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An Interview with Pete Barbutti

An Oral History Conducted by Lisa Gioia-Acres

All That Jazz Oral History Project

Oral History Research Center at UNLV
University Libraries
University of Nevada Las Vegas

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The transcript received minimal editing that includes the elimination of fragments, false starts, and repetitions in order to enhance the reader's understanding of the material. All measures have been taken to preserve the style and language of the narrator. In several cases photographic sources accompany the individual interviews.

The following interview is part of a series of interviews conducted under the auspices of the *All That Jazz* Oral History Project.

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Preface

For the first time, the world of the 1950s has been captured in a way that is both accurate and entertaining. The world of the 1950s was a time of great change and later the plans were changed. He had a gift for comedy and his comedy. The world of the 1950s would lead to a change in the way we see the world and a lot of personal and personal things that happened in the 1950s and the 1960s.

Some of the many stories shared in this interview include his famous routine about "Carnegie Hall". He also talks about his famous appearance on the Tonight Show during the time of the 1950s and the 1960s of George with the King Cole.

He and his wife Mary Ann moved to Las Vegas in 1960. They raised their children and made it their home.



Preface

Pete Barbutti (also spelled Barbuti) was born in 1934 in Scranton, Pennsylvania. As a child he was expected to learn an musical instrument. Pete's musical talents were honed on the accordion and later the piano and trumpet. He had a gift for music and for comedy. This combination would lead to a career in both and a list of professional and personal friends that spanned an era from the 1970s to the 1990s.

Among the many stories shared in this interview is one of his more famous routines about "Cordeen School". He also talks about his numerous appearances on the *Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson* and remembrances of touring with Nat King Cole.

Pete and his wife Mary Ann moved to Las Vegas in 1960. They raised their children here and made it their home.

Today is September 24th, 2008. This is Lisa Julia-Acres. I'm here with Pete Barbutti to do an oral history interview for the university archives, the oral history project for *All That Jazz*.

Hi, Pete. How are you?

I'm fine, Lisa. Thank you.

Pete, can you spell your last name for me?

B-A-R-B-U-T-T-I. However, legally it's B-A-R-B-U-T-I. I'll just give you a brief history of that.

Yes, I'd like to know that.

It's legally spelled with one T. That's the way my family spelled it. When I started doing the Steve Allen Show in 1962, I think it was, the videographer who put the name across the bottom (of the screen)—he spelled it with two T's. That wasn't visible on the monitor. So I never knew about it and I never saw the show because I was working at night when the shows played. I was in Seattle at the time. So it was like two or three months later. I had done the show a bunch of times. Two or three months later somebody noticed it and told me about it. When I told the agency I was with to correct it, they said it's too late; you better use the second T in there. So it's always been that way. I keep hoping Internal Revenue will forget about me and say, oh, he doesn't exist.

Pete, what instrument did you play?

I started on the accordion as did everybody I grew up (with) in a small town in Pennsylvania—Scranton, a coal-mining town. Everybody of the first- and second-generation immigrants, all their children played a musical instrument. If it was a girl, you got piano or violin. If it was a boy, you got accordion or guitar. Because, I guess, that was a part of the cultural heritage of Europe; everybody is involved in the arts over there. So we all played. In my family I played the accordion, my cousin played the accordion and my sisters took piano lessons. That was just the way it was done.

And what is your specialty now?

Well, I went from the accordion when I got into high school. Oddly enough, I had to take an elective subject. And I was already working when I was in the seventh and eighth grade. I was working weddings back in Pennsylvania playing the accordion. I played polkas and mostly Polish, Hungarian, Lithuanian and those types of weddings because they last like for two days. I'm not

sure there's a bride or groom involved. It's just a big party.

So you go in the morning to the bride's home and you play a traditional Polish wedding march when she comes down the stairs for the first time and the family sees her in her wedding dress. Then you're whisked to the church. You play the same song when she gets out of the car and goes into the church. Then you sit in the back of the church during mass. When that's over you play when she comes out. Then you go to the family's house for breakfast and you play all during the breakfast. Then you go home and they go have pictures taken. And you show up at the reception at night with the rest of your band and you play until whatever, one o'clock in the morning.

How fascinating.

Yeah. And I was probably making more money than my father was when I was in sixth and seventh grade because everybody coming to the wedding when you play as they play as they walk into the reception the accordion player and the bass player stand by the front door and you play as they come in and they put a dollar in a beer tray. Or sometimes they put it in the F-Hole of the bass. They'd stick it in there. Then you'd have to go home and the bass would be up on two chairs while you fished the money out or something. But you could make 60 or 70 dollars for one day.

Well, before we get too far ahead, what year were you born?

Thirty-four. 1934.

And what town again?

Scranton, Pennsylvania.

So why don't you talk a little bit about your childhood. Tell me your mom and dad's names.

My mom's name is Mary. Her maiden name is Kating. She was Irish. And my father was the first-born in the country of -- my grandfather came from a little village outside Naples. My grandfather was a contractor, small contractor—sidewalks, basements, things like that. He did a couple of small bridges in Scranton, but never big construction work. He was a magnificent man. His name was Rocco, which is my middle name.

They came to New York first and then migrated to Scranton because there was work there. They came in through Ellis Island, of course. And he bought an old defunct mansion. It was called the Tripp mansion, T-R-I-P-P. Tripp was the original settler in Scranton, which was originally

called Slocum Hollow. I was actually born in the house. When my parents moved in, the house was already 200 years old. And that was in the 1920s or something.

How was your grandpa able to afford it?

Well, it was derelict. And so he bought it. Since he knew how to do all that work -- plumbing and sidewalks and maintenance and everything -- he and his sons, who were young at the time, they rebuilt the whole place. And they partitioned it off and it was like a kibbutz. All of the families moved into one house. We each had an apartment. There were like maybe six families in the main house. And they put in bathrooms; of course, indoor plumbing—it didn't have all that. And they put in central heat radiators because it had a fireplace. It was a mansion with like 32 rooms or something and had a fireplace in every room. The kitchens were enormous. So he redid everything, redid all the wiring and put plumbing in and central heat. And in the back there were two houses that were originally slaves' quarters when the house was built. So two uncles and aunts, two of his children, moved back there. And we had our own vineyard and our own orchard.

How many acres?

I'm guessing but it was probably six or seven acres. But it was right in the city. So it had big stone lions on the front. The guy who owned it was one of the wealthiest. He had dozens of slaves and plantations.

What a great history.

Yes, my grandfather was an amazing man. He was the patron of the family. And there was never any -- he was a very smart man. What he did is when there was any kind of an argument he sided with the in-law rather than his own children because he knew he was close to his own children. I mean all of the in-laws just adored him. He was called pop to everybody.

He was unbelievably good to the children. He put in a swimming pool. This is in the 1930s. He built a swimming pool. It didn't have filtration or anything. So he put a couple of hoses in it on a Saturday morning and filled it up with water. And we'd swim all day Saturday and Sunday. Then by Monday he'd have to drain it because the water was filthy. But we had a swimming pool. I mean nobody had a swimming pool in those days.

How long did he live?

I was young when he died. I was not even in my teens. I was maybe eight or nine years old.

But you got to know him?

Yes, oh, yes. He was an incredible guy. Every Sunday we had dinner together in the basement, which was very large because this was like I say a mansion. We had dinner in the basement. There was a long table that he had built. My mother was in charge of making the sauce for the spaghetti, even though she was the Irish member. Another family baked all the breads and another family roasted the chickens. Then another family did this. And, of course, he made his own wine every year. He made like four 50-gallon barrels of wine. So they'd start cooking when it was still dark. We'd go to church and come home and then we'd have a little taste of something. About one o'clock in the afternoon we'd start eating. We'd eat for about two and a half, three hours. Everything homemade. After that there was always fresh fruit on the table—from fig trees and apples trees and cherry trees. Then they'd turn on the opera and we'd just lay around and sort of vegetate. The men would play cards and drink anisette or whatever.

But it was an incredible way to grow up that way, because all of my cousins, you know, a dozen of them, were all in the same house and all of my aunts and uncles. We had incredible supervision. I mean there was nothing you could do that some aunt or uncle didn't see you and fink on you to your parents.

What would happen to you if you would get in trouble?

