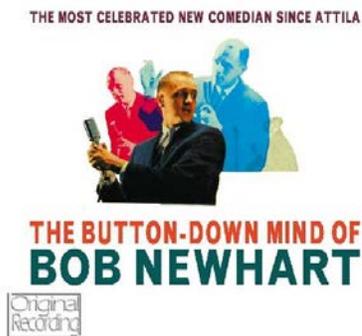


# “The Button-Down Mind of Bob Newhart”—Bob Newhart (1960)

Added to the National Registry: 2006

Essay by Cary O'Dell



*Original album*



*Original label*



*Bob Newhart*

Bob Newhart’s landmark comedy album of 1960 has the distinction of being the first comedy album to ever win the Grammy for Best Album of the Year. It is also, to date, one of only two comedy albums ever to obtain that honor. (Vaughn Meader’s “First Family,” made two years later, would be the other.) Though it was just the third time the award had ever been given out, it was still no small feat; Newhart’s competition that year included music by Frank Sinatra, Harry Belafonte, and Nat King Cole.

For Newhart, formerly a professional accountant living in Chicago, “Button-Down” was the spectacular start of a remarkable performing, recording and television career. The album would also prove to be a high water mark in American comedy as well as signify a major tonal shift in the world of “what’s funny.”

George Robert Newhart was born in Chicago, Illinois in 1929. By his own admission, Newhart’s childhood gave him little reason to grow up to be funny. Unlike most professional comedians, he never felt he had anything to rebel against or defend himself from. Newhart claims to have had a happy, contented childhood in a Midwest, middle class and intact family. Still, from an early age, his knack for impressions (including Humphrey Bogart and James Cagney) and a highly dry wit, garnered him some attention as a low-key class clown.

After high school, Newhart attended Loyola College and graduated with a degree in accounting and commerce. After graduation, he served in the Army. After his discharge, he enrolled in Loyola Law School in the fall of 1954. He flunked out two years later.

Eventually, Newhart secured a job as an accountant with United States Gypsum, where, reportedly, he often dipped into his own pocket to make the petty cash balance out at the end of the day. Later, he joined a Chicago advertising agency.

Throughout his early life, Newhart had harbored an interest in comedy and show business. In high school, he acted in class plays and, during his “Mad Men” advertising years, he created comedy monologues with a co-worker which they tape recorded and attempted to sell to radio stations. Though that venture proved to be unsuccessful, it did attract a fan in Dan Sorkin, an area DJ, who later recommended Newhart to a friend of his, James Conkling, the president of the recently-formed Warner Brothers Records. Conkling was on the look out for new talent and, after hearing a Newhart recording, signed him to his nascent record label to make a stand-up comedy album.

There was only one problem. Newhart had never done stand-up comedy. Since Conkling wanted to record the album live in front of an audience, Newhart would have to get used to being in front of an audience first. At Warner Bros.'s urging, Bob Newhart made his stand-up debut in February 1960 at a nightclub in Texas. Two weeks later, on that same stage, Newhart recorded the material that would make up his album "The Button-Down Mind of Bob Newhart."

Newhart's comedy was a major departure for stand-up at that time (and even today). Instead of the normal set-up and punch line structure, Newhart crafted short scenarios and acted them out. More often than not, his routines were delivered in the form of one-sided telephone conversations. This device, which would later be heavily incorporated into Newhart's television series (on TV, his "calls" were often concluded with the tag line "Same to you, fella!"), placed Newhart in the role of straight man to an unseen comic on the other end of the "line." The act was cerebral, the jokes more implied than actually delivered. They were also extremely funny and they often built to stunning crescendos.

For example, in his famous seven-minute "Abe Lincoln vs. Madison Avenue" routine (which would kick off Side A of the "Button-Down" album), Newhart plays an ad exec cultivating Honest Abe's public persona. In a one-sided conversation with the unseen Abe, Newhart talks his client into keeping his beard and stove-pipe hat and into not changing "Four score and seven years ago" into "Eighty-seven years" for his upcoming Gettysburg Address. In his 2006 book "I Shouldn't Even Be Doing This," Newhart related the genesis of the routine: "[It] originated from a book titled 'The Hidden Persuaders,' which talked about the danger of PR men creating images in presidential campaigns to the degree that you were voting for a personality rather than a leader's ideology."

