CHAPTER TWO

Twentieth-Century Stand-Up

A History of Charged Humor

> I volunteered to go to outer space. When Ike was president I flew over to Washington and I said Mr. Ike can I get on your outer space program? And he said what for? And I said well I can't go to school down here.
>
> *Dick Gregory*

> Football is my favorite sport, the only sport in the world where the Negro can chase a white man and 40,000 people stand up and cheer.
>
> *Dick Gregory*

In the early 1960s, a veteran and former postal worker by the name of Dick Gregory took the profession of stand-up comedy by storm. A comedic tour de force, in five years time he released seven comedy albums and published three books—one an autobiography and the others, print collections of his jokes set alongside pictorials—while also performing frequently and becoming increasingly involved in the African American civil rights movement. The jokes opening the chapter are not an aberration from his traditional material; they are reflective of the style and charged content of the comedy he performed around the country after getting his first big break in 1961.[1] In his own words: "If I've said anything to upset you, maybe it's what I'm here for. Lenny Bruce shakes up the puritans, Mort Sahl the Conservatives, and me—almost everybody!"[2] His charged comedy was fearlessly critical of what he called "your stinking White racist institutions," and with a gentility that added to his appeal, he was instrumental in bringing pleas for social justice and civil liberties for Black Americans into the homes of White Americans.[3] He eventually left stand-up comedy for a full-time position as an activist in

the movement, a position—though the causes have changed over time—he maintains today. From the release of his first comedy album in 1961 to nearly half-a-century later, his messages and convictions remain consistently focused on healthy lifestyle practices, institutionalized racism, better treatment for Native Americans, economic disenfranchisement, world hunger, and the medical and military industrial complexes. I saw Dick Gregory at a speaking engagement held at the American Film Institute in Silver Spring, Maryland, in 2005. These days he is not operating under the auspices of being a stand-up, and it is clear that is not his priority, though he still manages to hijack laughter from his audience, something he does rather easily. During his stint as a stand-up comic, he was among a handful of stand-up comics committed to performing charged humor and many others whose edgy material was a mix of charged humor and satire.

This chapter focuses on the landscape of charged comics performing from the 1950s to the mid-1980s—beginning with Mort Sahl, famous for his political humor, who also, at times, incorporated charged humor in his routines—and explores popular reception to charged comedy. I elected to focus on the charged comics whose comedy and careers are foundational to understanding charged humor as a comedic style and strategy, and whose delivery of charged humor greatly influenced generations of stand-up comics to come. Since I attend primarily to comics deploying charged humor regularly, if not as a mainstay in their routines, this means that some popular comics using charged humor sparingly like Redd Foxx, Moms Mabley, and Rusty Warren are not featured prominently. Revered and reviled alike, charged comics performing during this time like Dick Gregory, Lenny Bruce, Robin Tyler, George Carlin, Lily Tomlin, and Richard Pryor used the stage to promote social justice (some still do). Tyler championed gay liberation, Gregory played the wise oracle of race relations, and after Gregory left stand-up for full-time activist work, Pryor took up a similar mantle. They performed during a time when audiences were increasingly hospitable to critiques of institutionalized inequality, particularly around indices of race and ethnicity. Public support for these critiques allowed charged comics more opportunities for achieving mainstream status. Indeed, the rock-stars of stand-up comedy during this era included charged comics who used their visibility for more than just securing the yucks. It was a fecund period for experimentation, a Garden of Eden for stand-up comedy and particularly for charged comics.

This history of charged humor, its practitioners and its public's reception, begins with the advent of modern stand-up comedy in the 1950s. I track charged humor at this juncture where stand-up comedy became a distinctive cultural form, separate from other modes of performance and enticing the public to support shows exclusively comprised of stand-up comics. As such, I am most

interested in how charged humor was produced and consumed in the mid-twentieth century. The period from the 1950s to 1980s saw a surge in the number of comic performers and public interest in what they had to say. This is not to say that earlier popular forms of entertainment did not find ways of sticking it to the man vis-à-vis humor—a trusty device of the oldest order to challenge authority in a nonthreatening way. Lineups for vaudeville and variety shows, whose heyday spanned the latter nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, usually included at least one comic or comedic duo; however, comedy acts were sandwiched between a motley crew of entertainers: jugglers, contortionists, regurgitators, tumblers, ventriloquists, animal acts, minstrels, sketch artists, and musicians. Comedy acts were often but not always apolitical, as when the popular female comic sensation Trixie Friganza used the stage to champion women's suffrage. Vaudevillian comic performers and humorous orators like Mark Twain were the precursors to the stand-up comics so familiar to us today. Indeed, Judith Yaross Lee argues in *Twain's Brand: Humor in Contemporary American Culture* (2012) that stand-up comics today resemble Mark Twain in style and content in addition to borrowing from Twain's strategies for self-promotion and branding that secured his status as an American comedic icon. Charged humor also appeared in the cultural forms emerging from new technological innovations. Fred Allen used radio comedy to attack the wealthy, and Stan Freberg, capitalizing on the newest innovation for entertainment in 1948, the long-playing record, created parodic jingles satirizing the increasingly heavy-handed commercialization of everything. These early humorists and comedic performers unquestionably influenced the new wave of comics emerging in the 1950s, putting stand-up comedy on the map as a popular cultural form strong enough to hold Americans' attention, a form of entertainment that would become a booming business by the 1980s and an irreplaceable and significant influence on national consciousness by the twenty-first century.

Having examined a host of comics performing a variety of comedic styles, some patterns emerge in the usage and deployment of charged humor by comics. There are those that do not perform charged humor at all or sparingly and instead rely heavily on one or a combination of the following styles: shock humor, family friendly (safe) comedy, absurdist or character comedy, and modern-day minstrelsy. Other comics use charged humor with greater frequency, but it does not account for the entirety of their material. Other comedic styles just noted can certainly be enlisted but they are also more likely to employ satire or political humor, which they couple with charged humor (think: Lewis Black or Bill Maher). Finally, there are those comics that use charged humor almost exclusively, like Robin Tyler, Micia Mosely, and Hari Kondabolu (all case studies here). I am most interested in what happens to comics—that is, reception from the public and commercial viability—operating out of the latter two

categories. Focusing only on die-hard charged comics eliminates many vital contributions to the historical corpus of charged humor. The ensuing chapters focus on the comics employing charged humor (historically and in the twenty-first century) and the cultural climate and economic environs in which they perform. I examine the substance of their humor, the content of their critiques as well as considering the variability in their respective successes or failures to become mainstream comics.

Shifts in the entertainment industry like the centralization of stand-up comedy after the Comedy Strike of 1979, the rise of neoliberalism and the decline of Keynesian economics, a boom in the commercial airline industry that made it easier for comics to travel from one urban center to another, and the explosion of new programming on cable television all precipitated changes in the marketability and demand for charged humor, making the work of charged comics increasingly difficult to find in the emerging glut of comics striving for professional careers in the field. Furthermore, public interest and support for myriad social movements flagged in the 1980s; up-and-coming comedians seeking to use the stage on behalf of social justice were considered more of an annoyance and out of touch with yuppies' preoccupation with material goods and social status. Some, like Margaret Cho and George Lopez, performed sans charged humor until they secured a following or slipped in charged humor periodically, while relying primarily on jokes and content audiences were eager to hear—like material about airline peanuts, the Scarsdale Diet, and Molly Ringwald. Since the mid-1980s, devout charged comics desiring a wider audience have had to be resourceful and creative in finding venues and creating a fan base outside of mainstream avenues for exposure like the national comedy club circuit, television specials, and comedy concert films.

Mid-Twentieth-Century Charged Humor: 1950s–1960s

Bebop music was the musical style emerging in the 1950s, making quite an impression for its improvisational aspects. Spontaneity seeped into many cultural forms: experimental theater was on the rise, artists flirted with abstract expressionism, and the Beat Poets got their jollies from drugs and the heady high of artistic collaboration, playing around with the written word and breaking all kinds of literary rules. Though the '50s have been characterized as a conservative decade segueing into the more radical 1960s, historian Alan Petigny offers evidence to the contrary, calling the years following World War II until 1965 the "Permissive Turn," a period birthing the civil rights movements and prefacing the more overtly rebellious youth countercultures that would characterize the 1960s. An interest in the individual or self, the ascendancy of social sciences, especially modern psychology, a rise in enrollment in higher education, and theological shifts emphasizing love and forgiveness over discipline

and self-abnegation all contributed to the desire for spontaneity and improvisation and fostered investment in "the principles of democracy, diversity and individual autonomy."[4]

In comic performances, stand-up comics began moving away from traditional jokes both in formula and content. Instead of the standard—set-up and punch line, then repeat—comics began telling stories using anecdotal humor to amuse their audiences. According to Gerald Nachman, early storytellers, the progenitors of this shift in style, like Jean Carroll, Danny Thomas, and Sam Levenson "helped create a new, civilized environment for the wild band of revolutionaries who were slowly gathering on the horizon just over the mountains."[5] This more confessional style of comedy prompted audiences to identify with the comics as people; audiences felt like they knew the comic personally. In a style wholly familiar to today's consumers of live comedy but one not as commonly employed before the 1950s, some comics interacted with audience members, asking them questions and using the exchange as comedic fodder. Others, like Lenny Bruce and Jonathan Winters, improvised entire sets, employing a fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants method that mirrored the improvisational qualities becoming infused in so many other popular culture forms. Accustomed to sharing billing with other kinds of entertainers like contortionists, jugglers, magicians, and musicians, comics sought refuge and carved out spaces in small venues in major metropolitan areas like the hungry i and the Purple Onion in San Francisco, the Bitter End, the Village Gate, Bon Soir, the Blue Angel, the Duplex, and the Café Wha? in New York City, and Chicago's Playboy Club and Mister Kelly's, many of which catered primarily to folk singers and stand-up comedy and showcased young comic hopefuls like Mort Sahl, Bill Cosby, Dick Gregory, and Lenny Bruce.

