

## Ross Shafer

*'Almost Live!' host, writer and performer, 1984-1988. Interviewed via Zoom, June 5, 2024.*

[Jim Sharp came up with the 'Almost Live!' name.] "It was it was one of those things when somebody comes up with an idea, and everyone in the room said, 'Well, of course.' We must have had 150 names, honestly, trying to figure that out. And when he said 'Almost Live!' I think he I think he just deduced that because we were taping it on Thursdays, and it was being shown on Sundays at that time. It just hit him, 'Oh, this isn't live. It's "Almost Live!" And it was perfect.

[Everyone brainstormed?] "Oh, yeah, we all did. It was myself, Jim Sharp, Mike Neun, who was on at that time. I don't think John Keister was on board quite yet. He wasn't there for the pilot.

"In that time, 1983, 1984, the boundaries were pretty tight. We couldn't be crazy,-wild, R-rated even, so that seemed edgy, like we were giving the secret away. It was just something that we thought would might be clever enough. Well, as it turned out, what happened from the Seattle Times and the P.I. when they saw it and reviewed it, they called it "Almost Live!" is almost dead.' And we thought, 'Oh, wow, we set ourselves up for that, didn't we?'

"Maybe we were just burned out, but that was that was the name that stuck. And then I think as it is described in that book, the thing that we did not think of was copywriting that name. Jeff Valdez, a comedian that I knew, did it, and he built a smaller version of that show, and we had to pay him \$35,000 for that name so it could go on Comedy Central. Lesson learned.

[Favorite sketches or interviews you remember fondly today] "I was there for years and it was one with Phil Donahue was kind of a big deal for us. He was a big he was a big star, especially on NBC. When he came, I had made it my mission not to be starstruck and not to do all the softball kinds of questions that the daytime shows might do. So when he came on, he was acting a little cocky. We had just played in baseball game, and he was Phil Donahue, and he's telling us about how popular and famous he was.' We did this, and we were in the broadcast' and all that, and I think my first question was, 'That's great. How old were you when your hair went grey?' And he knew then that, 'Oh, these guys are not playing daytime television here.' That helped. That videotape actually launched me to the network because of that not playing so safe.

"Another one that was really instrumental for me, and I think for the show, is when Larry King came through. Larry was a big star. He was huge at that point. And he didn't have time to come on the show, but he did have time to do an interview with me offstage. So I had a list of questions, and again, I wasn't playing like he's a star. I'm just asking these non-sequitur questions. Like, 'Larry, something that's burning a hole in our viewers is, they want to know if you've ever lived on or near a camel farm.' And he lost it, lost it. And when he lost it, I had another four questions for him.

"He twisted it on me when he said, 'Well, I have an announcement to make to Ross here, because when the show airs, you'll no longer be the host.' He goes, 'What's my last name, Ross King?' 'You know the King Sisters, don't you?' So it was a good little banter that nobody saw coming. But he did laugh pretty hard for three or four minutes because it was so unusual. Then I became friends with him when I moved to Los Angeles.

"We had an interview with. Will Shriner and Jay Leno. And they were we went all through these [things], They had to jump through hoops. I think at one point Leno had to give blood. And that was a Cashman deal. So it was those things. It was just using those twists on what a local comedy show could do, and there was quite a comedy community at that time in Seattle. Before grunge, it was a comedy town. There was a comedy boom during that period of time.

[Why 'Louie Louie' campaign caught on in 1985.] "I'll tell you what I think it is. It was something we stumbled onto. You know, it was viral before viral was a thing. We had tried three or four campaigns prior to that. We're going to reunite Sonny and Cher. We were going to make the Mud the national dog of America. But nothing stuck.

"So when it came to 'Louie Louie,' we promoted the fact that it was a Northwest band that made it famous, the Kingsmen, and Paul Revere and the Raiders from Idaho. So they felt like they had a little say in it. They felt like they were maybe connected, that demographic. But what really took it over the top was, Washington state government had been really lazy, and they hadn't been doing anything anyone liked. And we were these little champions to change government, if you can call it that. But I went to the Capitol and gave a speech before the Senate. And we had 'Louie Louie' day and 5,000 people show up.

"The sweatshirt was a thing. We sold a lot of them. We had 'Louie Louie' buttons. And it was honestly in the press for 256 days, I believe, and it was an Esquire Dubious Achievement Award.

