

Emerson Comedy Archives Oral History Project

BILL DANA

Interviewed February 21, 2005

By Jenni Matz

At the Cutler Majestic Theater Emerson College, Boston, MA

Biographical Information:

Born William Szathmary in Quincy, Massachusetts in 1924, and is an Emerson graduate (Class of 1950)

Bill Dana is a comedian, writer, author, producer and composer, educated at Emerson College. He was part of the comedy team Dana and Wood (with fellow Emerson alum Gene Wood) appearing on television and in clubs. Dana later appeared on television as a solo performer and was a head writer for *The Steve Allen Show* (1956-1960).

Performer Dana's appearances include his starring role in *The Bill Dana Show* (1963-1965), appearances on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, *The Martha Raye Show*, *The Milton Berle Show*, *The Hollywood Palace* and as the role of 'Uncle Angelo' on *The Golden Girls*, among others. Bill was part of the sixties night club peer group with Jonathan Winters, Mort Sahl, Bill Cosby, Lenny Bruce, Shelley Berman, Bob Newhart, Woody Allen, Dick Gregory, and Phyllis Diller.

The Bill Dana written multi-E Emmy winning *All in the Family* episode, "Sammy Davis Visits Archie Bunker", for Emerson alum Norman Lear, is #12 in the TV Guide *Best 100 Episodes* in the history of television. "The Laughter Prescription " (Ballantine 1983) co-authored with the late Dr. Laurence Peter, of Peter Principle fame, was the first book of its nature following Norman Cousins's "Anatomy Of An Illness". Long active in the Latino cause, Bill was honored by the prestigious National Hispanic Media Coalition with their first Impact Award and is on their advisory board.

Bill was educated in Quincy, MA schools, and is a decorated combat infantry veteran of WW II. He is married to Evelyn Shular Dana of Walden's Creek, Tennessee, his inspiration and partner in life and business. At 80, Bill Dana is still performing and is a firm believer in the healing power of laughter. He is currently helping establish The American Comedy Archives with his alma mater, Emerson. This January, Bill will be honored by the Pacific Broadcast Pioneers with a lifetime achievement award.

The following is an excerpt from our interview with BILL DANA. For the complete transcripts, please contact the Archivist.

MATZ: We're going to talk about your career today, and what you have to teach from your varied experiences. Among your long line of credits include: Writer and Performer on *The Steve Allen Show*, *The Gary Moore Show*, *The Spike Jones Show*, *The Ed Sullivan Show*, *The Tonight Show*; Creator of the {character} Jose Jimenez; Star of the *Bill Dana Show*; an Actor of stage and screen; a Businessman; an Agent; a Recording Artist; a published Author and Illustrator; a founding father of television comedy; and friend to both Comedians and the Planet, Mr. Bill Dana. Aloha.

DANA: Aloha. Aloha-na-a- Julio Na-hali. {Hawaiin greeting} Well, that's -- That was a busy life.

MATZ: (laughter)

DANA: Let's have a few more of those. Uh, yeah. I don't deny any of that.

MATZ: (laughter) Good. So, we're just gonna start with this Question about survival which we've been talking about today-- what is the first thing that made you realize the power of humor?

DANA: There's a -- yeah. I tell the story, which is -- which is true. And like a lot of us do, we have a story, and then we come up with a moral afterwards. But, I remember so vividly -- because Quincy, Mass, where I was born and brought up, -- you had Protestants, Catholics, and a -- and a smattering of Jews. There was one family that might have been something other than Caucasian. There was one -- the Angs -- one Chinese family-- who had the restaurant. And, so, I never really felt anything, special, until one day, at Cordington School, second grade. No-- before second grade. I was about five years old, whatever that is. First grade. And these kids come, and

they push me up against the wall. I said, "What are you doing?"

They said, "We're gonna beat you up."

I said, "W-- what are you gonna beat me up for?"

"'Cause you killed Christ."

I said, "I didn't kill Christ. My mommy and daddy did. They live 48, uh, Glendale Road."

I mean -- so, the idea was getting the heat off. And of course, I didn't have that consideration then. But, when I'm thinking about, it's a lot of what humor does actively and passively. It -- when you watch it, it helps you get the heat off (laughter), or whatever. You know. And so much, the slipping on the banana peel: it didn't happen to you; it happened to somebody else, you know. 8,000 ways of going at that, but that little incident always stayed with me, obviously, all these years. And it -- it's a good indicator of what humor can -- can do for you: get the heat off.

MATZ: Do you think, other than being very quick on your feet, that there was something that -- maybe it was in your upbringing, or by the fact that your Jewish background had some kind of other influence on you, to prepare you to respond that way? Mel Brooks just wrote recently, that, you know, Jews have been using humor to battle --

DANA: Oh yeah. I think then, and I -- I think it -- There was definitely a correlation -- there's -- it's no accident that African-African -- anybody who -- who is in a minority, and has to defend themselves -- and if you're a little guy like me, you can't defend yourself -- you either use your legs or your mind. So, it must be at the root of a lot of what we know as -- as humor, or that becomes performance -- performance humor.

MATZ: So, let's talk about in Quincy, when you were a

younger boy

DANA: Um-hm.

MATZ: -- um, you used to take diversions to Scollay Square.

DANA: (laughter) Yeah, it was one of the great tragedies of my life, is coming to back to Boston and seeing that **Scollay Square** was no more. Yeah, we were living at 31 Mechanic Street. And I remember, if you went to the right, at Post 95, American Legion, if you went to the right, you went to high school. If you went to the left, you went up to the trolley tracks. And I'd go in, and I must have been 14. You know, you're not supposed -- I don't know what the age was. You're supposed to be 16 or something to get in there. And, uh, C. Georgia Southern, or whoever these -- these ladies were -- fascinating thing -- fascinating thing about the -- the fact that in burlesque -- this is in the thirties, late thirties -- if you said, "hell" or "damn," you could go to jail. You would end up imprisoned for any -- anything that's on primetime television today, here in this -- in this city. So, that they had expressions like, "What-a-hey," and all of that, were so they couldn't say a "hell" or "damn." You could expose breasts, you couldn't (laughter) -- you couldn't say that. And it was part of Boston, the Puritanical thing. But it was all over the country. So, that -- that practice, when I eventually went into television, I used to -- I came up eventually with a -- and people would say, "What's the difference between television when you were, you know, a Head Writer of The **Steve Allen Show**?" The country was so uptight sexually, you couldn't show a close-up of the stork on "Zoo Parade," you know. We had **Elvis Presley** on the show. A guy there from the FCC -- you had to shoot him above the waist, you know? So, that is -- I know I'm jumping around, but that

is the main -- the main thing. And there's a sense of pride -- I know writers of my generation -- that we did not have the license for what is now just the actual, not the innuendo, but the actual words. And, we were funny. With that license, they're no worse, but no better today, in terms of humor. What you're seeing, the license of -- of having all of the sexual references and innuendo and all that, it hasn't really helped. It's an interesting point. I don't know what that point means (laughter), but television of today and what's going on now, it's almost the first question people ask you: "What do you think of the young --" The ratio of crap to good stuff is almost identical. So called "golden years of comedy," same thing: a whole bunch of crap and a lot of good stuff.

MATZ: But perhaps those early days of watching the comics who couldn't say all these things-- it sounds like it informed what you found to be the challenge of creating something funny that was "above the belt".

DANA: Yeah.

MATZ: So, would you say these comics that you were seeing -- Because there were comics too at these burlesque clubs, right?

DANA: Oh, sure. The burlesque comedians, uh, some of them - - **Mike Sachs, Alice Kennedy** -- Mike Sachs was a blind comedian. Uh, and they'd do, "Here Come the Judge," and everybody had to make sure they were in the right place so that when he hit him with the ladder, there -- they were there. I remember -- of course, I was sneaking in to see naked ladies. But, I loved the comedy, and had no sense about that -- that was gonna be my career.

MATZ: Let's jump ahead a couple years --

DANA: Yeah.

MATZ: You're at Emerson. You then had an interest in radio.

DANA: Yeah, I was sort of -- at Emerson, I was -- I guess I would have been called a Radio Major. Charles Dudley -- the guys -- they physically built **WERS**. I mean, we built that first station. And, uh, our heroes were Bob and Ray, you know, **Bob Elliott and Ray Goulding**. And we had a -- at Emerson, "Bob and Ray Day," myself and a couple other guys put the thing on. So, we had our comedy heroes then.

