

THE SMOTHERS BROTHERS

A Talk with Tommy Smothers

Article and Interview by PETER JONES

IN AN ERA ACCUSTOMED TO ICONOCLASTIC SEXUAL HUMOR ON TELEVISION AND obscenity fines against radio shock jocks, it may be easy to forget what passed for controversy 35 years ago. During the late 1960s, *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* generated unprecedented ire from CBS brass. It wasn't sex that got the team into trouble, however, but political comments from the likes of Pete Seeger and Dr. Benjamin Spock, as well as the brothers' own seemingly innocuous and self-evident observations on the Vietnam war and civil rights.

The hoopla may seem silly in the context of today's permissive media. But perhaps things have not really changed that much after all. Recently, the Dixie Chicks and Linda Ronstadt infamously lost work for using their platforms to criticize President Bush and the Iraq war. Likewise, the Baseball Hall of Fame abruptly cancelled a tribute to *Bull Durham* when stars Tim Robbins and Susan Sarandon became outspoken war critics.

By those standards, the Smothers Brothers were certainly no more...or less benign. But the comedy team wasn't always controversial. The per-

"Curb your tongue, knave!"

petually clean cut siblings were anything but threatening counterculture figures when they debuted in 1959 at San Francisco's Purple Onion. With an acoustic guitar and a ➡

Tom (right) and Dick Smothers performing their unique brand of musical comedy on the album cover of *"Curb Your Tongue, Knave!"*

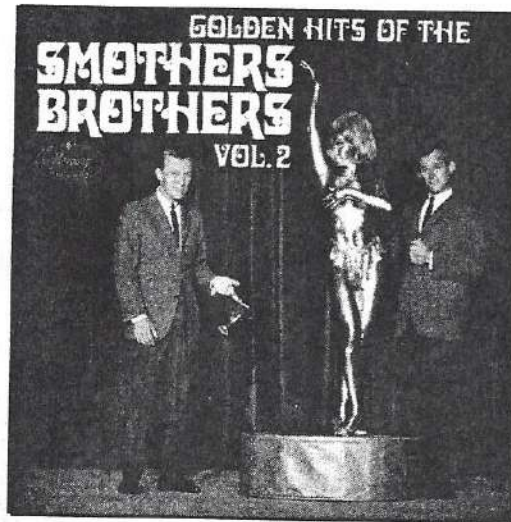
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stand-upright bass in tow, the duo fit in well with the commercial tier of the era's folk music boom. Mixing Kingston Trio-like harmonies with amicable stand-up comedy, the Smothers Brothers began their TV career in 1961 on Jack Paar's *Tonight Show*.

After a brief and forgettable sitcom stint, they created *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* in 1967. Almost immediately, the show generated hate mail, most notably for the program's frequent use of black performers. The team also battled network censors over a series of controversial anti-war segments before CBS finally fired the Smothers Brothers in June 1969, quickly ushering in *Hee Haw* as an innocuous summer replacement.

History has since been kind to the *Comedy Hour*. In 2003, the Smothers Brothers received the Freedom of Expression Award at the Video Software Dealer's Association in Las Vegas. The show is now studied at universities as an important example of 1960s protest culture.

In the early 1990s, the brothers for the first time authorized the E! Channel to air re-runs of



One of Tom's ad libs early in their career gave them their signature phrase, "Mom always liked you best." This carried over on an album cover with Dick getting a somewhat nicer trophy than Tom. By the way, there was no Golden Hits Vol. 1.)



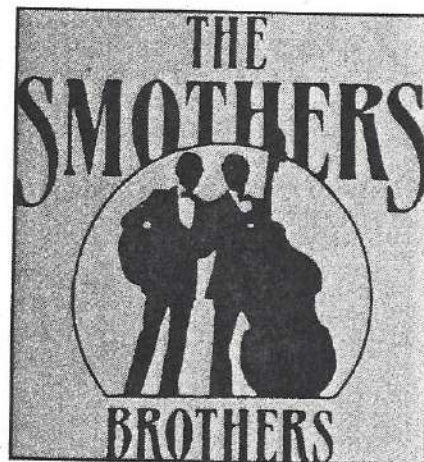
the *Comedy Hour*, for which the team recorded new introductions and interviewed many of the celebrities who appeared. Previously deleted segments were also belatedly reinserted.

