

*ALL BY
MY SELVES*

Walter, Peanut, Achmed, and Me

JEFF DUNHAM



Dutton

*ALL BY
MY SELVES*

Walter, Peanut, Achmed, and Me

JEFF DUNHAM



Dutton

Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Introduction](#)

[CHAPTER ONE - The Gift That Kept On Talking](#)

[CHAPTER TWO - How to Get a Job While Still a Minor](#)

[CHAPTER THREE - Three Radio Men and a Steek!](#)

[CHAPTER FOUR - Birth of an Old Fart](#)

[CHAPTER FIVE - Better Five Years Late Than One Day Early](#)

[CHAPTER SIX - The Instant Family plus Star Trek Nirvana](#)

[CHAPTER SEVEN - Moving Forward? Not Exactly](#)

[CHAPTER EIGHT - A Little Terrorist in the Best Damn Chapter](#)

[CHAPTER NINE - To the Stars and Back Times Infinity](#)

[CHAPTER TEN - Is This a Hockey Arena?](#)

[AFTERWORD](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

*ALL BY
MY SELVES*

Walter, Peanut, Achmed, and Me

JEFF DUNHAM



Dutton

DUTTON

Published by Penguin Group (USA) Inc.

375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, U.S.A.

Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario M4P 2Y3, Canada (a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.); Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England; Penguin Ireland, 25 St Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd); Penguin Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124, Australia (a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty Ltd); Penguin Books India Pvt Ltd, 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi-110 017, India; Penguin Group (NZ), 67 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, North Shore 0632, New Zealand (a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd); Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0R L, England
Published by Dutton, a member of Penguin Group (USA) Inc.

First printing, November 2010

Copyright © 2010 by Jeff Dunham All rights reserved

Illustrations by R. York Funston

Photo credits (numbers refer to photograph sequence):

Courtesy of the author, 1-5, 7-10, 12-15, 18, 20, 23 -25, 27-32 ; Courtesy ACTS Finals, 11; Carson Entertainment Group, 16 ; Cleveland Improv, 17; Dick Clark Productions, Inc., 19 ; Steven Whitson, 21; NBC Universal Photo Archive, 22; Fox Sports Net, Inc., 26 ; Gary Miller, 33

REGISTERED TRADEMARK—MARCA REGISTRADA
LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA
Dunham, Jeff, 1960 -

All by my selves : Walter, Peanut, Achmed, and me / Jeff Dunham. p. cm.
eISBN : 978-1-101-18928-3

1. Dunham, Jeff, 1960 - 2. Comedians—United States—Biography. 3. Ventriloquists—Biography.
4. Ventriloquism. I. Title.
PN2287.D846D86 2010
792.7'6028092—dc22
[B]
2010033645

Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise), without the prior written permission of both the copyright owner and the above publisher of this book.

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book via the Internet or via any other means without the permission of the publisher is illegal and punishable by law. Please purchase only authorized electronic editions, and do not participate in or encourage electronic piracy of copyrighted materials. Your support of the author's rights is appreciated.

While the author has made every effort to provide accurate telephone numbers and Internet addresses at the time of publication, neither the publisher nor the author assumes any responsibility for errors, or for changes that occur after publication. Further, the publisher does not have any control over and does not assume any responsibility for author or third-party Web sites or their content.

Penguin is committed to publishing works of quality and integrity. In that spirit, we are proud to offer this book to our readers; however, the story, the experiences, and the words are the author's alone.

<http://us.penguin.com>

For my parents. Why? Keep reading.

INTRODUCTION

The Possibility of Crazy

I was never one of the cool kids. On the other hand, I don't think I was one of the particularly weird ones either. I was just more interested in doing things that the others weren't. It wasn't a conscious decision—I simply liked driving off the pavement every so often. If you get that, then you'll understand why I consider my everyday life these days to be pretty great.

I make my living standing in front of thousands of folks, usually four or five nights a week, carrying on conversations with formerly inanimate characters that have come to life with my hand stuck up their backsides. There's a curmudgeonly old man, hewn of only the finest hardwoods and some fiberglass. There's a soft, fuzzy, purple mischief maker who acts like he's lingered a little too long at Star-bucks. There's a reluctant, slow-paced, mustached Mexican jalapeño on a stick; a skeletal suicide-bombing dead terrorist; a beer-guzzling, NASCAR-loving, cross-eyed white-trash redneck; an African American pimp who doubles as my manager; and finally a two-and-a-half-foot tall, giant-nosed superhero who claims he stopped a speeding bullet . . . once. Their names are simple and seemingly innocent enough: Walter, Peanut, José, Achmed, Bubba J., Sweet Daddy Dee, and Melvin. But their words bring laughter, start personal arguments, and sometimes create big controversies.

