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UNSCRIPTED

Sharp Entertainment's Matt Sharp on 20 years of "hunting for the next big thing"

By Barry Walsh

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Sometimes, Plan B is the one that works out for the best.

Take the case of Matt Sharp, founder and CEO of New York-headquartered Sharp Entertainment (part of Sony Pictures Television) and creator of the *90 Day Fiancé* franchise. As a history major in college, Sharp's Plan A was to attend law school after graduation. But upon getting a plum internship opportunity with a New York State Supreme Court judge — the only undergrad intern among a cadre of law school students — that original plan was cast into doubt.

"While it was a great opportunity, I quickly realized, after many never-ending days in the law library, that I did not want to go to law school," he recalls now, speaking to *Realscreen* about Sharp Entertainment's first 20 years. "Many times, the value in an internship is learning that you *don't* want to pursue a certain direction, and that's what happened here."

As “the kid in high school that was always making a movie with my parents’ camcorder,” Sharp gravitated to quickly to Plan B, which involved a move to Manhattan to try his luck with a career in TV. After “lots of cold-calling,” Sharp landed a summer internship at MTV in the development department.

“I will never forget showing up for my interview in an olive-green suit, while everyone there at the time was walking around in jeans and T-shirts,” he says.

That summer, he also donned togs of a different variety by accepting a paid position in the page program at CBS. “After working at MTV development all day, I would head over and work as a page at *The Late Show with David Letterman*, where I wore a uniform and showed people to their seats at the Ed Sullivan Theater,” he recounts.

The CBS gig morphed into a position in the Eye’s news department, working as an assistant to an executive producer of the net’s newsmagazine shows. Over the next three years, Sharp advanced in the department, moving into field producing. But although he had landed a solid position at one of the country’s top broadcast networks, something wasn’t sitting right.

“While things were going fine, I realized that ‘The News’ was not my passion,” he says. “I found myself working for CBS News during the day and writing spec TV scripts at night.”

Thus, another move was in order — this time from news to entertainment, and a writing position with VH1. There, Sharp was given the opportunity to make his first forays into creating and developing his own series.

“In 2003, I was tasked with creating a new show about celebrities and their money,” he recalls. “We wanted to do something different, irreverent, and unlike anything on TV at the time. Since we had no money, we hired young Flash animation designers — typically a format used for computers — to give the show a new look.”

That show became *The Fabulous Life of Jennifer Lopez*. “Since it was just a ‘backdoor pilot,’ the network just threw it on the air, with no promotion or expectations, to see if anyone would watch,” Sharp says. “Out of nowhere, the special became one of the network’s highest-rated programs of the year. After this success, the then-president of VH1 gave us the dream TV order: he asked that we produce ‘as many episodes of *The Fabulous Life* as we possibly can.’”

That “dream order” of 20 episodes, as well as the “blessing of a great mentor and boss at VH1, [executive VP of programming] Michael Hirschorn,” effectively kickstarted Sharp Entertainment. But, as with most dreams that come true, once you get the go-ahead, the hard work begins.

“August 2003 to January 2004 were high-stress months,” Sharp says. “Working with my now-partner, [Sharp Entertainment EVP] Bob Larson, we needed to form an LLC; find office space; hire employees, convincing many VH1 colleagues to come with us; set up payroll; hire a contractor to redesign the offices; buy office furniture; and buy office equipment, including Avid edit machines — all while simultaneously producing a 20-episode series with upcoming airdates. We were literally building edit rooms around editors while they cut the shows.”

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In its first decade, Sharp Entertainment laid the groundwork for success with several high-rating unscripted series, including *Man v. Food* for Travel Channel, *Extreme Couponing* for TLC, and *Doomsday Preppers* for Nat Geo. When looking at each series on paper, they seem like risky swings, lying just outside of each network’s particular remit. But in each case, the risk paid off.

That would happen again in 2014, when TLC took a chance on a dating show with a difference. But for that project, it was a three-year journey from ideation to air date, with plenty of bumps along the road.

“In the summer of 2011, there was a newsmagazine piece that aired about Americans going to foreign countries to find love,” Sharp says, recounting the origins of the massive TLC hit *90 Day Fiancé*. “Immediately, this felt like a fascinating new world that could have the makings of a great television series. We quickly developed it and brought it to market. The first version of the series we pitched was a show following Americans going abroad to meet people they had met online, for the first time. We took the idea everywhere, and everyone passed.

“Some networks felt that the series would not appeal to female viewers,” he continues. “Taking that feedback and pushing the concept in a more male-skewing direction, the redeveloped concept would follow men only, going abroad to meet the prospective foreign loves of their lives. We retitled the show as a very male-leaning *Bachelor Wars: Russia*. Again, we brought the show around to more male-skewing networks, and again got a resounding round of passes.”

Undeterred, the Sharp team homed in on one of the more interesting aspects of the “looking for love abroad” process — the U.S. K-1 Visa. “It was fascinating that there was an actual visa that allowed foreign fiancés to come to the United States for 90 days, leading to either the couple getting married or breaking up and the foreigner needing to leave the country,” Sharp says. “It was a natural reality-TV format with a built-in ticking clock.”

A sizzle reel was quickly cut, and the team delivered pitches on the project for the third time. And, once again, no buyers bit.

It was a meeting at the 2013 Realscreen Summit with TLC’s Howard Lee, then EVP of programming and development for the cable net, that finally set the *90 Day* train into motion.

“I was pitching Howard a bunch of things he wasn’t particularly interested in,” Sharp recalls. “Then he asked me what I really loved that I *wasn’t* showing him. I told Howard I had something, but everyone had already passed on it multiple times. He encouraged me to share it, so I played him the sizzle reel. After three minutes, he looked up at me and said, ‘I’m buying that.’”

The rest, as they say, is television history. Launching in January 2014 with a six-episode order, *90 Day Fiancé* has become TLC's flagship series, and is undoubtedly vying with the *Law and Order* franchise for the "most spin-offs" honor.

"I think to date there have been 34 different iterations," Sharp says. "We always have a long list of new directions to take the series that we think would be great — and we are continuing to push forward on many of these — but overall, our focus is to continue to make the existing series fresh and surprising. And that starts with casting. There are so many different places in the world and different types of couples we have yet to explore."

Now moving his company into its next decade, Sharp is looking forward to diversifying Sharp Entertainment's slate even more. Acquired by CORE Media Group in 2012, which morphed into Industrial Media in 2018, the prodco is now part of the roster of Sony Pictures Television's non-fiction division, overseen by division president Eli Holzman and co-president Aaron Saidman. Both Holzman and Saidman laud Sharp for "his innate ability to forge a lasting connection with audiences."

"He has kept them engaged for 20 years and counting," they say. "He always has his eyes peeled for the next big thing, with an unwavering instinct and unique knack for finding concepts that are both fascinating and entertaining."

Sharp also refers to that most elusive of beasts — "the next big thing" — when discussing what's next for the company.

"Internally, we always joke that every few years, depending on what hit we may have on air, we are known for a different genre of TV," he says. "When we were producing *The Fabulous Life*, we were known as a company that just did pop-culture clip shows. When we launched *Man v. Food*, we became known for food travelogues. With *Extreme Couponing* and *Doomsday Preppers*, we were the go-to company to find and document subcultures. And now with *90 Day Fiancé* and *Love After Lockup*, we are associated with organic love formats."

"The point is, I believe we can hit series in any genre, and we are constantly on the hunt for that next big thing."