William Breit came into the world on February 13, 1933, in New Orleans, Louisiana, when he became the second son of Sylvia and Murray Breit. In the 68 years since that event, William Breit has occupied a number of worlds. Let me cite some of which I am aware.

1. He has been a Teacher, and in the world of academia, has particularly distinguished himself in conducting honors seminars.
2. He has been a Scholar of economics, and in this world, has particularly distinguished himself in the History of Economic Thought.
3. He is a Mystery writer, and in this world, is unique in inventing the economist as sleuth.
4. Bill is a Connoisseur of fine food, a man relied upon by many in the profession as the authority on where to eat in multiple U.S. cities.
5. Bill is a Devoted cat owner. The Bible honors the man who will lay down his life for his friend (John 15:13). Bill would do that, but he would do it for his cats as well.
6. Bill is an Impressionist, and in this world, has particularly distinguished himself at being able to mimic other economists.
7. He is a Fan of Broadway, especially musicals of Broadway’s golden age. Is there a Broadway song to which Bill Breit does not know the words and melody?
8. He is a Mont Pelerin member, which establishes him as a certified libertarian and critic of all cant and political correctness.
9. And finally, there is the world of sartorial excellence. For many years, I considered William Breit one of the best dressed economists in the profession, the kind of person who wore a tailored sport coat and a proper tie to the office even on Saturdays - at least when he was at the University of Virginia. By my observation, Texas has had a corrosive effect on his attire, though he remains one of the better dressed people in the profession.

These are nine different worlds of William Breit. Most people in our profession occupy just a couple. So we are, today, celebrating the career of a remarkable economist. With all of these talents, at home in all of these worlds, I consider Bill Breit to fit the term Renaissance man: every thought he has can be dated to around 1500.

As a long-time friend, I have had the opportunity, the privilege, and the pleasure to observe William Breit in each of these worlds. I could speak about any of them, while perhaps supplying the most detail about Breit’s world of mystery writing, since I am the less creative half of the Marshall Jevons team.

But instead I want to speak about the world of William Breit as comedian.

I am in no position to judge, but I wonder who is the funniest living economist?

It would be a useful contribution to the history of economic thought to rank economists by their comedic prowess. Who is the wittiest Nobel Prize winner? Bob Solow perhaps. The wittiest John Bates Clark medalist? George Stigler perhaps. Among presidents of the Southern Economic Association, I will assert that Bill Breit is the funniest.

I first realized how really funny Bill Breit was when he gave me a brief lecture about comedy. When a colleague that I admired told a joke, and no one laughed, I remarked to Bill about what a dumb joke our colleague had told. Bill replied it was an excellent joke, but told poorly. I honestly did not know what he meant.

So Bill told the very same joke, but with different timing. I will never forget this experience. Even though I already knew the joke, even though I was aware of the punch-line, when Bill delivered the joke, with proper timing, I buckled over in
It was then, thanks to Bill, that I realized that Comedy = a funny story + timing.

A bit later in my career at Virginia, I experienced William Breit’s comedy skills “up close and personal” when I invited him to lecture to my introductory principles class, a class with hundreds of students enrolled.

To put it in context, let me mention that it was a tradition, before I arrived at UVA, to have senior members of the Department lecture on a particular topic to the introductory class. Thus colleagues such as Jim Buchanan would lecture gravely on the future problems of social security; G. Warren Nutter would discourse at length on the future problems of Soviet economic planning.

In line with this tradition, I invited William Breit to lecture on the history of economic thought, with one day to be spent on the life of Adam Smith, and one day to be spent on the life of John Maynard Keynes. I knew Professor Breit was funny. But it had never occurred to me that he would turn the entire first lecture into a comedy monologue.

After the first class ended, Breit assured me that the next lecture would be serious – somehow he just got carried away. But upon entering the auditorium for his second lecture, and seeing it filled with literally hundreds of extra students — students not enrolled in the class, but who had heard about this funny, funny economics professor — Bill’s instincts as a standup comedian took over. The “show had to go on.” And it did – with another 50 minute comedy routine.

Now you may be wondering: how does an economics professor go on for 100 minutes of comedy? I can answer that. I used to tape my class lectures (on an old reel-to-reel tape recorder) so that I might look for ways to improve my lecturing. I also happened to tape the guest lectures, including Breit’s.

Now, I cannot even begin to approximate Bill’s timing and delivery. But thankfully, after much searching, I was able to unearth these two taped lectures and transcribe them onto a compact disc. So now — in the words of Rod Serling — “I present them for your approval”.

[Excerpts from the Spring 1969 Breit lectures played.]

I’ve always suspected Breit’s concluding story was a gentle jibe at me — and at the type of story he suspected I was telling students when I gave talks about the Christian faith. Breit did not spare his friends from being the object of his jokes. More than once I have been described as the only man Breit knows whom he’s never heard curse, never raise his voice in anger, and never say something lecherous about a woman. And that’s why Breit has said many times, that I remind him of Saint Paul.

Saint Paul, Breit goes on to say, he considers to be the dullest city in America.

But like all of his friends, (and here I mean both of us), I love to be teased by him.

The comedy world of William Breit is not limited to the classroom. He is known as a wit in social settings and is one of the most sought after dinner companions in our profession because of his good humor, his story-telling ability, and his propensity to take funny situations and, with a dash of exaggeration, make them hilarious. Few people know that, as a young man, Breit was a stand-up comedian — performing in clubs in the San Antonio area.

Like many young men, he reached a point where he had to make a career choice. Instead of choosing comedy, he chose the dismal science. Few people have done more to make the subject less dismal.