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Bob Aaron  
*Illinois Wesleyan University*

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NEWS SERVICES  
P.O. Box 2900  
Bloomington, IL 61702-2900  
(309) 556-3181

Date: Sept. 4, 1992  
Contact: Bob Aaron

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## **TV Star Bob Newhart "Unbuttons" His "Button-Down Mind"; *Clockwatch Review* Probes Funny, Serious Sides of Comedian**

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.--Can an ex-bookkeeper and ad man make America laugh?

He can if he plays two of television's most memorable sitcom characters of the 1970s and 1980s: an unflappable Chicago psychologist surrounded by some of the Windy City's leading nut cases, and an innkeeper in backwoods Vermont, who doubles as an author of home fix-it books--sort of a Bob Vila with a typewriter.

This season, he's looking for another TV hit by playing an easygoing comic book artist, creator of a virtuous superhero named "Mad Dog", who's at odds with his younger partner--an artist with a more bloodthirsty image of their cartoon character. The series, which airs Friday nights on CBS television, is simply called, "Bob".

There's a lot of humor and some serious insights locked up in Bob Newhart's "button-down mind"--to borrow a phrase from his popular record albums of the 1960s--and much of it is revealed in a rare interview the comedian gave to *Clockwatch Review*, an independent journal of the arts, based at Illinois Wesleyan University, which hits newsstands in mid-September.

In "Hi Bob! A Conversation with Bob Newhart", the comedian told editor James Plath in the interview that "not a terribly happy childhood" helped prepare him for life as a comedian. He said that his father was "unemotional and distant and not always there. I mean, he didn't leave, but he wasn't around. So you tend to create your own world, and people it with people you like. I think that's true of all comedians."

The 63-year-old Newhart, born in Oak Park, a suburb of Chicago, said that living in the Chicago area helped shape his self-deprecating, "everyman" humor. "I find [that] being [in the] Second City and living in the shadow of New York, and then having a show that lived in the shadow of Mary Tyler Moore--I spend most of my life living in the shadow, it seems like.

"Also," Newhart added, "I find that Midwest audiences, you couldn't fool them, you know? You had to be very honest with them, because they would cut right through it and say, 'Hey, wait a minute, you're putting on airs. Don't.'"

Newhart, who describes his television persona as "the last sane man" in a world gone nuts, balked at the initial suggestion that he play a psychiatrist--rather than a psychologist--on "The Bob Newhart Show." He told the show's creators, "Psychiatrists tend to deal with more

serious problems, and I really don't want to make jokes about schizophrenia, multiple personalities--those are very serious subjects. It's easy to do a joke about a guy who thinks he's Napoleon, you know? That's kind of a cheap shot."

Newhart is conscious of the broader messages about life that lie behind many jokes and one-liners. "You know, I think the role of the comedian is probably to explain the inexplicable," Newhart said, "or at least *appear* to explain it . . . I really think that's what comedians do . . . We appear to solve problems. I don't think we necessarily do, but we allow people to go on."

Newhart earned a bachelor's degree in commerce, served in the U.S. Army, tried law school, and worked as an advertising copywriter and a bookkeeper for a paint company before his show business career got beyond an Oak Park theatrical group. His trademark telephone conversation monologues grew out of humorous talks he had with a friend, Ed Gallagher. Newhart and Gallagher had marginal success on the Chicago nightclub scene; Gallagher went back to advertising and Newhart got his first big break when he was introduced to a Warner Bros. talent scout--and, as they say, the rest is history.

Newhart's first comedy recording, "The Button-Down Mind of Bob Newhart", climbed to No. 1 on the charts in 1960, and was followed by five others, including two sequels--"Behind the Button-Down Mind" and "The Button-Down Mind Strikes Back." His early career also included nightclub engagements and appearances on popular TV shows like Ed Sullivan and Jack Paar.

He starred in "The Bob Newhart Show" (1972-78), along with Suzanne Pleshette, who played his liberated, school-teacher wife. The program was part of a blockbuster Saturday night lineup on CBS that included: "The Mary Tyler Moore Show", "All in the Family", "M\*A\*S\*H", and Carol Burnett. From 1982-90, he starred in "Newhart", playing the writer-innkeeper. Along the way, Newhart has appeared in films with uneven success. His first role in "Hell is for Heroes", a 1962 flick about World War II, was critically acclaimed; "The Entertainers", a 1991 made-for-TV movie about an aging performer with a chimp for a sidekick was in Newhart's words "just a mistake".

And, then there was the disappointing 1980 film, "First Family", where Newhart played the president of the United States. Despite a number of classic comedy gags (like making a senator jump and squat like a dog to get his souvenir pen at a signing ceremony for a piece of legislation), the movie flopped.

"I'm not sure the American people is on record for liking to have fun poked at their president--whether they agree with him or not--or to have fun poked at the office of the presidency," Newhart said.

The Newhart interview is part of special double issue of the magazine focusing on humor, dubbed *Clockwatch Review Light*. The magazine also includes what may be the first comic book

treatment of a serious short story published in a U.S. literary magazine, "The Halloween Parade" by Patrick Parks, with illustrations by IWU art student Jason William Panoke of Mendota, Ill.

*Clockwatch Review* was founded by Plath in 1983 and edited by graduate students from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, where Plath received his doctorate in 1988. Plath joined the IWU English Department in 1988.

*Clockwatch Review* is the only literary magazine to feature an ongoing series of interviews with musicians and artists, believing that writers can learn much from other artistic media. Prior to the Newhart piece, the magazine published interviews with actor Vincent Price, filmmaker David Zucker, cartoonist Jeff MacNelly, singer Arlo Guthrie, and many others. *Clockwatch Review* has featured original works by Pulitzer and National Book Award winners, including Rita Dove and Howard Nemerov.

In 1985, the Mark Twain Sesquicentennial Commission chose *Clockwatch Review* to be the official literary magazine for the Twain observance in Hannibal, Mo., and in 1990 *Clockwatch Review* received an Editors' Award from the Council of Literary Magazines and Presses, one of only five magazines in the nation recognized for excellence that year.

*Clockwatch Review* is distributed nationally by Ingram Periodicals, Inc., of LaVergne, Tenn.

Illinois Wesleyan University, founded in 1850, enrolls 1,700 students. For the past three years, *U.S. News & World Report* has ranked IWU No. 1 in the Midwest among the nation's 558 regional colleges and universities in its annual "America's Best Colleges" issue.

***For interviews about the Newhart article and "Clockwatch Review", call James Plath at 309/556-3352.***