A TEI Project

# Interview of Stu Billett

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## *1.1. Session 1 (February 4, 2011)*

*Collings*
Jane Collings interviewing Stu Billett at his home, February 4, 2011. Let's just start off with hearing when and where you were born.
*Billett*
I was born in Mount Vernon, New York. We moved to the Bronx. My father was a truck mechanic, and he wanted to be closer to his shop that he had on Boston Road.
*Collings*
When were you born, if you don't mind?
*Billett*
1935, the depression. I was called, I guess, a depression baby. My father missed World War--he was too young for World War I, and he was too old and had two kids in World War II, and so we worked on the Boston Post Road. I went to school, public schools there, and I always thought that I was going to be a truck mechanic. My mother never liked that idea. She always tried to talk me into trying something else, but I was my father's boy. I mean, I worked--I can't remember not working with him. I loved to work with him. He opened a gas station at one time, and I got to run the gas station down by the Whitestone Bridge. I drove--I learned to drive when I was eleven. I got in a tow truck that we had, and there was a big parking lot, and I drove, learned how to drive, and I remember my father came down and picked me up to take me home with my sister and my mother, and I said, "Hey, watch this, guys." And I ran out into the truck, jumped in the truck and drove it around. Well, my sister was upset, because she's older than me. Why am I driving

and not her? My mother was aghast, because I was only eleven years old, and my father said, "Jump in the car and drive us home." [laughs]
*Collings*
Oh, my gosh.
*Billett*
So I drove home, my sister burning up in the back seat, and I drove since I was eleven. It was great.
*Collings*
So was your father making a good living? Did it seem like a natural thing to go into?
*Billett*
He worked. He worked very, very hard. He wasn't a businessman, but he was a good mechanic. He had good ESSO trucks, those heating-oil trucks. He fixed Keebler crackers. He had big customers, but he didn't make a lot of money. We didn't have a lot of money. And college was kind of--he taught me sort of that college messed up kids' minds, you know. You get out and you work. That's what you do for a living, and common sense gets you through life.
*Collings*
So nobody in the family had ever been to college, it sounds like.
*Billett*
No, my sister finally did go. And when I graduated high school, most of the kids were going off to college, because we moved back to Mount Vernon. My grandfather died, so we moved back to Mount Vernon. I went to a school, A.B. Davis, where most of the kids went to school, went to high school, went on to college from high school. But I didn't. I started to work for my father and within a few months I realized, wow, do I really want to do this the rest of my life, work as hard as my father? I didn't know what to do. The Korean War was going on. I was very--being a kid who grew up with war movies about World War II and the brave soldiers we were, John Wayne, everybody wanted to be John Wayne. I joined the Marine Corps, and it upset everybody.
*Collings*
I'll bet.
*Billett*
But I went off and I did get to Korea. The war had ended, luckily, but I was in Korea, served in Korea. I served three years of Marine

Corps, and then when I came home, everybody told me about the G.I. Bill. And while I was in Korea, I remember this, I kind of read--you know, in school they gave you books to read, but I didn't read. You read them just to take a test, and I never really read a book. Well, I remember I read a book waiting for a plane somewhere in Korea, going one place to another, and I picked up this book that was just sitting there. It wasn't even a famous book or a great novel. It was a potboiler.

*Collings*

Like a good mystery or something.

*Billett*

A good mystery or something. But it amazed me. I read the whole thing from cover to cover, and I never realized how you could get into a book like that, get into the characters and, wow, how wonderful that was. Here I was, nineteen years old, eighteen years old, and it struck me. And so I wrote home to my sister, I told her, "Send me books. Send me books." I remember she sent me--I'll never forget--she sent--Rocky Graziano just had a book out called "Somebody Up There Likes Me," and it was about his life and how he went into the service, and how he thought everything was New York. He thought everything ran like it did in the streets of New York, and he got in the service, and he figured you punch a sergeant in the nose, you become a sergeant. [laughter] And that's kind of what he did, and they put him in Leavenworth. And he was on a train going out to Leavenworth, and it's written in this book. He's sitting there watching out the window, miles and miles and miles of wheat fields. Well, he couldn't imagine--

*Collings*

He never saw such a thing.

*Billett*

Yes. What is this? Thought it was like another planet. And I kind of related to him. Gee, that's kind of where I was, and my father and his world and the world of the Bronx and trucks and cars and stuff, and I related to that. And I started to read books. I read and read. And when I got home, I decided to go to school, and that was definite, I was going to go to school, and I thought NYU. I heard NYU, I thought maybe I could get into NYU. I went down, and I remember signing up, and the government paid for it. Out of the G.I. Bill, they paid the whole thing. It was like ten thousand dollars

a semester. I couldn't believe it. So there I was at NYU, and I was going--I realized I had to go nights. I had to get my schedules, because I needed a job, and some professor there, who really took a liking to me, I guess because I was a Marine, too, and had just come out of the service, he made a couple of calls and got me a job at a company called Entertainment Productions Incorporated, which was EPI, and it produced "The $64,000 Question," "$64,000 Challenge," a bunch of game shows and stuff like that. It was forty-five dollars a week, and if you worked the night shows, you'd get fifteen dollars extra for those, and I was a gofer, go for this, go for that, and I loved it. It was on 57th [Street] and Madison Avenue, right--it was "Mad Men," you know "Mad Men" now?

*Collings*

Yes.

*Billett*

We were right in the middle of it. The advertising agencies ran everything. Revlon was the product for "The $64,000 Question." They did live commercials there. Kent cigarettes for "The $64,000 Question," and it was a whole world for me. And I had such a work ethic, because my father taught me that when you have something to do, you do it, period. You stay till seven o'clock, eight o'clock, nine o'clock, two o'clock in the morning. You finish it. So whenever anybody gave me something to do, on the next morning they had it. And that just blew everybody away, because most people didn't work like that in television. [laughs] It's like, "My god, you give him something to do and he does it, so quickly." So everybody wanted me to work for them, and it was great, because I got into development, the development of new shows. I really loved it. And the quiz scandals started to happen, and I didn't know anything. I mean, I was a P.A. [production assistant], I was running. But I always thought that "$64,000 Question" was controlled, in the sense that you come on, you're a shoemaker, and you know everything about Shakespeare. Well, they have to give you a test. They can't just bring you on a show and ask you questions. They have to test you. They give you this big test and by the time the test is over, they know, oh, you're [unclear] the comedies, you don't know English productions. They know your strengths and weaknesses, and then they put you on the show and it's week by week.

*Collings*
They just happen to ask you--
*Billett*
Yes. And every Wednesday morning they'd have a meeting. "Hey, that shoemaker, we love him," the sponsor would say. Well, they slip him a question that they're sure that it's the area he knows. And if they say, "You know, that shoemaker's getting on my nerves," it's for the third week, well, slip him one of those comedy questions that he doesn't know. Off he goes. And I thought that's how it was. And I think it was. What happened was, $64,000 was a lot of money. But along came "Twenty One," and "Twenty One," all of a sudden the newspapers are running, "Teddy Nadler wins $120,000," "Vivienne Nearing--," and the headlines were going to the show that gave away the most money. So 64,000 became "Double 64," $128,000, and "Triple 64." Well, now they had to make sure to make sure somebody is going for $128,000. I guess that's what happened.
*Collings*
Somebody had to win it.
*Billett*
Now, I don't know any of this. They're having those big meetings, and I'm not privy to it. But I remember this one day, they came on, they called me into the producer's office and they told me, "We want you to get two or three fishbowls, with envelopes. We want envelopes, five envelopes in there," and they explained to me what they were doing. They wanted a card in each one, a one, a two, a three, a four, a five. And they were going to have somebody reach out, when it's time for the question reach out and by chance pick, "Oh, you're going to get question three," to give the illusion that it's more, hey, we couldn't have this fixed, because we'd have to give him five answers, you know, just to give that illusion. So it was my job to go get all the stuff. So I got it. I brought it to them. I didn't trust my printing, so I bought those paste-on numbers and put them on the thing and showed to everybody. "Great, great." And it was my job to bring every--we were going to do this on the Sunday show, "The $64,000 Challenge," which was Sunday night. So Friday night before I left, I thought, gee, I'm going to take all the stuff, bring everything to the studio, because I would go right to the studio, I don't have to come to the office and pick things up. And I

went upstairs to get the stuff, and the sunlight--it was like five, six o'clock, and this beam of light came in. It just happened to be hitting the bowl, the fishbowl. And I thought I could see a number through one of the envelopes, and I thought, oh, that's no good. The spotlight's going to be on them, and if you can see through the number, everybody's going to say, "Oh, they told him to pick two and he picked two." Oh, my god, what am I going to do? And everybody's gone. So I took them out and I took them all apart and I tried to get gray ones and the store was closed. Fooling around with things, I finally put a blank card in front of the two. "Ooh, perfect." You couldn't see it. I mean, I put it right in the light, and it was a perfect solution. Each one got another card in it, in front of it, sealed them all up, put them back in the bowl, drove over to the studio, put them in the prop box. And Sunday night I showed up, and my job was to get it all out again, and we do rehearsal, and we do rehearsal, had a rehearsal bowl and everything worked fine. Ralph Story was the host.

