



The Godmother of Comedy

Carol Burnett talks about her new Netflix series, shattering glass ceilings at CBS, and her love for *Breaking Bad*.

BY TOMMIE ETHINGTON

Q: Tell me about the concept for your new show, *A Little Help with Carol Burnett* (<https://www.netflix.com/title/80193475>). Why'd you decide to work with kids?

A: It was my manager, Steve Sauer's idea. We were talking about how "out of the mouths of babes" comes the truth. We remembered when Art Linkletter did a show called *Kids Say the Darndest Things* and how cute that was, and then it just evolved from there. We wanted kids ages 5 to 9 because they're not censoring themselves yet, and whatever they think comes out of their mouths. We have grown-ups come in with grown-up dilemmas, so to speak, and we have a panel of kids that tries to give advice on how to solve this grown-up dilemma.

Did you find they were pretty good at giving advice?

Yes, they are. They're so smart. A woman came in and her dilemma was that she's going to marry this single dad who is raising two very young kids. She wanted to know how to make his kids like her. One of the kids raised his hand and said, "Well, bribery always works." (laughs) And then another one, I can't remember what the dilemma

was, but this little guy, he was about 7 years old, and his advice was, “You have to follow your heart.” Afterward, we ask the adult, “What advice are you going to take?” Or “What have you learned from this that you could take away?”

If you had to present a dilemma to the panel of kids, what would yours be?

You know, I’m really lucky. I don’t have a dilemma at this moment in my life.

What has showbiz taught you?

Never make a career decision based on money. When I was in my 20s, I had an offer to do an off-Broadway show, *Once Upon a Mattress*. It was only going to run for six weeks at a subscription theater and paid \$80 a week. I wanted to do it, but my manager said, “Are you crazy? I can get you a nightclub act in Las Vegas for \$1,500 a week.” That was more money than I could ever imagine, but I had always wanted to be on Broadway. I said to myself, *I’m not going to think about the money. I’m going to think about learning.* The show not only ran six weeks, but we were successful enough that they moved us to Broadway and we ran for a year. That was a very big break for me.

Speaking of breaks, you’ve helped other women get theirs. Why has it been important to you to empower others?

The very first guest we signed before we even started *The Carol Burnett Show* was Bernadette Peters. My husband and I saw her in a little show called *Dames at Sea*, and she was about 19 or 20. We just flipped over her talent and how funny she was, how beautiful she was. We went backstage and I introduced myself and said, “We would love to sign you to be a guest on our show.” Before she really hit the big time on Broadway, we had her on I think almost 15 times. I talked to her the other day. She called and said she was going to be on *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* and I said, “I TiVo him so I know I’ll see you.” We’re very, very close friends. But I don’t think of “empowering”; that just isn’t in my vocabulary.

You’ve talked about how *The Carol Burnett Show* almost didn’t happen. What’s the story there?

I was leaving *The Garry Moore Show* and I’d done really well. CBS wanted to sign me to a 10-year contract, which would require me to do one special and two guest shots on their sitcoms a year. The

agent I had at the time built it into the contract so that, within the first five years of that 10-year contract, if I, Carol, wanted to [have my own show], CBS would have to give me 30 one-hour episodes. I was more of a Broadway baby and didn't consider myself a host, but the last week of the fifth year, I thought, *Maybe I ought to push that button*. So we did. I called one of the vice presidents in New York and told them I wanted to push the button. He didn't know what I was talking about. He said, "Let me get back to you." And then he did and said, "Carol, comedy variety is really a man's game." It was patronizing, but he didn't mean it in a mean way—he really felt that. He said, "We've got this sitcom you could do," and I said, "I don't want to be the same person every week. I want to do sketches and do music and have a rep company." I knew we would be putting on a little musical comedy revue, which just appealed to me so much. We went in saying, "At least we've got 30 shows." I remember the first taping, with the team—Harvey Korman, Vicki Lawrence, and Lyle Waggoner—and we all decided that we were just going to have fun and entertain that studio audience. If they laughed and had fun, chances were people watching at home would have the same reaction.

Obviously, the show worked out. Did you ever get to talk to that CBS executive again?

Oh, well, he was wonderful. He said, "You know, you were right." I never thought about the fact that it was a woman doing it; it was just what I loved doing. I've heard Tina Fey and Amy Poehler and other wonderful comedians talk about when they saw the show and thought, *Oh, good, then I can do that, too*. It was like how Lucille Ball opened the door for women heading sitcoms.

Do you have a favorite sketch from your show?

Oh, gosh, no. I have genres. I loved doing the movie [parodies], where I could be Barbara Stanwyck in *Double Indemnity* or Joan Crawford in *Mildred Pierce*. I loved the family where I was Eunice and Vicki was Mama and Harvey was Ed. Those were very interesting because there were no jokes; it was all character driven. And I loved doing Mrs. Wiggins with Tim Conway doing Mr. Tudball; those were always silly and fun.

If you could have someone on the show now, who would you pick?

Meryl Streep.

What would you do with her?

Well, everything. She's not only a terrific actress, she's also a terrific comedian, and she sings up a storm. If you haven't seen *Postcards from the Edge*, do. She's with Shirley MacLaine, and she has this big finale at the very end of the movie, and it's just perfect.

What other shows do you watch?

Well, I'm a big fan of Vince Gilligan. He's the brains, the writer behind *Breaking Bad* and *Better Call Saul*. I'm not one for gore or anything—I kind of put my fingers over my eyes—but the plotlines and the acting, they're mesmerizing. I'm such a fan, and then I found out that he was a fan of mine. I sent him some DVDs of our shows, and when we taped our 50th anniversary show, Vince came. He was in the audience and came to the party afterward.

Is there a role or a project you'd like to take on in the future?

Anything Vince writes. *Stranger Things* would be fun to do, too.

What is your proudest career accomplishment? What would you like to be remembered for?

Well, I think the career accomplishment was the 11-year run of our show. And how would I like to be remembered? That I made people laugh and forget their troubles, at least for a few minutes.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

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