

were really happening, but when I watch the shows, it doesn't show.

OUTRÉ: Don't you think the program has withstood the test of time?

SMOTHERS: Well, as a variety show, it stays with it, but when a show is so inexorably linked in its time... There's a great thing I have on my wall. It says, "To have a great poet, you must first have great audiences." Something to that effect. At that time, there was great audiences and a great sense of naivete and a great sense of passion, as opposed to now when there's more cynicism. That was just the first type of awareness at the time. So they hold up as a show from the 1960s.

It was just a good, solid variety hour. We were young. Dickie and I had been in the business for eight years. Steve Martin and Rob Reiner were 21, 22. Super Dave Osborne, Bob Einstein, he was 22 years old, and everybody was kind of young, and there's some youthful



Though their late '60s variety show was a huge hit, CBS fired them after just over two years for expressing their opinions on Vietnam and the Civil Rights movement.

mistakes. There's some great production numbers. Some of the artists we've had on are amazing, like Tallulah Bankhead, Jack Benny, Edgar Bergen, George Burns, George Carlin, Bette Davis.

OUTRÉ: Then there was a Mother's Day sketch with the words "Please Talk Peace" deleted.

SMOTHERS: They said, "That's not your job, to be up there to talk peace to our congressmen. Don't say that. They're running things"

OUTRÉ: Legend has it, the straw that broke the camel's back was that you didn't show up with a tape to preview for a group of affiliates. True?

SMOTHERS: Different affiliates said, "I wanna see the show before it goes on and we'll decide what we want to take out." So I would say to CBS, "Well, since they're the licensees, let's



The brothers made their first professional appearance at San Francisco's Purple Onion in 1959, and recorded their first hit album there two years later, shortly after their TV debut on The Tonight Show.

let them take it out." We used to edit with a razor blade back then (laughs). There was no digital editing like they have now. It was a very hard thing, and one of the shows was late for affiliate viewing, which was not a contractual obligation on our part anyway. Also, David Steinberg's sermonette was supposed to be the cause [of their firing].

OUTRÉ: You preferred affiliate stations censoring individual segments?

SMOTHERS: I was against censorship completely, but I figured, why have Big Brother make the broad strokes? Let each individual area do it. It takes more time. It takes more thought on their part and we can present a show with the full artistic content. It's up to the licensees who are worried about their license. Send it through closed circuit and let them do their deletions, which many stations did, although Canada never touched it at all, but I guess they were a little more mature at that time (laughs).

OUTRÉ: TV Guide endorsed your firing.

SMOTHERS: We'd been on the TV Guide cover twice. They were huge fans of the Smothers Brothers until this cancellation, which was right after Nixon's inauguration, of course.

OUTRÉ: Was there a connection?

SMOTHERS: Of course, there was.

OUTRÉ: A direct connection?

SMOTHERS: I figure a direct connection. How can I prove that? If they ever let out that other 400 hours of [Nixon White House] tape, I'm sure you're gonna hear a lot about us.

Anyway, both William Paley and the chairman of the board and chief executive of CBS, along with Walter Annenberg, were also at that time, in 1968, desperately looking to be the

Court of St. James, and there was a scathing attack on us. "CBS is truly the Communist Broadcasting System." "The Smothers Brothers are anti-American," etcetera. You watch these shows and you say, "Oh, my god, what sweet kids." And everybody was, Steve Martin and Rob Reiner, Mason Williams. We were all in our 20s and passionately caring, and that viewpoint, in hindsight, turned out to be the correct moral position.

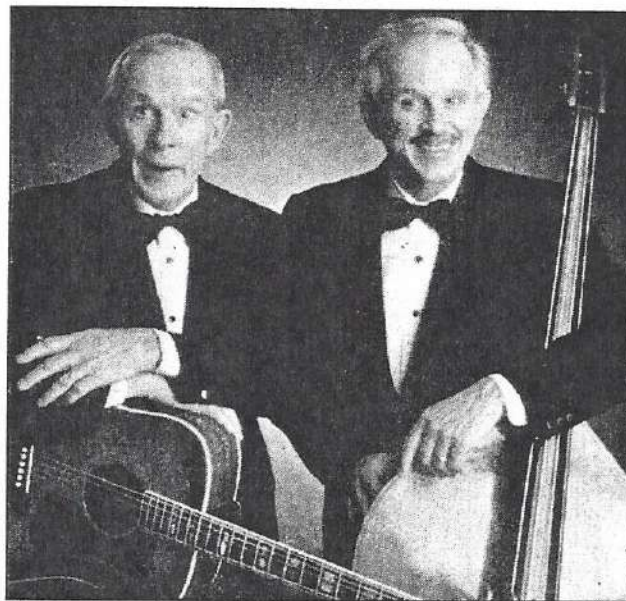
I look at the show now and I wonder what we were fired for. This isn't very controversial, as it is in people's minds, people who have a lot of fond memories of the comedy hour and the Smothers Brothers from that time. You can see a little bit of tension in my face sometimes when I'm worrying about a piece of material.

