

■ **NEWS**

How Monty Hall made a deal with fame

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LOS ANGELES

"We had prizes and doors, but no scripts," says Monty Hall, recalling those heady days back in 1963 when he and his partner went about the risky business of creating a game show that would hook one of the three big U.S. television networks.

"During the tryout phase, we would call people who had clubs and offer to provide entertainment. Once we did the show at 8 a.m. for 16 women who belonged to the Latter Day Saints knitting society in the Valley."

The show taking shape was called *Let's Make a Deal*, with Hall as host. A year later, it made its debut on NBC (before moving to ABC) and changed the history of daytime television, becoming an integral part of popular culture, watched by 12 million people. Critics attacked it as a glorification of greed, but Hall always said he was in the entertainment business, and clearly a lot of people were entertained.

Deal went off ABC in 1977 but returned fitfully in various forms until 1991, by which time Hall had hosted 4,700 episodes. This week, it has been resurrected in the form of an hour-long weekday CBS morning show produced in Las Vegas, with Wayne Brady as host.

Sitting at the dining room table of his elegant, traditional house in Beverly Hills, the former Monte Halparin – still dapper and boyish even with white hair at age 88 – is spinning yarns about his early struggles and eventual fairy-tale success. With him is his wife of 60 years, Marilyn, a producer and former radio actress who, like her husband, was born in Winnipeg. It's clear this man loves to entertain, even for an audience of one.

"You're in the pit with the people," he says describing the challenge of his *Deal*-making gig.

"You know what the prizes are, but you have to make up the dialogue. The star is not you, but the contestant, and the drama is what they decide.

"` So you have to be able to ad lib based on their choices."

But for years, Hall has devoted more of this time and energy to raising money for charity than to being a game-show host. Year after year he brings in millions for hospitals, victims of various diseases, disadvantaged children, a home for the aged. It's a monumental payback for the fame and fortune.

L.A., where his dreams came true, has been home for more than half his life. But that came after a rocky journey to the promised land of showbiz, including a decade in Toronto, when he had some success in radio but failed to achieve his ambition of becoming a TV star. That experience left a bitter taste and prompted him to leave Canada.

Those Toronto years are the forgotten chapter in the rags-to-riches saga of a sickly Jewish boy who grew up in Winnipeg's colourful north end. Driven to escape failure, he would eventually earn a star on Hollywood's Walk of Fame and a place in the Broadcast Hall of Fame, with the collaboration of needy dreamers who'd come dressed as a radish or a pizza hoping to get something for nothing.

In 1946, at age 24, Halparin left Winnipeg by train with all his possessions in one small suitcase. His ambition was to become a doctor but, despite getting top marks, Hall was the victim of a quota system. The University of Manitoba's medical school would accept no more than three or four Jewish students per year. That's why he wound up as a part-time disc jockey on Winnipeg radio station CKRC.

Frustrated with doing fill-in work for little money, he appealed to his boss for a better deal. His boss suggested he try his luck somewhere with more opportunity.

In Toronto, Hall knocked on many doors and got two offers: one from CKEY for \$175 a month, the other from CHUM for \$225. He took the latter. His boss didn't like his name. That's how Monte Halparin became Monty Hall. Soon he was on the air five mornings a week with a musical show called *Wake Up and Smile*.

After leaving CHUM, he came up with the proposal for a 15-minute program in which he would give clues about the identity of a mystery person and the audience would mail in their answers on boxtops. Sponsored by Colgate-Palmolive, *Who Am I?* was syndicated on 30 stations across Canada and aired for more than 10 years.

Even so, Hall, by now married and a father, needed other work. His ambition was to make it in TV and to break into the CBC. He came up with a concept for a late-night variety show that mixed talk and performance, with him as host. But in one of the most disillusioning experiences of his life, the CBC turned down his proposal and went on to produce the show using its own people. "I was convinced then I had to get away from Canada and the CBC," he wrote in his 1973 autobiography, *Emcee Monty Hall*. "I didn't know what sort of talent I had, but I knew the CBC didn't know either."

During his five years in New York, he tasted success on various TV quiz shows. In 1961, the year he turned 40, Hall moved to Los Angeles. He's still there.

When *Let's Make a Deal* returned to the air on Monday, Hall was supposed to be part of the show. But illness forced him to go home before the show was taped.

Now he's feeling better. "I'm going to appear on the 100th episode of the new show," he explained.

"And that will be something to celebrate, because 2010 marks the start of a new decade, and it means *Let's Make a Deal* will have been on the air at some point during each of five decades starting in the 1960s."

Obviously, this hungry kid knew which door concealed the big prize.

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