

The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour: A Look at the Sixties

By Rod Fraser



This past week I read a short obituary claiming Dick Smothers died this spring. This proved to be a hoax! He is alive and well, and currently a little over 80

years of age. His brother Tom, age 83, is also living. Both are long retired, although they do turn up from time-to-time for the odd TV appearance. Dick lives in Florida and Tom in California.

As luck would have it—a few days later, I came across another reference to the Smothers Brothers. I listened to '[The Draft Dodger Rag](#)', a tune performed by Tom and Dick (together with George Segal) during the late 1960s. After hearing this song, and feeling a little nostalgia for my youth, I decided to see what I could find out about the two brothers, and their life and times.



The Smothers Brothers came to public attention in the early Sixties as a music-and-comedy team. Tom played the acoustic guitar and Dick the string bass. They were both good singers and their music focused on folk tunes of the time. Their first national television appearance was on the '*Jack Paar Show*' on January 28, 1961.

Their routine on stage consisted of singing such songs as 'Michael Row Your Boat Ashore', 'My Old Man' and 'Pretoria'. Usually Tom—who played a slightly offbeat and unintelligent goof—would interrupt the songs with some funny asides. Dick would challenge Tom's remarks, trade barbs with his

brother (Tom's signature line being, "Mom liked you best") and so continue the comic banter that was quite popular with their audience.

Here are a couple of examples:

Tommy Smothers says to his brother, "you can tell who's running the country by how many clothes people wear."

Dickie says, "you mean some people can afford more clothes on, and other people can afford less clothes on?"

Tommy replies, "Exactly, ordinary people have the 'less-ons.'"

Dickie says, "Then who's running the country?"

Tommy deadbans. "The Morons."

Dickie Smothers once told their audience why he and Tom seldom finished a song,

"Well, it's like this. A song usually lasts three minutes, but my brother's attention span is only a minute and a half."

On television in those years, the nine o'clock evening slot on Sundays was very popular with viewers. Every network tried its best to fill it with a popular show. NBC was the most successful. They broadcast '*Bonanza*' which dominated the ratings for years. It was the story of a father and three adult sons living on a ranch in the 'old West'. For its time, it was very good television.

CBS were casting about for a new show to compete with '*Bonanza*' in the late 1960s. They wanted something edgy to appeal to a younger audience. They knew the Smothers Brothers and offered them the slot.

That's how the *Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* was born. It included singing, dancing, comedic sketches and satirical political comment. It premiered on CBS in February of 1967 and continued until the show was cancelled in the spring of 1969.

When the contracts were signed, Tom insisted on full creative control. CBS was agreeable to this: They didn't foresee any problem with two 'clean-cut lads' performing a one-hour music and comedy show with a number of well-known guests.

Indeed there weren't any problems initially. This changed quite quickly, however, as civil rights issues became more inflamed, debates concerning the

Equal Rights Amendment flourished and the war in Viet Nam proved increasingly unpopular. By late 1967, American casualties in Viet Nam included 15,087 dead and 109,527 wounded.

Young people were against the war, and sought an America with justice for all. Tom and Dick Smothers were part of this new generation and wanted to discuss these issues on-air.

George Washington said, "I cannot tell a lie."

Richard Nixon said, "I cannot tell the truth."

Bill Clinton said, "I cannot tell the difference."

...Tom Smothers

Although Tom Smothers played the fool during their shows, in real life he was a talented writer and an intelligent, persuasive individual. Together with Dick, he fought a running battle with CBS censors while providing their viewers with 'hip' and 'edgy' entertainment.

Dick once told an interviewer that Tom was the driving force in their success. If it hadn't been for Tom, they would never have started or prospered.

It was also Tom who took the lead in their dealings with the CBS censors.

According to Dick, it was probably Tom's intransigence that caused CBS to fire them. But he quickly added that Tom had his full support. He agreed with the principle that entertainers should not be stifled from speaking out on important issues.

Summary of Interview with Tom Smothers in
2002 by JerryJazzMusician.com

As our act evolved, Dick started introducing each song with a short monologue. Then after singing for a minute or so, I would start in with the jokes. Dick would interrupt by saying, 'That's not right.' Or, 'That's stupid.' This led to the comedic banter that was our watchword.

I played the guitar and initially Dick played no musical instrument. So I taught Dick how to play the string bass. After that, he looked like a proper musician and important part of the comedy team.

Dickie was the straight man. He kept it real and the tempo going. If the audience believes the straight man, then the audience will believe the comedian.

One of the funnier skits of the *Smother Brothers Comedy Hour* was performed by Pat Paulson during the 1968 election campaign. The writers on the show soon created a 'Paulson for President' campaign to satirize the political process. It was featured on the show throughout the election cycle and was hugely popular.

"With his bushy eyebrows and dark suits, Paulson looked like a politician." His spoof as a Presidential candidate earned him an Emmy award.

Here are a few quotes from Pat's election platform.

I want a government with no Taxes. Let's just tip the government 15% if they do a good job.

... Pat Paulson

Why should we tell kidnappers, murderers, and embezzlers their rights? If they don't know their rights, they shouldn't be in the business.

... Pat Paulson

In America, a boy can grow up to be president. Or, if he never grows up, vice president.

... Pat Paulson

After the Smothers brothers were fired from CBS during the spring of 1969, they won an Emmy for outstanding writing in Comedy, Variety and Music. It was well deserved. More importantly, they won a lawsuit against CBS for breach of contract, collecting almost \$800 thousand in damages.

We're a comedy act. We go out and loosen the screws of despair in this world, bring some joy, and a little discontent. We show some anger at the way things are going, because it affects us all. Thank God, there's comedy.

... Tom Smothers

The Smothers Brothers continued their writing, playing and performing in the years that followed their cancellation, but they never achieved the fame of the *Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*. For those who have never watched their program, why not click [here](#) to listen to a short video.

Tom and Dick will not be forgotten. They were champions of 'Free Speech' in the 1960s when the issues facing the United States were so compelling. History will be kind in remembering these two stalwart defenders of the 'First Amendment.'

April 30, 2020