

Lauren Weedman

'Almost Live!' performer and writer, 1998-1999. Interviewed via Zoom, June 18, 2024.

"It is the very first TV job I ever had. It's what started everything. I mean, it's why, maybe I should really be angry at 'Almost Live!' because I have some regrets. But I wouldn't have gotten 'The Daily Show.' 100%. I got 'The Daily Show' from an 'Almost Live!' tape because I played a news reporter on a segment, and then I used that. When I offered the job, I was, I was working in Entros. It was a gaming place in Westlake. It was cool. A bunch of actors worked there, and I got the job and people that I worked with were such Stranger-reading hipster types. They were all like, 'Almost Funny? Good luck with that one. That show's awful. It's not funny, they're not very funny. It's so dumb, it's so old.'

"I didn't know the show. I just knew John, and I'd done some guesting on it. I'm not a sketch comedy person, but it seemed great to me, like it's a job. And I like John a lot. Then I had one friend who said, 'You should do the job. If you get offered, are you stupid? You do the job. You'll get tape. You'll have experience on television, and you'll have a chance at whatever.' Then I got the job, and the whole time I had it, all those people were constantly, 'If they ever need somebody to play a waiter, I'd do it.' Everybody wanted a part of it. 'Of course, you all love it,' acting like you're too cool for it.

"I was a theater person — theater, theater. I did solo theater, and television was not, I'm sure I always wanted to do that, but it was not my main focus. I had the dreams of an actor because I wanted to do what I could do. I auditioned for a short film when I got to Seattle, and it was written and directed, he wrote it with Tamara Paris, 'That Night.' It was a John Keister film.

"Everybody was going to audition. I got an agent when I got to Seattle, so I did want to do whatever as an actor, wanted to make money and expand my experience. I just moved from Amsterdam, and I was doing an internship at the Empty Space Theater. Then I got an agent to a postscope and then she was 'Hey, we got you an audition for John Keister.' And everybody's, 'Oh, you're doing the John Keister.' And everyone was saying his name, like it matters. I didn't have a TV because I was such an Amsterdam, I'm going from Amsterdam to Seattle. Everyone's TV is still in the box. They don't care.

"When I auditioned for the movie, they kept dropping his name and then I'm shooting this, and he himself is sort of 'I'm a king.' Like everybody is worshiping. Through him is how I sort of got into it, but I wasn't thinking of sketch comedy.

"I didn't do that much writing. I don't think. I tried, but I wasn't good about writing for other people. That was my weak point. But they came to see me do solo show. I had a solo show I was doing at the Rep [Seattle Repertory Theater], and they saw it. I can write for myself, but I wasn't great about writing. I did a couple of sketches. I got a couple on that were mostly just me talking.

"Nancy Guppy, I did some sketch about the unemployment office, and during rehearsal, Nancy skipped her line or something, and I was, 'Oh, Nancy, that's you,' and she was, 'Oh, OK. Let me see. Did I skip? Let's see. Lauren, Lauren, Lauren, Lauren. Oh yeah, oh, sorry, yeah, here I am.' I was like, 'OK, OK.' And then she took me aside actually, and gave me a little, 'You have to write for other people. You can't just be writing for yourself.' And I was, 'Well, let me tell you about this job. It sucks. I can't write for you people.'

"I didn't come from that world of, in fact, I was very much an anti-theater sports, anti-comedy improv because I'm theater, I'm acting theater. I want it to be more of that kind of stuff.

"But it was an amazing year. It got me ready for dealing with other comedy environments or — not dealing with, but understanding comedy environments and the competition of it all. I was in the last season, because they said I was the reason some of the letters that came in. They were, 'I'll tell you what's wrong with the show. Get rid of the new people.' Joel McHale was the other new person. Joel and I, they were going to infuse it with new young blood. It was going to bring in the [alternative newspaper] Stranger-lovers.

"And then we got on there, and it still died. It was the last year. I was there when the people from KING came in and made the official announcement. I remember thinking, 'Oh, cool. I got a good year of work, you know?' And to them it was the empire, it was huge, it was the city. I felt it, but not nearly [like other people]. I was just an interloper for one year, where I got such great things from it.

"I don't know how much I improved the show. I don't know if I really belonged in that environment or not, but it was certainly amazing luck. I bragged about it all the time where I was, 'I was on "Almost Live!" Anybody's from Seattle, 'Oh, then you may [proceed].'

