dark humor that comes out of the Northwest, and I think you see that in "Almost Live!" development. I did a lot of on-the-street, man-on-the-street stuff — interviewing, interacting, improvising with ordinary citizens — that went well. We won a couple Emmy Awards for that work. I think that probably set the stage for that sort of stuff that was done later. Nancy did some terrific woman-on-the-street stuff after I left the show.

"I think the very first shoot I was on was called 'Alien Gumbys.' It was all John, but I think I'm definitely contributing to it big-time. That almost kind of sums up the tone or the collaboration.

"There's another piece that I really like, which was called 'Classic Conversations.' The very first 'Classic Conversation' was John and Joe. It was shot at the Cyclops coffee shop, it was our first two-camera shoot, and I love that piece. It was kind of comedy realism. It was shot like a scene out of a comedy movie. It wasn't a sketch. It wasn't like, 'Whoa, what happens if this crazy thing happens?' It was like a real conversation between two guys, and it was called 'Can I See Jill?'

"This was John's idea, apparently based on his own experience, with me asking him, 'Hey, do you mind if I take out your ex-girlfriend?' But John doesn't think they're really ex, and Joe's already actually been dating the girl. Very similar to the later one with Tracy and Nancy. There were some template pieces like that one that were repeated after I left the show, the same thing.

"Bob Nelson, Oscar-nominated screenwriter, is quoted in a video piece that Nancy did that 'Almost Live!' was the most fun job he ever had, and I've got to say, I get it. I think a lot of us feel the same way.

"I would type out my scripts, then John would show up, and his scripts were — no disrespect, the guy's awesome — but his scripts were bullet points, scrawled in his trademark handwriting. 'This happens, this happens, this happens, this happens,' and then we would talk about what the dialogue would be, and then we essentially improvised it. But it's pretty tightly improvised, because the beats are there.

"We probably shot it twice, and with the two cameras shooting different angles two or three times. Then it's put together from that, and man, I think it's a terrific piece.

[Filmed pieces in the field in the early days.] "There was considerably more than there would have been on a Letterman or Carson. Sketch humor was a major part of the formula, and some of the audience members really enjoyed that.

"We had Jerry Seinfeld on doing stand-up, or Ellen DeGeneres or Dana Carvey or Paula Poundstone, that's killer material. But there was always an idea to do sketch comedy, and we did a lot of in-studio sketches.

"So I think there was a fair amount of the comedy that came to be [later]. Not to mention the fact that John was the host on the last season that I was on before Nancy and I went to Los Angeles. So that probably leaned even more heavily into the comedy sketches. We won tons of Emmys, even back then, in that time spot [6 p.m. Sunday opposite KOMO's 'Town Meeting' with Ken Schram].

"I'm really happy with what I actually did end up doing. I don't wish I had come back to the show. I can't really imagine that. Nancy was on the show, and I was kind of helping her out behind the scenes a lot, and I'd go to all the tapings, so I still felt really plugged into the group. But as you know, I was becoming a therapist, which was great for me. But I think that, yeah, we really set the stage back then.

"There wasn't such a thing as full-time paid, but I was at full-time, really, the same as when I was in college, when I worked way more hours on the school newspaper than I did on my schoolwork. It's what you do. If you're doing something that's really what you do, as an artist, that's what you put your time into. I did a lot of commercials, radio commercials, TV commercials, to make money. So I did okay in that time period, as far as making money as a professional. I was a show business professional. But when your rent is \$175 a month in Wallingford, y'know?

"The 'Speed Walker' piece that Bill and I did. I had this idea. 'Hey, what if there was a superhero, Speed Walker.' Generally speaking, the default for any of us was, if we wrote something, we cast ourselves in it. That's Keister, [Pat] Cashman, because that's what we would do. So I was imagining myself in the tight shorts being Speed Walker, and I came in to pitch it, and then I look over, and I see Bill Nye, and I go, 'That's it, I'm out.' He was fantastic. There's eight episodes.

[Moving to L.A. for 'Not Necessarily the News.'] "Being in Hollywood gives you a broader worldview of the lay of the land. When I first got on 'Almost Live!', I assumed, 'Oh, there must be other versions. Milwaukee or whatever. I think there are some slight shadows of it. But I don't think there was anything like that.

[Why it worked in Seattle.] "There's JP Patches, and I think that's no joke. That guy was truly funny, and when he was a guest on "Almost Live!", it was like when somebody meets one of the Beatles. Like the drummer for The Police meets Ringo. If you ever saw any of his live performances, later in his career, he was hilarious. He was always on then. He was really, really talented. He was creating all these characters that are like, 'Oh, that's funny. I want to do that.' Later on, a big influence on me was Monty Python, which I shared with my dad. Al Franken says he didn't have quality time with his dad, but they had quantity time watching TV together. Actually, my dad had a great sense of humor. But we didn't really see eye to eye on everything. We saw eye to eye on the idea that Monty Python was hilarious. But the JP thing is important. See, my parents like JP, too. They thought JP was hilarious. And that must have some kind of influence. You're watching a kid's show and your mom's laughing.

"I got permission from Bill Stainton and the powers that be to do a one-hour special called 'Almost Live! Smash Hits.' It was like the best of, and it happened shortly before I left, but it was the first time that we took over that 11:30 p.m. slot. It was during the summer, and Saturday Night Live was on hiatus, yeah. That was the first time that we got permission to take that slot.

