

Pat Cashman

"Almost Live!" writer, performer, 1984-1999. "Almost Live! Still Alive" podcaster. Interviewed via Zoom on June 12, 2024.

"My dad was really a character. He was very funny, so we had a lot of humor in our house, but I was really drawn to comedians. On the audio side, it'd be people like Stan Freberg. I discovered this trove of 78 records my parents had with this guy Stan Freberg, and I started listening to those and I thought, 'Man, this is what I want to do.' I loved the satire. I loved the sound effects he used and the music. So that was very influential. Then I'd do little fake radio shows down in my bedroom downstairs. From the start, I wanted to do that.

"It's fun. I do a podcast with a radio partner I have in Seattle. We do a thing called Peculiar Podcast and we just talk about what happened at the supermarket yesterday. A lot of stories will veer inadvertently into politics once in a while. But I try to just make it more two people talking over the fence.

"The woman, Lisa Foster, is perennially looking for a date, so she's on dating sites, and that's always a lot of fun. 'Take a look at this guy. This is what I have to put up with. And there's this scary looking guy. He's got a beard, and he's holding a great big fish for some reason in this profile picture. And his text says I'm 64 years old, and most of the time I prefer to be nude, so if that sounds like something you'd like to do, let's get together.' Y'know, it's always the people you don't want to see naked that like to be naked. Why is that?

[Most known for "Almost Live!"] "Well, probably because it had a big profile, but I honestly, radio is what I liked the best. And I liked especially talk radio when I got into that because it was spontaneous for the most part. We had some ideas of where we were going to go with things, but you could ad lib a lot, and a caller might say something weird that takes you in a direction you hadn't planned.

"So I really loved the spontaneity and the extemporaneous nature of radio. Whereas 'Almost Live!' was we were working from scripts. The show had to be timed. It had to get out at a certain time. So it made you bear down more and really think about the words and what they should say in a particular sketch or monologue.

"You'd think they'd be similar, but they're really different disciplines. I loved them both, but radio was attractive to me because you could do comedy, but I could do character voices and that theater of the mind thing. You can imagine what that person looks like and what their experience might've been.

"I love big moments of silence. I think that's something that comes off more awkwardly on television, although I do like situations where somebody has said something and you cut back and forth between the faces, just staring at each other. That's fun.

"I remember a program director, I would do bits on the radio. One of them was, I'm trying to set a world record for the longest intentional dead air, and he didn't like that because he said, 'What if somebody tunes into the radio right in the middle of that and they don't hear anything and they think our station's off the air, and they go somewhere else?' Well, I didn't think of that, so it wouldn't truly be dead. I'd leave the mic open and you could hear maybe a little paper rustling or something, but I'd never quite get the record. I just came short every time, which was the recurring bit. But I did find also that some things that I did on the radio I thought could work on TV, too. 'Roscoe's Oriental Rug Emporium' was a radio bit that I did initially.

"It's just so insistent that 'We're leaving and that's it, I'm not kidding.' I had written it for radio and it played pretty well there. People liked it. And I thought, well, that could work on TV because it's really, there's no cuts.

"It's just one take. That was the challenge of it. In radio, you can stop and go, 'Okay, and then on the next track, I'll pick up where I left off.' But that thing had to be one take. I'm not really a professional actor, so I don't know the breathing techniques and things you're supposed to use, so by the end of it, I'm just screaming because I don't know how to modulate properly, and sweats pouring off me, and when I got to the end, I literally fell down on the studio floor, just absolutely drained. Steve Wilson was directing from a director's booth, and I said, 'Please tell me we got that, Steve.' 'Yeah, we got it. It looks fine. You want to do another take?' 'No, I can't. I'd start out hoarse.

"I said, 'What can I do to make it a little different?' So I liked the part where the graphics, he's moving so fast and I had get in his face, and he has to look around, stuff like that. It was just fun, but it was really silly.

"It all came from just walking through Pioneer Square one day, and I'm just noticing 'Going out of business.' Wait a minute. That guy was going out of business a year ago. I know he was the same, same big signs and everything must go. But not apparently very quickly.

"So I introduced the idea that the attorney general's is trying to shut us down and all those side issues that are associated with that. But I was also fascinated by why is it that particular type of business that is going out of sale? It's like, 'OK, everybody, now everybody's in this business together, right? So what we're going to do, that's different than everybody else. We're always going to be in crisis. OK? Everybody agree? We're going out of business. OK, OK, that sounds good.' Because they're all in on it. It seems like this struck me funny.