Well, you'd get hit usually by my mother, not my father. But they were pretty good. But it was a wonderful way to grow up. The camaraderie was unbelievable. We really had a very, very special childhood.

How many brothers and sisters did your dad --

I had two sisters. And my grandma's family on my father's side there were -- I think there were three boys and three girls. My father died kind of young because he was a heavy juicer and smoker. So he died sort of young. But all of the aunts lived to their late 90s. They're all gone now.

What was your dad's occupation?

He was just a laborer. He worked digging ditches. Then he worked in a dry cleaning plant washing and putting the clothes in the different machines and so forth.

Did mom work outside the home?

She worked at the cleaners, too, doing things like checking in clothes. It was not a retail cleaners.

The wholesalers would come to this. My grandfather sold a piece of the land next door and a guy built a small cleaning plant there. So they just walked next door to work.

Is the Tripp mansion still in the family?

It's still there. It's not in the family. It was purchased by the historical society. And it's rebuilt. However, it's considerably smaller because when my grandfather bought it what he did is there was a massive porch, probably ten to 12 feet wide, around three sides of it. He closed that in and made additional rooms and everything. So they took all that out. And they took one of the additions off in the back. It's in its original form now.

Other than the porch?

Yes, and it's all hardwood floors. It's a magnificent building. Marble fireplaces.

So how did music play into your life?

Well, when I was I think nine, my parents got me accordion and sent me for lessons to a classical teacher, Professor Sabastianelli. You had to learn solfeggio first; you know, where you don't play your instrument for months. You just sing the notes. It was do-re-mi-fa-so-la-ti-do. And you do two beats on your leg and two beats on your chest, four beats to a measure. And you sing do-re-mi-fa -- you know, you'd do that to keep time for months. And then you finally got to use your instrument and do it. That would teach you sight-reading.

So there's no question you would have to learn an instrument?

Yes. Everybody in the family got an instrument. The girls hated to play piano. They used to be livid with me because their teacher would come and they'd spend an hour hacking through this lessons, you know, the "Black Hawk Waltz" or some ridiculous beginner piece. And they would be hacking through it. The teacher would leave and I'd run in and play it because I had fairly good ears. I'd run in and play it. And they'd smack me and chase me out of there.

I started on the accordion. And when I got into high school I had just about lost interest. I was into sports. When I got into high school I had to take an elective. So I took band. And ran into one of the people who changed my life, my band teacher Gene Morse.

What high school were you at?

Scranton Tech. It was a technical arts school. Our whole family went there because nobody was considered college material. So we all went to a technical arts school. Girls learned home ec.

Boys learned shop. And I'm glad actually I went because you got welding, electrical, woodworking, mechanical engineering and machine shop. One or two semesters of each. So you learned plumbing and wiring; just enough to do it to keep your house in order.

But in the band room, all the freshmen went in for the trials. And you tried out. You played a trumpet and you played a trombone. It's real cursory just to see if you have any talent. He asked me to play the drums and showed me how to hold the sticks. And he said, okay, play this. And whatever he played I could imitate perfectly. So he said you're a natural drummer. So he put me on percussion. By the end of my freshman year I was with the advanced band, the senior band. And in my sophomore year I was with the Philharmonic playing timpani and that. And I played with every band in town. We had a DeMolay band, American Legion band, University of Scranton band. My whole life was playing with the bands.

What age were you when you knew this was going to be your occupation?

I think probably 13 or 14 maybe. Maybe 14.

How about your siblings? You just have two brothers?

(And) two sisters.

Did they go into the music industry at all?

No.

Not interested at all.

Not even remotely.

And mom and dad, were they encouraging to you?

Yes. Well, you know, they came from a culture where music is -- if you go to Europe and you say I'm studying music, they hug you and kiss you and say, oh, thank God. Well, over here if you say I'm going to be a musician, they say, yes, but what are you going to do for a living? What job do you have? Even my uncles when I'd go back east after I was on television, they say what are you doing now? I say, oh, I'm on TV. And they say, yeah, I know that, but what do you do? What is your regular job? They couldn't believe that someone could make a living at that.

So you were pretty much employed from freshman year on?

Yes. When I was a junior in high school, that would be like age 17, I had two accordion schools. I was teaching in Carbondale, Pennsylvania, and Honesdale, Pennsylvania. One is 15 miles and one

is 30 miles from Scranton. Obviously, I couldn't drive yet. We had no car. So I'd take the bus and get there after school. I'd walk down a couple of blocks and get on the bus. It would take about half an hour. And I'd teach about six or seven students and then get the last bus back to Scranton and get to bed at maybe one in the morning.

That brings up an interesting question. Were you expected to do any chores or anything around the house?

Yes. I still did whatever it was I had to do. We had moved out of the big house by then. We were in a smaller house. But there was still a lawn to mow and things like that.

So what did you do after high school?

Well, I was supposed to have a musical scholarship to Penn State because when I was in my junior and senior year I went to Pennsylvania All-State Band and I was first chair percussionist. So I had a music scholarship. But I had a chance to go on the road with a band and to me that was a whole lot more important.

How did that come about?

Well, I started a small group when I was still in high school. We were working six nights a week.

What was the name?

The first group was called the Polka Dots, P-O-L-K-A, Dots, you know. And then the next group was called The Overtones. And then the next group I guess was called The Millionaires, which is a name that I kept right up until the last group that I had. And, chronologically, I was working with this group. It was a trio. We were working at the local hotspot, The Glass Hat.

The Glass Hat?

Yes, which was like the sophisticated place. And then we went on the road with this group. We used to travel in the summers while I was still in high school. But then when I graduated we went on the road organized. We added one member and became a quartet and we went on the road full time. And that group lasted from '52 till about '56 or '7. The guitar player got drafted. It was one of those groups where we sang four-way vocals and we all played. We had arrangements. So when a guy leaves you don't just get another guy in. You've got to get somebody who can sing his part, somebody who can play the same arrangements, and somebody who doubles on bass. He also doubled on trombone. So the group was never quite the same again.

So I added another guy to it. There were five of us. And that group messed around for a few more years until finally the singer wanted to leave. And then the sax player, his wife didn't like him traveling anymore. He was married. So he left. So that group broke up.

And I started another group, which was this next to the last group of The Millionaires. There was a drummer from Baltimore, Joey Preston. He still lives in town here. He's retired now. And a trombone player from back east named Tony Ardido. And a guitar player named Norman Elliott, who was considerably older than the rest of us. We worked around the country. Did very well. It was a very strong group. And then we worked Chicago for about a year. And then the owner of the club in Chicago said I think I can get you booked in Vegas. We came out here to work the Frontier hotel. And then we were there for about six months and we left to go on the road again. We came back and worked the Thunderbird. And the guitar decided -- like I say he was considerably older. He didn't want to travel. So he joined a house band.

And then one of the owners of the Thunderbird hotel, Lee Dear -- L-E-E, Dear, D-E-A-R, Mr. Dear to everybody, was a huge jazz fan. Lee ran a club in Wichita, Kansas. He could not be on the license out here because he had a felony conviction from back there. He was obviously connected to some people. But Lee is the guy who sent Charlie Parker to New York. Charlie Parker worked at his club. And he said you don't belong here; you've got to get out of here. So he discovered Bird, you know.

Anyway, Lee was one of the owners of the Thunderbird and he loved our group. And so he said to me, when the last group broke up, put together a big group. Get a couple more musicians and a girl singer and you can stay here forever. So I went out and got the best piano player in town and the best bass player.

Names?

Piano player was Mike Wofford, who has been on TV a million times. Mike lives in San Diego. He's a brilliant piano player. Bass player was Chuck DeLora, who was living in town at that time. He now lives in Lake Tahoe. Richie Mattison was the horn player. He played bass, trumpet and tuba. Richie later went on to be head of the program at North Texas State. And from there he started his own music program in Jacksonville, Florida, and it became the number-one jazz school in the country. Richie was a teaching genius, arranging, teaching, everything. The drummer was a

local boy named Clay Campbell. The girl singer was Kay Brown, who was married to Maynard Ferguson, just divorced from Maynard. That was it. There were three horns, three rhythm and a girl singer.

Have any trouble putting that band together?

No. And we rehearsed literally eight hours every day. Everybody was so excited. The band was so good. The arrangements were so good. And we worked at the Thunderbird. And I mean Steve & Eydie Gorme and everybody, Mary Kaye Trio, they'd all come in. They'd say we don't believe how good the group is. And we were going to stay there for forever.

