

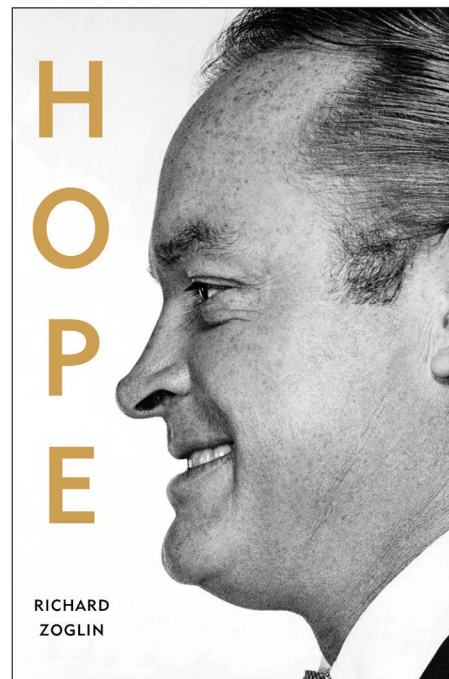
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Legend of comedian Bob Hope reconsidered in book

Brace Fessier The Desert Sun
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Richard Zoglin is the author of a new biography on Bob Hope, the late, longtime honorary mayor of Palm Springs. Desert Sun reporter Bruce Fessier interviewed Hope many times and received a rare invitation to his 2003 memorial service as a “friend of the family.” Fessier recently spoke with Zoglin over the telephone about Zoglin’s book, “Hope,” which Zoglin will discuss Wednesday on the opening night of the Rancho Mirage Writers Festival at the Annenberg Center for Health Sciences at Eisenhower Medical Center.

Their conversation evolved into more than an interview. It became a discourse generating insights into the comedy legend for both men. Fessier reflects below on that conversation and the irony that Hope’s biographer will speak on land once owned by Hope on the same day the Humana Challenge’s Eisenhower Bob Hope Legacy Pro-Am tournament is teeing off down the road at PGA West.



Richard Zoglin says he was inspired to write a biography on Bob Hope because, when he was interviewing '70s-era comedians for his first book, “Comedy at the Edge,” none of them cited Hope as an influence.

That struck me as strange. I once interviewed a previous Hope biographer, Bill Faith, who did a doctoral dissertation on him. Faith said Hope regained popularity in the late 1970s after losing favor with some audiences for his support of the Vietnam War. However, Paul Rodriguez, who was a young comic in the 1970s, said: “I can’t say enough good things about Bob Hope.”

Jay Leno undoubtedly was influenced by Hope as a standup comic and Robin Williams was called “the new Bob Hope” when he began entertaining military troops at a prolific pace in the 1990s. But, I think Hope was too much of a showbiz institution for younger comics to feel like they were following in Hope’s footsteps. When George Lopez succeeded Hope as celebrity host of the Bob Hope Classic golf tournament, he said: “I don’t think I have the credentials to replace a legendary figure like Bob Hope.” But the Hope Tournament president, John Foster, said Lopez had “the greatest respect for Bob Hope and his legacy.”

So I went into the interview with a bit of an attitude.

I got the sense that Zoglin didn’t know Hope very well. But then he said he felt no one really knew Hope very well. He asked me how I felt about that view after interviewing him a few times and I had to admit I never did get an in-depth interview out of Hope. He had the ability to turn a serious question into a set-up for a punchline, which got me laughing instead of pressing for a serious answer.

Zoglin thinks Hope was more comfortable around generals and CEOs and I agree completely. I met Gen. William Westmoreland when he was a house guest of the Hopes, and Dolores said former Secretary of the Air Force Stuart Symington was one of Bob’s best friends. The man he admired most was Dwight Eisenhower, who became the namesake of the medical center Dolores supported as board chairwoman after she and Bob donated the land for it in Rancho Mirage.

So Zoglin probably did know Hope as well as anyone could who wasn’t a close associate or family member. I think that comes through in the following Q&A, edited for brevity.

The Desert Sun: Around here, Hope was always voted the valley’s most popular celebrity, beating out Frank Sinatra year after year. The golf tournament kept his name until 2011. So, seeing that his name is on buildings, ships and airports across the nation, our first reaction to your book is, “Why do we need another book telling us who Bob Hope was?”

Zoglin: Certainly everybody knows his name and most people of a certain age remember him well. But he’s sort of gone off the radar in terms of people who were really influential. When I would ask all these comedians who their influences were, if they didn’t say Lenny Bruce, they might mention some of the other classic comedians like Groucho Marx or Jack Benny. They never mentioned Bob Hope. Never. And as I said in the book, he was really the inventor of their art form. That was really unjust to not at least recognize him.

