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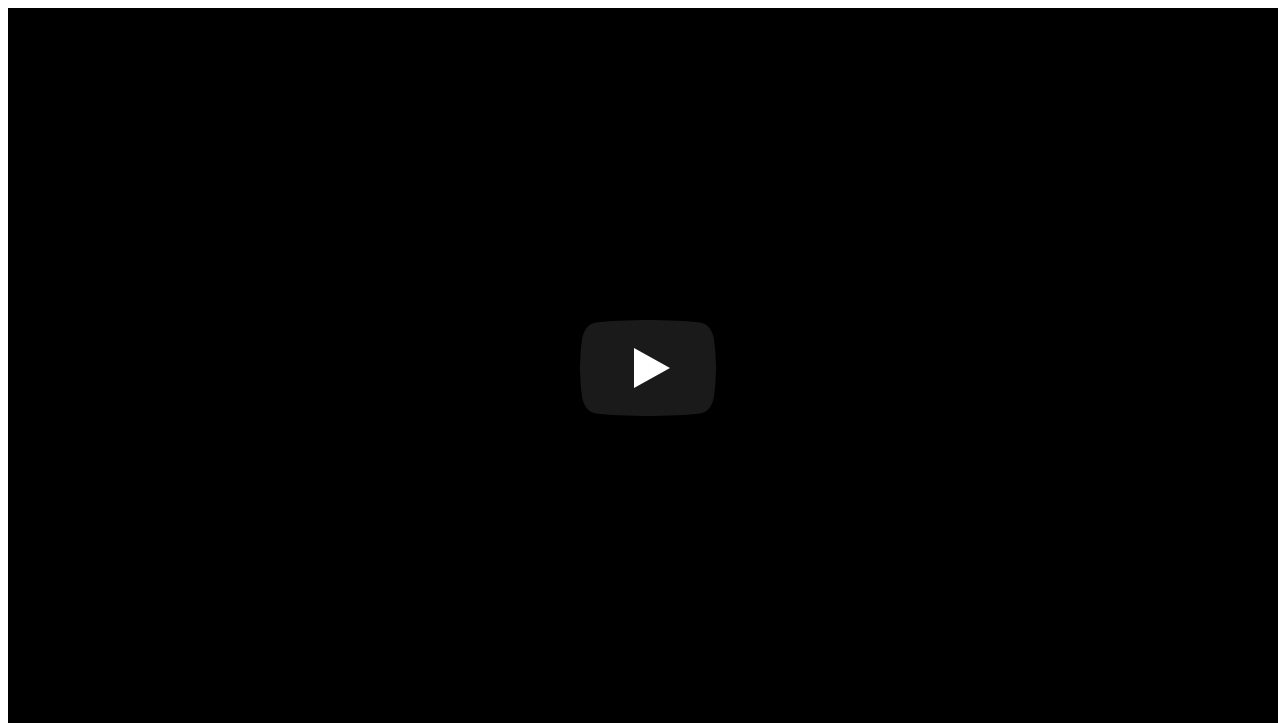
CULTURE [Brian VanHooker](#) / 9 hours ago

## FOR NEARLY TWO DECADES, ANSWERING MACHINES WERE THE CENTER OF THE COMEDY UNIVERSE

**For Nearly Two Decades, Answering Machines Were the Center of the Comedy Universe**

The sketch began with a rather lousy impression of [Jack Nicholson](#). Randy, a petulant boyfriend obsessed with his answering machine, was imitating Nicholson's signature sneer for his great new outgoing message, but his girlfriend Kristine's timing was off with the sound effects. Within seconds, Randy lost his patience. When Kristine failed to see what was so important about an outgoing message, he shouted at her, saying that answering machines are "the most important creative outlet of the 1990s." Then he added, "If [William Shakespeare](#) were alive today, he wouldn't be writing plays, he'd be writing answering machine messages!"





The sketch occurred during the fourth season of the classic sketch comedy show *The Kids in the Hall*, which aired in 1994. The obnoxious Randy was played by **Bruce McCulloch** – who also wrote the sketch – and Kristine was played by **Kevin McDonald** in a wig. It might seem ridiculous now to call an answering machine “the most important creative outlet of the 1990s,” but there was actually some truth to that statement, particularly when it came to humor. Indeed, from the mid-1980s until the early 2000s, the humble answering machine seemed to be at the center of every form of comedy, from stand-up to movies to TV.