["The Patty Dyke Show" sketch.] "That's one of my favorites, too. It was funny because it's a fish out of water sort of thing. The premise, is that I've been trying to ask this particular woman, Tracy Conway, out on a date forever. I finally screwed up the courage to do it, she says, 'Yeah, I'll see you tomorrow,' and then her boss comes in and says, 'Hey, we got to work late tonight.' So she calls her cousin, who's identical, of course, just like 'The Patty Duke Show,' and she's real butch, but she looks like exactly the same.

"So then I go to her house and it begins a whole series of things where she's far more capable of things. We go to a batting cage, and she's showing me, 'No, no, you get your elbow up.' And then we're fixing a pipe underneath the sink and I'm under there watching her do it. And then we're drinking beer, and she goes, 'Check this out,' and she does this big, loud belch. So at the end of it, as she drives away on a motorcycle, I go, 'Man, what a gal, what a gal.' there's a sweetness to it.

"It's not just funny, but it's charmed, too, because it disarms people's stereotypes about how people must be or what they're all about, because he doesn't know the fact about her. He's much more engaged and enjoying himself than perhaps he would if he'd known she was a lesbian.

"Especially in the early days of the show, I would argue that nobody knew how to write sketches. It's not a bunch of people that had been writing sketches for other shows for years. Everybody without exception was a newbie at writing sketch. So some of it is downright painful, but most of that isn't circulated because those were the early shows when it was an hour long. So when KING began repeating the show in 1999 or 2000, they ran only the half hour versions of the show with Keister.

"I'm not giving short shrift to Ross's tenure there at all, but we were all just learning how to do it. I think if you do something like that for 15 years, which was how long the show was on, guess what? You sort of start to figure it out and get better at it.

"My favorite sketch is one that I didn't write, I'm not in it, and it's so simple. Bob Nelson wrote the piece. Great writer. Just, he's fantastic. He could just read from the phone book and I used to fall out of my chair. He just kills me. He's brilliant. So he writes this bit and it's called, 'I Think I Love You,' and it's just him and Tracy.

"There's no cutaways. There's editing, but there's no big drama. It's just a simple little conversation with Bob. It makes me laugh really hard. It's not only funny because it's a guy who's opening his heart up, Tracy's sitting next to him, and Bob's delivery is perfect. 'Well, I guess it's been, been about three weeks now we've been going together.' 'Uh-huh.' 'Well, I'll just come right out and say it. I think I love you.' And she goes, 'Oh, that's sweet.' 'I mean, I was going to say I love you, but I thought I would put "I think" in there first, because I didn't know if you'd say, "I love you" back or not.' And she goes, 'OK.' 'So do you think you love me, too?' She goes, 'Well, you know, I really haven't thought about that.' It's just this painful, painful conversation, and you can hear the audience a little bit, and it builds to the point where he says, 'Well, it's not like you want me dead or anything.' She goes, 'If I had to guess, I'd say yes,' and the audience is just feeling so sorry for Bob. It just works as funny piece. It's sort of sad and poignant and bittersweet and wonderfully awkward. I think it's a masterpiece. It's as good as any scene that you would see in a movie or a TV sitcom. The performances are perfect in it. Tracey's great. Bob's just fantastic. I don't think it would work with just anybody else.

"I'd say Bob, as much as anybody — well, certainly John Keister, who grew up in Seattle — they brought that local-ness to much of the show that it needed. I lived in Seattle most of my life, but I didn't grow up there. These guys, they grew up there. They knew the neighborhoods. We identified places like Kent and Ballard and Renton and Lynnwood and stereotyped them. Kent is this kind of place, Ballard has old people living there, a lot of things that are no longer true. But they were at the time, or we said it enough that it became sort of true. Accepted fact when it really was just a bunch of blather.

"But we would all hear from people who said, 'I moved to Seattle five years ago. I didn't know anybody. I really didn't know what the local scene was. And then I saw your show and I got to know, oh, so that's Kent, huh? Oh, that's, that's what Bellevue's like. Oh, Mercer Island. That's where the rich people live.' Rather than a Chamber of Commerce leaflet, they, they got a lot of their feeling and understanding of the area from the show. I think I thought that was a pretty nice commentary for sure.