"John Keister and I were doing all kinds of press. We were showing up at Jaycees and clubs and Kiwanis and trying to rally this as a serious project where the little guy can win. Then I went on Dick Clark's 'TV's Bloopers and Practical Jokes' show, and they got a kick out of it. So it took off. It had a life of its own, practically, and then a life after that with the Seattle Times had the 'Louie Louie Awards,' a kind of a dubious achievement award.

"I blasted Miss Davis. Helen Davis was not happy. She thought if you're going to do that, then you might as well make marijuana the state weed or something like that.

"We did have a lot of coverage and I was in a lot of news articles. It was just enough and pointed at our TV show that we had to expand our show from a half hour to an hour. Selling so many beer and car commercials, just because of that publicity. The station never promoted us at all. So we were just searching for this vehicle to get known. We're very lucky that that it just happened that way.

[Competing on Sunday evenings with KOMO's edgy Ken Schram and 'Town Meeting.'] "We lost consistently to Ken Schram. His ratings were very strong. I don't know if they sold as many ads or had as much water-cooler buzz as we did. But I heard about it. This is going to sound arrogant, but at one point in 1986, I think it was, I had two small boys who were 6 and 4, and I had to wear a disguise in public. Honestly, I wore a mustache and a long wig. And I had these little boys, so we could go to the Bellevue Mall. It's ridiculous. Fame is fleeting, as we know. But for a window, being the captain of that ship, it was pretty intriguing. It was fun. It was invasive. It was a moment.

[Sketch: Gorillas on the Space Needle] "Somebody brought in a picture. 'Do you see what's happening on the Space Needle now? They've defamed our Space Needle. [But installing an inflatable King Kong on top.] So somehow the group of us, I'm not going to take credit for it, but I was the ringleader when we did it. 'Let's get gorilla suits. Let's represent the gorilla union and see if we can get on.'

"We did not give them a heads-up. Somebody said, 'We're from "Almost Live!" and there are these five gorillas standing there with a briefcase. They said, 'Well, what is it you need?' The distance between getting permission to get out on the deck, that took a while. We had to sign. Imagine that: they let us sign some liability release.

"We were not tethered in. We're not when you're when you're up there. It isn't that steep a slope. Well, we added the wind. I don't know. We were so young, we're in our 30s and we're invincible. It just seemed like we had to make it look real. And it was real. It was we were really out there and going through a little hatch to get on. So it was just another stupid thing that took very little time to make, and people thought we were champions for the Pacific Northwest.

"We tried as much as we could to make all of the outlying bergs Johnny Carson's Burbank, let's say. We were just trying to celebrate these. These communities are all different. Why don't we try to build them up or find out something about them we can tag. We did that for almost five years before the new crew took over, and we had to fill an hour. John was a half hour, mostly sketch, not much interviewing, but he didn't really care for the interviewing as much as I did.

"I thought this could be some kind of a launch. I should know all these skills. I took a job at KJR radio for two years so that I could get better at interviewing, better at coming up with more material on time. It was, for me, the glorious, unbelievable opportunity to learn about broadcasting, and we had to fill it with a lot of comedy."

"I didn't realize it at first. I had a manager at the time, and he said, 'Listen, you need to do this.' 'But I'm going to lose so much money from the road work.' And he said, 'No, television is better.' 'But it's local television.' 'No, you're going to see how this works out. If you do your job, you'll see how this changes.'

"What really changed between the first season and the second season for me was that I did get some notoriety from that television show. I had an agent in Hollywood and I got cast as a game-show host, and we did 120 episodes in Canada. We were doing six shows a day throughout the summer. I got so much practice. It was an immersion of writing 40 jokes a day, just cranking these shows out. By the time I came back for the second season, we changed the set. We changed the look. We changed everything. I had dropped almost 20 pounds, so I looked more like a person on television at the time, and it just accelerated on the heels of 'Louie Louie' and the experience."

"And we had a new producer. Bill Stainton came aboard. He was really, really great. Dana Dwinell, who was our producer when I was there, lovely woman, but she did not know what we were doing. She loved magazine shows and didn't quite understand how these wildcats could get on TV and make it interesting. I wonder now, in retrospect, did we bully her? Did we say, 'No, Dana, you don't know what's funny. We know what's funny.' We didn't know it was funny. Only the audience knows what's funny. But we were so young and energetic. I think it was a it was a page out of a book she hadn't read yet. And I'm very grateful for Dana, very grateful for Bill. They hung together this this team."

"We didn't even have an office. We were just huddled around a desk when the budget was really low. We couldn't afford to do things. When we wanted to edit, we had to try to squeeze the news department out of a little bay so we could cut them up. We were begging and borrowing everything. Then I got more money after I left."

"This was a baby to me and I helped give birth to it."

