SPEAKING OF RADIO



Chuck Schaden's Conversation with

ELLIOTT LEWIS



Some time ago we had the opportunity to visit with Elliott Lewis who starred on the Phil Harris-Alice Faye Show as Frankie Remley and did so much other work in radio during the 1940s and 50s. He was working on some special writing projects at the Paramount Pictures lot in Hollywood, California. We took advantage of the occasion to tell him what we had thought for a long time: that Remley and Harris were to radio what Laurel and Hardy were to movies and Kramden and Norton were to television.

Well, thank you. I remember those days with the utmost fondness. I don't know when in my life I have so enjoyed a job. It was just an absolutely marvelous job. When I realize that we did that for nine years, Phil and Alice and I, and Walter Tetley and Sheldon Leonard. It was just fun, wonderfully refreshing . . . the two characters and the way it played and the relationships.

The rapport that you guys had was marvelous.

Well, you know, Jack Benny was my teacher, really. I was here in Los Angeles when I was still going to school. I was going to junior college, and right across the street is the KHJ building. When I was eighteen I worked over in that building, which was then NBC. It had just been built and I worked in that building for Jack Benny, and then on and off for him for all those years.

You mean on the air?

On the air, as an actor, never playing Remley, always another character, because Remley never appeared until he appeared on the Harris show. But Jack was always fond of Phil and me and of what we were doing and was most helpful and kind of guided us and gave us suggestions. I remember sitting down with him one day and I said,

"Please explain something to me. I know that when Phil and I work that it's funny and the jokes are funny, but I don't understand why the laughs are so big. What are we doing?" He said, "You've found a wonderful thing in the relationship that you two have. The two of you say and do what everybody in the audience would like to say and do in a similar situation if they had the nerve. But nobody has the kind of nerve you two guys have, and that's what people are laughing at. They're just delighted." It always surprised me, you know. We'd say something like. "You stick Tetlev in the oven" and he says, "Let me out! Let me out!" and you just wait and say, "What do you think?" And the whole audience is screaming! It is, if you think about it, ridiculous. You don't leave somebody in an oven, but that we would even consider it and think about it and stand there and say, "Well, I don't know" and to talk about it, and this poor soul is in the oven, screaming and yelling and banging on the oven door!

There was one show where Phil and Remley were marching down the street behind an elephant, on Hollywood Boulevard. They wouldn't think about doing that on television.

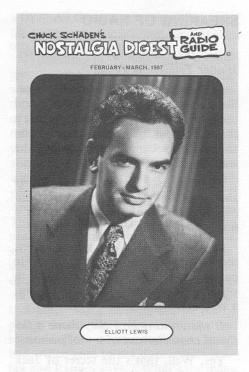
No! We did one, I remember, that Dick Chevillat and Ray Singer wrote, where they buy a race horse and the description of the race horse was so hilarious . . . and of course, you couldn't do it on television. You can't get a horse as running slowly or more quickly because his stomach is dragging on the ground! But, you know, these men would buy this and then consider it. You know, they're talking about it, saying, "Does it look right to you?" No! He thinks there's something wrong-a horse shouldn't look like that. A marvelous, marvelous relationship, very well written by Ray Singer and Dick Chevillat.

They wrote the whole series?

They didn't write the first twenty-six weeks or so.

It started on the Fitch Bandwagon, didn't it?

Right. And I wasn't on it at first. I was doing something else. And Remley, the real Frank Remley, was a lefthanded guitar player who worked with Phil's band and on the Benny show. He was a dear, dear, marvelous man. Well, they decided when Phil and Alice had their own show to use Phil's best friend, Frankie. So they wrote it in and they said to Remley, "Here you go." And he got up and he couldn't read it. He was a guitar player, not an actor. So, I had worked with all of them for a long time on the Benny show and we all knew each other and were close friends. I was doing a show down the hall and Phil came in-they did the first show without me, they cut the Remley thing-and he said, "We're going to write Remley in on the second show. The script is ready and we have to establish the relationship. Could you come in and do it? It'll take you a couple of hours and that will be the end of it." And I came in and did it and we got the kind of laughs that I've been



describing to you—which neither of us understood—and we did it every week for nine years.

That's how it happened. I think Bill Moser and Bob Connolly wrote the first twenty-six shows. Then Ray and Dick wrote it until, possibly, the last year, when they were off on something else. I have a memory of Marvin Fisher and Jack Douglas working on the show, 'cause I remember Jack wrote some wild, wild material. But Singer and Chevillat were responsible for the show.