"I was at KING-TV from the beginning [of the show]. I was working in the KING-TV commercial production department. That was my job. I did commercials and promos for the station, and I tended to like to do funny commercials because I always thought those stand out. And that included promos for the station and for the news department. News was never promoted humorously until I showed up and thought it would be okay. And it wasn't always well-received. Some of the news people were a little disdainful. 'Don't you know I'm a serious journalist?'

"We had to put Jean Enersen in silly situations and stuff. The idea of it to my thinking was that research showed that people didn't watch TV news because they thought one station did a better job necessarily than another. They watched because they liked the particular people on a particular station. They liked Jean Enersen. So let's trade on the personalities and put them in situations that other people may have been into because they're just people just like you. So, she might break a heel on her shoe or whatever, so those were, those were fun, and they were well-received.

"When the show begins, 'Almost Live!' gets under way. I'm interested in it, but I'm apparently indifferent to it because I got my own work to do, but I'm definitely just keeping an eye on it and thinking, how cool is this? That there's a TV station in America that's going to give this kind of thing a shot. To my knowledge, nobody else, in a major market at least, was doing anything like that.

"There were stations in those days, I worked at one in Boise, a late-night monster movie type of show with a host. Mine was called Peculiar Playhouse, and I was this crazy professor. I had wild gray hair and a mustache, but I was really stupid, not a very bright guy. In addition to introducing movie segments, we also would go out in the field and shoot field pieces. That sort of whetted my appetite for doing video sketches, inadvertently.

“So I had a little bit of experience with it by the time I came to Seattle. So as I was watching ‘Almost Live!’ I started thinking of sketch possibilities, even though I didn’t come forward and say, ‘Hey, I got an idea. Let me do this.’ I don’t remember exactly how, but I started just coming on more and more often. I became the announcer for the show. Generally at the end of the day I’d head home, and I wasn’t there for the taping of the show.

“For me, one of the big breakthrough sketches that I did was one called ‘Sluggy.’ It’s this kid who is poor, can’t afford a real pet, like a dog or a cat, so he finds a slug in his yard and asks if he can keep it. There’s a lot of obvious gags from that, but I made it with the feel of ‘Lassie Comes Home,’ with a little bit of a suspenseful, nearly tragic moment towards the end. It was a promo for this coming production of ‘Sluggy,’ and I wasn’t even there when it played in front of the live audience, but I got these notes from Ross Shafer and other people that said, ‘I’ve never heard such sustained laughter on this show until that.’ It was like saying, ‘Hey, would you come in and do more stuff on our show?’ It felt really good. Of course, I was, I was enthralled to get to do that.

“For a long time, I was the ringer. I didn’t get paid for many years until eventually they offered me a job in the early 1990s. So I was working both [KOMO] radio and was considered full-time but ‘Almost Live!’ as well.

“I have to confess that I would time things. I would drag my feet until the writing meeting was over with. I just found that process painful. Some people love it and you gotta have it if you’re doing a comedy show, but I just wanted to work independently, out of sight for the most part, and then come in with some offerings and see if we ran them up the flagpole anybody saluted. Those were interesting days, but it was really so much fun. It’s just incredible fun.

“I don’t want to speak for Bob Nelson, but he’s always told me, Bob left the show for a year to go down and work on a Magic Johnson talk show, called the Magic Hour, and it was dreadful. Bob saw a chance to go down and get more experience in Hollywood as a writer. The show didn’t last very long, and he came back to Seattle and ‘Almost Live!’ and we were so happy he came back. But since then, he’s done a lot of other writing for other shows. He directed a movie. He wrote a movie that got Oscar-nominated. And he said to me, ‘Of all the stuff I’ve gotten to do, absolutely the favorite time of my life was ‘Almost Live!’ He said he just loved it.

“There was just a lack of pressure on it. You hear these horror stories of people who work on SNL or other shows where your feet are to the fire all the time. ‘I got to get this on the air,’ and you’re competing with other people. They’re sometimes undermining your efforts because they want to push you aside and they’ve got a bit they want to do. I never felt any of that at ‘Almost Live!’ because it wasn’t that kind of environment. We were just a local show, and most people just felt lucky to be there because we didn’t have vast previous experience writing for Johnny Carson or anything. We were just a bunch of local yokels that got an opportunity to do this show.

