

Steve Wilson

'Almost Live' director, writer, performer, 1984-1999. Interviewed in person, May 31, 2024

[Bryan Johnston's 'Almost Live!' book] "He did the book on J.P. Patches, and it was a hit. In all the Costcos, it was a gigantic hit, and the next thing he wanted to do was our show, and I discouraged him. I said, 'Whoever you interview, it's going to be a different story all the way around because nobody remembers it exactly the same way.

[How long were you the director?] "From the pilot, which was Ross [Shafer], and it was called 'Take Five.' It was just basically based on Letterman. The first six months, it's foggy for me, it was directed by Mark Warner. I was doing 'Seattle Today.' He was doing news. He's older than me, so they assigned it to him, even though I did the pilot, and then the original producer was Dana Dwinell. She was formerly the producer for the 'Seattle Today' morning show, with Cliff Lenz. I would do the morning show, [then 'Almost Live!'] Thursday night and transform the set. I took it on after the first season. [On through the last season] Rode that plane, flew that plane into the ground after 15 years.

[Role of director] "There's the show, which is the live show. SNL, everything they do with the exception of stuff that's in the field, for our case, it's all blocked, it's set up, it's choreographed, and I coach. 'You should pause here, you should wait for the laugh, you should look at the camera, and I'll do the back and forth. Someone says something stupid, and then you go back to this person, and then you go back to this person, and you tighten in on this person and tighten in on this person.'

"It's an old gag, and finally one of them breaks, they're staring back and forth, the one that breaks, they go, 'OK, I got it,' they get the big laugh. It's all about timing. So when you cut a show, which is, for me, the live show — and it is live, I get one rehearsal — I will hold on certain shots, I block it out. One gets the signal, two is a two-shot, three gets the singles of Nancy, and then it's single to single, or you stay on the two-shot for a long time, or you do an over-the-shoulder. That's all done by me, I block it out, I write the notes down, and I pretty much stick to it, which is exactly the way they do SNL.

"Bill [Stainton]'s role, he was the producer, and John [Keister] was head writer, and the other actors that you see are hired as writer-performers. So I was a director-writer-performer. Bill was a producer-writer-performer. We had more credits than the others, but basically, the producer is the person who hires. He also oversees the whole show, picks what bits will go, paces the show. My job is to take everything — cold open, regular open, monologue morph into bit — cut that and rehearse it, everybody can see the monitors, knows where the graphics are. My job is to bring it all together and spit it out so it looks good on air. I make it look good on air.

[Ensemble approach] "That's out of necessity. There was the Ross show, which was an exact copy of David Letterman, and it was mostly interviews and not sketch. When he left, what are we going to do? We did one year of basically trying to find people. Ross left halfway through the season. Then we brought in different hosts from Hollywood, then John got anointed by the then=program director as the host. Now he's going to be the David Letterman character, and it just was not good. So we had that opportunity to do these shows, and finally we decided we're going to do more of an SNL show, and John would be the host. That's when it took a real long, slow take-off from 1987 to 1991. 1992 was when we went national, grunge took off.

[The Space Needle collapse prank] "I don't remember who came up with the idea. The show was on Sunday nights, it was not doing well. The program director, Craig Smith, wanted to either put it on five nights a week or find a spot where it could do better, where it could grow. It was still John hosting it.

[John's 'Bummer about the Needle' punchline] "This would not have happened if we pre-recorded the show. When the show was popular [airing at 11:30 p.m. Saturday], we recorded it Saturday between 9:30 and 10:30 p.m. Then it would play back at 11:30. We had to get done by 10:30 so they could get ready for the news. I think the cutoff time was 10:15.

"The reason [the Needle hoax] happened, it was Saturday. Craig Smith, the then-program director, was trying to figure out an audience for it because it was a good show. What he did was he switched. We were on Sundays at 6 o'clock. Nobody watches that. What he did was he switched, for one night only, we got Saturday at 7, which was 'Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous,' and he just moved Sunday at 6 for just one night only. We didn't really tell anybody. That show was very popular, especially with older people. At 7 o'clock, people were waiting for 'Lifestyles,' and this open comes up where people, they don't really know what we are. Then [music], and 'We interrupt this program,' and boom, everybody goes to their TV sets, and that thing looked real.

