

Kim & Jason  
interview  
**Bob McGrath**



an interview with...

# Bob McGrath



**Jason:**

We are very pleased to have with us today Bob from Sesame Street. Bob McGrath just celebrated his 38th year on Sesame Street and has bridged two generations of viewers as one of the original hosts. In addition to his role as the music teacher or a pied piper of Sesame Street he is an award-winning recording artist, concert performer, and successful author, writing both children's books and music curriculum. Bob has performed thousands of family pops educational and holiday concerts for audiences who are now bringing their children or Sesame Seeds to see and hear their friend, Bob.

Bob, we are so excited to have you here today. Thanks for joining us.

**Bob:**

Thank you. Great to be with you.

**Kim:**

There is just so much we have to ask you. We are going to just jump right in. The first question we have for you, Bob, is share with us the influence your family had on you in regards to the direction you choose throughout your career.

**Bob:**

Well, I guess if it wasn't for my mom, who was very musical – she played piano and so forth – in getting me sort out of the starting gate, singing at five years old at every function imaginable weddings, PTA meetings, and everything. I was singing at the Roxy Theatre in Ottawa when I was five. I probably never would have followed that sort of musical path. That was all from my mom. My dad was totally tone deaf but he was very encouraging for my singing.

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**Jason:**

I can relate to that.

**Bob:**

You are good with a pencil though, right?

**Jason:**

Exactly.

**Bob:**

I think the wonderful thing is that I had two brothers and two sisters and they were very encouraging and allowed us to all kind of follow whatever path we decided to do. We had a great support. It was a very loving family and I feel very fortunate for that. I hadn't thought about a lot of these things but thinking back, there wasn't a lot of money to go around but there was never any comment about having to pay for voice lessons and piano lessons and all that kind of thing. I think I was very fortunate to have had that availability at a very early age. I probably didn't have any idea at that time that I was going to end up in this profession. In fact, that came much, much later but it was all a good starting point for me.

I would say my first experience was my mom playing the piano – we inherited an old upright piano from my grandmother and she was playing. I went in and sang along with her one day and by the time my dad came in from the field, I had learned my first song, which I think was “In The Good Ole Summer Time” and I sang for him at lunch time during his field break. That was my very first performance. I did sing for my father at five.

**Jason:**

It is so great to be able to have that openness with your family to encourage you

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guys in whatever path you wanted to take. That is so important.

**Bob:**

Absolutely. I remember my father had hoped that my older brother – 10 years older – would help him run the farm. He did help him for a while and then he came one time and he said, “I’ve just been up and down this field once too many times. I’m off to college,” and he said, “Okay, fine.” There was never any pressure to stick around and have him help.”

**Jason:**

What a blessing.

**Bob:**

Yes.

**Jason:**

From a previous conversation, we discovered that you grew up without a TV. We are wondering how you went from having no TV – which was fairly common in those days, it is not crazy or anything – but how did you end up working on one of the most popular children’s shows of all time? Could you give us a little bit of a nutshell on how that whole journey came to be?

**Bob:**

I had a lot of strange transitions. Actually, not only did I not have a TV growing up but we didn’t have electricity, not until I was six years old and that was when Roosevelt got electricity in a lot of the farms.

Our form of entertainment then – television wasn’t even in the back of anyone’s

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mind at that point. We did have radio and that was a great source of entertainment from Jack Benny to Captain Midnight and the Green Hornet. Those radio shows really required a lot of imagination.

Maybe, I don't know, this is in retrospect, thinking that when I first saw some of the early test pieces done by Jim Henson before being hired on Sesame Street, I think that sense of imagination might have carried through. I saw what an incredible, imaginative kind of person he was.

As for Sesame Street – how did I get from there to there? I first heard about it from a college friend. I bumped into him in front of Carnegie Hall and he had just come off the Kangaroo Show and I was just coming off a touring of Japan for three years. When he asked if I would be interested in the show – in auditioning for a new children's show, I said, "No. Not in the least." It shows you how much I knew even then.

But then when I saw some of the early test pilots going on for animation and film from this guy called Jim Henson, whom I had never heard of, I realized that this was going to be a really important show and then I worked as hard as I possibly could. I passed the five pilot shows. Three out of the four of us survived those. Those were based a lot on the reaction of five year old kids watching the show on closed UHF channels around the country. Then that all got started. I've been eternally grateful to those five year olds ever since because that is really how I got my job.

Back to your question, I guess maybe not having a television was a positive experience that has kind of helped develop a child's imagination. When everything isn't put right in front of your eyes, you really do have to use your imagination.

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That is probably one of the most valuable skills that you can help teach a child using their imagination, I have always felt.

**Jason:**

That is great advice.

**Kim:**

I would totally agree. I think certain people growing up with Sesame Street kind of have an idea of the characters and all that, but what would be something that most Sesame Street fans would be surprised to know about you or even about the show itself?

**Bob:**

In terms of the show, I think one thing that when I discuss it with people, I think one of the things they are always surprised about is that there was almost two years of really intensive research before the first show was ever aired in 1969. Now 39 years later and some 4,000 shows later, there is that same dedication to researching every element in the show.

They are also surprised to learn that we have a worldwide audience. The English version is in over 120 English speaking countries and over 20 co-productions in foreign languages from Bangladesh to China and South America.

There are a lot of humorous things. Like in France, it is Rue Sesame in Cookie Monster is Le Macaron. It is kind of fun hearing.

