

# Heart To Newhart

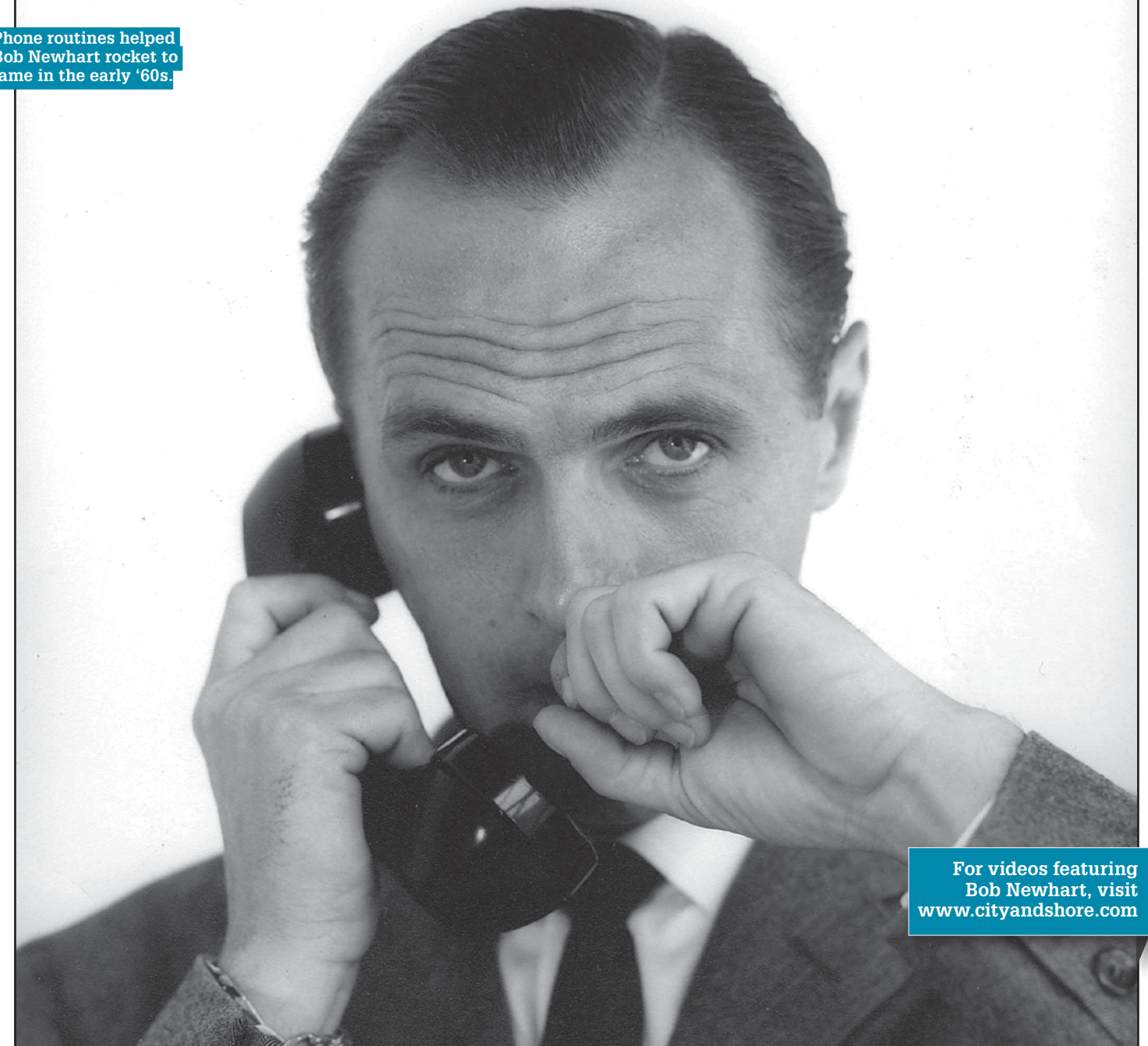
Iconic comedian Bob Newhart, the featured entertainer at this year's Boca Raton Concours d'Elegance, reveals fearsome and fortunate secrets to milestone anniversaries.