*Collings*

Ralph Story? Oh, my god.

*Billett*

Ralph Story was the host of "$64,000 Challenge." Hal March was the host of "$64,000 Question" on Tuesday. Now, on "$64,000 Question," there was a banker who had a big desk right on the show, Ben Feith from First National Bank. They would walk over to Ben Feith, and Ben Feith would have this box and he'd unlock it and say, [imitates] "The questions have been locked in the vaults of First National Bank, and here they are. No one's seen them." Well, on "$64,000 Challenge," they had a deal with the Chase Manhattan Bank, and what they'd do is they would fly in a different Chase Manhattan executive from a bank all over the country, and he would come in, go out with his friends, come to the show, walk out on stage, say the same thing, "In a locked up vault," and then go sit down. And he'd usually had a few drinks, so he was sitting there, kind of fall asleep in the chair after he did his thing. So the show starts, and everybody is in the control room, which is behind the audience. It was in Studio 52, where David Letterman is now, and I stayed backstage. There had to be somebody from the show backstage just in case something happened, what would happen. And the show starts. The Chase Manhattan guy goes out, does it,

get the questions, the lights, the thing, and I'm back there watching. And "Pops"--backstage always had a Pops--
*Collings*
Really?
*Billett*
--every stage I've ever been in, there's the old guy named Pops. He goes, "There's somebody on the phone who wants to talk to someone from the production company. He's really upset. You'd better take the phone call." So I run backstage, I pick up the phone, "Hi." "Is this Stu Billett from Entertainment Productions?" "Yes." And there's a man on the other end of the phone, and he is screaming. He said something about his name, Robert Lewine , I think, who was the president of CBS, and he's yelling and screaming. He's watching the show. "What is on the other--why are there two envelopes in the envelopes? Why are there two cards?" Well, it turns out, we find out later, that thousands of people all over the country were calling into their studio, into New York, saying, "We see he opened the thing and there's letter two, and the other card the answer on it. He had the answer right there. You've given him the answer." Because everyone was into the story--
*Collings*
They were so suspicious.
*Billett*
--so suspicious.
*Collings*
Oh, my gosh.
*Billett*
Well, I said, "Well," I said, "look. I'm Stu Billet, I'll tell you what it is." I explained quickly to him what it is, it's just a blank card. They all have a blank card to cover up so you couldn't see it." "You, Stu Billet, you get your ass out on stage right now. I'm watching. It's live."
*Collings*
It's live.
*Billett*
"You go out there, interrupt the show, and explain to everybody just what you explained to me."
*Collings*
Oh, my gosh.

*Billett*
I said, "Well, I'll get a hold of--." "No, you don't get a hold of anybody. You get out there if you ever want to work in this business again. If you want to work in this business, you'd better get out there on stage right now. I'm looking." So I hang up the phone, and you know, I'm twenty-two years old.
*Collings*
I know.
*Billett*
I'm a Marine, but still. I'm thinking, makeup, I need makeup. [laughs] I don't know why I thought--I mean, everybody that went on camera had makeup, and I thought maybe the cameras, there were x-rays--
*Collings*
They like do something to your face?
*Billett*
--like they may ruin you skin, yes, mess up your skin or something. Well, the makeup person's not there. She's on a break somewhere, and I'm running around, and I stumble over the Chase Manhattan guy, and it's a whole--he's asleep, half asleep, and I slap him in the face. [laughs] I wake him up. I'm explaining to him, "Quickly, you have to run out there, take this bowl, open these envelopes, explain to everybody there's two--," blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, yada, yada, yada. And now I push him out on stage. Well, there's a booth, and there's a spotlight on Ralph Story in the booth, and it's all dark, completely black around that. But, of course, in the audience you can see me pushing this guy out there. It was not on camera, but off camera, and everybody in the booth, all the producers and the executive producers and the people from the advertising agency--"What is he doing?" So they're all running down, and I am pushing this guy out. Well, I push the guy into the spotlight, and Ralph Story thinks he's drunk and just trying to walk in the thing, so Ralph pushes him back.
*Collings*
Oh, no.
*Billett*
And I push him back in. Finally I push him out there so he falls into Ralph, and he explains, "Blah, blah, blah, blah." Then he takes, you know, "There's two, it's empty, there's nothing on it. It just was

there to cover up the thing." And we got through it. But that was--it was my first real show-business story. [laughs] I mean, everything else was kind of--that was a big story.

*Collings*

Now, when you went to NYU, did you kind of go into the show business area?

*Billett*

I got into communications. They had communications. I wanted to be a writer.

*Collings*

Oh, you did.

*Billett*

I was still moved about the books and I was reading and stuff, and every weekend I would go down--I was living in lower East Side, on the East Side, and there were bookstores down there galore, and I spent all day in bookstores and then discovering Henry Miller before the "tropics" ["Tropic of Cancer," "Tropic of Capricorn"] came out. And these people that run the bookstores, they love people like me coming in asking about books. And so I was reading and I wanted to be a writer and all that. This was just a job. This was just the way to make money.

*Collings*

Well, it seems really surprising, because I've never heard of somebody just kind of jumping into "I want to be a writer" at that age, without anything kind of leading up to it.

*Billett*

Nothing, there was nothing. It was those books, that I was so moved by the books, and I thought, wouldn't it be nice to be a writer. I had no background. And I took some writing courses. I took a George Bernard Shaw course. I mean, college was marvelous. I never thought of school like that. School was always something I had to go do.

*Collings*

What were your friends in high school talking about doing?

*Billett*

There were doctors, there were people going, doing their life. I only--what happened is I went two years to high school in the Bronx, Evander Childs [High School], which was a huge high school, five thousand kids, so you didn't get to know anybody really. Kids I

grew up with went there. But then when my grandfather died and I moved back to Mount Vernon, now, Mount Vernon was a nice little town. It had two schools, and A.B. Davis was a small school, and everybody knew everybody. But I was only there for two years, and I really became known as the kid with the car. My father--we would go to junkyards and find old cars and fix them up, and I found this 1936 Ford convertible with a rumble seat--

*Collings*

Oh, my gosh.

*Billett*

--and it was a wreck, and we took it and I worked for two years, because I was too young. As soon as I get my license I wanted it finished, and by the time I was sixteen, we had finished it. We'd painted--there was no such thing a two-toned 1930s car, but we painted this green on the bottom. I have it here. Somebody sent me a picture of it.

*Collings*

Oh, really? Oh, wonderful.

*Billett*

Green on the bottom and cream on top, and it was the neatest car. I mean, it was an old car, but it was all done up, and everybody knew me more or less, "Oh, the guy with the car, the great car." All the girls wanted to ride in the rumble seat. Everybody wanted to ride in the car, so I was known for that car really more than anything else.

*Collings*

That sounds kind of like an early show-business gig.

*Billett*

I should show you real quick. I have it right here. [unclear] how we found it. It's not the car. We found the car. It was black, and my son went into Photoshop and shopped it.

*Collings*

That's gorgeous.

*Billett*

Isn't that neat?

*Collings*

Yes.