I was once chased around Paris one time by a group from France. In the early years, they used to dub us in whatever language before they were up and run-

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ning to their own production. So they all started speaking fluent French to me. Of course I didn't speak it but they were fluent in English so we were able to communicate. It was funny because they thought I was fluent. This has happened in several languages. People start talking to me in that language, just assuming that I knew how to speak it. It is all dubbed in.

**Jason:**

It is probably quite amazing when you see a show like that appears so simple. But that is really with anything. Most things that appear very simple actually have a lot of thought into them to try to get it to be that simple, that clear, and that effective.

**Bob:**

No question. I am sure that as simple as a strip cartoon is, I am sure an enormous amount of thought goes into those four or five little captions, right?

**Jason:**

Every word and every line matters when you don't have much to work with.

**Bob:**

It is almost like writing a haiku poem every day. You have to really minimize it down to get a thought across in the fewest words possible, right?

**Jason:**

That is a great analogy.

Your resume is quite extensive. We touched a little bit on it. So far you've toured Japan, you've sang with Mitch Miller, you've sat across the desk from Johnny Carson, and worked with Jim Henson. Looking back on things, what would you say is one of your highlights? What would be an experience or an opportunity that

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instantly brings a smile to your face after all of these years of all the interesting experiences?

**Bob:**

There are a whole lot of them including a child meeting me after a concert and saying – a little five year old girl in Vancouver saying, “I loved your concert, Bob.” I said, “Thank you.” Then she kind of pulled me down and whispered in my ears and said, “But you know something?” I said, “What’s that?” She said, “Up close you don’t look too good.” That was always kind of a nice leveling. I’ve had dozens and dozens of those little tidbits.

I guess, thinking back, one thing that kind of amuses me is the idea of being Bob O. Magoulas in Japan for three years for 9 or 10 trips. Thinking back, opening my concerts, I did a lot of concerts on television and recording – and opening the second half of my concert was another musician playing a shakuhachi that is a bamboo flute and both of us in full kimono and Gaitas and being asked to sing old Japanese folk songs in Japanese.

Also, we got an invitation from the Prime Minister, Sato, one time to go over and do the same thing with he with his bamboo flute and myself and singing for a few of his close friends over sake and dinner. It always kind of, even now struck my Illinois farmer funny bone for an Irish tenor to be singing “Danny Boy” in Japanese, either to the Prime Minister or on the Johnny Carson Show as well as on To Tell the Truth. Somebody just found that old clip. I had forgotten about that but I was on To Tell the Truth and I ended up singing “Danny Boy” there. That is a really fun remembrance.

The other thing that I find rewarding – maybe it brings a smile and is rewarding

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both is having the opportunity over the last 39 years to have done hundreds of family pops concerts with symphony orchestras and having had the opportunity to bring a live symphony orchestra to thousands of kids and their parents, many of them for the very first time, and having them hear live musicians as opposed to something recorded or just on their iPod. There is a big difference between that kind of a situation.

I know a lot of times parents come up and say, "This is the first time I've ever heard a symphony orchestra and it really is not as bad as I thought it would be." That is really nice.

Within my pops concerts, I'll also include classical pieces like "The Planets" by Gustav Holst with a narration and slideshow projections and another wonderful piece by Percafiar called "Lieutenant Kiesha," and a lot of classical pieces that I've either – not so much sung, but I'll do narrations to them and find interesting ways to inject classical repertoire into an otherwise pops concert from Sesame Street and from my recordings and so forth. That has always been kind of rewarding and fun.

Also, I was thinking back and just remembering some of the wonderful moments taping songs like "Sesame Street" and "The People in Your Neighborhood," which kind of became my signature song, and especially doing almost every occupation imaginable with Frank Oz and Jim Henson. They had a great sense of humor and they were just absolutely incredible to work with and to watch them work.

We always prerecorded the track and just before I had to sing, "Oh the baker is the one who makes" or whatever it might be, they would always throw in a gag line, a bad pun, and they'd change everywhere, through three or four takes, they

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always managed to come up with a different punch line each time, attempting to crack me up just moments before I had to start singing. At the time it was nerve wracking because you are taping the thing live and you don't want to blow it but it was fun.

I think also some of the reaction that kids have had over the years. Like one of our favorite stories that came in a letter from a mom early on. This has to do with kids discovering things and how wonderful it is to help kids learn to discover. She came running into the room early one morning screaming, "Mommy, Mommy! My pillow!" She said she and her husband sat bolt upright and said, "What is it?" She said, "My pillow! It's a rectangle!" She had just discovered for the first time in her life that her pillow was a rectangle. It is wonderful to think that the show has brought some of that sort of discovery into kids' lives. It is always great when parents or teachers can do that sort of thing.

**Jason:**

That is cool. I have to go back. You had mentioned Frank Oz. I didn't realize that he was involved in Sesame Street. I don't know if Kim – you probably didn't know that he was the guy who brought Yoda to life in Star Wars.

**Bob:**

Very much so.

**Jason:**

I didn't realize he was also involved in Sesame Street.

**Bob:**

No, quite the contrary. At the very germ of Joan Cooney's idea of Sesame Street,

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she was aware of Jim Henson's talents and the Henson Company and that was one of the first elements that she put in place before anything else went ahead is that he was going to be a very integral part of the whole show. He and Frank had already been working together for quite a long time. They were an amazing team.