The show started under the sponsorship of Fitch Shampoo and then Rexall came in there.

Right, and then RCA had it in the last couple of years. We were working for the dog, His Master's Voice.

The Phil Harris-Alice Faye Show was one of the greatest, funniest comedy shows on radio, with a story line, with the variety, the singing of Phil and Alice, the continunity of characters. Walter Tetley was Julius . . .

Sheldon was all kind of things, in and out as a friend of Phil's and Frankie's that Alice couldn't bear because he was so obviously conning everybody, the way Lennie does.

I have to ask you this. On the Benny show, whenever they referred to Frankie Remely, he was, of course, a lush, a drunkard. Now, was he really—

Oh, no! No. He was a very sweet, nice, quiet man, a really dear man. He passed away some time ago—fifteen years or more—but he was a dear man, a very nice man.

It's interesting how they made a fictional character out of a real person.

Yes, Well, that's the secret of Jack Benny, who was the comedy genius of all time and who taught us all. That was his theory, that you made jokes out of nothing. They would make a joke out of something that started at the beginning of the half hour show and by the end of the show you're laughing hysterically! Nothing funny, really; there wasn't a joke, just the gas man, and the car, and all of the things. The train to Cucamonga and . . .

I remember a routine we did on the Benny show where every year Jack and the group go to New York and therefore is the scene in the railway station. And Frank Nelson is saying, "Yeeeess." He's selling tickets and Jack's in line and Mel Blanc is on the speaker going "... and Cu—cumonga" and, you know, every year we did this. And I was always the man in line in front of Jack. And Jack is trying to get a ticket to New York. The first routine that we did, the reason that we then continued it, was that we took the lyric of Glocca Morra and all I did was read the lyric.

Jack was very nervous about it and he said, "I don't know. You got to be crazy! Is that going to be funny?" and I said, "I don't know. It just seems to me that it's funny if I just ask Frank Nelson these questions: "How are things in Glocca Morra?" And he said, "Fine." And I say, "Is that little brook still rippling there?" And he said, "Oh, yes." Well, you could imagine! We're doing this, Frank and I talking, and Jack Benny is standing behind me, just staring at the audience with that look, you know, he did with the elbow! Well, what is funny about it? I don't know, but it just was funny. It was funny stuff.

Indeed.

Jack would create these characters and he would create them in the image of Phil and, therefore, in the image of Remley. He created Phil and Remley -image and characters-for them so strong that Phil and I and Alice and their real little girls were in a Santa Claus Lane Parade on Thanksgiving down Hollywood Boulevard one year. It was freezing cold and, without thinking, we each took a mug of coffee, hot coffee. The girls were all bundled up warm, and one of the kids sat on my lap and the other kid was on Phil's lap. And we stopped at one place and I reached to get the coffee. I was really shivering, I was so cold, and I picked it up and Phil, without seeing what I was doing, did the same thing. We had stopped and there were crowds on either side on the street and they started to laugh. They thought we were drinking booze! They thought we were stoned! And you don't know what to do 'cause you've got a little kid on your lap and the audience is laughing 'cause they think you're drinking whiskey, which we weren't. Hot coffee! But that's how firmly the Benny show created those characters, established those characters.



I remember doing one show created for those characters. The musicians who hadn't the fainte what they were doing. They kr more about the music business no more right to be musician was so firmly established that on show, years later, we did a scene still recall, of a music rehearsa Phil is conducting. Remley is p guitar and Phil stops and sa Remley, "Wait a minute. W minute. That doesn't sound What have you got there?" Remley says, "I've got a black d then another black dot" and the dience started to laugh. You'd they'd have to be musicians to They didn't, but they just knew the hadn't had the vaguest idea wh were talking about. Phil says, "I there's supposed to be three dots." I said, "No, there's one that's a white dot." And he "Where is it?" And I said, "No,

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I remember doing one show Jack created for those characters. They were musicians who hadn't the faintest idea what they were doing. They knew no more about the music business-had no more right to be musicians-this was so firmly established that on Phil's show, years later, we did a scene, that I still recall, of a music rehearsal that Phil is conducting. Remley is playing guitar and Phil stops and says to Remley, "Wait a minute. Wait a minute. That doesn't sound right. What have you got there?" And Remley says, "I've got a black dot and then another black dot" and the audience started to laugh. You'd figure they'd have to be musicians to know. They didn't, but they just knew that we hadn't had the vaguest idea what we were talking about. Phil says, "I think there's supposed to be three black dots." I said, "No, there's one here that's a white dot." And he said, "Where is it?" And I said, "No, that's a fly." All those music jokes! But people were laughing because the characters had been established by Jack.

