

Nancy Guppy

"Almost Live!" writer and performer, 1986-1989, 1992-1999. Interviewed in person, May 27, 2024.

"I always call it the gift that keeps on giving, 'Almost Live!,' because I get recognized a lot. And it's not always old people. It's also 'I watched it with my parents.' 'How old were you when you started watching it?' '8.' Or '10.' It "still has a long reach.

"KING's very supportive of this. The new guy at KING, oversees New Day and Evening, whatever that job is. He's a good guy. He said, 'Oh yeah, we're very much supportive.'

"I started in 1986, I believe. Joe was on it, and he would bring me on to do bits once in a while. I joined the staff in fall 1988 as writer/performer. On the show until spring 1989. That's when we moved to Los Angeles. So my first solid position on the show was fall of 1988. I came back in January 1992. That summer Comedy Central was going to do 65 shows of 'Almost Live!,' so I met with John, and John said, 'Would you like to be a part of it?' 'Yes, but I want to be a writer, not just performer.' So he got that OK'd, and I joined the staff that summer of 65 shows. It was a combination of old material and half was writing new material, so it was just an intensive experience. They asked me to stay on after that with the local show, so we did that.

[Fall 1988] "That was John's first year as the host. John himself will talk about how he basically tried to step into what Ross [Shafer] had done. He wore the suit, but that was not John's deal at all. He interviewed people, but it was not John's thing at all, because he was the goofy, smart, quirky sidekick, right? So he was trying to do this main, middle-of-the-road kind of thing. And that was my first year. We were all trying to figure out what we were doing without Ross. It was still 6 p.m. on Sunday, which was not exactly the comedic hour. It was opposite 'Town Meeting,' which was a great show. Ken Schram.

"When we left in spring 1989, Joe had gotten hired with 'Not Necessarily the News' as an on-camera person, and we were hired as a writing team together. John was very sad and mad at us. 'You're jumping ship.' So we left. I think it was that August that John was able to do three summer late-night specials because SNL was on hiatus. They ran those, and it was good enough that KING had enough power at that time as an affiliate to tell NBC, the mother ship, 'We're going to push SNL half an hour, and we're going to keep that 11:30 slot.' Now that would never happen.

"So I was there for that first year when honestly, the show was this close to getting canceled because it was not good. There were some good people on the staff. I was OK. I was really green and didn't really know what I was doing and learning how to do it, so I was certainly not in the greatest shape for the role.

[When came back, it was literally day and night.] "Day and night, yes, in terms of when it was on air. So being in L.A., I learned how to write. I didn't even know it, but that's what happened. We were on a lot of different shows, most of which weren't great, but you were in writers' rooms, you were writing scripts, you were on deadline, you learned how to do this very intensive thing. So when I came back, I had a much bigger skill set of a writer. I didn't know, because I'd never written without Joe before, I'd never been on a staff without Joe, so I didn't know how am I going to be alone here, and I was really freaked before the first pitch meeting that summer for the Comedy Central thing. I had some stuff, I went in, I pitched it, there was enough laughter in a couple bits, and it was 'OK, I know what I'm doing.' I could never have done that a couple years prior. There's no way. You only get good when you're doing something, sometimes unbeknownst to yourself.

"And there was Tracey there. Before, there had been different women along the way. I was kind of the solo woman for a while, and then she was the solo woman and a great component of the show. So that was an interesting dynamic, too, of figuring out the two of us, how we were going to work together, and we were really a great combination because we are so different. We had such different skill sets, but we really complemented each other really well.

[When came back] "I felt like I had something to say. That's always been a driver for me. It's not so much that 'I've got an important thing to say.' It's not that. It just the ideas were coming fast and furious to me. I always had a notebook, writing a premise down. There was a bit called 'Nature Walk with Chuck.' I had this idea about this amoral person who doesn't care about nature at all but has a show about it. What a great contrast. That's an insane premise. It's just ripe for comedy. Matt Smith we cast as the perfect person for that. I just had a lot of ideas, and I was very excited about it. I was in a creative flow.

"The show was already doing well when I came back from LA in 1992. They were finding their way big-time. They were becoming a thing that people thought was funny and tuned into at 11:30 on Saturday night. So I wasn't walking into this sinking ship. I left a sinking ship, and when I came back the ship was not sinking at all. So that was pretty set. It was like this free-for-all.