> So, I think the reason the hungry i became what it became and why it was so widely copied was because in the Eisenhower/McCarthy/Nixon era and the early '50s that it was a springboard of dissent. You didn't find it in the legitimate theater. You didn't find it in a novel. You didn't find it on a television. You didn't hear it on the radio. But I think the hungry i and the spin-offs of the hungry i were the first signs of an opposition to the Cold War forming.[6]

Borscht Belt comics and aging vaudevillians, who had long ago learned to adapt to new forms of communication like film and radio, earned a living by recording comedy albums and in the emerging television programming that included late-night talk shows and variety shows like *The Ed Sullivan Show*, *The Tonight Show*, and *Laugh-In*. But a new kind of comedy was taking hold, mirroring the public disquiet that began to seethe in the youth countercultures and civil rights movements during the mid-twentieth century. Social unrest and upheaval was not around the corner; it had already

arrived and could be seen in the satire and the charged humor of this decade's comedians.[7]

Mort Sahl, Lenny Bruce, and Dick Gregory captured the nation's attention in the late 1950s and cemented their respective places in the annals of comedy with their cutting-edge, now-classic routines recorded and sold widely in the early 1960s. Longtime owner of San Francisco's legendary hungry i, Enrico Banducci started off hiring only musicians and singers but was convinced to give Mort Sahl a regular spot. Initially unimpressed with Sahl but recognizing his potential, Banducci felt sympathy for the waifish rookie in need of a job and, as he did for so many other hard-up artists, including Maya Angelou, Banducci hired him. It was the winter of 1953 and thus began a working relationship that would span many decades. Years later Banducci still admired Sahl's faith in what Banducci saw as social satire: his steadfast belief that comedy can help change the system.[8]

A loquacious satirist, Sahl spared no one, least of all acting presidents and other government and religious officials. A charged joke told during one of many hungry i reunion shows (this one in 1981), he waxes indignant at the censoring of the word "lesbian" on *The Tonight Show* hosted by Johnny Carson's stand-in John Davidson in 1980:

> So, uh, I sit there and say to Fred McCourt, the producer: "What's the matter?" And he says: "You were out there didn't you see? We tried to bleep it all in time. He said 'lesbian' on the air." And I said, "Yea I know." So he says, "Well, you can't say that on the air." So, uh, I say, "Why?" So he says, "Because we've got a middle class audience and we could offend their sensibilities" [*laughter*]. I said, "Really?" and he says, "Yea, this is not a night club where you can get up and curse" [*laughter*]. So I want you to know where television is coming from. Isn't that the example? What they think of that—the audience. The audience of course they are referring to is us. They think that's gonna bother us. Whether she says female homosexual on the program or the chiding of John Davidson, she said she is a practicing lesbian. That's gonna upset us? Remember what we've been through here. We went to Vietnam for fourteen years: cost $171 billion, 50,000 dead, 30,000 casualties and we lost. Came in second. Is that better? [*laughter and clapping*].[9]

Drawing from his vast knowledge of American politics, Sahl uses political satire to execute this piece of charged humor demonstrating the symbiotic nature of the two styles of comedy. This comic bit goes on to indict the government and military, detailing a litany of abuses foisted on the American people like rising inflation, expansion of the military industrial complex, and gas shortages. He concludes the bit with a rhetorical question: "And now I ask, in light of the forgoing atrocities, what's one more lesbian on *The Tonight Show*?" In this joke, making mention of a marginalized sexual orientation pales in comparison

to aggrandizing "family values" domestically while destroying families in developing nations. In the words of Dick Gregory, "America's the only country that lies about what she is . . . we say we're about one thing but we do something else."[10] The entertainment industry's protectionist stance against topics and words deemed inappropriate veils the sinister agenda to maintain power differentials that favor the rich and the White (often these go hand-in-hand) and dismiss marginalized social identities. Individuals can and will assume their abject status when they are convinced that they are impure, insignificant, and inferior and will find it difficult to mobilize if they are unaware of how to unite to redress inequality. Identity-based organizations, like the NAACP, lobbying for adequate and positive representations in television and film believe there is a direct relationship between equal and fair representation and social acceptance. A commanding presence and influence on many people, the representations we see in film and television can impact how we see ourselves and others. Sahl's joke strips away the façade of television, reminding viewers that content is heavily edited and moreover, the implications of that editing—who and what is rendered invisible.

Because Mort Sahl's humor was far more political than charged, examining his humor helps differentiate between political humor and charged humor. Sahl was nothing if not a keen observer of American politics. Listening to his successive comedy albums offers its own lesson in American history. He lampoons presidents as they take office—from Eisenhower to Nixon—and a cavalcade of political officials and intellectuals such as former press secretary James Hagerty, General Curtis LeMay, and Bertrand Russell. While he waxed eloquent on political figures, international affairs, and the government, his focus was seldom inequality and he took few measures to develop cultural citizenship among any swath of disaffected constituents. With fleeting references to women (who he only refers to as "chicks" or girls) "being attacked as a minority," in general his performances convey latent skepticism for the women's movement.[11] In the nearly dozen albums released in the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s, he says little on the topic of race relations, gay liberation, or access issues for the differently abled, but to be fair, when he does, his is a clear point of view that spurns bigotry. In 1960, he derided Tennessee governor Buford Ellington, for stalling desegregation in Tennessee schools.[12] Supported by his White constituents, Ellington's response mirrored many other state officials stubbornly opposed to integration. Sahl superficially addressed the status of atheists—a group historically reviled by the public—but not by attacking their persecution or offering possibilities for change; nor did he include himself as an ally. Responding to the evangelist Reverend Billy Graham's accusation that Sahl was an atheist, Sahl assures the audience he is not because, "It's too hard to be [an atheist] in society [*pause*] because you don't get any days off."[13] On a later album

he quips: "I'm not really an atheist—I believe in a higher power . . . electricity."[14] While humorous, to be sure, both jokes dodge the question and neither is charged because there is no substantive critique nor does he foster cultural citizenship among atheists or any marginalized religion. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, he shared a status as American cultural icon with the famed Lenny Bruce, whose material was less about politics and more oriented toward social and cultural commentary.

Introducing Lenny Bruce at his Carnegie Hall performance in 1961, the announcer defends Bruce's bad-boy reputation and the salience of his comedy:

> The one thing I'd like to say about the label of "sick comedian," which I think is a misnomer, what Lenny does perhaps as a short explanation to the people who don't understand what he does; it is not that Lenny Bruce, per se, is a sick comedian, but that Lenny Bruce comments, reflects, holds up the mirror so to speak, to the sick elements in our society that should be reflected upon and that should be spoken about.[15]

Bruce's records with the most charged humor are ones performed for audiences in 1960 and 1961 like *I Am Not a Nut, Elect Me! Lenny Bruce—American*, and the nearly two-hour performance recorded at Carnegie Hall on February 2, 1961. In these albums he addressed class inequality, comparing his income to that of schoolteachers and calling it a "disgrace" and assuring audience members that if teachers were paid a fair wage, "then the education system would change immediately."[16] On the same album he introduced a comedic sketch featuring a Black man (Randy) and a Jewish man, both escaped prisoners who, shackled together, are on the run. We drop in on them having a conversation outside of the clink. Randy wonders aloud "if they'll ever be any equality?" The Jewish escapee argues that equality already exists, citing that they stand an equal chance of being drafted for the Vietnam War. Randy replies: "Yeah . . . but what about the schools and segregated housing?" His Jewish mate dismissively responds: "Well those things take a little time [*laughter*]. You can't shove everything down people's throats."[17] Using comedic characters to illustrate the stagnancy and absurdity of advancement for people of color, Bruce avoided didactic remonstrations of prejudice and substituted them for an equally effective, though passive, means of citing systematic inequality. Similarly, in another set, he enacted a conversation between a White man and Black man at a party. Struggling to make the Black man feel comfortable at an event where he is in the minority, the White man only introduces every cliché and stereotype circulating about Black people.

> IMITATING WHITE GUY AT PARTY: You know what I'm gonna get you something to eat. I didn't notice any fried chicken here, watermelon [*laughter*], but uh, I'll get

something you'll like. I'll get a watermelon for you. I'll get you all the watermelons in the world 'cause I love ya [*laughter*] . . . Now, I'd like to have you over at the house.

IMITATING BLACK GUY AT PARTY: Thank you, I'd like to come over.

WG: Yeah, it'll be dark soon [*laughter*]. [*Pause*] Look you can come over to my house if you promise you won't do it to my sister. You don't want no heeb plowing your sister, and I don't want no coon doing it to my sister [*laughter*]. You can understand that can't ya?

