

The American Comedy Archives Interview

JAN MURRAY

Interviewed January 17, 2006

By Bill Dana and Jenni Matz

In Hollywood, CA

Biographical Information:

(Born Murray Janowski October 4, 1917 in New York, died July 2, 2006 in Los Angeles)

Jan Murray was a vaudevillian, nightclub entertainer, popular Master of Ceremonies, game show host, and film actor and a well-known comedian. The Bronx native started his career in his teens as a standup in NJ and NY and soon became a tummeler in the Jewish resorts of New York's Catskills ("The Borscht Belt") and then moved onto the vaudeville circuit. Soon he would become a standard Las Vegas headliner in the 1940s and 50s. In the early 1950s Jan broke into television in New York. He was the first comedian to become host of a gameshow in 1950s with "*Sing it Again*" and "*Songs for Sale*" which he hosted for its first year before Steve Allen took over in 1951. Other credits among dozens include hosting "*Dollar a Second*" (1953) and "*Treasure Hunt*" (1956-59) and he was a frequent guest-host on "*The Tonight Show*". He starred in his own television variety show "*Jan Murray Time*" (1955) with Tina Louise. In 1965 he moved to Los Angeles and appeared in such films as "*Tarzan and the Great River*", "*The Busy Body*" and "*Thunder Alley*", as well as television comedies "*The Lucy Show*" and "*Car 54, Where Are You?*".

Murray remained close friends with other great comics such as Buddy Hackett, Sid Caesar, Shecky Greene, and Milton Berle.

Editor's note: This interview was conducted at Mr. Murray's home several months before he passed away. He was in good spirits and kept the entire crew laughing for the duration of this interview, which lasted almost two hours. The following is an EXCERPT of the interview. To see the full transcript, please contact the Comedy Archives archivist.

JAN MURRAY: .. There was a theater in Baltimore called the *Hippodrome*. And so that was one of the theaters I was a hit in on vaudeville. I used to play it twice a year, which in the vaudeville days was a lot. You usually had to wait a full year before you came back -- and I always was a smash. Always, never missed. And one engagement, I walk out, and I don't hear a laugh. It's like I'm in an empty auditorium, you know? You just hear my voice vibrating. And I'm saying, *why? You threw me*. Because it was a thing -- it's like I owned it. You know, I used to walk out and say two words and get them laughing. And -- you know, it was just murder.

I didn't even want to go back to the hotel after the last show billed. You know, I was just so miserable, so brokenhearted. So I went back to see the picture. {*Ed: it was common for a vaudeville theater to show a moving picture before the live entertainment*}. There was a picture that starred Ethel Barrymore and Cary Grant as the son. Halfway into the picture she develops cancer and dies the last second part of the picture. Boy, you know what went on in life, you know? So Milton {Berle} came in to do a one-nighter, and he came to see me. And I told him, I says, "Milton, it's like the mystery of the world!" I said, "I've played here so many times, and I'm always, you

know, a big hit." I said, "I can't get a laugh here!" I said, "And I don't know why or what or what the hell is it," you know. And talking and all that, and then he said, "What picture you got there?" None But the Lonelyheart. And it was Ethel Barrymore and Cary Grant. "She spends," I say, "the last half of the picture dying of cancer." Her pain, her anguish. You know, this was some actress. "Oh, really?" he says. "And when are you on?" I says, "Right after that." I said, "I'm the MC." So he says, "Right after that?" He says, "Let me ask you something. There's no newsreel? There's no nothing?" I said, "No." Because the picture was over long, so it was picture, vaudeville, picture, vaudeville, picture, vaudeville. Otherwise the union would kill them, you know? -- and I told him about the last, you know, ten minutes of the picture. I told him what it was about. I had him crying in that room, you know. So he said, "Well, very simple, Jan." He said, "The whole thing is the picture and that you're following it. There's nothing between that picture and you. So when you come up, these people are in the audience, sitting in the audience crying or saddened. How are you going to make them laugh?" I thought, it never dawned on me! You know? What's ahead of you? You know, all the things you've got to watch for for comedy. And

gee, it never dawned on me. But I said, "You know, it makes a little sense!"

I ran out. I bought boxes of Kleenex and all that. I go flying out on that stage at death's age. You know, it came right after the picture. Nothing. The curtain came down. *Here he is, Jan Murray.* I flew out and jumped off the stage with Kleenex. And I started with the women. I says, "Don't cry. It's a movie. She's an actress. I spoke to her this morning. She wants to have a date. We'll have an affair yet before this week's out. What are you worrying about?" And I ran around like that, and they started to chuckle. Then they started to laugh. Then they started, and when I felt it was appropriate, I ran back on the stage and did my act, and all of a sudden I'm a hit. Now if he hadn't told me that, Bill, I didn't know. I'd have just died the whole engagement. Now, then I realized, I don't know if you ever saw him in a theater. There's nobody like him. He was the best in vaudeville.