That is a team that has never been replicated in terms of our show. We have individuals that are tremendously talented but they spun their humor, ideas, and creativity off on each other all the time. He was very responsible. All of the Bert and Ernie pieces were all Frank and Jim. Those are like classic Evan Costello pieces.

**Kim:**

Yes, that is for sure.

**Jason:**

Now did those guys do the voices as well as the puppetry or was that done later?

**Bob:**

In every case, the puppeteer not only has to manipulate the puppet, but has to create and do the voice at the same time because the personality of the voice and the manipulation of the Muppet is integral. Carol Spinney is inside Big Bird and inside Oscar. Frank and Jim and every puppeteer has to create their own – it would almost be impossible to do it otherwise because the manipulation of the hand and the whole puppet has to be so synched with the whole vocal thing.

As a matter of fact, it always struck me funny when – we haven't been doing this lately in the early years when we did some cast albums and the cast and all of the

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Muppeteers were all in a large studio doing a cast album together, it was interesting to see Frank and Jim and any other puppeteer, even while they are singing without the puppet, they would very often have their arm extended and their hand over, manipulating their hand while they were singing because it was such a tight bond union between the voice and the manipulation of the puppet. Isn't that fun?

**Jason:**

That is very interesting.

**Kim:**

Since we are talking about the different Muppets and characters, do you have a favorite Sesame Street character?

**Bob:**

It is sometimes hard to separate the person. You become very good friends. Carol Spinney and I have been very close friends for a very long time and he, of course, does both Big Bird and Oscar the Grouch.

The show has changed quite a bit in the last four or five, six years because our target audience is now much, much younger than it was. The show is constructed differently now. Our target audience is sort of zero to three instead of four, five, and six at this point. We have to do different kinds of productions. I will leave it at that.

**Kim:**

It changes things.

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**Bob:**

It is a little less interesting than it was in the early years in some respects. We had so many – especially with Oscar and myself we were really the odd couple and I got suckered into every one of his cheap tricks that he came up with. I never ever learned, no matter how many times I got suckered in with his magic spoon, which eventually got things going too fast and splattered chocolate pudding all over my whole face.

I really enjoy Carol with Big Bird and Oscar because of our personal relationship and the hundreds of pieces we did together. I also just absolutely love Grover, especially as the waiter with Mr. Blue, the blue guy. And waitresses all over the country – I'll go in and they will say, "Tell Grover we know exactly how he feels. I had a customer like that last night in one of my booths."

Of course Kevin Clash as Elmo and as Hoots the Owl and any number of others is absolutely brilliant. I have tremendous respect of Kevin Clash. He is just really one of a kind.

Way before Jim Henson passed away, he put Kevin in charge of the Muppets when he was too busy doing feature films and The Muppet Show in England and so forth. Those are kind of my favorites I guess. I love Grover, Big Bird, and Oscar.

**Jason:**

I was always a big fan of the obscure character, Guy Smiley.

**Bob:**

Guy Smiley was great! We've lost some good people including the fellow that did Guy Smiley, as well as Jim Henson, and our two most creative musical people, Joe Rapozo and Jeff Moss. Of course our principle writer, director, executive producer, one of the main group of four or five that started the show is John Stone. We have

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lost a lot of really good people over the years unfortunately.

**Jason:**

What a great legacy you guys have left, though. All of that work, it continues to touch people.

**Bob:**

It is interesting. This is a little off the track and I promise to keep it short, but Einstein and his whole idea of imagination and so forth – I've often thought it was Joan Cooney's sense of imagination, knowing that there were a lot of inner city kids who's Head Start funds were being cut right around the late 60s, which was why she had the idea of doing this show to help bring especially inner city kids up to speed of middle and upper income kids. The germ of that idea, that sense of imagination, has in a sense, as Einstein's spread all around the world, he said, "Imagination is more important than knowledge because knowledge is limited but imagination encircles the world." In a sense, Sesame Street has encircled the world now.

**Kim:**

Definitely. As we are talking about all of the different lessons, what important life lesson do you think you've learned from the kids that you have worked with over the years on Sesame Street and in your performances? I know there is a lot of interaction with different kids on the actual show. Is there any important life lesson that stands out to you from your interaction with them?

**Bob:**

Well there is a lot of them. Some you get from your own children and your own grandchildren. In general I guess if we could all be a bit more childlike that doesn't

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mean being childish we would probably live a happier and more productive and fruitful life.

Many, as we talked about, kids I think have a wonderful innate sense of discovery, which we talked about. If that has been nourished in their early years and they are open minded and it helps them to be open minded and open to all kinds of new and wonderful ideas. The discovery of the pillow is an idea, it is a thought there. I think if a kid has been fortunate enough to be raised with love and encouragement in everything they do, they can develop that sense of discovery and imagination.

As a parent, now maybe as a grandparent with eight grandchildren, I have a little more time – not much to think about these things. I think if you can help a child develop great imaginations and a sense of self-esteem, that is probably the best gift you can give a child because if you feel good about yourself, whether you are 5 or 50 or 98, you are going to start the day on a different tact than you would if you didn't feel good about yourself. I think that is terrific.

We are babysitting our two and a half and five year old grandsons this week because school is off and my daughter is busy. Just seeing the five year old, he is totally into fire engines and fire trucks. He said, "I want to build a fire truck." He showed me a picture of a very complicated fire truck and he said, "I want to build this one." I said, "It is kind of hard." He said, "No it's not." He just took off and said, "All you have to do is this and this and this and this, and we'll have a fire truck." I said, "Okay." I don't know how it is going to end up but I've started cutting some wood up. He could have said, "I am going to build a nuclear reactor this afternoon and I can do it." Isn't that great?