BG: It doesn't make any difference to me just as long as she's nice.

WG: [*Pause*] What do you want weed or something?[18]

This sketch illustrates what not to do when socializing in racially mixed crowds. It is humorous because it's ironic: White man attempts to make Black man comfortable; his every overture clearly reveals his discomfort. Illuminating the ridiculousness of these stereotypes, the joke makes us laugh, first because we recognize the stereotypes as such, and again, at the foolishness of the White man's ignorance.

For his 1961 album, Lenny Bruce borrowed a campaign slogan from Governor Earl Long of Louisiana, who was thought to have gone crazy when he checked into a mental institution in 1959. Long's slogan while running for a fourth term as governor was, "I am not a nut, elect me!" Bruce mocked his platform by arguing that the slogan is as ineffectual as running with a slogan of, "I don't wet the bed, elect me!"[19] Not unlike Sahl, Lenny Bruce was progressive and political. But, Bruce, who laced his comedy with Yiddish idioms and shared first-hand knowledge of Jewish persecution, frankly discussed queer folks (Lenny himself courted both sexes), conveyed a clear point of view regarding racial inequality, and directed attention to abuses wrought by organized religion, performed more charged humor than Sahl. In 1959, on *The Sick Humor of Lenny Bruce*, he chided the country for making such a fuss over a young White boy stuck in a well for six days: "You still see in the classifieds: Orientals may buy here, Negroes may buy here. And one schmuck gets caught in a well and everyone stays up for a week!?"[20] As he implies, the fate of a lone boy when compared to that of entire racial groups marginalized in the United States, seems rather shortsighted.

Throughout the 1960s Lenny Bruce's political insights and charged humor began to wane. In San Francisco in 1961, the police arrested Bruce for saying "cocksucker" at the Jazz Workshop, an obscenity charge for which he was later found not guilty. Several more arrests followed, some for drugs and two more for obscenity (Chicago in 1962 and New York in 1964). He was found guilty for these later charges. By 1965 he had been arrested nineteen times and had one conviction; his legal battles had left him bankrupt and embittered. Almost as

if prepping for closing arguments, his performances became lengthy remonstrations against the charges made against him. Painful to watch and hard to follow, in his next-to-last night club appearance, filmed at Basin Street West in Hollywood, Bruce brought a detailed memo of charges leveled against him, explained each joke condemned by the court, contextualizing it further and showing how it was misunderstood. He bristled at the accusation that his comedy was "insulting" and "lacking in redeeming social importance."[21] The audience seldom laughed; the whole thing feels awkward, then and now. On stage, Bruce shifted from using charged humor that commented on social stratification and the human condition to a fever-pitched rebuttal of the criminal charges that, like his life (he died in 1966) in the last four years, occupied most of his attention.

While Mort Sahl was politically savvy and Lenny Bruce broke taboos, Dick Gregory holds the title of champion charged comic during this time period. It was Hugh Hefner who spotted Dick Gregory, placed him in the Playboy Club, and helped him achieve the visibility and fame that got him on the cover of *Time* magazine just months after he left an unsatisfying career as postal worker to become a full-time stand-up comic. Starting out in African American clubs, Gregory became one of the first Black cross-over comics (along with Moms Mabley), a move he was ridiculed for by contemporaries like Nipsey Russell, Timmie Rogers, and Slappy White.[22] But Gregory seized the spotlight with a clear objective: "I didn't come here tonight to impress you, only to inform you."[23] Given this agenda, Gregory captured the ears of precisely the audience most in need of these messages. The Black civil rights movement needed allies, and Gregory's comedy proved one way to make White audiences hip to the need for social justice. His style and comic persona regaled audiences on both sides of the color divide, a good thing as otherwise he might have been just preaching to the choir.

On his first album *In Living Black and White*, recorded at Hefner's club in Chicago and on best-seller lists for over six months, Dick Gregory rips one zinger after another, discussing integration, the Ku Klux Klan, sit-ins, voting rights, and access to education. When a heckler interrupted him repeatedly near the end of his performance, Gregory replied: "Trying to get you to shut up is like trying to explain integration to a lynch mob [*loud laughter*]!"[24] His charged jokes packed a serious wallop throughout:

A lot people don't understand how we can own so many Cadillacs with them inferior jobs. Well, racial segregation buys us Cadillacs. You have a country club you can join—I can't. So I save $500 a year [*light laughter*]. You know damn well I'm not taking my family to Florida this winter so that's another $1500 I save [*laughter*]. Walk out here tonight I get hit by a bus, I'm not going to the best

> hospital where they're gonna charge me $2500 so I go to City hospital for free. Pick it up—I save $2,500 plus $2,000. $4,500 dollars and General Motors sell me anything I want [*laughter*].[25]

In under thirty-five seconds, he indicts institutionalized racism, which comes at a cost, a cost that he humorously quantifies at $4,500; however, he alludes to the psychological tax imposed on oppressed groups that is impossible to quantify. Line item by line item, he makes lemonade out of lemons, calculating the so-called profit gained when you are barred entry into elite organizations and clubs; when traveling poses the threat of verbal or physical assault and lack of access to restaurants, hotels, and stores; and when your station limits your access to the best health care. Knowing that White folks who believed Black people should not own nice things were angered by seeing a Black person own a Cadillac, Gregory exposes that a luxury car is hardly compensation for being treated as a second-class citizen. The responding laughter is bittersweet, sweet because it is funny, bitter because it is true.

Commerce is color-blind, or so Gregory intimated, reminding audiences of their powerful role as consumers. As long as efforts are focused, united, and determined, leveraging collective buying power can be one of the swiftest ways of creating desired social change, as when Black folks in Alabama forced integration on buses by boycotting public transit and organized elaborate carpooling schedules as an alternative. This is one among many strategies for empowerment that his charged humor advocated; others included boycotts, sit-ins, supporting the lowering of the voting age, and creating reform by organizing, educating yourself and others, and corresponding with local representatives. Summoning the promises made by the Declaration of Independence, he suggested that anytime someone sees a riot on television, they should stand and read the Declaration, which he goes on to movingly recite. The real injustice, he says, comes when Black people take a stand and do what the Declaration says, and they are called hoodlums, and that, he goes on to say, is "when we know the Declaration is for Whites only."[26] Some of his best advice promoted coalition building, as when he implores listeners to "get concerned about *all* people [emphasis his]," including his "White hillbilly brothers" in Appalachia and other rural areas. Calling for freedom and rights for Native Americans, Puerto Ricans, Mexicans, Jews, African Americans, and the impoverished, he promises that "Together we will solve my problems."[27] Recognizing that a racial order comes at a cost to everyone, Gregory's charged humor confronted multiple forms of racism and classism and its myriad targets.

While Gregory transitioned into the role of full-time activist, the next crop of charged comics earned their chops in the local scenes in New York City, the Midwest, and the West Coast during the sixties and early-to-mid seventies.

Robin Tyler, Lily Tomlin, Richard Pryor, Paul Mooney, and George Carlin each sought exposure as comics, sketch comics, actors, or droll drag queens. On the political front, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 had outlawed de jure segregation; in fact more constitutional amendments were ratified in the 1960s than any other decade, excepting the 1910s when Congress passed multiple amendments, for example, allowing the federal government to collect taxes, direct elections of US Senators by the people, and prohibition of alcohol. Civil rights movements came into full swing, promoting a culture of protest aimed squarely at the government and its domestic policies of tiered citizenship and foreign involvement in Cuba, the Soviet Union, and Vietnam.

During this era of protest cultures and cynicism toward the government, audiences clamored for substantive comedy. In the time period that birthed the folk protest movement, which made protest anthems in the style of Woody Guthrie a distinct genre of music, charged humor was highly sought after by coming-of-age baby boomers, though not always welcomed in mainstream mediums like television and film. Fortunately, the comedy album, which did not face as many restrictions from the entertainment industry to maintain family-friendly entertainment, was a hit with people of all ages, especially younger generations; politicized or rebellious content did not necessarily inhibit sales. In fact, several best-selling and successive recordings could turn a commercially risky enterprise (someone like Richard Pryor) into a known quantity, convincing network executives to take a risk and cast a long shot in a TV guest spot or a film role.