DANA: I never saw Berle in vaudeville --

MURRAY: Oh, that's where you missed! So, I mean, television, what the hell? But oh, that guy in vaudeville, there's nobody like him. He was -- well, he was electric. He was a dynamo on the stage, you know? So, it's like seeing a

man in love with a woman. You know, this guy, once he touched the stage, boy... And so I saw him many times. And he had before him a -- what do you call that went on? A short, about little puppies, little dogs, the cutest thing you ever saw. And this short used to get 20 laughs. I says, "You know, you're the luckiest bastard in the world. Wherever you work, you have the short." He says, "I own it. I own this film. What are you, crazy?" I says, "You own it?" He says, "What do you think I'm going to follow? That's what I follow. I'm going to let them tell" -- you know, look how smart he was. He knew everything. Isn't that bright?

DANA: Yeah. Yeah, it was amazing --

MURRAY: You and I wouldn't have thought of that! What's ahead? What's doing? You know.

MATZ: Isn't that one of the keys of perhaps especially stand-up comedy is to be observant about everything in the audience, that's going on in the world around you, your whole environment. I mean, that -- you can't just have something written on a piece of paper and go out and just do it straight, right?

MURRAY: Oh, no. A professional could, but, you know, some -- but even me, honey, I -- in my whole life, after a while when I got a little known and I started to develop routines, not just isolated jokes and stories and things,

and always I used to write -- I used to come out of it like a play. I had absolutely no talent to write a joke or write material or -- none. Absolutely none. But I was a good re-writer, even with my television shows, Bill. That's where I used to shine. I never put things on paper. I didn't know how to do it. I couldn't think alone in a room with a typewriter. I started to cry, you know? With a typewriter? I mean, that's why I always have the monumental respect for writers. How they do it is a big mystery to me.

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MURRAY: -- you see, my routines, I would think of an idea, something that made me funny. Because the act eventually became very personal. And something made me say, what a stupid idea, what an irritating idea. Here. "Press 1, press 2." It used to drive me crazy. Now, you know, when you call on a phone. "To speak to so-and-so (inaudible), press 1." I press 1. "Yes?" "I want to talk to so." "Press 3. If you want to talk to so, press 4. If you called because of so-and-so, press 5." So that struck me as funny. I says, "Geez, that's got to be an irritant to people." You know, when they first started it. And so I thought about -- now, what I was saying to you is that I didn't have the talent to sit in a room and make up a

routine. You know? But what I did, I was like an editor. So in my head, when I had a beginning, a middle, and an end, I'd call in a writer. Then he'd write, and then I'd sit and rewrite with him until we had a chunk, a piece of material. So that's the way I personally work. Now today, 95% of the comedians were writers. They all come from there. You know that, don't you, Bill?

DANA: Sure.

MURRAY: They were all writers!

DANA: I was a writer myself.

MURRAY: That's why they come on most of these kids, not the guys that are great, because every generation has their own great comedians. You know, people always say, "How do comedians compare from" -- I say, "You can't compare different time, different day." I says, "But don't worry." "Well, there's nobody like you guys." You know? "You guys" -- guys my age are saying this to me. Of course, he's going to love these -- you know. Or a little younger than me, but these kids... But I have learned that every generation breeds its own great comedians. You know, there's some great ones that we have today that came from today. When I say today, seven years, nine years ago, whatever, you know. But 95% of them, when they come out, they don't know how to walk on a stage, because they don't

know it's important how you walk on. They don't know it's important how you walk off.

DANA: That is the big difference --

MURRAY: So they come flying out, Bill, right? They come rushing out. "Hi! How is everybody?" How is everybody? You know, "how is everybody? Yeah, where are you guys from? Milwaukee? Hey, Milwaukee! How about big hand for Milwaukee?" No, because you're a comedy star. Get out and work and perform, and you're the master of the situation. "How is everybody?" What do you mean, how? "Well, we were good 'til you came out!" You know, that deserves to hear that! So, that's some of the fault I find. But that's because 90% of them are writers. They're not basic comedians. Well, some of them, of course, were. Woody Allen, you know, you had some that were just great.

DANA: Yeah. Today we were talking about that at the school and how when we were -- you were several beats ahead of me in the business, but number one, you looked good. You had a respect for that audience.

MURRAY: Yeah.

DANA: Would you ever sit down if your pants was --

MURRAY: Oh, no, no.

DANA: No, you protect that crease in the pants.

MURRAY: Yup.

DANA: You have a beginning.

MURRAY: Oh, yeah.

DANA: And you have a middle --

MURRAY: A middle, and then --And I know how to say goodbye. I didn't have a song. I didn't ever finish with a song or a musical thing because I don't know how to play any of those. So I had to finish with my mouth, after I've talked to them for an hour with my mouth, you know? So you've got to respect those -- you've got to respect your audience.

