



Spotlight on Bob Newhart

by Jennifer Gritt

For decades, Bob Newhart has been a shining star on the comedy scene. Before you catch his appearance at the Fox Cities Performing Arts Center on October 20, FOX CITIES Magazine offers you a closer look at his career.

Working as an accountant in Chicago, Illinois, in the early 1950s, Bob Newhart could not imagine that one day he would be the star of two long-running hit television series. With the release of *The Button-Down Mind of Bob Newhart* on Warner Brothers Records, however, there was no looking back. "When I made the first album and it came out," Newhart explains, "it really was much more successful than I ever could have imagined. It was the album of the year in 1960." And with the success of that album, Newhart was suddenly in the position to combine his talent for stand-up with the growing popularity of television.

While Newhart is mostly remembered for his two hit series, *The Bob Newhart Show* and *Newhart*, the comedian first starred in an NBC variety show that was nominated for an Emmy in 1961 and earned a Peabody Award. Despite the overwhelming response, the show only lasted one season.

"Well, it was marginal," says Newhart. "It was on the bubble as far as being picked up or not picked up. And I had a meeting with the head of entertainment for NBC...and he said, 'Well, we're thinking about picking up the show, but we want to make some changes.' And I, of course, I asked what were 'changes,' and he mentioned a couple

of things, and then he mentioned getting rid of the announcer Dan Sorkin, who was largely responsible for my getting the recording contract for the first album. And I said, 'Well, I'm sorry, I can't do that.' And I don't know if that was a critical decision, you know, if that was the tipping point or not, but it wasn't picked up." In the end, Newhart says he was somewhat relieved when NBC didn't pick up the show, pointing out that he found it strenuous to come up with a monologue every week.


Over the next ten years, Newhart concentrated on his stand-up routines, recording several more *Button-Down Mind* albums. In 1963, he married Virginia Quinn, and the couple soon started raising a family.

After ten years of going out on national tours, however, Newhart was ready to give television another try. In 1972, *The Bob Newhart Show* debuted on CBS starring Newhart as Chicago psychologist Robert Hartley and Suzanne Pleshette as his wife Emily. The show would go on to run for another six successful seasons.

When it came to an end in 1978, Newhart continued doing stand-up, hosting *The Johnny Carson Show* a total of 87 times. It wasn't until 1982 that Newhart returned to CBS with another

sitcom—this one set in Vermont—titled *Newhart* and co-starring Mary Frann. When that show ended in 1990 after eight successful seasons, the series finale went down in history as one of the best, with Newhart's character waking up on the set of his first series and realizing that the entire *Newhart* series was nothing more than a nightmare brought on by eating too much Japanese food.

When asked whether he was surprised by the success of his television series, Newhart is quick to explain that while *The Bob Newhart Show* was given a great time slot, that wasn't all that was necessary for his shows' success. "We were given a great time slot, which is a blessing and a curse at the same time," he says, "because you're expected to hold on to the audience. In other words, just getting a great time slot isn't necessarily the be-all and end-all of television because if you don't hold up your end of the bargain, you know, there are certain expectations that they expect you to maintain."

With two smash-hit television series, chart-topping comedy albums, and countless stand-up routines highlighting his successful career, it is clear Bob Newhart has held up his end of the bargain and earned the well-deserved title of comedy legend. 

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