



An Interview with Bob Newhart

by

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Accounting is a degree that will allow you to go anywhere. Just ask Bob Newhart. Bob has been a successful comedian for more than forty years and is an inductee of the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences Hall of Fame. He has won three Grammy Awards for two comedy albums, has been honored with a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame and in 2002 he was the fifth recipient of the Kennedy Center's Mark Twain Prize for American Humor. He has appeared in numerous movies including *Legally Blonde 2: Red, White and Blonde* and *Elf*. Bob is most famous for two of his six television shows: *The Bob Newhart Show* (1972-1978) and *Newhart* (1982-1990). The final episode of *Newhart* was ranked by *TV Guide* as one of the top 5 most memorable moments on television.

The Bob Newhart you see on television is the genuine Bob Newhart. He is a humble, down-to-earth person who speaks with stammers and pauses that have made his comedy routines famous. I spoke to Bob about starting his career as an accountant.

Mr. Newhart: Well, I actually got a degree; I was actually in Liberal Arts and in my Senior year decided to switch to Commerce, because I was going to go on to Law School from there and felt that that would be a better preparation; the business background would be better for Law School than Liberal Arts, so I switched and as a result I lost about 9 credit points which I was assured I wouldn't lose if I switched (*Laughter*) by a student counselor, which actually delayed my entrance into service by about six months, so it wasn't all that bad. (*Laughter*) I; but then I went to law school, and I was in law school about a year and a half, and flunked out of law school. So I guess my original intention was never really to become an accountant, but to become a lawyer, but then when I got out of service I had this degree in Management with I guess a minor in, maybe a major in accounting, so I decided I guess I'd better try to make my living as an accountant; certainly never thinking at that point that I would eventually wind up as a stand up comic or doing a television show. That was the furthest; the furthest thing from my mind. The question of being very pragmatic and earning; ok how you're going to earn a living and deciding ok I'll earn as an accountant.

Dr. Huffman: How did you get your job with U.S. Gypsum, was there an open accounting position or did you know someone?

Mr. Newhart: No I didn't know anybody I guess there was an ad in the paper and I applied for it and got the job with U.S. Gypsum.

Dr. Huffman: Ok, you've been quoted as saying you were bored and didn't enjoy your job. Were you always thinking, "Man, I've got to do something else" or?

Mr. Newhart: No, what I actually thought; I thought; I was; one of my duties was in charge of petty cash which you alluded to¹ and even then I kind of found the idiocy of the world you know, I mean why spend \$5 an hour to find three cents and sometimes spend three or four hours looking for it. So even then I had this kind of; that thought, that this world was kind of a very odd place. I left I think I was then; I left U.S. Gypsum and I went with the Glidden Company, the paint company, but in their Soya² Division and that's where I was in charge of petty cash and I kind of just decided, look I'm not going to spend the rest of my life wondering what would have happened if. As a result of the syndicated radio idea that we had I said I'm going to give this a shot and see what happens, so I left the Glidden Company and worked full-time on the syndicated radio program which was eminently unsuccessful. But I decided that I wasn't going to kick myself for the rest of my life saying "why didn't you try it, why didn't you give it a chance" so I gave it a chance and I figured I would give it a year, but then one year grew into two and two into three and then three into four, but there was always something on the horizon and then along came the making of the first album and then all of a sudden I had a team of accountants, (*Laughter*) who thought I knew what I was doing so they were circumspect where actually I didn't know what I was doing. (*Laughter*)

Dr. Huffman: That album is very funny even today. I enjoy listening to it.

Mr. Newhart: It holds up, yeah, it does hold up, yeah. But I was certainly unprepared for it. I mean I never expected that it would lead to what it eventually led to: two television shows and induction into the television hall of fame. I certainly never envisioned anything like that. I thought of it maybe as being; it might be helpful in a stand-up career where ten or twelve people would show up because they heard the album. (*Laughter*)

Dr. Huffman: A few more than that.