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MATZ: But for students who are just starting out today-- many of them, as you say, don't understand that you need to really develop that persona. You've got to have it to get you -- they have to understand what it is, who you are when you walk out on the stage.

MURRAY: You know what I used to do? Even after I was on with my only show on television for 16 years, and you know, we did every big variety show guest star, toured America playing the leading theaters and nightclubs and all that. Even though I did all that, in the latter years before I retired, when I came on I always told three or four stories, out-and-out jokes, Bill, which I didn't do in my act. And the act, as I said, was always like a play, a funny, you know, story. Beginning, middle, and end. I

would open with three or four isolated stories, knowing that each one of them is a powerhouse joke that's going to get the laugh. It doesn't depend on how you build up to it or anything. The joke is there.

I used to go out and tell them three or four stories, out-and-out stories. And you know why I did it? I didn't trust the fact that I was on with my only show all those years on television. I didn't trust the fact that I was a guest shot on every variety show. I didn't trust the fact that I was in every leading theater and nightclub in America. So I used to tell them four stories to get them used to my persona, to get them used to seeing me, getting used to my voice, getting used to the timing, what I'm talking about and how I use that. It becomes a whole thing. You become familiar with the guy, and then I'd go to work.

DANA: Do you have -- could I have a sample of one story?

MURRAY: Oh! And I'd also break into it, not like -- there was always a story behind the story, like I had an excuse to do it. You know, I'm not just telling you stories. And maybe I'd tell them one or two as a funny one. You know, this couple, the guy went to the doctor. She sat outside, and he went in. And he examined him, he gave him all the tests and everything. He said, "Let me ask you a few questions."

He said, "How is your appetite? How do you eat? Do you -- have you got a good appetite? Do you eat healthy?" And he says, "I don't know." He says, "Well, how many times a month you eat out?" He says, "We eat out every night -- I eat out every meal. My wife hasn't cooked a meal since we were born. Every meal, three meals a day, we eat out in a restaurant." "Oh," he said, because the guy came in complaining of pains in his stomach and a nervous condition. And he said to him, "How is your relationship with your wife? You know, your sexual habits? Is it plentiful? Does it" -- "Well," he says, "that's something else. You know, she always has an excuse. 'I've got a headache.' 'My aunt came in town.' You know, always has an excuse." He says, "I see." He says, "Send your wife in, and you stay in the office waiting for her." So he goes out in the waiting room. He goes out, she comes in. He says, "Mrs. So-and-so, there's really nothing wrong organically with your husband. I mean, you'll cure him right away. I know you'll be thrilled to hear this. And it's very simple. He tells me that you eat every meal out. Never again. Your husband must never go to a restaurant again as long as he lives. Every meal has to be made for him, cooked for him. We'll give you a bunch of, you know, what the hell do you call it? Recipes. You know? And you've got to do that. No more restaurants. Every meal

has to be cooked for him." He said, "And he told me about your sexual habits. You deny him, and all that." He says, "Well, don't do it. That's why he's so nervous. That's why he's like this. You know? Be a little kinder to him. Once a week. Whatever, twice a week, once a month. You know, but something. He tells me you're absolutely nothing. You always have an excuse and so forth. Now you just have to do those two little things, and this guy'll live for years and years and years." She says, "Well, thank you, Doctor. I'm so proud." She walks out. The husband is a nervous wreck. "What'd he say? What?" And she starts walking to the car. "Honey, you had a meeting! What'd he say? What'd he say?" She says, "You're going to die."

DANA: [laughs]

MATZ: [laughs]

MURRAY: So that's just something. I'd tell them a joke like that. Well, the next story has nothing to do with this. So I'm liable -- "Oh," I'd say -- wow, that entertained you. I got eight people, and I haven't worked in so long.

MATZ: [laughs]

MURRAY: In fact, this is about the size of my last audience when I quit.

MATZ: [laughs]

MURRAY: [laughs]

MATZ: Did you have a favorite joke that you heard as you were listening to all of these other great comedians? Did you have one that --

MURRAY: At different times I had, but I always had a handful of them that were -- you know, they were like money in the bank on it, you know? So let's assume I'd tell this story. And the way I would say it is I says, "You know, I flew down yesterday. I've got to tell you this. You know I come from Los Angeles. Well, anyway, I flew down. There was a guy next to me. He recognized me, and the minute he saw me, he said, 'Oh, my God. Jan Murray. Have I got jokes for you!' And this guy told me jokes until the plane landed. I was ready to kill him or jump out of the plane." But I said, "One or two weren't too bad. Here's one I thought was adorable." I'd tell them this. "For instance..." Right? Big scream. Never misses. Another one I'd go into -- and actually, these are full-bodied stories. I never used four of those at one time. But as long as you're here, I'll entertain you.

