



Funny Guy

Vinnie Favale's improbable journey from one night of standup to long-standing gigs with Letterman and Colbert. *By Jim Josselyn*

IT STARTED AS A GOOF.

Vinnie Favale, aspiring broadcaster and all-around funny guy, was working in the commercial traffic department of a New York radio station. Just for laughs, his coworkers nominated him, without his knowledge, for a spot on NBC's *Late Night with David Letterman*. Remarkably, one of Letterman's staffers called.

So began Favale's improbable association with Letterman, from his one-night shot as a stand-up comedian in 1982 to a 20-year stint as vice president of late-night TV for CBS, the network to which Letterman moved in 1993. Equally remarkable: When Stephen Colbert stepped into Letter-

man's role as late-night host last year, the sole member of Letterman's team he retained was Vinnie Favale.

Along the way, the 57-year-old Favale, who lives in Lincroft, worked for a variety of media companies, helped launch VH1 and became a regular guest on Howard Stern's radio show. He even wrote a musical, *Hereafter*, which opened off-Broadway in September 2014 and ran for five months.

But Favale never went back to stand-up. For that, we should probably be thankful.

As with much of the flaky talent that Letterman showcased, Favale's late-night appearance was based on a unique

skill: the ability, he explains, "to sing in two voices at once, or harmonize my own voice, something I'd been doing around the office as a gag." Called for an audition, Favale sang the Beatles hit "From Me to You" in "two voices" with a sock puppet and a guitar. (The guitar was just for show; Favale didn't play a note.)

"I figured the act was so bad the producers would laugh at me," says Favale. Instead, Merrill Markoe, Letterman's longtime companion and the show's creative force, asked if they could film him at his day job at NBC-owned radio station WYNY. The piece aired on October 28, 1982, followed by Favale's appearance.

"I went on live and did my act. It killed," says Favale.

After a commercial break, Favale sat with Letterman for an interview—another success. "It just clicked," he recalls.

Despite his rapport that night with Letterman, it would be 14 years before the two worked together again. Favale, a Brooklyn native who studied broadcasting at Brooklyn College, left his radio job in 1983 to join a group of executives who had recently created MTV. While there, he was part of the team that launched VH1, Nickelodeon and Nick At Nite. In 1985, he moved to the A&E Cable Network, where he was the traffic department director. Three years later, he left A&E to become vice president of operations at HBO.

After helping to launch Comedy Central for HBO, he pitched the idea for the groundbreaking 1992 live special, *State of the Union—Undressed*, which featured comedians Paul Provenza, Richard Belzer and Al Franken cracking jokes and doing commentary on President George H.W. Bush's annual address to Congress and the nation. "It was sort of like live tweeting—it was the first time anyone had done anything like that," Favale says. Also at Comedy Central, he was co-creator of *The Real Deal* and *800 Club*, which he also hosted. He also co-authored one of the first books on the Internet, *Web Sightings*, a *Mad* magazine-style send up of "websites we'd like to see."

In 1996, Favale landed an interview with Letterman producer Rob Burnett. The job: VP of late-night TV at CBS.

"At one point," recalls Favale, "I told him I commuted to work every day in New York on the Happy Bus, a bus a group of Jersey executives rented each day for the drive to New York so we could laugh and enjoy a cocktail on the way home. I could literally see Rob's eyes light up.... He was fixated on what made it a 'happy bus.' Are we all really that happy? There was something disarming about it. Shortly after, he excused himself for about 10 minutes, and when he came back he said he wanted me to meet with Dave." Favale could only hope Letterman wouldn't remember his absurd stand-up appearance 14 years earlier. He didn't. The next day, Favale had the job.

In the new job, Favale oversaw produc-

tion for Letterman. He worked on all aspects of the show, including booking guests, budgeting, promotion, marketing, press and sales. "I was a liaison between the network and Letterman, attending production meetings and tapings, fixing production issues like wheels falling off a cart, or dealing with the licensing department over content issues, or standards and practices over language issues."

Favale also appeared on the show in comedy segments such as "Duck Face," "Barbershop Quartet," "Elvis," "You Asked for It" and "CBS Is Gay." He enjoyed a good working relationship with Letterman—for the most part. "We had some bumps along the way, but as the network suit overseeing the show, that was always expected."

Favale's role at CBS extended beyond Letterman. In 1998, when the network bought Infinity Broadcasting, he pitched the idea of doing a telecast of Howard Stern's radio show as a competitor to NBC's *Saturday Night Live*. Stern was Infinity's biggest star. Executives at CBS and Infinity bought into the concept. *The Howard Stern Radio Show* aired from August 1998 to May 2001, sometimes beating *SNL* in the New York market.

"My first opportunity to work with Howard was as the executive in charge of production on the Saturday-night show," says Favale. "I had to deal with the censors, sales staff and the affiliates, three groups that were often at odds with what Howard was doing on the show."

Favale also started appearing regularly on Stern's radio show as Vinnie from CBS, a character who always spoke in hushed tones. The gag: Vinnie was a big TV executive who had to be quiet on his bus commute from New Jersey to the big city. Favale also hosted game shows and song contests on Stern's radio program.

Favale says his off-Broadway musical, *Hereafter*, owes much to his experiences with Letterman and Stern. "I brought everything I learned working with Dave and Howard to *Hereafter*," he says. "When I worked with Howard on the CBS show, he would message me at 7 AM on a Saturday, and Dave was the first one in and the last one to leave. Their work ethic is amazing."

Favale and his *Hereafter* writing partner, Weehawken-based singer, com-

poser and actress Frankie Keane, raised \$71,000 for the production on Kickstarter. The show, about three women seeking to make contact with deceased loved ones, debuted in April 2012 at Theatre 80 in Manhattan's East Village before moving uptown to the Snapple Theater Center.

Academy Award-nominated actor/singer Danny Aiello, who recorded the song "Talk to Me" from *Hereafter*, is a big Favale fan. "Most of the people in show business are takers, but Vinnie's a giver," says Aiello.

Favale is also a family man. He and wife Debbie, a native of Savannah, Georgia, have been married for 31 years. They have a 28-year-old son, Jonathan.

With the Letterman show winding down in May 2015, Favale served as executive producer of the prime-time special *David Letterman: A Life On Television*. Without the chance to catch his breath, he moved into his current job as vice president in charge of *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*. "The last night of the Letterman show was extremely emotional," says Favale, "with a lot of great people knowing they wouldn't be back." But Favale was back to oversee the transition. "Literally the next day, I started working with Stephen and all new people," he says.

Favale and Colbert have at least one thing in common. "Dave loomed so large in so many people's lives," says Favale. "Stephen and I related on that level, as gushing fans. It's a really hard thing to follow a legend like Letterman and do what Stephen's done. He's doing a great job."

Despite his early moment in the Letterman spotlight, Favale never considered doing stand-up again. He prefers working behind the scenes and developing other projects. Looking ahead, Favale is creating a master class for high school students who are serious about theater; a movie based on *Hereafter* (hereaftermusical.com); and a concert this fall at the Cutting Room in New York City featuring the music from *Hereafter* performed by the cast members. 🍸

Jim Josselyn is a writer, composer, teacher and the director of the Academy of Music and Drama in Little Silver (musicanddrama.org).