

THE BAKER BUZZ!



By Sheldon Baker

AN INTERVIEW WITH IMPRESSIONIST RICH LITTLE

You've probably seen him numerous times over the years on television and maybe even in Las Vegas. Rich Little, celebrity impersonator extraordinaire is said to be the mimic of more than 200 voices. I don't think that includes his family, friends, neighbors, or former home room schoolteacher that would put him well over that number.

Well-known for skewering of political figures, and imitating Hollywood legends, Little has literally charmed, amused, and intrigued global audiences. And charming and amusing he was to me during my phone interview with him. During our discussion, the late Tonight Show host Johnny Carson and former President Ronald Reagan became part of the conversation.

I don't think I have ever laughed as much during a celebrity interview as I did with Little.

Once described as the best impressionist in the world, I told Little he did Carson better than Carson did himself. To my amazement, that's what President Reagan told Little about himself, that "You do me better than I do."

According to Little, **"An impression is what you think a person sounds like. It could be an exaggeration or cartoon.** It's your impression. I think of an impression as more of an exact copy.

Knowing the person personally is not important. It's knowing the speech patterns and mannerisms in order to imitate the person the way the public sees him," says Little. It's been noted that it took him seven years to get Frank Sinatra down pat, but only several minutes to mimic Dr. Phil.

Little, from Ottawa, Canada, began his career at the age of 12 when he started imitating his schoolteachers, much to their dismay. And to get dates, he'd find out a girl's favorite actor, then call her imitating the actor's voice. Then when Little showed up, he'd say, "Sorry, Cary (Grant) can't make it." That approach stopped when a girl told him her favorite was Lassie.

As Little revealed to me, he started out entertaining in small Canadian clubs. But to his amazement, no one in the audience understood the English language. It was a French speaking crowd. But being the creative soul he is, Little started doing 'walks'. Jack Benny, Bob Hope and John Wayne all had a stylist walk of their own. "They all walk the same in any language," says Little.

In 2010, Little finally became a U.S. citizen. He was sworn in with a suggestion from the judge – do the oath as John Wayne.

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Little's wife at the time, the late Marie, passed away the same year as his newfound citizenship. To honor her, he created the Marie and Rich Little Foundation which focuses on helping children, the homeless and animals in need. Little is also quite supportive of Wounded Warriors for the armed services.

During our chat, I also learned about Little's talent as an artist, originally sketching in charcoal, family, and friends when he was young. Today having drawn hundreds of celebrities and politicians he imitates or has come in contact with, he has turned his art into a way to generate funds for U.S. veterans and first responders.

I didn't ask him this, but according to his website, Little's greater fear is a sore throat. 'Other people get a cold, and they just get a cold, I get a cold and John Wayne gets a cold. Orson Welles gets a cold. Nixon and Truman Capote get the sniffles, I get a cold and it's all over.'

NaturAlley: What or maybe who enticed you to get into show business?

I've always been interested in movies and actors from an early age and still am. I have about 2,000 movies on DVDs. Having seen so many movies, and film stars, I started imitating them.

Your father was a doctor, no interest in the medical field?

No, not really. My father was a neurologist. I knew at a very early age he was a neurologist because he was always telling me to piss off.

You first were working in night clubs, yes?

I started working in coffee houses and small clubs in Canada, where I'm from. Also doing a lot of television. In 1964, I was booked on the Judy Garland Show and that started my career in the U.S.

Did you always have a knack for impersonating people?

Oh yes. I imitated a lot of my family. My father and mother, friends, neighbors, and teachers. Then, I started doing television performers and movie stars. But teachers were the first.

Who was the first non-celebrity you impersonated, as well as the first notable?

My home room teacher. He had a lisp and looked a little like the actor W.C. Fields. When he asked me a question in class, I would answer him in his voice. It was usually the wrong answer, and he didn't like me responding in his voice.

I've always thought you did an awesome Johnny Carson... better than Johnny did himself.