MATZ: So, you had a passing interest at this point in comedy, or did you think early on, that you would be doing --

DANA: Yeah, but I thought it would -- I thought I would be in the radio production. And when we heard of television, I said, "What do they mean, television?" And I -- so, that story, **Orson Welles**, why television will never work. The story was, "I saw a castle on the hill. No, there -- everybody sees their castle. And it's got turrets and meadows flowing, and their little lambs and cattle -- and you know, whatever you -- a moat around it." That's radio. And television, say -- "I saw a castle on the hill. And the Art Director says, say -- 'Well, is that pre-Crusades or post-?' You know, 'We only have \$86 to build this castle.'" So, it's gonna be a very small hill. But, uh, little by little, we took a look at it. And the first -- because you're interested in radio, so the first -- the emotion was fear, "oh my gosh," you know? But, skipping a couple of -- a couple of points, uh, what had happened: **Gene Wood**, and unfortunately, the late Gene Wood, who was also from Quincy, we were the -- as they say, the *Campus Cutups*. And, uh, I'd gone out to California, trying to see what I could do there. Flunked out totally. This was 1950. Graduated, '50. And then right after, like, in

July, got on a Trailways business to go back East -- uh, to go out West. And, ended up totally flunking out of that, but I was at Douglas Aircraft, and, with the Testing Division of the *Nike* project. And, I got a letter from Gene Wood, who said he'd gone to New York City and became a page at 30 Rockefeller Plaza. And he was hanging around, doing bits on the very first late night show with **Jerry Lester, "Broadway Open House."** And he said, "You know the stuff we did at Emerson? They pay for that." So, I got another guy from Emerson, we drove in a Studebaker where you didn't know whether it was going or coming. We drove back. And I was making like, \$60 bucks a week, which was -- in those days, was a lot of money. And, went on the staff for \$32 a week at **NBC**. It was great -- that was a great experience. And that -- that allowed us to rub up against the shows. And -- and we were -- became being recognized. *Szathmary and Wood*, then. There's a whole other -- There's a story about how I became, {clears throat} uh, "After this word, from my throat."

MATZ: (laughter) Yeah, we want to talk about the name change, but -- but you need to back up just a little bit, OK?

DANA: Let me back up.

MATZ: Explain, at this point, what was -- was it a conscious decision that you wanted to be a performer? And was that the reason to go to LA?

DANA: Gene Wood affected me dramatically. Number one, in finding Emerson College because I had the G.I. Bill. I didn't have great -- I barely got out of high school. If my sister, Fanny hadn't helped to get me tutored, I never would got out of -- because I really was a flake in school -- in the Quincy school system. Uh, so, Gene delivered

Emerson, and then later on, said, "If we become a page, we can rub up against the stuff, and we can become Szathmary and Wood." If you're in business with a guy who's last name is "Wood," you always get first billing because it's a wooden -- *what's a wooden Szathmary?* you know? The -- the story -- there's a little bit of history in that, simply because of the namedropping. But, uh, nobody in this story is alive, including the building, the Hotel Astor. **Bill Stern**, the famous sports announcer, had a show called, "Star Night at the Astor," on the roof of the Astor Hotel in Times Square. He used to say, "Hello." He was a Hungarian also, and I had "Szathmary" on my uniform.

MATZ: -- when did you figure out you were funny?

DANA: Yeah. Awareness of, uh, being funny, being able to provoke laughter is like my sense memory is that it was a tool for attention. And I was greatly influenced by my brother, Arthur, who was the genius in the family. He graduated Quincy High School at 15 and Harvard at 18. I mean, he taught me an awareness of language and respect for it, and a pronunciation. He had a professor, Francon. If anybody in the house said, "France-son," "No, no. Francon." So, I learned why -- a lot of the tools of the -- of the dialect, and -- and reproducing languages, I can communicate in several languages, almost without accent. "Si, je parle francais. Si possible." Somebody who are from France, maybe, but I can screw around, {speaks in made-up French-sounding language} that, you know? And, so it made me kind of a dilettante: French, German, Spanish, and Italian. And he brought my attention to the different sounds, which I used enormously later on. Mrs. Afbrer (sp?) -- they were from San Tander (sp?) -- I would do errands for her. And she'd say, "Get a big bopa rope."

I said, "Uh, Excuse me?"

"Vig vopa rope."

"Could you write that?"

"Vicks Vapor Rub." You know, (laughter). So. And -- and, all of this, you would hear it, but it didn't make -- make any -- you know, to get to your attention. So, my brother, Arthur who is still, thank God, he's still alive -- he's a Professor at Princeton, Emeritus. He's 88. He was really, was a guy that -- because I had a great respect for him. And he would laugh at stuff that I would say. And that was, you know -- an approbation from him was big. So that, in those years of, rubbing against all these other exotic sounds and people, if somebody says, "Notice that, there may be something of value there for later on," I mean that -- I had that sense. But I never thought, "Well, I'm gonna grow up to be a comedian." That didn't happen. As I say, I went through **Emerson College**. It was pretty the only -- I couldn't pass the -- to get into -- into Harvard. I didn't want to study languages. But then Gene -- I -- I know I'm being repetitive here, but Gene found Emerson. And it was glorious. And then of course, we were the first post-World War II G.I. Bill. So, whereas I barely got of school -- I flunked all sorts of courses in school, I was an A student here-- because I had something to learn. And I paid attention. And we had Quite an impressive faculty also.

MATZ: Now, in terms of tools that you picked up at Emerson, I mean, would you say that comedy, certain aspects of it can be taught?

DANA: Sure, oh yes. Absolutely. There are -- you cannot, -
- if you -- what's another, some analogy -- if you have a blade, you can -- of a sword, you can make that sharper.

But, if you don't have a blade, then there's nothing to sharpen. So, there are people who do not have a sense of humor. They don't have, uh, irony. You know -- they hear stuff at face value, and they're not gonna be able to do anything with it. So, you can become funnier, but you can't become funny. I -- my, uh, my feeling of it.

MATZ: So, you were still a Cutup in college. You were getting response that you were funny --

DANA: Yeah.

MATZ: -- but you're saying, you're still --

DANA: I got one -- one "C" -- I should have protested it -- among my "A+"s and "A"s and the occasional "B."

MATZ: What was the "C?"

DANA: It was a -- English Composition. And this lovely man, whose name I can't remember -- and I call him lovely; he wasn't lovely. He was teaching a preposition. So, he picks up a ladder-backed chair. And he says, "The preposition is a word that's used to relate to another one, like" and he got, "I am on the chair. 'On' is a preposition. I am under the chair. 'Under' is a preposition. I am beside the chair. 'Beside' is a preposition. And he put his head through, and he couldn't get it --" I -- I said, "Is 'stuck' a preposition?" "C." I got a "C" out of that. So, I -- You know, I was one of those guys, if any kind of an audience, I'd be wanting -- would get a laugh.

MATZ: OK, so you weren't thinking, "career," but -- you knew you wanted to be --

DANA: I wasn't thinking, "career," I was just thinking, "survival," and "acceptance," and "Maybe, it'll help me with that young lady there." Because that -- at the time, I didn't realize, I'm as beautiful as I am. You know, I --

I thought that I needed -- needed at that. I didn't have the skills in basketball or (laughter) football. Oh boy.

MATZ: So, let's go back now. You're a page at NBC.

DANA: Yeah.

MATZ: You're rubbing elbows with people. You're obviously -- smitten in some way by the bigger business.

DANA: That -- that's become a traditional pathway now. And -- and as it was then, being a page at **NBC**, meant that you saw these -- the greats, the near-greats, and the ingrates of show business were walking by. I was at outside of 6B, "**Texaco Star Theatre**," with **Milton Berle** and **Eddie Cantor** and all these big -- when -- when **Jerry Lewis**, "**The Martin and Lewis Telethon**" started, you know, I mean all of that, that magnificent stuff was there. And the fascinating thing about this is that **Gene Wood** and I were either stupid or brave; we broke in material on television. Before we ever went into a nightclub, we did these little routines that we had on TV. The first one was Broadway -- was "**Date in Manhattan**," **Ed Herlehee**. The Producer was **Billy Harback**. The Director, **Dwight Hemion** -- Dwight has got more Emmys than anybody in the history of the medium. Uh, the trio was the **Cy Coleman** trio, you know, everybody starts someplace, so there were all of these folks there. It was a terrific opportunity.

MATZ: How did you get the chance to just be on the show from being a page --

DANA: Well the audition.

MATZ: You auditioned.