I remember the biggest laugh we ever got. To show how little I know about what I'm doing, I had no idea we'd get this kind of laugh and it made me kind of nervous. The story, very simply, was that Alice says to Phil, "Remley is not your friend. He doesn't really care about you. He's a terrible, vile person who is looking to take advantage of you and you've got to be very careful." And Phil keeps saying, "No, no, no. That's not true." They keep arguing until finally Phil says, "Alright, I'll tell you what. When Remley comes to the door this morning, you tell him I just died of a heart attack. And then you'll see what a friend I've got." Well, I thought, "My goodness, are we really going to do that? But, we play the scene in front of the audience. Door bell. Alice goes to the door. She's crying and Remley says, "What's the matter? What is it Alice?" And she says, "Phil just died of a heart attack." There was a long pause and then I said, "Alice, will you marry me?" Well, I tell you we could not stop the people from laughing! The studio was shaking! This explosion of laughter! That he had the gall . . . didn't even wait . . . didn't say, "Gee, I'm sorry." Nothing! Couldn't wait to get his hands on that money! And I thought, "No, we really can't do that." Ray and Dick said, "It's funny, do it. Just do it." Phil said, "Don't worry about it." Well, they were right.

Did you have to do a lot of rehearsing for the Harris show?

No. As a matter of fact, by the time we were in our seventh, eighth and ninth year, we were on tape, the show was no longer live. And we would record—we would tape the show on Friday for Sunday broadcast. We would meet at

around noon or eleven o'clock in the morning on Friday and read the script around the table and make some cuts and changes, go get our lunch and come back and read it again on mike to balance it, make additional cuts and changes. I was producing and directing over at CBS, so Phil would go and do his business and Alice would do whatever she had to do. I'd go over and work on scripts for Suspense or On Stage or Broadway's My Beat or one of the shows I was doing at CBS, and then come back, dressed to do a show in front of an audience, at 5:30. The audience would come in at 5:30 or 6 and we'd do a little warmup and do the show from 6:30 to 7. And Phil and Alice got on the train and go back to Palm Springs and I went home and that was it. So we would devote most of a Friday to it. But that was about all.

Of course by that time the characters had been so finely refined and keenly developed . . .

That's right. And you're able to do in radio, especially in radio, comedy in radio, the kind of humor that you cannot do anywhere else. And once it is set up, the characters are set up and a situation is set up, and you have the kind of writing that we were getting from Ray Singer and Dick Chevillat, there are no problems. Everybody knows what they are doing or they wouldn't be there. And if it wasn't a good show and the audience didn't like it, it wouldn't be on the air. You know. you find out very quickly whether it's working or not. And as always in almost anything, but especially in show business, if it's going easily it's usually on the right track. It's not hard to have a hit, it's hard to have a failure. because it's rough. You know, you keep trying to fix something that you should just throw away. When it's going well, when all of the elements are

together, wow! It's no problem, it just runs.

You mentioned producing and directing Suspense. Did you do some of the writing, too?

Yes. I did writing and editing and produced and directed the radio Suspense for about five years, I guess. And then, while I was married to Cathy Lewis, we did On Stage for a couple of years, and I wrote the openings and the closings and did the editing on it. And E. Jack Neuman, with whom I'm working here at Paramount, contributed I would guess half of the scripts during the two years we worked on that show. Also wrote goodness knows how many of the Suspense shows.