DANA: [laughs]

MATZ: We've got nowhere to go.

MURRAY: [laughs] As I just said, material comes from anywhere and everywhere. You've got to be aware of it, and you've got to understand it. And you've got to have a funny bone organically in your body to know how to do it. I said, "I

just came from Israel." And I said, you know -- and this incidentally is true. You know, a thing like this, you can't make up. So I said, "I just came from Israel. I did a show for the variety club. You know, once a year, the variety clubs, they have a big banquet honoring somebody in a different country. And this year they were honoring Lord So-and-so from England and asked me to entertain. At first, I turned down. I said, 'No, all I do is talk!' 'All the English-speaking people there, Jan. Don't worry about it. Because from England itself, there'll be about 150 people, and the people that are going to be in the audience from Israel all speak English.'"

You know, I'm going to put myself on another road. It's an interesting thing that just occurred to me. So I went out, and like I told you -- later I'll get back to what I was talking about. So I went out, like I told you. Tell them four stories, isolated stories. They screamed. They hollered. They did. They all spoke English. You know, Bill? It was hilarious. Geez, I was so thrilled. I said, "Well, I've got them now. And I'll start going into a routine."

Let's assume I go into this thing with my son. You know, those were the hippie days. You know, whatever, "His hair was so long that, you know, he sat on it, whatever. 6'4. Give him a hair cut, he's 1'8." You know? The jokes about

hippies and those. I die like a dog. 600-700 people that were just screaming at me are staring at me. So I quickly -- you know, they threw me off. They threw me off-meter. So I went back to another story. I told them another out-and-out story that's not related to anything. I told two of those, got two big screams. I go back to another routine. Not a laugh.

I found out what the hell it was. It broke my heart, you know, because I really didn't get off on what a hit I was, you know what I mean? And it broke my heart. And I realized what the hell it was. See, there's so much to do with comedy. Even though they spoke English, the culture was entirely different. They didn't know what the hell I was talking about. I'm talking about my hippie son with the long hair, and their sons are in a war every day of their lives dying. You know? Whole different culture, Bill. But you have to learn that. You have to learn it. So to get back to how I used to do this, I'd tell the story like I just told you. With "Oh, you're going to die." I said, "I just came" -- so this guy -- but one, now I'd tell them about I'm on the plane, and this guy is telling me jokes. And I said, "One of them wasn't too bad." And this maybe was one of my all-time favorites. I said, "I did a show for the so-and-so variety club. And then some people were nice enough to invite us to their home, and I always

love to -- when I travel and all, I love to see and do things that are indigenous to its culture, its society, you know. For me to go to Japan and stay at the Hilton is no thrill, you know.

So," I said -- oh. I said, "This guy kept us in his house until midnight, my wife and I, because he was such a great host and we had so much fun." I said, "But I had to be at the airport at 5 am. You know, in Israel if your plane leaves at 7, you've got to be two hours. They started this examining luggage a long time ago. So they didn't wait for their building to get hit with an airplane, you know? They knew it, that you have to do this. So we slept about an hour. Now I'm, like, in a coma, and we're going to the airport. We get into the cab. And the cab driver was a real European-type of a guy. He had a neck -- this thing, you know. We get in. He says -- we started to drive. I says, you know, 'The airport.' They only have one big one. It's in Tel Aviv. 'Yes, sir!' he says. He evidently just came out with a cab full of energy and strength. And I'm saying, well, it takes an hour to get there. I'll take a nap.

'Mister! You going home?' I said, 'No. I always get up at 3 in the morning and take a walk. You know, or a cab to the airport. Yeah, I'm going home.' 'Yeah, where's home? Where do you live?' I said, 'I live in Los Angeles.' 'Los

Angeles? I got a cousin lives near you!' I said, 'Where? Where's he live?' 'In San Francisco!' I said, 'If I bump into him, I'll give him your regards.'

Now that's quiet, and we're driving. And he says to me, 'You like jokes?' He had no idea who I was. I said, 'Yeah, I like jokes!' He said, 'Wait a minute.' And he stopped on the highway on the road. Picture this. It's 2:30, 3 in the morning. No cars, nothing. And he gets out of the cab. And I said, 'Where are you going?' He says, 'I have to stand to tell you this joke.' You hear this? A cab driver! He said, 'I have to stand to tell you this.' Now I start to laugh at this guy. I said, 'Oh, let's hear it.' He told a joke. His arms were flying. He performed it. Boy, it was terrific."

And this is the joke. And it became one of my favorites for years and years. I love it. He says, "A man came home from work one day unexpectedly. He walks in the house, and he smells cigar smoke. He says to the wife, 'Who was here? You had a man here. I smell cigar smoke! You don't smoke cigars. I don't smoke cigars. Who'd you have here?' She said, 'Oh, you jealous animal. You smell nothing. There was no' -- 'I smell' -- 'You don't smell cigar smoke or anything. There was nobody here, you idiot.' He is steaming, he is so mad.