DANA: Yeah. We auditioned and we were also, whether you're a page or not, you're part of the family, so uh... and then we ended up getting an agent and that helped. Then later on we went into the nightclubs, and it was in the

nightclubs that I decided I didn't want to -- it was too scary. And Gene and I had the opposite phenomenon. He could either fool me or whatever and we'd go onstage and then he'd start to get a little flop sweat and stuff. As soon as I got my first laugh, I just wanted to stay there, you know, this was home. *Wow, I'm saying something, they're laughing at me. It's love.* But we were supposed to be not Martin and Lewis, not a straight man and a comedian. We were supposed to be Sid Caesar and Sid Caesar. And I got this Jewish, or whatever, my -- people either thought I was Syrian or anything when I was growing up. You know I was skinnier guy. And I had the face of a comedian, and Gene had this wonderful white bread look, so he, obviously he was a straight man, and they'd come up to me and say, "Boy, you're so funny, and you're a good straight man." And essentially that broke us up. Uh, and also then I decided I wanted to write. **Mace Neufeld, Sherwin Bash.** Sherwin had married **Ray Block's** daughter, who was the conductor for the **Ed Sullivan Show**. Mace Neufeld was from a wealthy family. They were becoming managers and they, they saw us and became our managers. They -- Betty Clooney, the **Rosemary Clooney** family were part of that set up. Uh, but when we broke up I decided, cause I'd been writing the material for **Don {Adams}**, and some we wrote together, but a lot of it I was writing myself, and I said uh, "Is there, do you think I'd have a career as a writer?" Because Gene had gone on to, to getting some other gigs, with **Tom Poston** as a matter of fact. And I was just collecting uh, unemployment and then Mace brought me to the **Ruban Bleu**, the (French accent) *Ruban Bleu*. Chic, East Side nightclub in New York. To see this comedian that goes on. (New York accent) *There's your*

man, inspector, a liar, a cheat, a thief, and a homicidal maniac, but he's my son and I love him, he says. That was **Don Adams** doing impression of **William Powell** as the *Thin Man*, and I locked into that voice and I told Mace, I said, "I think I can write for that guy." Well there's a whole, there's a musical comedy sequence that comes uh, comes out of that -- it'd be great to tell you -- with Don. But I was was on unemployment and I had met **Imogene Coca** when Gene Wood and I were in Bermuda. And she needed a house sitter and so I said I'd be happy to do that. She had the most gorgeous apartment in 300 Central Park West. The Marjorie Morningstar building there. Duplex. When you walked in, had this beautiful piled, white piled rug, and an ebony piano and this whole thing. And uh, Mace told Don Adams, "I think I've got a guy who would like to write for you, maybe you could visit with him," gave him the address. And he opens -- and I was in this borrowed smoking jacket (laughter) and uh, Don is saying, "Who's this crazy rich guy wants to write, what is this," you know, so we're talking back and forth. Color television, he hadn't seen that before. There was some *Picassos* on the wall. So in the middle of this craziness that this eccentric wealthy young man wants to write comedy for me and we'd agreed that I'd make 10% of his income, and he was making \$150 bucks a week, so I was going to do this for \$15 a week (laughter). While I'm talking to him, I reached in for something else and my unemployment check fell out (laughter). So pretty soon it all unraveled, but he was more impressed with the fact that this was Imogene Coca's apartment. And then we started writing together and they, if the word magic is appropriate, I'll use it. And the early routines were all based on that character, but I would say let's keep that

same voice because (with Don Adams' accent) *when you give a punch line with that character, it just follows through.* So the first routine was um, the defense attorney. (Adams/Powell accent again) *Your Honor, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, for the last 20 minutes, I've set idly by while the prosecuting attorney has stood up here and made a complete ash of himself. Now it's my turn.* I mean, we knew we were into something really good. And then he started to do uh, we did Mr. Football or Leon Football. (Accent) *How lame in a man. Oh, this Umpire School became a classic, um, Mr. Baseball, you know. (Accent) Now men, it's going to be a tough road of holes. Some of you will make it and some of you will crack. Those of you who make it will go on to great things. Those of you who crack will be umpires.*

MATZ: (laughter)

DANA: So. (laughter) And, and then, when Don started performing on the **Steve Allen show**, we knew we had something because -- and then, **Herb Sargent** and **Stan Burns** were the two writers on **the Tonight Show**. By the way, the **Tonight Show** that I joined, that third show, was the template for what you see now. I heard somebody in an interview and Johnny (accent) *I'm doing Johnny Carson*. But, the **Steve Allen show** at the Hudson Theater is the exact show that you see with **David Letterman**. All of the stuff, going out in the street. All the departments. Not for any other reason than the fact that that's the way it happened historically. The Carson show -- we, we had **Skitch Henderson**, a trumpet player was, was, help me-- The one that went on with Carson.

MATZ: Doc.

DANA: Yeah, **Doc Severson** was our trumpet player. All of the

byplay with the crazy outfits and Steve, the interview, the home base, the desk, the proscenium area, the orchestra area, identical. It was, I think I heard -- you know, Letterman the other night said, "Well, Steve got the thing going, but it was the Carson show," and now when I see him I'll say well just, just for -- and Carson would tell you that *Carnac*, **Don Hinkley** and I created the **Question Man**, where you get the answer first. I tell that story -- The Question was, give the name of the oldest living kamikaze pilot, you know. (laughter)

MATZ: Right.

DANA: So that became Carnac, you know.

MATZ: So does this --

DANA: This is, just for a sense, the sense of justice in history. *Steve Allen show*, the template for the Carson show, Carson for everything else that followed.

MATZ: Right. So just back up a bit. It was because of Don Adams appearing on Steve Allen show that Herb Sargent found you and basically asked --

DANA: Herb, yeah. Herb, as you would -- there were... **Steve Allen** wrote all of his own material, then he hired Herb, then, then came Stan Burns, and I was the, I was the guy, the next guy. And uh, our stunt company of singers was uh, **Andy Williams**. **Pat Kirby**, who left the business, and Steve Launch (sp?), **Edie Gorme**, you know. The Hudson Theater, 44th Street.

MATZ: The "best of the best".

DANA: Yeah.

MATZ: Yeah, we're up to right before your career really takes off, so um, let's just talk a little bit about the *Steve Allen show* and what exactly your role was on it, in terms of who did what and were you each writing your own

bits or what you were responsible for.

DANA: Various iterations of *the Steve Allen Show*. When I went on, um, the thing in back, one of the reasons they added a writer was that they were going to prepare for a primetime show. So my baptism of fire, and I think about this every time I see this squad, a platoon of writers come up on stage to accept the, to accept Emmys, this uh, hour and a half, Monday through Friday, for the first month, I guess, you know, it was about a month, I was the writer on that show. What a great baptism of fire, you know, I thought that, I thought you were supposed to write a sketch every day and run all that stuff. So I got really a instant realities of the fact that you, you can't screw around, I mean, here you have to be productive. **Steve Allen** was a great mentor and total always in action, always doing something productive. If, if he were on a break he'd lead the piano or go to the piano and do some musical dictation. When I was at his memorial service, **Tom Poston** says, "Since Steve Allen died he's written 73 songs," (laughter) you know. It was like that. The family when we, primetime, basically **Leonard Stern** came in as a fixer or whatever to... all of that politics that happened. Um, but we, uh, were still, , uh, still at the Hudson Theater, and then we went up to the Colonial Theater in Columbus Circle. But I was very, very happy. Once in a while I'll do a little bit, and uh, the next writer who, to come in, uh, let's see. Who am I skipping?

MATZ: Peter Summers.