Critics were not nearly as congenial to the Smothers Brothers' later projects. When the team eventually ventured back into television, the programs were largely dismissed as timid and socially vacuous. Their live routine, with its sibling rivalry theme and recent Yo-Yo Man diversion, has more in common with the duo's early comedy albums than the now infamous TV show.

When the brothers are not performing, Tommy runs Remick Ridge Vineyards in Kenwood, California near San Francisco. The winery was originally called Smothers Brothers Wine. "I changed the name to Remick Ridge," Tommy explained, "because when people heard Smothers Brothers Wine, they thought something like Milton Berle Fine Wine or Larry, Curly, and Moe Vineyards."

As the Smothers Brothers mark more than 45 years in show business, they are arguably the longest working major comedy team in entertainment history. To answer some of the questions fans have often asked, Tommy Smothers took time to speak with *Outré* about the Smothers Brothers' lengthy and continuing career.

OUTRÉ: How did the Smothers Brothers stage personalities develop? **SMOTHERS:** Well, Dick, my brother who I think is one of the great straight men, without being prejudiced in his favor, is exactly who he is. On stage, off stage, Dickie's identical.

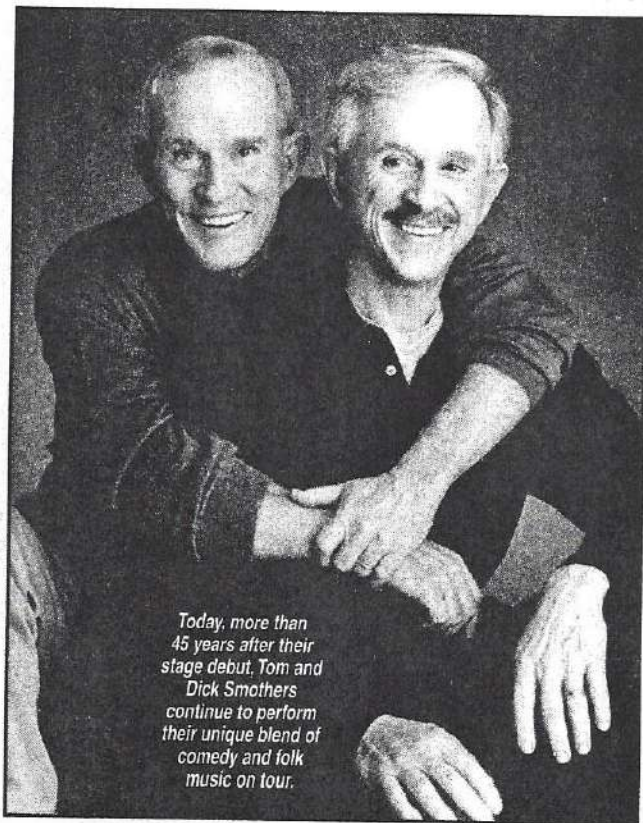


The Smothers Brothers logo is an easily recognizable silhouette of the two musical performers.

We see that comedians generally, if they're still insecure, will use a persona off stage. You do an interview with them and they're still characters. I used to do that for ten years.

So Dickie was always conservative, pragmatic. It had to make sense. He wanted to know what time it was and why, and when he bought something or someone gave him a gift, he took it apart to see how it worked. I realized that if I got something, I couldn't believe it worked. I didn't care how it worked.

We had defined personalities, and being brothers, it was so easy and natural. This isn't a fake relationship. Primarily, when we start



Today, more than 45 years after their stage debut, Tom and Dick Smothers continue to perform their unique blend of comedy and folk music on tour.