This “suitcase posse” and I regularly crisscross North America by bus and plane to play well over a hundred gigs a year. Plus, we've been to Europe and Australia, performing in London, Dublin, Amsterdam, Stockholm, Copenhagen, Helsinki, Oslo, Sydney, and Melbourne to an average of seven thousand people at each show. Many mornings I wake up trying to remember where I am before I open my eyes. The schedule can be a little disorienting, and sometimes even dangerous. In fact, I can accurately state that I'm the only American to have been rescued *from* the U.S. military by a foreign terrorist.

Many people would call my life crazy. I say it's refreshingly unconventional. But whatever you call it, it's all thanks to a trunkful of dummies. I've been pursuing this career since my first performance as a ventriloquist at age eight. Before lunchtime on that particular school day in 1971, I knew exactly what I wanted as a career for the rest of my life.

The odds of succeeding in my chosen profession have always been terrible. There are probably three thousand stand-up comedians in this country, and less than half of them make enough money to live just by touring. But then the number of *ventriloquists* that make a full-time living would barely fill up a clown car. After forty years of being onstage, it has taken far longer than I imagined to achieve any of the goals I set for myself so long ago, but my childhood pursuit of this dream has never wavered . . . not once. On the other hand, when you need a puppet named Achmed the

Dead Terrorist to save your ass from a bunch of U.S. Marines pointing M4 rifles at your head, you kind of get to thinking that yeah, maybe this *is* a little crazy.



Peanut: Do we get to talk in this book?



Walter: You mean *annoy* everyone?



Peanut: Hey!



Achmed: I will KEEL the readers who do not like this publication!



Jeff: No, you won't . . .



Bubba J.: Can I say something too?



Jeff: Of course you can.



Bubba J.: I like pie.



Jeff: . . . Thank you, Bubba J.



Walter: Idiot.

CHAPTER ONE

The Gift That Kept On Talking

Stand-up comedians aren't normal. As a rule, most of us had bad things happen to us as kids, or grew up in less-than-perfect circumstances. Adversity builds character, or so the adage goes. It also creates problems and eventually might send you to therapy. Many of the best comics are the most screwed-up folks on the planet. Some end up with guns in their mouths, or at the least, don't function like "normal" folks. You've probably heard the stories. But life's trials fuel a comic's twisted mind, allowing him to look at the world a little differently and make observations that average folks don't piece together. Sometimes when I hear a great comedian I think, "Wow, he's funny. Wonder what screwed him up." This of course isn't every comic, but a lot of them, admittedly, could have had happier childhoods.

I don't envy the guys who grew up with a great deal of strife, but many of them have been able to mine their early years for comedy gold. Fortunately or unfortunately, that's not me. I've had to work really hard at being funny because pretty much everything for me as a kid was positive, uneventful, and almost boring. Sure, Lady Godiva and William the Conqueror are somewhere in the Dunham lineage, but I was adopted. That means wacky ancestors don't count, right?

My parents, Howard and Joyce Dunham, adopted me a few months after my birth in April of 1962. I had a happy, drama-free youth, growing up in an upper-middle-class neighborhood in Dallas, Texas. The only thing that was slightly unusual compared to most of my friends was that I was an only child. . . . I don't think that's why my parents gave me a dummy—at least they've never copped to it.



Walter: If your parents only knew *then* what they know *now*. . . .



Jeff: What's that supposed to mean?



Walter: Wonder if it's still too late to return you and get a refund.

My father was the sole proprietor of the oldest real estate appraisal firm in Dallas until he retired a few years ago. My mother is a housewife. They are solid church-going Christian folk, and my mother still gets upset when one of my characters uses bad language. I keep trying to tell her, "MOM, it's not ME!"

Not long ago when I told my parents that I would be writing this book, my mother

turned to my father, and as if I weren't even sitting there, said, "I'm very worried about what he might say about us." To which my father replied, "I'm very worried he won't say *anything* about us."



Peanut: Your dad's like a comedian!



Achmed: Did he beat you as a child?