DANA: Anyway, **Don Hinckley** was the important one, because we'd be, because I'd never been a writing team, I'd written for a comedian and with a comedian for **Don Adams**, but now I had that, of writing with another guy, liking him

instantly, and, and we started writing really funny stuff. We created -- the survival of any of these shows, as you see with top 10 lists and everything, is to find the departments that work. And the first department we wrote, which became sort of our report to the nation, cause Huntley and Brinkley were the big news people, it was the Nutley, Hinckley, Butly, Winkly--the weekly *Nutley, Hinkley, Butly, Winkly Report*. Reporting in shallow about what's happening across the country. When we moved out to Los Angeles, in Burbank, in November of 1959, in one of these, uh, it was called "pre-Christmas USA", what's happening, getting ready for the holidays. And just out of the year we thought, well wait a minute, if we had a school for Santa Claus and the instructor were Latino, and then, so we went on, **Pat Harrington** as the straight man: "Hi, this is Chit Nutley, we're here at a school for Santa Claus, what is your name?" And I had no beard or anything, just had a little Santa Claus outfit with a little hat. "What is your name, and what do you teach Santa Claus?" (Latino accent) **My name, Jose Jimenez**. And there was a big laugh. And I remember thinking, *whoa, wait a minute*. What, what do you teach Mr. Jimenez? No, no, he meant it. (Latino accent) *My name Jose Jimenez*. And what do you teach Santa Claus? (Latino accent) *I do this -- now this is the early Jose, who barely spoke English -- I do the Santa Claus, I did, I do the Santa Clau-- I teach a Santa to espeak*. So that was the first laugh. What do you teach him to say? (Latino accent) *I teach him to say -- now we pull down a think and it had J-O, J-O, J-O. Ho, ho, ho*. And that was the whole start. That was the total essence of the creation of Jose Jimenez. Ho, ho, ho. And then it was like a B movie. People calling in, "Who was that guy?"

Because they were used to having what we call left fielders. Joe Interlege, the human garbage can or Mrs. Miller, all these people would come on to the *Steve Allen show*. So they all thought this Jose Jimenez was Amos, it was the real thing. And if you did a time lapse, you can (Latino accent) *esee that in the very early*, you know, trying, struggling to hear, he heard every -- without irony, he, if you said, you must have some opinions on the race, Jose. (Latino accent) *All right, I will*. You know, you must, OK, I will. Jose then uh, became more and more hip and a little bit more conversant, and by the time I had my own show, '63, '64, he was still the naïve, but very much, very much in charge and he used polysyllabic words and everything, maybe misunderstanding. But I, and I just fell totally in love with that character because it really was whatever Pollyanna and good guy was in my, it just, Jose was totally pure, no, nothing below the belt. You know, he would see a beautiful buxom lady and say, "*Good afternoon, sir*." You know, it was one of those. But that was very, very fascinating to be that close to, to the creation of, of a character. Because I'd seen the **Don Knotts** when Don came on and did that little, did a little nervous guy. "Are you nervous?" "No!" All that. Um, you saw all of those characters evolve. **Louis Nye** with a very sort of prissy (accent) *Hi-ho Steverino*, you know, with the thing. He was, he wasn't gay, but he, he wasn't, wasn't not gay, you know. That was sort of the type of guy that was in advertising agencies then. And so many of the characters that evolved on *the Steve Allen show*, it was great to see that happen.

MATZ: Before we talk about the evolution of Jose, let's talk more about what you drew on to emerge that character within

and also why you played him rather than write it for someone else.

DANA: The reason I played him is that, in the, in rehearsal, I'd written this hunk, and they all knew I did all the dialects, so Steve, Steve said, "Uh, you do it," that was the, that was the -- as we say, the rest was history. It was, that was just a field expedient. Um, but it, it, it had a life of its own, I mean it was just Topsy that grew. Um...

MATZ: I'm just curious what sort of tools you had at that point to draw from to create, first the accent, where that came from and why.

DANA: Well, all of my accents and dialects go back, the interested was from my brother Arthur, as I said earlier. The specific character in understanding this configuration happened, uh, on vacation from Emerson College, 1947, friend of mine a father was over 10 colonel at Fort Brook in Puerto Rico, so, uh, Guy Elwood was a good pal, also an Emersonian. We went down there to have a vacation and neither one of us had been in Puerto Rico, and I met a guy -- it's funny because so much of this is part of my act because I just, telling these stories sort of works. At the Club Nautico, at the yacht club, I'm talking to this guy, I say, "Well, what do you do?" He says, (Latino accent) "I am the Dutch representative." I said, "How nice, you with the Netherlands government?" (accent) "No, no, I am the Dutch representative." "Holland, tulip?" "No, I'm the DUTCH representative. DUTCH, Plymouth, Chrysler." And gratitude I would rather hug you are, ever since. And that's a true story and then, that got planted into my computer. This was 1947, and I used to tell this story, tell this story and others I had picked up in the

dialect and, somehow along the line I decided that when I would use a dialect, that it wouldn't be a caricature, not an unkind stereotype. Because the thing, the thing that used to really bug me, a lot of times, people would refer to **Jose as a stereotype**. Well the fact of the matter is, number one, there was a lot of Joses, the various changes and iterations of the character. But if you got in a cab in New York City and somebody said, (Latino accent) "OK, *where do you want to go?*" You know what I'm saying, oh, this guy is doing this impression -- you just think this is the guy, so everybody thought he was the real thing, and I delighted in that. He was a naïve, a, you know, totally, uh, totally, Pollyanna-ish type of guy. But he was unique. And so there's hours to talk about just the movomiento, the movement, and what happened uh, some of those stories will curl your toes or... what went on in the 60's, because of the desire for the Latinos to get some kind of a representation in the media and in, in society in general, so Jose got caught in a firestorm, especially you know, already a big hit nationally, with a big Latin base, but they, they uh, had an ad for Southwest Dell, *Let your fingers do the walking to the jellow pages*. And there were these big signs, J-E-L-L-O-W, all over the place. And I got a call from these friends of mine in the movement, you know, in La Causa, Viva La Causa. And they said, "Hey, what are going to do, we got a public utility, we got to hit him." I said, "Take your best shot." I didn't hit, you know, I didn't have that investment in that character, but I never had a sense that there was anything hurtful about it because you come from your own intention. And I know I'm jumping around but this, this of course is at the core of my -- every performer has a, a core story or some

sort of an engine, and the fact that something you had created was becoming important, by virtue of the fact that it was lightening the load for people.

MATZ: Yeah.

DANA: This is what I'm saying about going all the way back to Cardigan School, I, I didn't kill Jesus, my mommy and daddy did, people, you know, want to get that load off. Get the heat off. And laughter, of course, is that great bond. And um, so it was, it became an amazing conflict going on inside one guy because at one point stuff was happening, I'm with Anthony Quinn and **Ann Margaret** raising money for a group called Concillio (sp?), with **Anthony Quinn** doing straight for **Jose the Astronaut**, which was a huge bestseller. At the same time, in San Antonio, they're picketing about, about the jellow pages. It in fact became very -- and then there was a lot of -- I had a meeting at my house one time, Vicky Carr, um, Ricardo, **Ricardo Montalban**, Anthony Quinn, uh, three or four, I mean these big, big stars that happened to be Latinos. Ricardo was getting death threats. Why? Because you're portraying the image of a Latin lover, the stereotype. Then I started to get a lot of hostility, tremendous amount of defense, but still, you're the guy in the middle, and it got very very confusing. And Jerry at Emily Mayer's house had a meeting with a professor and he brought some young kids. There were about 7 or 8 children. Because I wanted to find out how this character affected them. And they all loved Jose, but they didn't know (Latino accent) if I'd come out and said to them, in just, *Hello, what do you think of Jose*, yeah, oh. But I was, I was saying, talking like this, and I could see, wait, wait a minute, you mean there is no Santa Claus? And then I got confusing and one of these

people said, "Will somebody call me?" and you could see, if you do a sketch about dentists, and you go to your mail, you're going to get a hate mail. Don Knotts, when he used to do that character, I used to read the mail to Steve to see the sense of what his reaction to the show. "Well I hope you die of palsy like my father did," I mean, oh God, the stuff that comes out of there. So, at one point, and, to this day I don't know whether it was a mistake or not, but I was invited -- we were, but I knew it was a challenge. Nobody's going to tell me, "Hey, you can't do something." But at one point I said, "Hey, who needs it? I've got plenty of avenues and if one person's getting hurt by this, then it's not worth it." And there was a huge event, a night for Latin American unity at the sports arena in Los Angeles. And I declared Jose Jimenez was dead. Big mistake, big mistake. Big mistake. Because there was a combination of cheers and groans and, uh, I don't know, I mean, it, I still haven't come up with the answer of what was the appropriate thing to do, but decided to go on with different stuff, and it was a hassle, because I was doing commercials, my management got, I mean this was, signaled the loss, you know, seven figure loss. And then, um, I don't know if it was my first one, but then that whole mid life crisis and I think I'll go to Hawaii.

MATZ: We're going to talk about that. But um --

DANA: It certainly demonstrates the power of that tube, you know, you just, anyone who was given that, and I can say this directly to any student of Emerson or anybody who's a student of comedy, it's a very, very dangerous weapon. You'd better make sure it ain't loaded or it's loaded with the right stuff before you shoot it. And, um, great responsibility, especially if there's love and acceptance

that goes with it. People out there looking at you, trusting you. You're daddy, mommy, you're everything to them. And that's, if you've got it, you've got yourself a huge responsibility to respect, respect your weapon.