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**Kim:**

It is. I have to say that you would be like the coolest grandpa ever.

**Bob:**

Sometimes I am a little more strict than I have to be on Sesame Street.

**Kim:**

That is true. That is just as important as the fun at that age.

**Bob:**

It is fun. My kids are all different ages when the show was growing up.

Another thing that brings a smile to my face is remembering back to one time when I came home, my youngest daughter was about three and she was sitting and watching the show. I happened to be on the show at that point, just closing the show. I walked in and she had her back to me, looking at the TV. I said, "Hi Kathlyn." She did about three or four double takes from the screen to me and then jumped up over the back of the couch and without even stopping for a second just leapt at me, assuming I was going to catch her. Then she sort of started beating me on my chest and pointing to the TV and said, "That's my daddy! That's my daddy!" I don't know who she thought I was.

A few days later, I walked out of the house just as I had closed the show saying, "Sesame Street has been brought to you today by so and so." I finished and I turned off the set and I walked out the front door, at which point a little boy two doors down was coming down the sidewalk on his scooter. He was about five and he practically came to a screeching halt in front of our and he said, "Boy, are you fast!" He assumed that I had managed to get from Sesame Street to Francis Street

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in a millisecond. It was like a time warp for him, I guess.

**Jason:**

Did your kids ever ask you if you could bring Big Bird or Bert and Ernie home for dinner?

**Bob:**

Not really. What I did want to do early on because it was a bit of a problem for Matt Robinson who was the original Gordon on the show, because he actually lived in Philadelphia and commuted. His children were young and they would turn on the show and see he and Susan as husband and wife for five days a week and it was a very confusing thing for them, and difficult.

**Kim:**

I bet.

**Bob:**

I wanted to make my job – my kids were different ages. The youngest ones were fine and dandy. The ones that were in fourth or fifth grade when the show started, they got a lot of flack from their friends at school because it was not cool if you were 12 or 13 to be watching “a baby show.” So they would say, “Big deal. Your father can count up to 10.” They had to sort of figure out how to deal with all of that.

What I did do, and I wanted to make it like I went to work like anybody and it is my job and it is not this star kind of thing – I did take each of them to the show once or twice just to kind of get to know everybody and get to see that it was a long 8, 9, 10, or 11-hour day. So they got a pretty good sense of who I was and the reality

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of everything. I think they realized.

I had each of them on the show just once. Some cast members have used their children on the show. I found that I didn't really want to do that because it is hard to concentrate on what you are supposed to be doing and make sure that your kids are not poking a Muppet in the eye, which my three and a half year old did with Ralph. She kept trying to look inside his mouth, where his hand was. It is hard to remember lines when your kid is acting up. I couldn't do that, but it was fun.

**Jason:**

This kind of ties into the little boy on the scooter scene and thinking that you got home so fast. Obviously when you started the show, Sesame Street was an idea, Jim Henson was a relative unknown and it wasn't really that big of a deal. What was the point that you realized that Sesame Street had become a pretty big deal? Was there a moment for you that you were like, "Wow! This is really something."

**Bob:**

I think there were a few moments. There wasn't really an epiphany all at once kind of thing. When I finally did get the second call a couple of months after I said, "No. I am not the least bit interested in being in a children's show," I was called in a couple of months later and they said, "Come in and take a look at some of the early animation and film." I think I got an inkling that this was going to be a really different kind of show at that moment. That is when I decided that I was going to do everything I possibly could to be a part of it.

As the showed started being aired, we started getting some really good feedback from our folks stationed around the country. We had outreach people, probably four, five, or six of them around the country – especially where inner city and low

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income kids – because we wanted to make sure that they knew there was such a thing as PBS because it wasn't a very important station in many respects at that point, and they wanted to let them know that this show, Sesame Street, existed.

We even had people down in the hoots and hollers in the south going up and fixing television antennas on individuals' homes so they could actually get the show. That is how thorough they worked in terms of getting the word out.

We started getting good feedback from those folks that were working with our target audience several months into the first broadcast season. Early reviews were positive.

I think maybe for several of us, the first summer we were off and not taping, we toured many major inner city areas, including Watts and Jacksonville in Chicago. I remember the one out in Watts, there were the four original cast members and Big Bird and Oscar was what went out. We went out and there must have been – I was sitting on the lawn in the big park – like 3,000 kids or so. It was like a little mini Woodstock.

When Big Bird appeared, half of the kids had already bought their Big Bird doll and it was like a Rolling Stone concert. They were all thrusting their birds up over the tops of their heads and screaming and everything. That was pretty exciting. We had a feeling we were really on the right track when we saw the action for the first time live from the kids.

The other thing was along the way was the response from the parents but especially from our inner city parents and teachers of how we really were, in fact, reaching our target audience and what an impact it was making on kids who

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were coming from really tough home life situations and were at a disadvantage educationally.

None of us had any idea that we were going to be on the air for 39 years – we are now preparing for our 40th season – and to be all around the world in 20 different foreign languages. That is nothing anyone could have ever anticipated. It is pretty rewarding to see what the show has done.

Even now when I see what some of the foreign co-productions are, even having been this close to it for 39 years, I am still amazed at the response and what is happening.