In another "Button-Down" routine, the six-minute "Nobody Will Ever Play Baseball," Newhart is the exec of a game manufacturer having a phone conversation with Abner Doubleday about his recently invented game of baseball: "Eighteen people? That's a hell of a lot of people. Nine guys on each side? You got a pitcher and a catcher and they throw this ball back and forth?... A guy from the other side stands between them with a bat.... He may or may not swing at it, depending on if it's a 'ball' or not. What's a 'ball,' Mr. Doubleday?... Is this a rib? Is this one of the guys in the office?"

Another route, "Merchandising the Wright Brothers" has a guy asking the Wrights about putting passengers, baggage, and bathrooms on their tiny one-person plane.

Six routines (or "tracks") make up the "Button-Down" album. Included with those discussed above are "The Cruise of the U.S.S. Codfish" (where a commander addresses his submarine crew after two years at sea; it was inspired by Newhart's own military service); "The Krushchev Landing Rehearsal" and "Driving Instructor."

While the routines, when set down on paper, are funny, they benefit immeasurably by Newhart's studied, stammering delivery and timing. The pregnant pauses and delayed, sometimes surprised, reactions draw the most out of the material. While the bits work superbly on the nightclub stage, they also transfer excellently to radio and record.

After its release on April Fool's Day 1960, via some radio excerpting, some TV appearances and lots of word-of-mouth, "The Button-Down Mind of Bob Newhart" made it to number one on the albums chart, the first comedy album ever to do so. In the end, it sold over one million copies, a remarkable achievement for any album at that time, especially a comedy album. It would go on to become the best selling comedy album of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Not only would Newhart's disc be named Album of the Year by the Recording Academy, but he would also collect that year's Grammy for Best New Artist. (For the latter, he beat out Leontyne Price and Miriam Makeba.)

Newhart's quick accession to the top of the show biz heap was meteoric, a fascinating phenomenon in the days before the "insta-fame" often provided by the internet today. His rise to the top of the comedy pyramid, via vinyl rather than nightclub appearances, is still highly unusual.

After "Button-Down," Newhart produced two follow-up albums, "The Button-Down Mind Strikes Back" (1960) and "Behind the Button-Down Mind" (1961). Both were successful and for a time "Button-Down" and its sequel, "Strikes Back," occupied the #1 and #2 slots on the albums chart, a feat that would not be accomplished again until 1991 with the release of Guns N' Roses's "Use Your Illusion I" and "Use Your Illusion II." (Newhart joked at the time, "Well, you hate to lose a record, especially when you don't know you hold it, but at least it went to a friend.")

Newhart's recording success soon led to television appearances on Jack Parr, "The Dean Martin Show," "Ed Sullivan" and, later, "The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson." In 1961, he helmed his own variety series "The Bob Newhart Show" but it was not successful and ended within a year. Newhart had much better luck about a decade later with his first sitcom, also titled "The Bob Newhart Show," co-starring Suzanne Pleshette. Featuring Newhart as a somewhat befuddled and neurotic psychologist, it ran from 1972 to 1978. A follow-up sitcom, "Newhart," with Newhart as a Vermont inn keeper, ran from 1982 to 1990. Throughout, Newhart has also continued to record and make film appearances.

The early 1960s success of Bob Newhart did more than just announce the arrival of a major new multi-media talent, it also signified a major transformation in American comedy. Nineteen-sixty was the same year that Nichols and May made their debut on Broadway. That year George Carlin (who would also craft a famous baseball bit) also made his first appearance on record. Collectively, their humor was sharp, smart and a major departure from the frantic one-liners favored by many so-called "old school" comics.

Newhart's work specifically shows not only an astute aptitude for history but also an appetite for the absurd. His deconstruction of historic moments requires not only patience from an audience but also a basic working knowledge of history's events. His subdued, deadpan delivery, along with his slow-build, is a career hallmark and would later be seen in the comedy of Steven Wright, Larry David and the commercials of Joe Sedelmaier. His humor is not "schtick" but mini-plays which he acts out one side of while the audience, almost inadvertently, fills in the rest. Ellen DeGeneres seemed to pay homage to this technique, and Newhart himself, with her 1986 breakthrough bit "A Phone Call to God." In it, she dials up the Almighty and learns, amongst other things, the underlying reason for the existence of fleas.

In his movement away from a series of punch lines towards comedy monologues and comedic story telling, Newhart also presaged the work of such comics as Sandra Bernhard, Christopher Titus, and Eddie Izzard who turn their humorous views and experiences into full-length one-person shows. Interestingly, though, for as much as Newhart's style beckoned a new approach to comedy delivery, it also seem to hearken back to some of the most popular comics (and recording artists) of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially Cal Stewart and Nat M. Wills.

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