*Billett*

That was it, a rumble seat, and I put a swan on the front of it, a chrome swan with Lucite wings that from the dashboard I can light up the wings.
*Collings*
Oh, my goodness.
*Billett*
Yes, it was a hot car.
*Collings*
Yes. That is--
*Billett*
I would take that car and when the snow came, as soon as it snowed, I would go get a big truck tire, and I'd put it in the front of the car, and in the back seat, the rumble seat, I would throw in a crankcase or something to give it weight in the back. I would go up on the Hutchinson River Parkway, which was near where we lived, and there all these people sliding off to the side and they'd get stuck in the snow. Well, I'd come with my car and I'd say, "Five dollars, I'll push you out of the snow." [laughs]
*Collings*
Oh, good for you.
*Billett*
And I'd get behind them and push them out. I could make fifty dollars in a night when it was a big snow. So whenever it snowed I'd go, "Wow."
*Collings*
Like, "Yeah, I'm headed out."
*Billett*
I'm headed out.
*Collings*
Did your mom have any interest in writing or books or arts?
*Billett*
No, no. My mother was one of eleven children--
*Collings*
Wow.
*Billett*
--brothers and sisters. She was born in Rhinebeck, New York, where Clinton just had the wedding. Well, Rhinebeck was a little town, and my grandfather when he came over from the other side, was sent up there to get a job up there doing something. It was near Hyde

Park. It was near a lot of estates where very rich people, the Astors and the Vanderbilts and the Roosevelts lived, and he was an upholsterer and cabinet maker. He worked for somebody, and then finally that person died and my grandfather took over, and my grandfather became Roosevelt's private upholsterer and cabinet maker.
*Collings*
Are you kidding me?
*Billett*
My mother would take people to Hyde Park, which is a museum now. Anybody who came up, she'd get them in the car and drive and go through the house and pointing out all Grandpa's pieces.
*Collings*
That's wonderful.
*Billett*
Yes. It was really a claim to fame.
*Collings*
Where did your grandfather emigrate from?
*Billett*
Probably Poland or Russia and they came to England. I don't know, they came from England.
*Collings*
Did your mother's family emigrate as well?
*Billett*
That was my mother's family.
*Collings*
Oh, that was your mother's family. Okay.
*Billett*
Yes, that was my mother's family. My father's family, yes, came from France or someplace. They're still--nobody really knows; about the same time. My father was born here, five brothers. They got into the trucking business, and they--five-brother trucking business, I think. My father had one of the trucks,
*Billett*
Brothers Trucking.
*Collings*
Oh, that's great.
*Billett*

But then they all got married, and then it didn't work, because the wives would say, "Oh, you're working harder than the other one," and so--
*Collings*
Oh, no.
*Billett*
--the whole thing split up and they all went their separate ways. They were all friends, of course, because they were brothers, but my father became the mechanic. He was the mechanic, the youngest one, and he was a good mechanic, so he stayed in the mechanic end of it.
*Collings*
So a lot of ability to work with your hands, very creative.
*Billett*
Oh, yes, yes. Everybody was very--and hard work. They had all those kids because that's what you did, because everybody had to work to keep the family together. Nobody could make enough money. Nobody went out there and became a wealthy star or somebody. Everybody worked and you all chipped in. I can remember they'd tell stories about my Uncle Benny was the youngest, and he loved basketball, and he played basketball, and he loved doing this, and he didn't want to work. [laughs] He just--
*Collings*
He was the most Americanized of the bunch.
*Billett*
Yes, yes. And my grandfather took him--there was a touring judge that came around. They didn't have their own courtroom in Rhinebeck. This circuit judge came to town, and my grandfather took his son into the judge, he was sixteen years old, and said, "I want you to lock him up for a couple of days and teach him a lesson. He doesn't want to work." And the man said, "Mr. Colton , it's not against the law to not work. I can't lock him up because he doesn't want to work. Eventually he'll want to work. You'll put him out of the house, let him sleep outside for a little bit. Don't feed him, and he'll go to work." But, yes, it was a very hard-working family on both sides. And, yes, my generation of kids started, just started going to college. I had a cousin, Martin, who went to college. He was the first, went to MIT, which was really a big deal,

and his children are all in Boston, and they're pediatric, the heads of pediatric divisions.
*Collings*
So it's a real sort of classic postwar story, isn't it?
*Billett*
Oh, and there's about ninety of them. I mean, well, figure eleven kids and they all had kids, and it's grown and grown. Most of them are all back there, a marvelous family.
*Billett*
Anybody else go into show business?
*Billett*
I don't think so. I don't think anybody else went into show business. Yes, it was really removed. It was such a quirk for me and how I fell into it.
*Collings*
Yes. So when you were working as the P.A., were you thinking of that as something that you might develop?
*Billett*
I was just thinking about I was going to be a writer, and I started writing. I had to get a job, and then all of a sudden the scandals came, and I had to get a job, and the next job I got was "Who Do You Trust?" Johnny Carson was doing this ABC--it was called--and this is--most of the people I worked for, most of the shows I worked on were radio shows. All the producers and everything came, they were working in radio. Television happened in the fifties, and they all just came over. And the shows--"Who Do You Trust?" was like a radio show that we put cameras in and shot it.
*Collings*
It's such a great title.
*Billett*
On the radio it was called "Do You Trust Your Wife?" and it was Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy. Now, think about that. It's a ventriloquist on the radio, on the radio. I mean, the whole idea of ventriloquism--
*Collings*
Talk about who do you trust.
*Billett*
The whole idea of ventriloquism, it's a magic act. Look, he's not moving his lips. But on the radio you can't see that.

*Collings*
So why did that work?
*Billett*
Well, I think it was because they were stars already, and it was so big. They were in the movies, so they gave them a radio show, and everybody listened because they all knew him, I guess. That was it. And so then when it came to television, Johnny Carson got it. He was a kid who was a magician. He did a thing here or there, and by the time I got to the show, he'd been doing it four or five years. And it was completely written. We would get in oddball contestants. The writers would write up a script based on their story and throw in jokes for Johnny. I was there a couple of months and this girl left or was fired, and I got the job, and it was a great job because I was the liaison between the writers and Johnny, and the writers wanted every joke done. And Johnny, of course, wanted to get rid of the jokes that he didn't like, of course. But I had to play this game of back and forth and make sure they were both happy, and I was good at it, and I had to teach the contestants their lines. I told them, "There's a joke coming, but I don't want you to know what the joke is," so we cut that side of the script off, and they had to deliver their lines perfectly, because it was the lead in to a punch line. It was a great job, and I loved doing it. It was a good comedy show. Johnny was great.
*Collings*
Sounds like you had a lot of responsibility.
*Billett*
It was marvelous. It was a really good job. Do you have time? I mean, because there's a good Salvador Dali story comes now.
*Billett*
Yes, please. Of course, yes.
*Billett*
All right. So this time I'm twenty-seven, twenty-eight. I get called into the producer's office, and Salvador Dali was in town, and he was publicity--he'd go on shows, and he called ABC, wanted to be out there.
*Collings*
Yes. He was sort of big at that time.
*Billett*

He wanted to go on shows, and he wanted to go on "Who Do You Trust?" because it was that kind of show, and he'd come out. He was going to do a painting or something and do something wild. So they called Johnny. Johnny didn't like celebrities on a show too much--

*Collings*

Oh, really.

*Billett*

--because, yes, they threw him. He liked regular people. They could stick to the script, back and forth. But Salvador Dali, hey, he wanted to do it, how could we say no, so, "Stu, here's what I want you to do. Go to the St. Regis Hotel. Salvador Dali is there, his people. Meet with them, find out what he needs, everything. Thursday, make sure he gets there, arrange everything for him. Whatever he wants, you get for him. You're in charge of Salvador Dali." Great. [unclear] expense account, I get a cab.

*Collings*

That's nice.

*Billett*

I was always subway and buses. I hail a cab and I take a cab up to the St. Regis Hotel.

*Collings*

Right, and maybe stop for a little lunch on the way.

*Billett*

And I can remember this, it was so beautiful, walking into the St. Regis--St. Regis is a very fancy hotel--and walking in and walking up to the front desk and saying, "I'm Stu Billett here to see Salvador Dali." [laughs] "Oh, right away, sir." Bing, you know, the little bell. Bellman comes, "Yes, sir," takes me in the elevator, brings me up. And we didn't go to Salvador Dali's room. We went to a special room they have in the St. Regis, a library maybe, tall, tall ceilings, big, big windows and stuff.

*Billett*

So we walk into this room, and sure enough, it's Salvador Dali, with the mustache and the eyes.

*Collings*

With the mustache, yes.

*Billett*

And he has two people with him, and they're sitting there, and we introduce and shake hands, and he speaks Spanish, French, and very little English. And I notice there's a big, like a canvas with a top on it, with a plastic six, eight inches high over it, and I notice that. I didn't know what it was for. And Salvador Dali starts saying, [imitates odd accent] "Do the painting with the fly excremon, fly excremon [fly excrement]." [laughs] "[unclear] fly excremon." And they could see I was a little confused, so one of them said, "Mr. Dali's is going to paint with fly shit." [laughs] "Oh."

*Collings*

Not that again.