They did one a couple of years ago called Around the Corner. That was a version done in Israel, Reckov Sumsum, with both Israeli and Palestinian and kids of very different cultures there. And there is a new initiative going right now in Northern Ireland, as a matter of fact. It is being produced over there by the Irish. That is meant to help kids understand the difference between Catholics and Protestants. That is the whole basis and that is what the show is designed for. It is a Muppet and live cast show.

I just talked to one of the folks working over there and they said they had to make sure they had exactly the right Irish dialect to make it authentic. It wasn't just any old Irishman talking like any old Irishman. It was the Northern dialect. I don't know if there is a difference between the Protestant and Catholic dialect, I suspect not in Belfast and in those areas.

So the show has done just incredible things in just so many different directions. We have a fairly new segment for two or three years called Global Grover. Those are little inserts that Global presumably has been traveling around the world un-

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derstanding different cultures and games and children from all of these different countries where we broadcast to help our kids understand what it is like to be a child in Bangladesh, Africa, or China.

The scope is incredible. It is a huge organization and I barely understand it myself after 40 years.

**Kim:**

That is amazing. Out of everything, what would you say has been your favorite part of working on Sesame Street?

**Bob:**

I guess probably there are several things, not one thing. Maybe working with creative writers, puppeteers, and the cast. I am often asked, "Do you really get along?" I have to say the cast really is like a family. We actually get along exactly off camera, maybe even better, than our roles on camera. We've been very, very good friends for almost 40 years and I think everyone has great respect. We each bring something, hopefully different, to the show. I think there is just a tremendous respect between all of the cast members for what the other member does. That has been very rewarding.

Also, I think we mentioned earlier about the feedback from parents about the show and what it has meant in their life and the lives of their kids, especially for the kids who grew up in inner city stories.

A few years ago I was in Newark airport running for a plane and I heard this voice say, "Yo Bob!" I looked over and there was this very attractive African-American girl behind the American Airline counter. I went over because I had a few minutes and

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said, "Hi." We got to talking. She was saying how great the show was and what it meant. I sort of kidding, kind of off handedly and not too seriously I said, "I suppose it changed your whole life, right?" You know, being a little bit fresh. She got serious and said, "Yeah, it certainly did."

She told me this long story but she had basically grown up in just a terrible project in Newark and no one in her family had ever graduated from high school, let alone go to college. There was a great deal of crime in her neighborhood. She said she remembered at a very early age, maybe four, five or six, of watching the show she said to herself, "I don't care what it takes. I am going to get out of this neighborhood and be able to live in a neighborhood like Sesame Street."

She not only finished high school, but she got a full four year scholarship to Rutgers and has a pretty top executive job at American Airlines right now.

For every one of those stories that you hear, you know there are probably several more that have followed that same path. That is probably one of my favorite parts of knowing what the show has accomplished, just being a strong part of it.

Sometimes I will have folks of all different ethnic backgrounds, big guys give me a hug and say, "You were my surrogate father." It is very rewarding. I just feel incredibly fortunate to have bumped into this thing in my life.

**Jason:**

It sort of ties in good into the sort of lessons that have been incorporated into Sesame Street all along, but what would you say to someone who maybe has big dreams, maybe they are in a place where they want to be something greater, or do something else? What would you say to them if they have these big aspira-

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tions but they don't quite know how to get there?

**Bob:**

Well, I have been asked that a lot. It is kind of a hard question to answer to anybody, I always feel like I am short changing them. In a sense, there is not a whole lot you can tell them because, as you know, no two people are going to approach their life and where they hope to go in the same way. A lot of it depends on their personality. A lot depends on how much energy they put into whatever they hope to be doing.

In my case, I guess I would say being absolutely as well prepared as you possibly can. That is kind of an open, broad statement, but looking back, certainly all of the performing I did at a very early age was helpful. Certainly all of my formal training at the University of Michigan and getting an undergraduate and graduate degrees at the Manhattan School of Music, those were all long preparation years. While no one has ever asked me for a degree or to show my degree papers, all of that was very important. I don't think you can short change that amount of work that goes into preparing for a career.

I once worked with a very wonderful voice coach. He was from Julliard School of Music. It was just about the time that I got the Mitch Miller Show. I was then working with him to be an evangelist and all of the St. Matthew and St. John passions and that kind of repertoire and I said, "I just got this great show singing along with 25 guys. I am so lucky!" In his wonderful Viennese accent, he said, "Luck has very little to do with it." He said, "It was because you were prepared. It may have been a little luck that you had a chance to audition or that situation came about to perform, but if you didn't deliver at that point, there would be 50 people lined up around the block waiting to take that job." I think that is really important.

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I think you have to be – I have to talk only in my own case because that is the only life I know – but I think it is important to be as flexible as you possibly can.

In my case, I had a chance through college and all kinds of performing in the Army and in Germany to do all kinds of music from from everything from classical to rock and roll. So those first several years in New York when I was doing a lot of freelancing before I got with the Mitch Miller Show and then ultimately Japan and then ultimately Sesame Street, which are more steady kinds of things, I was sometimes doing three and four jobs a day. Everything from singing a roaring chant regularly in the morning to a rock and roll date at night with a recording by Servinski in a chorale group in the mean time – that was one particular day. There was quite a wide range.

But all of that early work doing a lot of different kinds of things kept me alive and I never waited a table or washed a dish in my life except at home and in college. I was always able to make a living doing that.