All this began on January 1, 1984. For decades, telephone services from coast to coast were **run by AT&T**, who not only controlled the phone lines, but also the telephones themselves, **which most people rented** from them for a monthly fee. But at the beginning of 1984, an agreement took effect that saw a breakup of AT&T’s monopoly. Along with other changes to how phone companies operated, Americans were no longer required to get their telephones from their phone company. Instead, they started to shop for phones at places like RadioShack. The same was true of telephone accessories, the most notable of which was the answering machine.



While **answering machine technology** dated back to the 1930s, the machines didn’t take off until 1984, when people had the option of buying their own device. That year,

answering machine sales **exceeded one million** for the first time, quickly changing the way people communicated. Inevitably, it would change the course of comedy, too.

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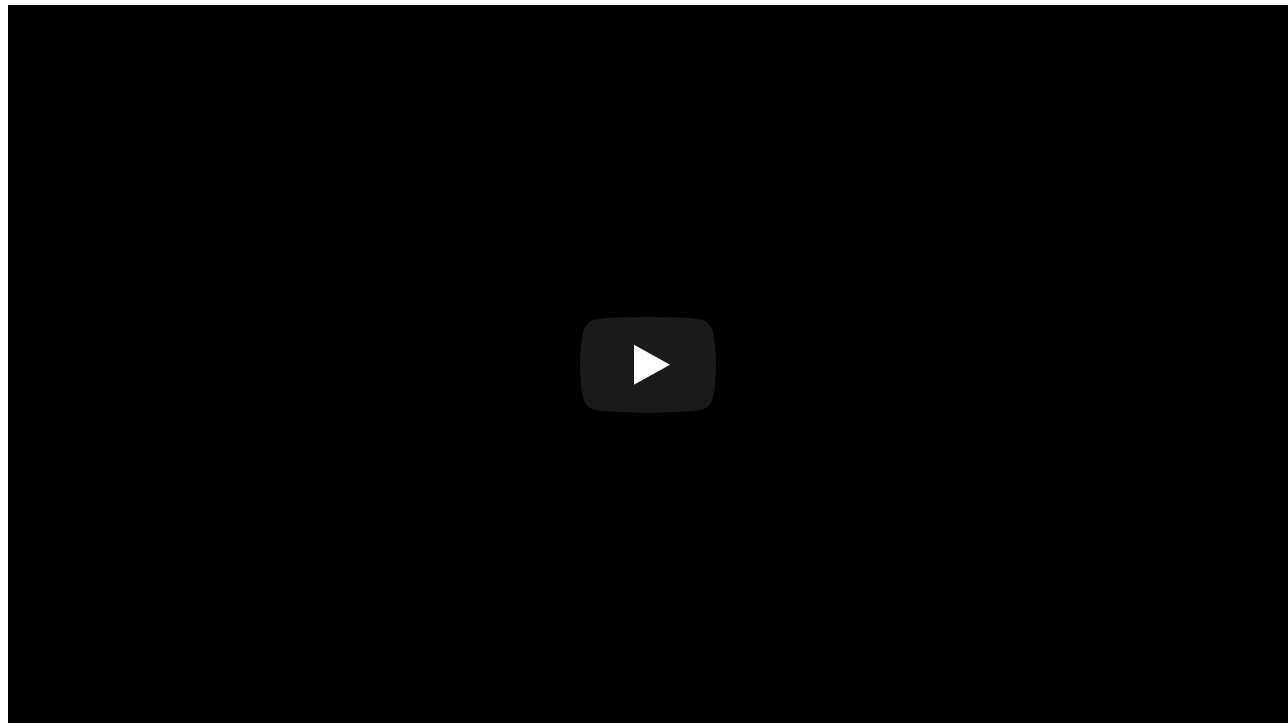
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“First there was **fridge poetry** as a creative outlet, then there was your answering machine,” McCulloch tells me. “Your outgoing message became like your five best tweets – it was something for your friends. There were all kinds of issues surrounding it too, like, when to change your message and how to change it. You could also use your answering machine to avoid people – **I did a whole song on my album about that.**”