Jeff: NO!



Walter: That's too bad.

My mother and my father have always supported me. Now in their eighties, they actually clamber onto the tour bus with me once or twice a year so they can watch the performances and hear the crowds. Traveling with eighty-something-year-olds on a tour bus . . . There has to be some sort of reality show in *that*.

But even if my parents are cool with life on the road, no one will ever describe them as "hip." However, if it hadn't been for them, I may never have become a comedian. As I mentioned earlier, the seeds were sown very early in elementary school.



At eight, I was a fairly typical kid. I did well in school and had a few friends in our neighborhood. I rode my bike everywhere and would take off on all kinds of adventures, usually alone, to explore as far as I could pedal before dark. Rain or shine, freezing rain or searing heat, I would ride my bike to school every day. And sickness? I got the perfect attendance award every year from first through sixth grade.

I wasn't an athlete but my parents insisted I play on every baseball, soccer, and basketball team possible. Of course, the only sport I really liked was football, but they wouldn't let me play that because the mother of the only child thought I'd get killed. The same group of elementary school boys from my grade was on every team and I was always the third worst player. If teams were being chosen at recess, I was one of the last three guys picked.

I was just beginning to see girls in a new light, and Cub Scouts was starting to lose its minimal appeal. I wasn't exactly looking for something new to do, but I certainly hadn't found anything I was particularly good at yet.

Just before Christmas in 1970, my mother and I were walking around in a store called Toy Fair, at the Northwood Hills shopping center. For my birthday that year I had picked out a purple Murray bicycle, a banana-seat two-wheeler from the same store. (I didn't have an older brother or a knowledgeable enough dad to tell me I should have pushed for the much cooler Schwinn Sting-Ray.) As we walked around the store, I begged my mom for stuff here and there. I kept saying, "It's *not* too close to Christmas! PLLEEEEEEASE?" Of course, I now realize she had taken me there to get ideas for Santa and had no intention of buying anything that day.

After we rounded a corner, just above my head, I saw a small, vinyl, orange-haired, bucktoothed ventriloquist dummy. His name was Mortimer Snerd. I'd seen ventriloquists perform on television but had never seen a dummy in real life. He was a simple little guy, about two and a half feet tall with a cloth body, a fake straw hat, a little checkered suit, and a bow tie. Sticking out of the back of his neck was a string you could pull to make his mouth open and close.

I took Mortimer down and showed him to my mother. She seemed totally unimpressed. So, back he went to his shelf as I went to hunt for other treasures. By the time we got home, I'd forgotten all about him.



Peanut: Poor Mortimer.



Jeff: Why?



Peanut: Imagine how depressing it must be to be rejected by a nerd.



Like most kids, I woke up early on Christmas morning, long before my parents, and snuck quietly into our family room where the tree and presents were piled, to get a peek at everything. Well, I'd *feel* more than *peek*—at five A.M. it was still too dark to see much of anything, and I was too scared to turn on a light for fear of getting caught.

This particular Christmas, one of the gifts was not easily identifiable. It was sitting on the couch, and it had a cloth body and a molded face of some kind. I was stumped. A couple hours later when I was allowed to run in for the "first" time with lights ablaze and the eight-millimeter movie camera rolling, I had my answer—it was Mortimer!

Life is a series of "what-ifs." What if I hadn't made that turn in the toy store and seen the ventriloquist dummy? What if my mom had thought it was a featherbrained idea and that boys shouldn't play with dolls? What would I be doing today?

Well, it's now forty years later, and I'm still at it.



Walter: And if you keep practicing, maybe one day it will work out for you. . .
. But I doubt it.

Trust me when I say that it doesn't take much for an eight-year-old to learn to talk without moving his lips, throw his voice, and manipulate a dummy all at the same time. It's just a step-by-step process and one that I pursued relentlessly.

Not long after Christmas, my father took me to the Dallas Public Library's bookmobile, where we checked out a couple of books on ventriloquism. I confess that I still have one of those books, and writing a check for that fine now just might require a five-digit number. And it did. More on that to come.



Achmed: You know what happens if you're late returning a book in my country?



Jeff: No.



Achmed: Me neither. We don't have libraries.



Bubba J.: I have a question.



Jeff: What is it, Bubba J.?



Bubba J.: How fast can a bookmobile get up to?