[Michael Schauer mann, the anchor, is an actor.] "But he's sitting in an area that looks like the live show. It's not the newsroom, but it looks just like the newsroom, and he's doing this, and he's really good, and we had these prerecorded things. It was Tracey [Conway]'s first appearance, as a hysterical woman. 'It just fell over.' When we put it together and I looked at it — this is me, the director — I said, 'You have got to put in the corner the location and the date, but you have to put April Fool's Day.' I made them put April Fool's Day, which stayed up there.

"And the guy who was the graphics guy, Kelly Pierce, good friend of mine, I said, 'Can you make it look like the city?' At that point the Paintbox, where you could move things around, was brand new. He was an expert at it. So he took pieces of the Needle, and he made that picture, just two pictures. It's before Photoshop. It's a device that made graphics for an over-the-shoulder thing. Rather than hand-drawing them in color and coloring them, it's a computer device.

"That's a pre-taped thing, and we opened on that, and that was the cold open. But I actually saw it and went, 'Wow, that looks really real, and I made them put that thing in the corner, and that's what actually saved our asses, because 'It says right there! How can you watch it and not see it's April Fool's Day? How could you not tell?'

[Any premonition it would be national news the next day?] "No, and we didn't think of being in that time slot, nor did we know that nobody's going to know who we are. It's before the show's even identified. It goes right into it. Back then, whenever you do that, it's like that 'War of the Worlds' thing. You don't tell them it's not a newscast, and people believed it.

"Because the show was live, I'm in the booth upstairs directing it live, so it started at 7 o'clock, and John does his monologue, and we go to the first break at about 7 minutes or 8 minutes after the hour, and it's a two-minute break, and my phone is ringing ringing. Ringing. ringing. 'Yeah, what's up?', 'This is the answering service. What have you guys done? We've gotten over 150 phone calls in the last 7 minutes.' I went, 'Woah, we're in big trouble.' I immediately thought we're in really big trouble. There's a phone line to Bill, he's on the floor, and he picks up the red phone, and I go, 'We're in trouble. The answering service has called. We've gotten 150 calls. We have to come back and show that this is actually a live show.'

"One of the bits I had done, for Act Two [midway through the show], to prove to people that it's a live show, I had put a camera and a camera operator on top of the KING building, which can see the Space Needle from where it was, very close. And what we did was, we taped a \$20 bill to a phone pole that was at the corner of Aurora and Harrison. So the Space Needle's here, Aurora is below you, and that corner is right there. So I said, what we should do is come back and show that the Space Needle is still standing, because we have that camera.

"So that's what we did. In Act Two, John comes back and says, 'Hey, I know that a lot of you thought the Space Needle [went down]. It's still standing. Here's a live shot right here, you can see it, there it is, it's still standing, everything's cool, everything's fine.' And he says, 'We made it a live shot because' and they swung down. 'We want to show that we're doing this live. It's not "almost" live. We're doing it live for the first time, and what I'm going to do,' he says, 'what we've done, we're going to swing down' and shows the phone pole, 'There's the phone pole at the corner of Aurora and Harrison, and the first person to go to that phone pole gets the \$20 bill, and we'll have you on the show.'

“And this is the part that really pissed me off. We spent extra money to hire the guy out of our budget, got the camera, got up there, got the Needle, saved our asses on that thing. One of the editors in the newsroom is watching the show live downstairs. He goes out there, gets the [\$20 bill], says, ‘I got it, I got it,’ and then he realizes, and goes back and tries to put it back there. John goes, ‘Great, OK, game over, on to the next thing.’ I was furious at that guy. I thought, ‘What in the hell? How could this go so far south?’