[Difference between you and John Keister.] "I had a pretty full toolkit, I think, for television, and John was uncomfortable with a lot of it, but he was a fantastic sidekick kind of guy who was completely look different, sounded different, thought differently. I had him come down to Los Angeles when I was hosting the FOX 'Late Show,' and he was a hit. Yes, FOX Network wanted to hire him immediately. His wife was pregnant with twins, and he couldn't do it. He always wonders, what would it have been like if I had stayed in California?"

"We let John do anything he wanted. He would write out bits on napkins that would be unintelligible. He'd say, 'Well, there's this guy, and then he's going to go over here, and he's going to get a sandwich, and he's going to drive to—' 'John! Beginning, middle, end, anywhere?' 'I got it.' 'OK, OK. Get the camera. We trust you.' He blew us away early on by what he thought of and how he shot it."

"In those days, I had a team. I talked to the band. I talked to the producer the first time that I put Bill Nye as a science guy. I'm bantering with Bill Stainton. That just seemed to be intimate and how it worked. John and Pat Cashman were special artists, special guest artists."

[Any similar show nationwide?] "There wasn't because it's kind of represented in the awards. There's this national award that we got over and over and over again as the best comedy show in the nation."

[So why did it happen in Seattle?] "I think that that the comic talent came to the table with what we need to do. Remember the story of the Beatles? Why did the Beatles get famous? They already had 100 songs. They put out album after album because they'd been practicing for a long time. Well, all of us had been practicing for a long time because there wasn't an opportunity.

"I've been a standup comedian since 1979, and the first pilot we did was 1984. I'd been touring, I'd been doing what I do. John was writing for The Rocket across town. Jim Sharp's a brilliant writer and teacher. Mike Neun had been performing for 20 years prior to that. And we could get guests already coming to our station. We just needed to convince them, 'Would you like to come on this fun little comedy show? So I think we had had some rehearsal before we got there.

"It was a wide-open opportunity that we seized, and it was bumpy. Oh, God, after 13 episodes is what we first got, I'd watch them and I thought they're not very good. These are too slow.

"I think because what we did was so different, the Bullitt sisters, Bremner and anybody else who was in executive positions would hear about it from their friends, there was enough buzz around that they're saying, 'Oh, yeah, that show. You guys got a comedy show on now, and you took over for that Al Wallace guy.' And I think they were getting a little handshake, little 'nice goings' from their friends, and they wanted to see if we could do anything.

"And then when we promoted it like we did, and it got some steam, then they couldn't take us off. Also, we weren't breaking any banks in those days. We were all making not very much money, but we were allowed to do pretty much anything we wanted to.

"I went down to Nordstrom and walked through with my shirt off and a number 44 painted on my chest, looking for the Bosworth department, Brian Bosworth. And nobody stopped us. We should have been jailed or something, but they were, 'It's just all those "Almost Live!" guys.'

"Then John and I, we did have a recurring bit that was very popular called 'Ballard Vice.' We did it over and over again, just two stupid police officers, undercover cops, doing dumb things, but we had the music that Cashman edited, so it looked like 'Miami Vice.' And we got letters, and people wanted to see it again. So we had to come up with new ideas. And I got more and more.

"They got so popular that Seahawk players wanted to be in on it. They all wanted to be a part of an ensemble cast. Chip Hanauer was smuggling fish in a hydroplane. So it was really fun. It was just a hoot, the whole thing. And it did get a lot of attention. We got a lot of attention throughout the country.

"Now, I didn't want to leave Seattle. That was something that I think maybe my cast mates got wrong. But I found an old letter of me writing to the station saying, 'We have a station in Spokane. There's one in Boise.' They had three or four, I think, at that time. 'Let's spread this out across the Pacific Northwest and take this thing and syndicate it if it's popular.'

"And I got note after note back from management. 'No, they won't understand Ballard.' 'Well, do you think anybody in Nebraska understands Burbank?'

"So we could make it funny if we could identify the trait of that community, which we had already proven that we could do. It was after they said 'no' several times, I told Bill Stainton, 'We're not getting anywhere, we're spinning our wheels. Let me let me at least go and audition. I'll audition in Hollywood, and we'll I'll shop it if you let me. I'll shop this to a syndicator.'

"And so I did. We never did it. We were getting really close and it was the same week in April of 1988 that I got a phone call from my agent to go down and audition for the FOX Network talk show that Joan Rivers had been fired from. That happened on a Thursday, we taped on Thursday, I went down on Friday, I was offered the show and went to work on Monday. I had 'out' clauses in both my radio and my TV contract. But still I just wanted to come back and work on 'Almost Live!' during the week or during the weekend, shoot episodes and then go on back and do the flight.