MATZ: Like you say, it was like being Santa Claus for a while. And here you created a character that had such good morals and such a good value system and was trying to teach something good and yet there still was this back and forth of people responding and saying it was a threat or it was a negative stereotype.

DANA: Yeah.

MATZ: But do you think that's inherent in celebrity, when you create something that becomes... did it get out of control because it was so big?

DANA: Sure. That analogy, the weaponry of celebrity, or the responsibility of celebrity is really not recognized by a lot of people. And there's a debt, those are the, they're feeding you and they're putting you... they take you from the back of the cab and you're up in first class. And over and over and over again you see people who get celebrity and think that God or somebody just you know dropped it in their pocket.

MATZ: Were you getting good advice in this period? Because I mean, you were a writer and Jose kind of happened and it was a big explosion and thrust you into the limelight. And to have this kind of power, were you appreciative of it early on or before you got your own show, or...

DANA: Well, Mace. Mace and Sherwin. Mace knew Phil Sherwin best. Sherwin still manages done to... you also have to realize that the comedy population, name comedians, is very, very small. And the comedy club phenomena happened, and now you see comedians all, all over the place, but then

you, identifiable people in comedy, when I was going through this, was, what, 20, 30 people? You know. Maybe more, but I'm, I'm talking about people who were, you know, the Jackie Gleasons, and that would be ahead of me, would've been the Jack Benny or **Fred Allen** -- oh God, I adored Fred Allen. Um...

MATZ: But at that level, at that level.

DANA: Yeah, at that level, very, very few. And now of course you've got the whole, I guess **Doug Herzog** is an alum of Emerson College. He, he -- look at the Comedy Channel. You've got all that stuff. Um...

MATZ: What were some of the immediate affects on you of achieving that level of celebrity status? I mean you started doing more shows and more appearances, never do -

DANA: You know, I, it's, uh, it's confusing, because I'd never wanted to, uh, I started calling myself a hyphenate, and then I started to overextend all over the place, but I was -- if you'd have come up to me and said, "Which, you can only have one hyphen writer, producer, performer, jaywalker, which one do you want to keep?" I would've kept writer. The cliché, if it ain't on the page, it ain't on the stage. I mean to this day, that's... and in my own case what has evolved is I know what I am is an inventor. That's, that's what, what happens to people who progress and step out in front. They've invented some kind of a different thing that communicates. **Chris Rock** invented something different than **Richard Pryor**. They, you, **Jack Benny** invented this persona. I mean, I'm, I'm pushing that word, but it is, it's true. It's a matter of invention and uh, if you're going to become an Edison of comedy, to strain the analogy, uh, and you desire to, to be unique, to be what is called a star. To this day I like, I put a

well-known personality. Cary Grant was a star, so I hated a lot of people who would, because they had their own show, would think of themselves as stars, you know. So the, the nomenclature to your own soul was very important.

MATZ: So as the inventor of Jose, I'm wondering, when you were offered your own show, *The Bill Dana Show*, by NBC in 1963, and you were doing also appearances on a million other shows, and the ultimate hyphenate, as you say you became, did the writing get away from you?

DANA: No. No, the longevity of that character is that I, I could protect myself. Because writing is a two-faced sword. You can get cut pretty bad if somebody else is -- or you, you, I'm sure you've looked at something and said how did those people put that show on? You know what I mean? And it's always bad writing! It's, that's the blood. If you're going to put acid in there, or whatever kind of... that body, that performing entity is not going to live. Now writing, writing is absolute, writing and brevity are both the soul of wit.

MATZ: (laughter)

DANA: That's catchy. Brevity is the soul of wit.

MATZ: Did you come up with that? --

DANA: When you're insecure, you claim credit for everything.

MATZ: Right. let's talk a little bit about the *Bill Dana Show* and how this was changing your personal life as well as your public life, and what, maybe there's a lesson to be taught, an object lesson to learn.

DANA: **Bill Dana show** was a work of love and, and a total aberration in terms of what's happening in television today. **Lou Edelman**, who was the guy, a big screen producer who went into television, and he put **Danny Thomas** and Sheldon Leonard together as Mark Teartoe (sp?). And they

were doing ***Make Room for Daddy***. The character was a big -- Jose was a vaudeville character. He could be uh, uh, a astronaut or he could be a submarine commander. He could be a farmer or a senator, whatever. He was, he was a puppet. Lou Edelman convinced Danny Thomas and Sheldon Leonard and I, I agreed with him that Jose could be a flesh and blood character. So we tested it, that he would be the elevator man. They even said boy, the elevator boy, in Danny William's building, where Danny Thomas played this nightclub performer with the -- *Make Room for Daddy*.

That's the Jose that I want everybody to remember, because that was the flesh and blood character, and then what happened, I was up performing a, in Calneva (sp?). I got a call from Sheldon Leonard. He said, "Bill, I've got some very good news. NBC has picked up *the Bill Dana show*. Twenty-six firm. No pilot." 26. So I called my mother and I said, "Ma! NBC, they hired me. 26 shows firm, and we don't have to do a pilot." "Billy, when are you going to get married?" (laughter). Oh my mother Dena, God love her.

MATZ: You said that was the moment when you said, now I've made it.

DANA: Yeah, well, yeah. Eh, when you've got your name on the garbage cans, man, you've made it, you know. I, I felt, yeah. And then of course everybody hypes that. Either they want you to be investing your ego, yourself, because they're going to be schlepping you all around the country and have other people -- they're going to identify you as a star so they want you to act like that. the only thing is, I never had a, a retinue. And I never made big money, by the way. Those days, it was a lot of money for those days. Now 1963, 64 is the start of the Bill Dana

Show, with the created by credit paid for, was all \$3200 a show. So when I see *Friends*, I said, "They can't be that much funnier," you know.

MATZ: (laughter)

DANA: Um, and, in a small family, you know, a Chuck Stewart, Jack Alanson, Howard Leeds, the small writer producers. I made a big mistake. I wrote on every *Bill Dana show* but I didn't take credit. I took credit on a few of them, the ones that I, that were beginning to end. But that was, a lot of that's a learning process. They think somebody, somebody who might be in the same predicament, don't um, take credit. If you, if you deserve it, it's your duty to your family to take, take credit. It was a mistake not to do so.

MATZ: And what's the importance to having a good agent? And a good manager?

DANA: Agent, agents, managers, they're, they, uh, are absolutely, urgently important. Um -

MATZ: Talk about who yours were at the time.

DANA: Well mine... the main two guys were Mace Neufeld, he's become a big producer at uh, at Paramount with all the, the omen and all of the, what's that series, oh dear, um...

MATZ: We can come back to it.

DANA: Yeah, come back. But, but really big. The Harrison Ford movies where --

MATZ: Indiana Jones?

DANA: Hmm?

MATZ: Indiana Jones?

DANA: Not the Indiana Jones, the, uh...The Clancy, the Clancy books, those characters. They're real good at, um... Mace, **Mace Neufeld, Sherwin Bash, Paul Rosen**, uh became Paul and Bob Rosen. I've had some, some good quid

pro Quo -- a guy in my life now, **Shelly Schultz**, has made an enormous difference. I mean, he, he stayed with me. I mean, it's no secret that the *Pagliacci syndrome* is rampant in humor. I mean, I don't know any comedian who hasn't had some form of depression. And I had a big dose, big dose of it. Of course of all of the managers, the one person, the most valuable person in my life, in the entire history is my wife, Evie, **Evelyn Schuyler Dana**. That, that's a big thing. We got to do a book, I've talked to **Mort Sahl** and **Shecky Greene**, all these wives. Every comedian's wife, when they go out, they get the same thing. "Oh, you're married to **Shelley Berman**. Oh, you must laugh all the time." Yeah, you know, it's a horror story to be married to a comedian.

MATZ: Why, particularly?

DANA: I was only married to one briefly. Oh Lord.

MATZ: And why, why, why is that?

DANA: Why is it? Because most comedians behind closed doors are, uh, basket cases.

MATZ: Yeah.

DANA: You imagine what it's like to stand in the front of a couple of thousand -- I mean, here at the Cutler Majestic, to stand on this stage and have the place loaded, and you say something and all of those people, in the form of laughter say, "I love you, for this moment, you know, I really love you." That's, you know, forget the age or ice or I don't happen to know, forget it.