I think you have to be willing to be of the temperament to take failure and understand that is part of the game. At one point I did a number of commercials both on and off camera. You would average about 20 or 25 or 30 auditions for every one that you might get. That is pretty common. I did a little auditioning for Broadway, although it was never a really driving, I did summer stock and everything but I never had a great desire that I wanted to be a Broadway star necessarily, partially because I had a light lyric voice and at that time no one was amplified. Now it would be very much easier. I never had much luck doing that sort of thing. Sometimes you can get very discouraged at that sort of thing and it very often has very little to do with your talent or who you are. They may just be looking for

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someone who is two inches taller or shorter than yourself.

Lesley Augims was with us on Sesame Street. I always thought she had probably one of the best temperaments for being in show business. She just had a great positive attitude about everything that she did and was willing to accept the kind of music that Mitch asked her to sing, even though she may have wanted to do some other kinds of songs at the time.

Also, if they are coming to New York, certain professions in the business I think are harder. I think acting is incredibly difficult. Not that I've ever tried to be necessarily a full time actor as opposed to a television person and singer. I think that is very, very hard and you should probably have enough resources to stay alive without making any money in what they hope to do for a year or more so you are not just coming and getting very discouraged because being in New York and not having a job can be very discouraging. I've been a freelancer all my life and I've always been kind of willing to go with that flexibility but it is very hard.

I guess the bottom line is that you really have to be tremendously passionate about what you want to do and extremely dedicated and be willing to work as hard as you can. Probably at some point also have the reality that if this doesn't work out, because it is incredibly competitive, you should have some backup. In my case, I decided to get my graduate degrees. I did teach part time while I was getting a Masters, at a private boy's school in New York, which I enjoyed immensely and I knew that I could have always continued teaching and would have enjoyed that and probably would have done some singing. I had no idea if I was going to be able to make a living singing when I first came to New York. That was to be determined.

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You should have a backup, especially in the arts, it would be very wise to have some additional kind of skill to fall back on. How many cartoonists make it into a strip?

**Jason:**

Not very many.

**Kim:**

The odds are not with you.

**Bob:**

It is like how many are going to be astronauts in reality?

**Jason:**

It is really great to have that snapshot you just gave. I think anytime anyone has a certain level of success, the people that don't know them very well that are just from the outside, they look at it like, "Oh they are so lucky." Or, "It must be nice," and things like that. I don't really think there are too many overnight sensations. They take a long time and I think what you said really sums up that old line of "Luck is really when preparation meets opportunity."

**Bob:**

Absolutely. I couldn't agree with you more. That is very well said.

**Jason:**

It is really great to hear that and all of the stuff that you have been through and the different things that you had to be flexible with. It is really great inspiration and I think that is more realistic for people to hear of how you get to where you

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are because it is really not a magic formula necessarily. It is just hanging in there.

**Bob:**

It is probably not exclusive at all to people in the entertainment business. If you train to be a doctor, dentist, or lawyer, you probably know you are going to have a profession to go to. Certainly in the arts that is not true. You really don't know.

The other thing is that a lot of people feel that unless you are a star, you've not been a success but there are just thousands of musicians working that people have never heard of that have recording dates and spend their whole life in recording studios making a very good living and people have never ever heard of them.

On the other hand, all of those people have worked since they were six years old learning their instrument. There are very few overnight sensational successes, I think.

**Kim:**

This is kind of off the subject, but before we go to our last question, I have a little side question for you. A couple of days ago, we were at a speaking engagement and we told someone that we were going to be interviewing you. She said, "I have been to one of his concerts. It was so cool because at a certain point, Bob had all the kids stand on their chairs." I don't know how she worded it but she said, "You guys can't see very good, so stand on your chairs." She said that the staff that were running it were like, "Oh no!" But she said it was the coolest thing.

**Bob:**

I don't remember that but probably foolish advice because if they had fell off, the

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whole place would have been sued, right? That's funny.

**Kim:**

But that was what she remembered. She was like, "That was just so cool. The kids just felt so big and important."

**Bob:**

Oh isn't that funny? I was probably warned afterwards never to do that again because I don't recall ever doing that again. That is funny.

Now going around the country, I run into kids and they say, "Oh I was six and I was one of the people in your neighborhood." I run into musicians in major symphony orchestras and they said, "We were down at Disney with you in the All American College Orchestra and we played there and now we are in the Phil Harmonica." It is kind of fun to bump into these kids all the time saying they did this or that when they were little. That is fun.

**Kim:**

You were a part of so many people's lives. It is kind of an interesting thing because you don't know them.

**Bob:**

That is right. I had a funny letter one time from a little girl. You kind of have to think back to where her logic was coming from but she wrote me this letter saying she liked the show and, "By the way, my cat just had her kittens." So what you can imagine is that she was holding up this pregnant cat in front of the T.V. set showing them to me because kids always thought we could see them like they could see us. I've been asked by kids, "How did you get out of that little box?"

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Fred Rogers was also asked that one time. I heard a little quote by him one time and he gave this long, wonderful Mr. Rogers explanation of the electronics of the whole thing. As he was walking away the kid yelled, "Well how are you going to get back in?" So much for that explanation, right?

I have to tell you one quickly because it is sort of the same thing. One time I was standing down at Disney I was working and I had my kids with me. We were standing in line for a long time for The Small World event. We just took our grandchildren down there a couple of months ago and you stand in line for a long time. This family ahead of me, a husband and wife, and they had three kids. Two of them were like six, seven, eight or so and this one was like a three year old little girl. The closer she got to this, the more she knew she didn't want to go in. She was just screaming her head off and they were beside themselves. No one had turned around and recognized me or said hello.