As a matter of fact, there was a thing we would do together that was kind of fun because it was kind of a challenge in the mystery sense. I recall, driving to work one day, I had seen a scene in my mind which was a marvelous first act curtain. So I said to Jack, "Somebody's chasing a man and he's in a fun house at an amusement park and he knows he can't get out the front door so he tries to get out, to find another exit. And at the back of this building there's an enormous animated figure, a great big, jolly kind of animated stuffed thing, and its arms are at its side and it goes 'Hohohoho' and as it's doing 'Hohohoho' the arms raise over its head and then the arms go down and the man describes this in the narrative." And I said because what he does is, he times it and the guys are chasing him and so he waits and the figure goes, "HO HO HO HO HO" and the arms are up and he's going to make a dash. And so he waits and he times it and it goes "HO HO HO HO" and he starts to dash and as he starts, the arms go BANG and cut him off. There's a door behind him when the arms raise

and as he heads for the door and the arms come down and from inside the figure a voice says, "You didn't really think I was gonna let you get out, did you?" So I said to Jack, "I don't know who he is or how he got there or how it ends." Jack says, "Great idea, you really scared me." It was called "Giant of Thermopylae". It was marvelous suspense.

And it was on Suspense.

Yes. That was what we did on Suspense. We did a lot of them that way.

This was in the later forties and early 1950s.

Yes. Before World War Two I had been on Suspense, working with Bill Spier as an actor and a rewrite man and also writing originals. Then I was in the service, working for Army radio, Armed Forces Radio. I was in charge of what they called "Commercial Denaturing" which was a division with Howie Duff. We supplied 476 radio stations. Howie and I and three other guys, with 120 programs a week, which we took off the air, edited, took the commercials out, took out anything that dated the show. By editing, I mean anything that would be considered information that vou didn't want broadcast worldwide. These were then placed on acetate discs and sent to the short wave stations. Then masters were made, printed and shipped all over the world, to these 476 stations. So, I was busy doing that.

Then, when the war was over I went back to Suspense. Bill Spier, who was doing Sam Spade and Suspense, wanted to do a picture in Europe with his wife, at that time June Havoc, and with James and Pamela Mason. Bill would produce and direct the film, so he wanted to get out of his deal and he suggested to CBS that I had done so much work on it—and since I was producing and directing another radio



show for them at the time, called Broadway's My Beat—that I should produce and direct Suspense. They were agreeable and so that's when I picked up on Suspense. I think I did some of the Sam Spades for him, too.

On the show, The Casebook of Gregory Hood, you were Gregory Hood.

Yes, Anthony Boucher's character.

Before you took over the role of Gregory Hood, it was played by Gale Gordon.

Yes. Gale and I had known each other for years and, in the true manner of show business, I was called one day to the Young and Rubicam Advertising Agency and they said, "We have a property called Gregory Hood. Have you ever heard it?" And I said, "Well, it's on the air, isn't it?" And they said, "Yes, but it's not working out the way we want and we would like you to be the star." And I said, "What happened to Gale?" And they said, "Well, we've told him and he agrees and you know, no hard feelings or anything. We're trying it, so come to rehearsal Monday and you're Gregory Hood." I said,

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"Fine." I walked into the studio and there sat Gale. Nobody had said a word to him. So I said, "Gale, why don't we go outside and have a cup of coffee and have a little talk," cause we were old friends. It was supposed to have been arranged, but I was the one who said to Gale, "I'm doing Gregory Hood now. I guess you're not." It didn't matter, of course.

Well, he had to scratch for work through the rest of his career, didn't he!

Yes! Well, he really was desparately looking here and there trying to find something to do. And then, when I was producing the Lucy Show on television, there we were, working together again. When we started the television series, The Lucy Show, that I produced, Lucy came back from New York and she and Desi had been divorced. We were sitting around with the writers and we said, "Gee, we need somebody—the Mr. Mooney character. Let's get Gale."

You followed him again on another series, Junior Miss. You played Judy Graves' father.

I think he may have followed me, because I remember doing that one with Shirley Temple. I played her father. And I played her father the week I was drafted! So, I was like twenty-two! I was playing Shirley Temple's father and I did the Junior Miss show on a Thursday or something, waved bye-bye and Friday went into the Army. So, I think Gale followed me on that show, and then I think Shirley dropped out and they did another version of it later on.

How busy were you at your busiest?