But the Thunderbird, they had an incident with Lee Dear, who was also the credit manager. And he was in charge of the entertainment too. Something came up. He couldn't be at some meeting. There was a controversy. So Lee said I've got to get an entertainment director. I recommended a guy whose name will not be mentioned. But Lee hired him. And after we were there a couple of weeks, he gave us our notice. So it was one of things where we didn't really care because the group was so good we didn't have a problem. We went immediately to Reno. We did an album for Capitol Records, which I mean that was unheard of in those days.

Let me ask a question real quick. First of all, this was The Millionaires?

Yeah.

You started the band. You were playing in the band. And now you had to market the band.

How was it to juggle all those different things?

Well, not only that, I was the leader and the formulator of the band. So I signed for all the uniforms. I mean we had double-breasted Italian silk suits and Italian shoes. And the girl singer had real expensive gowns. So I signed up. We were on our way.

So we were working Lake Tahoe. And our manager, who was Maynard Sloate, who is well-known around town, flew up to Tahoe and he said we have a problem. And I said what problem? I've never been so happy in my life. He said, well, there's a little friction in the band. What are you talking about? Well, the drummer wants to do more. He incidentally was the weakest link. He wants to do more. He wants to sing. He wants to be up front. So I said, but, we need him as a drummer. We have so much strength up front. Anyway, he started this and he said that somebody's stealing.

What was happening is he knew how much money we were making. I think we were making \$5,000 for the band, which was very good for a lounge act in those days. So there were six of us. First of all, the manager got 20 percent or 15, whatever Maynard was taking. Then the agent got ten. So there was a quarter of that gone. So whatever was left was divided by six. And when he divided it by six his check was less than what it should be. So he brought that up. He did not take into account the union work dues in the local in which you're performing. He did not take into account if you're in a town more than two weeks there's a traveling rule saying you have to join that union and pay one quarter's dues. So when I finally presented him with those bills, it turned out I was the leader and I was making less than the other five members of the band. So he felt embarrassed with that. But the bad blood was brought to the surface.

Anyway, the girl singer was upset with the whole thing. She had a domestic problem at home. Her current husband was having a substance abuse problem. This was leaking over to her. The next thing you know the group broke up. So I mean it was a tragedy. It was a tragedy.

What year was that do you remember?

Yeah. It was '62. It was 1962 right after New Year's. We worked New Year's at Lake Tahoe. So we came back to Vegas and we said we're going to put together a new group. So myself, the bass player, the piano player and the other two horn players, five of us, were together. So we lost the girl singer and the drummer. But we could get another drummer. And we were looking for another girl singer. And then the piano player decided he didn't want to continue. So we were going to get Gus Mancuso.

But what happened was we couldn't get everybody together and rehearsed in time. The horn player Richie says I've got to take a gig for two weeks because they're going to repossess my car. So Richie took a gig. At the end of the first week, the bass player said I've got to take a job. And I was the one that had to stay idol to hold this together. So all of a sudden, they were knocking on the door. I couldn't pay the rent and couldn't pay the utilities. Our fourth -- no. Our son wasn't born yet. My wife was pregnant with our youngest son. It got really squirrely. So I was writing checks. I had a checking account in Scranton and one here. So what I would do is kite a check. I'd write a check from the Scranton bank and deposit it here and then write a check from the Vegas bank and deposit it there just to keep -- small checks, you know, just to keep going. I mean it

wasn't a good time.

So, finally, I went to Frank Ross with the Mary Kaye Trio, who's now deceased. Well, they're all gone but Norman Kaye. I said what am I going to do? He said you've got to take a job as a single. You shouldn't be with a group anyway. You have your own thing. I'll put you in touch with an agent. And he put me in touch with an agent. I'll remember his name in a minute, George something or another from L.A.

He called me back the next day and he said I have a job for you for two weeks in Spokane, Washington. I'd never even heard of Spokane. So I said all right. He said it's a piano bar thing. I said all right. I play enough piano because I switch from accordion to piano. That's a natural. And I could tell jokes and sing. So I said okay. George Burke was his name. He's gone too.

So I said, George, I'm embarrassed to ask you this, but I don't have the money to get to Spokane. The bus ticket was like \$73. And it took two and a half days because it would go from here to Reno and then it would go to San Francisco. So I said it's going to take me three days to get there. He said, okay, I'll put a money order in the mail for \$73. You pay me back your first week. Okay, George. Anyway, I said send it special delivery. They didn't have in those days overnight. This is '62. So he said I'll put it in the mail. It'll get there. It didn't get there. So I called him and he said, look, this job pays 300 a week. I'm only making \$30. I don't want to go through all this for 30 bucks. Call the agent in Spokane.

So I called the agent in Spokane. His name was John Powell. And he was a small, sort of mousy-looking guy with horn-rim glasses and blond curly hair. I mean he looked like a Caspar Milquetoast kind of guy. And an agent in Spokane, what could he be booking, you know? So I called him and said, Mr. Powell, here's the deal. But he said I booked you and my name is on the line. He said I'm going to send you an airline ticket and when you work you give it back. I said okay. So it paid 300 a week and the airline ticket was \$309. So I had no choice.

So I flew to Spokane. And he met me at the airport and he saw he and he almost had a coronary. I mean I had a goatee and long hair. And I had like a real hip topcoat on and Italian shoes. He looked at me and I looked like an alien in Spokane. I mean Spokane is the heart of conservative right wing. You know, it's right next to Couer d Alene, Idaho, which is where the American Nazi party is. So Spokane was like really right wing.

I got up there and all the way out to this club he kept saying remember this isn't a jazz gig. This isn't a jazz gig. Okay, John. So we get there. It was named the Stockyards Inn. I assumed that implied it was a steakhouse because there's a Stockyards Inn in Chicago and Kansas City. It was so named because of its geography. It was located in the middle of the feeding pens. So we had to walk on planks across the steer residue. It was raining when I got there and there was a big sign on the front, "Direct from Los Vegas." And he misspelled Las Vegas. He had L-O-S. And the owner's name was Rocky Rothrop. He was a caricature of a nightclub owner that you would put into a script.

What I'm going to tell you now, the beginning of this, sounds like a comedy routine, but it is literally true. I walked into the room. It was a rectangular room, long, skinny room. It had an antique bar in it. It wasn't a large room, but it was good-sized. And he said, what do you need? I said, well, there has to be a piano, Rocky. You know, I need a piano. He said what kind of piano? I said, well, a piano bar would be best. And he never heard that term, piano bar. And so he said what's a piano bar? Well, my explanation was that of a person who was incredulous that he wouldn't know what a piano bar is. So my explanation was brief. I said it's like a piano and there's a bar built around it. You put barstools and the people can drink and you can sing and dance. He said, oh, that's a great idea.

So I went in that night. And he had bought an old upright piano, put it up against the wall. And he built a bar around the back of me. So I had to climb under to get in and the people were staring at my back. And the piano was an antique. So some of the notes didn't work and it was out of tune. It was unbelievable. I played two or three nights and I talked to the people at the bar. They were amused because I had been to Las Vegas and Chicago and I was a little more erudite than they were. So people would come in and they'd sit around. And he said is everything okay? I said Rocky, you know what? I said I can't see the people. The bar is not supposed to -- ha, don't worry about it. I've got that covered.

The next night I went in. I'm not exaggerating. The same piano up against the wall, the same bar, but now mounted on top of the piano, a mirror from a dresser that would swivel up and down. And he gave me a wooden dowel. He said, see, you can reach up and you can move that mirror and see the whole room.

Anyway, I would go in the men's room and actually cry. And I had pictures of my children. I said I've got to do it for them.

So I worked there the rest of the week. And then he said everything okay? I said, Rocky, you know if there was a light there? Got you covered. Next day I go in. Now we have the same piano with the mirror and hanging from the ceiling a cord and above me like an 80-watt bulb with one of those shades in a poolroom. So I'd play and encore and turn on the light and it would be like a train coming down. Everybody would go, Whoa.