Twentieth-Century Charged Humor: 1970s–1980s

Comediennes during the 1960s and '70s took advantage of the freedom and lawlessness allowed by the comedy record, though women hardly constituted a statistically significant number of working comics during these times. Seen as an aggressive form of performance and antithetical to women's delicate sensibilities, women were less likely to pursue a career in stand-up comedy. Other factors contributed to the paucity of women comics like the shared cultural belief that men are naturally funnier than women, a society that promoted a gendered division of labor that made women responsible for childcare and domestic duties that effectively kept them at home, and tough conditions on the road for comics. Phyllis Diller, Moms Mabley, Joan Rivers, Rusty Warren, Totie Fields and Lily Tomlin, were a few of the women who succeeded as professional comics at this time. With rare exceptions (Tomlin perhaps), successful female comics mainly performed in gender-appropriate ways that were palatable to mainstream audiences. Self-deprecating humor was one tactic for overcoming audience opposition to a funny lady commanding the stage, and diminished the threat of a female comic asking a coed crowd to give her audience, to listen to her,

to value what she says, her point of view. This was not easily done in a society where men were accustomed to commanding attention, barking orders, and amusing starry-eyed ingénues. According to Albert Rapp, a classical literature scholar exploring styles of humor in the 1951 study *The Origins of Wit and Humor*, self-deprecating humor communicates the performer's inferiority; it is one of three ways a comic puts the superiority theory of laughter into action. You can laugh at people that are "better" than you, turning the tables and making you feel superior; you can laugh at people that are "lower" than you (i.e., stupider, inferior in some way) and maintain your social standing; or you can draw laughter at your own expense, that is, you invite the audience to feel superior to you.[28] There is a subversive element at play in using self-deprecating humor. At first glance, you are making fun of yourself, but therein lies a criticism of a society that constructs ideals impossible to achieve.[29] When Phyllis Diller mocks her fright wig and stick legs, she simultaneously draws attention to the impossibility of fulfilling socially constructed standards of beauty, and disarms her audience by making them feel superior to her. Phyllis Diller and Joan Rivers made careers out of self-deprecating humor, while Rusty Warren and Moms Mabley both performed blue, meaning the content of their material contained sexual innuendo or was considered "dirty." In a live performance at the Greek Theater in Los Angeles, California, Mabley humorously recalled: "Had a brother older than he was—ninety-nine. He married a girl fourteen—fourteen! He didn't live but five days. Took three undertakers a week to get the smile off of his face."[30] Central to her commercial appeal and success, Mabley pushed an irreverent granny persona that made her seem harmless. In the process, she managed to say all manner of things on stage deemed inappropriate in other social settings. She started performing on the chitlin' circuit at a young age, was the first woman to perform at the Apollo Theater, and like Dick Gregory, was one of the few African American comics (and the first female) during the 1960s to secure patronage from both Black and White audiences.

It is understandable that these women pioneers poked fun at themselves or flirted with the profane; women had a hard enough time getting stage time, let alone the gumption to become mouthpiece for issues like women's liberation, gay rights, and civil liberties. But that was not the case with Robin Tyler, who began writing charged material in the late 1960s for comic sketches she performed with Pat Harrison. As a comic duo (billed as sisters rather than the lesbian lovers they were), they recorded two albums, *Try It, You'll Like It* (1971) and *Wonder Women* (1973), performed antiwar material for troops in Vietnam, and played a select number of university and college shows. Robin Tyler went on to develop her career as a stand-up comic and later became a full-time activist for gay civil rights. She was the first openly lesbian comic and one of the

only early female comics to be as committed to charged humor as Dick Gregory. Indeed, their career paths are eerily similar with the principle difference being Tyler's obscurity relative to Dick Gregory. An omission in the history of popular culture I seek to remedy, I chronicle her life and career in chapter 4 in great detail, attending to the multipronged strategies she has employed in order to create social change on both political and cultural fronts.

Mild-mannered and sensitive, Lily Tomlin was everything the unapologetically brash Robin Tyler was not, though both sought to educate and entertain using stand-up comedy, sketch comedy, and one-woman shows in order to do so. Jane Wagner, Tomlin's longtime partner, comedy writer, and author of much of Tomlin's work, preferred to operate more subtly when trying to communicate a message. She believed that a story line or narrative nudged audience members to identify with people cut from all kinds of cloth. Identification serves as a humanizing force engendering empathy and accordingly, "the people on the stage, in the movies, represent humanity, so the people in the audience themselves, somehow they are changed by watching," says Jane Wagner.[31] With Tomlin as the face and Wagner as the voice, together they brought a peace-loving feminist-lite charged humor to an appreciative and now aging body of hippies in the mid'70s and early '80s.

Influenced by the likes of Ruth Draper, Beatrice Lilly, Lillian Gish, and especially Lucille Ball, in 1969 Lily Tomlin was an instant sensation on *Laugh-In*, beginning at a salary of $750 a week and three seasons later boasting a salary of $2,500 a week. This variety show would be her creative playground, a place for her to develop the characters that would go on to make her famous, like Edith-Ann, a precocious and observant five-year old, and Earnestine, a nasally operator whose snorts signaled derision toward the poor soul on the other end of the line. Before making it on the show, Tomlin had early training in theater at Wayne State University, skills she honed while performing stand-up comedy for years in Detroit, Michigan. Her first one-woman show *Appearing Nitely*, cowritten with Jane Wagner, uses humor to negotiate universal topics like coming of age, parenting difficulties, and the ubiquitous passage of time. In offering us multiple subject positions with which to identify, Tomlin accounts for the diversity both within and between individuals and their respective communities without passing judgment and without making claims to objectivity. Tomlin describes her work as "comedy that is relevant and comments on our lives," but avoids being too topical, meaning the content can stand on its own decades later and for generations to come.[32] An important piece of cultural work for feminism, scholar Jennifer Reed argues that Tomlin's *Appearing Nitely* serves up a "critique of patriarchy, capitalism, conventionality, naïve politics, and selling out."[33] Inspired by women's liberation and civil rights movements, Tomlin's performance appealed not just to a niche audience of feminists, hippies,

and performance art hounds but to the masses as well, which helped bring the goals of these movements into the homes of millions.

The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe (1985), also written by Jane Wagner, was considered "the first feminist comedy ever to appear on Broadway."[34] (The same feat has not been accomplished since, although Whoopi Goldberg's *The Spook Show* [1984–1985] may not have gotten the credit it deserved for tackling issues about race and gender too.) Other shows since then like Kathy Najimy and Mo Gaffney's *Kathy and Mo: Parallel Lives* (1989) and Eve Ensler's *Vagina Monologues* (1996) were certainly popular but played off-Broadway. Responding to this description, Tomlin explains that in this show "there is no hierarchy . . . it's connected . . . The conflict is not someone triumphing over someone else, or whatever the classic definition of drama is, etc. Yet, the play is cathartic, which is staggering you see."[35] Staggering because in the theatrical genre of drama, catharsis has been assumed to be achieved only by introducing conflict—for example, man loses battle, man loses woman, man loses dog. Tomlin and Wagner illustrate otherwise and show that a celebration of humanity in all of its complexity and quirkiness may yield catharsis not achieved at the cost of someone else's life or dignity.

In *The Search for Signs*, Tomlin portrayed a cast of twelve characters addressing the need for developing and strengthening community, and commenting on pollution, male chauvinism, advertising/trends/fads, suicide, drug abuse, gay bashing, women's liberation, reproductive rights, and a world rapidly globalizing. Many of the same themes pervade Tomlin's early recordings. Beginning on *Laugh-In*, and especially on her comedy albums, Tomlin used her characters to communicate her own values and/or cast aspersion on societal elements supporting unjust systems. One such character in the show: Lyn, a hippie women's libber turned yuppie coping with a midlife crisis, says to her general physician:

> But doctor, [*pause*] pre-menstrual syndrome? [*Pause*] I'm getting divorced, [*pause*], I'm raising twin boys [*pause*], I have a lot of job pressure. I've got to find one. The ERA didn't pass. Not long ago I lost a very dear friend [*pause*]. And the woman, [*pause*] my husband is in love with is quite a bit younger than I am. And you think it's my period and not my life?[36]

In this bit, Wagner and Tomlin attacked the medical establishment's tendency to, when confronted with women emoting anything other than congenial affability, connect their emotions to menstruation or menopause, never recognizing them as a valid response to the situation at hand. As if losing a dear friend to suicide, leaving your husband of ten years, having few job prospects other than low-paying and unreliable pink-collar work, and learning that your government refuses to make equality for women a constitutional priority, or

any one of these things alone is not enough to drive even the most stoic to distraction. Desiring to communicate the possibilities of "feminism, and new age . . . and gay rights," Lyn becomes mouthpiece for the feminist wordsmith Jane Wagner.[37]

One-woman shows remain somewhat popular today among select audiences. In 2007, I attended a solo female performance called *Family Secrets* by Sherry Glaser, a Jewish lesbian performance artist, in which she portrays five characters in a Jewish family: Mort (father), Bev (mother), Fern/Kahari (eldest daughter), Sandra (younger daughter), and Rose (grandmother).[38] Much like Tomlin, Glaser's characters are bound by a certain time period and span multiple generations. For Glaser it is the early 1980s in Los Angeles and for Tomlin it is the mid '70s in New York. Period jokes and references keep the audience chuckling—who wouldn't laugh when reminded that track suits became hugely popular in the '80s and folks did *not* turn the radio station when they heard Duran Duran? Glaser, like Tomlin who was among the first female comics to perform in male drag, takes on the male persona of Mort, who stubbornly refuses to accept his daughter's bisexual lifestyle and teeters on the brink of being the family boob, especially when it comes to nontraditional beliefs. Tomlin and Glaser explore a range of subjectivities that convey the powerful lesson that acceptance and tolerance are key to maintaining a family, community, and nation. It is cultural citizenship writ large. It is also worth noting that Glaser's charged humor in the twenty-first century, despite deploying a similar style and mode, has not come close to rivaling the successes of Lily Tomlin.