Not too much later, my mother and I went back to Toy Fair and purchased a record album, called *Jimmy Nelson's Instant Ventriloquism*. If you don't recognize the name Jimmy Nelson, your parents might. Jimmy, who is now in his early eighties and has become a good friend, was a regular on Milton Berle's hugely popular television show, *Texaco Star Theater*, in the 1950s. He and his wooden partners Danny O'Day and Farfel did live commercials during the broadcast, both for Texaco and for Nestlé's Quik. Danny was a mouthy boy dummy, and Farfel was a talking, long-eared dog. Danny would sing: "N-E-S-T-L-E-S, Nestlé's makes the very best. ..." And Farfel

would then finish the song—“Chawwww-klit!” and slam his jaw shut with a resounding *clomp*. During his heyday, Jimmy released two instructional record albums with Juro Novelty Company that taught ventriloquist lessons, and produced toy versions of Danny and Farfel.

The idea of making a dummy talk fascinated me, and I spent long hours in our “art room” listening to Jimmy’s instructional LPs over and over and practicing the basics that any beginner must learn to perform ventriloquism. I can’t exactly put my finger on why it appealed to me so much, only that it was unique and I figured it was a way to get myself out of my shell. I wasn’t popular and I wasn’t an athlete. Girls didn’t pay attention to me, and with the other boys, I just kind of blended into the background. For an eight-year-old at that time, there was no such thing as stand-up comedy. . . . But somehow I figured that if I developed this skill of ventriloquism, I could make people laugh; I could finally *stand out*.



If you want to learn ventriloquism, or “vent,” you can find a few courses online, or on DVD. You can even find CD copies of Jimmy’s albums here and there. But the mechanics of learning to “throw your voice” are pretty simple. Anyone with a tongue, an upper palate, teeth, and a normal speaking voice can learn ventriloquism.

This isn’t an instructional book, but I can give you the basics. The first thing to know is that a ventriloquist simply learns a different way of pronouncing words. Most sounds in the English language are produced without the use of lips, and are made inside the mouth and throat. Only a few sounds and letters utilize the lips. The only way a ventriloquist speaks differently is that he forgoes using his or her lips, and learns to reproduce sounds using the tongue, upper palate, and teeth only. Those “difficult” letters are B, F, M, P, V, W, and Y. Every other letter in the alphabet can be pronounced without moving your lips: A, C, D, E, G, H, I, J, K, L, N, O, Q, R, S, T, U, X, and Z. Go ahead! Try it! Put your teeth lightly together, part your lips slightly, hold them still, and pronounce that long list of easy letters. If you watch in a mirror, you’ll probably be impressed with yourself.

But now, try and pronounce the “difficult” letters without moving your lips. It can’t be done . . . unless you use the ventriloquist’s method: sound substitution.

Here is where I tip my hat to Jimmy Nelson and his record album *Instant Ventriloquism*. Recently Jimmy graciously granted me permission to share his method. This is the simplest way to learn vent: For the difficult letters, you say one letter, but THINK another. So for *B*, use the letter *D*. The word *boy* becomes *doy*. You can say *doy* without moving your lips, but it doesn’t sound anything like *boy*. The trick is thinking the actual word and rehearsing. After you practice it over and over and over, the substitution sound starts to sound like the real sound, and eventually you will figure out for yourself how to make the sound as close to the real one as possible.

Here are a few more examples:

F becomes Eth

M becomes N

P is T

V is The

W is Duddle-oo

Y is Oh-eye

It all sounds ridiculous at first, but with many hours of practice, it can become very convincing. “Ny oh ny, tretty thunny stuth, don’t oo think? Holy noly! Ethen ny nother can tronounce oords like ne!”



Walter: That explains it.



Jeff: Explains what?



Walter: Why I sound like an idiot most of the time.

After you master sound substitution, you have to learn to speak in a different voice from your own, manipulate the dummy, act, react, use proper microphone technique, et cetera. Oh, then there’s that part about actually being funny. . . .



Walter: Did you tell them you’re still working on that part?



Jeff: I’m always working on that part.



Walter: Seriously?

Back to the story at hand. Remember, I’m eight years old. I spent a lot of time listening to the record player in the art room, and sitting in my bathroom in front of the mirror for hours, practicing and practicing to make Mortimer come to life. I had the goal of impressing my classmates and making them laugh. After about a month of doing little else in my free time, I knew I was ready for my debut.



Peanut: And your parents knew it was time for a therapist.