“That’s what Bob imparts to me all the time, too. You had a chance if you had an idea. I always thought when people said, ‘Why didn’t you go to Hollywood and do stuff?’ I always had this idea that I’d be standing in the back of a line of people waiting to maybe get something on the air somewhere. But with this show, it was a hungry animal. We had to do it every week. And if you had a decent idea and you thought it would work, you’re more than likely that sketch is going to be produced immediately, and it’ll be on the air that weekend. And that just doesn’t happen anyplace else. So that made it incredibly attractive and just too much fun. Plus, I loved living in Seattle and didn’t want to uproot my family and move anywhere.

[KING-TV president and NBC affiliates chief Eric Bremner’s role in pushing “Saturday Night Live” ahead a half hour to make way for “Almost Live!”]

“Eric moved down here to central Oregon advance of me moving here. He retired. He passed away last year. I got together with him several times and I asked him about that, and he pooh-poohed it and said, ‘I don’t know if that had a lot to do with it.’ Well, he had everything to do with it because there was great pushback from NBC. ‘This is so hot. SNL is our hottest show, and we don’t love stations screwing around with the time slot, but ‘Almost Live!’ was really floundering and couldn’t find an audience that would justify keeping it on the air much longer. How are you going to be funnier than Ken Schram [host of KOMO-TV’s “Town Meeting”]? So we got to move.

“I wasn’t the decision maker on any of this. I just was there because I was working on my other stuff. And then I hear, ‘Oh, we’re going to move the show. Now it’s going to come on at 11:30 or 11:35 and then SNL.’ And we caught a real lucky break because ‘Saturday Night Live,’ that was their not very good years. I think Lorne Michaels might’ve have left the show for a year or two, and that was that time period right there when we decided to try and put our show on.

“There was a little viewer pushback at first, but it didn’t take very long for us to settle in because for the first time we were in an environment where people were expecting comedy, and they were looking for it at 11:30 on a Saturday night. And we finally hit our stride with that, that simple move. The show itself didn’t change a lot. Finally people got a chance to see it. And, so, and then it just took off. It did really, really well, and, for a lot of years, actually.

“They came up with a thing called, overnights, and so you would know the next morning how your show did that didn’t exist when ‘Almost Live!’ began, at least. So, you’d only find out during these sweep periods, November and February and May at the end of those sweep periods, then everybody turn in their diaries or whatever ratings, disciplines they use. And then you’d find out, ‘Oh my God, nobody’s watching this show. We got to take it off the air,’ but we had those long periods where we don’t really know how it’s doing, and we’ll just wait and see. Then it just coincided about that same time with the advent of overnight ratings, and we were able to see that the show has finally got an audience and it’s growing and people like it.

[Why the show ended.] “I don’t pretend to know what was going on behind the scenes, but there were a lot of things going on with KING in that period. One of them was that they were being sold a couple of different times during that time. One of them, BELO, is headquartered in Texas, and they were not a local owner anymore. So if I’m a, an accountant and I’m looking at the books, I’m saying, ‘Well, why are we paying nine, 10, 11, 12 people every week for a show that only airs once a week? We like the news because that airs all the time. That makes sense.’ Even the Evening magazine is on five days a week, but ‘Almost Live!’ once a week for a half-hour show, I think it’s as simple as that. It got to be a bottom line or perceived bottom line-thing. Those were really the halcyon days of local TV.

“I had already decided that that would be my last go-around with the show. I just thought that I’ve got to get out of the way for, and we need, younger people. We need some people of color on the show as regulars.

[His podcast] “My hope was, and I only got this to happen a few times was that they would be not overtly critical of the show or any of the other people that they worked with, but that they tell some stories out of school, if you will, and not the usual, like I just said, gee, we just got along great together and it was so much, no pressure on, that’s how I remember it. It probably wasn’t at least occasionally more contentious than that. I think all of us privately thought that certain people weren’t carrying their share of the workload, but it was pretty under the surface if it existed at all.

“I know this is kind of a cliché, but there is a Seattle nice to this town, at least there used to be during that time. People just aren’t, they weren’t like guys from New York, ‘Hey, get out of here. What are you doing? Move over. I’m writing this sketch.’ People were like at traffic lights: ‘No, you go.’ ‘No, no, you should go.’ ‘No, you were there first. You should go.’

"That's kind of how the show was. I don't remember a writer's meeting where somebody suddenly read a sketch and then he said, 'That is the biggest piece of shit I have ever heard. I can't believe you would even throw that possibility out there. Get out of here.' Even though you might be thinking that in your mind. 'Well, that's got possibilities. It'll work.'