A rare shot of the brothers at work in the recording studio. Most of the 11 albums they released in the '60s were recorded live.

talking, it is us. It is definitely two points of view that don't have to be manufactured or faked.

OUTRÉ: Did Mom really love Dickie best?

SMOTHERS: (laughs) No, that was an ad-lib back in 1962, when we did an album in St. Louis. My brother was doing a wonderful job of being a straight man, putting me down really bad. He used a litany of reasons why I wasn't any good and ineffective, and then he finished up with a kind of exclamation point and a period. And I looked at him, and I said, "Oh yeah? Well, Mom liked you best!" And it just stuck like Super Glue. It was one of the great lines because there's not a person in the world who doesn't have a sibling, a brother or a sister, concerned about whether their parents or their mother liked the other one better.

The actual truth is she didn't like either one of us. She preferred our sister, Sherry.

OUTRÉ: Is it true Dick was more devoted to auto collecting than comedy?

SMOTHERS: He always believed that show business was a portion of his life and his family was another portion. And also, whatever he was doing, skiing or car racing, and he liked that balance. In the '70s, when our show went off the air and I did some theater and we did other things, Dick thought everything was kind of messed up. He said, "I've lost my balance. I don't have my work. I'm spending too much time on my racing."

OUTRÉ: The Smothers Brothers emerged during a boom in both live comedy and folk music. You did both, but were best known for comedy. Were you always sure that music would take a backseat to the jokes?

SMOTHERS: It just naturally took its course. We were serious about our music and we worked very hard on our music for the first four years. We started in 1959. By the time we got to 1967,

the comedy was starting to dominate and there was more of a demand for comedy albums and so we used up most of our song material, and then it got kind of hairy there. We started scratching for things. So we really were going to be musicians and didn't plan on the comedy taking off. Television also denied any consistency of developing new musical material.

We struggle with music to this day. It's harder for us to do than the comedy. Although people say, "Why don't you ever finish a song? You sing good." If we just tried to be musicians, we would have been out of the business long ago.

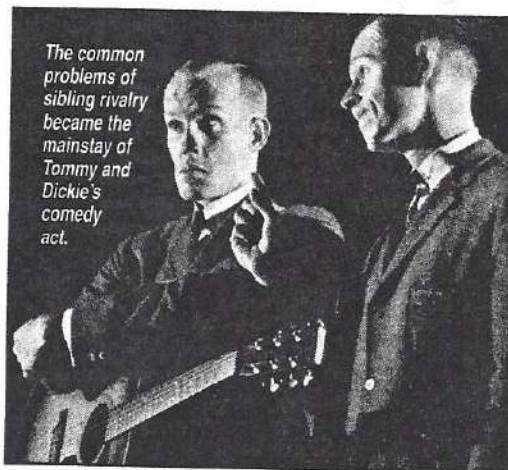
OUTRÉ: Your first TV show was sort of a *My Favorite Martian* derivative sitcom, *The Smothers Brothers Show*. It's something a lot of people don't remember, largely because you later became so associated with the variety show.

SMOTHERS: I was the brother who was lost at sea. I came back as a probationary angel and I could do amazing things. I could disappear. I could change into different people.

It was our first show on television. We had been working maybe four years in the business (laughs). We were warned by Danny Thomas. He said, "When you do a show, be sure you do it with a live audience, and you do it with three cameras." Well, the show we got was with Aaron Spelling at Television City in Burbank, and it was with one camera, no audience. They took two guys who had never acted before, took away their guitars and their bass. We didn't know what to do with our hands. We were like Jack Benny. We sense an audience, tension, and timing. That's where we get our laughter, and that's probably why Jack Benny wasn't a very good film actor.

Anyway, that was our first foray into television so we did it all wrong. We did 32 [episodes].

