

# Bob

*'Write if you get work—  
and hang by your thumbs'*

ONE HALF OF the Bob and Ray show lives between a dirt road and the ocean at Cundy's Harbor, population close to 800.

Bob (Robert Brackett) Elliott has been coming here with his wife and children for 22 years. I went to their house for dinner recently and met the voice of Wally Ballou, world's dumbest reporter, Pop Beloved, and countless characters who have peopled the nation's longest-running radio comedy show.

The Bob and Ray show began in 1946 at a Boston radio station where Elliott and Ray Goulding were young staff announcers. Today, 38 years later, the team is going stronger and more popular than ever. The comic company of characters they created has won an immense new following in a new generation. But the loyalty of old fans is also stronger than ever. When Bob and Ray starred at prestigious Carnegie Hall, every seat was sold for every performance.

"Lots of teen-agers came with their parents and grandparents," says Elliott. "That span of three generations astonished and pleased us."

The Bob and Ray team crisscrosses the country several times a year, doing personal appearance shows in theaters, cutting radio and television commercials, making films in Hollywood.

THEIR MATERIAL has the stature of a classic in broadcasting circles. Two years ago, the Museum of Broadcasting compiled a Bob and Ray retrospective 25 hours long and presented it daily in five-hour segments. Their skits featuring Mary McGoon giving recipes, Mary Backstayge, Noble Wife, Joe Blim-mix, private eye, Captain Parker Gibbs (public relations flak) have been published as hardcover books and come out in paperback next January. The New Yorker has run two major profiles—nine years apart—on this pair of strangely gifted New Englanders.

"Bob and Ray have, as unique producer-author-actors, invented, dreamed up the lines for and then played, mainly on radio and television, a surrealistic Dickensian repertory company, which chastens the fools of the world with hyperbole, slapstick, parody, verbal nonsense, non sequitur and sheer wit, all of it clean, subtle and gentle," wrote Whitney Balliett in The New Yorker of July 5, 1982.

But the man at Cundy's Harbor didn't act at all like a legend. Elliott at 61 looks and behaves like a low-key country squire, not a touch of show-biz showing. He is the thinner

and shorter one in the Bob and Ray team. The hair he has these days is close-cropped and white; he has prominent eyes and a ruddy, outdoor complexion. But his most conspicuous characteristic is an easygoing pleasantness, a sense of feeling good, so infectious everyone around him acts pleasant and feels good, too.

ALMOST HALF of the Elliotts' house is deck overlooking the ocean and islands of Casco Bay. The main room overflows with fascinating facets of Elliott's life. He is a good painter, and one wall features several of his paintings. (Elliott recently had a one-man show at Bowdoin College of some 30 paintings he has made of the Brunswick area.)

The sloping ceiling of another room is covered with the wooden signs Elliott has carved and painted, reproductions of the old commercial signs which once hung outside livery stables, taverns, butcher and fishmonger shops. On another wall is Elliott's special pride—the old-fashioned soda fountain, taken complete from the drug-



By  
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store in Brooks, owned by Bob's uncle.

ELLIOTT'S MOTHER was a Maine girl, born in Brooks. "Whatever artistic talents I have, came from her," says Bob. "She did needlepoint, refinished old furniture and painted toleware trays. His father was musical and worked in the insurance business in Massachusetts.

Bob was born and raised in the Boston suburb of Winchester, went to the Exeter School of Art every Saturday morning in Boston. After high school in Winchester, Elliott went to New York. In the daytime, he studied at the Feagin Drama School, where Jeff Chandler, John Lund and Angela Lansbury were classmates. At night he worked as an usher in Radio City Music Hall and as a page at NBC with Gordon MacRae.

When he was 18 and back in Boston, Elliott landed his first job



in radio—as an announcer on local radio station WHDH. He wrote his material, carried his equipment and did remotes from such spots as the Silver Dollar Grill and the Seven Seas Cafe, where the big black bands played.

By 1943 he was drafted into the Army and sent overseas with the 28th Infantry Division. After World War II, in 1946, Bob was back at the Boston radio station. The station hired another returned veteran, Ray Goulding, to read the news breaks between 6 a.m. and 9 a.m., while Elliott spun the records.

The chemistry between the two was right from the start. Soon they were living up the morning show with the first ad-libs, the first a spoof of soap opera (Linda Lovely). The Bob and Ray team was never born; it just slid into existence and grew and kept growing for the next 38 years.

In 1951 they grabbed a chance to break into New York radio, gave the Boston station a week's notice and left for NBC.

"Things really began to hum," says Bob. "In addition to our 15-minute evening show on NBC, we soon had a two-and-a-half-hour morning show, a half-hour evening show and a 15-minute television show."

All that happened more than 30 years ago, before Elliott and Goulding were 30 years old.

AS WE SIT on his deck, watching ledges uncover as the tide ebbs, it is hard to realize that this happy, unassuming man cooking steaks on the outdoor grill has been making

America laugh for almost 40 years, through the presidencies of FDR, Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, LBJ, Nixon, Ford and Reagan. And more millions are laughing with Bob and Ray than ever before.

But Elliott doesn't act like a comedian; he cracks no jokes at home. And he doesn't give off even a whiff of that show-business aura.

So what's the secret? Certainly Bob and Ray are, as Dick Cavett has said, "immaculate performers. They have faultless timing, and they are effortless... They have none of that sketch-playing broadness a lot of comedians fall into, and they never, never let on that they are trying to be funny."

Yet, as I watch Bob turning the steaks, and think about his painting and woodcarving, about his affectionate bonds to his uncle's old-fashioned drugstore in Brooks, I am sure that technique and talent alone cannot explain why people take Bob and Ray to their hearts, as friends, in 1984 just as they did in 1954.

So what's the secret? I think part of the secret at least is that Bob Elliott is an extremely pleasant man, who loves being alive, loves the people around him and likes being the human being he is. That is a pretty comfortable, sane spot from which to poke gentle fun at a world which he hugely enjoys. Perhaps this is why the Bob and Ray show goes on and on and on, ever enjoyable and ever laughable.

Then, of course, Bob Elliott has Maine.