

## John Tesh Keeps Bouncing Ba-Ba-Ba-Ba-Ba Back

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On an industrial stretch of the western edge of Hell's Kitchen, a tall man with a helmet of silver hair was perched over a keyboard and a rack of sheet music inside a 2,000-square-foot space that recalled a high school band room.

It was late October, the day before an anticipated live televised performance of a song the pianist and composer had written 36 years earlier. “Let’s take it from letter B,” the man said in the sonorous, distinctive baritone of John Tesh.

A regal horn fanfare joined by strings and a kicking rhythm section followed. The tune, called [“Roundball Rock,”](#) is better known as the “N.B.A. on NBC” theme song. A 2013 [“Saturday Night Live” sketch](#) spoofed the wordless anthem, with Tim Robinson singing the invented lyrics “ba ba ba ba ba basketball” in a gaudy vest.

After a 24-year pause, the league’s games returned to the network this fall, [along with Tesh’s beloved earworm](#). Accompanied by 12 other musicians, Tesh was scheduled to play the track on the “Today” show with more from “Sports,” a recent release in his 40-plus-album catalog.

He betrayed no jitters — few people are as comfortable in a TV studio. For a decade starting in 1986, Tesh was a co-host of “Entertainment Tonight,” and one of the most ubiquitous media figures at a moment of peak monoculture. To a nationally syndicated nightly audience, he reported about Oscar nominations and, to his chagrin, celebrity birthdays.

“There was stuff the writers wanted to put in there, like ‘So-and-so is considered the stud muffin of the moment,’” he recalled over lunch a few days later. Tesh, 73, who’d previously been a newsman and a sportscaster, had his limits. There was “a list on the wall right by the voice-over booth of stuff I wouldn’t say.” He laughed heartily, a quartet of *ha*’s.

Tesh is a precise and energetic raconteur of his life story, which he’s been telling for decades onstage and in books, mainly to niche audiences, as he’s dipped in and out of the mainstream spotlight. The pop music world does not particularly celebrate the types of instrumental and cover LPs that Tesh is passionate about, which often showcase his Christian faith. Though he exudes sincerity, he knows how to weather a ribbing and then some. His ups and downs include homelessness, a brief romantic relationship with Oprah Winfrey, an epiphany at a Yes concert and a terminal cancer diagnosis.

But Tesh is still here, and with a “Roundball Rock” boost, more visible than he’s been in years. He beamed as well-wishers approached him at a Midtown Manhattan steakhouse. A few hours after the meal, he would hop a flight home to Los Angeles for a doctor’s appointment. He’d snapped part of a glute during a workout, and after limping around “like Quasimodo,” he was receiving an injection of plasma in his rear.

He chuckled at the idea that he was chasing a week of giddy highs with an unfortunate low others might be too embarrassed to mention. It was pure John Tesh.

**TESH GREW UP** the youngest of three in the Long Island suburb of Garden City. His mother, a formerly ranked tennis player, quit nursing to raise the family (speaking of her fondly, Tesh invoked “The Feminine Mystique”), and his father worked in textile sales. Music was serious business, and Tesh practiced piano and trumpet daily, devoting an hour to each. In high school, he doubled on Farfisa organ and trombone in a Blood, Sweat & Tears cover band.

His father nudged him to study textile chemistry at North Carolina State. Science classes weren’t easy — “My G.P.A. was hovering around a 1.9,” he recalled. To bring his grades up, a friend suggested a radio and television course, where Tesh found his calling. He weaseled out of statistics by forging a professor’s signature, and the college suspended him; his dad said he’d shamed the family and threw him out.



*Tesh devoted himself to music early on, taking up the piano and trumpet as a child.  
Credit: Margaret Norton/NBCUniversal, via Getty Images*

Tesh packed up his Jimi Hendrix records and drove his Volkswagen Fastback to Raleigh, N.C., where he lived in a pup tent for several months and worked construction. A local radio station told

him he needed a demo tape if he wanted a gig, so he returned to the campus studio at night and recorded a newscast, complete with a Henry Kissinger impression. He was hired, setting off a whirlwind few years.

In 1974, WSM in Nashville recruited him to anchor the news. The weatherman was Pat Sajak; Oprah Winfrey was cutting her teeth at a rival station, and they went on a few dates. Tesh recalled they'd be out enjoying themselves when patrons uncomfortable with an interracial couple would walk out: "It got to the point where she would call me up on a Friday and say, 'Hey Tesh, what restaurant do you want to empty tonight?'"

Two years later, he landed at CBS in a high-wattage newsroom beside John Stossel and Meredith Vieira. An unexpected call from the network's sports chief introduced a fresh challenge: commentating for gymnastics, figure skating and, most crucially, the Tour de France broadcasts. Tesh partnered with the announcer David Michaels, who told him to bring his synthesizers — they'd need themes and background music.

"That's where I learned how to write the picture," Tesh said. "The torturous uphill, the unbelievable falls. The tragedy, the quitting, the triumph, the teamwork, it's all there."

**TESH'S LOVE OF MUSIC** had never been far from his mind. The Beatles' "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band" was a formative album, and at college, a friend invited him to see the prog-rock institution Yes. "I never smoked pot in my life," he said, and he didn't need to. At one point, his pal noted, "Your mouth has been open for like an hour."

He wanted to distribute his Tour de France compositions, so he bought a cassette duplicating machine, did some rudimentary advertising and "ended up selling 12,000 of these things out of my garage over a two-year period," he estimated.