So the last thing I asked for was a microphone. He said, well, the whole place is wired. All I've got to do is rent a microphone. So he went and got me one of those little stand mikes you use on a desk like from the old TV series. Broadway and Crawford, Highway Patrol, calling all cars, you know. So it was a little -- like eight inches high. And he said all I've got to do is plug it in. There's a sound system. So I'd set the mike on the piano. But now I had a microphone. So I could turn around -- I'd sit on the keyboard. I'd talk to the audience. I started doing jokes, right? Well, the audience -- people would come in from the dining room. The place was crowded now. So Rocky picked up my option for another two weeks.

Did you want it?

Well, I wasn't sure, but it was a gig. Anyway, the first week I was nine dollars in the hole from my airfare. So I had to pay John that back. So then the second week started to draw a bigger crowd. Then the third week, bigger crowds.

There was a big mayoral race going on. And the big thing with the mayor is that he was promoting drinking milk. I mean a mayor of a major city was -- that was his whole theme. I think he had a deal with some dairy or something. I don't remember his name. Anyway, I did a joke one night because I was doing some political jokes. I said what do you think about the mayor? I said the mayor is gay. I think I said fag. In those days it was a controversial word, but they didn't use the word gay yet. I think the mayor's a fag. Oh, my god, what did he say? Well, the next night there were like 40 more people. The room was packed. They wanted to see me get busted for calling -- what about the mayor? I said, no, he's not; he's with his boy friend. Oh, my god, he said it again.

So the next night the mayor was there and the place was jammed. People lined up against

the wall. Somebody said the mayor is here. They introduced him, the mayor, and his big mouth thing. I said, Mr. Mayor, I want to apologize for saying you're a fag because we know you're not a fag. He said, well, at least we put that to rest. I said right, I know. He said how do you know? I said because most junkies aren't into that. Oh, my god, he called the mayor a junkie. I mean no one had ever said anything like this. Now the joint is packed every night. They're waiting. Am I going to get arrested for what am I going to say?

So here I am one night and I'm doing a routine and I'm right in the middle. And I'm back. I'm back like almost in show business. And over my speaker system -- somebody hit the wrong button somewhere else -- I hear, Johnson, party of four, two chicken fried steaks, two fried chicken dinners. It comes right over my PA system. I mean the people laughed. They thought it was some kind of -- but I was livid. So I screamed.

There was a guy who was the manager. His name was Mr. McClusky. And when I say Mr. McClusky, the mister was part of his name. His son called him Mr. McClusky. So I did the unthinkable. I addressed him as McClusky, which was like addressing Alec Guinness without the sir.

Hey, McClusky. And he came in and his eyes were this big. What the hell are you doing? I'm trying to -- and you're ordering chicken -- anyway, this agent John Powell went to Rocky Rothrop and he said, Rocky, the room is packed every night. You've got to give Pete a raise. And Rocky's response to that was, well, John, it is true. He said the bar is up over a thousand percent. He said but we'd rather sell food than whiskey. We're a restaurant. And when he said that I pulled John away. I said who is he talking to? There's no money in food. You know, you make ten percent if you're good at your food. You sell one martini, you made more than the whole dinner and you don't have a cook. It doesn't go bad. It doesn't have to be refrigerated. You go like this and this and you hand it to the guy and you made all your money. Sell a bottle of wine, you made more than ten dinners. So John Powell said, all right, you're right.

So he came back the next night. He said I've got you booked at a place on the other side of town. It's a bigger place. The guy's been in. He loves you. His name is Perry Williams. It's called The Plantation Club. And if you work there you're going to have a band behind you. Well, now my career is reborn. And it was \$100 more. It was \$400 a week. Now I have a chance to pay my

bills.

So I went over there. And the band consisted of an organ player. His name was Tony Pasco. Everything he played sounded like you should roller skate to it. No matter what it was it all had that same (making a sound). He'd change all these buttons and it would still sound the same. I don't know what he did, but everything sounded bad. And the rest of the band was a drummer. And the drummer was the owner of the club, Perry Williams, who used to be a drummer when he was in college.

So opening night I go out and there's a fair crowd. I had built a little following. So I'm singing a song to open the show. It's like I'm back in show business, "Lady is a Tramp" or something. And the band is playing behind. I mean they're terrible. Remember I just came from this all-star band. You know, this was not an easy thing for me to put up with. So I'm singing this song. And out of the corner of my eye -- well, first I hear the drums stop. Now, I'm in show business. I'm not going to turn around and say what the hell happened? So I keep singing and out of the corner of my eye I see my drummer, Perry, walking down the aisle. And he goes to the front and picks up two menus, party of two, follow me. In the middle of my show my drummer was seating people.

Anyway, I was there for about six weeks. And the crowds were good. He was a dear man to work for. He was very kind and gracious.

Who was?

Perry Williams. And he was very nice to me. I mean he fed me. And I had a little motel about 50 yards away. It was convenient.

But it was Spokane.

It was Spokane. And then John Powell came to me and he said I have a job for you at the Moose Club. And they have a trio there. So I went there and I did a regular show. And it went over very well. And John said to me I'd like to be your manager. And the audacity of this wimpy little guy from Spokane wanting to be my manager after I had just come from Las Vegas and experienced success with a group, I was so upset with it that I said okay. I think I had an ulterior motive. I think my motive was let's see what you can do and you can't do anything and I'm going to embarrass you, you know, whatever it was.

So then he came to me about two weeks later and said I think I have you booked in Seattle during the World's Fair. It was '62, the year of the fair. It was already June, but he said I think I can get you in. Well, I figured it's got to be a lot of people in town for the World's Fair, people from all over the world. He said it's a place called Rosalini's 410. It's one of like the spots in downtown Seattle. So he did get me booked there. And it paid I think 500 a week. I mean it was like a fortune to me.

So I went there and I got a trio. I could take a trio with me. They could actually play my arrangements. It was a small room. And I didn't see the contract. It was five shows a night, five 40-minute shows a night, 40 on and 20 off. So I went in there and I might have had like 40 minutes of material when I went in there. But I stayed there a year. And when I got out of there I had five different one-hour shows. It forced me to develop material on my feet. It was the best job I ever had in my life.

And the owner of the club was Victor Rosalini. He was a giant bear of a man that nobody could get along with because he was a perfectionist. He was maybe one of the top three or four restaurateurs in the world. He was president of the International Restaurant Association. He was a genius at restaurants. He knew everything about every type of food, about seating, about sound, about bartenders. He knew everything.

Anyway, during this time John Powell came to me and he said we have a chance to do a TV special back in Spokane for a new savings and loan. It was a division of Lincoln, that big boondoggle that happened like 15 years ago where everybody went to prison. He said Lincoln Savings and Loan. But these are the local guys putting it together, the Lindseys. They're very well financed and it's a big deal. And they like you. They used to hang out at the club where you worked, The Plantation. And they like you and they want you to do a special. I said, well, what does it pay? He said it doesn't pay anything. It's free, but we get to keep the tape. He says I think I can use this tape. I said okay. When do I have to do this? He said, well, it's going to take a lot of work because you'll actually be the producer. You'll have to hire the band, you'll have to hire all the talent, the singers, if you want another comic, whatever. He says you'll have to write the show, the sketches, and you'll have to direct it because these guys don't know anything about directing a show.

So I'd get up early in the morning. I'd work till two, sleep a couple of hours, get up, fly to Spokane, work four or five hours on the show, fly back, take a little nap, take a shower and go do the show. Like four days a week I'd do that. Then on my day off I'd spend it over there. It was a very tough schedule.

I had moved my wife and the children -- I had moved them up to Seattle. We had a beautiful house we were renting. We really shouldn't have been in the neighborhood. It was all doctors and airline pilots and everything. In fact, I used to dress Japanese to do the lawn because I didn't want them to think I was doing my own lawn.

Anyway, we did the TV special. And it wasn't perfect, but it came out pretty good considering. So in those days they used two-inch videotape and it was a reel. It was about this big around and it must have weighed 35 pounds. It came in a box. It had an aluminum reel in the middle.

So John said I'm going to L.A. with the tape. So he went to the Steve Allen Show because he figured that's the right show for me. And he walked in there cold and he said, I'm John Powell from Spokane and I have a videotape of this comic I want you to see. He talked to one of the writers. The writers were Burns and Marmer. They had written Ernie Kovacs, Carol Burnett. They were the two wackiest, but they were geniuses. They were insane, but geniuses. And so they said here's a guy from Spokane. Well, they didn't know much about geography. So they figured it rains all the time. Well, that's Seattle. In Spokane it doesn't rain, it snows. In Seattle it rains all the time. So they said it rains on him all the time. That's why his hair is -- and they were doing jokes. They nicknamed him "The Sponge."

