

Orlando Sentinel

Trevor Fraser **Contact Reporter** November 23rd, 2017 Front page.



It's seven o'clock on a Wednesday evening, and the regular crowd at a downtown Orlando pub is moving with purpose.

Reservation cards with names such as “It’s a Damn Shame” and “Get Schwifty” sit atop several tables surrounding the large bar in the center of Sideshow, a circus-themed pub on Orange Avenue. The bar is betting on a pretty good crowd because people are coming to see Curtis Earth, the trivia man.

Earth, chrome-domed and sporting a black jacket, sets up his fan-made lectern on the stage and gets his questions in order. The Orlando resident hands out answer sheets to the teams. At 7:30 p.m., he gets on the microphone.

“So glad you all could join us again tonight,” he says, “making trivia night a part of your routine.”

Earth has been running a trivia game night for 24 years, 15 at this location. Earth Trivia, the New York native's business, employs eight other hosts in what is Orlando's first quiz empire.

According to Earth, 52, he may be the creator of the first recurring quiz night in the United States.

'Don't quit your day job'

Earth has always been interested in trivia. "When we were little, he used to play [a robot] and he would ask us questions," said sister Kim Smith. For prizes, he would give his siblings jewelry that he took from his mother.

Years later, after studying communications in college, Earth was working a weekly DJ gig at a hotel in Pennsylvania in 1993.

"I hate to be bored, and I was just getting so bored," he said.

While looking through the cards of a Trivial Pursuit game one night, he decided to throw a question to the audience.

"I said I'd buy anyone a beer if they could figure [the answer] out," he said. The bartender offered to pick up the tab of the winner, and the game was born.

After a few weeks of randomly throwing out questions, Earth formatted his show into a quiz game with three rounds of questions that can be anything from sports facts to science and word jumbles. "My format has been the same since 1993," he said.

The game grew popular, and Earth began shopping it around to other venues. Within the next six years, he was performing five nights a week while also working for a car dealer.

“Even though I was successful, a voice kept repeating, ‘Don’t quit your day job,’ ” he said.

That changed in 1999 when he fell asleep at the wheel while driving back from a night of trivia. “I woke up in a cornfield,” he said. “I thought, ‘I’m quitting tomorrow.’ ”

That’s when he went to quizzes full-time.

Curtis Earth collects answer sheets during Curtis Earth Trivia at Sideshow Bar in Orlando on Wednesday, August 31, 2017. (Stephen M. Dowell/Orlando Sentinel) (Stephen M. Dowell / Orlando Sentinel)

First in the country?

Earth arrived in Orlando in 2001 from Pennsylvania. He started shopping his game around to bars immediately, but “I was told, ‘This is Orlando; no one is going to sit through a quiz,’ ” he said.

The Loaded Hog, now Sideshow, was the first to give Earth a shot in 2002.

Although pub quizzes began in England in the 1970s, Earth hadn’t encountered any in the U.S.

Earth knows of several annual trivia tournaments, but they aren’t like the weekly games that he hosts. This year, Earth asked friend Liz Logsdon to look into who had the oldest recurring trivia game night in the country. A former player and Earth Trivia employee, Logsdon dug into the research.

“I did a lot of creative Googling,” said Logsdon, an attorney. “I used as many different search terms in the U.S. as I could think of.”

The oldest company that she could find was one in Pennsylvania that dated to 1995, a couple years after Earth began hosting his quiz nights.

Earth accepts that he might not legitimately be the first. He hopes his claim to the honor might bring out the truth. “If I’m not the longest running, I want to know who is.”



The trivia team It's a Damn Shame writes down answers during Curtis Earth Trivia at Sideshow Bar in Orlando on Wednesday, August 31, 2017. (Stephen M. Dowell / Orlando Sentinel)

‘Hooked on Curtis’

Jamel Bolden has been coming to Earth’s trivia nights since almost the beginning. “It’s the mixture of people,” said Bolden, 48. His team, It’s a Damn Shame, is primarily friends and family members. “It’s about the relationships.”

Members of his team know the host's jokes. For example, whenever Earth uses the word "rump" (which happens a couple times), the audience shouts back, "You said rump!"

Other longtime teams include a group of doctors, another of lawyers and others of friends young and old.

Kristen Manieri of Orlando Date Night Guide hires Earth for some of her singles mixers. "He's just such a professional host," she said. "He knows how to be with a crowd. He's well prepared and reliable."

Jhon Builes, who goes by Simon Time, has worked as a host for Earth Trivia since 2008. He started as a fan, coming out to games in 2005.

"I didn't know what a trivia night was," he said, but he quickly fell into it. "It was an amalgam of everything I love ... the humor, I was a fan of trivia, the Riddler [from Batman] is my favorite character."

Earth functions "more as an agent than a boss," said Time. Earth books most of the venues and gives them to his hosts. He also negotiates the money. "If there's ever a problem with pay, Curtis handles it."

Time, 32, seeks to emulate Earth as much as possible in his own shows.

"Curtis, as a performer, really sets the bar," he said. "First and foremost, he's hilarious."

The players agree: It's the host that brings them back. "No matter what, he doesn't break character," said Bolden. "No one gets special treatment."

Bolden says his team is "consistently in second place," so it isn't winning that makes this part of his routine. "We're hooked on Curtis."