He goes over, looks out the window. They're on a fifth floor. And he looks down. He sees a man coming out of his apartment building with a big cigar, singing and dancing, 'Zip-a-dee-doo-dah, zip-a-dee...' He got so angry, got so nuts, he ran over, grabbed the refrigerator, pulled it out of the wall, rolled it up to the window, lifted it up, threw it out of the window, and it hit this man right on the head. Killed him. He looked down. He said, 'My God. What'd I do? I killed this poor man? Why? I mean, what'd he do? He spent an hour with my wife? So much fun he couldn't have had!' And he was contrite, he jumped out the window and committed suicide. Now they're both laying there side by side.

An hour later, they're trying to get through the Pearly Gates in heaven. St. Peter said, 'Before I allow you through to the Pearly Gates, you must tell us how you died.' He said to the first guy, 'How did you die?' He said, 'Well,' he said..." Let me try to lay this out quick. I haven't told this in so many years. He says, "How did you die?" [pause] Oh. He says, "I don't know." He said, "I was happy as a lark, smoking a cigar, walking in the street, happy as could be. All of a sudden, a refrigerator (inaudible) shot in the head and killed me." "Oh," he said to the second guy, "how'd you do it?" He says, "Well, I confess. I threw a refrigerator on his

head. When I came home, I smelled cigar smoke." And he tells him the story. "And I see this guy coming out of the building. Took the refrigerator. I threw it on his head." He said, "I see." He said to the third guy, "And how did you die?" He said, "I don't know. I was sitting in a refrigerator..."

DANA: [laughs]

MATZ: [laughs]

MURRAY: Great joke. A great joke. It was one of my favorites for years! [laughs]

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DANA: When did you segue to Jan Murray, the impresario of the game and the --

MURRAY: That was completely by accident because, you know, I actually think I was the first comedian to do a game show. I mean, Groucho might have done that before me, but his wasn't exactly a game show. His was a joke show, you know. They picked out the contestants they wanted. Then they wrote the routines for him, and they overshot it. They were the first ones. A half-hour show, they'd shoot 50 minutes and then edit 20, so 20 bad minutes. So I was the first one that actually did it live. What was doing there was what went on the air, what the people saw, you know?

So I might have been the -- but -- and that was so accidental. Where the hell do I come to that? You know? I was appearing in Vegas. And my agent came up. He says, "Jan," he says. "I have the darnedest thing," he says. And this was about 1950-51. Television was brand new, you know? He says, "I've got an offer for you to do a TV thing." I got all excited because my mind told me that that was where the world was going, you know? And I said, "You're kidding! What -- what -- who? What? What?" He says, "Well," he said, "there's a show on the air called Blind Date." Now Blind Date was on on radio for about ten years. It was a very popular show. Arlene Francis was the mistress of ceremonies. The reason it was so popular was that the blind date was given always to a serviceman. So you were the audience. You sat back, you were happy for this guy. He's in the Air Force, he's got a nice date, he's going to the Star Club, he's going to do this, going to do that. You know? And it was a successful -- now they tried to put it on television. And the funniest part was that they hired a guy who was one of the fine, fine motion picture actors in the world, and to hire him to MC a show like that. And the show was a disaster. So, after it was on two-three weeks, they panicked, and they let him go. And now they want somebody fast, and some guy in the agency saw me. You know, my act at the -- I was headlining at the

Sahara. So, he said, "Well, I saw a guy, Jan Murray. He's hilarious," rah, rah, rah. So -- So, he said -- then, you know, the guy liked Jan Murray. I says, "Blind Date? I'm going to do Blind Date?" I saw it on radio. I said, "What the hell's that got to do with me?" You know, I'm a performer, an entertainer. Big deal. He said, "Jan, I have a hunch," and so forth. To make a long story short, the agent said, "Look. It's only nine more weeks, because it was a 13-week contract and they cancelled the show. You've got nine weeks. Go do it. Is it going to hurt your business, what you have in the clubs and in the theater?" So, OK. I took it. And I scored very heavily because the one lucky thing I have about myself is, I told you candidly and truthfully, that I have no talent. I can't sing, I can't dance, I can't play an instrument, you know. But I have a talent, you could say, that not many stand-up guys have. I could work with other people like an actor. When you talk to me on a stage, I listen to you. And I don't necessarily look to get the laugh. Because if I ruin the thing by being -- they (divide?) you. A straight-man comic, bull! The straight man is important, because if he don't lay it in right, Bill, as you know, there's no laugh. So that -- and it turned out that I had a talent for this.