*Billett*

[laughs] Yes, that old act. "You want me to get--? I'm not sure exactly how to get that." "No, no, just get flies. Get flies." And with that Mr. Dali gets up, he takes the top off of this jar. He's got a pitcher of cream, and he takes a spoon and he's putting cream, lines of cream all over, not painting anything recognizable, just lines all over this thing with cream. And he said, "You get the flies. Tomorrow morning when we get the flies, we'll put them under there." "Magnifico, magnifico."

*Collings*

Was he making a joke of some kind?

*Billett*

What do I know? Do I accuse him of making a joke? He wants flies. Okay. "I'll be here tomorrow morning with flies." And I leave and, "Where am I--?" You know, it's not like you can Google flies. There was no computers in 1962, '63. I don't know. I go back to the office and everybody's saying, "Oh, we'll all collect a fly." I said, "He needs two hundred flies. He wants two hundred flies." So I started making phone calls and sure enough, I mean, you can get anything.

*Collings*

In New York.

*Billett*

You can get cockroaches, anything. They sell a hundred house flies, a thousand house flies for a hundred dollars.

*Collings*

Oh, really?

*Billett*

Yes.

*Collings*
Are you kidding me?
*Billett*
Oh, no. No. You could do it today. You Google house flies, Google insects.
*Collings*
Live ones?
*Billett*
You know, people use them for laboratories. They sell them to laboratories.
*Collings*
Oh, yes. Oh, of course, yes, yes, yes.
*Billett*
They sell them for all kind of reasons. Lightning bugs, anything you want, anything. So I figured house flies, and I had them delivered to the St. Regis. Next morning I get there and the St. Regis has it right at the front desk. It's a yellow duffel bag kind of thing, bright yellow, and it's got a strange canister on the top. We go upstairs. Oh, Salvador Dali is beside himself. "Oh, magnifique, magnifique." And now we have to lift up the lid and unscrew the jar and get the flies in there. Well, we got about two hundred flies under there, and eight hundred flies were all over this room.
*Collings*
Oh, no.
*Billett*
I mean, all over. They went to the windows immediately, so they were all over the drapes. It was a mess. But, you know, hey, they're Salvador Dali's. Now he's, "Oh, great, it's perfect. Close it up. Be back--." I forget if it was, "Come back at five o'clock," or, "Come back tomorrow morning. We need to let them do their thing." Fine. I came back the next morning, up to the room, and, oh, my god, it is a mess under there. Ninety percent of them are dead, 10 percent are kind of flying around, another 5 percent are walking around drunk. And Salvador Dali is thrilled. He's just thrilled. "Perfect." He takes the top off and the eight or ten of them fly away. They fly, they hop away, all over. And now it's perfect and his two people leave, because Salvador and Stu Billett, we sit down on either side of this thing, and he has eyebrow tweezers. Whenever you start not believing this story, let me know. [laughter]

He's got eyebrow tweezers and he's got a box of pins with little like you put in maps, little heads on them, little round heads, and he shows me what to do. You stick the pin through the fly and into the piece, hold it. You take the tweezers and pull the wings off. He doesn't want to use any wings, no wings.
*Collings*
Yes, that would ruin the piece.
*Billett*
Yes, it would ruin the piece. So we sat there. It had to take us two hours, me and Salvador Dali. And I'm thinking, I wonder if my name's going to be on this painting, Salvador Dali and Stu
*Billett*
. But we sat there and I didn't understand. He was talking all the time. I couldn't understand him. He was speaking French and Italian, and we just sat there pulling wings off two hundred flies.
*Collings*
Gosh.
*Billett*
That's four hundred wings. We got them all off, and then he got his brush. He had a stiff brush, short brush, and he started smushing them up until he made like a paste, like a paint. You ever see paint that comes out of a tube? It was kind of that consistency, only green and black and blue, and he just mixed and mixed and mixed, and he started spreading it around.
*Collings*
Wow.
*Billett*
And he said that's all he's going to do. The rest he's going to do at the studio or something, I don't know. "Perfect, perfect." He was thrilled. Well, you know, the rest day I remember came. I had him picked up. He walked into the studio. The writers did the jokes. We did shit jokes, fly-shit jokes. Everybody laughed. They saw the painting, and I assumed that Johnny got the painting, not me. And I'm saying bye to him. I don't know if he remembered it was me. Two days later he probably forgot me. But it was a great story, and I was telling everybody the story, and everybody saw the show that Salvador Dali was on, and I've been telling this story for years. Well, about six months ago I'm telling Miguel, my assistant-- Salvador Dali's name came up for some reason, and I said, "Oh, you

ever hear the Salvador Dali story?" And I tell him this whole story. Well, by the time I got to the end, Miguel is looking at me like, you've got to be kidding. You think I'm going to believe that story? Nobody's around to prove it. You've made up this story. And I felt kind of bad, you know, he's right. How could I--? Well, there were now computers, and I sat down at my computer and I Googled Salvador Dali, and, oh, I mean this was the most prolific painter probably ever in the world. You could sit on a computer for ninety days and not see all his stuff, and it's all kind of--finally I found something that said "periods."

*Collings*

Periods, okay.

*Billett*

Periods. And I went down da, da, da, da, thirties, forties, the fifties, fifty, '55 to '65, '55 to '65, well, that would be the period. I clicked on it. Boom, a whole screen with postage-sized things, and click, click, click and I'm going down, '55, '56, in the sixties, in '63, '64--"Landscape With Flies."

*Collings*

Wow.

*Billett*

Click, click, boom.

*Billett*

Let me see. [searching on computer]

*Collings*

Did you get any sense that he was trying to do something sort of sensational for the show?

*Billett*

No, I think he was just having fun. Here's the painting.

*Collings*

There it is.

*Billett*

Now, it says '64 because he probably took it, he didn't leave it. He put some color in. He put these dots over it, and someone has since told me that he does that on several paintings, to give it depth. He puts these white dots on. But that was the kind of [unclear]. It's "Landscape With Flies." He painted it with flies, fly excrement. "Fly excremon," there it is.

*Collings*

Right, right. It actually is with flies.
*Billett*
Miguel is now--I mean, Miguel went crazy when he saw this, and he's now trying to find--it's in a museum somewhere, and he's trying to track it down to see if we can get it. [laughs]
*Collings*
Oh, that would be interesting.
*Billett*
Or a copy of it or something.
*Collings*
So how did the audience react? How did the show go when he was finishing it?
*Billett*
Well, it was a daytime show. I don't know how many people cared about Salvador Dali.
*Collings*
And was this something where--I mean, I know that like Sid Caesar's shows, for example, this was earlier on. They had this kind of sophisticated New York audience, and then things started broadening out and everybody got a TV--
*Billett*
Yes. No, no, see, Johnny was--"Who Do You Trust?" was a daytime, five days a week, three-thirty in the afternoon, always near being cancelled. We just stayed on because everybody liked Johnny, and we bordered on the--you know, Johnny could get away with saying things that no one else could, because he had such innocence--
*Collings*
Because he had that smile.
*Billett*
--and there was such innocence to him. So the writers kind of pushed the envelope and would do foot fetish, you know, bring in oddball people and do double-entendre jokes. I remember one of my jobs was Grace--I forget her name--Standards and Practices at ABC, we'd have to send them the script, and she would call, and we would put some jokes in just so she could take out. So she'd say, "You can't say this." And I'd fight for it a little bit, and then, "Okay," and we knew it was going to come out. We put it in just for her to take out. So there were a couple--and then the writers would say, "Don't lose this joke." It was my job. [laughs]

*Collings*
Right, right, just distract her a little bit.
*Billett*
Distract her a little bit. So when I said before it was Johnny, the writers, and I forgot, it was her, ABC. So we were always very close to the line of being bad boys.
*Collings*
So why did you want to be--why did they feel like they wanted to have these bad-boy things in? Was it something on their end?
*Billett*
Oh, it was just the writers, the writers.
*Collings*
Was it they felt like the audience wanted this?
*Billett*
No. Nobody even thought about it.
*Collings*
Nobody cared.
*Billett*
Nobody cared. They were just doing it for their own--this is what--you start writing, and they did it for seven years. Roy Kammerman was the writer who did this. I remember Roy died a few years ago, and he never got recognition for that, because Johnny was Johnny Carson, went on to become this big thing. But I believe Roy Kammerman made Johnny Carson.
*Collings*
Oh, really.
*Billett*
I mean, he spent that time with him, giving him pacing, takes, jokes.
*Collings*
Oh, interesting.
*Billett*
Johnny wasn't bad, but after seven years--you know, when they were looking for a replacement for Jack Paar, they looked on ABC and they said, "Look at this guy. He's ad-libbing now." They thought he was ad-libbing. They didn't know it was all scripted. I mean, I mean Johnny scripted. The takes were in red with parenthesis, and if it wasn't in red, he didn't do a take. If--we had to stop the mail, or people would say--he'd be talking and we'd put the cue cards

between the two people standing. They would come out and stand at two big microphones and the cue cards were between them. Every once in a while there was a close-up of him, and you could see him do that, and someone would write in, "Who are you looking at when you look off to the side?" Well, if he saw that, then he wouldn't do it, and he'd try to do an interview without looking, and he'd screw it all up. So we always had to go through his mail and make sure we threw those away.