At one point the father put this little screaming three year old up over his shoulder. So we were face-to-face like six inches apart, standing in line, she is screaming in my face. I thought maybe I could do my good deed for the day. I whispered in her ear, "You are going to love this ride. It is Big Bird's favorite ride." She stopped long enough to stare me in the face and say, "I don't care if you are on TV." Then she screamed twice as loud. She knew who I was the whole time and just didn't want me to be any part of her life or telling her. The funny part was that the parents never heard any part of this discussion or dialogue. It was just simply between she and I.

Some of those things just totally crack me up. I wanted to fall down on the ground laughing.

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**Jason:**

Sometimes star power just doesn't have much power, does it?

**Kim:**

Not with a three year old.

**Bob:**

As impressive as I was to that little girl standing on the seat, I was just as unimpressive to – It's been a wonderful life, I will tell you.

**Kim:**

That is awesome. Could I convince you to sing part of the "Who Are The People In Your Neighborhood?" I know you sang a little bit of it before and I just – my eyes lit up.

**Bob:**

I guess I could.

"Kim and Jason are the people in your neighborhood, in your neighborhood, in your neighborhood. The artist is the person in your neighborhood. They are the people that you meet when you're walking down the street. The people that you meet each day."

I have to tell you one other thing that constantly brings a smile to my face – back to an earlier question. About 6, 7, 8, or 10 years ago, we did a night time special. We did a spoof of that on this night time, for adult, special with Martina Navratilova, Barbara Walters, and Ralph Nader. They were all in the song with me and

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each one had a humorous little bit to do with me. Barbara Walters was trying to get the inside scoop on Linda and myself. "What is really happening with you and Linda?" I said, "We are going out for a walk in the park and we are coming back to our apartment." And she said, "Yes?" I said, "Then we are going to have a really great game of chess." She turned to the camera and said, "This is what you call a really slow news day on Sesame Street."

The funny one was Ralph Nader. He had a little wagon upside down and testing the wheels. I said, "What are you doing?" He said, "Well, I am testing this wheel to make sure it is safe." I said, "That is pretty nice." He said, "Well, that is my job." I had a sweater on and it was a breakaway, thick sweater. He said, "Nice sweater." I said, "My Aunt Matilda knitted it." He said, "Is it safe?" I said, "I don't know. I suppose so." He said, "Well, better safe than sorry." So he pulls at my sleeve and my buttons and the whole thing falls apart. He said, "Your Aunt Matilda knitted you a lemon." He was into rating cars at that point.

That was funny but what I thought was ludicrous was that he had come to the studio an hour or two earlier before the taping and he had never looked at the song that they had sent him to learn so he could sing, "Cause the consumer advocate is a person in your neighborhood." So I had to sit in my little dressing room with Ralph Nader, teaching him to sing "The consumer advocate is a person in your neighborhood." I thought, "That's got to be one of the sillier things – other than singing "Danny Boy" to the Prime Minister that I have ever had to do in my life.

Then at a big sold out performance at Carnegie Hall as a tribute to Harry Chaffin. Do you know that name? Harry Chaffin? Well, we were good friends. When he was killed at a very early age in an automobile accident, they did a huge tribute at Carnegie Hall. Everybody was there, from Bruce Springsteen to the Smothers

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Brothers to Belafonte and on up and down. We were all together in one relatively small room. Ralph Nader was there and he sort of stood out, even among all of these great stars. We were sitting there with Bruce Springsteen and Paul Simon and he said, "You know I just did a really great thing on Sesame Street a couple of weeks ago." They said, "Really? What?" He said, "Well, I sang with Bob and the people in the neighborhood." He said, "Maybe they'd like to hear it." I said, "No, no." So we proceeded to sing the consumer advocate to all of these major stars and I thought, Oh my God!

**Kim:**

They probably loved it.

**Bob:**

They did love it. I was just a little embarrassed during that song for all of those folks. Oh God, it's been a funny, fun life.

**Jason:**

I can imagine that certainly when you were a five year old little boy you had no clue whatsoever what your life would end up being. We always ask everyone we interview at the very end what they wanted to be when they grew up. I am very curious to hear what, when you were five or six, what was going through your mind as your big dream?

**Bob:**

Well, I have been asked that once before and I never really thought about it until somebody asked me the question. I grew up on a farm. I think, even though I milked all the cows and did all of my chores, and did all that stuff, I was pretty sure that I didn't want to be a farmer. I knew it was really hard work and somehow that

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didn't seem so exciting, nor did it to my older brothers as I mentioned earlier.

When I am thinking of our kids here, and I have grandchildren living in New York, I grew up in a much, much simpler time. Not only was I living on a farm with a creek running through and all kinds of great stuff and my border collie, Lassie and that kind of thing, there really wasn't the pressure that kids have today of making sure that you get into the best kindergarten so you can get into the best Ivy League college. It is getting a little ridiculous.

Also, I was around 10 during the big World War II. The country was totally absorbed in that whole thing. I remember as a 9, 10, 11 year old, stripping and collecting tin foil from chewing gum wrappers and rolling it into a ball and depositing it someplace to make gosh knows what. Maybe it was more of a psychological thing than actually being useful. I was selling war bonds. I was always very busy doing what I was doing at the time.