BY ELIZABETH RAHE

Milestones have been whizzing by for Bob Newhart. The comedian – who marks his first appearance at Boca Raton Concours d'Elegance on Feb. 23 – recently celebrated the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the hit sitcom *Newhart*, the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the hit sitcom *The Bob Newhart Show*, and the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his triple-Grammy win for his two career-launching *Button-Down Mind* comedy albums and as Best New Artist. Then there's the real accomplishment: the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his marriage to Ginnie last month.

The secret of his success, if you ask him, is a combination of luck and fear.

Phone routines helped Bob Newhart rocket to fame in the early '60s.



For videos featuring Bob Newhart, visit [www.cityandshore.com](http://www.cityandshore.com)



"I think fear has kept us together. That's the secret of a long marriage," he says with his familiar dry delivery. He's on the phone from his Bel Air, Calif., home, yet one can imagine the deadpan face that accompanies it.

He can't explain his luck – what he calls his charmed life. He grew up in a working-class community on Chicago's West Side. His comedic journey started after college and military service in the mid-'50s, while he was working as an accountant, swapping offbeat, role-playing phone conversations with a friend. They eventually recorded their routines and sold them to radio stations – at a loss of \$18 per week. His friend moved on with his life, but Newhart kept working on his bits, which eventually led to a man-on-the-street TV show in Chicago and – his big break in 1961 – *The Button-Down Mind of Bob Newhart* album, followed quickly by *The Button-Down Mind Strikes Back*.

"After the album broke, my price for performing standup skyrocketed from basically zero to \$500 a week," he wrote in his

2006 memoir *I Shouldn't Even Be Doing This!* (Hyperion). "Then I was offered an eye-popping \$2,000 a week to play Harrah's in Lake Tahoe. I wondered what the catch was. Do they beat you between shows?"

Soon he had his own variety program on NBC – the single-season *The Bob Newhart Show* – and he was juggling standup engagements, movie roles (*Hell Is for Heroes*, *Catch-22*) and TV appearances (*The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson* 87 times). *The Bob Newhart Show* sitcom ran from 1972-1978 and *Newhart* from 1982-1990. He received The Kennedy Center Mark Twain Prize for American Humor in 2002.

To this day Newhart's career is a source of wonder to him – mixed with some residual fear.

"It's like you're walking down the street and you turn the corner and hear this big crash ... a safe has fallen 15 floors and just missed you. That's kind of the way I feel sometimes. It could've all not happened," he says.

Referencing his start as an accountant, he adds, "I probably would have gone with Enron, and I'd probably be in prison now."

His dark portrayal of good fortune may seem incongruous, but it's that ability to turn circumstances inside-out – along with his stammering style and intelligent, clean humor – that have made him a comedy legend, and some of his comedy routines legendary. His most famous bits are conversations with imagined characters in which Newhart plays the straight man.

There's the one about Abe Lincoln's press agent trying to convince him not to shave his beard or revise the Gettysburg Address. *You changed "four score and seven" to "eighty-seven"? ... I understand it means the same thing, Abe. That's meant to be a grabber. ... Abe, we test-marketed that in Erie, and they went out of their minds.* Then there's the novice Empire State Building security guard phoning in a problem not covered in the guard manual – a King Kong infestation. *I looked under unauthorized personnel and people without passes and apes and apes' toes. ... Apes and apes' toes, yes sir. There's an ape's toe sticking through the window, sir...*

Although he includes classic routines in his act, he describes his current comedy as "observations on what a weird place this is we inhabit" – and he is constantly on the lookout for these absurdities.

"I have said that all comedians do is we watch you people in the audience. You give us all the material we'll ever need the rest of our lives, and then you pay us to do you. You should just watch each other and pass the money back and forth and leave us out of it all together."

At age 83 Newhart still does around 20 standup dates a year, and he's not about to quit. He recently performed in Carmel, Calif. – it was a very good night, he says – and he recalls talking to Ginnie on the drive back to the hotel.