*Collings*

Oh, really? Oh, my gosh.

*Billett*

But god forbid if he met someone and someone said it to him. Then the next day he was--he had to stick to the script. And if a contestant--see, they didn't know the joke, and if they heard the joke, and it's fine for them to laugh, but if the contestant was real sharp and came back with a line on Johnny, Johnny would skip to the end, say, "Oh, time for the questions." Then he would go into the quiz and that was the end of it. He didn't like people that--he wanted it run that he did it. So when he took "The Tonight Show," we were very--everybody on the staff was, "What's he going to do?" No script, it's not all scripted. That is ad lib, and he's got stars who answer him back. Well, anyone who does Johnny Carson when they're imitating him, they do all the nervous tics, you know, this and this and the golf swing. Those all came about the first six months of "The Tonight Show." He was a nervous wreck, a wreck. He did bits or demos, we call them demos, where you'd bring some big-busted girl out to show him some exercise, and he'd get into position. Well, he never took his jacket off, because he was sopping wet underneath there and he didn't want to show it. So if you ever see clips of the early "Tonight Show," he never took his jacket off. He would do all these bizarre things, and everybody, "Why don't you take your jacket off?" Or, "What's he crawling into that thing with his jacket on?" Because he was self-conscious about being--

*Collings*

But how was somebody so stiff like that able to survive?

*Billett*

Because he learned it, and he did--you know, seven years he did "Who Do You Trust?" Seven years. So he got into it, and now "The Tonight Show" took producer Art Stark with him, and he brought Ed

[McMahon] with him, and he just slowly did it. And he had a charm about him. There was such a charm about him that you felt bad for him if he'd make a mistake, if he slipped and said--
*Collings*
Well, maybe if he was too smooth, he wouldn't have been as endearing.
*Billett*
Exactly. Exactly. You exactly hit it on the head, that the people watching him were--he was hometown. He was Nebraska. That's just how everybody in Nebraska would act if they were up there, nervous, a little nervous, a little awestruck that, "Wow, I'm sitting here with James Stewart." He wasn't slicker than them, and he wasn't, and they loved him for it, and they loved his--
*Collings*
So was Ed McMahon there to kind of ease over the--
*Billett*
Ed McMahon was just because--he didn't like Ed that much--he didn't want to break in a new person, so he just brought Ed. And Ed is sharper than Johnny almost, sometimes faster and stuff. And he used to sit there, and they finally--I remember this, because I worked with Art Stark for a long time afterwards. Art moved him to the end of the couch and said, "If you keep it up, you're going to be backstage doing the commercials back there, and you'll never be--,"
*Collings*
If you keep up sort of trying to out--
*Billett*
Stepping on his lines. "Don't try and outdo him. If it comes into your mind, just swallow, don't say it."
*Collings*
Poor guy.
*Billett*
[laughs] But he did it, because he knew where his toast was--you know, Ed till the day he died was talking about the friendship of him. Nobody was Johnny's friend. He wasn't a friendly guy. He was very much like David Letterman is now. David Letterman has no friends. I mean, here's David Letterman, the star, big star, big, big star, right? Could have any woman in the world, any model, any actress. He's having affairs with interns--
*Collings*

Like in the office.
*Billett*
--in the office, and they're not attractive. They're just the girl in the office that was easy and no trouble--
*Collings*
Yes, convenient.
*Billett*
--doing it, it's convenient. "We'll go into the supply room and--." [laughter] You know, "No trouble, I won't make any trouble." That's how Johnny was. That's just how Johnny was, very self-conscious, but nice. Nice, basically nice people. Oh, enough about Johnny.
*Collings*
Yes, okay. So where are we in the chronology?
*Billett*
I told you, I told you--
*Collings*
That's great. No, it's great. So you've got the job with the--
*Billett*
All right, now [unclear]. And now I'm thinking about the business all of a sudden. And radio, it's all radio shows, radio shows, and I'm doing development. I like development. I like creating new shows. And there's a guy in California named Ralph Edwards, and Ralph Edwards' two shows, "Truth or Consequences," it's first "Truth or Consequences," that's a television show. How did they do that on the radio? [laughs] You know what I mean? It was a very visual show.
*Collings*
I know.
*Billett*
It was all visual. I mean, you take their silliest act. He would go down and say, "I want to give a hundred dollars away. Okay, who wants a hundred dollars in the audience?" And he'd walk down to it. And then he would describe the person who stood up, on the radio, and he got so used to doing that, he'd do it on television too. "Oh, isn't that a cute blue-and-white dress you're wearing with flowers all over it?"
*Collings*

But you know, what he said--I mean, of course you knew him and I never met him--was that he wanted to try to sort of bring the parlor game back into the American living room.

*Billett*

Yes, but what was funny was that he was doing it on the radio, and what he was doing were all visual bits. Mouse in box. You know, he had a hundred dollar bill in a box, like a Kleenex box, right? And now somebody's going to put their hand in. Ooh, are they going to go in there and there's a mouse? But there's a hundred dollar bill in there.

*Collings*

Ooh, that's creepy. That is really creepy.

*Billett*

Now, what's funny about that is the visual of seeing her go--well, you're on the radio. You can't see it. On the radio, he's describing her putting her hand into the thing. And I'm sitting there saying, "It's such a television show. Did he invent this for television and just said, 'I'll wait and put it on radio until then'?" And the same thing with--and on the radio, how he had to describe everything. He was the voice-over, he was the announcer, he was the emcee. He was all three things at once. You listen to the audiotapes of the show, it's amazing what he's doing, because on television, there it was. "Here, there's a hundred dollar bill in there, Mrs." He didn't have to say anything more, just watching her. He'd just put the camera on this poor lady wondering if, "Ooh, ooh. I want the hundred dollars already." [laughs] He didn't have to say anything.

*Collings*

But I wonder if the mouse has rabies.

*Billett*

And then "This is Your Life." I mean, to go out and get confederates, all these people from--

*Collings*

That is a huge production.

*Billett*

Production. But then to bring him up on stage, and he doesn't know about it, and the camera zooms in on his face, and you're watching his eyes as he's hearing his story being told by somebody backstage, it's a television moment. But wait, they did it on radio. [laughter] It was on the radio. And I'm sitting there in New York

thinking, my god, either this guy's a genius or he just fell into it. But he did these on the radio, and they're perfect shows. To me, "This is Your Life," there's never been--I mean, what do you do if you want to tell a story of somebody's life. You'd make a biography or a documentary, you'd do a biopic, a movie like on Kennedys, they just did it. You'd do a long interview and interview six or seven people. But here's "This is Your Life," which is completely different, and nobody's done anything better since. It's eighty years old and nobody's done anything to top that device of the way to tell a story. I mean, I was blown away, really blown away when I got thinking about it and thinking about the business of--because I was creating shows and doing shows. Well, I came out to California in 1970, and I came out to do development for Monty Hall. I had known Monty Hall in New York when I just a kid. Monty was a great host. Shows were all live and so if anybody got sick or they couldn't come up or they wanted to take a week off, call Monty Hall. Monty could walk into any show, walk in, do it.

*Collings*

Wow.

*Billett*

He's, yes, incredible. There was nobody like him. The problem was he had a little hook nose, and he wasn't Tom Kennedy and Johnny Carson. He wasn't from the Midwest. He was a little Jewish, and they all went, mmm, you know. There were Jews running everything, and they didn't want that Jewish feeling. "He's too Jewish." So poor Monty would never get a show. They'd use him for fill-ins here and there, but they wouldn't give him a show. He actually went and got his nose done. Steve Karlin, who I worked for at EPI, met his rabbi, and the rabbi came and said, "How come you don't give Monty a show?" And said, "Rabbi, just between me and you, maybe if he had his nose done." So Monty went and got his nose done and didn't get a show, still didn't get a show.

*Collings*

Still didn't happen.

*Billett*

But Monty, smart, said, "Look. What I'll do is I'll get my own show. I'll create a show and I'll--." So he sold his first show called "Personality," and he sold it out in California, came out here, did the pilot, sold the show. They wouldn't use Monty as a host.