OUTRÉ: Are you still as passionate about politics now as you were then?

SMOTHERS: I feel strongly about politics, but today there's a lot of people expressing themselves. In the time, it was great. There was morality. There was an ethical stand that we took that threw us off our career. The '70s disappeared for us.

Glen Campbell said to me, "How come you're always hitting on Nixon and this war and stuff? Why don't you just shut up and go out to a march or be involved in an organization, instead of taking it on to your show?" And I said to him, "That's what I do. That's what I consider my strength. I don't consider myself marching in a thing as important as when I use my platform to say the same idea."

But when I look at it, it wasn't that much. If you were there, it was strong. But if you're =>



After more than 45 years of performing together, the brothers keep up their touring schedule, entertaining audiences around the country.

looking back in hindsight, it doesn't look like we did anything. But I know we were there, and I remember dealing with the people and talking to Bobby Kennedy and Nicholas Johnson of the FCC and going to NAB conventions. It's just that it doesn't show up on the show like it did during the '60s when everything was very passionate. There was right-wing and left-wing. You were a hawk or a dove. Those were profound positions back then.

OUTRÉ: How did you meet Steve Martin?

SMOTHERS: Steve Martin was brought to my attention by Mason Williams. I kept looking for new people with a political or moral ethic, which was kind of rising at the time. Mason said, "I was in Pasadena at a folk club and saw a guy who was very funny. He does some weird things, plays banjo. His name is Steve Martin." I said, "Well, bring him in. I'll see him." So he brought him in. We talked and [after we hired him] put him out in the receptionist room with someone else because we didn't have enough space. We got him into the Writer's Guild and he became a writer. He did several appearances on the show.

In hindsight, you see exactly where he's going. It's the same Steve Martin, except black hair and 21, 22 years old and kind of a Dada type of sense of humor. He was always quiet. Spending time with him was like being alone. He wasn't a typical comedian looking for attention. He seemed always very secure in himself.

OUTRÉ: What about Pat Paulsen?

SMOTHERS: My first memory of Pat Paulsen was in San Francisco, when we first started in 1959. He was irritating me, following me around. He was a street comic.

So, by the time we got the show, I was going to do editorials like they have on television stations by the vice-president. So I tried it and it didn't make it, so I threw it to Pat and that's what he started. His wife had a day care center to take care of kids, and he was a house painter and worked on weekends sometimes. So we got him playing the drum in the opening segment so we could get him paid every week. Then whenever there was a sketch, we'd put him in, and slowly he became the vice-president of the *Smother Brothers Comedy Hour*.

Then he started denying in 1968 that he was a [presidential] candidate and it became one of the classic pieces. He was an American icon. He's one of those people I mentored personally. That was my guy.



Tom shows off his skills as *The Yo-Yo Man*. Look for instructions at smothersbrothers.com.

sponse to an FCC ruling that there had to be independent production in prime time. A friend of mine produced this piece and said, "Would you be a spokesman on it?" I just did that. It was not my piece of material.

OUTRÉ: So you disagree that your post heyday shows were toothless?

SMOTHERS: Yes.

OUTRÉ: Why do you suppose that perception exists?