They said we can't help you, but come back tomorrow. He came back every tomorrow. He was there seven days a week standing in the back with this tape under his arm. And so they created a character in their sketches called "The Sponge." I mean he was that amusing to them. After a while he was no longer amusing. So the producer said get rid of this guy. So there was a page, a gofer named Jerry Goldstein. He went on to become rather important number business, but this was his first job. They gave him a jacket that said Westinghouse. That was the producer of the house, their logo. They said do you have glasses? Get some glasses. You've got to wear glasses. And you have to smoke a cigar. So they gave him a cigar and glasses. They said you're the

executive producer. So he went out there and said, Mr. Powell, I'm the executive producer. They were all watching from behind the curtain. Bah, bah, bah, bah, bah.

And John said if you'd just look at it. So he said, well, this afternoon between two and three we can look at a little of the tape. So anyway, Jerry said we'll put the tape on. Okay. So Jerry went in and they cued up the tape and he watched about ten minutes of it. He went and got one of the writers. He said come here and watch this. So he watched about ten minutes of it. He got the other writer. And they brought Steve Allen in. Then they brought their producer in. They watched the whole tape and called me the next day. You have to be on the show tomorrow.

It was like -- and that was the beginning. From doing the Steve Allen Show, Nat Cole saw me.

So that was your very first. Other than the show you put on in Spokane, you hadn't really been --

Well, I had a little local show in Seattle that was called "On The Town" or something where whoever was appearing in town I would host the show and introduce them and just do a couple of my routines in it.

Tell me about the Steve Allen experience that first time.

Well, Steve and I connected immediately because I was a piano player, as was he. I was a comic, as was he. I was a jazz freak, as was he. And so my sense of humor was colored by my love and appreciation for jazz. My humor represented the world through the eyes of a bebopper, as did Steve Allen's. So we connected immediately. And the writers loved me because I was completely off the wall. I didn't do anything conventional. And, of course, the band -- Don Trenor had the band. They were all the big jazz players, Conte Candoli and Frank Ross. They were the top guys in L.A. So they immediately glommed on to me. I was there guy. So they -- get Pete back -- Steve would say, yeah, get Pete.

So I did. And then they would work me into the sketches with Louis Nye, Don Knotts, Tom Poston and Bill Dana. So I would do these sketches. They would write these sketches and I would do those.

And Steve Allen -- I mean he was so hip. First of all, he created the talk show, The Tonight Show in New York. He created a desk with a couch and a stage and a band. No one had ever done

anything like that. And it still exists today in every talk show in the world.

We had this connection immediately. And when I'd sit on the panel -- you know, on talk shows they always interview everybody. What are you going to do? What are you going to talk about? They don't want any surprises. With Steve Allen -- maybe it was just me. I don't know. But later -- we'll get into that -- I had the same thing with [Johnny] Carson. But no one ever said once what are you going to talk about on the panel? They just let me go on.

And I went in and sat on the panel. And one day there was a 45-RPM record laying on Steve's desk that some artist had -- so I picked up the record and put it on my ear. It was on my ear. And Steve did the entire segment and never mentioned the record on my ear. And so the next time I did the show I picked up another record and put it on. And after like three shows, you know, he said, what are you doing? He said doesn't that hurt your ear? And I say sure, it hurts, but it's not as bad as the old 78s. And he went ballistic. He said you mean you've wasted like three months of my time for that joke? But he connected. We had the same sense of humor.

And Steve was not personable. Nobody knew Steve Allen. He was a strange commodity. He had no close friends. Even his own family, they weren't estranged, but they were not close and loving or anything. He wanted to be friendly. But Steve thought -- we later talked about it. He asked me how do you make friends? He thought there was a formula. He was so analytical. He thought that I could tell him, well, first, Steve, sit and cross your legs and then look to the right. He thought there was a sequence of events that would enable you to become personable and friends.

What was the range of time that you were on the Steve Allen Show?

Well, I was on for a period of probably a couple of years, maybe three years.

Do you know what years?

1962 it started. And then Nat Cole saw me on there. And, of course, Nat was a piano player, jazz musician. So immediately he understood where I was coming from. He would laugh at the in-between lines. So Nat booked me for a tour. I was with Nat for almost two years until just before he passed away. And being with Nat, that elevated me to another thing. We worked the Sands. I was the opening act. We worked all the big theaters in the world. And Nat and I hit it off right away.

It was a large company. There were 16 singers and dancers, eight boys, eight girls, half

black, half white, called the Merry Young Souls. There was a 15-piece orchestra, lighting and audio. We all traveled together. It was called Bus and Truck Company. All the equipment and the instruments went in trucks. Personnel went in a bus -- two buses. Nat and I flew first class everywhere. We were together. We were sort of above that thing and we always traveled together. Every hotel he would have the largest suite. He got me the connecting room. And the door was always open. So I literally spent two years with Nat Cole. He's one of the kindest, gentlest men and one of the greatest jazz musicians, pianists that ever lived.

In fact, later -- I'll tell you a little anecdote -- I had a TV series in Toronto. And the piano player, a kid named Gary Gross, who was excellent -- the rest of the rhythm section was off Rob McConnell, the Boss Brass Band from Canada. They were brilliant. And Gary wasn't a pure bebopper, but he could read and play everything. And we had a lot of guests; he was invaluable. So Gary said there's this friend of mine, a piano player, who wants to meet you in town. How about go to his house for dinner? I didn't really like that because, first of all, I was writing this sitcom, too. I was exhausted. And then I'd have to rehearse the band. And I said, Gary, tomorrow is Sunday. He said, please, man. And I loved him so much I said all right. And I really didn't want to go.

So we stopped and picked up some wine. And we went on this rather long drive. I was somewhat uncommunicative because I was a little bugged. So we got to this house. And he said you knock on the door and I'll get the wine. I knocked on the door and Oscar Peterson opened the door. I almost had a coronary. And he hugged me and said I'm a big fan of yours. What's wrong with this picture? It's like I couldn't even talk.

Anyway, one of the conversations Oscar and I had was about Nat Cole. He said Nat Cole was the bridge between the old Art Tatum style of playing and the new style of playing, the different voicings of the chords. Nat Cole was the bridge. He was the guy who brought it into the new era. He was one of the most important musicians in jazz.

Was this taking place here in Vegas?

Yes. We had moved back to town when I joined Nat.

And Nat was living in Vegas?

No. Nat was living in L.A.

And where was Oscar Peterson?

Toronto. I had the TV show in Toronto. That was in later years. I had a TV show called "Pete's Place." It took place in Vegas. The opening scene was the lights on the Strip and a Rolls Royce convertible coming down the Strip at night with all the lights gleaming off the car. It was a chauffeur driven. It pulled up to a red light and the camera would pan back and I was sitting in the back with my big cigar and a tuxedo. Then the horn would blow, the light turned green and there would be a pick-up shot of a green light and then a wide shot of the car. And you hear a horn blowing. The chauffeur and I both turned and looked at the car behind us and shook our head. And the Rolls Royce pulled away and I was next to it on a bicycle. I only appeared to be in the Rolls. I had my trumpet hanging from the handlebars. So I pedaled on the Strip and I parked it. The sign said "Pete's Palace," the same printing as Caesars Palace, that Roman block printing. And as I looked up the A in palace fell and it just said "Pete's Place." So I walked in. And then from there everything else was shot this Toronto, all the interior shots.

And what was the format of the show?

The format of the show was that I owned a small club off the Strip in Vegas and the mob was always trying to move in. And all the big stars from the Strip would come and visit me and I'd talk them into doing a number or two. So they'd get up. And they were dressed casually. Everything would go wrong. The band didn't know the arrangement or the roof leaked and there would be a drip and they'd have to keep moving. I mean everybody -- Della Reese -- I mean everybody who was anybody did the show. So everything would go wrong in the show.

What years did that play?

