

**The following interview with
BOB NEWHART
was conducted by the Library of Congress on
August 18, 2015.**



LOC: Who were your greatest influences in terms of comedy and the type of comedy that you perform?

Certainly Jack Benny. I likened his timing to my timing, only I'm not as good. I don't think you can teach timing; it's something you hear in your head. I was later fortunate to meet and know Jack. He was not to be afraid of the silences. It was a great thing Jack did. One-liner comedians might tell 15 jokes in a minute; Jack knew it was worth it to wait. It was like that famous routine of his: He had already created a character who was very cheap. Mel Blanc, who did all the voices on his show, says, "Your money or your life!" And, of course, everyone knew Jack's reputation. And then the silence. And the longer the silence went on, the more people laughed.

Jack wasn't afraid of the silence; he knew it would pay off.

I just learned from him, and all the comedians I saw on the Sullivan show or Steve Allen. Good comedians. Learned why they chose that particular word, how they would plant something and play back on it four or five minutes later.

LOC: How did Warner Bros. records initially contact you about making an album?

I started out doing a two-man comedy radio program, sort of like "Bob and Ray," but not as good as "Bob and Ray." My partner was Ed Gallagher, he was in advertising and then took job in New York, and I had to find a new partner or become a single. I was afraid I'd find a partner that's wasn't as good as Ed, so I started working as a single.

I was introduced to a DJ, who became a friend of mine, Dan Sorkin. I had been on his TV program called "The Dan Sorkin Show." The Warner Brothers record people were coming through Chicago. They were calling on Dan, Dan said, "I have this friend...." And comedy records were starting to make some noise, people like Mort Sahl. And Warner said, "Have him put some of this material down on tape."

So Dan called me and asked, "Do you have a tape recorder?" I didn't. "Well, borrow one and put your routines down."

I had three routines that I had written—I had no place to do them. They were just things that struck me funny. Then I sort of honed them. I had though no place I was...*aiming* for, maybe stand-up, but that was out of the question at that time.

The three routines were “Driving Instructor,” “Abe Lincoln” and “Sub Commander.” I put them on tape and Dan played them for the Warner Brothers people. And they were--“Okay, we’ll give you a recording contract.” [Laughs.]

They said, “We’ll record you at your next nightclub date.”

I said, “Well, have a problem there.” I had never worked in nightclubs. So they went looking for a place for me to record. And it took them longer than they thought. Clubs didn’t want to take a chance. It took them,...yes, almost a year. I finally called them and asked them what about that record contract?....

The club [they found] was named the Tidelands in Houston, Texas. And they were willing to take a chance with somebody with radio experience but no stage experience.

So I went down there with half an album. I had yet to write the second half. Then, in two weeks, they came in and recorded the album. I thought it might sell 10,000 copies.

Then I waited and waited and didn’t hear anything. Again, I called up Warner Brothers and said, “Whatever happened to that album?”

And they said, “It’s going crazy in Minneapolis! We didn’t press that many copies and now every copy we press we have to send to Minneapolis.” A DJ in Minneapolis had started playing it and they even published in the newspaper—“Abe Lincoln’ will be aired at such-and-such a time.”

It exploded far beyond my expectations. Then it moved up the charts and wound up as a No. 1 on the “Billboard” charts! Then the second album came out, it became #2, then it became #1 and the first album became number two! It was like New Year’s every night. I was totally unprepared for it.

LOC: Were there any routines recorded but omitted from the first album?

That was pretty much it. We had those two weeks to try new material to fill up the album. I was lucky to fill up a full album.

LOC: The year the album came out, you won two Grammys—Album of the Year and Best New Artist. Did you attend the ceremony? What was that evening like?

It actually won three Grammys that year: Album of the Year, Best New Artist, and Spoken Word--not necessarily “Comedy,” they didn’t have a Comedy Album category then, it was just anything spoken--it could have been someone reading Mark Twain.

Warner Brothers wanted me to come to New York. The Grammys weren’t on TV yet—I don’t even know if they were on radio!--but they had a big ballroom in New York. I had never been to New York before. So I flew in to New York and [at the ceremony] they kept calling out my name! I don’t think I really understood how big it was. I think I beat out Sinatra!

I don’t think I realized what an honor it was, what a big deal it was, to get it the first shot out of the box.

LOC: When you went to record the follow-up album, was there anything that you specifically wanted to do again or not do again or did Warner Brothers simply want more of the same?

I think they were still reeling from how many albums sold--a million and a half, or two million, and that's when the country's population was half of what it is now.

The second album: it was like the flood gates, once I opened them, the material just poured out.

But I had one problem: I was a cut short. I called Bill Dailey (he later played Howard on "The Bob Newhart Show") who was doing stand-up then. Bill and I knew each other. I said, "Bill, I need the 'Grace L. Ferguson Airline and Storm Door' [routine] back. I'm a cut short. I'm going to have to take it."

He said, "But, Bob, but that's my strongest bit." But I only loaned it!

After the first album, I started thinking about the second album immediately.

LOC: Have you listened to the album recently? What strikes you about it now?

What strikes me-- My timing isn't the way I timed it. In the editing room, they [Warner Brothers] wanted to bring the album down to a certain length, so they cut some of the pauses. When I heard them, it was very jarring to me because I had heard the original. So for the second album, I said, "Please leave it the way I did it." As a comedian, those pauses—like with Jack Benny—those silences are very important.

LOC: Besides it being extremely funny, do you have any thoughts on why the album—still in print, excerpted on Youtube, etc.—is so enduring?

I think because it's still true. In some instances, like in the "Abe" sketch, it is more true today than it was in 1960. As now we are going through the election year, with focus groups and they hire these professional people who know how to package a person for the run at the presidency. It's more true today.

For people to laugh, people have to identify with it.

Even the "Driving Instructor"... "Driving Instructor" came to me when I was unemployed in Chicago and I was just taking part-time jobs so I could, possibly, pursue comedy. Every Sunday, I would leaf through the paper to see any part-time jobs. I didn't want fulltime jobs, in case I had to leave it for comedy, so I'm going through the "Chicago Tribune" and I see this huge ad, full-page, WANTED: DRIVING INSTRUCTORS. Then, next week, the same full-page ad. That's interesting. Four to five weeks, this same running ad. I thought, "There must be a huge turnover, because there's this insatiable need for new driving instructors." So, I thought, "Well, this is what it is like" and that's where that came from.