SMOTHERS: Because when we started working later on, that followed us

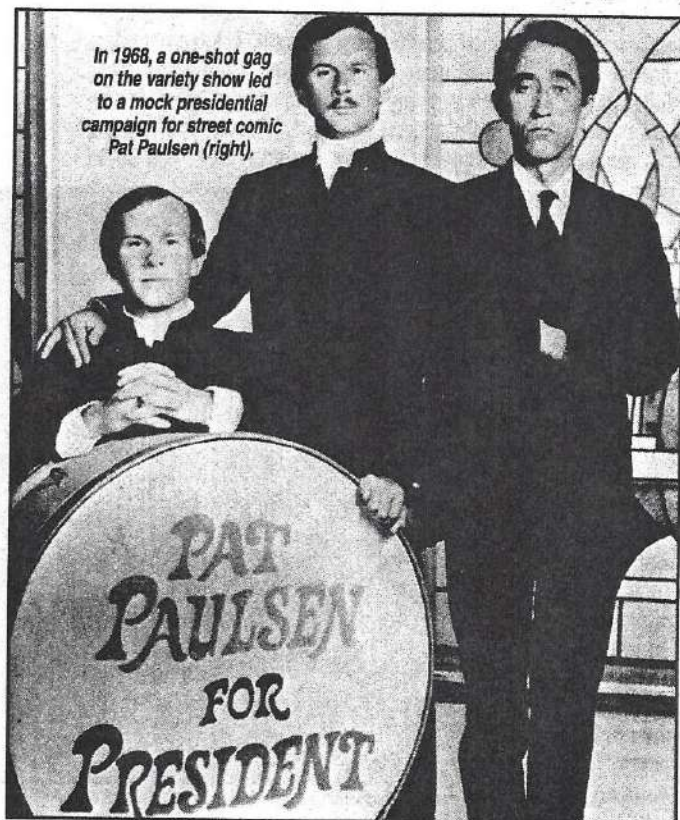
around. We worked in the '70s and it didn't have much reference to the show and I would tell the reviewers, "You can't review the comedy hour television like you do the brothers as performers because our night club act is a feel good time," even though I would kind of attack Nixon. And we got criticized, "Why aren't you guys steppin' out in your club act?" And I say, "The same reason I chose to step out on television, a freedom of choice. I choose not to and I don't care what you think."

And that's what I said also on the television show. This is how I feel politically, socially, and morally about the war and this is what I'm going to say. And they said, "You shouldn't do that." And I said, "I don't care. That's what I'm going to do." So the sword cuts both ways. The right to be innocuous is just as valid as the right to be cutting and leading edge.

OUTRÉ: But why did you decide to drop politics from the act?

SMOTHERS: I was tired. I'd been going through this for three and a half years. For five years, I was the leading spokesman on censorship and freedom of speech, and also losing my sense of satire and becoming involved in issues. So I got a little screwed up there. I had also spent two months in federal court with CBS about the same time that [Daniel] Ellsberg, who wrote *The Pentagon Papers* thing, was taking place. I used to see him going to work. I'd say, "Hi, Dan." He'd say, "Hi, Tom."

I still get tired of talking about it. It's not as clear in my mind, even when I see the shows, exactly those issues. I should have written a book back then, every day I went to court (laughs). Everything was fresh in my mind. But I just ran out of gas. I didn't care to talk about it anymore. Probably, that's why it took so long for *The Smother Brothers Comedy Hour* to get on the air in syndication or be seen again.



In 1968, a one-shot gag on the variety show led to a mock presidential campaign for street comic Pat Paulsen (right).

For the first ten years, the controversy always centered on censorship. In reality, only five to ten minutes of the show dealt with things, sometimes a short teaser in front, sometimes a major sketch, but overall, maybe ten percent had controversial material. It was a very, very good show.

Also, when we had our 20th year reunion on CBS in 1988 with Steve Martin, Mason Williams, Jennifer Warnes, Bob Einstein, Officer Judy, all these people were on the show, and it was a gorgeous show, a wonderful show. It didn't have one political thing in it of any significance, except censorship we mentioned briefly.

I guess the times change. When you have a cynical audience, it's very difficult to be satirical. You say something pointed, you hear a lot of "oooooooooh." It used to be if you get a good joke, if it was political, you'd hear a laugh. Things have changed.

I became a big supporter of freedom of speech. Even today, I still believe that, even when we hear some of the most horrendous things being said that comedians feel is necessary. Or even PG movies, everything has to be a four-letter word. But it's their right to use it and anybody's right to speak anyway they want. If people don't want to see it, they don't have to. That was my point then, and it's still my position.

OUTRÉ: You sang and played guitar on John Lennon's "Give Peace a Chance," recorded at the Bed-In for Peace in 1969. You were also mentioned in the lyrics. How did all that come about?

SMOTHERS: Of course, the *Smother Brothers* were the cutting edge show on television at that time. Someone called me, said, "You wanna hang out with John Lennon and Yoko Ono? They're doing some things against the war, a Bed-In for Peace." I said, "Sure."

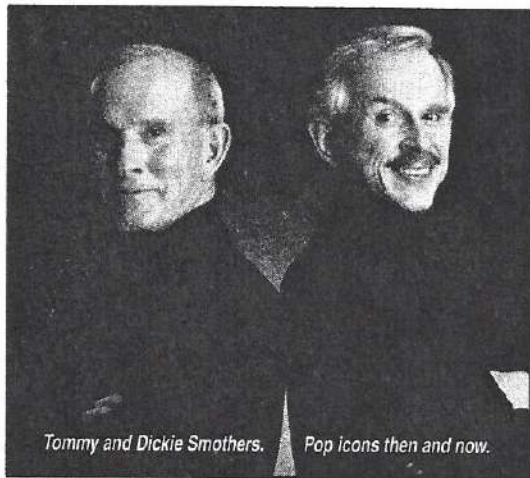
My girlfriend and I went up to Montreal, and they were in bed (laughs). There was Timothy Leary and the guy that wrote *L'il Abner*, an incredible conservative right-winger, Al Capp. He had a real mix of people. They were all there. It was musicians and actors.