"I learned how to, well, I was on a set, a television set, a weekly live TV program. I got a lot out of it. I am more of a lone wolf. I wish I had a tattoo, and I could just be this guy [she bares upper arm], but I do solo theaters. I'm a solo artist, in a way. I'm an actor, but I'm not even in plays with other people, I'm in plays with myself. So to be around that environment, and male comedians, they're different. They're not nearly as extreme 'Almost Live!', these guys were low-key compared to folks I ended up working with in Hollywood. I learned so much about working on a camera, just being on camera.

[The uniqueness of 'Almost Live!'] "I was told that when I got there, this is the only one in the country, and I didn't know Seattle that well. I didn't know. I'm like, 'This is a real insider show.' It's like Blue Chicago. I remember I was living in Amsterdam and Blue Chicago showed up and started doing comedy about being a tourist in Amsterdam. I remember thinking, 'Well, who wants to, why would you come to Amsterdam and want to have yourself talked about? Don't you want to go see some Dutch theater?' People didn't want to do that. The same thing with Seattle, people laughing at a local show about the city, and that's amazing.

"I got what a big deal that was and how unique that was and how it was also able to showcase that amazing sweet spot of the 1990s, of the music and being able to have musicians on and have guests on like that.

"That village thing of this little show, and in Seattle, it felt much more of a town than it does now. I don't know. I haven't lived there for a long time, but people keep complaining about Jeff Bezos all over it. It felt like this, I'm trying to think of another word besides 'nerd central.' It's that people who loved it, boy, do they love it. It was such a bonding thing to have your own. And then they had a little hit of Comedy Central. It's just hometown.

"I guess it's just like with sports, and people get so excited. 'Our team! Our team!' That's how it was. Like comedy dudes. I've been around them all the time. It's people who love comedy and love film and love the arts so take the nerd away and take the dude away. There's some female too. But it was an amazing thing to be a part of such a cool thing at that time.

[Sketches you could or couldn't do today.] 'I've written a couple of books, and I was trying to steal from myself because I'm writing something else, and I thought, 'Maybe I've already written about this. I'll go back to something, and maybe I can save myself some time.' I go back, and I was reading this book that I was fairly proud of, at least parts of it, and I'm, 'Oh my God, I could not read this aloud someplace. I would be in big trouble. I'm not careful at all. It was not carefully stepping because comedy was still just, you barrel through, everybody gets hurt. That's the arena.

"Not everybody gets hurt, but everybody's off limits is my point. Or maybe everybody gets hurt, but you just barrel forward and the idea that you're going to hit things and, and talk is going to be, it's going to happen.

"There are so many you could not do. But the other thing, and John would also tease me a lot when I was on the show — and Jon Stewart said the same thing to me, so it's definitely me, not them — 'Boy, you definitely act like you don't really care about this show.' Not 'care about it.' That's too extreme. I act sort of nonchalant. Basically he's like, 'We've given you the best job you could ever have,' and I'm still like, 'That was dumb.' I was just cynical about it.

"The women stuff, men in sketch comedy, it's nine guys, one girl, and she plays all the girl [parts], so that environment is there — not just there, it's everywhere. Of course, that's in the comedy too.

"Of course, they could not do all sorts of things. But comedy was doing that everywhere. They weren't unique to it. It wasn't like they were the shockers.

"That's what I learned too is after I got from 'Almost Live!' to go into New York and being in LA and all these comedy environments. 'The Daily Show' is the most similar to that. I was also a writer, a creator, on camera, but I realized how, that's just comedy. They weren't any worse. They didn't have any black people on 'The Daily Show.' There was no black people in Seattle. I mean, there was. I dated this guy, a black man in Seattle, but even he would say, as a black man, 'There's nobody here.'

[Memorable sketches] "The unemployment one. I had an amazing time doing that because it was the only time I got to fully do what I like to do, which is to dominate or just to do get my humor out as much as I want to. I felt like I couldn't act. It was all about just delivering a joke. And I wanted to act, I wanted to be in an acting more and not just I'm doing a joke. So I felt like it was the one time where I felt, 'I fly!'

"I remember John calling me after it aired, and all he talked about were the pants I was wearing. 'Well, Lauren, everybody's talking about those gold pants.' 'That's what they're talking about? OK, I'll take it.' But that one I really enjoyed.