In 1970, during Lily Tomlin's second season on *Laugh-In*, Richard Pryor spent some time in Berkeley, playing around with performance, writing, illegal drugs, and even playing the trumpet. (He would later meet Lily Tomlin and always thought highly of her and her work.) At that point, still early in his career, he had only recorded one comedy album, *Richard Pryor* (1968), live at the Troubadour in Los Angeles.[39] In it, you can hear early iterations of famous bits like "Super Nigger"—featuring a Black man of heroic proportions who can "see through everything except Whitey" and lives in a model city, which, according to Super Nigger, "means we have niggers under control here [*laughter*]"—and the "Prison Play," wherein the prison warden, upon hearing that a play to be performed is about a White woman who falls in love with a Black man, is placated only when assured, "It's quite alright, the nigger gets killed." (When the play does not, in fact, end with a lynching, the bamboozled warden warns: "If I don't get a damn nigger out here we're gonna hang a homosexual."[40]) After his brief stay in Northern California, Pryor returned to Los Angeles at the end of the year. In his memoir, he recalled: "For the first time in my life, I had a sense of Richard Pryor the person. I understood myself. I knew what I thought. I knew what I had to do. I had to go back and tell the truth. The truth. People

can't always handle it. But I knew that if you tell the truth, it's going to be funny."[41] He recorded one of the earliest video recordings of his stand-up comedy at The Improvisation Night Club in New York, *Richard Pryor: Live and Smokin'* (1971), where you can hear little outbursts of opposition to his charged humor, which is gritty and seasoned with coke-addled anger. Confessing that he "always wanted to be something different than a nigger. 'Cause niggers had it so rough," he also began using a junkie character (not Mudbone, who surfaced later in his 1975 album, *Is It Something I Said?*) whose observations serve as cultural critique: "I'll be alright. I can handle this White world then—I get a little shit in my veins, I can take all this shit."[42] Exploring a conflict that must have resonated with many African Americans—the desire to belong regardless of racial identity—he opens the set stating:

> Always wanted to be something. Never wanted to be White. Hope not all along. No, I always wanted to be something different than a nigger, 'cause niggers had it so rough. I tried to be a Black cat with neat hair [*soft laughter*]. I thought that was a problem—the hair. I said if my hair was straight, then they dig me. So I got it processed [*pause*] . . . wrong.[43]

He went on to point out the spurious treatment of Black folks—inequitable housing, lack of access to education, negative assumptions based on race and so on—and closed with: "Black people have a lot to overcome. And it ain't just a mountain. Martin Luther King said, 'I have been to the mountain top' [*laughter*]. I've been to the mountain top too and I looked over the top and what did I see? More White folks [*laughter and pause*] with guns."[44] In his memoir, he writes that his second album, *Craps after Hours* (1971), "also explored race, sex, and drugs, but with even more shape and sting."[45]

On *Bicentennial Nigger* (1976), the album Pryor referred to as his "most political album," he criticizes the recently released blockbuster *Logan's Run*, a cinematic romp through a futuristic world where no one is allowed to live past thirty and instead of seeking monogamous relationships, people celebrate free love and women cannot seem to find enough fabric for skirts longer than mid-thigh.[46] Pryor lamented: "White folks ain't planning for us to be here," and based on the all-White cast of *Logan's Run*, he would be right. In response, he urged people to make movies that include African Americans and that do not depict them as criminals or pimps. Recalling a history of being sold as chattel and another century of economic exploitation and second-class treatment, Pryor cited White folks as being the biggest pimps yet, saying: "We the biggest hos they got." Pryor played a blackface minstrel in the final bit that doubles as the album's namesake, "Bicentennial Nigger," detailing centuries of abuse and malignment received at the hands of "Whitey." To end, he broke minstrel character. "I ain't never going to forget," he said, emphasizing each word to the

hushed crowd.[47] There is a moment of silence before you hear any flutter of air and then, deafening applause.

Surprising then that fifteen years before that Pryor, in 1962, was honing his craft in New York City and invited to perform on *The Ed Sullivan Show* and *The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson* with material very different than what you hear on albums like *Bicentennial Nigger*. Pryor enjoyed a modicum of success performing family-friendly material, but for him that material did not feel honest. Honesty about the racism he observed would not grant him access to television shows, but over time he did build a fan base with his charged humor. Fast forward and by the end of the 1970s, Pryor was well on his way to adding movie star to his resume. He had small roles throughout the mid '70s, but after his concert film *Wanted: Live in Concert* (1978), Pryor became Hollywood's new sweetheart. This comedy special, along with subsequent shows like the 1979 concert recorded live at the Terrace Theatre in Long Beach, California, and back-to-back tours in the early 1980s, *Live on the Sunset Strip* (1982) and *Here and Now* (1983), show us a Pryor who has settled into himself, found a distinct point of view. Actively working to stay off drugs (although he went through a period where he began freebasing in the early '80s), seeking to continue securing choice film roles, enjoying several life-changing trips to Africa, and recovering from the loss of his grandmother who raised him, all these factors shaped Pryor into a man who maintained his convictions but whose comedy was less punctuated by or focused on social justice—though by no means was it unclear where Pryor stood. Most fans were so because they were acquainted with his early charged comedy, but even new converts would recognize his point of view that emphasized equality, community, and antiracism. His charged humor, included more sparingly in later concert films, focused on a racist criminal justice system that looks the other way when police officers "choke niggas to death," and schools White listeners on the dangers faced by Black people at the hands of law enforcement officers.[48] Just as Dick Gregory revealed the hidden costs of racism, Richard Pryor takes inventory of the psychological toll of racism.

> Racism is a bitch. White people you gotta know. It fucks you up—but what it does to Black people is a bitch. Because no matter what it—it is hard enough being a human being [*laughter*]. It's really fucking hard enough just to be that [*clapping*]. Right? Just to go through everyday life without murdering a motherfucker is hard enough. It's hard just to walk through life decent as a person. But here is another element added here when you're Black. Got that little edge on us. It's enough to make you crazy [*laughter*]. If you're in another argument with another man—he could be White—and it's man on man for a minute, get rough, ending up calling you nigger. You gotta go, "oh shit. Fuck. Now I ain't

no man no more. I'm a nigga'. Now I gotta argue with that shit [*laughter*]. Fuck. Throwing my balance all off" [*laughter*]. No, but it's an ugly thing . . . I hope one day they give it up [*clapping*].[49]

Recognizing the skills necessary to make difficult topics like racism palatable for mixed race audiences, fellow comic and talented writer Robert Townsend explains that "when Richard exposed how ridiculous racism is you had to laugh . . . that's being a master comedian."[50] Aside from these charged moments, and they really do feel like moments, which bookend the shows, the rest of the material on later specials focuses on Pryor's life, stories about his pets and children, his childhood, an occasional appearance from the long-standing character Mudbone and, of course, his many, often volatile, relationships with women. Notably, his material during this time focused on the lasting impact of his trips to Africa, where he confesses he understood "how White people feel in America now [*pause*] . . . relaxed."[51] It was a trip to Africa that provoked Pryor's change of heart about use of the term "nigger." He announced in 1982 that he would no longer use the word, "Because there aren't any. . . . We never was no niggers. That's the word that's used to describe our own wretchedness." and as a result Pryor suffered backlash from his community, fellow comics, and family.[52] "[Paul] Mooney and David Banks," he writes, "told me that people thought I'd gone soft, sold out, turned my back on the cause, and all that political, militant shit."[53] This was no grand gesture of complacency; for him it was a redemptive move meant to reinvest Black subjectivity with worth and value, conferring cultural citizenship where otherwise denied. It was a plea for acceptance, honesty, and unity, themes he continued to include in live performances as long as he performed (he died December 10, 2005). Testimonies from family members, former wives and lovers, and fellow entertainers indicate that though he struggled with addictions which made him difficult at times, he was a good person striving to live and perform with integrity.[54]

Coming onto the scene around the same time as Richard Pryor, George Carlin's career trajectory was fairly synchronized with Pryor. After only ten months of radio comedy, George Carlin scored an appearance on *The Jack Paar Tonight Show* as part of the comedy duo Burns and Carlin, just months before Dick Gregory appeared on the same show. The public eagerly embraced Gregory, whose protestations anticipated the social rebellion already in full swing. In contrast, Carlin was a bit of a buzzkill—as hacky as he was apolitical—and he was still working to develop his comic voice, his stage persona, his point of view. Carlin and Jack Burns parted ways and Carlin began pursuing stand-up comedy as a solo career in New York City. In two years time, coveted comedy venues like Bitter End and Café Wha in Greenwich Village welcomed Carlin. He began releasing comedy albums around the same time as Pryor. Both

nursed a cocaine habit and both initially performed mainstream-friendly material. Pryor fashioned himself after Bill Cosby and Carlin donned a more conventional appearance, style, and content. Pryor was moved to make his comedy more honest, more of a reflection of himself and his worldviews, and Carlin, having realized that audiences were demanding antiestablishment humor, felt he could also be more honest on stage, which prompted an overhaul in image and comic persona that made him less appealing for mainstream gigs but a huge success with the public. Early on in Carlin's career, he was arrested and hauled off to jail after mouthing off to the cops in defense of Lenny Bruce when he was arrested for obscenity while performing at the Gate of Horn in Chicago. Afterwards Carlin took up a similar mantle in the '70s with his "Seven Dirty Words" bit, which attempted to secure the right to free speech for comics.[55] Sporting a longer coif, dressing down in jeans and t-shirts, and peppering his comedy with drug culture references (his 1974 album *Toledo Window Box* was named after a kind of marijuana) and hippy idioms like "hey man," "yeah," and "cool, dude," turned out to be a genius marketing move. Audiences wanted someone edgy and rebellious, a voice that would challenge the norms and traditions that baby boomers were eager to slough.

