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John Tesh shares some laughs, explains the Klingon thing and drops some names

By EMILY REILLY Special to the Union Leader Sep 11, 2019 Updated Sep 12, 2019



John Tesh, who anchored the TV newscast "Entertainment Tonight" for 10 years, is a lifelong composer and piano player — he played the Hamond B3 organ in three Long Island rock bands and has earned six music Emmys and three gold records. He brings "Stories and Songs from the Grand Piano" — and his trademark sense of humor — to Tupelo Music Hall in Derry tonight.

TV host, sportscaster, musician and entertainment and news journalist John Tesh can tell a lot of stories.



In an interview with NHWeekend, the Emmy Award-winning, Grammy-nominated radio host touched on playing the keys on Black Sabbath's "The Wizard" with Dweezil and Ahmet Zappa; talked about how he and Tim Allen, as parents, paired up on the "coffee team" at their kids' school; and divulged what it was like to ride a tandem bike with William Shatner and Abe Vigoda. And it turns out "Star Trek" fans won't let him forget his brief time as a Klingon.

Tesh, 67, also dished on his "NBA on NBC" basketball theme song known as "Roundball Rock," his recent battle with cancer, and his soon-to-be memoir, which crystallizes his career ups and downs.

Tesh will bring his musical talents and upbeat, comedic storytelling to the stage at 8 p.m. today for "Songs and Stories from the Grand Piano" at Tupelo Music Hall in Derry.

Here's more of what he had to say.

It's interesting to hear your voice on the phone rather than on the radio (program, "Intelligence for Your Life.")

It's a little creepy, right?

Who's joining you for your show?

The concert is really a combination of telling stories and playing music, which is why it has the goofy name "Songs and Stories From the Grand Piano." My daughter is a ballerina and modern dancer and so she'll be dancing with us. And then my son, Gib, he's 38 and he is a comedian and a ukulele player, of all things, because what instrument would a comedian play — a ukulele, right? We're like the Partridge Family, if you remember what that was.

How did the show get started?

I'm about two days away from turning in a memoir to the guys at Harper Collins. In 2015, I ended up with a terrible cancer diagnosis. It was a very rare form of cancer. (Doctors) said, "Well, you could probably count on 18 months." (I said) "18 months of what? Treatment?" (They said), "No. Life."

So my life really changed dramatically. We used a combination of surgery and the stuff that doctors do — chemicals, chemotherapy and the ketogenic diet, and also focused prayer. Not only did I get healed of cancer, I got healed of everything. So it's part of what I talk about a little bit at the end of the show.

One of the guys at Harper Collins said, "You need to tell this story." And so two years ago, I started writing this thing. I didn't use a ghostwriter. They were just these bizarre stories.

What kind of stories?

Things like when I was 20 years old, I was homeless living in a pup tent in North Carolina. My father wanted me to follow in his footsteps and make underwear. He was the vice president of Hanes Underwear, and I wanted to be a musician and a media guy. I tried it first, the underwear thing, for three years. And I finally just freaked out. I had to change my major. So I did it without telling my parents, and I did it against the rules of university. I got suspended for a semester, and then my parents threw me out of the house 'cause they were embarrassed.

And so that's how I ended up in a tent. Three years later, I was anchoring the news in New York City, right in the same building as Walter Cronkite. It's an interesting tapestry of some major successes and some horrible failures. And I think that's why people read memoirs anyway, right?

Looking through some of your bio it turns up that you once dated Oprah Winfrey. How did you two meet?

I was a reporter, a correspondent at Channel 4 in Nashville when I was 21, and their weatherman was Pat Sajack. Across the street at the Channel 5 station, Oprah was a reporter at 19 years old. So we were always on the same stories. We did actually go out for about six months. We would go out to dinner, and we would hang out. We've helped each other get interviews and things like that. But this is 1973. If we went into certain restaurants, in Nashville, there were people who would get up and leave because, oh, you know, a white man and a black woman were together, sitting across from each other at a restaurant.

We found it a little humorous. We would actually go into restaurants and try to empty them out. That's how dark we were, but yes, I did go out with Oprah, and we remain friends.

How did you write NBA on NBC's "Roundball Rock?"

