Hi, Bob: Hall of Fame to welcome Newhart

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Bob Newhart's comedic delivery may be deadpan, but for five decades the Chicago-area native has made it tough for audiences to match his straight face.

The Illinois Broadcasters Association will honor Newhart when the group inducts the comedian into its Hall of Fame during a private event Friday morning at the Chicago Theatre.

"He's such a versatile actor and performer and really an American icon," said Dennis Lyle, the group's president and CEO.

Hall nominees must either have been born in Illinois or honed their skills here, and Lyle said Newhart qualifies on both counts.

The 82-year-old was born in Oak Park, was raised in Chicago's Austin neighborhood and received a degree in business management from Loyola University. After working as an advertising copywriter in Chicago, he turned his focus to comedy, and his career began to take off with several albums and TV appearances.

Newhart won over TV audiences in the 1970s with "The Bob Newhart Show," which spanned six seasons, followed by "Newhart," which ran for eight seasons in the 1980s.

"It's one thing to have one successful sitcom in a career, but to have two is quite the accomplishment," Lyle said.

Newhart also has taken his skills to the big screen with roles in movies like 2003's "Elf" and this year's "Horrible Bosses" and has been inducted into the halls of fame of the Academy of Television Arts & Sciences and the National Association of Broadcasters.

As an inductee into the Illinois hall, he joins the likes of Jack Benny, Bill Kurtis, Jack Brickhouse, Orson Welles, Dick Biondi and Oprah Winfrey. Earlier this month, the Chicago City Council also honored Newhart with a resolution calling him a "favorite son" with a "unique style of comedy."

Newhart will take the stage at the Chicago Theatre on Saturday night to celebrate his 50th anniversary in show business. The comedian, Lyle joked, will be "kick-starting his second 50-year career."

Newhart told WGN-TV's Dean Richards that he remembers watching bands perform there when he lived in the city.

"I've never played there before," he said, "so for me, to walk out on those boards is like something I never thought would happen."

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