"One of the great things about 'Almost Live!' is, everyone had an ego, because everyone does have an ego in the world, we have to, but it was never you had to prove yourself and you were going to be beaten down, and someone was going to attack you. I mean, there was that in a healthy sort of way. But it was 'Basically, we want you to do good work.' Stainton was that way as the executive producer. John certainly was just so, so generous. He only wanted people to do great work. It was never about him. Ever.

"So that whole tone made it a really fun place to work. I think I would have drowned at SNL. Let's just assume that I could have been on the show, which is a gigantic assumption because I don't think I would have ever made it there. But I would never have been able to handle that. It would have been way too much pressure. Way more cutthroat, and I would have been too insecure, for sure.

[It seemed 'Almost Live' was an ensemble. There wasn't a pecking order.] "No, the competition would have been, honestly, more with myself. 'Am I doing this right? Am I delivering the goods?' You knew who was really good at certain things. That's super-obvious. Some people got a little more leeway than others. That's typical, that's not abnormal. But it was yours to succeed at. That's how I felt about it. [Rising tide floats all boats.] No question about it. Because you're not trying to hold onto your own little fiefdom, you're not trying to protect your own. You want to do great work, and you want the whole thing to be great, and when the leadership is that, that that's what it's all about, then that's the key, because all the little minions can be out squirreling around and be all weird and stuff, but as long as the management piece, for lack of a better way to put it, is solid, and the foundation is like, 'Hey, let's all do the work.'

[Came through when Stainton came in.] "Absolutely. He hired me. I wasn't there in a permanent way when it was Dana Dwinell [as producer] and whoever else was before that. But the show was trying to find its way for so long. And Ross, to that point, he was a force. He had a really strong opinion, and it was his show. The way it was going to be was his thing. So he had the producer, Dana, she was definitely, she controlled the ship. That's not a bad thing at all. But then Stainton had a really good comedic mind and knew how to manage people.

"I was a late bloomer, and I didn't know what I was or who I was. I had no idea. In eighth grade I did a sketch comedy thing for the annual talent show thing at Catherine Blaine junior high, where the little sketch group did little sketches between the bigger acts. I remember getting a laugh then. I didn't think, 'I want to do comedy.' I just remember it lodged with me. I liked the response. It might have had something to do with a shoe store, but I can't remember.

"I was irreverent. I was probably comedic in a way. I would say things a little outside of the box, and I guess I have a pretty good sense of humor, and I have a good sense of timing. That was always true about me, but putting that toward a career, no, I never thought about it. I only got into 'Almost Live!' because I was working at Nordstrom as a corporate credit office-worker, hated it, loved my workplace friends but didn't like the work. I was never going to be promoted up the ladder. I wasn't the management type. So I took an acting class at Seattle Central Community College in 1984 and kept working my straight job. But that was the pivot point, and then I met Joe, and he was getting involved with 'Almost Live!' He had a background in sketch comedy with Off the Wall Players, this great group of improvisers and writers. So that brought me into 'Almost Live!', which brought me into performing, which brought me into writing, but it was this very organic process. I never saw myself as a stand-up, ever. People call me a comedian. I just kind of go, 'OK.' I don't see that.

[Ross was a stand-up. Sketch is different.] “Right. They did some sketch with him, it was really good stuff, and it was predominantly him coming out, dadada, band, interviewing Jerry Seinfeld who was coming to town, whoever, Ellen DeGeneres, all these great people coming through town. It was a talk show that was fun stuff.

[Transition due to getting out of the studio and doing the film pieces.] “Right. They did some of that before. They did ‘Ballard Vice.’ Ross really loved John because John brought this gritty edge. But the key to John was, he had to take that suit off, and it couldn’t be an interview show because it just wasn’t his jam, at all. But he is a funny guy. He worked for the Rocket, he wrote for the Daily, he did REV, that show on KING. He’s got a great facility with language and a really great rhythm, so he loved coming out and doing his jokes. We wrote the John Report jokes, and he wrote his monologue with help from Bob, that’s what I’m guessing. But he loved doing that, then it’s ‘Here’s the first bit, here’s the second,’ everything was just sketch at that point. And it was a half hour, not even a half hour, 23-24 minutes. Perfect, that’s perfect.

[John loved the editing room.] “It wasn’t Ross’s thing, exactly. And that’s one of the most fun parts of the job. The writing, then the editing, then you go into post-production, everything was analog, of course. It was so fun because you’d get to control it, really tightly. It was down to, you’re going to cut one frame, add one frame, it makes all the difference in the world. That kind of minutiae, I’m very anal-retentive, was very satisfying to me. And working with really great shooter-editors.