"I guess I do have some control things. I really enjoyed watching it because I remember the character gets really mean to John, and he's so good at, 'OK, OK.' That was definitely our dynamic. He and I've always really liked each other, and then he will always, to this day, he'll be 'OK, OK, OK, back off, Lauren, back. Oh God, you're rough. Oh, you're a ball buster.' And I'm like, 'Yeah, you are, too. I'm just in a lady form.'

"That one I liked, and I liked the one where it's Pat Cashman is a reporter. It's very short, but he's like, 'I'm reporting from the scene of this awful wreck and these casualties, awful, there were two casualties, reporting live.' I just play somebody who saw them recording, I was walking by, and I have a t-shirt on that says 'Slut.' I was, 'Hi!' And then he lets me say, 'Reporting from the scene of this tragic, awful thing.' I can't say it right.

"And that to me was really fun. I remember being so happy to get to act with Pat because Pat was really good, and he got into it. I never talked. I spoke to that man afterwards when he did a podcast. But he would come in every day, go right to his office, not talk to anybody, barely at the pitch stuff, because he was just out doing his own [thing]. He had a radio show and never talked to me, just didn't talk to anybody. He was busy. Then when I got to act with them, I was, 'Right, OK. This guy's a good actor. He's into it.' So that was fun.

"I did a movie review that I got to also do by myself. And the movie review is a review of a horror show movie. In the middle of it, I get freaked out thinking about it and have a meltdown. So mine was all about emotional stuff, wanting to show more. And that clip of the movie review is what got me 'The Daily Show.' They showed that to Jon Stewart. I look like a reporter, and I act like a reporter. That's what got me that thing.

"But I have jokes, two that I quote, but I have three. One is too offensive. You can't do it anymore. But I always tell this whenever 'Almost Live!' comes up. The three jokes that I remember laughing so hard. One was, Bob Nelson wrote this one, it was a parody of the book, 'The Top 10 Habits of Highly Effective People.' And his was 'The Top 10 Habits of Highly Mediocre People. The top habit of a highly mediocre person is calling out 'Good enough' in the middle of a project and walking away. And that has stayed with me. I've quoted that throughout my life. 'We're done.' That's so good.

"We had another one where we had the setup of a joke. This is what you couldn't tell anymore. It's about weight, but we get setups for the joke. So we had to finish them, which I thought was going to be fun because I love writing. So hard, so hard. And it was Cinnabon has changed its colors from green and blue to white and pink, and you had to fill out why, and the joke that got in was, it was either John's or Bob's, but it was 'Changes colors to white and pink, the favorite colors of fat people.' I thought that was simple, perfect. Of course, you can't do that now.

"The other one was, I don't know if this was when we had the Seattle SuperSonics cheerleaders come in — which was also amazing, they could get anybody in Seattle, they were, 'Just call them!' and anybody would do it. After John's news thing, he ended the news, and he goes, 'Well, that sure was a funny joke. And here at 'Almost Live!', joking is important to us. What's more important is reading, and here to celebrate Literacy Week are the Seattle SuperSonics cheerleaders.' And they come in and they're super sexy. It goes bump, bump, and they do the most just sexy, sexy, over the top, and at the very end, they go, 'Read a book!' In rehearsal, they did that, and everybody burst out laughing at 'Read a book!' I was in the hallway as the cheerleaders were leaving rehearsal, and they were all just, 'Why were they laughing? What's so funny? Like, what are they?' And I was, 'Oh my God, they don't even know. They thought they were brought in to do a cheer and to say, Read a Book for Literacy Week.' That's the one I was more laughing at than with. But those are the jokes I remember.

[Distinction between mean and kind humor.] "Oh yeah, they're not mean, those guys, they're not mean. I'm way meaner. My stuff is more biting and the stuff I write about, but they're not. In fact, that was a problem for me, is that I wanted to do more self-deprecating stuff, but no, I never think of them as being mean. They were very sweet, and they all are sweet people. Sweet boys, sweet men.

"I'm 54. I'm not going to be retiring for a long, time. I've never retired. If you're an actor, you never retire. That's what I always say. People say, 'How are you?' And I'm, 'I got a job.'

"When I look at my career, I feel like I've been a part of so many cool shows. I always think I don't work enough, but man, do I seem to get in with the right folks. So that makes me happy. From 'Almost Live!' to 'The Daily Show,' and when I got 'The Daily Show' job, Bill Stainton sent me flowers, which I thought was great, because I didn't know if they were frustrated with me on that. Very supportive, and I was so grateful.

"I can't believe they chose me. I think they really chose wrong, but it's over. Can't do anything about it."