It was on Friday night at one time slot. It started out as number three in the country. As I told them, "This is not going to work." So it went to five and then to nine and then to 12 and to 20. We got this [variety] show, with CBS again. They

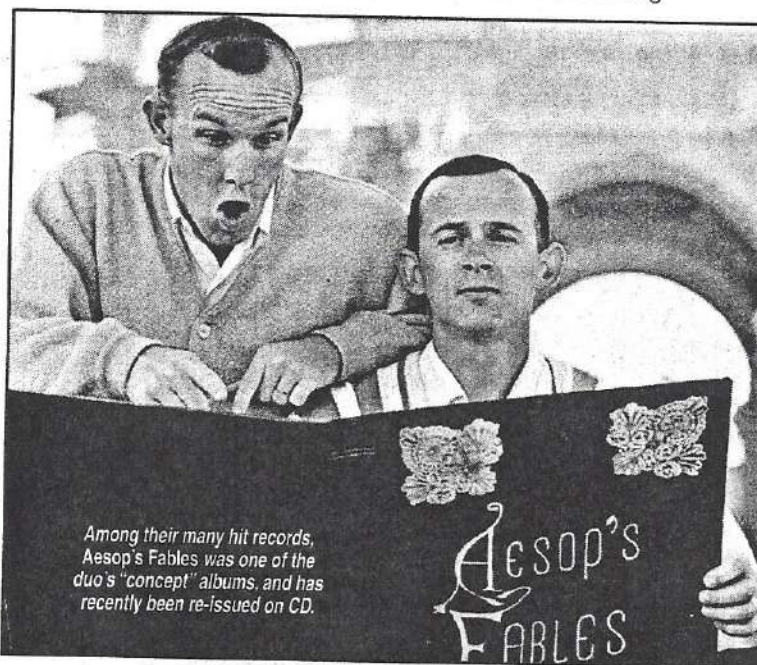


The common problems of sibling rivalry became the mainstay of Tommy and Dickie's comedy act.

said, "You do a variety show," and I said, "I want creative control this time. I want to be able to have the right material and writers." They said, "Sure, you got it." That was opposite *Bonanza*. And boom.

OUTRÉ: Then it was cancelled less than 100 days into the Nixon administration.

SMOTHERS: We weren't cancelled. Wrong



Among their many hit records, Aesop's Fables was one of the duo's "concept" albums, and has recently been re-issued on CD.

phrase, we were fired.

OUTRÉ: What's the difference?

SMOTHERS: Well, cancellation is a normal form of doing business. All shows eventually come to their end and are cancelled for lack =>

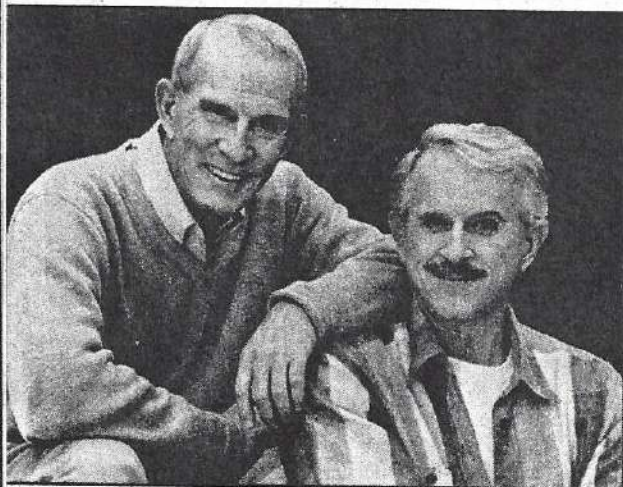
of interest. On our show, we were fired, accused of bad taste, breach of contract, all kinds of things. Whether you're cancelled or fired, the show's gone. Like murder vs. natural causes.

OUTRÉ: Are you still bitter about it?
SMOTHERS: No, you can't hold on to that. I was bitter for two years. It was difficult. In fact, I lost my sense of humor for a couple of years. Then I saw Jane Fonda on a talk show and realized what I was missing, and it turned around for me.

