



## Portland-produced show offers up a singular voice

*Host and crew of 'Live Wire!' hear the call of national radio*

By ERIC BARTELS Issue date: Tue, Dec 13, 2005

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**No doubt Courtenay Hameister has her low-key moments, when she visits the quieter end of the emotional spectrum. But she's one of those people who are always leaning, if not practically falling, toward a good laugh.**

And when she cracks herself up, which is often, her explosive laughter clearly comes from a handy place, one she can access easily.

It's the spirit behind her laugh that has makes Hameister a pivotal piece of the local radio program "Live Wire!," of which she is the host and head writer.

The 37-year-old Hameister will be up front once again this week at the Aladdin Theater, when the troupe presents another of its monthly tapings, a picaresque mélange of music, comedy and commentary that has become a consistent crowd pleaser for Portland audiences.

If the talented, ambitious producers and cast members of "Live Wire!" have their way, the show will become a fixture on the U.S. entertainment landscape, a sort of Northwest version of National Public Radio's venerable Minnesota-based "A Prairie Home Companion."

"We'll get there," says co-producer Robyn Tenenbaum, who spent four years in San Francisco with the radio show "West Coast Live." "In the public radio world, we've progressed at lightning speed. We're a lot further along than I thought we'd be."

"Live Wire!"'s previous taping, at the Mission Theatre last month, drew a near-capacity crowd. Thoughtful types in sensible outerwear absorbed offbeat sketches, a reading by a woman addicted to professional wrestling,

and hypnotic Middle Eastern music from the esoteric local combo 3 Leg Torso.

The show, which is approaching its third year, is built on a slightly off-kilter foundation, some of it deriving from Hameister's comic sensibilities as a writer.

"I absolutely respect what Garrison Keillor's done," she says. "He's done it for 30 years. But it's not even close to what we want to do. Their comedy's very safe. We'd rather play with the boundaries."

More surprising is Hameister's unexpected development as the show's glib, upbeat host.

"She's come a long way," Tenenbaum says. "She listens and she learns from everything she does and doesn't do and applies it to the next show. She's getting better all the time.

"Would we like for her to grow to be the ideal host? Yes, we would. She's an absolutely invaluable part of the show."

### **Steps toward the stage**

Hameister (pronounced HAH-my-ster) grew up all over the map as the daughter of a West Point graduate who did two tours in Vietnam before becoming a doctor. After attending high school in Northern California, where she acted in school productions, she studied theater at New York University, but she never got on stage.

She worked behind the scenes for school productions and also for a sketch comedy troupe, "The State," which ran on MTV for two years in the early '90s. "I just idolized them," she says. "I knew that I couldn't be in the troupe, I just wanted to help out any way I could."

At the time, Hameister felt she didn't have the constitution to pursue performing as a career.

"The life of an actor seemed so unappealing to me," she says. "I never auditioned. I couldn't handle the rejection."

When she moved to Portland in 1997, she went to work for the advertising and public relations firm Grady Britton, first in technical support, later writing ad copy. It was through that job that she met co-producers Tenenbaum and Kate Sokoloff, who had begun to map out a live radio show.

Hameister was quick to show interest.

"I kind of said, 'I'd love to write for the show,'" Hameister recalls. She was taken on board as both a writer and performer, a member of the show's eight-person Faces for Radio ensemble.

"I was essentially the head writer from the beginning," she says, "with a

great, great staff.”

Sketch comedy, Sokoloff says, is Hameister’s strong suit. “That’s her passion, and she’s really, really good.”

When “Live Wire!” launched in early 2004, the host was Rob Sample, the partner of restaurateur Lisa Schroeder. But Sample couldn’t commit to the project full time, and Hameister jumped in on an interim basis.

“I just remember sheer terror,” she says. “We thought Rob would be back.”

But the show’s producers were comfortable with Hameister as host, a role she had auditioned for initially.

“We didn’t set out to have a woman,” Tenenbaum says. “It just sort of happened. She sort of stepped into this role. I think she changes the feeling a little bit, maybe skews it a little younger. We’re happy with that.”

“It felt right,” says Sokoloff, who didn’t want to go outside the existing cast for a new host. “This was the sensitivity we wanted.”

Hameister, whom Tenenbaum calls “self-deprecating by nature,” says there is comfort in the fact that shows are taped weeks ahead of their actual broadcast on KOPB (91.5 FM) radio. The “do over” option is always available, although it was seldom used at the last taping.

“This gives us a lot of leeway in terms of experimenting and being a little bit looser,” Hameister says. “If we know the interview is going to be five minutes, we interview for nine minutes.”

More reassuring, she says, is the enthusiastic nature of the show’s live audiences.

“People are really excited that there’s something like this for Portland and the Northwest. We screw up, and they go, ‘Good for you, you guys,’” clapping her hands in a frenzied imitation.

“It’s like an audience filled with mothers. They’re very supportive. That’s what feeds your performance.”

Hameister admits she hasn’t mastered all her duties as host. Interviewing guests — and not always for laughs — is at once the most challenging and most rewarding part of the experience, she says.

“I know patently well what I don’t know,” says Hameister, who must strike a balance between serious and outright silly, depending on the guest.

“We’d love to be between Jon Stewart and Charlie Rose,” she says. “We’re a little lefty; I don’t think that’s a secret. We’re trying to inject our sensibility. But we haven’t had anybody on that’s overtly of any political party.

“We don’t want it to be ‘Crossfire.’ Instead of having them have a political debate, we might have them juggle. Or have a political debate while they’re juggling. We like to twist things a little bit.

“Even though I have a lot to learn, what excites me about it is that I’m so lucky that I get to talk to these people.”

### **A station break**

Tenenbaum says “Live Wire!” has found all the brainpower and talent it needs to move ahead with plans to tape weekly, then go regional and national. The problem is finding the funding in the somewhat gravity-bound world of public radio.

“I love public radio,” says Tenenbaum, who worked for the music promoter Bill Graham Presents in San Francisco, “but people just avert risk. It’s the anti-rock-and-roll scene.

“It comes around to raising the money. We’ve had all sorts of heads of companies in our audience. Maybe people don’t know we need money. We’re being more aggressive about letting people know that the show can only go on with investment.

“As long as we’ve got momentum and we can see the future, I’m willing to stick it out. I’d like to think that there are a lot of options and opportunities.”

Hameister is also in it for the duration.

“I’ve never been more proud of anything in my life,” she says. “I’m amazed at the talent of our writers and that they’re not living in New York or Los Angeles. Same with the actors.”

“It’s the thing I never knew I always wanted to do. I gave it up because it terrified me. Now I’m doing it.”