He said, (impersonates Lennon) "Tommy, will you play the guitar with me?" I was playing the guitar on "Give Peace a Chance." It was simple chords in the key of C (laughs). So I started doing some chord inversions, some passing chords, some diminished and stuff. We're midway through the song. He hears it and says, "Stop, Tom, play exactly the same thing I'm doing. Don't play that other thing" (laughs). He used to hang around with Harry Nilsson down in L.A. and we got to know each other a little bit.

OUTRÉ: And there hangs a tale. Around 1974, Lennon and Nilsson, both inebriated, infamously heckled you at the L.A. Troubadour.

SMOTHERS: Harry Nilsson did our ABC show, and he was very shy about live performing. So, I talked him into it and made sure he was presented very well. Then for a while he didn't work. Harry and I were good friends and we hung out together and did some music.

I went to Georgetown in Washington, D.C., to do a show by myself, a stand-up, and he couldn't believe I was doing this. He said, "God, you mean you're going to do this by yourself without your brother?" I said, "Yeah, I've got some material." I brought all my notes, put it on a music stand. And all the agents, big people, came to see what Tommy Smothers was going



to do. This is maybe '74, something like that.

I got up on stage. I followed some folk/rock group. The place was jammed. I took out my notes and I started making observations. Well, I was working hard. I was really sweating. Finally, I said, "Anyway, how long I been on?" The guy at the door said, "20 minutes." Well, I was supposed to do an hour and I'd done at least an hour and a half of material in 20 minutes. That's how bad my chops were. So I said, "Are there any questions?" Well, I didn't know, but Harry had flown in. He was so amazed that I was going to do this. He was up in the balcony of the Cellar Door in Georgetown and started throwing some questions. There was a black minister down below and they were yelling at each other. And it turned into kind of a riot.

He came back for the second show and did the same thing (laughs). By the end of that week, I had two totally different 45-minute shows. I had senators coming, everybody saying it was really a wonderful show. But for the first two days, it was really rough. My chops were gone.

So I get back to the Troubadour with

Dickie. Dickie was working on some songs. I was working on my comedy, some concepts. So we go to the Troubadour and John and Harry Nilsson [are there]. Harry says to John Lennon, "Tom likes you to get really wrecked and then heckle. It really helps the show" (laughs). So they came in all tooted up, all brandeyed up and cognaced, and the minute Dickie and I got on stage, they just started on us. Harry said, "God, I thought I was helping you." But they were just so drunk and so twisted.

OUTRÉ: You didn't take it personally?

SMOTHERS: Oh, no.

OUTRÉ: Really? It was supposed to have been such a brutal attack.

SMOTHERS: It was very brutal. There were four letter words, "God f**ks pigs," things like that. I was very angry there during the show. A fight took place. Someone that wanted to see the show threw a blow at Lennon and they were thrown out. It got quite colorful.

The following day flowers were sent. It didn't take very long for me to recognize what had taken place and the little mistake in thought process that Harry meant, thinking that every time Tommy's on, he needs help.

OUTRÉ: More controversy, in spite of yourself. Do you ever get intentionally political or controversial in your act anymore?

SMOTHERS: The thing is, generally the people that come to our shows have a point of view. It's like preaching to the already converted. And if you do it another way and do it on a negative point of view, then you get "oooooooooh." I get it from

watching *Letterman* and seeing comedians and I don't get the laughter anymore. I get a partisan response, like it's Us and Them.

We do have a point of view in our show and the people who see it know we've stood for things and still do. I think it's a very difficult time now for satire. We do our individual work. We do what we can to make things change, reflect a generous and loving attitude. We don't like liars. We don't like people who do things that hurt other people. That reflects in our show, but we're not that specific.

We gave at the office, and we're still giving, but my god. It's up to U-2 and other people out there who do their thing. I wish I had a stronger edge. I wish the corners were still as harsh.

OUTRÉ: Was that a pun? It's up to U-2 and you, too?

SMOTHERS: (laughs) No, it just turned out that way. I do malapropisms all the time. That was a pretty good one.

OUTRÉ: Thanks, Tommy.

SMOTHERS: Yeah, life is good, you know, even when it's bad.

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