[Conflated into ‘The Art Zone’ for you on the Seattle Channel.] “Absolutely. All of those skills I brought, I just kept building on and applying it. And I try to find ways to bring little humorous moments into ‘Art Zone.’ It’s obviously way straighter, for lack of a better way to put it. But all of that is why I have a career. That is absolutely why I have a career. ‘Almost Live!’ is the starting point for everything.

[And to many people, your persona.] “Oh, absolutely. That’s what I mean, it opens doors still. It’s like a good standing. And even though, my God, we weren’t always funny, we missed the mark, I missed the mark many, many, many times, but in the overall meta, it was a feel-good thing, and people felt like it was theirs. They knew it. Like ‘Oh, I know Kent.’ ‘I know Ballard.’ ‘I know Mercer Island,’ whatever, ‘Fremont.’ It was this communal thing. There’s no internet, there’s no [smart]phone, there’s no social media, so it’s very much in real time, unless you record it on VHS. You’d talk about it at, as they say, the water cooler. That communal thing was huge.

[You had to watch ‘Almost Live!’ at a certain time or you’d miss it. Whereas now, it’s on demand.] “And you can watch one thing vs. the whole show. The way it was done, parsed out, it’s a way more individual experience. I’m not saying that’s good or bad, but I look back on this ‘Almost Live!’ era, the communal piece is gigantic, it’s important. And that’s why there’s an exhibit at MOHAI. That’s why. Because of the way it really had a broad reach across the whole Northwest, and it wouldn’t now.

[It’s communal for the creators, the studio audience and the viewers.] “Absolutely. We’re all part of it, and people like to be part of it.

[‘Louie Louie’] “Maybe Joe was on the show at that point. If I was, I would have been in the milieu. Huge. They went to Olympia. It was ‘Louie Louie’ Day. Yeah. Fantastic, fantastic. So great, so great.

[Space Needle collapsing.] “I was on the cast then. I was on the show. That was Tracey’s first ‘Almost Live!’ bit, and she was an actor. The important thing [in the collapse prank] was the people couldn’t be known. It had to look real. We were so furious before the piece aired that someone at KING insisted that they put it was April Fool’s in a chyron crawl. We were like, ‘That ruins it!’ Well, thank God that was there because that was a debacle. We left the station that night. The phone lines are lit up. They shut down Harborview, the lines had been shut down, they’re getting inundated. At the Space Needle. ‘My God, my granddaughter’s there, dadada.’ And we thought, ‘Are you kidding me? What?’ People didn’t [know it was a spoof], because we did it so real. ‘We interrupt this ...’ ‘Special Report,’ everything about it. In retrospect, of course, people thought it was real. And then John had to come on the next week and give an apology. ‘We are very sorry.’ Because that could have canceled the show.

[‘Bummer about the Needle.’] Anybody who believed it would have been outraged about how cavalier. [he was]. Oh, that’s so funny. It went national. It was in all sorts of papers across the country.

[What made sketches work? “It’s a combination. If you’re talking about the local stuff, I wrote ‘East Side Story,’ a few other things that were very local, but for me that was never the funniest stuff. I was always more about the weird relational things or something super absurd. But I think, fundamentally, the idea has to be funny, even if it’s just a local thing, even if it’s a game show, and the premise is some local thing. It has to be funny, the jokes have to be well-written and funny, and the pace of it has to be done correctly.

“That said, I think the hook of local stuff, people were ready to laugh maybe a little more than they would be if it was just some premise that wasn’t based in any sort of reality that they knew. But there are plenty of local things we did that were just not great, weren’t good, weren’t that funny.

“I wrote a bit about [sexologist/sociologist] Pepper Schwartz. It was a bad, it was a shitty piece of writing. It was mean, and one of the things I’ve always said, ‘Anything is fair game.’ But if it’s mean or you’re punching down, I just lose interest. I’m not going to say you can’t do it. Of course, you can do it, and I think Andrew Dice Clay way back in the day is a great example. He was hideous. He was horrible. He was misogynistic, he said horrible things about women. I would never say ‘Oh, you can’t do that.’ I would just say, ‘That’s not interesting at all. That’s cheap. That’s stupid.’ So in this bit we were making fun of Pepper, and it wasn’t getting many laughs, I remember that, and I remember feeling crummy about it, and I actually wrote her a letter. I think I said, ‘I’m really sorry. This was a stupid bit, based on dumb, whatever little piece of information I was pulling, I’m sorry.’ It was not kind, and it was not funny. I don’t even remember the premise, but it was just dumb.