He hadn't seen "Entertainment Tonight" when its producers decided to take a newsier approach to the Hollywood roundup show and auditioned him with the host Mary Hart. His CBS Sports gig was wrapping up, and he was starting to panic about money. With a promise he'd have plenty of time to work on music, he signed on.

Sports fans who thought he'd sold out sent hate mail. (Dealing with negative feedback would become part of his résumé: "I got ripped in 1992 in Barcelona for being overly dramatic at the gymnastics coverage.") But Tesh seized his opportunity. He befriended [Yanni](#), and briefly joined the new age superstar's tour as a keyboardist. He recorded "Roundball Rock," which he [sang into his answering machine](#) during a burst of late-night inspiration after he heard NBC was seeking an N.B.A. theme. He hunkered down, "just banging out songs, trying to get a record deal." No one bit.



*After composing original music for CBS Sports's Tour de France coverage, Tesh dubbed it onto cassettes. He "ended up selling 12,000 of these things out of my garage over a two-year period," he estimated.*

*Credit: Philip Cheung for The New York Times*

It dawned on him that companies who'd signed "people like Billy Joel and Bruce Springsteen didn't want the guy who was reading the celebrity birthdays on the label." In an airport with his wife, the actress Connie Sellecca, Tesh came across a book called "Life Is a Contact Sport." Its message, he said, was that "you need a big event to raise your hand to say, 'I'm here, this is who I am.' And it was just like, I need a big event."

He paused: "I just gave myself chills."

That's how he dreamed up ["Live at Red Rocks,"](#) a full-orchestra performance of his originals and covers of Sting and Phil Collins songs, with the gymnastics greats Nadia Comaneci and Bart Conner showcasing balance beam and pommel horse routines beside him. He wanted PBS to foot the bill and air it during fund-raising drives. They told him to pay ("It was a million-dollar concert," he said), so he turned to his wife.

“He had a plan and he had a vision. And I wasn’t going to stand in the way of that,” Sellecca said in a phone interview, noting (with good humor) that Tesh was organizing the show even as she was hospitalized before their daughter’s birth. “We invested in his passion.”

Tesh mailed out tapes of the concert, and a PBS station in Maryland that tested it received a rapturous response. (The long-form video was certified platinum in 1995.) His indie record company was suddenly a success. Tesh booked a tour without informing his day job, which did not go over well. It was time for a new chapter.

**TESH IS NOTHING IF** not resilient. (One of his five books is titled “Relentless.”) His aesthetic, a melding of several unhip genres, hasn’t found mass appeal. He’s absorbed countless punchlines, which made [support from the late-night talk show host Conan O’Brien](#), who treated Tesh with respect, so meaningful.

(Sometimes, however, the jokes write themselves. Tesh released an album called “Sax by the Fire,” followed with “Sax on the Beach.” “Probably a poor choice,” he conceded.)

The public pounding “would wake me up at night,” he said, especially when he turned to music full time. [“Everybody made fun of me.”](#) But other musicians gave him advice, like “You must play live.”

He put out a barrage of music — Christmas albums, classical recordings, worship music — and played around 20 dates a year (50 at his post-Red Rocks peak). His label, named for his hometown, allowed Tesh the freedom to experiment. “Everybody thinks of the music industry in terms of superstars,” said Richard James Burgess, president and chief executive of the American Association of Independent Music. “But there’s a healthy amount of money to be made and a really satisfying career to be had outside of that world.”

“Most people would not think that John Tesh is independent,” he added. “He can do exactly what he wants, and that’s a beautiful thing.”

“Everybody made fun of me,” Tesh said of his music career. But other musicians gave him advice, like “You must play live.”

Tesh also developed [a syndicated radio program](#), “Intelligence for Your Life: The John Tesh Radio Show,” that includes advice and health tips rooted in studies and scientific reports. His reverence for facts traces back to his days at CBS, “where the most important person was the head of the research department.” On his [website](#), he sells prayer and piano courses.

But it all nearly ground to a halt in 2015, when Tesh was told he had a rare prostate cancer and approximately 18 months to live. “I was just like, well, I’ve had a good life,” he said. He threw what he calls his “pity party,” and numbed himself with whiskey and Vicodin. But John Tesh couldn’t simply give up.



*Credit: Philip Cheung for The New York Times*

With encouragement from Sellecca, he thrust himself into locating doctors who could treat him, and an evangelist versed in what he called the healing scriptures. “It’s not like ‘The Secret,’” he said, “but understanding that the true nature of God is health and healing, and being able to see yourself well.” (The disease eventually “roared back,” and Tesh said he lost a kidney and half his lymph nodes. He is still receiving treatment.)

Religion is deeply entwined with Tesh’s life and work. Though he has cited conservative groups that have powerfully impacted him — the Promise Keepers, Andrew Wommack Ministries — his accounting of how Christianity has shaped him is not political. “Connie and I call them ‘Holy Spirit Moments,’” he said. “There’s just things that have happened in my life that are basically supernatural.”

The “Red Rocks” success was one of them. “Roundball Rock” was another. Sellecca was the one who realized the “S.N.L.” sketch was a jolt of priceless publicity. “I said, John, this is the best thing that’s ever happened to you,” she recounted.

The bit [got a shout-out last month during the “Today” show](#) appearance, where Savannah Guthrie hopped around off-camera, and Ethan Hawke, awaiting his own interview, [played air drums](#). Tesh, in a sharp blue suit, brought his trademark dramatic flair to the big performance. He ended “Roundball Rock” hovering over his piano bench, and threw an emphatic punch in the air.

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