Fessier: It seems like comedy changes quite a bit from generation to generation. Even Jerry Seinfeld seems like someone from an older generation now. We’re seeing comedy in movies where there has to be character development like there is in drama. So we’re getting further away from Hope’s comedy and it seems like comedians get forgotten as their art form moves on. Don’t you think?

Yeah, that’s true, except sometimes there is a retro rediscovery of some of the old-timers. For example, Rodney Dangerfield — a very old-fashioned, one-liner type of comedian. But a lot of the younger guys really loved him and appreciated his professionalism and his career path. But Bob, because he was so much of a public figure, he so much represented the establishment to at least the protest generation that they kind of eliminated him from their universe of comedians to pay attention to. Comedians often think of themselves as rebels and anti-establishment. Bob, though he did political jokes, was never a political satirist. He was very public in his friendships with the presidents, which I think was such an interesting part of him. He became such a public figure in a way that no other Hollywood celebrity did. There is no other celebrity who we could say was friends with every single president.

Comedians often hang out in groups. A lot of the Jewish comedians were part of the Round Table at Hillcrest Country Club in Beverly Hills. But Hope didn’t seem to join in groups.

Yeah. He thought of himself as unique and standing above the rest of showbiz. He never played Vegas. Everybody else played Vegas. What I heard was, he listened to some offers from some hotels, but he wanted to be paid more than anybody had ever been paid in Vegas. He wanted to set a record, as he did in almost everything else, but he never got the offer that Streisand or Dolly Parton was getting. So, yeah, he wasn’t part of a group. He wasn’t a big Friar’s Club guy. He was a golf player at Lakeside Country Club, but he palled around with corporate chiefs and generals, not other comedians so much.

I interviewed Hope many times and knew Dolores fairly well. Before everybody was talking about branding, he was very well aware of his brand. Once we were talking about the future of the Bob Hope Classic and he told me he was thinking about selling the name. I thought, “How can you sell your own name?” But, in 2011, it became the Humana and he would have been smart to have sold his name. He was aware of what it was worth and how it was going to diminish in value. I think he was pretty brilliant, don’t you?

Sure. That’s one of the points I make in the book. He was really the first I think to recognize the power of his brand and to do the first brand extensions. When he was barely a movie star — 1941, I think — he wrote his first book, a little jokey memoir. Celebrities didn’t write books at that time. Then he had a newspaper column, and then a golf tournament. He realized how that could expand his brand. That’s one of the things I think he was a pioneer (of).

You mention he wasn’t an easy guy to get to know.

Yes, how did you feel interviewing him?

It’s funny. I interviewed several business people who were close to him. Bob Bremson of Indian Wells, for example. He was shocked that Bob Hope called him up and asked him to play golf. They had met and Bremson didn’t think he was anything more than a fan. But Hope found something he admired in him and he just liked playing golf with him. He was nice to me. He always took the time to pick up the phone when I called his house. You said he talked to a lot of media, but usually you had to set that up with PR people. I remember calling one time and he was on the massage table. He had a massage every night at 7 o’clock and he got off the table to talk to me. It took about seven years of working here before he even knew who I was, but then we had a breakthrough. I remember him looking at me up and down, like he was taking my measure. He was a private guy, but, at the same time, he wasn’t as private as Bing Crosby.

OK. I’m sure he was friendly and could be accessible, but I think there was a kind of limit. You couldn’t get very deep. I doubt if you could probe very deep into Bob.

Yeah. He might have been (deflecting). I don’t think comedians get as much respect as singers and dramatic movie stars. That’s why they generally don’t win Academy Awards. But, who would you compare Hope to today?

I don’t think there is anyone. I don’t think you can be a cross-media celebrity like that, such a mass audience celebrity because of all the fragmentation in the media. It seems like people are huge in the under-30 ground and the rest of the country doesn’t know them. I think all of the late night guys are trying to be Bob Hopes even if they don’t acknowledge it with their topical monologue and sketches. They want America to regard them as nightly companions — a kind of mass audience appeal. I think Leno would probably acknowledge that. I don’t know about Jimmy Fallon. He thinks of himself as a younger, hipper guy.

Actually, he’s more versatile than any other late night comic. He sings and tries to dance a little. That would probably put him closer to Bob Hope than David Letterman.

I think you’re right. Where Letterman still has that sour, kind of ironic pose, Fallon is a more well-rounded entertainer that you would identify with Bob Hope.

It’s kind of ironic that you’re going to be speaking here the same day the Humana starts. Any thoughts about going up against the former Hope tournament?

I feel a little sad that the tournament doesn’t carry on the name and the tradition. I certainly don’t want to help draw attention away from it and I hope somehow I’ll be able to draw attention back to it! I always hoped my book would revive interest and a little bit of a rediscovery of Bob Hope. If that in any way helps his golf tournament, that would be great.