“There’s plenty of other ones, I’m sure, that didn’t quite hit.

[Could the show could be done today? You were part of a sketch on political correctness, but it’s way milder compared to today’s DEI. How about Pat Cashman’s ‘Roscoe’s Oriental Rug Emporium?’] “Even though that’s a word that Asian countries use, I don’t think you could probably say that.

“Get this: At one of our meetings with the MOHAI people, ‘The Lame List’ came up. I just zipped my mouth. John started popping off, and I thought, ‘John that’s enough because this is a world that’s real, the cultural carefulness, the censorship.’ I find it to be insane, completely. Comedy can never be controlled, never be corralled, it cannot, it can’t, or it’s going to be compromised.

“So, the show could be done, because the writers, the people who do it now would be of that ilk, would be in that milieu, much like SNL. But the stuff we did, a lot of the stuff we did, no.

[‘Ballard Driving Academy’] “Is it that we’re just too sensitive, that we can’t talk? I can’t stand it. Comedy is all about always making fun of something. Hopefully it’s smart enough, y’know what I mean? That goes back to you don’t want to punch down. I don’t want it to be mean.

[So was it mean in the main?] “The Pepper Schwartz bit yes. But in the main, no, absolutely not. The only thing we were doing is what’s funny. Now someone could say, ‘You’re a bunch of white people, you’re privileged, you’re coming from that perspective,’ and it’s like ‘Yep. Where else am I coming to come from? Where else is my perspective going to be?’ Can we be more aware? Can we be more inclusive and all of that stuff? I guess so, but I feel like real comedy people, and I don’t care what gender, what color you are, it’s all going to come down to what’s funny, and they’re not going to care about the other thing.

[Clara Berg at MOHAI says neighborhoods were proud of the geographical humor of ‘Almost Live!’] “They loved it. Renton? Kent? Lynnwood? They loved it. Of course, these are stereotypes. What we were doing is taking the stereotype and blowing it up. That’s all we were doing. And yeah, I think they liked to be defiant and but also embrace it. [Show would not be same today.] “You just find your irreverence. You just do it in different ways, I guess. It doesn’t make sense that it couldn’t be done.

[Which ones could be done today?] “I’d say the majority of them could be done. I did a bit, the only thing wrong with it was it was 15 seconds too long, which is always the thing you learn: ‘Cut it,’ brevity. It was called ‘Fat Ass Jeans,’ and it was men. I love taking concepts that typically you would apply to a woman, like ‘These pants make my butt look too big.’ That’s a stereotypical comment a woman would make. So OK, let’s do it with men. These guys are wearing these jeans, and they’re pillowed, big pillows, and the voiceover is ‘Everything evolves, especially your butt.’ They’re running around in a park, they’re having a great time together. Could we do that today? [With a questioning tone.] I think so. [Tentative.] I think so. [Conclusive.] I think so. [Would the trans community object?] Maybe. Who knows. Yeah, who knows?

"I personally think you can't be constantly running it through that filter or you're just going to shut yourself down creatively. The more rules and censorship you apply or feel being applied, the less free and loose you are. That's why in writers' rooms, like in 'Almost Live!' and SNL, what's said in those rooms stays in those rooms. It's for the table. For the table. But you have to be able to do that, and then maybe you say something so completely off the charts, insane, funny but completely no way. But that can be the point when you can then think of 'How can we get that funny thing, but in a way that's going to be not so offensive?' But you have to be able to say it. You can't not be able to say it. That is fact. But it's become so controlling, so sensitive, so tight, and whatever happened to 'Hey, free speech. Let's deal with it. Someone said something. Let's deal with it.'

[If you don't learn from history, you're doomed to repeat it.] "If you pretend it never happened, that sure is dangerous. Just look at history, it becomes it never really happened, that horrible genocide, it never happened. Y'know what I mean? You can't deny the reality.

[Whether there were similar shows in other cities?] "No, there weren't. If I remember right, this was not done in other places. Maybe improv shows, and since that time, but not on commercial TV.

[Brave to do it right before SNL.] "Dorothy Bullitt, she didn't love the show, but I think she tolerated it. She allowed that to happen, and she had the power to talk to the brass of NBC, the big guys, and say, 'We're doing this.' Station managers helped tremendously, and the station was private. No stockholders were breathing down their neck. It was, 'Well what do they want to do?' And it was a printing press for money, anyway. The station made a ton of money. 'Almost Live!' in its time did really well.