MATZ: So is having a strong ego part of the secret to being successful and being able to portray that strong identity, like like me, I'm here to be liked.

DANA: Yeah, I think, uh, a strong ego in control, um... in kindness, love. I mean, that's what you're selling, and if

you hate love, you ain't going to last. You're not going to last long. And respect, I mean. The motherhoods that happen between a performer and the audience, in any medium, whether you're writing for New York or you're doing a cartoon. The relationship, if it has the kind of respect that says I've manufactured something and I want to make you a little bit happier, that's good, you know. People say, "Hey, thank you." Yeah. And they'll, when you get it in the kind of dosage that a successful comedian does, so you can see where a lot of wackiness comes out of that.

MATZ: Yeah.

DANA: I guess in the form of a land.

MATZ: (laughter) Let's go back a minute. *The Bill Dana Show* is cancelled in 1965.

DANA: *The Bill Dana Show* is cancelled? Oh my God.

MATZ: (laughter)

DANA: How did that... that's... that is... talk about mini Holocaust. Yeah, being cancelled ain't good. I had a little leg up because of these hyphens we were talking about. So I had other stuff to do. By then I had Adams Dana Silverstein, which was an advertising agency. I started with Mace and a fellow, Sherwin Bash, uh, a management company. Our first client was **Herb Alpert** and the Tijuana Brass, you know, so I had, I had a lot of stuff. My cousin, Steve Weiss, and I had a business manager -- and I had a broker, so I had, I had money, you know, the so-called up yours money. Um... but, uh, getting, if you've got a show and you know it's a Quality product, and it gets cancelled -- and now those, on those days, even when they put me next to, across the street from **Ed Sullivan** (laughter). There's a, oh God, we could go on for hours and hours just with Ed Sullivan stories alone.

MATZ: And weren't you up against *Lassie* on the programming?
Wasn't that not your competition like?

DANA: Well, they, they had me up against everything. And then, of course, a character of **Don Adams** who was Byron Glick, the hotel detective. That character never ever changed and I was doing dumb stuff. But I had been part of that. Uh, I wrote the, the first "would you believe?" joke way much, like 1954, for a thing for Don, the British in India. And we were using that in *the Bill Dana show*, and then it became like a massive catchphrase. I never made a penny! *Would you believe I never made a penny for it?* Um, so there's advice too, just protect your ass, you know. They -- the stuff that probably people that are watching this who are interested in becoming performers of comedy, uh, probably can't avoid, is, is some kind of depression. It's -- you're dealing with, with such a responsibility and you're just litmus paper, you come out on stage and, although thank God I never had the sensation of bombing that much, but when it did happen, my God, it's a visceral thing, you know. It's rejection. Being a hit is better than being a bomb, write that down.

MATZ: Words to live by. Now did you find that humor was something you could fall back on again like you had previously as a survival tactic? Did you find yourself using it that way?

DANA: Well the humor's always there, but depression is chemical. As far as I can see, something happens that changes the chemicals in your body. Why it is so consistent -- I call it the *Pagliacci* syndrome. **Shecky Greene** will do a commercial on Zoloft and it's literally saved his life. I came out of mine uh... just on... just like that. Self-limiting, but it was 30 years, I mean a

long, long time. I'm... I turned 80 October 5th, and I am happier now, I mean 80, I really think is the old 60. And I'm not depressed, and it's, it is such a delightful thing, my gosh. Another thing to write down. Don't get depressed.

MATZ: No. Right before, I think, the major incident was you were working on the Don Knotts special in 1969.

DANA: Yeah, that's right. Don, um, I had uh, created uh, the **Don Knotts' Nice Clean Decent Wholesome Hour**. It was a successful special on NBC. Anyways, CBS bought the show. Mace and Sherwin asked me to come and produce the show, and it, it was, this was severe mid-life crisis time. I always loved, uh, ever since 1959, before it became a state, **Andy Williams** and I went to Hawaii, and I fell, I fell in love with Hawaii. So that became a place where I went to nourish my wounds. And uh, I forget the name of the nurse. Leilani something. Stop that. Uh, {looks up} oh Evy, you must laugh all the time.

I've had an opportunity to, I, we haven't talked about the uh space program and that became a major force in my life.

MATZ: Yeah, we'll come back to it.

DANA: Uh, but uh, when I left that show, it was, it was very symbolic. I mean, it was giving up and I took a review I had written, I even called it this ego trip by, written, produced, performed, starring Bill Dana.

MATZ: (laughter) So we're talking about, you go to your Mecca, which is Hawaii.

DANA: I went over there had the *Bill Dana Brand New Old Traditional Hawaiian Revue*. It was a small revue. And Baron Hilton would become an acquaintance through the space program, set me up and it was nice. And it worked, it worked for a while. A lot of the songs I wrote became kind

of suck them up standards. *I'm going to Maui tomorrow to marry Tamara Malone*, all those things. Um, but it was, it was a g-- you know, escaping, thinking you're going to build up. You know, Thomas Wolfe, you can't go home again. So, I loved, I loved Hawaii, and Evy and I eventually went to, to Hana, and you know Hana, the next step is off the planet. So I'm just so, so happy now being, being back and working with the guys, with **Mort Sahl, Shelley Berman, Dick Gregory** --

MATZ: Yeah.

DANA: **Professor Irwin Corey**. And laugh a minute **Dick Cavett**.

MATZ: Now you've been someone who, throughout your career, you've continually reinvented yourself. You've bounced back and you've tried different things, and after doing a lot of touring in the sixties, after the show was cancelled. Going to Hawaii, still working there, and then you come back and you have this huge -- basically come back as a writer. You've killed Jose, now Bill Dana's back and he's writing for Norman Lear.

DANA: Well, that, that... yeah, that's an Emerson connected story. Um, it uh... what happened is that, I, Bill Dana, totally lost his identity. I mean I was **Jose Jimenez**, as far as anybody was concerned. And I wanted to come, to get back into the business of writing. At that time, **Norman Lear** had the world's biggest hit, it was **All in the Family**. And so I made a date with him and I said, "Gee, will you let me write an episode?" He said, "Ah, well, we have staff, we have overcommitted with outside, uh, scripts. No chance. Unless," he said, "We got a guy, **Sammy Davis, Jr.**, who goes a hat on stage at *The Sands* in Vegas a half an hour later so he can see *All in the Family*, and he tells

everyone what Archie and Edith did. He's going to be our only star, and if you can find a way to get the real Sammy Davis into the mythical Archie Bunker household, then you can write that script. So we kicked around a bunch of ideas and then we had, hey, he moonlights as a cab driver, so why couldn't he have Sammy Davis in his cab, and why couldn't Sammy leave his attaché case, and the next time, he, the next time he's going, if you go from Manhattan to Queens, you got to go by where, where they live, so the mathematics was worked out. And I, I wrote first draft and Norman said, "This is the best first draft we ever had, and uh, well, you know, we're going into rewrites." I said, "Rewrites? Send it to Tiffany to polishing, what do you mean?"

So I, uh, I was on a huge high. I thought, the first phone call I got from rehearsal was Sammy Davis who said, "This is the greatest thing and they're already talking about Emmys." This might be the most important thing that I can transfer here for students of comedy. What happened was, Jerry Goldstein was my manager at the time. His secretary, whose name I have expunged, instead of calling the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences called the Writer's Guild about this script and they said, "Well, it's not -- it won't be eligible until next year." Hence, a little crafts card, a little card, the craft card, has to be sent in to be submitted. Everybody walked away with an Emmy from that except the writer. I mean, there, one of the writers, I got credit. They were generous enough to give me the credit, but you know what happens... all television shows are a team effort. But the fact of the matter is that, if -- and this happened to **Carroll O'Connor**. It happened to Tim Allen. It may, I don't know, have you ever changed the

rules of this Guild? I don't know. But you must take responsibility for yourself, protect your ass at all times in any of these award things, because some of them have rules. Well, they were embarrassed. They said, "Well how could you know, the guys get writing uh.." and then they called me back and said, "There's no way, what dominoes we'd get if we made that exception for you, the dominoes get pushed over," and I, and so, instead of being my big breakthrough, back into depression. I understand God, you didn't want me to have my **Emmy** and I -- you've, you've got your reasons, OK, see you later. You look cute, by the way, you know. So that, that was um, that was a, a, clop upside the chops there. That was not good. And as I was saying, it, it convinced me that I'd better stay in Hawaii some more until I find out I'm not that bad a guy. So there was now, the joy just having that credit, and they were generous to give me sole credit on it. I'm reading, **Norman Lear** has a book. It says his favorite -- somebody asked him his favorite line, and the one he picked out was the curtain line of act one. All during act one Archie's been telling Edith and everybody, "Eh, the guy's got one eye, got a glass eye, now cool it, you understand what I'm saying, Edith? Repeat it to me." OK. So at the end of act one, you're sitting there and there's some coffee. He said, "**Uh, Mr. Davis, do you want uh, cream or sugar in your eye?**" (laughter) You know.

