

# Introduction

At the end of the quiet block in the San Fernando Valley, a street begins its rise over a hill that leads down into the land of dreams. Once Tim Reid and Tom Dreesen traveled that road in fear and trepidation. Today they make the journey in comfort and serenity. They have prospered in show business for more than three decades now—no mean feat, ask anyone who has tried—and they have done it on their own terms.

Reid has been an actor, producer, and director, on television and in the movies. If there is a living human being who has appeared in more television series than he has, Reid would like to meet him. Walking down the street, he will still hear the occasional shout of “Hey, Venus!” from someone who remembers him as Venus Flytrap, the preternaturally hip overnight disc jockey in *WKRP in Cincinnati*, one of the most beloved sit-coms from that genre’s golden age.

Reid also has the satisfaction, bittersweet as it is, of knowing that as the star and executive producer of *Frank’s Place*, he helped create a show whose hilarious and loving depiction of black life in New Orleans is as fondly remembered by its passionate fans as its untimely demise is regretted. Today, Reid makes films and documentaries at his own production studio in Virginia where he chooses the historical and cultural themes

that mean the most to him. That is, he thinks, the only kind of show business success that really matters.

Dreesen does exactly what he likes, too, just as he did when he traveled the world with Frank Sinatra as the legendary singer's opening act during the last fourteen years of his career. He hones his stand-up routines at comedy clubs in Hollywood, then takes them on the road, often back home to Chicago. He appears regularly on David Letterman's late-night television show, although their warmest conversations, about the days when they were struggling young comedians, take place when the cameras have been turned off.

Dreesen performs in clubs, at corporate functions and before so many charitable groups that Jim Murray, the late sports columnist for the *Los Angeles Times*, once wrote, "If you count the benefits he has performed without a fee, he has contributed more to charity than the Rockefellers." He is a low-handicap member of the celebrity golf tour, which features some of the top entertainers and athletes in the country. "I tell jokes and I play golf," Dreesen says. "Life is good."

Life is so good for both Dreesen and Reid that for years they resisted the idea of revisiting the time when it was not. They had an idea then—a sure-fire, can't-miss idea that was certain to make them rich and famous, to make them kings in the land of dreams. Now, however, as they sit in Dreesen's condominium near the road that leads over the hill to Hollywood, they have begun to look back, to try to come to terms with what went wrong and to wonder. Were they ever that young? Were they ever that naïve? Did they really quit good jobs, abandon their families, throw away all they had accomplished in overcoming childhoods that would have strained the credulity of Charles Dickens to form an inter-racial *comedy* act?

"Do you remember what was going on in America then?" Dreesen asks. "Vietnam. Race riots. Cities burning. Protests in the streets. About the time we were getting our first gigs in Chicago, for instance, Fred Hampton was killed in an FBI raid on Black Panther headquarters and police were using tear gas to

break up a race riot at my own high school. And here we were thinking we could make a difference by telling jokes. We must have been crazy.”

“It wasn’t going to happen,” Reid agrees. “We took on the country’s hatreds and fears in many ways. There was just so much pain in those days.”

But there was laughter and adventure, too. And there were appreciative crowds, enough of them to keep Dreesen and Reid coming back for more, to keep them chasing the one big break they knew was just around the corner, to keep them from facing reality for almost five years. It all seems so distant now, so removed from who they are today. But as they remember the struggle and the danger of those days, and the fun and the excitement, they realize how much it all has to say about where they are now, and perhaps where their country is as well.

Here, then, is the story of Tim and Tom, the first black and white comedy team in the history of show business. And the last.