*Collings*
Oh, god.
*Billett*
Yes. "Book somebody else." Well, then his director was Stef Hatos , and he and he and Stef created "Let's Make a Deal" together, and they did it in church groups and stuff. And they presented it, and they said, "Great. We'll do it." They didn't want to use Monte. Well, they couldn't find anybody else to do it, because Monty [snaps fingers] had numbers. You have to know numbers. You know, "Hey, six da da thing," and--
*Collings*
Yes, yes. That's a very fast-moving show.
*Billett*
Yes, right, and you've got to keep it all in--and they couldn't find anybody, so they said, "Okay, let him do it." And they let him do it, and bingo, huge, huge hit. So he's out here, he's a huge, huge hit. He meets me. I came out I think with my wife on a trip in '69, and I met Monty at NBC, and he said, "What are you doing?" And I said, "Well, I just finished this." "Come out then. We want somebody in charge of development to do development for us. You'll be in charge." "Great." So I took the job.
*Billett*
So Monty hires me. Within the first year, I think, I created a show called "Split Second." It was a ripoff of--I worked for Merv Griffin back in New York, and "Jeopardy," I loved "Jeopardy," I loved the pace of "Jeopardy." But there were things that bothered me about "Jeopardy." Final jeopardy, if you're way ahead, you can't lose. You just bet two dollars and you're done. No matter what they do, they get it, you miss it, you still win. That always bothered me. So there were a few things. I changed it and it was a good show. It really is an excellent show. And we had a pusher at the end of it, five cars onstage, five Pontiacs, a convertible, a sedan, a wagon, five models of Pontiacs. And the winner, whoever won the game at the end, final jeopardy, won that final round, which I changed, too, and made it really exciting, got to pick one out of five cars. Only one would start up. This is my mechanic days. We pulled the coil wire out of four of them, and only one could start, and if you picked the car--you would put him in there, you'd turn the key and it went

[demonstrates sound], and if it didn't start, boo, boo. "Oh, you can come back tomorrow."

*Collings*

As an audience member, I don't even think I could take it.

*Billett*

But you'd come back tomorrow. And if you won the second day, you'd get a one out of four chance. We'd black one car out, and then it was a one out of four, one out of three. But eventually you would get into the car, you'd go, "Vrooom," and it'd start up and, you know, whoa, music. It was great. It was great. So Monty and I were--I was thrilled. Monty, I loved Monty [unclear], and Monty and I would go--Stef didn't like the business end of it that much, so Monty and I would go to meetings with executives. And out here, you had to wait till the people from New York came out to Beverly Hills Hotel, and then you'd go meet them, and you know, what are they looking for, what do we have, that kind of stuff.

*Collings*

So things were still sort of being run out of the East Coast?

*Billett*

Yes, yes. They had executives here, but the New York people were the bosses. So they would meet at the Beverly Hills Hotel, and this one day--I'll only tell the story because, well, you'll hear why I tell it when we get to the end of it--we met them at Scandia on Sunset Boulevard. There was a restaurant where they'd get bored of the Beverly Hills Hotel and say, "Let's have lunch in Scandia." So at Scandia at lunchtime, it was all suits. They're all dressed up and everybody hobnobbing and that stuff, and Monty and I go and we sit, and we have talk and blah, blah, blah, and then we leave. And they'd stay because they'd have dessert with another package after. I mean, they'd stay there for meetings. So we come out, and there's a few steps down and then the driveway that comes in off Sunset, and you hand your ticket. We're waiting for our car. We're standing there waiting, and in drives this Stutz Bearcat, dark midnight blue, a replica of a 1928 Stutz Bearcat--

*Collings*

Gosh.

*Billett*

--beautiful. It was just, you know. Well, of course, all the suits stand there, they just go, mm, mm, look at that car.

*Collings*
Mm, who's that?
*Billett*
Nobody's going to go, "Wow!" [laughter] Everybody's very circumspect. There's two people driving, and the driver gets out, and he starts to come out, and the driver's got the same color suit on with a high neck--
*Collings*
Oh, gosh.
*Billett*
--and it's Elvis Presley.
*Collings*
Oh, my goodness.
*Billett*
Well, and everybody, mm, mm, Elvis. Well, Monty was talking to somebody, and I'm pulling his [unclear]. "This is Elvis." And nobody's saying a word, because they're too cool to say anything, and the next thing you hear is, "Holy shit! It's Monty Hall!"
*Collings*
Oh, no.
*Billett*
"My god, let's make a deal." And he starts jumping up and down.
*Collings*
This is Elvis Presley?
*Billett*
This is Elvis Presley. [imitates voice] "I tell Priscilla I seen Monty Hall, she going a sheet." [laughs] Well, they're there with their mouths open. He is jumping up and down like a housewife from Boise, seeing Monty. He's jumping up and, "Let's make a deal! Let's make a deal! Pick me! Pick me!" Standing in front of this place. And Monty's used to it. He's not used to Elvis Presley doing it, but--and he reaches behind him, and he takes from his back, not pocket, he had it in his waist, this gun--
*Collings*
What?
*Billett*
--a pearl-handled, inlaid with all kinds of jewels, and he said, "See this gun, Monty?" He says, "Which is worth more? I'll make a deal.

Let's make a deal. Is this worth more, or the car?" He said, "And if you're right, you get to keep it."
*Collings*
You can have it.
*Billett*
"And you can keep it. What do you say, Monty?"
*Collings*
Oh, my gosh.
*Billett*
Well, Monty being--you know, Monty was very into variety clubs and very into doing charity work, and I am sure, he stood there--I forget exactly what he did, but he got the gun or the car--
*Collings*
He did? Oh, my gosh.
*Billett*
--to auction off at some variety thing, or got him. And I remember the last thing is they were talking and he said, "Oh, this is my associate, Stu Billett, Stuart Billett." And Elvis said, "Stu Wart? Stu Wart? What kind of name is that?" [laughter] "Stu Wart?" "Stu is fine, Elvis." "Stu Wart, Wart. That's a weird name." [laughs] In Tennessee, I guess, Mississippi, he never heard [unclear] Stu Wart. [laughter] Oh, god. But I met Elvis Presley. Salvador Dali, Elvis Presley. [laughs]
*Collings*
That's it.
*Billett*
All right, now, Monty. I leave Monty, and I hear--I'm going to go out on my own. I decide I've got to do this myself. So I open up an office, I take a little office on a lot. It was the old Zoetrope lot. I had a parking space next to George Burns.
*Collings*
Oh, really?
*Billett*
He had a Cadillac and I had a Volkswagen bug convertible, red. It said "George Burns and Stu Billett." I loved that. That was the best part of that. I got a deal at NBC. I did a show called "Fantasies Fulfilled." And long story, it didn't sell. I did the pilot, love the pilot, they loved the pilot. Freddy Silverman had a dream, woke up and wanted to change it, some stupid thing, and I said no.

*Collings*
He had a dream?
*Billett*
Yes. Woke up one day, and they called me over and said, "Oh, Freddy had a dream. He dreamed he saw the show with--." I had like "I've Got a Secret" in front of it, and then the audience would pick the best fantasy fulfilled. Everybody had a fantasy. They'd come on and guess their fantasy, and then the audience would pick which one should be the thing, and then we'd do that next week, or three days later you'd see that, because you could only do one a day, the fantasy, fulfill somebody's fantasy one day. Well, he has a dream, and he thinks it should be like "Let's Make a Deal," like do you want your fantasy, or do you want this couch?
*Collings*
This car.
*Billett*
Yes. You want your fantasy, or do you want this washer-dryer?
*Collings*
Yes. What if your fantasy is the washer-dryer?
*Billett*
Well, no, we had great fantasies, and to have somebody trade it away for something? I said, "No, I'm not going to do that." But anyway, I had a pilot. And now I said, "Look. I don't want to make a studio deal." Because if you make a studio deal, what happens invariably is the person you make the deal with leaves, for some reason or other. The new guy comes in and he's not going to touch anything you've got, because you're the old guy's guy. So I hate those deals. So I said to my agent, "Find me--." Like Chuck Barris had Milton DeLugg as a partner, silent partner. "Find me somebody with a lot of money." Well, they also represented Ralph, and Ralph was at a point where he wanted to bring somebody in. So they set up a meeting. "Oh, god, Ralph Edwards?" And I could remember they set up the meeting, the agent and a lawyer at Morton's on Robertson Boulevard. I'm driving there and I'm thinking, I can't go in and then start blubbering about, "Oh, I think 'This is Your Life' is the greatest thing," and, "Oh, you're the genius of all time." It's bullshit. So what I'll do is I'll talk about executives at the networks who we both know. I'm sure he knows Mike Brotman and Freddy Silverman and so and so, and what I'm going to say about this one

and that one and talk business, because that's what he's looking for, a guy to--business. So I remember I walk in and they were there, and I wasn't late, but I got there and they were all seated, and the maitre d is bringing me to the table, and Ralph pops up out of the table--of course, his agent and the lawyer, they sit. He pops up, he runs over and grabs my hand. He has the biggest hands in the world. I found out--a couple of years later I told him this, not long after. I said, "How could--?" You know, he's not that big a man. He said, "You work on a farm, you can't--," how did he put it, "You can't grow up on a farm with little hands." But he took my hand in his big hand and he shook my hand, and he sat me down and he spent a half hour talking about my show.

