

Anchors away

Peter Jennings' death sends network news further into the abyss

As a longtime pop culture junkie, I'm hopelessly preoccupied with celebrity deaths. Whenever I hear about the passing of a fallen star—the more low-rent the better—I pause for a moment of silence. This year alone we've lost Miss Ellie from *Dallas*, Scotty from *Star Trek*, The Riddler from *Batman* and Doc Baker from *Little House on the Prairie* (who kicked the bucket in Grants Pass, of all places).

But when news broke that ABC anchor Peter Jennings died of lung cancer Aug. 7 at age 67, I was actually bummed. Not only was he a familiar face on the evening news for 27 years, but he exemplified a smart sophistication that has been quickly fading from broadcast journalism since the telecommunications deregulation of 1996.

With the recent departures of Dan Rather from CBS and Tom Brokaw from NBC, we face an uncertain future of further deteriorating newscasts that confuse entertainment with information, that synergize stories with sweeps stunts and, most shamefully, that ignore the flagrant corruption of the Bush administration. The networks now have an arsenal of smoking guns—Diebold, Abu Ghraib, Downing Street, Jeff Gannon, Karl Rove—but you wouldn't know it by tuning in to ABC's *World News Tonight*. Instead, the program recently devoted a significant segment of its precious time to the popularity of Christian video games.

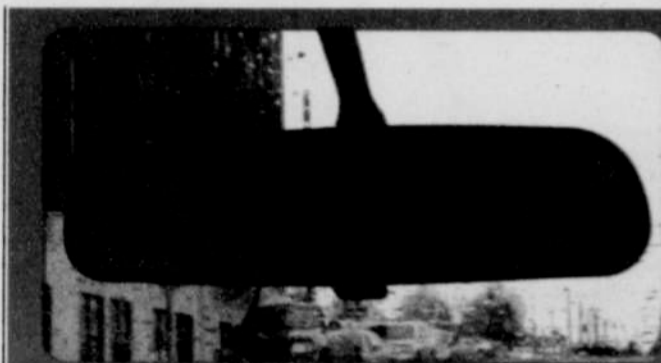
How far we've sunk since 1979, when ABC News produced *The Killing Ground*, a scathing exposé on toxic waste dumps like the one in

Love Canal near Niagara, N.Y. The chief correspondent was none other than Brit Hume, who's now polluting the airwaves himself at the Fox News Channel. Clinton Street Theater screened the documentary this month as part of a retrospective on investigative journalism, and I was struck by the steadfast zeal of the reporters who went after these unapologetic corporate scumbags.

These days, ABC News apparently has nothing better to do than disparage the dead. Last November—mere weeks after the gay-bashing of the 2004 presidential election—20/20 aired a segment that implied Matthew Shepard was murdered not because he was gay but because of money and drugs. That's right, folks, the most famous anti-gay hate crime in history wasn't really motivated by hate—if you believe highly dubious sources, misleading oversimplifications, distorted conjecture and sensationalistic repetition of unsubstantiated claims.

I've been a journalist for more than half my life, ever since I joined my high school newspaper 18 years ago. While studying journalism in college, I learned that members of the media are supposed to pursue truth with the same commitment that doctors and lawyers dedicate to health and justice. I still believe in this ideal, but without respectable journalists like Peter Jennings around, it's going to be difficult.

My fondest memory of his tenure at ABC came on New Year's Eve 1999, when he calmly reported on the non-event that was Y2K. From his perch in the middle of Times Square, Jennings chatted with drag comedian Barry



Jim's Closet
by Jim Radosta

THE TOP SHELF

Good news for Melissa Etheridge fans: After announcing last October that she was undergoing surgery to have a malignant tumor removed from her breast, the dyke rocker told *Extra* Aug. 4 that she is cancer free. She attributed her successful recovery to the strong support of her partner, actress **Tammy Lynn Michaels**.

"At the end of the whole thing when it was over, I came home to a bouquet that said 'in sickness and in health,' and she means it," Etheridge said. "And the love and support of someone like that is worth all the money in the world."

The couple are even planning on having a baby together, but **David Crosby** won't be the sperm donor this time around. "Been there, done that," Etheridge said.

As one queer icon heals, another ails. **Ani DiFranco's** label announced July 21 that the tireless singer/songwriter is taking a hiatus from live performance until next summer because of tendonitis.

"In late spring, Ani's doctor instructed her to follow a regimen of relative rest, restriction of hand use to critical times, nonsteroidal medications and splinting," Righteous Babe Records said in a statement. "Unfortunately, after having taken almost three months off from touring earlier this year to treat her condition, Ani's problems have not decreased in severity. If she were to continue to perform at this time, she

would risk permanent nerve damage to her hands."

DiFranco was scheduled to perform Sept. 2 in Veneta, Sept. 3 in Portland and Sept. 10 in Jacksonville. Those who have already purchased tickets should check with the point of purchase for instructions on receiving a refund.

““” “Star Wars is over/Will the force be with me so/I can get laid now?”
—My entry in the *Live Wire!* haiku contest Aug. 17 at the *Aladdin*. (This month's theme was "summer blockbusters.") Find out if I won by tuning in to the zany radio variety show at 7 p.m. Aug. 27 on OPB.

Humphries, aka Dame Edna, as if they were old friends. While the world celebrated together for a brief moment of unity, Edna remarked optimistically, "You feel, perhaps, peace among men is a possibility."

Ah, those were the days. **JR**

Arts and Culture Editor **JIM RADOSTA** needs your feedback. Write to jim@justout.com.



Peter Jennings: Thank you, and good night.

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