Incredibly clever with language, Carlin admitted that he was always trying to make up for dropping out of high school by being articulate, smart, and well spoken. And so he did, for not long after Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann published the now renowned sociological text, *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966), Carlin was applying its arguments in his comedy routines, making Americans think about morals and values as cultural constructs, deconstructing society as deftly as any professor. If you combined Stan Freberg's commercial jingles with Lenny Bruce's yen for the taboo, and Mort Sahl's political satire, you would get groovy Carlin in the 1970s. Commenting on reproductive rights for women, arguing that being gay is not abnormal (or, rather, that abnormal is relative), and pondering the extermination and relocation of American Indians, Carlin delivered some charged humor in his repertoire (usually one track on each album that detoured from his stock mock commercials and commentary on human foibles, bodily functions, and vernacular idiosyncrasies). But, his real beef was with Christianity, specifically the Catholic Church, most likely since he was raised Catholic and sent to parochial schools. His early religious satire seems more light-hearted and good-natured as when he assumed a Brooklyn accent to play Jesus being interviewed for a radio show. Those barbs hastened to sting as Carlin aged and later comedy specials convey less patience and more frustration when confronting the topic. Mark Twain became so angry at the inconceivable inequities and unfair things he knew about the government, society, and world that he ceased to be able to insert humor in his speeches and writings. Carlin never lost the funny

but his comedy got heavier and sometimes preachy—usually on the topic of the government and religion.

Carlin was politically incisive at times, wielding satire like a weapon, but in main his jokes on religion zero in on problems without offering solutions; they critique without building anything in the process, making religion appear more silly and superstitious than an impediment to social equality. In contrast, Bill Maher, a man who is today's comedic critic of organized religion, does not just criticize religion; rather, he uses charged humor to demonstrate how religious practices perpetuate inequality. Like Carlin did, Maher makes a living commenting on political officials, cultural issues, and the economy with a similar I-make-no-apologies-for-myself attitude. Both are openly critical of organized religion (Maher released the documentary *Religulous* [2008] on this topic), but Maher also lambasts religion for its role in perpetuating inequality. His solutions center on critical examination of religious doctrine and practices that sanction oppression. He gets flack from the public about the criticisms he levels against religion and uses the stage to explain his opinions. Regarding a trip to Africa taken by Pope Benedict XVI, Maher complains: "I'm mad at him for going to the continent most ravaged by AIDS and telling them they couldn't use condoms. So don't tell me that religion doesn't do any actual harm [*cheers and clapping*]."[56] He details a litany of abuses stemming from religious practices or actions taken in the name of religion, which, according to him, include:

> most wars, the Crusades, the Inquisition, 9/11, arranged marriages to minors, blowing up girls' schools, the suppression of women and homosexuals, fatwahs, ethnic cleansing, honor rape [*people start wooting and clapping that intensifies throughout the rest of the list*], human sacrifice, burning witches, suicide bombings, condoning slavery, and the systematic fucking of children. There's a few little things that I have a problem with [*crowd claps and cheers*].[57]

Among those infractions includes collusion in the systematic oppression of women, LGBTQ persons, African Americans, and children. Carlin may have agreed with Maher, but his own comedy targeting religious institutions seldom makes the connections Maher does between faith practices and oppression. On the other hand, Maher and Carlin find common ground connecting US global relations to ideologies of exceptionalism, or the belief that the United States is innately superior by pedigree, skills, and power to other nations and their inhabitants. On this topic, they both generate charged humor.

Three years before Carlin hosted *Saturday Night Live* during the show's inaugural season in 1975, he performed in Santa Monica, California, taping the show for a LP record entitled *Class Clown*. This second album, like his first, went gold. It is this album that contains the infamous "Seven Words You Can't

Say on Television" routine that secured Carlin a place in American collective memory. Addressing US occupation of Vietnam during this performance, he likens Vietnam to a woman with whom the United States has its way. In less delicate terms: the United States is fucking Vietnam.

> Then you have to remember the sexual side of Vietnam, which a lot of people don't notice . . . they're always afraid of pulling out, that's their big problem you know [*laughter*]. [*Talking in different voice*] "Pulling out doesn't sound manly to me Bill [*laughter*]. I'd say leave it in there and let's get the job done" [*makes explosion sound effects and then resumes normal voice*]. Cause that is, after all, what we're doing to that country, right [*clapping*]? Yeah [*heavy applause, whistles*]! And we have always been good at that, you must admit, we uh, took care of uh, took care of the Blacks, uh took care of the Indians. I consider the South just another minority that was screwed by the US government. I have no prejudice against them. They got it too [*makes same explosion noises; sparse laughter*].[58]

Drawing a parallel between the conflict in Vietnam and slavery, the treatment of the Vietnamese, and treatment of racial minorities here at home, Carlin connected global and cultural imperialist practices. Carlin revealed the patriarchal underpinnings of global conquest and social stratification by gendering this relationship—by feminizing Vietnam, emasculating social identities construed as inferior (i.e., we "took care of the Blacks"), and rendering military occupation and social dominance as the terrain upon which masculinity is secured. Nearly forty years later, Maher's charged humor reflects changing discourses on racism, highly politicized discourses emanating from right-wing conservatives allowing White men to lay claim to victim status. Maher explains this phenomenon while also pointing toward the flaws in this argument:

> A lot of this birther stuff [Tea Party politics] is obviously just racism [*crowd cheers*]. It's funny the way racism has really grown up, if you will, you know from the Jim Crow days. It's just more subtle. . . . The only racism they [conservatives] can see now is reverse racism [*laughter*]. Right, this was the big problem with Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor is that she was a reverse racist. [*Sounding exasperated*] Yes, that's the problem. For too long Puerto Rican women have had their boot on the neck of the White man [*laughter, cheers and clapping*]. . . . You have to understand the Teabagger mindset. They have this nostalgia for this America they think was stolen from them that used to be, that was better. It's really the 1950s, okay. That's what they think was Shangri La. You know what they never get is that it's kind of insulting to a lot of Americans to pine for this era because it wasn't that good for a lot of people. It was good if you were a White man. It wasn't that good if you were Mexican, [*audience claps and the clapping is sustained throughout the list*] or Black, or Jewish, or disabled, or gay, or a woman [*audience hoots, hollers, and claps*].[59]

If supporters of the Tea Party movement pine for a time when women, people of color, gays, and religious minorities knew their place, they have to go farther back than the 1950s, because revisionist history reveals a 1950s bubbling precipitously with social rebellion, a precursor to the radical countercultures that would soon manifest. Inequality has always been met with resistance, but in varying ways—there is no Shangri La of yore. These jokes by Bill Maher and George Carlin both confront issues of racism, illustrating the various ways it manifests over time. In a supposedly "postracial" country in the twenty-first century, Maher's observations may meet with greater skepticism than Carlin's did in the 1970s. By the late 1970s, Carlin, Pryor, and Tomlin were rising stars whose charged humor had found favor with the American public. They managed to get a foot in the door of mainstream entertainment before charged humor began its decline in popularity in the 1980s. The Comedy Strike of 1979 precipitated this economic and cultural shift about take hold in the United States.

The Comedy Strike of 1979

Civil rights movements in the mid-twentieth century demanded political and social equality for minority groups and modeled successful strategies for subsequent social movements, including one fought by stand-up comics seeking economic redress and standardized club practices in the late 1970s. In March of 1979, the Comedians for Compensation led by Tom Dreesen, comprised primarily of comics in Los Angeles, picketed the Comedy Store, owned and managed by Mitzi Shore, for fair wages. At the time, many of them, except major headliners, received no compensation other than the exposure and opportunity to develop and hone new material. Mitzi Shore called it a "workshop" for comics and even established the Belly Room, a smaller room where women, whom Shore believed audiences had trouble liking, could work on their material in order to eventually strut their stuff in the main room.[60] The strike lasted nearly six weeks and was supported by many comic notables including Richard Pryor, Jay Leno, and David Letterman. Shore finally conceded to compensate the comedians and a settlement was reached on May 4, 1979, to pay $25 per set, but these promises were not enforced with any regularity. However, other comedy venues, in order to lure in the talent and maintain competition with other local and national comedy clubs, began standardizing their pay for the three positions of opener/emcee, feature, and headliner. Comedy clubs, including chains like Budd Friedman's Improvs, the Comedy Zone, Punch Line, and Funny Bone began popping up in the Midwest and all over the country. In order to get the big names to travel, club managers had to provide travel stipends and a living wage. Only a few years after the strike, there were over three hundred new comedy clubs in the country and many more on their way. Within five years time, by 1985, a job as a stand-up comic feature or headliner went from being synonymous with "broke" to a potentially financially stable profession, whereby someone could earn a decent income.[61]