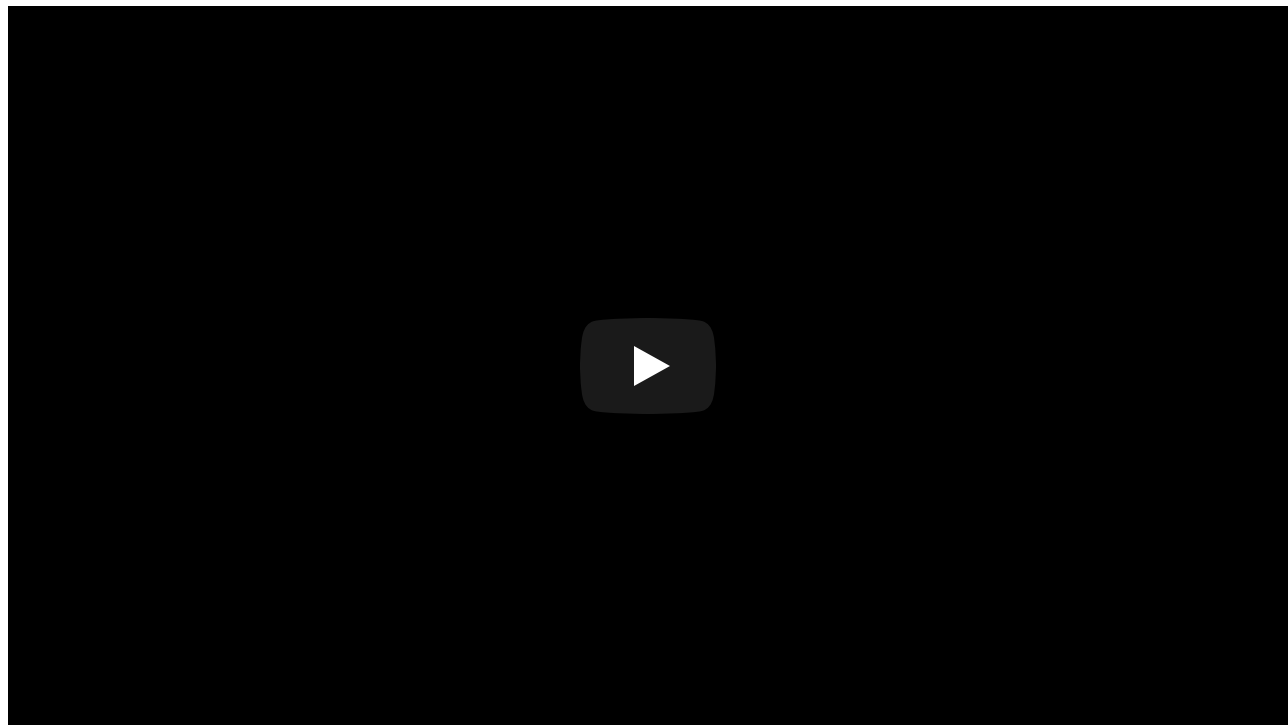


Much in the way social media does today, answering machines also complicated relationships. Did your girlfriend *want* to be a part of your answering machine message? Did that mean you were official? "The answering machine was a microcosm of a lot of different relationship things," McCulloch continues. "That's why it worked its way into so much comedy."

Just as that *Kids in the Hall* sketch depicted, having a creative outgoing message was indeed important. As Lebanon, Pennsylvania's *Daily News* reported in 1981, "When writer Hollie Davies is out, God answers her telephone. **Darth Vader** takes messages for psychologist Lee Solow; Sparky the Dog barks greetings for a Virginia veterinarian. Creating novel phone-answering messages has become a nationwide pastime."