“That \$20, that was a bit, so we were going to make the person the king of ‘Almost Live!’, king of KING, bring it down, and whoever drives to it, from their house, obviously, because nobody’s watching TV in their car, and they got there first, they did it, and we interrupt the show, or we tape it, and they would get it, and then someone would be down there. There was someone waiting down there to escort them into the building. We just did it to show we were live. ‘What could we do to show we were live? How about this? How about we tape \$20 to a phone pole, and whoever drives down first, they get to come in live into the studio and see that it’s actually live instead of ‘almost’ live?

[The hoax put the show on map, with news coverage afterward.] “It’s a very defining moment.

[Soon ‘Almost Live!’ was at 11:30 p.m. Saturdays.] “We were [airing] on Sunday evenings, it was an experiment on Saturday to see what would fly. I think it was Craig Smith who said, this was exactly the same time Lorne Michaels had left SNL and it was just going down the tubes. They had those actor kids from Hollywood, so Craig decided, I don’t know how this was decided, but it’s Craig who pushed it back and pushed ‘Saturday Night Live’ to midnight. It runs on tape anyway, so might as well just start it later. And the first year they did it, everybody was, ‘What’s this? I hate this show. We want to see SNL.’ The second year, ‘Oh, not so bad.’ The third season, we had three seasons to do it, we didn’t have a timeline to do it because they didn’t care. It was a show they produced and were proud of, it only had to make so much money and didn’t have a huge staff. By that time, we had reached our stride.

“Eric Bremner at that point was general manager of the station, very nice man, very smart man. He was the president of the NBC affiliates for many years and during that time, so he went to NBC and said, ‘We’re going to push back SNL.’ ‘The hell you are.’ ‘We are. We’re going to do it, it’s going to be fine. Your show’s not doing that well, and we want to try something.’ They went, ‘OK.’ He fought for them. I don’t think he had to fight very hard. I think it was Craig Smith’s idea to push it back.

[It helped ‘Almost Live!’ but also helped SNL.] “That’s a little bit of a stretch, only because SNL was the only show in town. They tried to mount other things, like ‘Fridays’ on ABC didn’t work. CBS tried a comedy show, didn’t work. SNL was established in 1975, and this was 12 years later, so it was established, it was an icon at that time. Even as bad as it got — and it’s bad now, it’s 50 years old, and it has outgrown its usefulness. The way comedy goes, it’s fun to see sketches, I think they do a pretty good job. I’ll say that political humor is Stephen Colbert’s bailiwick, as is ‘The Daily Show,’ they do it well. The others try. Johnny Carson didn’t do political humor. He just didn’t.

[Did Ross’ ‘Louie Louie’ campaign have impact equal to the Space Needle prank?] “The ‘Louie Louie’ thing was great. There’s nothing funny about it. It’s a promotion device. [And it’s local.] Yeah, but they got Olympia to make it the official rock song. You’re not going to replace ‘Washington, My Home.’ It was something that people got behind. It garnered viewers, it was fun. It wasn’t necessarily funny, but there was a whole list of things that they thought, let’s do it for a promotion, we’ll make buttons. But that one really did stick.

“Like I said, two different shows. During the Ross days, they did that, and we had a lot of good guests on in the Ross days, but you have to go back in time where, if you were promoting a book or were a local comedian, we would tape the show on Thursday nights. The reason was, that’s the first night the comedians would play at Giggles or the Comedy Underground or whatever. Which is why we got Jerry Seinfeld and why we got Ellen DeGeneres and all those comedians going to these crap-can little clubs across the nation trying to make a buck. Jay Leno, Jerry Seinfeld, Ellen DeGeneres, Dana Carvey, all of these people. I didn’t know who they were. Once Seinfeld became famous, but he would come back once or twice a year.

[Also had Phil Donohue and Joe Walsh.] “If they were in town, we would approach them to do it. We had Cheap Trick. That’s the thing. As local show, the word gets out, and here’s the thing about the comedians. They would come to town, and they would do five minutes of standup. The whole idea was to get on the Carson show, because if you got on the Carson show, you were anointed, and if he invited you to join him at the desk, you were untouchable. Comedy clubs in L.A. are not any different than the ones that are here, they’re just in L.A., and to get his producer to come out on a night, a Saturday or Friday, and see you, impossible. However, they come on our show and do five to seven minutes of their act, the best part I would give them a ¾-inch tape. I would make a tape, I would go down afterwards and, ‘There it is. Good luck.’ They get that, that’s their calling card, and that’s how most of them got on the show. For the comedians, it became, ‘If you’re going to Seattle, you’ve got to get on this show because they’re give you a tape.’ Nobody else would.