And one day Lou Weiss grabs me. He says, "I want you to come up to the office immediately. There's a French movie I want you to see, and there's an interpreter there, a young lady." So she sat down with me. And this was the thing. It's called Dollar a Second. And it was the biggest hit in France on radio. And it was such a hit that the story of the movie was that the hero had to get some money fast and all that, so he went on as a contestant on this show. So, to play that scene, they showed the show, so that's how I got to see what it was. She's explaining it all to me, you know. And I walked out. I says, "I'll fight to kill anybody that wants to do this show but me. You know, as many as I've turned down," I said -- A Dollar a Show to my mind to this day is still one of the funniest things that were ever on the air. It was really hysterical! And I was lucky enough to MC that. So after that, for about 18 years, I would do the game shows. They had me typecast like an actor, you know?

DANA: Well, yeah. There's a whole generation that know Jan Murray, and that's the guy with the game shows.

MURRAY: Damn right.

DANA: What were some of the shows?

MURRAY: Well, the big one I did was Treasure Hunt. Was even bigger than Dollar a Second. And that was on daytime, and we were number one for about five years. We were the

number one rated daytime show. We beat all the soaps, all the everything. That was a really popular show. But, you know, it just took me in that direction. And I didn't fight it, Bill, because I got married before that, and we started having children. And one is 6, one is 4, one is 2. And it gave me a chance to be with them while they grew up.

DANA: Was this based in New York or --

MURRAY: Yeah, New York. So I did all these shows in New York, and I could have still did -- doing quiz shows or game shows. But when the last one went off, I went off. I said, "Goodbye." I packed bags and came here. I said, "No, no, no, no. I've had it." Because I began to miss the regimental effort you have to put in to be funny. You know? Not to worry so much about it. And I used to give them gags, you know? And not give it to me, give it to them, because then I used to work off of that. You know? So, that's how I got to do it. Then I stayed in it. I was very happy to stay in it all those years. I was home. I used to leave meetings with the president of NBC or ABC, wherever I was working -- I used to leave in the middle of a meeting. I got to go home before the kids go to sleep. I lived out in Rye. You know? So, for that, I'm grateful. Otherwise, I felt my career in my life could have gone in a whole different direction, and maybe not as good.

DANA: No, it was a part of the game show, the quiz show, the whole thing, is a genuine art form of the American culture.

MURRAY: That's right. That's right. But I was the first comedian. And to this day, most of them are just good-looking straight guys who know how to handle the show, you know. The -- what do you call it? Now you walk here, come over here, now pull this lever and see if -- you know? And they're good, they're good personalities. But they're not funny, they're not comedians.

MATZ: We talk about the specific skills and qualities of a good straight man, which is essentially what you play as a host. You mentioned listening?

MURRAY: Oh, yeah.

MATZ: What were some other necessary skills to be able to play off the gags to make them funnier?

MURRAY: Well, I also feel that you have to have a humanity with it, because a show like Dollar a Second was a show that -- it took the contestant down. If you made a mistake, you wound up in a pool of water. If you did this, a pie's in his face. You know what I mean? Without going into the format. So you -- they have to believe that you're not a cruel guy, so they could laugh along with you. So -- and I did it naturally by being, you know -- I'd be a patsy. I'd fall into shtick and things, you know? That's the only thing I could tell you.

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MATZ: You mentioned before the camera was rolling about how for Milton Berle, comedy was his everything. It was his elixir, his intoxicant. What was it for you that motivated you to even get into the business of making people laugh?

MURRAY: You know, winding up in show business in any form is really like a miracle from God because, as I said before, I had no ostensible talent. Nothing could have been more foreign to me than to have wound up in show business. I had no relative that knew anyone in show business. I had no friend, no relatives. My parents knew nobody in show business. You know? Nothing had been more alien to me than show biz. What the hell have I got to do with show biz? But I was a very funny kid. I was never in a school play. I was never the clown. You know, everyone would say, "Boy, I bet you were the clown in the school!" No, I was scared of getting a detention, but you know. Oh, no clowning. But I was a natural funny kid. And around the house and my block, they knew it, and the neighbors knew it. That's all. Because I was just a natural funny kid. I saw things a little differently, and I was able to say it. And so that's how I guess -- it's quite a story, but

it's longer -- you know, I don't know if you want to  
wrestle with it, but that's how I wound up in the business.

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MATZ: One of the things I think would be very useful for students  
starting out --

MURRAY: Yeah.

MATZ: -- if you have a God-given natural gift, you've got a funny  
bone, you start off funny, how do you hone the talent?

MURRAY: Everybody does it a different way again. You can get  
a thousand different answers.

MATZ: What's yours?

MURRAY: Huh?

MATZ: What's your answer?