Jeff: Very funny.



Peanut: I think I would have left out the part about doing little else in your free time.



Jeff: Why?



Peanut: Other than sounding pathetic? No reason.

Mortimer and I were going to give an oral book report on *Hansel and Gretel*. I put my little buddy in his red-and-white-striped corrugated shipping box, strapped it on the book rack on the back of my bike, and off I pedaled to Northwood Hills Elementary School for our debut in Miss Bentley's third-grade class. Today, if I'm visiting my parents, I still like to go by my old school after hours and look in the window to where I first sat in front of the class. . . . I can see Mortimer on my knee, and me clutching him by his shoulder and pulling the string on the back of his neck.



Bubba J.: My elementary school teacher was a nice lady. Since I was having so much fun in the third grade, she let me repeat it three times.

We did a two-minute presentation on the book and then launched into a ten-minute unscripted routine in which we poked fun at my classmates, our teacher, and the lunch ladies: So-and-so was pretty; so-and-so's feet smelled. I don't claim that Mortimer and I were terribly witty, but to third graders, it was pretty funny. Even Miss Bentley liked it. She gave me an A+.

It's clear to me that the dummies helped me through my early years at school. Miss Bentley didn't give me an A because I gave a good report. She gave me that good grade because there was something more to what I was doing. The shy, almost pudgy, fairly unremarkable kid with freckles and braces had found something that he might be good at. And it was something different. Miss Bentley and my parents were the first ones to really encourage me. My friends did too. I remember standing in line ready to file outside for recess after my book report. I asked a couple of friends, "Did it really sound like Mortimer was talking?" They all said yes, and that it was funny. Funny? Really? Me?



I was hooked. Any stage performer feeds off the emotions of his or her audience: There's a true synergy that takes place. I learned to love the laughs and the accolades. Also, performing let me say things through a dummy that *I* would never say. I would have been in a world of trouble if I, as just me, made any kind of fun of our incredibly stern and feared principal, Mr. Levine. But if Mortimer did it, everyone laughed.

I know that's one of the main reasons people laugh at my stuff today. These little guys get away with verbal heresy. And yes, it's the little guys, not ME! Truly. There's some sort of unwritten rule that allows my formerly inanimate characters to say things that humans could never get away with. I always just play the nice guy.

Today, Achmed is the best example of how far things can be pushed. Here's a menacing little suicide-bomber terrorist, glaring out at the audience, and yelling, "I KEEL YOU!" and perfectly sane, God-fearing people laugh. Can you imagine if some other stand-up comic tried to do *that*? What if some guy dressed up like a terrorist and started yelling he was going to kill people? His life or at least his career would probably end quickly and dramatically.

I never set out to offend anyone with my material, and I have a line that I draw for myself that I won't cross, no matter where I am or what audience I'm playing for. A good portion of my act is just plain goofy. On the other hand, there are the parts that I try to keep as edgy as possible. Every good comic learns how to read an audience and feel just how far he or she can go. Another comedian of note once told me that if you're not offending a few folks here and there, you're not pushing the envelope enough. Experience and reading every audience is the key to figuring out how far you can go. I will admit that there's nothing better than hearing people laugh when they know they shouldn't, because they can't help it. If a couple of people here and there are offended or pissed, then I know I've done my job.

If characters like Peanut or Walter or Achmed say something I know they shouldn't, then I always look surprised or disappointed and protest what they just said. That's another reason I get away with those sorts of lines. I'm as stunned and as offended as the audience. So I end up onstage chastising myself for what I just made the characters say.



Achmed: So when I say I am going to keel you, that is actually you saying you are going to keel yourself?



Jeff: Well . . .



Bubba J.: My brain is hurting.

Wielding sharp-edged comedy can become an addiction. As a stage performer, you sometimes can't help yourself, and the audience can become completely engaged in the politically incorrectness of it all (if that's your act). However, you have to win over the crowd before you step into the controversial arenas. It's like a guy taking a woman for dinner and a night out: He has to gain her confidence and make her feel safe before making any moves on her. In the same way, an audience needs to feel comfortable before the comic starts running the bases. NOTE TO MY THREE DAUGHTERS: PLEASE READ THE ABOVE LAST FEW SENTENCES OVER AND OVER AGAIN AND TAKE NOTES. MOST GUYS BECOME MASTERS AT GAINING A WOMAN'S CONFIDENCE FOR ULTERIOR MOTIVES. BEWARE! YOU HAVE MY PERMISSION TO SMACK THE HECK OUT OF ANY GUY WHO TRIES ANYTHING ON YOU. AND IF YOU DON'T, I WILL. I PROMISE.