Mr. Newhart: A few more showed up. (*Laughter*)

Dr. Huffman: You also stated that it's not easy being an accountant today, is that in reference to Arthur Andersen, my former employer, and Enron or?

¹ Huffman, William E. "An Accounting Sense of Humor." *The CPA Journal* (August 2003): 14-15.

² Soya is an ingredient of paints that is made from soybeans. It is used in a lot of today's paints

Mr. Newhart: Yeah, that's what I allude to the fact you know that even on stage today I'll say that; I'll tell the story of the petty cash thing and they say well Bob that isn't the way we; those aren't sound accounting principles and I wind up saying well, but I guess Enron those are sound accounting principles.

Dr. Huffman: Right.

Mr. Newhart: So it means I was right all along. (*Laughter*)

Dr. Huffman: So when you stated CEO's get nervous when they hear lots of laughter coming out of the accounting department; (*Laughter*) that doesn't really apply to ENRON? (*Laughter*)

Mr. Newhart: Well, there's something subversive about comedy. There's always; comedy is basically subversive. I remember I published an underground newspaper when I was an accountant of the goings on between, you know, in the office. So there was a; I'm not sure subversive and accounting go together. (*Laughter*)

Dr. Huffman: What are your opinions of the accounting profession as a whole today?

Mr. Newhart: Well, hopefully; I hope I've changed somewhat the perception of the accountant as the guy; the humorless guy with the green shade. They're real people like everybody else. They have senses of humor. That was the stigma of an accountant, you know.

Dr. Huffman: Do you think working as an accountant helped developed your style or that was just you?

Mr. Newhart: Well, I think there's something; there's a connection between numbers and humor. There's a; I don't know exactly what it is but there's a logic to numbers, but there's an illogic to comedy. Somehow there's a connection between numbers and music and comedy, but I don't know what it is, but I know it's there. I know it's a case of 2 and 2 equal 5 in terms of a comedian. You take this fact and you take that fact and then you come up with this ludicrous fact.

Dr. Huffman: Now, I hear you still write out your ideas on the yellow legal pads. Did you start that when you were an accountant?

Mr. Newhart: You know I don't remember. That just seemed the most logical place to do it. I still can't do it on a computer even though I have a computer and I'm computer literate. It's interesting, because when we were expecting our last child, Courtney, which is now almost, well, 26 years ago, we had to move from where we were while we did some; while we added a

bedroom and I remember I was looking through *Popular Science* and I saw this add for the Commodore Computer, The PET it was called; The PET Computer and it was tape driven. You know you loaded programs on; they were on tape. It was long before the disk or the hard drive or the CD or anything like that. And I saw this was advertised and realized that my two boys were probably going to come to me in the future and say, ‘how does this work’ and ‘how does that work’ and so some 26 years ago I got involved in the world of computing. But I still don’t; I can’t write my routines on the computer even though it would be easier in terms of Microsoft Word or something like that. It’s just I’m a traditionalist and I just; I have to write it down on a yellow, legal size pad of paper.

(Laughter)

Dr. Huffman: Now, did you really go by your first name of George when you worked as an accountant?

Mr. Newhart: Well, my friends knew me as Bob. But of course in service I was called George and when I worked as an accountant; yeah, I was called George, because that was; you know you had to list your first, middle, last name. So, if someone calls me George today, I probably knew them in service.

Dr. Huffman: You spent 2 years in the Army?

Mr. Newhart: Yeah.

Dr. Huffman: What were your duties?

