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RADIO AND TELEVISION

# NPR's 'Wait, Wait ... Don't Tell Me!' You Can't Make This Stuff Up. Or Can You?

By SUSAN BRENNAN

IT'S hard to picture the anchor of NBC's nightly television newscast enjoying "appointment radio," but that's what [Brian Williams](#) said he does at home each weekend. He sits with his avalanche of Sunday papers, yelling out answers to public radio's comedy news quiz, "Wait, Wait ... Don't Tell Me!"

"Like so many fans of the show," Mr. Williams said recently, "I have said to more than one family member at times, 'Boy, I bet I could do well on there.' "

You think? But acing the quiz isn't really point of the eight-year-old National Public Radio show, which features the host, Peter Sagal, testing callers on the week's dumbest events and most misguided newsmakers. It's about how the news can be so absurd (the Defense Department develops human cannonball technology; [Keith Richards](#) falls out of a palm tree) that listeners are challenged to distinguish real events from the ones invented by the show's writers.

The weekly quiz is also a verbal throw-down staged by Mr. Sagal and a rotating crew of three panelists, who vie to top one another's ad libs and provoke the biggest laughs from a studio audience.

"We're all happily hams," said Mr. Sagal, a playwright. His crew of obscure and slightly famous humorists includes Paula Poundstone, Mo Rocca and the writers

Roy Blount Jr., Charlie Pierce, P. J. O'Rourke and Roxanne Roberts, among others.

Each broadcast features Mr. Sagal leading listeners and panelists through a series of games, including a fill-in-the-blank speed round in which panelists compete to answer the most questions correctly. Last week Ms. Roberts was quizzed on an Oregon citizens' group that demanded that legislators be banned from voting when they are: What?

"Drunk," she correctly replied.

Another panelist, Adam Felber, interjected, "This is in reaction to the 'I never realized how beautiful you were' bill, right?"

The show, which is co-produced with Chicago Public Radio, has the fastest-expanding audience among NPR's programs and is now heard by about two million people on 358 stations. Four months ago it became available as a podcast, and since then it has consistently been among the Top 20 most popular downloads ranked by iTunes.

"There's a giant segment that doesn't listen to NPR, and they can find us now," said Mr. Felber, a comedy-writer-improv-guy-blogger. "I know people have mentioned the show to me 100 percent more times" since they could hear it on their MP3 players.

Mr. Sagal said "Wait, Wait" got a boost a year ago when it switched from taping in a studio, with panelists phoning in from around the country, to staging live shows à la "Prairie Home Companion." "Suddenly we're funnier," he said, "because people are laughing at us" on the air.

He said performing before a live audience in Chicago allows him "to do more aggressive, dangerous, funnier stuff."

"If the audience laughs at you, they protect you," he added.

But the show's creator, Doug Berman, the man also responsible for NPR's "Car Talk," attributes the pricklier humor as much to the show's raw material: what is actually happening in the world.

"If you were looking at the history of the universe back to the Big Bang, and you had to pick eight years to do a humorous news quiz, Clinton and Lewinsky into the Bush administration would have to be it," he said. "What period is even a close second?"

Mr. Berman added, "We're lobbying for a repeal of the 22nd Amendment," which prohibits presidents from serving more than two terms.

"The ability of the people on the show to think on their feet just astounds me," said Murray Schrottenboer, a fan who claims never to miss a show. The owner of a mountain bike retreat in Pennsylvania, he said, "I can guarantee to pretty well be laughing for the entire hour, and nothing else does that for me."

Mr. Schrottenboer's devotion is such that in September he will be the host of a gathering of "Wait, Wait" fans that he's calling "Felberpalooza" in honor of the publication of Mr. Felber's first novel. Another fan made a seven-year spreadsheet that tracks the percentage of correct answers from each panelist.

It takes a week to create each show. Beginning on Mondays, Mr. Sagal and a staff of five Chicago-based writers and producers comb the Web, including sites like The Obscure Store and Reuters: Oddly Enough, for news of the weird. Pea-brained criminals and scientists who study minutia are favorite subjects.

The writers also begin to shape some of the set pieces, including "Bluff the Listener," a game in which players must distinguish a real news story from two tall tales invented by the panelists. In another segment, "Who Is Carl This Time?," Carl Kasell, a 56-year radio veteran who is also the stentorian voice of NPR's morning newscasts, mimics something a newsmaker said in the previous week. A listener must guess if he's being President Bush, [Britney Spears](#) or even Keith Richards.

"It's kind of a throwback to the early days, when there were interesting dramas and quiz shows and comedies on radio, and I'm glad to be a part of it," said Mr. Kasell, 72.

On Wednesdays and Thursdays staff members work up the quiz questions. Three panelists fly in from around the country and, along with Mr. Sagal, tape the show

on Thursday nights in the basement auditorium of a bank building. The show is edited down to its best bits on Fridays and is broadcast on Saturdays or Sundays.

One indication of the show's thriving fortunes is the class of celebrity it attracts. Each week, in a segment called "Not My Job," a famous person is tested on a topic he or she would be expected to know little or nothing about. Salman Rushdie, for example, was quizzed on the history of Pez dispensers and won the show's single prize: Mr. Kasell's voice on a listener's home phone recording. (Mr. Williams of NBC will put himself to the unfair test on the weekend of June 24.)

What a difference a year makes: for the show's first live taping a year ago, the contestant was a guy who did movie trailer voiceovers; the weekend of May 13 it was [Tom Hanks](#).

In a play on Mr. Hanks's nice-guy reputation, Mr. Sagal prepared three multiple-choice questions for him about "the meanest, cruelest, drunken" louts in old Hollywood. The first question concerned [Marlon Brando](#), who allegedly split 52 pair of pants while filming "Mutiny on the Bounty." Mr. Hanks got the answer wrong. "Can I say just one thing?" he responded. "Damn you to hell."

He and Mr. Sagal also engaged in some chitchat about "The Da Vinci Code." Typical movie star stroking, except that a week later, the show featured a question on the movie's generally lousy reviews. This caused Mr. Blount to ad lib, "I remember us being a lot more open to this movie last week."

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