Boy, I'm just guessing at that, but it would be in the 70s. It never played in the States. The producer was not an ethical man in my estimation. The producer didn't need the money. He had a deal with Grant Tinker for all the MTM products -- *Mary Tyler Moore*. I think Carol Burnett was on MTM. Anyway, all those big shows were MTM -- *Lou Grant*, you know. So he was making a zillion dollars. So he didn't really need the money.

It was an excellent show. I wrote the show, too; the format had never been done yet. I think it's an excellent format. It combines variety with sitcom. In other words, the show would start where Della Reese would come in or Connie Stevens or whoever it was would come into my

dressing room. And there would be some problem. They'd say don't worry, honey, we'll get through this. So then we'd do the scene in the dressing room where there would be jokes. We'd break. We'd come back. I'd be on stage. There would be an audience. I would introduce Della Reese. Della would start singing a song. I'd walk. Then they'd pick me up coming back into the office. And there would be a problem with some guy, the bartender, or the cook would be there telling me about this problem or we oversold the club. You'd hear Della Reese in the background. She would be the musical background like in a movie singing her song. And then we'd go back to her finishing the song and the audience applauding and her walking off. And that would be commercial break. It was perfect.

You got tapes of this?

I have a couple of them, but not enough. The producer also said I'll send you -- we did 50 of them. He said, I'll send you the tapes, but I never got any of them. I have just a couple that were promos. We had every big star on -- John Candy, Cybill Shepherd when she was really hot.

So how much of your life has been based in Vegas?

Well, I was still living here all the time. I moved here in '60. January the 1st or 2nd we got here when we first opened at the Frontier hotel. So I called my wife and said -- this was paradise for me. Remember that my whole life was on the road. Even when I was in high school I was traveling.

From 1950 to 1960—ten years on the road. Every town we'd get to we'd get off work at two o'clock. That was the standard, nine to two. When we'd get off work at two -- you have to remember juxtaposed against the guy who works in an office, his working hours, he gets off work at five in the evening. He doesn't go home and go to bed. That's when he eats his dinner, reads the paper, watches the news and then he goes to bed. So we'd get off at two. We'd go and have our dinner then. Well, the only restaurant -- this was before Denny's and before fast-food restaurants. So the only thing open was the bus station—and the food was terrible. So we'd go and eat dinner at three. Then we'd go back to the apartment. It's still the middle of our day. There was no television yet. Or what there was, was only like one station. There was a test pattern on after midnight if you remember in those days. So we'd listen today the radio and there wasn't much on the radio. We'd try to get some news. We'd read the paper or read a book and go to sleep at five or six. But the

time we got up the banks were closed, the cleaners was closed and the barbershop was closed. So my entire life was setting the alarm to do anything I had to do relative to a normal person.

You go to the cage and cash a check 24 hours a day. Supermarkets are open 24 hours. You can buy a pair of shoes at four in the morning or get your haircut at three in the morning. You could order breakfast at four in the afternoon and the chef didn't come out of the kitchen with a clever saying what the hell do you think this is? Everywhere else in the country you can't get breakfast after 11 at the latest, even New York City at 11 o'clock. Even though they make a fried egg sandwich, you can't get eggs and bacon.

So anyway, when I got out here and called my wife and said you've got to get out here. She put the kids --

How many kids did you have?

Three. So she put them on the train and they came out on a train.

Has she been happy with the move to Vegas?

Oh, yeah.

When did you guys get married?

Ready for this? 1955. It's 53 years this year.

Wow. What's your wife's name?

Marianne. Yes, she's from a small town about 60 miles from where I was born and raised.

What did Marianne do other than raising kids?

She never really worked. She took odd-and-end jobs now and then. When airport security started right after D.B. Cooper, the whole beginning of it, before terrorism, she worked at the airport.

They didn't have machines. They just searched purses and things. She did that because she knew somebody who owned the security company. She did that for maybe a year. And then she worked for a couple of years at a beauty salon being a receptionist. She did those kinds of things just as the kids got older and she wanted to get out of the house.

How supportive was Marianne with the kind of lifestyle that you led?

Well, it was tough for her because I was gone a lot. But it probably kept us together because culturally we came from two diametrically opposed -- she was raised Germanic Pennsylvania Dutch where nobody ever hugged or kissed or said I love you or anything. And my family, when

we go back there all of my uncles would kiss me and my aunts would kiss me and they'd kiss her. It was very tough for her to deal with that physical contact and the praising. She never had any of that when she was growing up. So it was hard for her to get used to that.

And she raised the kids almost on her own.

Yes, but when I was working in town here, which was a lot in the early years, it was a perfect set up because I'd get home -- the shift here was until five in the morning. We'd work midnight to five or 11 to five. It was six hours. So I'd get home at 5:30 and I'd be up and fix the kids breakfast and get them to school. Then I could go to bed. And then later she'd get up and fix the kids dinner and so forth. Then I'd get up and we'd have dinner. And we still had time to go out or something before I had to go to work. So that particular shift worked good. We always seemed to be on that shift.

Did any of your children go into the music or entertainment?

Not really. Our third child, our daughter, she was in dancing for a long time. She was wonderful at it. But she got married and had kids and that ended all that. She's an executive with MGM.

What's her name?

Linda Smith. Smith, can you imagine that? Yeah. She has three daughters. That's one of her daughters in there. She lives in town here, of course.

My oldest son works mostly with security companies. The next daughter works for a linen company doing inventories at hotels. And our youngest son is an audio engineer. He's the one who's the closest to show business. In fact, he won an Emmy last year for his work for Showtime.

And what's his name?

Mark.

Now, what kind of work are you continually doing? Are you still working?

I still work all the time, yeah.

What do you do?

The same thing. I do comedy and jazz. I do jazz festivals. I do at least three in Los Angeles every year. I sometimes do the Wichita. I used to do it every year, but it was too much. Newport Beach, I've done that. I do a jazz cruise. I'll be doing that again in November. It's a straight-ahead jazz cruise, no fusion, no Dixieland. It's bebop, the whole ship.

And I do some colleges, universities, even some junior colleges where I send in arrangements that

I've written. You have to send them in a couple months ahead because it's tough for the kids to read. It's not like dealing with pros like Doc's band or something. And then I go in and do a clinic in the afternoon with the kids. It's not complicated. Usually the same things are happening. You know, get five trumpet players, you can only hear one. You have to let them know that -- same thing with saxophones. You can hear the lead alto, but not the baritone or vice versa. So you explain that and you have them play a chord and listen. They never listened before. They just played their own part. Drummer beats the bass drum too much. Bass player, the notes are too short. The solos are immature because they're kids, you know. And then we have a concert that night or the next night and their parents all come. And whatever money is raised I just get my expenses and the rest goes towards the music program so they can buy instruments or whatever.

No plans on slowing down it doesn't sound like.

No. In fact, I just got back from Scottsdale. I worked an Indian casino down there for six nights, two shows a night.

And while you're doing the shows, you're doing your comedy and playing the piano?

There was no piano down there. So it was straight standup comedy. But now I'm doing Sunday. Saturday we leave and Sunday we're doing a show in Chicago with this group we're out with called That's Italian. It's myself; Frankie Randall, the singer -- well, he still has a house here, but he lives in Palm Springs now -- Dick Contino, the accordion player who lives here and has for 35 years; and Julius LaRosa, the singer originally from *The Arthur Godfrey Show*. Julius is 79 now and still sounds exactly the same. It's full orchestra. And Vinnie Falcone, who lives in town, Vinnie's conducting. And full orchestra -- seven brass, five reeds, five rhythm. We're working a big theater in Chicago. And we've done Palm Springs, Palm Desert, Thousand Oaks. We're working that next month. All these big art centers. Cerritos, California. Atlantic City, we worked a casino there. Casino in upstate New York, an Indian casino. This is Chicago. So it's four guys. We each do like half an hour.

Sounds wonderful.

It is. It's great. And the band is good because Dick Contino's charts are very good. They're not jazz. Julius LaRosa's charts are all written by the top jazz guys -- Sammy Nestico, Don Costa, Torey Zita. All those charts are written by the top guys. So the band loves playing them. And

Frankie Randall is doing Sinatra's book. He's doing like four of Sinatra's charts with the Sinatra family blessing.

Take me to after the Steve Martin. Tell me what took place after that show and after your career got started.