(Editor's note: Rich responded in Johnny's voice.) I did Johnny Carson, and I am still doing Johnny Carson. The last time I saw Johnny, about a year before he passed away, he was taken

aback that I was still doing him because he wasn't on television anymore. I said to him, John, I will be doing you for years because people will never forget you. He had a hard time accepting that and here we are 30 years later and I'm still doing him. Yes, it's true, my audience is an older demographic. Younger folks don't always know a lot of the people I imitate. My audience is usually people 50 and up. Those are the people who remember, and they know the people I'm doing.

You appeared on the Tonight Show a lot and were a guest host.

Yes. I was a guest host on the Tonight Show 32 times.

Do you know how many television guest appearances you've made?

About 80 different shows and many two or three times in the last 40-plus years. I also did a lot of variety shows and situation comedies.

Who have you captured in today's Hollywood scene or in the political world? Who stands out?

I'm doing Biden right now and it's getting a pretty good reaction because Biden has given me a lot of great material (Rich laughs). I'm still doing Reagan, Bush, Clinton, and Carter. *(Editor's note: this interview was conducted prior to President Carter announcing his hospice health situation).* Overall, I do a lot of political voices in my Las Vegas show.



You were recently honored with the Order of Canada for your contributions to comedy and as a renowned impressionist, entertainer, and voice actor. You are from Canada, but now a U.S. citizen. It's quite an honor.

Yes. But I think they gave it to me because I left (Rich breaks into laughter, again). Just kidding. I'm kidding. I'm kidding. It was a great honor, and I am thrilled about it. The honor will be made within the next year. It's really an incredible honor that they would consider me. A lot of people think I'm not around anymore. Some people think I've passed away.

In addition to your numerous entertainment accomplishments, you support the men and women of the U.S. Armed Forces and veterans, as well as first responders.

Before Covid, I sold a lot of my tapes and art, as I draw a lot. I would that do it this after my shows. The proceeds go to the Gary Sinise Foundation. But I haven't done that for a while because of Covid as I couldn't mingle with a lot of people. I've sketched about 500 to 600 celebrities over the years and a lot of them are in my book.

Have you ever gone overseas to entertain our troops?

I have been overseas. I have visited hospitals in Europe as I am a big supporter of our troops.

In 1982, you joined forces with the Chairman of the Board, Frank Sinatra for a one-night benefit to build the "Rich Little Special Care Nursery, which is still operating today as a part of the Ottawa Hospital in Canada.

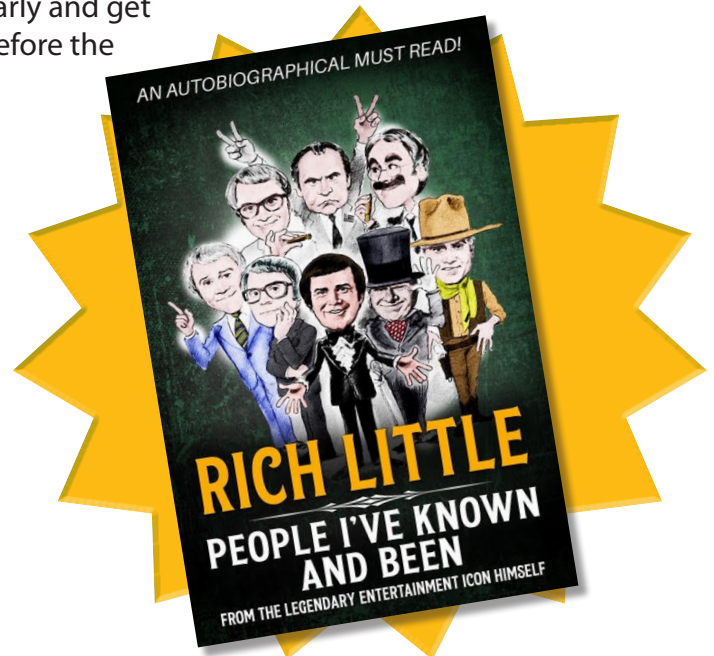
Frank Sinatra and I did a show in Ottawa, my hometown. The money went to the Rich Little Neonatal Center. Yes, it is still operating, and I still receive thanks for doing it. That hospital has saved a lot of premature babies. We raised one million dollars. Well, Frank Sinatra really raised it. I was just tagging along. The thing was when we did that show in Ottawa, Frank opened for me. I was the headliner. I said to him wait a minute, I'm not the headliner, you are. He said, no, this is your hometown and you're going on after me. The real reason was so he could leave early and get back to New York before the bars closed.