Mr. Newhart: Well, I went through classification and assignment at Fort Sheridan and the guy said, ‘did you graduate from college?’ and I said, ‘yeah’ and he said, ‘what was your degree?’ and I said, ‘management’ and he said, ‘factory management or personnel management’ and I realized that the army didn’t have any factories, *(Laughter)* because at that time I thought real fast like that and I said, ‘personnel’ and so he put down personnel management and I was assigned to a personnel inspection team on the West coast and we traveled around and inspected personnel records for service, largely to find out if there was any favoritism being played by; you know, to keep guys from going overseas, usually athletes. That was my primary responsibility to find out that; because I remember we ran across Ollie Matson, who was a great football player at; I think the University of San Francisco and some of these; some of the generals were real jocks and they would try to keep these athletes on the football team and send somebody else overseas, so that was part of our job was to find out if the guys who were supposed to be going overseas were actually going overseas.

Dr. Huffman: So did you have any friends that went to Korea?

Mr. Newhart: Well, yeah I knew some. I knew guys that went over. In fact, the rest of the team, they were all guys who had just come back from Korea. They were; they had the CIB, the Combat Infantryman's Badge. So, they had spent time in Korea and they would tell me about it and I never felt I missed anything by not going. (*Laughter*)

Dr. Huffman: I do appreciate everyone who served, so thank you for your service. (*Laughter*) Now are you still in any contact with any of your former comrades or those you worked with as well when you worked as an accountant?

Mr. Newhart: No, not so much guys I'd worked with, guys I grew up; guys I went to high school or college with. I don't think I was anywhere long enough to make any friendships. (*Laughter*)

Dr. Huffman: You've been married to Ginnie since 1963? What's the secret to a long, happy marriage?

Nr. Newhart: I think laughter. I think if you look at most comedians, their marriages tend to last, Jack Benny and George Burns, and Sid Caesar and Buddy Hackett and Don Rickles. There's something; it's more than just happenstance. I think laughter has a lot to do with the longevity of a marriage.

Dr. Huffman: Well, you've definitely provided laughter. (*Laughter*) I remember when I was working as a CPA in Evansville, IN, a friend of mine named Terry Brown, we couldn't wait to get to work, I believe it was on Tuesday mornings, I think you were on Monday nights, Newhart?

Mr. Newhart: Oh, that's right, yeah that's right.

Dr. Huffman: We couldn't wait to get to work Tuesday mornings and talk about what happened on Newhart the previous night. (*Laughter*) Did you come up with the idea for the *Newhart* finale?

Mr. Newhart: No my wife came up with that.

Dr. Huffman: That was excellent, it was excellent. (*Laughter*)

Mr. Newhart: Well, there was so much illogic in the show that it lent itself to that kind of thing. The maid was an heiress and you know the people I was surrounded with of course.

Dr. Huffman: Now, what was your favorite roll or do you have one?

Mr. Newhart: I don't think I have one, I enjoyed them both. I mean I enjoyed *The Bob Newhart Show* and I enjoyed *Newhart* and for different reasons. I can't say I prefer one over the other.

Dr. Huffman: If you were a 22 year old graduating from college today, do you think you would be interested in a career in accounting?

Mr. Newhart: Oh boy. (*Laughter*) I can't even imagine being a 22 year old graduating today. (*Laughter*) I don't know, I was just kind of carried along by events. You know it was; I wish I could say there was a plan to it, but there was; even when I became a stand-up comic I didn't think it was going to last all that long, certainly not as long as it's lasted, 44 years.

Dr. Huffman: Do you still have an irrational fear that someone is going to say, 'Sorry, Bob, but it's all been a big mistake (*Laughter*)—you've got to return all the money and go back to being an accountant'?

Mr. Newhart: No, I think maybe I have a future in comedy (*Laughter*) after 44 years.

Dr. Huffman: Do you have any movie plans right now?

Mr. Newhart: Nothing right now, no, but of course that could change.

Dr. Huffman: I was pleasantly surprised with *Elf*. I thought it was very good.

Mr. Newhart: Oh, I enjoyed that, yeah, I enjoyed that very much.

Dr. Huffman: Well, I really do appreciate the opportunity you've given me to talk to you. It really has been an honor to visit with you.

Mr. Newhart: Well, thank you.

Thank you, Bob, for all those years of comedy! You are a class act and a favorite of accountants everywhere.