[How unusual was show nationwide?] “There’s no other show like it, seriously. I go online and look for local shows or comedy shows. There might have been one for one season, but not anything like our show with a live studio audience of 120 people. It was loud and raucous, and recorded live, like ‘Saturday Night Live,’ it’s iconic.

“I just went a year ago, and it’s very exciting. Even for me, it’s extremely exciting to watch the whole process and setting up the next sets and getting ready and playing ear-piercing music during the breaks. I went to see the Letterman show, and I went to see ‘Saturday Night Live,’ and that’s back in the day where, because of Eric, ‘I want to go to New York, I want to see these shows.’ ‘No problem, you get the VIPs,’ the VIP tickets. I said, ‘Oh, this is how they do it.’ They had a live band, but it doesn’t matter. You just play music going to break, and you keep it so loud that you can’t even talk to each other. And you keep the studios cold as you possibly can. I learned that through the Letterman show. People go into a hot studio, and people go, ‘I could take nap.’ Letterman would keep his studios at like 48 degrees, and people like, ‘Better wear a jacket.’ Because they turn on the lights, and then it starts to heat up. I learned a lot from that.

[Did you know at the time that this was an anomaly nationwide?] “It wasn’t nationwide until 1992, when we went national. If you were in L.A. and you did a sketch comedy show like ‘Haywire.’ There were a lot of sketch comedy shows in the early 1990s, but they would be syndicated, they would go national, which was the whole idea as long as they tried to syndicate it, and they missed the mark, so the next thing was to sell it to this brand new station called Comedy Central. They bought ‘Almost Live!’ We did 65 episodes. It was a killer. I was working seven days a week, 16 hours a day, loving every minute of it.

“First of all, they had a show five nights a week. Second of all, the only thing they said that we couldn’t do was use Bellevue because Bellevue on the East Coast is a crazy hospital, it’s well-known nationwide, it’s mentioned in many movies, from the 1930s and 1940s all the way to today, but we could say the Eastside. That’s why we didn’t call it Bellevue, we’d say the Eastside like ‘East Side Story.’ The East Side in New York is the fancy side. Every city has neighborhoods: that’s where the hicks live and the rich people live and the old people live. It’s all segregated, and people make fun of them. Every city has that. Every city has these quirky little things, so they were like, ‘The only thing you can’t do is use the word Bellevue.’

[Why Seattle was the only city to have this kind of show] “Seriously, I have to give respect to KING 5. None of the other local stations would do a show like that. They wouldn’t have allowed the creativity. KING was lousy with creatives, lousy. I started there as a floor director. I spent my internship there, and when I got there, I was on a show called ‘How Come’ with Al Wallace, and that was extremely creative. A young guy, Craig Johnston, he was the producer. He wrote the show, so it had an edgy, smartass thing to it, and also just read the [Tele]Prompter. He’d walk out, and we’d drop stuff on him, or we’d do a cartoon thing where we’d blow him up. And I walked into that. I was, ‘This is what I want to do,’ and they did a lot of my ideas.

“KOMO was uptight white guys that were, ‘We’re going to do a show, and it’s going to be really really good,’ and it sucks. I couldn’t watch it for five minutes. Compare Stan Boreson to fuckin’ Captain Puget. He was terrible, unwatchable, even as a child, and Boreson’s doing bits that are vaudeville. And you’ve got Patches, and he’s way out there. I love Stan, but Patches is the king of that stuff. At that station, those guys were the only creatives, and they made so much money.