MATZ: After telling everyone not to mention it, right.

(laughter)

DANA: And, and now the tremendous amount of joy having been connected with that. Norman Lear, Emersonian Norman Lear, has been there so many times for me. Without, in the early days, it was Simmons and Lear, **Eddie Simmons** and Norman

Lear. Eddie Simmons, a Boston boy. They were the highest paid comedy writing team, Martin and Lewis, on and on. And they were doing the **Martha Raye** show. And they hired me to do some bits and pieces early on. So over the years, Norman has been a, been a pal. And uh... that's another thing about it. You, you know who your friends are. Yep.

MATZ: There was someone who said, "Get yourself a jail sentence. Find out who your true friends are." But also, you know, in your case, that was really the time where people either stepped forward or disappeared probably from your life.

DANA: Yeah. Well, I was, if you're in Los Angeles, in that community, the show business community, and you move to San Francisco, you're out of the business. So when I was in Hawaii, you're off the planet, you know. And now we're living in Nashville, but I make sure to, you know, let people know you're around.

MATZ: Aside from this, this *All in the Family* episode, which is clearly a highlight, although it resulted in something not so positive for you-- what are some of the greatest achievements that you could say, "These were the moments I'm most proud of as a writer, as a contributor to the art of comedy".

DANA: I don't think there's anything. I think there are very few people that had the uniqueness of privilege that I had. Because Jose Jimenez became the eighth Mercury astronaut out of a possible seven. On May 5, Cinco de Mayo, 1961, **Alan Shepard** became America's first man in space. Deke Slayton and the Capcom, the first words from the ground, the astronaut going into space said, "**OK, Jose, you're on your way.**" You see *The Right Stuff*, the movie, you see Jose through the whole thing. So there, by far,

that's my, my most proud accomplishment that, uh, that corny phrasing, but bringing the light stuff to the guy's with the right stuff. Uh....

MATZ: Can, can you talk about -- you said it before, but explain what you mean by lightening the load and about how comedy has, in specific instances in history, really made a difference.

DANA: Mm-hmm. We're in discussions. I have, uh, now I wanted to be here at Emerson, and that's most likely where it'll happen. But I was with Al Shepard, and I'm on the advisory board of the astronaut scholarship fund, and they, all of these guys remained extended family. Uh... so we're in Titusville, and they wanted to, to do... they'd already sort of enshrined Jose, but they, they wanted to do it officially, and I said, "Geez, I don't know." You know, you've got **Neil Armstrong** and Jose Jimenez, and it just doesn't compute. But then I said, wait a minute, there should be a whole separate thing, and I invented on the spot for distinguished service, "lightening the load on the way to achievement", on the way to space. The United States astronaut hall of fame medal of humor is given to Bill "Jose Jimenez" Dana, Don, the reluctant astronaut, whoever, Art Buchwald. And then we pulled back a bit and all of a sudden I'm saying, wait a minute, this is a basic idea. An institution, maybe it's something that the American Comedy Archives at Emerson could do, or some educational institute does the halls of fame medal of humor. Every single profession, there's a body of humor that lighten the load on the way to achievement. Rock and roll, baseball, foot-- whatever, your plumbing or whatever. Or there's... so, uh... I'm now dedicating my life -- and it's doing well while doing good. I mean, I'm a working

stiff like anybody else. Uh, the overall title is to, "to support diseases for which there is no known fundraiser", causes for which there is no known fundraiser, and to, uh... use, hone in on that particular creation of that type of invention or multimedia stuff that raises money, especially for the orphan, orphan diseases. So this, uh, act three of my life is going to be using this tools of humor developing various tools for, for fundraising.

MATZ: And I want to follow this up, because I want to talk a little bit about your book, *E colo Jest*, for example.

DANA: Mm-hmm.

MATZ: But it's interesting to me listening to you now talking about how you started off turning to humor as a survival tactic and now you're talking about it almost as a healer.

DANA: Yeah. Well, I had the privilege of working with **Dr. Lawrence Peter**, the **Peter Principle** guy. We did a book called "*The Laugh Prescription: The Healing Power of Laughter and Play and a Positive Attitude.*" And the, the irony is I'm writing a book on the healing power of laughter and play and a positive attitude and I'm (laughter) in deep, in deep depression. And uh... within the year, both -- and I was also working with **Norman Cousins** who wrote "The Anatomy of an Illness," as perceived by the patient, you know. And uh, that was, well that's a whole other hours and hours of talk about, because the laughter is the greatest, the greatest healer, the greatest surviving mechanism God ever gave us. Um, within a year, both Lawrence Peter and Norman Cousins were off the planet. Um, I'm going to write a... I've got a series of small books coming out of that. It's like premises, premises.

Amuse it or lose it. It's very, very important to exercise that muscle up there, and crossword puzzles or whatever, keeping that activity. And the comedy, comedy premise, you give them and then they, they have to do that.

MATZ: I just have a couple more questions to ask you. But this is, I think, going to be very informative to a lot of people to understand too the, to use the power for good, just like you were saying before.

DANA: Mm-hmm, yeah.

MATZ: And to use, when you do achieve this rare bird of celebrityship to be able to then turn the issues that are important and like, I mean, I'm very curious why you got into the whole thing with the ecology and saving the planet basically with that book, and the innovative ways of using humor and just the bigger, the bigger role that comedy plays in society as you see it now and what, if you were to tell a student of comedy, if you ever make it big, and you get a soap box, there's a something to do with it.

DANA: Yeah, well. Are we rolling?

MATZ: Yeah.

DANA: The... the only thing I can think that would improve the planet is if animals could smile, you know. I have two dogs, Lazy and Jazzy, and there's something about when you see that, when you turn that, that's the whole symbol that Pavlov's dog's response, stimulus and response to laughter. The basis of all of the fancy words, uh, endorphins and catacolymines and all of that. That's true because it's the same stuff up there that gets you depressed is the same thing that's going to be stimulated to give you joy. When you think of great people, you almost instantly -- Abraham Lincoln -- you almost instantly go to the funny stuff, the sense of joy and humor that important people translate. So I mean, it's gilding a huge lily to talk about the **value of**

comedy. And I have to tell you, there's no bigger fan than myself of people who can provoke genuine laughter. I have a very strong prejudice, however, when people come and tell me a dumb Polack story or a dumb Portuguese story or something which is really a put-down, and they say, "Oh, I love ethnic humor, did you hear this?" And I say, "Wait... if you'd asked me if I liked anti-ethnic humor, I don't, and don't ever say that again," you know. They, the power, earlier on we talked about the humor as a weapon, and it can kill for good as well as evil... no, for evil as well as good. They (clears throat) I guess I'm repeating what I'm saying earlier, but there is a huge responsibility, and every day we see it flaunted because people will do the wrong stuff in front of young people especially, and you can teach in a millisecond people to hate. In the, how's that song go, Rogers and Hammerstein? You have to be, you have to learn all of these things? Do you remember the songs? You have to be to... whatever, whatever. You have to be... Anybody know the name of that song? It's from *South Pacific*. We talked about that if the, the theme was racial intolerance. There's no -- you have to be taught this stuff, and there is no stronger teaching tool than humor, so If you're teaching the wrong things, it's going to be burned into the frontal lobe of these impressionable minds. That's why the PBS and some of these places where they protect this is very valuable. And that's why a lot of that... a lot of the stuff you see... where they, where there are really hostile stereotypes -- this is under the heading of 'don't get me started,' and I don't want to make enemies, but I love the character of Jose Jimenez because he, it was a love-based organism. And I despise a lot of the stuff that's out there because they're just purveyors of, of hate.

MATZ: And a lot of below the belt comedy now that passes for...