MURRAY: Well, first of all, how to start from the very  
beginning, you know, everybody does it differently. Today,  
I guess they have -- today is a big advantage for kids  
starting out because of these clubs, these improvs.  
They're happy there. The boss -- you know, some silly guy  
gets up and five minutes -- you know, because his family  
told him he's funny. But here and there there's a gem.  
Here and there there's a Billy Crystal, there's a Jim  
Carrey, you know. So that's -- but the only -- you know, I  
give advice. One piece of advice I give to people who are  
already in the business and working, you know, and I'll

give you this piece of advice that **Al Jolson** gave to me, who was the greatest entertainer to this day that ever lived. People who saw him say he was the best entertainer that ever lived. And he saw me after he was retired. He lived in Florida and he came in and saw me one night. He came over to -- Ben and Bernie? You remember that name from radio?

DANA: Sure. Yowza, yowza.

MURRAY: Yowza, yowza. And, "Boy, I want to tell you..." I like Jolson. He looked like a star, he smelt like a star. He was tan, he wore those wraparound camelhair coats, you know? His bearing. Today, even the girls, they schlump around, you know? Not this guy, not him. Well, you know, every time you saw him, he was a star, man. So they were in that night. By that time, he had been retired two or three years. But his picture came out, "The Jolson Story," you know, which eventually brought him back to life, and he had another career before he died. So he was in the audience. He had a big home. Oh, he was a multimillionaire, but he had -- what do you call it -- cabanas at the Lord Tarlton Hotel. So even though he had a big, beautiful home in Florida, he kept the cabana there, a big spacious one, you know? Now he ended his show, the captain came back and said, "Mr. Jolson would like to see you, to join his table." I said, "Mr. Jolson? What

mister..." He says, "Al Jolson." I said, "Al Jolson was here tonight?" "Yeah, he saw your show. He's here with Ben and Bernie." "Was Tom Mix out there, Laura Laplante? Who?" You know. "Jan, we're not kidding, he's here." So he took me and sure enough, it's Jolson sitting there. Tan, oy. Turtleneck. First guy I ever saw with a turtleneck sweater, you know.

So we start talking and I'm looking at him like, you know, Moses looked at God when God spoke to him, you know? I don't believe this guy is talking to me. And he gave me one piece of advice that I adhered to, which you'll find maybe a little interesting. To the every end, and the times when I was negotiating and sometime there were important deals because I had deals in Vegas at times, you get 16 weeks in a year. And you know, you multiply what they paid you because they paid you much more than the ordinary nightclub or theater paid you because of the gambling. So important deals, I'd always adhere to his -- go back to his advice, and you know what it was? He says, "You know, kid, you've got a good chance to make it some day," he says, "**But it's entirely up to you. Only you could screw it up,**" he says.

See, when I got in this business, Bill, I never dreamt of being in the movies, signing autographs, people running for

it. I never dreamt of any of that crap. My old -- *where do I open Thursday* was my whole motivation. The work and, of course, the money to keep me alive, to eat. But even when it got better than that, when I started to make good money, you know, the Paramount theaters and -- it was still the same, the same feeling. I never thought I'd get beyond it, I never thought I be the picture star or television. Well, television, we didn't know of. But radio, I didn't think about it. The work, that's what I thought about. Where do I open and when do I open? So he said to me, "Only you could louse it up." And I says, "What could I do to louse it up?" He said, "You know, you've got a unique quality that's never been explained." Incidentally, this is good to this. He says, "It's never fully explained because no one ever fully understood it, but there's something about you that flies out -- off the stage, into the audience," you know, he said, "And that cannot be denied. So if you stick with it, the business gets so tough that you quit, you know, or for any other reason you quit, then, of course, you're not going to make it. But if you stick with it, there's just something in your persona, Jan." Well, Al Jolson saying, it's like God telling me this, for God's sakes. Anyway, and the next day I met him in the -- he invited me to go to the cabana at the Lord Tarlton Hotel, and I went there, and you know, he had a

reputation of being a very tough man around there, but to me, he was a darling, you know. And one of the things -- "I'm going to give you some advice that you listen to all your life," he says, "If you stay in the business." I said, "Yes, Mr. Jolson. What?" Because then he said, "If you stay in the business," he was right.

When he saw me, if you offered me a hundred a week for the rest of my life, I'd sign with you. You go into the Post Office, I can get you a job, a hundred a quarter a week, I'll sign with you right away, rest of my life. If I ever make anything more than that, you could have it. So here's a man telling you a thing like this, you know. Now he says, "I want to give you some advice. You adhere to it. Now this is good for this." Great advice. He says, "All your life fight, fight like hell for money and for billing." You know what billing is, you know, where you're putting the name on the marquis. He says, "Fight like hell, but before you lose the job, lose the fight." He says, "You know, because," he says, "remember two things. No performer was ever discovered laying off in a hotel room and no performer ever improved laying off. If you're working wherever, whatever, somebody could walk in that will take you to the next notch. Not if you're in a hotel room. And boy, when I was dickering for big, big money, that came to my head, and before I won the fight, I lost

the war -- I mean I lost the fight, you know? And whenever I got snooty and big shot and I'd think of what he told me and I'd pull the agent aside and I says, "Sign it, let's go." But Bill, isn't that interesting? "Nobody was ever discovered laying off in a hotel room. We don't think in those terms, and "Nobody ever improved laying off in a hotel."