*Collings*

Wow.

*Billett*

He had seen "Fantasy." [chokes up] It gets me. A half hour. He loved--he wanted to hear about this, and how'd we do this, all the things that I wanted to talk about, he was talking about to me, about my show. Excuse me.

*Collings*

That's all right. I mean, that sounds like that's the kind of guy he was. I mean, this is your life.

*Billett*

Yes. I know. By the time dessert came, I mean, he was going to make me an offer, and no matter what the offer was, there's no way I wasn't going to take it. I wanted to work with him. And we made a deal quickly, and I was right. I mean, he was positive. And then I met Barbara [Edwards], and Barbara was positive, and Barbara came to run-throughs. She'd come to the presentations and always positive, always pushing you, "Go, go, go." The two of them were just--I mean, I consider that I'm the luckiest man in the world, to have a career where I end up Ralph Edwards' partner for twenty-five years. I mean, what is that? It was great. It was great.

*Collings*

Were there--I mean, here you are coming from this background, your dad's a mechanic and--

*Billett*

Well, Ralph was from a farm.

*Collings*

From a farm, and here's Johnny Carson, Nebraska. I mean, were there a lot of people who fell into that?

*Billett*

Sure. Sure. Sure. Because show biz, it's not rocket science at NASA. It's not big business, MBAs at Wharton. It's show biz. An idea can come from anywhere. The enthusiasm of putting together a show is that. You don't need--what do you need for it? Think back to Al Jolson and all those stories of those people.

*Collings*

Yes, right, right. But I mean, there's a long tradition of Vaudeville and all kinds of show biz in this country, but you're kind of pointing to people who didn't even come out of that legacy.

*Billett*

Didn't even come out of that, yes. But that's where they came out of. That's where they came out of. Al Jolson's father was a cantor. He said, "I don't want to sing right here. I'm going to sing to the world."

*Collings*

I'm going to sing over there.

*Billett*

"Who said you could sing for the world? Stay here, schmutz. Sing here in the synagogue." "I don't want to sing in the synagogue. I want to sing in the movies." "There are no movies." "There will be movies." [laughs]

*Collings*

Just leave it to me.

*Billett*

Yes, "There'll be movies and I'll be up there on the movie." Who knows. No, that's what's great about show biz. Anybody can get and do it. I mean, look at the most powerful person in the world of entertainment is Oprah Winfrey. Where did she come from?

*Collings*

Well, she almost came from the equivalent of radios, you know, local Chicago television.

*Billett*

She did. She was doing a "Phil Donahue Show" in Chicago, issues. This is interesting. And when we went on, "People's Court" went on the air, Chicago would hit immediately. It was a huge hit in Chicago. Why, I don't know. But she sat there saying, "Why is that a hit?

Why is that everybody loved this so much? Conflict." It was the conflict. So she took her show and she put conflict in it, and so when she came out here and she first went on the air, she was Jerry Springer. That's where Jerry Springer and all those shows came out of was Oprah. She came out having conflict, people who were at each other. Once everybody started copying her, she said, "Whoa. I'm not going to--look at, that's awful." She never did it like that. They were carrying it to--so she changed the whole show around. She's a genius. She is true genius, because she could have just stayed doing what she was doing. And the funny thing about how she got on the air is interesting. King World [Productions] brought her out. King World had gone out, and King World--the agent, Merv Griffin's agent, Murray Schwartz , a little guy, cute guy, was in a bar one night, and one of the King brothers was there. They had a few drinks, and he's talking about, "I can take any show, I could sell anything, I can get it on the air. Look at that." I think "Wheel of Fortune" was on the air. And he said, "I had that show, I could take that out in syndication and make millions with it, like that." Well, Murray knew Merv was showless, so he sat down, he said, "You're telling me you could do that?" "Yeah, you give me a guarantee," blah, blah, blah, started talking, meet him the next day. They made a deal. They took "Wheel of Fortune," went off the air, took it out in syndication and he sold it. "Quick, we need another one." And he gave him "Jeopardy." Voom. All of a sudden King World, who was selling "Our Gang" comedies--their father was in the business before them. They were schleppers. All of a sudden they are out there, seven-thirty, two huge shows. Now, one of the deals they made with Merv was any game show had to be a Merv Griffin production. So they could take another game show, but it had to go through Merv. Merv had to approve it, change it, whatever. So Merv had another couple of shows he gave them. They didn't work. And they would bring in Merv shows, and Merv, he didn't like it, and oh, this one year, holy shit, they're sitting there and, "We could sell anything," because they've got the two hit shows on the air. They can sell anything. They can sell you dancing with your--

*Collings*

Turtle.

*Billett*

--your turtle. They can sell it. "Give it to me." And they don't have anything. They don't have a game. That year Oprah came out and got the rights to syndicate her show. She comes out, she goes to Warner Brothers, she goes to so and so, she goes to so and so. She's going to all the studios, and everybody would say, "Mm, kind of chubby black lady from Chicago, no show." Everybody turned her down. She walked into King World. "I've got this show." "Is it a game show?" "No, it's not a game show. It's a talk show. What do you mean game show?" "You're sure there's no game elements? You don't do game?" "No, I don't do game." "Okay. Sign here." [laughs]

*Collings*

So why did they want the show?

*Billett*

Because they had nothing else. They could sell anything. "Mario, we can't get a game because of Merv, and time's running out. We've got to get something." "Here, we'll take her. Boom, we're selling that." So they go out and they say, "You want 'Jeopardy' and 'Wheel'? You've got to take this fat black lady with the so and so," and sold it. Isn't that show biz? What kind of degree do you need to do that?

*Collings*

Right. [laughter]

*Billett*

That's why you find people coming from anywhere. I mean, it's tough. There's that element. There's creating shows and there's selling shows, and that's a whole different thing.

*Collings*

Well, is it the same today? I mean, you're describing like thirty--

*Billett*

When I got into syndication is when it started. See, Monty didn't even want to go into syndication. "The People's Court"--somebody contacted Monty, a fellow named John Masterson contacted Monty. They had an idea; 1975. Monty says, "See my guy Stu Billett." John Masterson created "Bride and Groom" back in the fifties. He was an older gentleman, been in the business, and he came in and what he had was that they had just put cameras in the courtroom in California for the first time. John said, "Hey, if we put tape machines on all of those cameras and tape all these cases, we could sell all

these cases, make half-hour shows out of all these cases." What he really had in mind was Court TV, but there was no cable then. But he brought that to me. And I thought, well, I mean the law always fascinated me. Something--I liked that idea. So I told Monty, "Take it for six months. Let's get a deal so we can play with it or do something." So I went downtown. I got in my car, I drove downtown where there's a lot of courtrooms, just because there were more courtrooms down there, and I went from courtroom to courtroom and watching cases, you know, weeks down there. The most fascinating thing to me that I discovered was, we all grow up watching courtrooms on television and in the movies.

*Collings*

Yes, like "Perry Mason" or something.

*Billett*

"Perry Mason" and James Stewart in "Anatomy for a Murder." The lawyers are, boom, and everything's clear, and boom--

*Collings*

Right. They give these wonderful speeches.

*Billett*

Yes, these marvelous speeches and it turns around. But you go to a courtroom and you see people standing up, and now I know why they have legal pads are longer than regular pads for everybody else. Lawyers have more, because they read off their pads, and they drone on and on and on and on and on and on. I saw judges sitting on the bench like this [demonstrates].

*Collings*

Just like, "Oh," like, "make it stop."