"I said to her, 'Why would anybody want to stop



## Classic Newhart, classy cars highlight Boca Raton Concours d'Elegance

Boca Raton Concours d'Elegance returns for a seventh year Feb. 22-24, paying homage to antique, vintage, classic and new exotic cars and motorcycles while raising funds for the Boys & Girls Clubs of Broward County. **Tickets and information: 954-537-1010, [www.bocaCDE.com](http://www.bocaCDE.com).**

**Feb. 22** - DuPont Registry Live! Hangar Party at the Boca Raton Airport, \$100. Enjoy an evening of tastings from 20-plus South Florida restaurants, wine tastings, live entertainment and cocktails amid exotic cars, custom motorcycles, extravagant boats, private jets, vintage aircraft and luxury motor coaches.

**Feb. 23** - Gala Dinner Auction & Show at the Boca Raton Resort & Club featuring a performance by comedy icon Bob Newhart; tickets start at \$500. Guests at this black-tie-optional event will enjoy a cocktail hour and silent auction, followed by dinner and a live auction with new exotic cars, one-of-a-kind trips, luxury jewelry and more.

**Feb. 24** - Automobile and Motorcycle Exhibition at the Boca Raton Resort & Club; \$50; Gourmet-VIP, \$100. The main event features a competition of some of the finest vintage, antique and classic automobiles and motorcycles ever built. Guests will have the opportunity to enjoy gourmet food and fine wines from 30 South Florida restaurants at the Concours d'Gourmet Pavilion.

**Feb. 22 & 23** - Automobile, Motorcycle, Memorabilia & Jewelry Auction by Bonhams to benefit the Boys & Girls Clubs of Broward County, Boca Raton Resort & Club, 212-461-6515, [www.bonhams.com](http://www.bonhams.com).

doing that?' What do you say? 'Yeah, I'm really tired of making people laugh. I'm going to stop doing it.'"

Newhart considers performing comedy a rare privilege, as well as a responsibility. "I have a feeling when you go up on Judgment Day and they say, 'What did you do?' And you say, 'I made people laugh,' maybe they'll say, 'Get in that real short line over there.'"

Still, he says, every show is challenging. "The minute you feel comfortable and don't worry – bang – it gets up and hits you. I wouldn't know how to walk through a show. Every audience is a challenge, and when you get through and it's been good, it's just a great feeling."

Since *Newhart* wrapped in 1990, he has continued to get acting roles, including film appearances in *Elf* and *Horrible Bosses*, TNT's *The Librarian* movies and guest-star stints on *ER* (for which he received an Emmy nomination), *Desperate Housewives* and *NCIS*. In addition, *The Bob Newhart Show* sitcom reruns are on MeTV (weeknights, 10:30 p.m.).

He enjoys being able to pick and choose his roles and dates, having time to spend with the couple's four grown children and soon-to-be 10 grandchildren as well as with close friends, including comedians Don Rickles and Tim Conway and actor Mike Connors (*Mannix*).

Newhart couldn't pass up the offer to play a retired medical examiner on *NCIS*. Ginnie got hooked on the series when she was recovering from a 2009 liver transplant due to cancer. He is thankful for a saving grace in her case because, after the surgery, doctors found a tiny spot of cancer in her lung. If they had found it before, she would not have been a candidate for a transplant.

"That's scary and at the same time you go, wow," he says. "Luckily she got the transplant and she's in great health."

Although Newhart jokes about fear being the secret to a long marriage, he says the real key is humor. "As crazy as comedians are supposed to be, they have the longest marriages in show business – Jack Benny, George Burns, Buddy Hackett, Danny Thomas. As long as you can laugh it will get you over those rough times. I think that's kind of what comedians do – we help people get past the rough times."

Over the past 50 years, it is likely legions of fans have weathered rough times with laughs from Newhart's comedy. There's no doubt he and his biggest fan can thank laughter – and maybe a shot of fear – for their 50-year matrimonial gig. ●





# Life with

## Newhart's real-life wife dishes on the first 50 years

BY ELIZABETH RAHE

**B**ob Newhart had two famous TV wives, Suzanne Pleshette in *The Bob Newhart Show* and Mary Frann in *Newhart*. Show business is also responsible for his real-life marriage, which recently hit the 50-year mark.

