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Portland's got it 'Wired'

The success of "Live Wire!" has its two creators thinking about going national

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Lots of people move to Portland thinking they'd love to do something creative. But few of them manage to create and produce their own regular radio show. Fewer still dream of taking their live performance/radio broadcast baby to a national audience.

But that's just what Robyn Tenenbaum and Kate Sokoloff, the co-creators and producers of "Live Wire!," have in mind. They're not satisfied with selling hundreds of tickets to their show's live performances. Or with having an on-air berth every month at Oregon Public Broadcasting. They want nothing less than to do for Portland what "A Prairie Home Companion" has done for Minnesota: put it on the national radio map as a place with its own entertaining quirks, personality and sense of humor.

It's a tall order. How can one scrappy show convince the listening world that there's more to Oregon than salmon, trees and Tonya Harding? So far, "Live Wire!" has offered the following: sketch comedy by its resident Faces for Radio Theater troupe; music from the likes of Colin Meloy of the Decemberists, Reggie Houston, Helio Sequence and Pink Martini's Thomas Lauderdale and China Forbes; and interviews with such based-in-Portland talents as director Todd Haynes ("Far From Heaven"), Oregon Symphony maestro Carlos Kalmar, and Columbia Sportswear matriarch Gert Boyle.

And that's not even counting Audience Haiku (sample entry: "In the seventh grade/I rocked out to the Osmonds/For that I repent.")

Since launching its monthly shows in March 2004, the Live Wire! crew have been recording the show live, for broadcast about a week later on OPB. When Tenenbaum, 38, and Sokoloff, 44, were first brainstorming about doing a live radio show, back in 2003, they had a choice. They could approach potential sponsors and underwriters by describing the kind of show they had in mind. After all, they boasted impressive credits: Before Tenenbaum moved from San Francisco to Portland in 1999, she'd worked for Bill Graham Presents, catching flights from Athens to Istanbul with the Rolling Stones, and she'd also helped produce the Bay Area-based radio show "West Coast Live."

Sokoloff had worked both in California and in Portland on music and theater productions and events management, with such clients as Portland Revels and Mississippi Studios.

But they decided to put on the show first -- and then run around looking for financial backing. "We thought it was better to put together a show people could actually come and see, to try and raise a buzz about it," Tenenbaum says.

The show that airs this Saturday on OPB is the 18th one the producers have overseen. While the Portland-based business Rejuvenation is on board as sponsor, the duo think just a bit more corporate support could launch the show to a weekly schedule, and, they hope, national syndication. "I think we're probably two really enlightened companies writing us nice-sized checks away from that," Sokoloff says.

Meanwhile, the show must go on. And so it does, usually at the Aladdin Theater (though the next taping is a "road trip" to the Mission Theater & Pub). Though crowd size varies depending on the guests, the tapings draw a core of loyal fans.

At the Oct. 21 taping of the show that airs this Saturday, Margaret LaBrecque, 41, showed up with friends and fellow workers at Intel. "I've listened to the show as long as it's been on OPB," she said. "Listening to it, there was just something about it that said 'Portland.'" LaBrecque would love to see "Live Wire!" go national, for the benefit of "those poor people in the rest of the country," she said with a laugh.

While the guests are an obvious source of That Portland Something, comedy sketches by the Faces of Radio Theater convey Portlandness in a more indirect way. Occasionally, they'll put a specific local spin on material -- as in running gags about Great Moments in Oregon Music History (including former Rose City resident Courtney Love screeching about MSG in her food). More often, the routines come out of the writers' and actors' predilections, such as a fondness for retro pop culture (hard-boiled movies of the 1930s and '40s are a frequent inspiration) and goofiness (a fake commercial for a product that remedies noisy stomachs) that strike a not-too-hip, not-too-square chord that audiences here obviously feel comfortable with.

Tyler Hughs, a veteran of the Portland improv scene and a member of the Faces for Radio Theater troupe, warms up the crowd before taping starts. The bearded, husky Hughs cautions the audience not to make noise during taping: "If you are wearing leather pants, refrain from crossing your legs." But just to kick things off, each taping begins with the attendees encouraged to, on cue, shout out the name "Live Wire!" at the top of their lungs.

Courtenay Hameister, the show's head writer and host, enters, wearing one of her trademark sparkly '50s-retro-style frocks. The rest of the Faces for Radio crew -- Sean McGrath, Tricia Ferguson, Jon Paul McLellan, Pat Janowski and band leader Ralph Huntley -- perform comedy bits between guest appearances. Depending on the show, the sketches can either follow a theme (music, books, holidays) or just be goofy, like that fake commercial about embarrassing gastric noises.

Though nobody is making a living off of "Live Wire!" yet, Hameister says the experience of working on it keeps the crew coming back. "I'm very lucky that I got in before they actually knew what they were doing," the 37-year-old freelance copywriter says. After attending New York University, Hameister had worked with the comedy group The State, home to such people as Michael Ian Black ("Ed") and Thomas Lennon ("Reno 911"). Though she was a behind-the-scenes person there, Hameister seems eminently comfortable onstage.

Managing a creative team in the writing process -- which is open to much collaboration and feedback -- can be challenging, Hameister says. The biggest argument Hameister remembers having with her colleagues goes back to last October. "It got bloody over an Abbott and Costello parody sketch. It's one of those things where, the next day, you think, were we actually arguing about that?"

Asked where she'd like to see "Live Wire!" a year from now, Hameister says, "I'd love to be a nationally syndicated show, and I think that we have the Northwest-based artists and filmmakers and musicians to fill up the show." On the other hand, she says, "If this is where we are in a year, still doing the show here, I'd be happy as well. Because I love it. As long as we're still doing the show, I'll be happy."

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