[What does it say about a city that allows itself be poked fun at? Why did Seattle welcome this?] "The city hadn't experienced the influx of southern California, and Microsoft hadn't quite hit yet. That whole engine wasn't revved up with massive people coming in. It was more of a set population. People weren't constantly leaving and going, so there was a certain familiarity and homogenous quality, to a degree. The population wasn't constantly in flux with massive growth and massive buildings being built. It just had a more steady energy.

"So then you've got to bring in the players, and you've got Ross Shafer, who was a stand-up comedian. Jim Sharp was a good producer. Then you've got KING. They are a private company, and they are really into local programming. Somebody there knew us and said, 'Sure, give this a try.' So there was a lot of luck. Ross is interested, he's ambitious enough, he's driven enough, he's got some good people he works with, and there's an opportunity. In fact, it wasn't even Ross at first. It was somebody else. I don't know the exact derivation of the show, but I don't think it was Ross. So all these stars had to align, and there was more freedom and more latitude for things to happen. You could get a show on KING-TV. It wasn't as big of a deal. It was just the right time.

"It's a liberal city, for sure. It's a smart city. It's an educated city. And the material was good. It was funny. They wouldn't have laughed if it wasn't. Or they laughed enough. They let go of the stuff that wasn't. They forgave the crap. And it had a lot of time to find its feet. It was not 'You've got to make it in three shows, two months, whatever, or boom, you're gone.' Much like 'Seinfeld.' They got a lot of time to find their way. There was a lot of, 'Yeah, yeah, sure, give that a try.' That doesn't exist anymore.

[Blockbuster syndrome.] "No one's great from the get-go. Nobody. You can't be.

['Almost Live!' title] "It was live to tape, and it aired live. We were rolling by about 9 p.m. Those cameras had to get to the other studio next door for news at 11, so it was a very hard deadline of when we had to start rolling tape. Eventually cameras moved robotically. [Appeal that live is the best, but we're almost there.] My mother always mistakenly called it 'Almost Alive.' She got it wrong all the time. The graphic is great. I love the energy of that. The exclamation point. Really good graphic, super strong.

[In a Seattle IQ game-show sketch, there was the question, 'What neighborhood has experienced the most density lately?' You answer, 'Greg Nickels.'] "That's hilarious. Because he got big? Making a fat joke. I think with public figures, political figures you could get away with it. Would we get away with it now? I don't know if I would. It's kind of cheap.

[Did you talk of the need for more diversity?] “We did, and there was a point. David Scully was on the show for a year or so, an African American writer and actor. Victor Morris, good comedic actor. We had a woman on for a while, too [Rhonda Watson]. But I would say that’s absolutely an area where we failed. We didn’t see the necessity of it in a way that [today] you absolutely would have for sure. We were lily white, and one of us would have had to quit and leave to bring in someone permanently, and no one did, except for Ed Wyatt, and he left early on. Bill Nye left for bigger better things. Joel McHale was on with John. But anyone who came on for a long period of time was white, and I would say that was an area where we were blind. That was an era, it was no excuse, but we didn’t see. It’s like they have to hit all of these boxes, and if they don’t, then we can’t bring them on because it’s too small a staff to have someone who’s not going to ‘pull his weight.’ David pulled his weight, no question. He’s great.

“It was a group thing, absolutely. We were all individually writing, but as a group we made it work as a whole. All of these little parts, but the whole was all of us together. And the audience. How so many of the known people in the city embraced us and would do stuff with us. They would come on the show. Dave Niehaus and whoever else. Gary Locke came on and sat in with The Presidents of the United States of America. He sang with them. [On ‘Volcano.’] That’s hilarious, and they were willing to do it because it made them look good to be on the show. It upped their cred.

[What now?] “I started ‘Art Zone’ for Seattle Channel in 2009, twice a month. Now it’s once a month part-time. I did more TV and radio before then. Everything I do promotes art and artists and events. I’m not retired. What does retirement look like? I don’t know. I want to keep doing ‘Art Zone’ as long I feel passionate about it, I’m a freelancer, and I’ll do it as long as they want to fund it. It will go away eventually. One show a month I can handle. I’m the single producer. I have a lot of freedom. [It’s your happy place.] Exactly.

[Wouldn’t have been able to do it without ‘Almost Live!'] “Truly, everything in my career came from that. Best job I ever had, by far, by far. Funnest job, coolest job. You got to do it in your own city. You got to make a living writing and performing comedy in your own city, and you were an employee of KING. That’s insane. Lucky. It was amazing. Being in the right place at the right time. Saying yes.”