Do you write most of your own material?

Yes, I write all my own material. I keep track of all the things I have done over the years and sometimes recycle them. I do some material I did 40 or 50 years ago and just bring it up to date.

Let's talk about your book, People I've Known and Been.

It's funny things that have happened with me and celebrities down through the years. It's in its third printing. The first two were lost. (Rich laughs yet again). Just kidding. I wrote the book about five years ago and the publishing company didn't do much with it. So, I re-released it last year with a few new chapters and cover. It's doing better now. It's available at RichLittle.com.



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Your Las Vegas show at The Tropicana keeps you busy. I believe you just developed a new show.

I do the same show every night but get a little tired of doing the same thing, so I've added some new things. It's a bit fresh. But I do similar material every night. I work four nights a week, Sunday through Wednesday at The Laugh Factory at The Tropicana Hotel in Las Vegas.

Of those you have imitated, who stands out the most?

I have a number of favorites. I love to do Ronald Reagan. I was a great friend of his. I had a great relationship with him. So, I'm still doing Reagan.

I actually do a press conference where if Reagan were alive today, what would it sound like. That goes over quite well. A reporter will yell out "Mr. President, with all the unrest in Afghanistan right now, do you think it's a good idea to send them jets"? And my response as Reagan is "what the hell would they do with a bunch of football players? I think the Jets should stay in New York and play hockey"

Where do you find all that energy to keep entertaining? You are a definite super-ager. Do you watch your diet? Exercise? Take supplements? What's your secret?

I exercise every day for about an hour. I watch what I eat and take vitamins every day. I had Covid but got over that. I'm doing pretty good health wise.

What is the best piece of advice you have been given, and by whom?

My mother gave me some advice when I was first starting in show business. She said 'Richard, don't rely on others and be your own person. You'll go far'. I never listened to her. That's all I do is imitate people. That advice was not that really that great.

But she was a great mother. She was always there in the front row every time I performed.

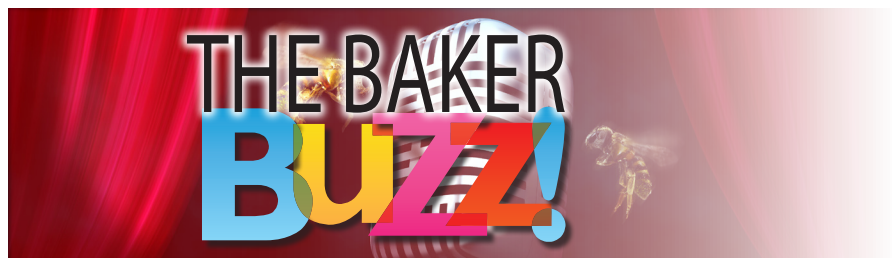
What is your philosophy on life?

What is my philosophy on life?

Perform and try to make somebody's life a little more enjoyable and make them laugh and forget their problems.

Make them feel better. And that's what I do every night.

When people laugh and enjoy the show that's very rewarding for me.



About the Author: Sheldon Baker has been interviewing people from all walks of life for more than 15 years. He loves interviewing celebrities, athletes, authors, and other interesting people and is also known for creating iconic health brands and continues to develop brand marketing for natural health and wellness products. He wears many hats. Sheldon's interviews will now be seen on a regular basis in NaturAlley publications and exclusive interviews on the website. NaturAlley and Sheldon welcome your email comments.

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