Bob, a Chicago native, and Ginnie, a New Yorker, met on a blind date in 1962 set up by comedian Buddy Hackett in Los Angeles. Ginnie, who babysat for Hackett's children, remembers it vividly.

"Buddy came back one day and said in his own inimitable way, 'I met this young guy and his name is Bobby Newhart, and he's a comic and he's Catholic and you're Catholic, and I think maybe you should marry each other,'" she says.

They had dinner and played pool at the Hackett's home. However, Ginnie, whose father was character actor Bill Quinn, was determined not to marry into show business. "I didn't want to marry an actor who didn't get a paycheck every week ... but it turned out fine," she said, laughing. "I guess it was meant to be." They were married Jan. 12, 1963.

While Bob was out shooting TV shows and movies and doing his standup act, Ginnie kept life going in their Bel Air home with their four children, although the family often joined him on the road, especially for long summer stints at nightclubs in Las Vegas and Lake Tahoe.

"When I look back I think how glamorous and what fun — playing Tahoe when Bill Harrah owned the hotel. Bob has said, 'If I didn't have to do those two damn shows a night, it would have been great,'" she says.

We caught up with the straight-talking Ginnie Newhart to get the inside story on her husband and their 50 years together.

**How would you describe your husband?** What you see is what you get. He's shy, quiet. He doesn't say much unless he has something to say. His humor is subtle. It comes out sometimes in ... uh ...very strange ways. I have often said, 'You've really fooled the public because they think you're nice, clean-cut.' But there's a sick side to his sense of humor, which has probably gotten us through some rough spots. Some of it is pretty ... bawdy? Some of it is ... sick.

**Can you share a story?** I knew you were going to ask that. No, I can't.

**He cleans it up for his act.** Yes, he does.

**What has kept your marriage strong?** I don't know whether it's our generation — divorce was just not in our vocabulary. Like anybody we had fights, and we had some pretty good ones. But I was never

happy being apart from him, and he was never happy being apart from me. When we both cooled down I'd say, 'I'm miserable,' and he'd say, 'I'm miserable. OK, let's end this.'

I really respect him. I respect the way he's led his life. I respect his professional choices, his personal choices. I respect his opinions and his intellect. I just respect him as a man. I think he's a very good person. By the way, I will deny this to him. I will say, 'I never said that.'

**You have said he's a very patient man.** Yes he is. He would have to be being married to me for 50 years. I'm a little bit more New York, and he is definitely Midwest. Most New Yorkers are not retiring and shy.

**How did you keep your family grounded?**

We did try to lead a pretty normal life — whatever that is. ... I think it's who you pick as friends. As you probably know, we are very close with the Rickles. Barbara and I knew each other before we even met our husbands. Believe it or not, Bob and Don are very much alike. They work differently onstage, but offstage they're a little bit alike. One is Catholic, one's Jewish ... but they have the same kind of values, and we did things with our kids. We didn't move with the fast group. I'm sure we were considered a little bit — especially in the '80s — a little bit on the square side.

**What's a perfect evening with Bob?** It depends on the energy we have. A special evening would be with friends, to go out for great food, but then other times I'm very happy being home. We've traveled so much in our lives that we kind of like being home.

**You've said going through your liver cancer and transplant brought you closer. How so?** We both appreciate what we have so much more. We appreciate our alone time — just being the two of us. Of course, it makes you more aware of your mortality and how many days you might have left. We have fun together, now more so than ever. Just going with him to the deli can be fun.

**Is he a good grandfather?** [She laughs.] Yes he is. He is 83 years old. [Ginnie is 72.] Our youngest, Asher [age 4], was visiting with his brother, Griffin [6], for two weeks. When they got home their dad asked Asher, 'Did you have a great time at Yaya and Poppy's?' And he said, 'Oh yeah, I saw the cousins, and we went out to dinner and Yaya and Poppy babysat for us,' and then he said, 'Poppy really doesn't do much ... but then, he's very old.'

I guess what he was referring to is that Poppy doesn't run around the house chasing him and throwing him up in the air — which he doesn't. ●