Well, there was Nat Cole. While I was with Nat Cole, I was doing Merv Griffin, Mike Douglas. And then I did the *Tonight Show* maybe a little earlier than all this, but right in there. I did the *Tonight Show* in New York when Carson was the host before it moved. Oh. They told me this is your first time. Don't go to the panel. You do your thing, you take your bow and walk off.

I've heard that was the whole thing.

That's the pecking order. And I'm okay with that. It's your show and okay. So I did something really hip. I do a routine on the fourth trumpet player of every band. It's very visual, but people can relate to it. And I think the artist on before me I think was Mel Tormé. I'm not sure, but I think it was Mel Tormé. Doc wasn't leading the band. He was playing lead on the band. Skitch Henderson had the band.

So I did this routine. Of course, the band loved it. It's like so inside; they just fell down. And Carson came and got me and took me to the panel physically. Everybody said he's never done that; you're home free; this is the biggest thing. And he did two complete segments with me. And everybody said he's never done this.

In the middle of the second segment or near the end he was telling a story related to the story I told. We're talking about the music business and bands. In the middle of the story Mel Tormé broke up and started laughing. And Carson assumed he was laughing at the story. And Johnny was really buoyed because Mel Tormé was the hippest singer around. So that was an honor for Carson. And then Mel said something not meaning anything by it. He said I'm sorry, John, I didn't mean to interpret your story, but I can't stop laughing at that thing Pete did.

And Carson took it personally like I was in competition with him or something. He turned off right then and there. He said we'll be back right after this. And he left during the break and the producer came and said everybody off the panel. And he did the rest of the show.

Then Peter LaSalle became the producer of the show and he was for 25 years. Fred De Cordova was -- Freddie was up in years and he was the executive producer. Freddie just walked

around and said it's going fine. Peter booked all the talent. Peter was a huge fan of mine from the Arthur Godfrey days. Peter was the producer of the *Arthur Godfrey Show*, which is a whole other chapter in my life. So Peter would call me like three or four times a year. He'd say I'm trying to get you on the show. I mentioned your name to Carson and he got real bugged and kicked over a chair and he just said no way. So this was like ten years. I mean I was persona non gratis.

And then Carson started to take some time off. He was in L.A. John Davidson was hosting the show. And John called me and said would you do the show because John was a good friend and a big fan of mine. I said, John, I'm not allowed on. He said but Carson's not here. And I said, well, you better check with Peter LaSalle. So Peter called me and said, yeah, as long as Johnny's not here, you can do the show.

So I did the show and it went fine. I was the number-one call whenever a substitute host was there. McLean Stevenson did it. Don Rickles did it. David Brenner did it. Everybody who did it -- Jerry Lewis -- they always said we want you on the show. So I did it a ton of times.

Then once they called and said can you do the show on Friday? And I said yeah. And my usual was I'd fly in late morning from here to Burbank. They'd have a limo to take me to the studio. You're there about midday. You go to the commissary. You get a sandwich or a cup of soup. You go back to the studio and rehearsal was at three. You go through your charts. Then after all the acts were rehearsed, Doc rehearses the rest of the music. Then you go to makeup. You put your suit on and you come down. 5:30 to 7:00 was the show.

So I said who else is on the show because I find that if you get a lot of talkers on, it's better if I do something more musical. It's a better balance for the show. If you get a lot of music, I'll do straight standup. So I was fortunate I had that option. They told me. And I said who's hosting? And they said Carson. I said to the guy, uh-oh, no, no, I'm on the do-not-disturb list; I can't do it. And the guy said, oh, I'm sorry, I didn't know. He said I'll find you another gig. Then he called back like two minutes later and said I just mentioned to Carson you're on and he said great.

So I went there. I never apologized. He never apologized. I just started doing the show and I did it --

What did you have to apologize for?

Well, you know I think he was expecting me to and maybe I was expecting him. But neither of us

did. And for some reason we developed an unspoken thing between us. There were a set of rules for the *Tonight Show*. First of all, you never go into the makeup room when Johnny's in there. There's a large makeup room with three chairs and you go in there. Then there's two little private rooms with one chair. You don't go in there when Johnny's in there. I went in all the time. Knock on the door. John, I've got to tell you this joke. I'd tell him like the worst joke or the dirtiest joke. And he'd laugh and he'd tell me a joke. There was never a complaint.

When Johnny comes in to do the show, Ed McMahon does the warm-up, the band plays a tune, right? And then they say, ladies and gentlemen, we're starting the show in 60 seconds or whatever. Johnny walks in the back door. He's always flanked by a security guard, Peter LaSalle and Fred De Cordova. They're always these four when they walk in. No one is to approach Johnny at that time, right? When they'd walk in John would see me and he'd leave them and come over to me. And he'd tell me another joke or something, some running gag or something. They'd all say what do you have on him? What's going on? I said nothing, man.

Then he'd go out to do the show. Somewhere in the show -- you know, they'd say don't interrupt him when he's doing an introduction. He'd be saying here's a comic. And I'd be standing behind the curtain and I'd yell, "Hurry up." He'd break up. It was like how dare you do that. It was sacrosanct. But he found it so irreverent that it was funny to him. He'd say whatever he'd want. I never said don't say this or don't say that. He'd say here's a guy who's just like anybody else in your neighborhood if you live in a very weird neighborhood.

He'd bring me out and then I'd sit on the panel. And he'd be ready to go to commercial and I'd grab him and say, oh, no, no, no, wait, I've got to finish this story. I mean that was unheard of it. And I'd finish the story and he'd say we'll be right back and he'd laugh. After I'd say, John, I'm sorry. And he said to me once. He said you know what? As long as you're scoring because let me tell you tomorrow morning people riding on the train to New York from Scarsdale will say did you see Johnny's show last night? There was this comedian on and they were so funny. He won't even remember your name, but it'll be Johnny's show. He said, I'm the producer. That means that this guy is out there. So you're working for me. You're beefing up my money by doing a good job on the show. He said, I trust you.

They never said to me what are you going to talk about? They'd just say you want Johnny

to ask a question if I just got back from London? I'd say, yeah, tell him to ask me about London. So that's all he'd say. Sometimes he'd say, I understand you were in London. I'd say no. And he'd break up. He'd say don't do that. We had this thing and he would even -- if he'd have some other guest on and they'd do a joke or something, he'd say that sounds like Barbutti's joke. I mean if anybody said something about the accordion, he would say, no, it's not accordion, it's "cordeen" because I did a routine once that's been on a couple of albums about a "cordeen" player. It makes it sort of ethnic.

When did you stop doing the Carson show?

When Jay Leno took over. And they were nice enough or evil enough to inform me that they wouldn't be using me because I had done it so much they didn't want it to look like it was the same show. I understand that. But I don't understand them making a big deal out of it.

I swear I could go on and on and on. But I'm going to start cutting things down a little bit. Anything you want to talk about your Las Vegas experience that I haven't had a chance to ask you or bring up, and some of the people you worked with?

You know, this town was real good to me. But I've always felt that I owed the city a lot, too. So I served on every bloody committee that was ever put together here. And they'd call me and say we need some act for this, we're doing a benefit for this, we're doing a benefit. And I can tell you the names of the people in this town, the late Joe Williams. I never called Joe once and he said no. Joe said what time do you need me there? Do I have to wear a tux? No matter what it is. Joe, we're doing this radio show to help them walk again. We're doing a thing for the spinal injuries. We're doing a thing for the Fitzgerald Rehab Center. Joe would just say what time do you want me there?

So you had a good rapport with people.

Robert Goulet. Every time I called Robert Goulet. Bob, we're doing a thing for the governor. Well, why do you always call me for this -- you know, he would carry on and rant and rave. And then he would say, okay, I'll be there. He came there and never complained about not going on first or last or anything. He was a gentleman. And all the other people in town -- Peter Anthony -- same thing with all the musicians, anybody I'd call -- Gus Mancuso, Joey Preston, Billy Christ, all my guys, the other guys, Carl Fontana. We're doing a thing. Will you be there? You got it.

Do you still see these guys or work with them at all?

Well, so many of them have passed away now. We've lost so many of them. But, yeah, we stay in touch. Joey isn't playing anymore. His wife is not in good health. So he's sort of taking care of her. Gus Mancuso is still active and still works.

I'm seeing him Saturday.

Yeah. Gus is still one of the great musical geniuses of our time. He will always be.