DANA: Well, the, the idea that we, the structures that we

had, we mentioned before... my comment there is if you were given that license, that you can say anything that you want to say, you should be a lot more -- it doesn't equate. You know, it should be then, by some factor, some filth factor, that much funnier. You can laugh -- I used to handle this a lot of times with **Buddy Hackett**, who didn't need to do it. He'd do the raunchiest stuff. And -- get huge laughs, and people were on their way walking out saying, "Oh, God, that didn't make me feel good..." but they laughed. So just the, the activity of laughing at something doesn't necessarily going to be mean that it had a positive effect. I have, the big joke has been my, my theme. I think everything's explained in the big joke or, if not explained, is put out there as a huge Question, and I'm one of the few people that not only knows the big joke but knows why God wrote the big joke. It's a two parter. Humankind says to God, "God, it hurts when I do this," and God says, "Don't do that!"

And the punch line is, even though we know it's going to hurt when we do that, what do we do, class? We do that. We do that. That's the big quandary, that's what we wake up and face every single day. We know we shouldn't do that, and yet we do that, and that's everything from interpersonal relationships to war. And thus it is, by waving my hands back and forth and spelling out help.

MATZ: (laughter)

DANA: Nah, this is fun. I really enjoyed this.

MATZ: Well it's fun to --

DANA: It's another thing to find about, about the comedians and all the actors. You know they say, "Are you OK?" and hey, you're the center of attention.

MATZ: (laughter). This is your community. Um, given that

everything you said about the kind of humor that passes today for humor, and having all those restrictions about what you could say, and really comedians were forced to be a lot more clever with puns and playing on words to not be so explicit... what's the value of -- the project that we're doing now is talking to people who, who were funny then, to teach to kids today that you think that it's essential that you know who came before you. To be good at what you do?

DANA: Yeah. I, I think as a matter of **technique** as distinguished from gift -- earlier we talked about the blade, you'd need the blade. If you don't have the gift, forget it all together. Once you have the gift, then everything else is, what are the techniques, what's the delivery system? You've got this weapon, how are you going to get it most effective? I don't, I don't respect anything or anybody more than humor and people who know how to deliver that, that mechanism.

MATZ: Do you think it's one of the toughest jobs to have?

DANA: It can be. And again, if you're given the gift of creating and delivering humor, and you've got another gift that... eliminates or assuages the fear aspect, it's, you know, number one of almost every phobia list is standing in front of a, any kind of a large group. When I go, walk out on stage, the Cutler Majestic Theater, and the audience is there, what a gift to say, "They like me, and they're going to like me even more. They already like Jose Jimenez, now they're going to meet Bill Dana, and I'm going to tell them some stuff, going to make them laugh their asses off." You know, I think you can tell a lot by who avoids the meets and greets. Like I love the meets and greets. After the show, you go over and you talk to people. It's, it's just

wonderful, and obviously that's, that is the narcotic that drives people into entertainment.

MATZ: Clearly. What would you say the most central quality or skill of a comic would be then?

DANA: The most essential... I think that it's respect. In fact, **Rodney Dangerfield**. I think that if you were given the, well, respect/love. That if you were given the gift of feeling the respect and the responsibility over talent, that allows individuals or groups of people to experience laughter, you've done a good job.

MATZ: So, Bill, we're coming towards the end of this. I'm curious-- clearly this has been the thing that drives you is, and being in the public and sharing yourself with people. And -- even if there was no one around, even if you were back in Hana and no one came to visit you, would you still write jokes?

DANA: Oh yeah, I do it all the time. I never ever stop, I never ever stop writing. When I was in, in Hawaii, I was just giving my stuff away. I was doing NNN, no news network, no news all the time. We distort, you decide. Um, I had the, very sort of left politically headlines like, um, FBI uh, decides to connect the dots. Arrests everybody by the name Dorothy. Um, I mean, I love... the political satire is just the highest achievement in the human.

MATZ: Really?

DANA: Oh yeah.

MATZ: Why, why is that?

DANA: Well, because it's, it's affecting lives, it's affecting lives and death. Yeah, if there are a few more laughs in the United Nations, it would be a lot, a lot better off. And ever since they lost major clowns like

Kissinger... (laughter) I had a little line one time about him, you'll know the period when I tell you the line. I was being interviewed, and it actually ha-where the image came from... I said, "Oh my God," so he says, "What's wrong?" I said, "I just realized that if Kissinger were to die, Nixon would be president." Meaning there's nothing new. You could say the same thing about -- who's our vice president?

MATZ: Um...

DANA: You can't lose it, anybody who loses their sense of humor is in deep doodoo. Deep doodoo.

MATZ: So comedians in particular political satirists offer something to comment on, because life is an absurd world we live in today. And what they have to offer is what, do you think? What is the role of the comic today? Is it something so essential to our society?

DANA: Oh yes, I think, I think it's vital. Um... either, in two ways, either as point-making, the humor is the shortest distance between two points, obviously. Uh, but in the release of, of tension, you know, if you're laughing you're not shooting. It's as simple as that. I feel like I've mouthed 8,000 clichés here, but, but this is fun. I mean, I'm, I'm thinking about a lot of this stuff and I'm going to listen to it, and I'm going to act accordingly.

MATZ: Good. So, uh, you know what the last Question was. Looking back on this incredible life you've had and the ups and the downs, was it worth it?

DANA: Absolutely. I wouldn't have -- don't change your hair for me. I have a clumsy analogy that if you're happy and content where you are, and you look at the pathway that got you there, you've got to love every one of the steppingstones, even the ones that have a lot of crap on them. That's what got you here.

MATZ: (laughter) I'm about done. I'll just, while we're still rolling you're still on tape, I'd like you to just state what you're hoping to do with this whole project that we're doing, because we should say that this is the first in the long line of -- a long line of collected history that we're getting.

DANA: Yeah.

MATZ: And what is it that you hope that it can impart?

DANA: Well, what I'm hoping is that it can augment the, the student is going to go make the same mistakes and fall down and do every -- but, every... when you're tripping on the way down, if you can think about the value of what you're, if you're going to go out there and try to make people laugh, to realize that you... the responsibility, the craft that you're learning now is just as important as brain surgery. (Transylvanian accent) *And that's why we have this brain. You take the brain of the dwarf and put it into the stomach of the monster. Then we take the stomach of the monster and put it into the brain of the dwarf. And then, and only then, we eat lunch.*

MATZ: {laughter} Oh, one question? I didn't ask you this. How would you describe your particular plan of humor? What is unique about Bill Dana's humor?

DANA: Well, you have to presuppose there is something here. Yeah, yeah, I guess there is something unique about my humor because, uh, everybody's humor is going to be involved with their own corpuscles, you know. The, the gestalt of your entire experiences is going to make everybody unique. The thing is, if you're going to get paid for it, you've got to be a little bit uniquer, and those usually are going to be happy accidents. Like I my case, the accident of Jose Jimenez. And, uh, everything

else was bromidic. I mean, you know, I mean, it was, it is, to use a, I use the word so much, I keep coming back to it, so there must be something there... is to have the respect for yourself and the smarts to know that you have to respect your audience. And that you were able to engage in a 50/50 marriage. They give to you, you give to them, it's nice. It comes like that, comes together.

MATZ: Is stand-up for you, then, more rewarding than doing television, where you don't have the immediate back and forth?

DANA: Well, I enjoy stand-up. Uh, but there's, you know, sitting down at that computer, the word processor, I enjoy that too. I delight in the, in writing for third parties. Love to see something that I wrote get a laugh, yeah. You know, that's, that's, this is a, for people who can hack it, this is a terrific career. Well worth examining.

MATZ: In terms of finding a unique voice, what do you have to say about people who have, say, stolen bits from you? Is everything stolen, is that acceptable business?

DANA: Well, you know, Gene Wood and I found out after, you know we wrote, as Dana and Wood we never stole anything.

MATZ: That you knew of.

DANA: And -- and, then we found out that a lot of people, a lot of the, you know, the greats, the near greats that we're talking about. They, that was done a lot. Famous line about the two comics arguing in the Borscht belt, and **Phil Foster** is standing over there, and what are they arguing about: "Hey, you stole my Phil Foster routine."
(laughter) You know.

MATZ: Right.

DANA: I think we're just making it to the end here.

MATZ: Yeah, I think that we're going to, we're going to end

up there. Is there anything you wanted to say that I haven't asked you, that you wanted to talk about?

DANA: No, all of that stuff will happen on the way to the dressing room.

MATZ: (laughter). That's where all the best material comes -- you should've been at the 11:00, right?

DANA: Yeah, that's right.

MATZ: (laughter). Well, thank you, Bill.

DANA: No, thank you, this is great.

MATZ: OK, Jose. You're on your way.

DANA: (Latino voice) *OK Jose.*

End of Interview Excerpt - Bill Dana