But I got very, very serious and got very involved in the issues and the war and all the things I think are human and important. Harry Belafonte, when he was doing our show, said, "Tom, I've been in voter registration and civil rights for all my life, and I'm against the war, but be sure you don't do something to lose your platform." I said, "Don't worry, not me. I'm smart. I won't lose my platform."

And, of course, I did and I was very upset.

Dickie took it in stride, as he takes everything in stride. But it was three years before I got the priorities back in order. There's only so much you can do. So these are all wonderful life experiences. In hindsight, it might have been a gift in disguise, our little personal tragedy. But looking at the rest of the world and what things are happening, it seems so insignificant.



When not on tour with his brother, Tom Smothers (left) runs a successful vineyard in northern California. He also appeared in a TV production of *Once Upon a Mattress* with Carol Burnett and Tracy Ullman.

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OUTRÉ: Let's touch on some controversial events from the show. First, a skit on film censorship with Elaine May.

SMOTHERS: Well, that was in our first season and little things were starting to show. The country was becoming aware of a strong disagreement about involvement, a split personality about Vietnam, a lot of heat about integration and things. We were starting to reflect some of those things.



Before becoming famous for their humor, the brothers started out as a straight musical act, and in 1966 showed that they still had some chops.

Program Practices [department] really didn't know how to handle stuff so we were teasing them about censorship. So Elaine May wrote this piece on film censorship and the word "breast" was in there in the sketch. The censor said, "You can't say, 'My heart beats wildly in my breast.'" And I said, "What about my neck or my wrist? It's not very romantic. We gotta leave breast." "No, we gotta cut it out." Well, life imitates art. [People reading this] will say, "What are you talking about?"

We couldn't use "sex education," the word "pregnant," the words "Hey, you really turn me on." They said, "That's a drug reference." So in hindsight, I have a little sympathy for the censors because some of the things they were dealing with were ridiculous. But they were told [the network] didn't want to hear about "Another Mother for Peace," or "Hope you guys come back from Canada soon. The war will be over," or ridiculing our involvement in Vietnam,

trying to make a more humanistic view. So they immediately jumped on anything they could, but they weren't used to censoring ideas and concepts. They implied "Another Mother for Peace" could be a subversive communist group or something.

We had Pete Seeger on, who sang "Waist Deep in the Big Muddy," which is a song written in 1942 about a platoon sergeant who brought his training mission across this river, and I think they lost 15 men in this training exercise. "Waist deep in the Big Muddy, and the big fool said to push on." And there was a subtle reference to Lyndon Johnson, who was really escalating the war in Vietnam.

OUTRÉ: That was edited out of the show, right?



This 1964 album was re-issued the following year to promote their CBS sitcom. For much of the '60s, they averaged nearly two hit albums per year.

SMOTHERS: He had been blackballed during the McCarthy era. I think he might have been a socialist or something, a classic man of great and enormous integrity. So we had him on. Not just because he was blackballed, but because we liked him and knew his history. So he sang it and CBS said, "Nope, that's trying to affect American policy or something." So they cut the whole thing out and of course, I screamed and yelled. The following season, we had him on again. This time, same song, same thing, but this time they let it on. It must have been from the reaction of the first time of being censored because Americans don't like having something taken out that they want to see. They want to make their own decisions.

OUTRÉ: Joan Baez, Dr. Benjamin Spock, and Harry Belafonte were also censored.

SMOTHERS: Joan Baez said, "I'm dedicating this song to my husband David Harris, who's going to prison for three years because of his above board involvement in resisting the draft." CBS edited it so that Joan Baez just said David Harris was going to prison for three years, period!

For Belafonte, we did the news footage from the 1968 Democratic convention. It was a police riot with a lot of people hurt, a major television event. When Belafonte came on the show, our writers wrote some special material for his calypso medley with special lyrics. We played it against the Chicago convention news footage, kind of synced in, a really nice piece. That was a seven-and-a-half or eight-minute piece. They censored that, and that was a *cause celebre*.

What bugged me is they replaced it with a Republican National Committee campaign chairman (laughs). This was 1968, right after the Democratic National Convention, and things