This certainly does not mean that life on the road was without problems. Comedy club managers stiffed the comics or flaked when it came to providing promised lodging. There was no standard reimbursement for travel, which was out of the question for openers and possibly negotiable for feature comics. Personal accounts of life on the road in *I Killed: True Stories of the Road from America's Top Comics*, testify to the myriad difficulties comics continued to encounter in the 1980s. A better, more stable life might be found on television, whose market had recently ballooned dramatically as entrepreneurs successfully launched new cable networks. The availability of acting roles especially comedic ones surged and lured in not only road comics, but new talent taking advantage of this low-hanging fruit. A glut of television roles and the rising popularity of live comedy meant that comedy veterans were getting television roles and appearances, but so were novices, otherwise "green" comics with little to no stage time under their belts. Televised comedy, unless you were fortunate enough to land a special on HBO, curtailed the kind of free speech found in live performances and on the long-playing records that put charged comedy on the map thirty years earlier. Considered unsuitable for television, the rebel comics of the 1950s, '60s, and '70s cultivated a cultural form that could not be adapted for television while retaining its contempt for a corrupt government, cynical view of politics, and critique of social inequalities. And comedy clubs, while growing in number, booked comics most likely to appeal to their audience, that is, middle-class White folks. Ergo, the rise of pseudo-satire (which poses as rebellious, but is not) and family-friendly comedy illustrated that the project of securing equality as citizens is antithetical to the success of capitalism. T. H. Marshall waged such an argument in the 1950s and concluded that capitalism and citizenship are inherently contradictory: political action taken to redistribute wealth or compensate workers adequately is a right guaranteed by citizenship but is one antithetical to the maintenance of class stratification, a hallmark of capitalist systems.[62] In short, comedy on television avoided aggravating advertisers, even if this meant silencing or editing humorous material. In other words, new spaces for entertainment accelerated by capitalist efforts to secure consumers exercising brand loyalty placed restrictions on the messages of comedic material. Jokes were vetted for controversial, lewd, or questionable content. Charged comics in the mid-twentieth century revealed gaping fissures between our moral code touted abroad and the moral code enacted domestically—not exactly a topic welcomed with enthusiasm by network executives. Careful review of content was not new protocol for network television, but there were more people tuning into the television and for longer periods of time. With most of

Americans owning a television by the 1980s, and the rise of the global market for television, the entertainment industry supported programming that played a central role in producing consumers.

But, the aims of the TV networks were only one of many factors influencing a decline in the performance of charged humor relative to the number of professional comics, whose ranks inflated alongside a rise in comedy clubs and network channels. Others include Reaganomics, new probusiness policies, greater investment in the military industrial complex, aging Baby Boomers having kids of their own, and shifts toward conservatism. These trends ushered in the age of neoliberalism, a political philosophy and practice cogently described by Lisa Duggan in these terms:

> The raising of profit rates required that money be diverted from other social uses, thus increasing overall economic inequality. And such diversions required a supporting political culture, compliant constituencies, and amenable social relations. Thus, pro-business activism in the 1970s was built on, and further developed, a wide-ranging political and cultural project—the reconstruction of the everyday life of capitalism, in ways supportive of upward redistribution of a range of resources, and tolerant of widening inequalities of many kinds.[63]

Legislation had been put in place that dictated de jure equality, despite de facto experiences of cultural and political exclusion, and was used as evidence that everyone had equal opportunities to succeed. When the pay gap between men and women did not diminish or when people of color continued to be overlooked for promotions, this new conservatism placed responsibility squarely on the shoulders of "those people who didn't work hard enough" rather than any institutional or societal flaws. The comedy record, so popular in decades prior and a format conducive to delivering material ill-suited for television, fell out of favor with consumers. Records were replaced by cassette tapes, but it was hard to compete with the plethora of alternatives available for watching your favorite comics perform, for example, television, concert films, and live performances in comedy clubs. Given the restrictions imposed by television censors, charged comics eager to disclose these truths were more likely to be able to do so via live comedy, but even performing live in comedy clubs they could incur the wrath of audiences and risk losing an invitation to perform there in the future. It was far easier and commercially successful to tread carefully or to avoid controversial topics or critiques altogether. The combination of these forces changed the landscape of comedy—the content and the modus operandi of comedians. Not challenging the status quo allowed plenty of comics to flit back and forth from comedy clubs to television and film acting. Migration between these entertainment forms became the new gold standard for success as a comic.

Comics with the cultural cachet of national notoriety had arguably more freedom to employ charged humor—after all, this is the humor that helped comics secure a national following in the first place; you would think a savvy agent would capitalize on that market potential. For example, Pryor, Tomlin, and Carlin were championed by audiences because of their charged comic personae. They achieved national fame before or just at a time when audiences clamored for comedy with substance, reflecting an era of civil discord, social unrest, and a declining faith in the political system. Already having market cachet, they managed to maintain careers firmly ensconced in the mainstream in the ensuing decades. Charged comics emerging on the heels of their success in the mid '80s, like Kate Clinton, Marga Gomez, and Karen Williams, found themselves locked out of the game and were forced to find alternative means of establishing themselves without compromising their charged points of view. Presciently, Jane Wagner said in the early 1980s: "I still have this urge to be moralistic [*she laughs*] and want things to mean something. And I know that it's, pretty soon it's not gonna be fashionable at all."[64]

Comedy Centralizing: A Shifting Market

A decline in the popularity and frequency with which comics use charged humor has everything to do with the predilections of consumers, who are in turn influenced by the unique confluence of social, political, and cultural forces around them. In the 1980s, many factors contributed to changes in the availability and consumer demand of charged humor, including the neoliberal conservatism that proved to be a backlash to the prevailing social movements of the 1960s and '70s, the decline of the Keynesian welfare state and the rise of Reaganomics. At this time, the explosion of channels on cable television, which, while supplying greater opportunities for national exposure, simultaneously demanded comedy (and lots of it) appealing to the widest demographic possible. While I am leery of and aim to avoid any claims uniformly declaring pre-1980s stand-up comedy as libratory and post-1980s as restrictive, there are connections between the institutionalization of stand-up comedy as big business (largely spurred by the Comic Strike of 1979) and the styles of comedy deemed more profitable, that is, absurdist humor, apolitical safe comedy, shock humor, and modern-day minstrelsy in the mainstream. Charged humor found fewer opportunities to flourish in comedy clubs and on television, but entertainers knew how to adapt and they did in this rapidly shifting market.

While subject to the moral leanings of its rulers, popular entertainment has also challenged those rules, introducing public debates about definitions and standards of decency and propriety. Performed comedy has a long history of pushing the boundaries of social acceptability, of toying with the taboo. Lenny

Bruce and then George Carlin became household names and comedic icons because of their public battles with law enforcement over language used in sets. Not unlike vaudeville's decency standards, which were imposed as a means to expand its target audience to women and children, today's censorship focuses on preventing obscenity, for example, use of foul language, pejoratives and sexual innuendo, and questionable content, whether explicitly sexual, political, or violent, from being broadcast. By contrast, ratings systems are far more forgiving of violent content and the Hays Production Code of 1934 and today's film rating system is more likely to request an "R" rating for a show with "adult content," that is, sex, language, drugs, gender nonconformity, than they would for a movie in which viewers might see a dozen or more people die throughout the film.[65] For instance, after his first appearance on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, wherein Elvis Presley was captured gyrating his hips suggestively and which elicited a number of complaints from viewers, he was filmed from the shoulders up during subsequent performances. For his appearance on the iconic show, Bob Dylan refused to change the lyrics to his music at the request of network executives and was barred from performing, and when The Doors reneged on their promise to substitute another word for "higher" in a live performance of "Light My Fire," they incurred the ire of network executives; according to keyboardist Ray Manzarek, they lost out on a contract for six more appearances on the show.[66] During the mid-twentieth century, charged comics like Lenny Bruce, George Carlin, and Richard Pryor were wooed cautiously or not at all for television and film roles largely because their acts included profanity and incorporated taboo topics like drug use, sexcapades, and illegal activities. Although Pryor assisted in writing the screenplay for *Blazing Saddles* and Mel Brooks advocated on his behalf, producers passed him over for one of the lead roles because they feared he was too controversial.