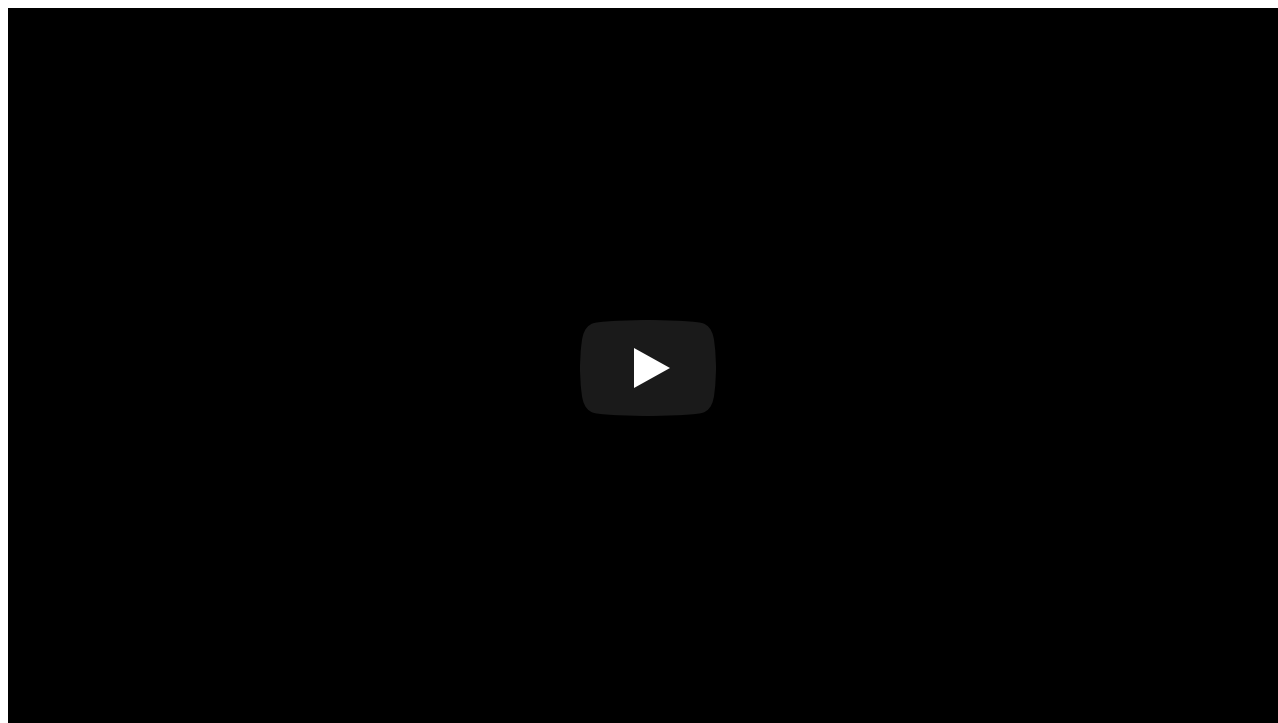
It was only natural, then, that people started making businesses out of it. Several companies got in on this space in the mid-1980s, but none did so more memorably than *Crazy Calls*, which gained nationwide popularity thanks to its infomercials.





"*Crazy Calls* was like a 1980s version of going viral," says **Emmy winner Ira Yuspeh**, co-founder of **M&I Recording Studios**, who produced the recordings. "In the mid-1980s, my brother Mitch and I had a recording studio and, for fun, we would do these funny messages to put on our answering machine. Our friends would call and hear them, and they'd tell people. Before long, we started getting calls from people we didn't even know. Also, every year in New York, right in front of our studio, is the 9th Avenue food festival. Everyone liked our messages so much that in 1985, we got a booth and a boom box, and we made up a tape that had seven outgoing messages. It had the ['Wait for the Beep'] rap and Beethoven's Fifth and all of that, and we just played it on a loop."





"Before long, it was selling so fast that one of us was upstairs in the studio just running off cartons of cassettes and slapping labels on them. Then we'd run downstairs to sell them," Yuspeh continues. "After that, we thought about getting an ad on cable TV, because in those days, you could actually afford them. So we bought three spots a day on USA, and right away, we were selling 200 to 300 [cassettes] a day."