*Billett*

Holding their eyes open so they wouldn't fall asleep. I mean, it's the dullest thing in the world. That's what happened to Court TV. It was a great idea, but--they tried to intersperse talking heads. You know, they'd interrupt and try to get through it. Why is it so dull? It's so dull. And they used to try to obfuscate so that, oh, we'll mix everybody up and they won't be able to convict them. Nobody'll know what to do. It was boring. And this one day I'm walking, going to another one thinking, this--I see a little thing, Small Claims Court. I had heard of Small Claims Court, but I didn't really know. I went in and I sat down, and most of the cases are people not showing up, they win by default, or the defendant had no--the

rents, they didn't have the money. "I don't have any money to pay him." [laughs] "Yeah, what do you want? You want my hat, want my clothes?" But the first day this happened. They call a case and it's a little Jewish man, who waddles up to the thing, and he's suing a street kid. I don't know if you remember Eddie Murphy on "Saturday Night Live" played a character I think called Divine [Brown] Jones or something, slicked-back hair and this real street [unclear].

*Collings*

I'm thinking of somebody else.

*Billett*

And that's what this kid was. I mean, he was--he's zipped up. So this old Jewish guy is suing this street kid. That's interesting right off the bat. Just watching him walk up there was interesting. And the case, you know, "So and so, okay," the judge says, "Mr. Goldberg, what's your gripe?" [imitates accent] "Vell, I bought this glasses, sunglasses mit sprinkles." "Sunglasses with sprinkles?" The defendant jumps up. "No, they're rhinestones, your honor. Here they are." And he's got a pair and they're just beautiful. He turns to the audience, you know, "There, see that? Only ten dollars a pair. I've got all different kind--." Boom, boom, you know. "Hey, defendant, when it's your turn, you could go. You don't talk now." "All right, what happened? You bought--?" "Yes, I bought three pairs. I bought one for my wife, I bought one for my neighbor, and one for my sister-in-law. And he said he'd give me a five dollars off, twenty-five dollars for the three pair. And I tried them on, they were beautiful, I said okay. I told him to put them in the bag. He puts them into the bag. I take the bag, I get on the subway, I go home, and on the bus, and I tell--I call my neighbor, I call my sister-in-law and my wife, I got a present for them. And I open it up and nothing. All the sprinkles aren't in the bag. No sprinkles." Judge says, "Oh," he says, "let me look." And he looked and, "You're right." Turns to the defendant. "What have you got to say about this?" "My honor--."

*Collings*

My honor.

*Billett*

"My honor," and he shows them off again. "We've seen your glasses, but--." "Here's what happened," he said. "Mr. Goldberg,

three, I started to wrap them up, put them in each separate bag. No, no, he don't buy. He don't want three bags. He wants one bag. I told him he doesn't want one bag. You've got to keep it separate. No, no, I'm there. I have to go all the way on the bus. I don't want three bags. I'll lose the bag. Blah, blah. And so I put them in one bag. Customer's always right. I put them in the bag, I gave him the bag, took his money, goodbye." "Your honor, I would like you to ask the plaintiff to raise his hand up, his right hand." "All right. Mr. Goldberg, raise your right hand." He's got palsy.

*Collings*

Oh, dear. [laughter]

*Billett*

I mean, he lost the case right there. He's sitting on a bus. He's sitting on a bus shaking for two hours. He gets home, "Look, all the sprinkles are gone." [laughs] Well, I mean, everybody was on the floor. And I thought, it was great. Now, how many of these are there? So I went back, took--an hour away from where we were, Hollywood. Went up Ventura, Santa Monica, and we checked how many cases in Small Claims Court. Seventy-five thousand cases are filed a year.

*Collings*

Gosh.

*Billett*

There was a $750 limit, and, you know, we'd need 600 cases, half hour a day. There has to be five hundred goos ones out of 75,000. It's just a matter of getting that thing and stripmine, go through all the cases. So we took it to the networks. The networks all, "Who cares? Small Claims Court, blah, shitty idea." I actually did one at NBC. I forget who I used for a judge, but they thought it was, nah. Well, syndication to me was the place to go. That's where you can make money. The networks didn't own it, and Monty and Steve didn't want to go. At that time, the big packages--syndication--show business and the garment industry are very similar. I was going with my wife during this time, and I discovered this. She was in the garment industry. She worked for a buyer, or worked for a supplier. What she did was she would go out and go to a store and buy the hottest blouse that was selling at Neiman Marcus. She'd bring it back. They would call so-and-so from the back, the guy with the pins in his mouth, and they'd say, "Hey, remember that material we

got stuck with? Here. Copy this and--." That's what they do, and they sell it, and anything that's hot. Oh, Britney Spears took the top off. She's wearing her thing below her belly. Everybody in town started cutting the tops off their jeans, right, and they flood them out. It's show biz. That's exactly what show biz does. Think about a store. Prime time is the boutique stores up on top, right? Main floor, that's daytime. Bargain basement? That's syndication. Nobody goes down in bargain basement. Ooh, ooh, nobody even wants to admit they're down there. Same thing with syndication. So a lot of people didn't want--Monty didn't want to do syndication. He wouldn't do it. They wanted to do network. They were big. So when I joined--a couple of years later I joined Ralph, Ralph is in syndication. He doesn't care. He's going to get a show on the air. He likes show biz. And we called John Masterson, because they didn't want to spend money to keep it going, and the rights went back to Masterson, so we called Masterson. Masterson couldn't get anything going, and we make a deal. Ralph and I made a deal with Masterson. You see his credit on the show, "Based on an idea by John Masterson." We took it and we went into syndication.

*Collings*

Just straight in.

*Billett*

And syndication--and Telepictures, who we used, they were like the King Brothers. They were selling "Here's Lucy," not "I Love Lucy," "Here's Lucy." They were four guys who came from CBS and got together. They were set, and "People's Court" became their--boom. Now, once you have one hit, then you can sell anything, and they turned into the Warner Brothers, they got so big because of "People's Court." So a whole new thing opened up in syndication. And I discovered that every year they're selling "People's Court" with "Show X." You buy "People's Court, you've got to buy--. Well, I said to Ralph, I said, "Hey. We can't go anyplace else. We've got to do a show for them every year. If they're going to take a show out, it should be one of ours." So every year we came out with another show, and one year we had three shows on the air. We had "People's Court," "Superior Court," which was all written, and we had "Family Medical Center," which was another written one.

*Collings*

There's a show like that now, reenactments of--it's called "ER Dramas" or something like that.

*Billett*

Yes, yes. And this is before ER was even on the air, and "People's Court" was before any of the legal shows, "L.A. Law" and all that. It triggered--everybody said, "Wow. Courts?" Boom. And they ran out and--

*Collings*

Yes, it seems to have--

*Billett*

But it does that. Westerns, one western and all of a sudden you have twenty westerns. Cop show? Now there's twenty cop shows. I mean, it's like the garment industry, same thing. Oh, my god, off the shoulder is it. Everybody's selling off the shoulder. It's very, very similar.

*Collings*

That's a great way of looking at it.

*Billett*

I have to tell you a marvelous story, because I don't want to forget it, a Ralph and Barbara story. We had three shows on the air, and every Christmas Ralph had a Christmas thing. If there was no show or one show on the air, it was at his house. It just went to wherever, but it had to be a Christmas party, Santa Clauses and the elves and a choir singing things. It was marvelous. It was so them. And this is where we had three shows on the air, so it was big, a lot of people, our staff, and he did it in the Hotel Roosevelt right across the street from us. We took the main room, and we're in there, and Ralph's up. Ralph would make little notes on everything. He loved it. He was performing, you know, and he loved it. And I would just get up and blah, blah, blah quick and get Ralph up there. I'm sitting there and Ralph is going--he's doing--he's just, everybody loves him. I look over and Barbara is sitting there, and she's going [demonstrates]. She like blew three kisses to him.

*Collings*

Oh, that's really sweet.

*Billett*

And, oh, I melted. You know, here they are, fifty years they're married or something. They have three kids grown, and that is so sweet, you know. So I couldn't say anything then, and the evening

went on and he stopped and then the dancing and other things are happening, and I notice she was sitting there and nobody was right there. So I sat down real close to her and I said, "Barbara, I've got to tell you," I said, "if I can get Lucy to do that, blow me kisses, it would be so marvelous." She grabs my shoulder and she pulls me down with her lips right next to my ear, and she said, "Ralph and I have this little thing worked out. Kiss, k-i-s-s, keep it short, stupid." [laughter] So whenever she thought he was going on too long, she blew him a little kiss. [laughter] Isn't that great?

*Collings*

That is a great story.

*Billett*

Isn't that great? Oh, god. [laughs]



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