

Ralph Bevins

Bevins was photographer, editor and sometimes writer and performer for "Almost Live!" from 1993 to 1999. After an in-person interview, he chose to write this essay in July 2024.

When I was flown from Dallas to Seattle to be interviewed for a job with KING-TV's "Evening Magazine" in 1986, I was given a tour of the station and we stopped by an edit bay. I was told Mike Boydston was editing a comedy bit for a show called, "Almost Live!"

I thought, "OMG, this is the show I should be working on!" I made little comedy shorts on film when I was in high school and was a huge fan of classic film comedy shorts. It took seven years, but when Boydston left the show I was hired as the director of photography and editor for Almost Live!

I have the dubious honor of producing the only sketch in "Almost Live!" history that never aired. It was a commercial for a series of books for people actually dumber than "dummies," called "The Guide for F-----g Morons."

Anyone was welcome to pitch sketch ideas at our weekly meetings, and the process was essentially "survival of the funniest." Whatever got the biggest laughs at the table "made" it. So even though my role on the show was as photographer-editor, I also got to write and produce some occasional sketches as well, including a series of five "Jet Guy" episodes, which I wrote, produced, shot and edited. (A few others were "The Hunter" in which Santa Claus is killed and "Ballard Files.")

Any given week, we might be parodying a big-budget movie or some commercial, and it was a challenge trying to emulate something produced with large crews with our limited resources. We didn't have a lot of lighting gear. We didn't have professional grips and sound persons to assist us. Our college interns were our crew. They were invaluable and worked hard, but by the time we trained them up, it was time for a new batch.

There were rarely creative differences producing the field pieces. There was a mutual respect and trust there. Well, as far as I know, anyway! I can think of one time when there was a pretty heated debate about whether a commercial parody of a Nike commercial needed to duplicate the look of it. I argued it should, and others said it doesn't matter what it looks like, it's just about the jokes. But with our limited resources it wasn't going to look anything like the actual spot, anyway. I ended emulating it as much as I could. In the end, it did win a local Emmy for Bob Nelson.

Probably the most fun sketch to work on was "Mind Your Manners with Billy Quan," a concept developed by Keister and Mike Boydston. John would come up with an idea (Disks of Fury, Hoops of Fury, Yard Sale of Fury, etc.), and after he, Darrell and I got lunch, we'd head out to a location, basically making a lot of it up as we went along, though there were the trademark gags that were a part of all of them (flying legs, sped up and looped weapons). I'd cut the piece in a sequence with some music and some sound effects from "Enter the Dragon" — no dialogue — and hand it over to John and Pat. They would go into an edit bay, plug a microphone into the back of a recording deck and make up all the dialogue and create all the other effects right there on the fly. It was an amazing thing to witness.

There was one event not long before the end that made me think the show might be on its way out. We had spent the summer before the last season producing a special, "Sex, Slugs and Rock and Roll." As I watched the premiere, it slowly dawned on me that there were no paid commercial spots, just PSAs and station promos. I figured the proverbial handwriting was on the wall at that point.

I played a character on the show called "Jet Guy." He was based on a Republic Studios movie serial character of the 1950s I loved as a kid called, "Commando Cody." Basically, the "professor" demos some new weapon for Jet Guy's "war on crime," then Jet Guy is called into action, screws up the operation of his device and is blown up or hit by a van, wrecking ball, etc. I assumed everyone would want Pat Cashman to be "Jet Guy," but they let me do it, for some reason. I think my amateurish performance probably kind of enhanced the low budget, cheesy look and concept.

Pat Cashman was the "jack of all trades" of "Almost Live!" He wrote, performed and edited his own pieces. All brilliantly. I think he would have shot them himself, too, if it were possible.

What made it all special, and what do I miss? Lots of laughter, the camaraderie with really gifted colleagues, creative and challenging work, the experience of watching a live audience react with laughter to comedy bits you worked on, Emmy recognition occasionally. I'm really grateful to have been a part of it.