Walter: Seriously, how intimidating can you be to the guys your daughters are dating?



Jeff: What?



Walter: Sitting on your couch at home, surrounded by dolls. That's just sad.

On his album, Jimmy Nelson said that to become a good performer, you have to do as many shows as possible, here, there, and everywhere. After my debut with the book report, I did just that. I started by presenting more oral school reports with Mortimer. Almost immediately I noticed a shift in attention and acceptance from my fellow students as well as the teachers. After a couple of school talent shows and Cub Scout banquets, I realized that people outside my homeroom liked what I did as well. A good portion of the school would applaud and hoot when I was introduced. But then I began to wonder if the only way I could be accepted was with my dummies. I knew I wasn't cool, and I certainly wasn't one of the popular kids. Was the dummy some sort of personality crutch? But then again, was being accepted for being funny any different than being accepted for being good at something normal, like sports?

The summer after third grade, my mother signed me up for a week at a summer camp. It was a place called Sky Ranch, and was a nondenominational Christian camp near Denton, Texas. I figured that this would provide the perfect opportunity to see if I could make friends without using a dummy. I now had a little plastic Danny O'Day, and I took him to camp, but kept him hidden in my suitcase . . . for about a day and a half. When I learned there was going to be a talent show, I couldn't resist signing up. And even with a new crowd, I made 'em laugh.

When I got home from camp and started fourth grade, I looked for every

opportunity to do shows and build my act. In the early years, when I was very young, my father would bring home store-bought magic tricks for me to try. My first one was the little red magic vase. It had a blue ball in it that any aspiring prestidigitator could make disappear and then reappear at will. AMAZING! My next trick had me demonstrate my mind-reading ability with a blue magic cube and box. Inside a small blue box was a cube with a different colored circle on each of the six sides. The magician would hand the box to the volunteer, and ask him or her to choose a color, and then put it face up in the box and put the lid back on, hiding the color choice from the magician. The box would be handed back to the magician, some hocus pocus words and motions would ensue, and then the magician would tell the dumbfounded patron what color had been chosen! FANTASTIC ! I was good at this stuff! So, I added some magic into my vent act and thought maybe I could make some spending money.

I handwrote an ad for my new business on the top third of a sheet of typing paper. My dad then took me to his office, where I copied piles of these announcements:

NEED SOME ENTERTAINMENT?
VENTRILOQUISM AND MAGIC OR BOTH!
JEFF DUNHAM AND HIS FAMILY OF DUMMIES!
CALL 214-239-••••
FEE: \$5.00

(I would have put the actual digits, but even forty years later, it's still my parents' phone number!)

Back at home, I took off on my purple bike and stuffed my flyer into as many mailboxes as I could pedal to. Then I waited. First day: No phone calls. Second day: No phone calls. Third: Same. Fourth: Nada.

What the heck? Didn't people want some ventriloquism? Or magic? Or *both*?

No one bit. Not one phone call. But by the fifth grade, after a few more Cub Scout banquets, church gigs, and talent shows, I started to get requests to entertain at younger kids' birthday parties . . . and get paid for them!

I can't recall much of what my act was back then, but most of the dialogue came from Jimmy Nelson's albums, with routines that he invited students to copy and perform. His bits were surefire, and perfect for a young entertainer.

Along with performing, I was now fascinated by every aspect of my craft: everything from the history of ventriloquism to all the different types of figures used. (*Figure* is the politically correct term for a dummy in the ventriloquist world.) I visited every library possible, and read everything I could find associated with vent. I kept coming across the name Edgar Bergen.

As I began to find from my research, Bergen, along with his characters Charlie McCarthy and Mortimer Snerd, had a hugely popular radio program from 1937 to 1956. My parents would tell me stories of many Sunday nights, sitting down with the rest of their families in front of the radio and listening to the hour-long broadcasts. Bergen was huge in his time. With a number one radio program, numerous films, and merchandise featuring his characters, Bergen made Charlie and Mortimer American icons. Edgar Bergen and Walt Disney were contemporaries as well as friends, and both were among the first in Hollywood to successfully and commercially exploit their