I was very influenced by my 10 year old brother who was in the air force and he was in a B-17. That was pretty influential. I think he was kind of a role model. He went to the University of Illinois and became an engineer. Pretty much through high school I thought that was probably what I should do because he did it and he was having a successful life and everything, even though I had been singing that whole time, preparing for what I was ultimately going to do. I don't think I really understood through all of those many years of singing and performing that this was what I was actually going to end up doing the rest of my life.

I was all signed up to go to the University of Illinois as an engineer when I won about a two or three week scholarship to a music camp outside of Chicago. There were a lot of professors and music people from the Conservatory and Northwest-

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ern there. It was at that time that they said, "We did a lot of music and you really ought to give music a chance because you have some talent and a good voice." That is when I did a one eighty turn and decided to go to the University of Michigan along with a good friend of mine. They squeezed me in because I was like six months late in applying for admission. Fortunately my best friend's father was a fraternity brother of the dean of admissions so he picked up the phone and got me in. Otherwise I never would have gotten in because I was so late.

I know you have quoted in your book, "If you want to hear God laugh, tell him your plans." It is an old saying. That has a lot to do with my life. I kind of just went where it seemed the logical place to go at that time. I guess when I was a child and singing, and my mother was the prompt for all of that I guess, I didn't dislike it and I don't honestly know how much I did like it but I think I probably enjoyed it. I didn't dislike it and it was kind of fun winning contests and doing all of that kind of thing.

It wasn't like my five year old grandson, who is just a total fireman at this point. He just knows everything one could know about a fireman. He has got all of the equipment all of the firemen in town know him because he goes down and spends time. If you asked him right now, he would say, "I am going to be a fireman." That is a tough profession, I am not sure I would be happy. It is a tough and dangerous one.

I guess I kind of ambled along in life, just seeing what felt right at the time. Doing music felt right at that time, it felt good when I was preparing all through college. I guess by the time I finally got into college and had an encouragement from my voice teachers, one who had a very successful singing career in New York on radio, Phillip Dewey. He said, "You will never have any trouble working in New York

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because there is always room for a good top tenor." Where it was going to lead, I didn't know but it was pretty encouraging even though I knew the operatic work which I had to do there probably wasn't going to be my life work.

Then as I said, just freelancing every possible kind of musical thing in New York when I got there and seeing what worked out. That has kind of been what I have done. I never expected to be in Japan. I never expected to be on Sesame Street but things seemed to flow along in kind of a natural way. Many things didn't work out, but not a whole lot frankly. I don't think I ever had that great aspiration that, "I've got to be this when I grow up," which is probably a reckless way to grow up.

**Jason:**

Well, I think there is a good message in there. Like following what makes sense at the time and what you are interested in.

**Bob:**

I kind of always – and my life is that way right now. Right now, I have maybe like five, six, or seven projects all kind of juggling and going at the same time. Now I am much more into – It has been a gradual transition. Sesame Street brought me into all of my live performing that made that possible to do thousands of concerts with I think over 110 or 115 different symphony orchestras at this point. I never would have thought of being able to do that, but that happened as a result of Sesame.

As a result of Sesame and their connection with NAM, the International Music Product Association, and MEMC, which represents about 7,000 or 8,000 music teachers, educators around the country, I am much, much more into early childhood music education and doing a lot of national conventions and keynotes and

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workshops. I am doing one on Monday at the Sony building for about 100 teachers from the Newark Arch Diocese, the Catholic Arch Diocese, helping them bring music in a little more in depth than just sitting around and singing a song.

We have some products now that ties the literacy skills to music. One thing just sort of feeds off another. My work with NAM, that is this product, I am already signed up to be riding on the Rose Bowl float for them again next year. They sponsor the Sesame Street float. I have done that for them five times. Everything sort of spins off from one thing to another it seems these days. Jimmy Stewart had a great line. It was a friend of his and they said, "What are you doing these days Jimmy?" This was later in his life and he said, "Well, I guess I seem to be mostly going around and collecting awards." That is happening to me more and more frequently and every time I get one, I think of Jimmy Stewart saying, "I seem to be getting more awards."

**Kim:**

Well, then you know your life was very meaningful if everyone wants to award you.

**Bob:**

Sometimes it is just to get a crowd. I could be cynical if I wanted to. Most of them have been just wonderful. You have to look at all of these things. Like the little girl that says, "Up close you don't look so good." You have to look at life in a pretty realistic way.

**Jason:**

Well, it sounds like God has had great plans for you and he continues to use you. It is really inspiring to see that. You have been so generous with your time. We just

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want to thank you for taking the time out. It has been a real treat to talk to you Bob.

**Bob:**

Likewise. You mentioned God. Religion has been a big part of my life and I think that is an important kind of foundation for at least me in my life and I think for a lot of people. There are a lot of parts that go into a rewarding, happy life.

**Kim:**

It is obvious that you have one. Thank you for sharing so many great stories with us and smiles. We just are really anxious to share this interview with our listeners.

**Bob:**

Not at all. I loved reading a lot of the stories in your magazines. They are inspirational and they are fun and they are clever and I think it gives insight to a lot of people. Good luck with that, plus all of your work you do around the country. That is terrific.

**Jason:**

Thanks Bob. Take care and it was great chatting with you.

**Kim:**

Have a good weekend.

**Bob:**

Thank you. You too.



Learn more about Bob and his music and books at [www.BobMcGrath.com](http://www.BobMcGrath.com)