I think I counted in one week I did twenty shows, in one capacity or -8- Nostalgia Digest

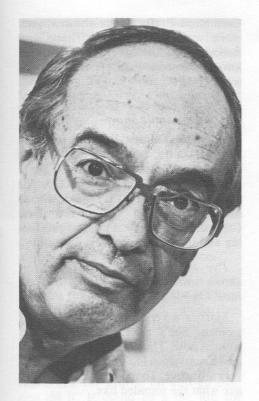
another. Finally, in the late or middle fifties, I guess, I was involved in the production, directing, acting, whatever on five weekly series. My desk at CBS looked like a joke! I was doing the Harris show as an actor, I was producing and directing Suspense, I was producing, directing, editing, writing openings and closings, and co-starring in On Stage. I was producing and directing Broadway's My Beat and I was producing, directing and writing the openings and closings and editing Crime Classics. And one point CBS had three of those shows on back to back on Wednesday night. And, by taping parts of this one and sections of that one, because you couldn't record the music-music had to be live and put in when you went on the air-and having adjoining studios-Studios 1 and 2 at the old CBS-I was able to do it. I had a show on the air from 5:30 to 6, and a show on the air from 6 to 6:30, and a show on the air from 6:30 to 7.

It was Eliott Lewis night on CBS!

Yeah, it was ridiculous! There was no reason for that, it was just silly. But that's the way scheduling happened.

I'd like to back up to your army career for a moment or so. You were working on editing and dubbing all those radio shows. Did you start that? Were you the first one to get involved with that?

I think Howie and I were, yes. Duff, when I say Howie. We were both in the service at different places and were called here by Colonel Tom Lewis, who we had known when Tom was head of Young and Rubicam. And he needed people who knew radio and he had this thing starting and he needed people to take over the job that had been handled by Don Sharp, who had been an agent and a producer. At that point I believe Don was working for the Office of War Information and they were trying this but nobody had



done anything with it yet. So, Duff and I were there and were called in and they said, "Now, here's what we want to do . . . "

As a matter of fact, some of the things we developed . . . well, I won't be bashful, some of the things we developed worked so well that I was given the Legion of Merit for developing new techniques in recording and broadcasting . . . only because there was no other way to do it. We had three civilian crews working seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day to reassemble these shows by the techniques that we developed—cut this, pick up here, and so forth. And this is before they had tape. We were doing this editing off of acetate. We got so that we could look at the turntable playing at 331/3 speed and drop the head on a word or on a spot. You look at the grooves and the right line and you'd know exactly where you are and what you're doing!

You picked up the shows as they were being broadcast, more or less right off the broadcast line?

Off the line at Radio Recorders. They were taken off the broadcast line. Howard and I would pick them up in an army vehicle which was given to us occasionally. The rest of the time we were to use our own car and our own gasoline and were never reimbursed for it. And we had to be very careful because we had a stack. These were not aluminum-based acetates, they were glass-based. And we had one guy cut in front of us on the way to the studio one night and we lost two hours of programming because the records just slid and that was it! Nothing you could do about it . . . they were gone. They were glass-based acetates that we took off the air. We picked them up and what we tried to do with the immediate show is that we would make worksheets on a typewriter as the show was on the air, so when we picked it up and delivered that acetate to McGregor's or to Universal or to the other part of the division of Radio Recorders, they had the worksheet and the crew knew exactly what they were going to do with it. And by the following morning that show would be ready to be broadcast short wave. We were watching a clock. timing, so that when a commercial began, this would be taken out, or a new opening would be put in, what fill material was to make up for what we deleted.

You always had to pad it back to thirty minutes again, right?

Right. Twenty nine thirty. And it got to be quite a thing. As I think about it now, I don't know how in heaven's name we did it. Because as we were typing, we were listening to a show and watching a clock!

What you fellas did there, and you really didn't realize you were doing it, but you were really preserving the sounds of radio from the 1940s, because the networks never wanted to keep it. They just did it live and they didn't copy it.

Right. What we did, if we didn't have enough material coming off the line to make fifty-two weeks of something, we invented. So, we invented the Mystery Theatre. Now, the Mystery Theatre had to have a host because sometimes it would be Mr. and Mrs. North or sometimes it would be Inner Sanctum or whatever was on the air that was a mystery show that we could use. So we had our own opening and our own closing. Now, whichever of us went down with the record, with the transcription, to make the show, also recorded an opening and a closing for that show. So, we had to invent characters, because it was not the same person. There was Corporal X and there was Sergeant Y, and we did all these things. Whoever went down. It was Howard, or Jerry Hausner or it was me or it was Jimmy Lyons, who was part of our group and now runs the Monteray Jazz Festival.

But we all fell into patterns. Alan Hewitt loved opera and symphony, so he would edit opera and symphony. Jimmy Lyons, now doing Monteray, loved jazz and knew all those people, so he did that kind of music. Howie and I did the dramatic things and the comedy things. Hausner did all of those and also fifteen and thirty-minute original shows for everybody. But we were kind of a lost group. We were in a side corner because the big shows the Armed Forces Radio Service was doing were Command Performance and things like that. They did one

Command Performance show a week while we were doing 120 shows and nobody even knew we were there, you know, we were just off in the back somewhere.