It's one of the songs that we finish (the show) with, because it's an example of bizarre ways to write a song. Ten, 20, 30 years later, everybody on YouTube has learned how to play it on their kazoo. We take you through that ... the kids playing it on the ukulele, somebody playing it on their nose. It is an example of not being afraid to just come up with an idea and then chase it for awhile.

Did you initially see the melody as a sports-themed tune?

I had an advantage. I was doing the Tour de France bike race as an announcer and also as a composer. If you're working in the sports world already, the grapevine is a little more attached to your brain. I found out that NBC was looking for a new theme for their basketball coverage.

I knew what the tempo should be and I knew what the different changes should be because I lived in that world. I submitted it not as a demo, but fully formed, right? So they didn't have to think very hard.

It just feels like the perfect song for a basketball game. Do you think a lot of people still have no idea you composed "Roundball Rock?"

"Yeah, for sure. I see it every night when we're in concert. My concerts are women 35-plus who have dragged their husband to a John Tesh concert. You see everything from the stage, right? You could see guys with their arms folded. You know that (look), "OK, I gotta get through this." Then all of a sudden that song comes on and you just see them lean over to their wives or girlfriends going like, "I know, (this song). "This is the one I know." So it takes us a whole show to get the guy, but eventually we get 'em.

How did you end up playing a Klingon?

I was working for "Entertainment Tonight." I've always been a huge "Star Trek" fan. I was at the Paramount Studios gym and I saw one of the producers of "Star Trek: The Next Generation." I said, "Hey, just so you know, if you ever need anybody to play the captain's assistant or something like that, I'd be glad to." About six months later I get this call from the "Entertainment Tonight" assignment editor saying, "Hey, the guys at 'Star Trek' want you to come be on the show."

(I) show up on Thursday at 2:30 in the morning. I'm like "Wow ... they shoot early." But the reason I was there at 2:30 was for hours of makeup. And I was becoming a Klingon before my own eyes. I was in that one scene where Worf, the head Klingon, was ... I guess he was going through puberty or something, I don't know what it was. And I was supposed to stab him with a stick. So I had one line (in Klingon). And that was it. And now people show up at my concerts and they have little trading cards and I sign them. I've been asked to go to one of those 'Star Trek' conventions. I haven't been able to go yet, but I'm dying to go. I was a minor character. It's amazing how many people remember that, though.

Jonathan Frakes, who plays Picard's second in command, that guy ... Commander Riker, I think. So, Riker lives up the street; (his) kids learned to swim in my pool. I've interviewed Bill Shatner, I don't know, five or six times. I was surrounded by "Star Trek."

When I was interviewing William Shatner the last time, I said, "Mr. Shatner," ... He goes, "John, call me Bill," and I said, "No, no, you're Mr. Shatner. Sorry." That was our (kids') first experience with a regular science fiction show.

There have been a lot of those connections in your life.

The weirdest thing that ever happened to me was ... Conan O'Brien and I have been friends over the years. Back in the day Conan couldn't get any A-level guests because Leno and Letterman had them all. And there was this unwritten rule, well, if you do a Conan show, you can't do our show. So he had like B-level guests. So it was Abe Vigoda and Bill Shatner and me. So we were on like all the time.

It was too bad Conan had to get quote-unquote "B-level" guests.

He was so loyal. On his 10th anniversary, he called me up and he said, "Hey, you know I want you and Abe Vigoda and Bill Shatner, I want you guys to do something, 'cause I really want to talk about you guys and how you were so supportive of me." And so I said, "Sure."

I said, "What are we doing?" They said, "Well you and Bill Shatner and Abe Vigoda are gonna ride a bicycle built for three ... and we want you to ride in the front." And I said, "Why?" And they said, "Because you're the lightest." And I weigh 220 pounds. That's so bizarre!

They said, "You're the lightest, and you have the most arm strength." So we rehearsed and I couldn't control the bicycle. It was so heavy. I ran it right into a wall, and they said, "That'll be perfect. Can you do that again?" We just rolled across the stage and that was it.

But after the performance, Abe Vigoda comes by my dressing room. He says, "Hey John, hi John, how you doing?" I said, "Great, Mr. Vigoda." He goes, "You know, we should really hang out." I'm thinking, "OK." (Laughing) What does that look like, you know? Never happened, but I was excited.



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