"It was very frustrating. My family is from Seattle. Everybody I knew from college and most of my life was from Seattle. My two young sons lived in Seattle and her mom didn't want me to, it was already kind of difficult. So it was a tough time to leave.

"Also, I just thought, oh, how do I say no to an opportunity to compete against Letterman and Carson, right? It was too big. And then I thought, 'Oh, maybe they'll get canceled quick and I'll be back home, so I won't sell my house. But it worked out differently.'

[Why Denver?] "I've been married a few times, so my wife, at that time, we lived in Los Angeles, and she and I were not getting along. It was not working. Two years, three years prior, we had adopted a little baby at birth because she and I were not having any luck having a child. We did, and then thought that maybe a change of scenery would be good. We had relatives in Denver and we made a trip out here on a weekend. I thought it was going to be a weekend, but it turned into a three-day shopping expedition looking for homes, and the dollar goes much further in Denver than it did in Los Angeles. So I made an offer on a big house in Denver that I dreamed about. We made that move in 2010, and then the marriage didn't make it. We divorced five years ago. But I have my daughter. It does feel like home. I really do like it, and because I'm on the road a fair amount, Denver's airport goes anywhere in two and a half hours.

[‘Almost Live!’ segments that couldn’t be done today.] "I put everything I have was on VHS tape and beta tapes. It's all digitized now. I saw some of the comedians that we had on, and they would do these blatant Asian, overcast, they're just so blown up with big teeth and eyes and hats, oh, coolie hats, it was just awful. I thought, 'How did we do that? Why did we do that, especially with the Pacific Northwest large Asian community?' I think because it was a different time, we didn't have that large Asian community at that time. It was largely Scandinavian at that time.

"You know, the thing that that always worked and I think would still work today is when we can target a behavior, not a race, not a creed, not a religion, but somebody's common behaviors. 'The Worst Girlfriend in the World' was a good example of that. 'Ballard Vice,' we were making fun of these cool guys, but they're idiots. We made fun of our government there.

"John had a bit when I was hosting, called 'Hoop Head.' It was a game that somebody would take a suction-cup basketball hoop and smack it on his bald head, and people would try to get a ball through the hoop. But he didn't know he was part of the game. So when we made fun of ourselves, we were in clean territory. We just needed to know what the rules were. We did intoxicated drunk routines from time to time. We wouldn't do that now. I had a dumpster diver. I was the dumpster diver looking for stuff, and I find a MasterCard, I'm delusional. So I wouldn't be able to do that kind of thing anymore.

"A year ago, I started writing a new stand-up act. I am working it out in clubs around Denver. But I have aspirations to go back to my roots to see, and so far it's going really well. But I'm very cancel-culture conscious. If you know what the boundaries are, you can stay within those boundaries. What I'm doing now is talking about what happened over these three and a half decades that I have a unique experience to talk about. A lot of it pokes fun at me. I've been married and divorced three times, so I talk about that, and for a group that's 45-plus who have been through that, I can talk to them.

"Lewis Black, the comedian, is a friend of mine, and we talked about that. He's 75, and I saw his audience. He had the Paramount filled with the 50-plus. They loved it. So there is an older audience because we're living longer. Medicine's better. They still want to laugh.

"If you're a standup comedian going from club to club, nobody sees it. You know, you're in, you're out. And I know quite a few of those people who didn't ever have the television exposure, and they're still doing that same act from 40 years ago. They're still funny, but they're bitter because they didn't quite make it or they weren't able to do it.

"Jay Leno is a good friend of mine. And we talk about our career in corporate events. Well, we're clean, so they want to hire us because they're not going to get anybody canceled. They're not going to get any complaints, and I think that it's better and broader for anybody's career, if you can be funny and clean at the same time. I know comedians who are really hilarious, but they whine that they're not making money because they can't get hired. Well, no company will take a chance on somebody that could turn it off for them.

[In a long arc of a career, where does 'Almost Live!' fit in?] "It started everything for me. I have not had a regular job since "Almost Live!" And I've been able to ride the comedy pony for all these years. And it's served me really well because I've because it's so fun, number one. I've known the funniest people in the world, become friends with the funniest people in the world. And I can't think of a of a better life that would be suited for what I did. But 'Almost Live!' was the genesis. It really blew up for me.

"I'll tell you that I still get events booked by people who saw "Almost Live!" when they were young. It's just had so much longevity that none of us expected."