Even when embraced by the masses, comics performing charged humor may encounter career complications. When Dick Gregory began his ascent to fame he was invited to perform on *Tonight Starring Jack Paar* in the winter of 1961. Gregory declined because Paar never allowed Black guests to talk with him postperformance as he did White guests. Gregory reports that Paar called him personally to let Gregory know he was welcome to come sit on his guest couch following his performance. It was the first time Americans saw a White man and Black man on television engaged in real, civil, humanizing casual conversation, according to Gregory. The public response was overwhelming (studio lines could not handle the volume); more importantly, it was overwhelmingly *positive*.[67] Undoubtedly the public played a role in sustaining Gregory's prominence as a comedic voice—Paar would never have made concessions on his show were it not for Gregory's rising popularity. The substance of his comedy resonated with many during a time of social unrest. The confluence of

Gregory's early soft-spoken yet incisive musings on racial inequality, a spirited and increasingly progressive public eager to consume this comedy, and the novelty of his approach and content, all ushered him into the mainstream at precisely the same time when other comics using charged humor were struggling. Lenny Bruce was being blacklisted from nightclubs all over the nation as was Mort Sahl, whose envelope-pushing political and charged humor television executives had determined too controversial. After extending a short-term contract to Sahl in anticipation of more opportunities for exposure on network TV, executives later rescinded and opted to forego any further commitments to him for fear of losing sponsors, ratings, profits, and viewers. Sahl also refused to pander to any political party, making some fans, and especially the Kennedy family, furious since they had assumed him an ally.[68] Sahl and Bruce suffered professionally but for different reasons unique to their careers, comedy styles, and personal choices; performing charged humor contributed to but does not account entirely for their stalled careers when it came to televised performance opportunities nor can charged humor be solely credited for Gregory's career taking off. Gregory opted to retreat from the comedy scene, favoring a career promoting civil rights and healthy living, so it is unknown the extent to which he could have maintained his status as popular charged comic. It is questionable whether his material on racism coming from an unknown comic would be welcomed by the public. Richard Pryor's early comedy was safe by his own estimations and sought mainstream recognition but did not reflect Pryor's point of view. Chris Rock, in an interview filmed for *Richard Pryor: I Ain't Dead Yet, #*%$#@!!* (2003), suggests that "Pryor didn't make his early albums to cross-over like *That Nigger's Crazy*, but he did cross-over and get mainstream."[69] When he did cross-over, making a national splash with his third album, *That Nigger's Crazy*, which sold over a million copies that year, he did not stop politicizing his jokes. That the charged content of Pryor and Gregory garnered such enthusiastic support reflects more than just their skills, but also the ideological propensities of their fans.

Charged humor that arises from or addresses issues germane to one's identity appeals to minority communities because in most cases, they "get" it in a very real way. In 1969, while civil rights activists pressured the government to make good on civil rights laws passed in 1957, 1960, and 1964, statements from Dick Gregory like, "We [African Americans] tired of these insults. All we doin' is reacting to them," and "We trying to work to change this racist structure," appealed to Black audience members who shared Gregory's frustration and ire for system changing too slowly.[70] Whether the same content can and does find favor with audience members not sharing similar experiences rests on the individuals digesting the humor and on the tenor of the jokes—the more aggressive a joke, the more likely it is to be off-putting. Similarly, a penchant

for the didactic to the exclusion of the funny (all talk and no jokes) can sour reception. African Americans lend a sympathetic ear to Richard Pryor, Dave Chappelle, Chris Rock, and Katt Williams, a demographic pull that helped to ensure their eventual cross-over to the mainstream and subsequent rise to stardom. To that effect, Pryor writes: "I was hot in the Black community long before I cracked the mainstream."[71] Of course, you have to be talented too. It is not as if minority communities usher in every performer simply because they share a phenotype, gender identity, or sexual orientation.

What Lily Tomlin and Whoopi Goldberg did in the 1980s continues with Sherry Glaser, Judy Gold, Monica Palacios, Micia Mosely, Marga Gomez, Anna Deavere Smith, Sarah Jones, and Lisa Kron, but these ladies are barely blips on anyone's radar. Tomlin and Goldberg fared well in part because the timing was right; in the early-to-mid '80s cultural forms continued to reverberate with the revolutionary oeuvres evoked in earlier decades. This became increasingly muted as the '80s marched on and folks declared feminism dead, which was wishful thinking encouraged by the glut of images of women on television and film as either deadly seductress (read: men have no power) or in positions of power that totally belied the reality of women's professional careers. Susan Douglas identifies these images as emblematic of two prominent narratives in US culture right now: embedded feminism—we have achieved gender parity—and enlightened sexism, which ironically condones sexist images because they are considered outmoded.[72] Either image sends the message loud and clear: women are in control, so effectively, in fact, that some men (mainly White) in the 1990s and after became angry at what appeared to be a threat to their long established dominance and a takeover of their livelihoods by women, immigrants, and people of color.[73]

Mid-twentieth century comedians explored charged comedy and owing to a favorable zeitgeist for it, charged comics gained the popularity necessary to strut this material before receptive American audiences. Manifold shifts in American political, technological, ideological, and cultural climates facilitated a decrease in the commercial viability of charged humor in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Stand-up comics committed to using the stage to foment social justice either resigned themselves to other careers or learned to promote themselves within a market increasingly catering to niche demographics. Longstanding popularity in a consumer niche can, as it did with Pryor, launch a comic performing charged comedy onto the national stage. This is how the charged humor of Chris Rock and Dave Chappelle made its way into White Americans' homes. Unfortunately, women have less success with this tactic because, while there have been attempts to create women-only reviews (always billed as a "girls night out") meant to appeal to a female audience base, generally women do not rally behind other female comics in numbers necessary to impel

crossover to the mainstream. Acculturated to regard men as the standard bearers of humor, women learn to laugh at men's jokes and like many other men, share their skepticism for women's capacity to successfully generate humor. Some solutions for charged female comics in this predicament are to lean heavy on another niche base, that is, Jewish, Latino/a, LGBTQ, differently abled; develop one-woman shows they can perform in a variety of venues outside the comedy club scene; or revise material (limiting charged humor) in ways more palatable to mainstream audiences. The latter strategies apply to male charged comics as well. This is the climate in which charged comics learned to operate in the 1980s and '90s and arguably where we are now in the twenty-first century, which explains why many of the comics discussed in the next chapter on contemporary charged humor may be unfamiliar. Those that are household names most likely made concessions with their charged material in order to achieve that status.

I grew up listening to Bill Cosby, Louie Anderson, Eddie Murphy (without parental consent . . . sorry Mom and Dad), Bob Newhart, Paula Poundstone, and Sinbad. They are still some of my favorite comics, as are Keith Alberstadt, Bill Burr, Kristen Key, Bob Marley, Ellen DeGeneres, and Jim Gaffigan. I love how their comedy makes me laugh at human foibles, awkward interactions, and family drama—the mundane stuff of life. Their humor unifies listeners and makes for great entertainment, but in most cases does not politicize or enact cultural citizenship. It is not charged humor. You have to be true to yourself when you go on stage as a comic performer, and I hold no judgment against comics opting to perform safe comedy or using styles that make sense to them. There is nothing wrong with this kind of humor, and comics are sure to make successful careers from this family-friendly apolitical comedy. But many writers and scholars have tackled these topics, focusing on mainstream comedy, and so now I want to look at what does not lend itself easily to mainstream incorporation in the twenty-first century.

In 1998 while I was in college, I traveled two hours from north Alabama to Nashville, Tennessee, to attend my first live comedy show featuring Beth Donahue, a talented comic and radio personality at the time. She blew me away and not just because her tagline was "Whoooooore" (a bumper sticker I sported on my car for years). Before then, I had only been exposed to what I saw on television, select concert films and my father's collection of comedy albums; the comics I had access to were almost exclusively men, save Rosie O'Donnell's stint as host of VHI's *Stand-Up Spotlight* and Elayne Boosler's comedy specials (I was most familiar with *Party of One* and *Live Nude Girls*). I had never seen a female comic so irreverent, but moreover, who spoke directly to my identity as a woman and commented on society's maltreatment of women. Having realized the power of comedy to promote social change, I began a quest to find more of this kind of comedy. Some of my favorite charged comics include Kate Clinton,

Patton Oswalt, Kate Rigg, Chris Rock, Maria Bamford, Margaret Cho, George Lopez, DeAnne Smith, Kathleen Madigan, and Maz Jobrani. These charged comics and others like them sought and continue to seek myriad methods of securing a fan base outside of mainstream comedy, and over time, some of them have garnered enough of a following to warrant television and film roles, placing them alongside mainstream comic contemporaries. Emergent technologies in the twenty-first century like social media sites facilitate wider exposure, bearing the promise of greater access to charged comics and perhaps, even portending the reshaping of what constitutes the mainstream. Charting how and where charged humor succeeds or fails reflects changing attitudes, popular discourses, and social issues. The relative marketability of charged comedy—the fact that this shifts over time or based on who delivers the charged humor—indicates fluctuating consumer demand.

CHAPTER THREE

Laughing into the New Millennium

> We use our humor to speak the unspeakable, to mask the attack, to get a tricky subject on the table, to warn of lines not to be crossed, to strike out at enemies and the hateful acts of friends and family, to camouflage sensitivity, to tease, to compliment, to berate, to flirt, to speculate, to gossip, to educate, to correct the lies people tell on us, to bring about change.
>
> *Daryl Cumber Dance,* Honey, Hush! An Anthology of African American Women's Humor

Meet Patton Oswalt, a White forty-something male comic, who situates himself as an atheist, a belief system held by few in the United States, where 95 percent of the population cite some form of religious or spiritual affiliation.

> I'm an atheist. And I love religion. I really do. And I don't love religion in a snarky mean-spirited way. I unabashedly, sincerely love that we have religion. Because if we didn't we wouldn't be here right now being all postmodern and ironic [*light laughter*]. There'd be no civilization.[1]

He locates himself as atheist and now (unless you are among that 5 percent of nonbelievers) what little information you have about atheists stirs and like carbonation begins popping into your thoughts, perhaps things like unscrupulous, confused, or hedonistic. Documentarian Morgan Spurlock, in an episode of *30 Days* (season 2), took public polls on opinions toward atheists and found that they are among the least trusted of people and thought to have little moral grounding. Yet another common misperception is that atheists are antireligious, because to be disassociated with religion somehow implies an aversion to or condemnation of religion. Countering this false perception about the way atheists are imagined, Oswalt professes his appreciation for religion and launches