In addition to the answering machine rap and the Beethoven parody, the first volume also contained parodies of *The Twilight Zone*, the song "Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy" and an imitation of Humphrey Bogart. It was just seven tracks totalling less than seven minutes, yet it sold like gangbusters for \$14.95, or the equivalent of \$40 today. "All

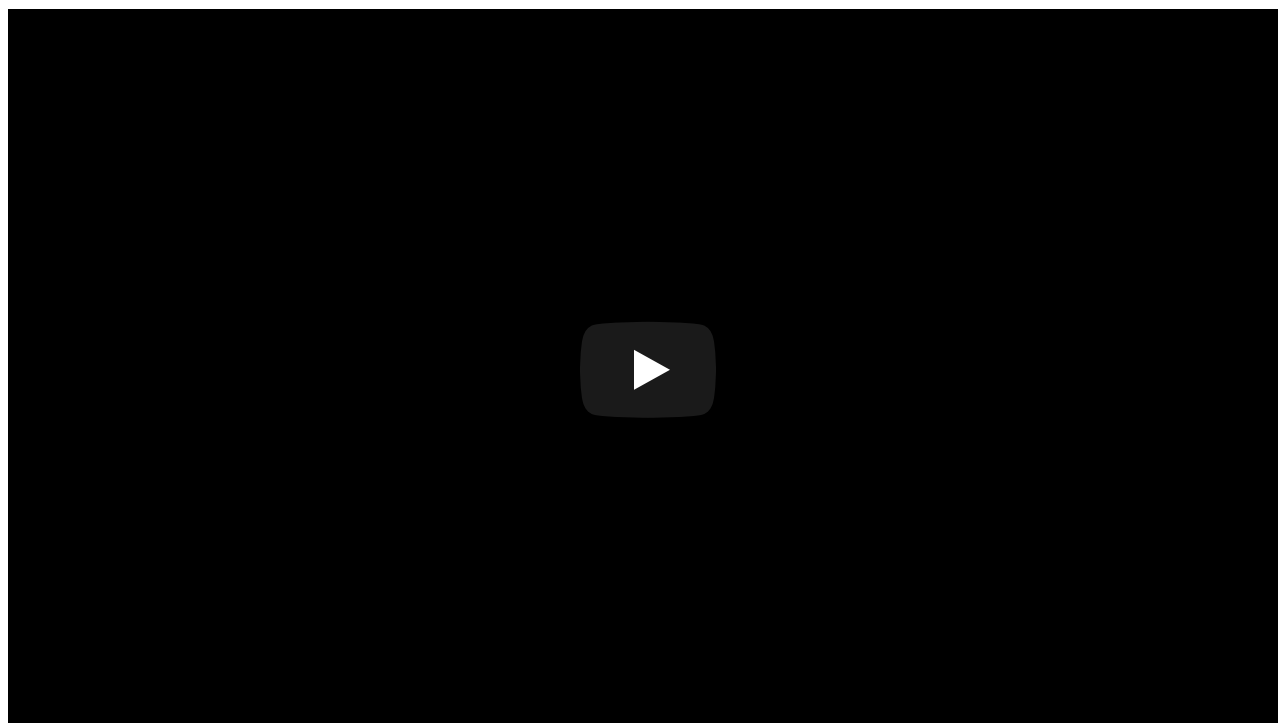


told, we sold close to a million cassettes. It was a crazy ride," Yuspeh says.

After the success of *Crazy Calls*, other companies joined in with their own answering machine tapes. Matthew Furman, who created the website

[NoveltyAnsweringMachine.com](https://www.noveltyansweringmachine.com), says that although most of these tapes have been forgotten over the years, *Crazy Calls* is still providing comedy fodder to this day.