"I used to do a lot of radio commercials, too, and I used to really love it when, when you do a take, and the guy in the booth would go, 'That was perfect. That was right on, perfect. Let's do another one.' Wait a minute. It was perfect. Why don't we do another one? And then you'll do 20 takes, and they take the first one. I feel like they got to get their money's worth. Let's beat this guy up for a while. So, so he earns his paycheck. The nature of the beast.

"One I did was called 'The Phobic Gardener.' It's just a guy, it's me, and he comes out and he is deathly afraid, he's afraid of insects, of lizards or anything that might be in the garden and aphids. He comes on, it's an Ed Hume or Ciscoe Morris sort of show, and he's going to show you stuff, but he always runs away terrified because there's a bee or he thinks it's a snake, and it's just a garden hose, and he runs away. I was happy with that sketch, and, of course, I did not realize at the time that would be the last sketch I ever did on 'Almost Live!' because that was the last show of the last season, although we didn't know it yet.

[Speaking at corporate gatherings] "I've made a bit when I give speeches to like a company or a corporation, I will ask them, you're going to be at the meeting. And is there one person that is famously gabby, the most loquacious person you have? So they'll give me that name. And will they be okay with me making a little fun of that? And they say, 'Yeah, they'll love it.'

"My premise is, 'Thank you for having me here today. I'm so thrilled to get the chance to speak to you. I'll tell you the truth. I was contacted about this opportunity about six months ago, and then I never heard from anybody again. And then just today, this morning, I got this letter confirming that I will be the speaker.'

"So then I read this fake letter. It's usually from the president of the company, and it starts out, 'Dear Pat Cushman, this is to confirm that if you need to change clothes when you've arrived, we have a room set aside for you to do that. Look for a door that says "Men" on it.' Then I'll get down to where he writes, 'Once you get up there and start speaking, Pat Cushman, do not babble on and on. We have Larry Jenkins to do that.' It just kills. People just go crazy for that.

[Living in Bend, Oregon.] "I grew up here, and my wife and I had a kind of a cabin chalet house here for 30 years in a place called Sunriver, which is 12 miles from here. We were on a five-acre place in Snohomish, a big house. We had two horses. It just got to be too much to handle. And we just figured we should wrap things up here. I think we are inclined to move back to Seattle. We've had our house up for sale a couple of times and for various reasons didn't pull the trigger. One of them was during COVID and people couldn't, preview a house, they couldn't come inside. We couldn't go to the Seattle area and look at houses, either. It just didn't seem like a good time to leave. Then we tried again later and changed our mind again. But I think we'll be out of here and back to Seattle, which even though I grew up here in central Oregon, I will always think of Seattle as my home.

[Could a show like 'Almost Live!' be done today?] "I think absolutely it could and should. After 'Almost Live!', my son [Chris] and Keister and I did a show called 'The 206,' and we were able to get on the air in places like Spokane and Portland and Eugene. That's a way more recent show than 'Almost Live!' and yet I can already think of sketches that I don't think we could do that one.

"I remember one that we did, which we just thought was funny, called Perv Brothers Appliance run by Irv and Merv Perv. Just the name made us laugh, and they're sort of cheesy looking, and they make deliveries and installations 'Even as late as 1 in the morning.' A young woman answers the door, 'We're here from the appliance. You wanted your hot tub put in.' We thought it was pretty funny, but I think we'd give that a second thought today just because of the sensitive times.

"I always was able to think of ways you could have talked about something without really talking about it. One example was, there was a guy that was killed trying to have relations, shall we say, with a horse down in Enumclaw years ago. There was a story in the newspaper. And so at the beginning of the show, Keister comes out and says, 'Well, I guess you heard about that story down in Enumclaw,' and then two guys in a horse suit walk out onto the studio. Keister just looks at the horses. 'Nope, we're not doing that sketch. Nope.' And then they just leave, but you made a comment about it without really making a comment about it. That's clever.

"Having said all of that, I think times change and topics change and people change, but there's some commonalities. It's still about affordable housing and the homeless and transportation and all the issues are all still kind of the same.

"It's in the way you handle it. I don't want to come across as in any way pretentious about this, but I think you could make an argument that if you had a local show, like 'Almost Live!', that was a sounding board for what people are talking about around town and could present some otherwise uncomfortable issues with humor. I think that could moderate some of the explosiveness of the times. Humor diffuses a lot of bombs. So I think that kind of a show would still be maybe even more needed at a time like this."