"I grew up in Lakewood south of Tacoma, but we watched 4, 5 and 7. Even Brakeman Bill because of Crazy Donkey. He was the whole thing, and he was the straight man. Warren Reed, he was the guy, he was that show. But for Patches, if you were a floor director, if you played a bit, you got paid an extra \$3, and they had seven people who were doing bits. When you've got seven people, that's like \$21 a week. Pretty soon the management said, 'You've gotta pick one. Chris, you get to pick one.' And Sheriff Shot Badly and the Professor, Wiener Von Braun, they went way, and there was Gertrude, and from that Bob Newman grew other characters. If you ever sat five minutes with Chris Wedes, if you had drinks with him or whatever, he is always on, he is extremely funny.

"KING was a creative station. They had not one kids' show. They had three or four, and at the time I got there, there was a bit of humor in them, and I added humor, but who does three or four kids' shows? Granted, they were only one once a week, they weren't on every day. KING did more local programming than any station in the United States, and that includes shows like 'Almost Live!' 'Seattle Today,' they had a game show, 'The Great American Game Show,' they did public-affairs shows, they did kids shows, they did cooking shows, they did gardening shows, they did all these shows, and when I worked there, we were busy all day. Once 'Seattle Today' went off the air, we would go shoot 'Gardening with Ed Hume,' and then we'd break for lunch and shoot something else, we'd do evening newscasts. It was busy.

[What role Seattle itself played?] "In that period of time, from the 1960s on through the 1990s, it was a very inviting place for the arts. You've got the Seattle Rep, Fifth Avenue, ACT, you've got many many places for actors and writers and people in the arts, and it's a very liberal town, so it's more likely that people would say yes. The third thing is that it's more of a matter like people and luck. If I go back to Patches, the guy who dragged him out here, the guy knew that he was the guy in Minneapolis and made him an offer he couldn't refuse. So he came out and started out here because he'd had another kids show.

"The same with KING. They hired Stan Boreson when he was in college at the University of Washington, and his first show was Clipper Capers with Art Barduhn, and just put 15 minutes on, and everything was live. I just think that living here there's a lot of creatives here, or there were at that time. I don't know about now. It was owned by a hugely liberal Democrat family, and the people who worked there were mostly liberals, and you just knew it.

"The people when I got there, there's a guy named Bob Guy. I wanted to do the Stan Boreson Christmas reunion show. I'd gone to Stan and said, 'Do you have any old kinescopes,' and he goes, 'I do, I've got boxes of them, and I've got props from the show.' I said great, I'd like to do this thing, and so I gathered all my stuff, I had all of those things transferred at night, I was there every night and transferred it, from film to tape, and I pitched it to my then-boss who wanted to be the next program director, and he says, 'Nah, you can't do it.' 'Why?' 'You don't have any video.' 'I've got 16 hours. We're only gonna make it a half-hour show.' 'Well, Stan won't do it.' 'He will do it. He loves the idea. So what's the problem?' 'I don't want you to do it.' 'What do you mean?' 'I don't want you to make him look good.'

"So I did this. He was the guy who hired me. I was sad that he didn't get that, but I got up and walked out of his office and went to the program director's office, Bob Jones, and I pitched it, and he said, 'You bet. Let's go.' 'He grabbed it out of my hands, and it got done, I was given a producer's role, I just wrangled up people and hired actors, but the vision was pretty good, it wasn't exactly what I wanted, but they thought I was too young, but still. You're never going to get it your own way, but you got it on the air. That was a learning lesson.

[Favorite segments. 'Roscoe's Oriental Rug Emporium'? You had him do it one take.] "All I did was take the Sunday paper and cut out the stills of all the rugs. So if you look at it closely, I wipe between two of them, wipe, change it, I went wipe wipe, shit I already did that one. He went through it with me, and I said, 'If you're gonna go from zero to 100, you've gotta run this thing out. The copy is almost two minutes, and if you get to 100 at one minute, you're gonna run out of breath and have a heart attack, so make sure you do that.' 'OK.'

[Who wrote that?] "Pat, that's Pat. Pat's a solo act. He's a total solo act. He would write a bit, he would do the bit, he would edit the bit, and that was it. He would act in other people's things, but his bits are his bits. And he was really good with me. He dubbed me 'Wilson's the Cal Ripken Jr. of Almost Live!' That's a really good compliment, because he can do everything, and he does it really well.