Did you ever meet G. I. Jill? Her little fifteen-minute show—

Oh, sure, Marty Wilkerson, Mort Warner's wife. Mort Warner is, was, the head man at NBC television for I don't know how long. And G. I. Jill was Marty, his wife. And Mort, who at that time was a G.I. with the rest of us, Corporal Warner, was kind of producing and directing his wife's little show.

I've heard lots of those G.I. Jive shows with G. I. Jill. What did she look like?

Marty's a very lovely looking young woman. She's a very attractive older woman now. They have grown children. Just a marvelous looking woman, warm, very attractive. To me, she always looked like what she sounded like.

She had to be every girl next door for every G.I. around the world.

But Marty primarily was a writer when she wasn't doing that. She wrote, has written many, many television things. She wrote the Robert Montgomery Show, wrote original material for it.

Let's return to civilian life. You were the lead in another version of the First Nighter program called Knickerbocker Playhouse.

Yes. They called me to go to Chicago in '39. I knew nothing about this program. I was working as an actor on a lot of shows here and one of the shows I was working on was called Silver Theatre, which was a Sunday afternoon drama. I was under contract to them. The AFRA contract stated that you could pay people, if you signed them to a thirteen-week deal, scale less

ten per cent. So, I was under contract to Silver Theatre . . . and Big Town. Now, on Silver Theatre, some weeks I had four lines and some weeks I was the leading man opposite whoever the leading woman was. One time, they had heard me as a leading man opposite Ginger Rogers or somebody. and they were out here. I knew nothing about this and my agent called me and said. "There are some people here from Chicago and they would like you to audition for them. There's some kind of radio show that they're going to be doing from Chicago and they're over across the hall and would you go over and read something for them?"

Now, I'm in the middle of a Silver Theatre rehearsal playing the lead opposite Rosalind Russell, a darling, lovely, gifted, talented lady. So I came in and must have looked puzzled and she said, "What's the matter?" And I told her and she said, "Well, we'll stop rehearsing for a little bit and go over and do it. It could be a big job for you." I said, "I don't know what to read." she said, "Let's read what we're doing." I said, "We?" She said, "Sure, don't tell them who I am. We'll go over there and read. I'll read with you."

We went across the street to this other studio and went in and I still don't think they knew who she was. She said, "Tell them I'm Miss Brown." So I said, "This is Miss Brown, she's going to read with me." And they said, "Fine, how are va." And we read the scene which we had been rehearsing for two days. They said, "Thank you very much" and I said "Thank you" and Roz and I went back and did our work. The following day I got a call from my agent and he said, "They want you. The show is called Knickerbocker Playhouse and it's going to come from Chicago and they want you to be the star. Do you want to go to Chicago this summer? It's a firm thirteen." And I said, "Well, I've never been to Chicago. That sounds like it'd be a lot of fun, I'll drive to Chicago."

And I did. They said to bring a tuxedo 'cause they get all dressed up. I checked into the Medinah Club, which was across the street from the Wrigley Building where they do the show. Then I got an apartment on Wabash. And the woman to whom I have been married for seventeen years. Mary Jame Croft, was coming through town on her way to New York. She had been working in Cincinatti and that's when we met one another. Then she married somebody else and I married somebody else and she divorced and I was divorced and we've been married for seventeen years. We met in Chicago in 1939, 720 N. Wabash.

You've had an interesting career.

When you talked about Phil Harris . . . I saw Phil maybe a couple of years ago. He called, he was coming to town and wanted to know if I wanted to have breakfast with him 'cause he's an early riser. He was in the band business so long, the two things he hates are staying up late and wearing a tuxedo. And his idea of heaven is if you go to bed early and you get up at 5:30 and you wander around and see a sunrise fresh, not just as you're ready to go to sleep. So we met and had breakfast and chatted and it's like-we hadn't seen each other in five or six years-just picking up where we left off.

I wish you guys could pick up where you left off. It would be great to hear Frankie and Phil again. They were good, great shows.

Yes, and a great time.

Thank you very much for doing them and for chatting with us.

Thank you! This was a lot of fun. I appreciated it.