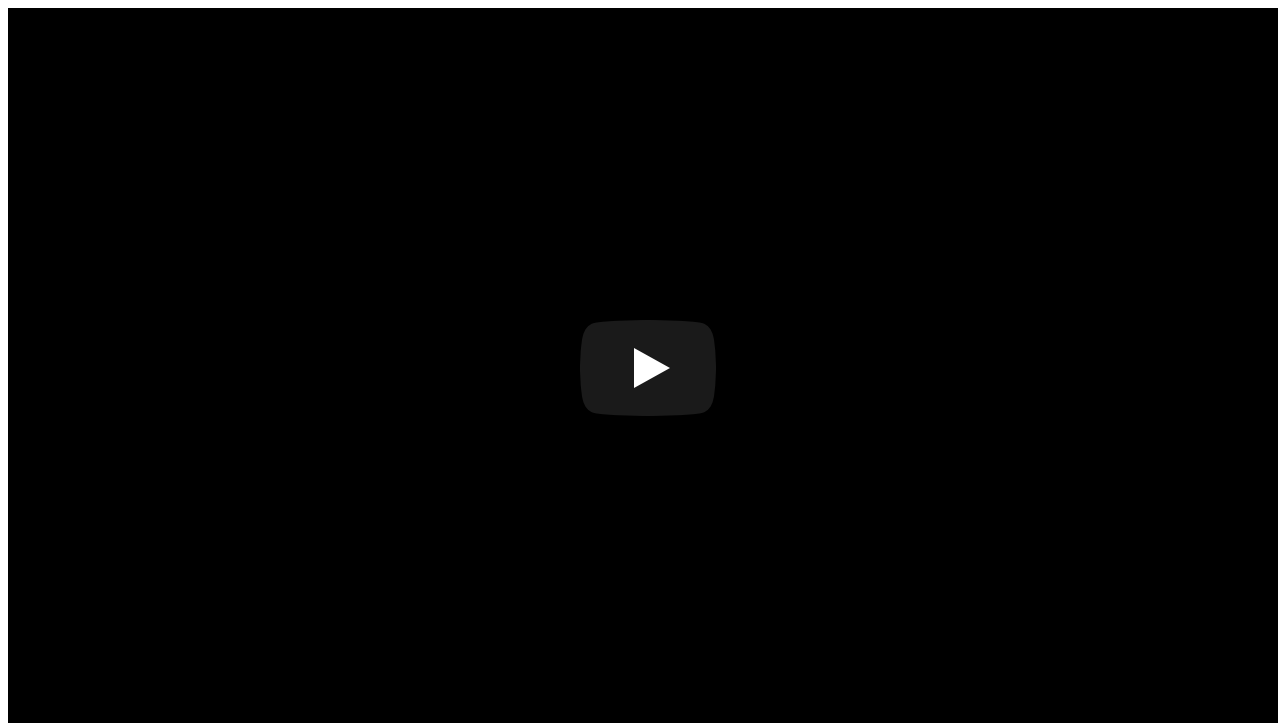
Recently, they appeared in Jimmy Fallon's "History of Rap" segments with [Justin Timberlake](#), as well as in episodes of *Family Guy* and *The Simpsons*. Just last year, they were referenced in an episode of *Ted Lasso*.



But for some answering machine owners, *Crazy Calls* wasn't quite crazy enough. So, starting in the mid-1980s, celebrities with notable voices began to provide funny outgoing messages for fans. Actor [Townsend Coleman](#) – who was the voice of Michelangelo in [the 1987 Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles series](#), as well as the voice of [The Tick](#) – recalls the days where fans would make such requests. "Over the years, I've been asked *many* times to do people's answering machine messages," he tells me. "Not so much anymore, but back in the days of true answering machines, I'd say, 'Sure, why not?' I did a lot as Michelangelo, and I actually did my first *Tick* one for my sister.



People were always very respectful about it, so I didn't mind."



Funny outgoing messages were just the homefront of answering machine comedy, though. Because the devices changed the way people communicated, a whole new aspect of etiquette had to develop along with it, and people suddenly needed to figure out how long a message should be, how often they should leave one and whether or not it was okay to screen calls. This kind of awkward social evolution is exactly the kind of thing that was reflected by stand-up comedians of the era, particularly George Carlin and Jerry Seinfeld, who specialized in observational comedy. In one special, Carlin griped about parents who had their kids record their outgoing messages. Seinfeld, meanwhile, talked about **the awkward moment** a caller felt when they called someone *expecting* to leave a message, yet was caught off guard by an actual answer.





Comedians who specialized in the storytelling aspect of stand-up also took part.

Comedian **Judy Gold** would **play her overprotective mother's messages on stage**, and

*Top Gear* host **Adam Ferrara** recounted his father's hilariously surly outgoing message:

"Alright look, I ain't giving you a ride, I ain't got any money, I don't care who's dead and I ain't calling you back."



When I ask Ferrara why he thinks answering machines were so prevalent in stand-up during this era, he tells me that it was simply the answering machine's time to shine. "The frame of reference was there for everyone," he says. "It's kind of like duets on TikTok now – it was a new delivery system of information that comics could use to illustrate funny things. For me, it was natural to talk about my parents and their answering machine because they were funny, but didn't know it. Plus, they've been a part of my act since I started doing stand-up in 1988."