I told him I'm going to have him play for me. We're going to meet at The Bootlegger. And I said you get your fingers warmed up because I'm going to have to have you play.

Yeah. Gus also has -- see, if I have any success, it's due to the ambiance within which I work, like musicians. When I do the *Tonight Show*, the guys in the band when I say hello, they start laughing because they're thinking and when I start going somewhere they're following me. They're tuned into this same very narrow frequency. They know exactly where I'm going. They're laughing before I get there. It is not just a sense of respect or admiration. They understand where I'm going with this. And they start laughing when I say hello. And the same thing with the musicians here in town. When I'm doing something, you know, I do a piece of business about the kind of acts that I hate, the singers who all sound the same who sing the same songs, the singers who do the wrong material, you know, I don't want to hear Gordon MacRae sing "Lullaby by Birdland" (singing).

Hey, did you write your own comedy?

Yeah.

You wrote all your material?

Yeah.

Did your mom and dad get to see your huge success?

Well, my dad did. He died young, but he saw me on TV a couple of times. I mean that was good enough for him.

And then how about mom?

My dad only saw me on local TV, but my mom, yes—I brought her out here a couple of times. I took her to see Steve Allen once at the Thunderbird hotel in the showroom there. I said I've got to go see him, mom, come with me. Okay. So we go there. A lot of celebrities were there because Steve Allen started everybody. Sid Caesar walked in and came by the table. Hello, Sid. He shook

my hand. I said this is my mom. Oh, he said, so nice to meet you. You have such a wonderful son. Liberace was there and I waved. And he came over to the table. Lee, this is my mom. He had to give her a hug. Then Steve Allen introduced us, you know, a comic who started on my show and I'm real proud. You know, there were other people there.

Anyway, we got home. And she called my sister and said we went to Steve Allen, but we couldn't enjoy the show. All these celebrities kept coming by and bothering us. I mean she was -- you know, she was being a real mom about it. Yeah, she got to see all the TV shows and everything.

I'm glad. I'm wondering if you'll be able to take some time to show me some pictures or anything before we go? You got anything?

You know what? You're better off going on my website. I have a website. There are a bunch of things on there. It's Barbuti with one T dot-com, WWW. Because I'd have to hunt up scrapbooks or something.

Who handles your website for you?

My son does, the audio guy. He also does graphics and all that. He's done a bunch of things for Lucasfilm and all those. They outsource some of that stuff.

Pete, this has been wonderful. I swear I could talk to you for two more hours.

I sort of just go on, but I --

No. That's the best. It's wonderful. There's so many nuggets in there.

My opening here in Vegas is another one of those stories. The late Joe Delaney -- he taught a course in hotel management out here at the university. And I did Joe's class every semester. And the expertise I would bring to them was that when you graduate you're not going to be managing the Bellagio. You're going to be managing the Holiday Inn in Ames, Iowa. So if you decide to have entertainment in there, here are the rules. You're going to be dealing with an agent and/or a manager. You're going to be dealing with the press in that town for your PR. Here are the rules. If you're in charge of setting up the room, don't have the entrance near the stage so that every time the door opens attention is drawn away from the stage. Have the entrance in the back. Do this. Do that. Have the stage this high so that the entertainer can relate to the audience and, yet, they're high enough above to imply that I'm special. All these little rules. If you have rooms in the hotel, make

sure the entertainers get rooms. You can write it off at the retail rate of \$60 or \$50 a night or whatever. And in case there's a snowstorm, your entertainers are there. You don't have to say there will be no show tonight or, yeah, but we paid for dinner and you're supposed to -- all these little things.

Anyway, Joe always made me tell this story. I'm going to take one drink and then I'll tell you the story about our opening here in Vegas.

We came to town here and we rehearsed in the afternoon, the Millionaires, at the New Frontier hotel, not the one that's there now. The employees came out of the casino and said this is the best group we've ever heard. You're going to be the biggest stars. We sang like the Four Freshmen. We did all this jazz and we had comedy. Well-rounded group. We rehearsed. And then we came back that evening to set up. And we were working opposite Frances Faye. I had heard of her because she did some very important album. She did an album with Mel Tormé. I think it was called "Manhattan Towers." She was known in the business.

And so Frances Faye came in. She was in a wheelchair. I don't think she had to be, but she was suing the Flamingo for falling. (Someone) told her to be in a wheelchair. Francis was gay and had another woman with her, which is her business -- I don't care -- called Teri, who was her manager, who was big and tough and very, very outspoken. So they came in and she said, huh-uh, get those instruments off the stage. So I said, Ms. Faye, I'm the leader of the other band. She said I don't care who you are. My band sets up on the front of the stage and we're having an extension built out into the audience ten feet from my grand piano. She played at a piano. So I said well, where are we going to set up? She said I don't care where you set up. So she set up her band along the front. I said can we move the stands? She said no. So she had like an eight-piece band with two tiers and her drummer and then her grand piano.

So we got to work behind them. The audience couldn't see us. And we couldn't turn the mikes up because the monitors were back there and they'd get feedback. So they were like Mazak. Nobody could see us, and they could barely hear us. And they said what's that sound? And it kept getting worse every night. It was so bad that we hated Vegas and we hated her and we hated the hotel and we just wanted to get out of town. Our hopes were so high.

And so Bill Miller was the entertainment director. I think Bill just passed away at the age

of about a hundred. He was a big-time New York producer. He owned a club back there in New York -- just across the bridge in Jersey, actually. He took his first vacation. He had a show in the main room called "Holiday in Japan" with Jimmy Shigada, the Japanese star, and a big cast of Japanese entertainers, singers and dancers. It was a beautiful show, big band. He had that show and in the lounge he had Frances Faye. And he took two weeks off to go to Florida with a Japanese girl, a lady friend of his.

So our act was so bad not being seen and heard that one of the casino managers called him and said you've got to get back and fire this act. He said they're only in for two weeks. Let them finish the second week and we'll never see -- he said no. It's Friday night and we're expecting a big weekend. Bill Miller flew home. He was livid. He flew home like the next day when he got a flight. We had about three days left.

And the crowning blow -- she finished and she was coming up the aisle. And I was walking down the aisle. And she was in a wheelchair. As she wheeled by she grabbed my sleeve and tugged at it. Without making eye contact, she said the keys on my piano were a little bit sticky; take some soda water and clean them. I mean I was supposed to be her peer.

So we got up on stage. And I got the microphone and I walked up and I stood on her piano, her grand piano. And I said, ladies and gentlemen, we have an act here. Now, in the audience there weren't many people because she had just finished. People were coming in and people from the casino were watching. What the hell's going on? I didn't know Bill Miller was in the audience. In fact, he was sitting in the back with Donald O'Connor way in the back. I said, this is the worst job we've ever had in our life. I said, we had a good group when we came here and this witch made us set up back there. I said, we're going to do one show for you. You want to see a good show? People were there and they applaud.

So I brought the trombone player up on the piano with me and the guitar player. He had a long cord on his amp. The drummer was way in the bay. And we're playing and doing. They said you guys are good. I said, wait until you hear -- you want to see the drummer? And they said yeah. So I went back and I knocked over all the -- put the drums on the piano with the spurs digging into the piano.

When we finished the show up there, we got a standing ovation. Bill Miller said this is one

of the best groups I've ever seen. He extended our contract and we stayed there six months.

What a great story.

Yeah. It was the end -- we had nothing to lose.

And what was her reaction?

She had no reaction. Eddie Grady was the drummer. He was kind of a famous drummer. He had a band called The Commanders. It was an all-brass band. He was having a real problem with her, too. She was unmanageable, Frances Faye. Nothing was right in the world with her. And Eddie went to her room to talk to her. And he knocked on the door and he opened the door and he said to her manager, Teri, I've got to talk to Francis. And Teri punched him in the nose and almost broke his nose. He came back and he was bleeding.

I mean this was the most bizarre thing. But we stayed there. Everybody else got fired. The manager of the room who hated us, he got fired. The pit boss who wanted to get his money, he got fired. We ended up there. They brought in -- who's that old actor? He had a series on a tugboat. I mean from early television, 50s, black and white. Preston Foster, he did a bunch of movies. He was the host. He got fired. We were the only remaining people there at the hotel, The Millionaires.

What a great story. That's excellent. Pete, thank you so much for this. This was terrific.

All right, Lisa. Thank you.

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