DANA: We'll do a famous -- it sounds like a redundant, almost silly question, but we've been asking to everybody and we're getting a little different flavor.

MURRAY: Yes, of course. That's what I'm saying with comics, you know.

DANA: And we use it as sort of a wrap-up, and the question is was it worth it?

MURRAY: Was it worth it? You know, I offer my thanks to God, which all of you should do, and if you don't believe in a God, what you believe in. A statue, a tree, nature, anything you believe in, you know? Because I thank God for the life that I had. How could I have resented it? Had some tough times. Not too many, but enough times where I was scared to death. No work, no idea how to work, have no idea where I'm going to work, but now I'm running, you know, a run on Broadway looking for the jobs. As what? A couple of times when I was rolling, then I'd into a place and it would die and get canceled. Break my heart. I sat

in my -- you know, lived with my mother and father, sat in the apartment there crying myself, you know. So you have to have some kind of stamina and you have to have some kind of strength within you because if you don't have it, you quit, and maybe you should. I'm not saying everybody should do this. But the final answer is that if you want it enough, do it, and I wanted it enough. Not beforehand. Never though about show business. But once I had a taste of it. You know, there's something very medicinal about standing on a stage and 3,000 people are laughing at you. I toured with Sinatra's last tour that he did. I did it with him because you know, he'd always had younger comics and he grabbed one day and he said, "Hey, Clyde, why don't you tour with me, for crying out loud?" He says, "The old days, wherever." And I said, "All right." I said, "I'd love to, Frank." And we used to sit in his plane, you know, going from place to place, always reminisce about the Paramount, how it came out at the Chicago theater, this and that. Julie Podel, the Copacabana, but we're not there -- and he loved it. He loved to reminisce. And so what -- you know, first of all, it's a way of artistically expressing yourself even if you don't have to, even if you don't realize you want to, you know? So -- and because not everybody can do it. I can't paint the picture, I can't write a song. Many things I can't do, but by God, this is

one thing I could do and I wound up doing it, and for that, I'm eternally grateful. I wouldn't change anything.

DANA: Your audience over all these years is very grateful too.

MURRAY: Well, thank you, Bill, it's sweet of you to say that. And it's true. You know, it's quite a thing to be proud of and this is one of the things, that when I finally leave this earth, I could feel and I do feel now that I just didn't take up space here. I did some important things. I made millions of people laugh, for God's sakes, in my life. It's an important thing I did. And when someone says to me what my proudest show was, I always say that my proudest thing was the benefits I did. I bet, in my life, I did 2,000 benefits. Leaving your family at parties, doing this to run someplace to work for nothing. People don't realize. They sit there and they watch these actors come out, these performers. They perform and then they criticize them, yet. The poor guy's getting nothing, you know? He gave up his time, he gave up his life, his time off to run down -- you know, Buddy Hackett, a very brilliant mind all the way around, he once said to me, "You know, Jan..." You see, to Buddy, the latter part of his life, his main business was Vegas. He was a smash there at the Sahara. Was there for years, had a big job, made big, big money. And he got a club date, a one-nighter. He was

up to 40 or \$50,000 for the one night. So you're talking about a major star. And he once said to me he never does a benefit west of whatever, Mississippi. You know, pick a place. I don't remember the exact place he told me. And I said, "Why?" He says, "Because, well, you do -- how many benefits did you do this week?" I said, "Three, here, in Los Angeles." And New York was just as bad, if not worse. Three times I ran there, worked for nothing someplace. He said to me, "They'll never see me at a benefit here, Jan. I'll write them a check if I believe in their charity." And I said, "Why?" He says, "Because that's my business," and he's so right. He says, "Geez, they see me here for nothing, you know, doing all these benefits. Then I work Vegas, where I really need them. They go see someone else." "Oh, we saw Buddy. We saw him three times already this week." And I realized how true that was. In my life, I'd never thought about it, how many times I saw people I know and I was, you know, appearing in Vegas. And, "Hey, how are you? Hey, come in, I'm opening tomorrow night." "Jan, I'll level with you. I saw you already four times this month. I'm going to see so and so." We don't think in those terms. He did. He was very bright.

DANA: It's very helpful and you know, it seems to me that you really have spent your time well. You weren't just taking up space.

MURRAY: I wasn't taking up space.

**END OF INTERVIEW EXCERPT: JAN MURRAY**