[When Ross Shafer left for L.A.] "There's a whole transition there where Ross was pulled by his own desire to be the next Joan Rivers. If Ross hadn't gone to L.A., I wouldn't have gone to L.A., because there's a connection and that happened through Scott Schaefer, the producer of 'Almost Live!', who gave my tapes to 'Not Necessarily the News.' They saw my man-on-the-street stuff, and they said, 'This is what we want.'

"Sometimes I tell people, 'If I have a choice to be a celebrity or not, to be recognized or not, I know what that's like,' because I would be recognized from 'Almost Live!' a couple times a week, just walking around. When I came back from L.A., I was no longer recognized, and that was fine with me. I preferred it. There's nothing wrong. Being with Nancy for decades, she's so good at being recognized. She's just fantastic at it. And I always go, 'Better you than me,' because I just don't like it that much.

"But the point is that I think the show had a certain elevated profile in the community before we went to 11:30 p.m. Ross Shafer was certainly known. He was definitely known.

"What brought us back to Seattle was 'Almost Live!' because Nancy was given an offer to come back for the Comedy Central the summer of 1992. When 'Almost Live!' got its first run on Comedy Central, they were short females, and they knew Nancy was as good as she is. So they asked her to come back for the summer. I stayed in L.A. for the summer and did L.A. stuff. We went back and forth a little bit, but when the fall came along, they asked her to stay on the staff.

"We were on the phone, and we got to create so much material. Make no mistake, I never wrote a single sketch for 'Almost Live!' after I left, but there was some collaboration, just as Nancy always collaborated with me on anything that I did. We just consult with each other. That's what we do.

"I started grad school in 1996 and I was a psychotherapist until 2015. I always continued to do improv shows and different creative stuff, and I wrote the memoir ['My Fluorescent God'], so I was still doing creative activities during that time.

"My main gig is a creative consultant. I've got a number of clients doing a number of different things. I am very much a one-on-one personal coach. One of my clients just had his project in the Seattle International Film Festival. I'm like a counselor for your creative project. I have a private practice to counsel you. I don't consider myself retired at all. I'm loving working on these projects with people, and I'm actually going to do an improv show, an Agatha Christie improv show in the fall. It's great. It's down at the Market Theatre. Somebody pointed out to me, 'Whenever anybody does something with Agatha Christie, it's popular,' and I thought, 'You know, you're right.' I'd better be good because this probably will be a popular show. I better start practicing.

[Favorite sketches.] "It's the ones that people always talk about. So, 'The Bead Store.' It's a man-on-the-street thing down in the Pike Place Market. It's Keister's favorite piece of mine. I'm sure his favorite piece is one of his own. Another one is '1970s Clothes,' which is a man-on-the-street thing. This is done in the 1980s, but I've got on disco clothes.

"An actor friend of ours who went to Juilliard, a trained actor, asked me once, 'Well, how do you prepare that character?' I just went, 'What? I just did it. You know, you just do it.' I think Nancy has the same reaction. I think comedy people tend to just do it. I don't know why that is, really. We don't necessarily work on the character in any way. Somehow we just have it.

"I think there's something about improv. Nancy has said that I'm my best self when I'm doing improv or teaching because in both cases I'm not worried about myself. I'm not thinking about myself. I'm in that moment. So when I'm doing those man-on-the street things, I'm really trying to serve the people I'm talking to, strangely enough.

"That's probably why they work the way they do. There are other forms of that kind of thing — which I hate, by the way — where they go out and they try to annihilate the people that they're talking to or trip them up, lay traps, and I'm not doing that at all. I'm really collaborating comedically with the people I'm talking to. Improvisers talk about kind of a Zen state or losing the ego.

"You have to do that because the classic thing about stand-up comedians is that sometimes they can't do improv because they're trying to score points with the jokes, whereas an improviser has to be ready to just take it where it goes. The idea is to make your partner look good. I'm trying to make my partner look good and my partner's trying to make me look good. That's the way it happens.

"The other sketches that people talk about include the Dr. Seuss book review called 'Book Look.' Basically, it's this highfalutin, erudite professor. The joke is that you're doing Dr. Seuss.

"There's a difference in the kinds of humor. Andrew Dice was just totally offensive to anybody, and that was his gig, but you wouldn't want to sit through that, whereas the "Almost Live!" sensibility is to poke and fun at all kinds of segments of people. It's really, both literally and in a general sense, to poke and fun at all kinds of ourselves in Seattle.

[Neighborhood humor] "Capitol Hill was always made fun of as kind of this arty, gothy type thing. Which I did think was funny because when I grew up there it wasn't like that, but I was definitely part of the arty scene, music and theater scene of Capitol Hill. So I appreciated that about my home neighborhood.

[High-Five'n White Guys.] "People are always asking me, 'Are you one of the "High-Five'n White Guys?' 'No, no.' It's not making fun of black people who high-five. It's making fun of white people who are attempting to be hip or think they're cool and they're awkward and goofy. So it's not punching down, it's punching up. I mean, white people are the people in power that need to be taken down a little bit.

"There's another one called 'The Ineffectual Middle Management Suck-Ups,' which is not racial at all. But it's taking the same cadre of people, people who are elevated for the wrong reason. It's taking them down a bit. So I just don't see where that's hurting any marginalized group to have the 'High-Five'n White Guys.' It's almost like, 'So we can't have anything to do with this topic at all? Even if it's actually poking fun at the dominant group that needs to be taken down a peg? Still no, huh?'