"I was the cheerleader or the bad mom. 'Goddamn it, quit fuckin' around. We have 35 minutes, and I have to get this down on paper and get it in my head to call the shots. So please quit fuckin' around.' They will always refer to me as the taskmaster, but there has to be one bad cop in that thing. And it's really hard to put on a show every week that's gonna look really good, and I don't want to screw it up. All of it is timing, to me. If you watch a comedy bit on Saturday Night Live, and they take a bit a little too early, it's blown. I can say I didn't blow any bits.

"You've gotta have beginning, middle, end, and you've gotta have an end that's good. It can't just be 'Ha ha ha' hit the applause. It's got to be one more joke or a continuation or something. I just hate when people do sketches, and it doesn't finish. It ends flat.

"Anything that Pat did, I liked. Anything that Bob did. Bob and I are so very close friends. [It's tough to do what Bob did on the show.] My moniker was the hollering guy. Not only did I holler as the director, but if they needed someone to yell really loud or get mad really fast, that's me. I did a weathercaster thing. He's wrong and wrong again. 'Are you happy?' 'Good!' Really loud. But Bob was the dumb guy. He's not dumb, but he was 'What?' He can hold that for the longest time. He never wrote for himself.

"Interns were not allowed to pitch bits or bug us to be on the show. We could not afford to pay actors. It just had to be an ensemble.

"'The John Report' was changed to 'The Late Report' because he was going to leave the show. We did 17 High-Five'n White Guys. We did the same number of Billy Quans. We knew that those would be greatest hits, so we kept repeating, and people loved that. Nancy had a few, 'Me!' I brought in Dave Grohl on that.

[Gov. Gary Locke] "Had him on with The Presidents of the United States of America. There's a song called 'Volcano,' an ode to Mount St. Helens. There's a verse in the middle, 'It's gonna blow-ow-ow, volcano.' On the third one he says [loud voice], 'Vol-CANE-o.' [Locke's intro line] 'Ladies and gentlemen, I may be the governor of the state of Washington, but these are The Presidents of the United States of America.'

"John Keister hated doing promos. He would just throw them off. 30 seconds in Seinfeld. KING instead of selling that 30 seconds for \$20,000, they set it aside as a promo for 'Almost Live.' And he was like, 'The people who are going to watch the show will watch the show. We're not gonna get any new viewers.' 'Man, you are just stupid. You don't even understand what a gift this is.'

"There was a year we swept the Emmys. They had to change the categories because there was news and non-news. We won everything. It was embarrassing. We had to get up there six or seven times.

[Never going to retire.] "If the phone rings, I'll answer it. I do all the stuff for Microsoft, direct the local Emmys. [TV is your life.] It is. Making cheese. I'm just making better cheese.

[What was your best time?] "Best 15 years: 'Almost Live!' The fun. The notoriety. After the show was over, we'd go to a bar, I think the Brooklyn. We didn't show up for a couple of weeks, maybe we were on hiatus, we didn't do anything for the month of March. They got antsy. They said, 'Look, we're going to comp all your drinks and all your food if you come down after the show.' 'OK.' So we did that for a long time. They'd set up big-screen TVs, it was a watch party. Pat never went. He had to go to work in the morning.

[Before the internet. Communal experience: ensemble, audience, city as a whole.] "We had this tool that nobody else had. We had a news director who was a bastard. He got really upset with us. We made fun of Jim Forman [on-scene weather disaster reporter]. He didn't like it. The general manager said, 'They can use the video if they black-and-white it.' We did it for one week, then we went back to normal.

[Keister] "Great writer, very creative. Ross was learned funny, imitating a stand-up comedian. He wanted to host [Joan Rivers show similar to] 'The Tonight Show,' and he got that opportunity. He got that, but after 18 months, he was out of a job. John was the anti-, the angry young man, the totally angry young man. He was very good, a great actor, and he could do everything. He had his demons, but that show wouldn't be what it was without him."