Our awkward social adjustment to answering machines also found its way onto the big screen. In *Swingers*, [Jon Favreau's rambling voicemail](#) to a woman he just met is one of the best, cringiest parts of the movie, partly because it immediately brings to mind the most awkward message you've ever left in your own life. In *Cable Guy*, we feel what it's like to be on the receiving end of answering machine insanity with Matthew Broderick's reaction to [Jim Carrey's obsessive messages](#). And in *Office Space*, Ron Livingston's unanswered voicemails provide us with a little bit of hilarious wish fulfillment when he completely ignores his annoying boss.



When it came to television, similarly funny moments became a part of sitcom history. In the original *The Office*, Ricky Gervais' David Brent makes the mistake of letting his messages play in front of his boss, including one from a perverse sales rep that accuses him of looking up his boss' skirt. On *Friends*, Ross proudly presents a cringeworthy parody of Queen's "We Will Rock You" as the new outgoing message when he moves in with Joey and Chandler. And perhaps the greatest sitcom answering machine scene ever came in the 1997 *Seinfeld* episode "The Susie," where George is revealed to have an outgoing message parodying the theme from the 1980s TV show *The Greatest American Hero*:

*Believe it or not, George isn't at home  
Please leave a message at the beep  
I must be out, or I'd pick up the phone  
Where could I be?  
Believe it or not, I'm not home!*



Comedy writer **David Mandel**, who wrote "The Susie," says that he'd *love* to take credit for George's answering machine, but that it's actually based on a real-world outgoing message. "We basically stole it," he tells me. "It belonged to a friend of my old writing partner **Jeff Schaffer**, and we used to call him just to listen to it because it was so great. For this episode, we knew George would be screening calls and we said we *had* to use that. The message was **perfect for George**, but we had a bit of a problem when we first recorded it. Jason Alexander was too good of a singer, so we had to have him re-record it to make it worse. To this day that message still brings a smile to my face."



us, there was something about sitcoms and answering machines that provided for

more than just jokes – they also provided *stories*. Sitcoms – particularly multi-camera sitcoms from the 1980s and 1990s – often thrived on small stakes made big. Simple, everyday occurrences were blown up for comedic purposes, and entire plotlines would be about next to nothing. Applying that to answering machines, Mandel explains, “They were so culturally huge that you couldn’t *not* do stories about it.”

In the *Seinfeld* episode “The Phone Message,” George, thinking he’s being ignored, leaves an angry message on his girlfriend’s phone, only to find out that she’s been out of town. The entire episode then unfolds into a story about switching out her answering machine tape. Mandel didn’t write that episode – it predated his time on the show – but he says it was one of the episodes that not only epitomized *Seinfeld*, but made him want to work there, too.

Arguably, the answering machine had an even bigger impact on the stories in *Friends*, which had so many plots revolving around answering machines that *Screen Rant* wrote a whole article entitled “[Friends: 10 Best Episodes That Rely On Answering Machines.](#)” To offer just one example, in the episode “The One Where No One’s Ready,” Monica’s entire storyline revolves around her obsessing over an answering machine message from her ex-boyfriend, as she’s not sure if it’s an old or new message.



Rather fittingly, *Friends* would end in 2004, the same year that the number of **cell phone users in the country exceeded the number of landlines**, making the days of answering machines decidedly numbered. Voicemail, though similar, wasn't quite the same – funny incoming and outgoing messages could still exist, but stories about answering machine tapes or whether a message was new or old were a thing of the past. Over the past decade, **people have also started leaving less messages** over voicemail, so even the “funny message” component of answering machine comedy is nearly extinct.

Now, in more contemporary comedy, answering machines are mostly referred to as a defunct novelty from yesteryear. The aforementioned *Family Guy* clip was, unsurprisingly, poking fun at *Crazy Calls*, and over the last decade of his career, **Norm MacDonald** – particularly in his **memoir** – had a running joke referring to his “surefire answering machine bit” that was meant to make him seem like a dated hack.



The decline was inevitable, of course. While the answering machine may have been the most important creative outlet of the 1990s, when the device was no longer important to our lives, it faded from our humor as well. We'll always have the reruns, though, and thanks to the technology that *replaced* answering machines, those reruns are always at

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